

VOLUME 1

SATO FUMINO

ILLUSTRATION BY AKIRA EGAWA

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[†Prologue†](#)

[†Chapter 1: Chance Encounter in the Dark†](#)

[†Chapter 2: An Anxious and Unsatisfying Morning†](#)

[†Chapter 3: Beast Blood Zelaide†](#)

[†Chapter 4: A Troublesome Situation†](#)

[†Chapter 5: A Peculiar Housemate†](#)

[†Chapter 6: Tainted Blood†](#)

[†Chapter 7: Signs of Confusion†](#)

[†Chapter 8: Humans and Beast Bloods†](#)

[†Chapter 9: Crash into the Wilds†](#)

[†Chapter 10: Laboratory in the Dead of Night†](#)

[†Afterword†](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

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ZELAIDE
[HUNTER]

EUPHEMIA
[SCIENTIST]

ERICA
[MAYOR]

PALMINA
[AGENT]

WEI
[POLICE]

†Prologue†

RAIN pelts the ground just before daybreak, cleansing the world at its darkest every single day. The flow of water blesses the earth with moisture and washes away any traces of the bloody hunts left by the beasts prowling the forests in the dead of night.

For humans, the rainfall becomes a silver curtain, concealing a criminal's hidden crimes, an infant's peaceful sleep, and a couple's romantic tryst. And then, with the dawn's light, the rains retreat. Such is the unbroken cycle, the never-changing promise between the heavens and the earth.

This is exactly why this world's dawn is so incredibly beautiful—no matter what atrocities and absurdities will smear the day ahead.

†Chapter 1: Chance Encounter in the Dark†

“GET away from me! Who are you people?! What are you doing?! Stop it!” Euphemia turned and twisted her body, trying to throw off the men who had yanked her out of the car.

The two men wordlessly dragged her kicking and screaming past the freeway’s hard shoulder and into the plains beyond. The braid wrapped around her head like a crown came undone during her struggle and her specs slid to the tip of her nose.

They no longer waved around the guns they had initially threatened her with.

Two big men didn’t need guns to make one petite woman do their bidding. Case in point, Euphemia knew her efforts failed her and she stumbled forward several times as they forced her to walk over the grass-covered plains.

The balmy winds of the midsummer night carried an ominous atmosphere. Even the rustle of the dry brush sounded similar to the heartless cackling of a jeering mob.

The bright lights of Gothic City were visible under the distant sky. Highways circled the city like Saturn’s rings and its dazzling city center was enclosed by a forest of skyscrapers, emitting only a fraction of the light it once had when it was dubbed the Nightless City.

Nevertheless, the illuminated city looked like an oasis compared to the wild plains shrouded in the same darkness blotting out the sky.

Fuel saving policies for the freeways located on the city’s outskirts required that only the fourth streetlight after every three was to be lit, and although headlights illuminated the fluorescent paint on the road, the paint didn’t emit light on its own. To make matters worse, the moon and stars were hidden behind dark clouds because it was almost time for the daily downpour. While Euphemia saw the silhouettes of her attackers, she couldn’t make out their faces no matter how hard she strained her eyes against the dark.

“Let go of me! What do you want?!” she shouted, not ready to go down without a fight.

People normally didn’t venture into the city outskirts during the daily downpour hours because of the dangers associated. Apart from attending to dire matters, young women never stepped outdoors at this time, even in the highly populated urban center.

Moreover, these outskirts were still a good 5 kyros from Gothic City’s main entrance, Forzarin Gate. If these criminals were after people to mug or women to rape, setting up shop in a place like this would be bad for business. They would catch far more prey elsewhere.

Indeed, aside from those with the most extreme of circumstances, no one was crazy enough to drive through here at this hour.

At least, no normal person who was an upstanding citizen.

What the heck, Erica? Wasn’t restoring public safety one of your campaign promises? Euphemia cursed at her older sister in her thoughts. *How in the colonies did this happen? Are you even doing your job? Do I just have bad luck? Or has this city and its outskirts become a whole lot more dangerous?*

It’s probably both.

Euphemia furrowed her brow, narrowed her bright-green eyes, and ground her teeth to steel herself against falling into a panic.

The man dragging her behind him with a tight grasp around both her slender wrists not only refused to lessen the pressure but dug his fingers in deeper. He was never going to look back at Euphemia, and even if he did, she knew he wouldn’t give a damn.

He was short and stout, accompanied by a gaunt man of average height who led the way. The two men wore dark-colored patchwork clothing.

“I don’t have any money on me!”

Even the best voice she could muster quivered a little. The men ignored Euphemia and tossed her into the middle of a thicket a slight distance from the freeway.

“Lady, you look like you don’t have a clue ‘bout how this works. Whether you’re broke or not, men’ll only be thinkin’ ‘bout one thing—seeing you saunter ‘round with your pretty face and hot bod, ya got me?”

“Excuse me? Are you implying you specifically targeted me? To rape me?”

“You cut right to the chase, huh, lady? As long as we do as we’re told, they’re gonna give us the street equivalent of one million Nightz. You can see how attractive of a deal this is for us, yah? Now, I’d love to teach you all sorts of things before the deed is done, but sadly they haven’t told us anything aside from what we’re to do to you.”

Nightz was the name of a drug secretly circulating through Gothic City. The drug wasn’t cheap, but it wasn’t so exorbitantly priced that addicts had to sell their left hand to get it. People could easily obtain Nightz by saving up enough money—provided they had the audacity to accept risky jobs like this.

“Excuse me? What did you just say?” Euphemia sharply drew in a breath.

They’re saying I was bound to be assaulted at one point or another, so they’re the ones doing it? But who’s targeting me and what for? And what deed are they going to do? I’m sure it’s not good, but do they mean they’re going to rape me? Kill me?

“Sorry, miss. Give up.”

“I won’t!” Euphemia yelled with everything she had. She felt like fear was going to swallow her whole if she didn’t scream. “You’ve made a mistake! There’s *no reason* for me to be targeted! I’m little more than a junior researcher! I’ve only just graduated; I’m no different from a scrub! Why me?!”

“I told ya, even we don’t know a thing ‘bout our employer. But y’know, even without an explanation, your looks alone are more than enough to invite a man to attack you. Don’t ya think, Pete?”

The gaunt man walking ahead of them turned around for the first time when his accomplice addressed him. “Oh yeah. You thought so too, Danny?” A sickening smile was plastered on his face. “I was just thinkin’ the same thing. She’s a total babe and she’s got a nice rack. It’s a damn waste to feed her to a Muta even if we get to do her first.”

“Muta? Feed me? What are you talking about?” Euphemia asked, barely stopping her voice from sounding hysterical.

Muta was the common name for the creatures that lived deep in the thick forests dotting the planet. The majority were ferocious carnivores. Shudders racked Euphemia’s body.

“We were ordered to feed you to a Muta. But we’ve found somethin’ fun to do before that.”

I don’t want to hear it. Euphemia’s mind recoiled in horror. Her throat constricted; she couldn’t breathe.

“You still don’t get it? You’re one sexy babe. So we’ll feed on you before we let the Muta have the leftovers. Take a look over there.”

Euphemia hadn’t noticed the parked semitrailer until Danny pointed it out.

The metal vehicle gleamed in the darkness where it reflected the freeway lights. Only military vehicles or contractors with permits were allowed to drive off-road outside of the city. Their semitrailer would’ve been reported on sight if it was left in the open, so they kept it hidden in the tall wilderness bushes during the afternoon. It wouldn’t have been hard to do since the semitrailer wasn’t big, and the bushes were.

The men steadily advanced toward the semitrailer while tugging the speechless Euphemia behind them. They circled behind the shipping container on the back of the trailer.

“See this? It’s a Bijour. Ain’t it cute?”

Pete opened the small utility window blinds attached to the container door. Something slammed viciously against the door from the darkness within.

Entertained by Euphemia’s stifled cry and horrified retreat from the container, Danny supported her from behind and whispered the creature’s name in her ear, his voice elated. The small window was made of thick glass, and Euphemia caught a glimpse of the red eyes glowing on the other side.

Bijour.

A beautiful, but terrifying, bipedal creature with a long, serrated tail

positioned in an elegant curve. It was an extremely dangerous species of Muta that attacked anything that moved.

“H-How...did you get one of these?!” Euphemia stammered.

“It’s a damn rare Muta all right. I’ve heard they sell for an insane price, but it’s the first time we’ve seen one too. They’re bloody fast little suckers, so they’re almost never caught. But, if we don’t hurry this up, the rain will fall. We’ve gotta get this over with before that.”

“This area here seems soft... Plus, it’s in view of the camera.”

Danny grabbed Euphemia’s tense shoulders and glanced up at the camera affixed to the container door. It was a rearview camera for monitoring what was behind the semitrailer. Were they planning to film their crime with it?

“Hahaha! Down you go!” Danny howled with laughter and shoved Euphemia against the summer grass. Her specs tumbled from her nose onto the brush. She tried to escape, but Pete firmly grabbed hold of her legs and pinned them, and Danny trapped her hands above her head.

“N-No... Stop it... Stop it!” Euphemia’s voice came out in a pathetic whimper, she had never cried in front of others.

“Sorry, lady. You’re about to be devoured by that Bijour, but not before we both have our way with you. Then the rain will fall, and come morning, whatever’s left of your body will be found—or so goes the script. I’m of the opinion it didn’t have to be a Bijour of all things, but that seems to be our employer’s hobby. The camera set up is perfect too. Goes to show our employer’s one hell of a perv. He’s got sick tastes.”

Excited in his moment of triumph, the man’s lips became loose and talkative.

“No...no...”

Euphemia twisted, squirmed, and frantically shook her head in a last-ditch struggle, but it had no effect aside from further pulling apart her braid. No sooner did a dirty finger touch the front of her white button-down shirt than another ripped it apart. The nauseating fingers slid over her soft, exposed skin.

She felt the sickening heat of filthy fingers on her and her revulsion brought

bile to the back of her throat. The man restraining her hands decided there was no need to miss out on the fun and released her hands to lean over her head and tightly grab hold of her breasts over her bra.

“Stop it!” Euphemia screamed.

No! No! No!

She burst into tears, but the only scenery that filled her wide-open eyes was the darkness known as night. Was her life going to end in such an outrageous, unreasonable way, just when she had finally gained her independence?

This is crazy! I thought I'd finally found my goal in life, and now that's going to end with me being two scumbags' plaything and killed in a place like this? I'm going to be food for a Muta?

“Don't screw with me!” Euphemia shouted.

I can't...I can't have it end like this!

Euphemia heard the cool click of metal as her belt was removed from her jeans.

Calm down. Is there anything I can do? I won't go down without a fight!

As the men enjoyed fondling her chest and thighs, Euphemia thrust her fingers into her lush hair and fumbled for the tiny blade embedded in her only accessory, a decorative hair comb.

It was a custom-made comb her older sister gave her for self-defense when she had left home to live on her own.

Endlessly tolerant and kind, Erica Saionji was Gothic City's mayor who never overlooked a thing.

Euphemia had deemed the small weapon as unnecessary but Erica forced her to take it, supposedly as a good luck charm. It was a medium-large hair comb made of light materials. She ended up using it all the time because she liked the design and the way the comb held up her thick, unruly hair. In other words, her older sister knew her very well.

Erica!

Euphemia thought of her intelligent and composed older sister. The sister she imagined with a troubled smile stared back at Euphemia in her mind's eye.

It was ironic. Euphemia had tried her hardest to become independent of her perfect older sister, and yet she ended up falling right into the traps her sister had warned of. It was laughably ironic. Euphemia would never be able to catch up to her now, not in this lifetime.

But I'll never stand for this.

Euphemia checked the tiny blade in the middle of her hand.

The blade was the length of her thumb. For a second, she considered stabbing the men with it, but such a tiny weapon stood no chance of inflicting damage serious enough to make two men back down, so she threw out the idea. Even if she happened to injure one of them, they would only fly into a rage and rape her in an even more heinous way. They would undoubtedly confiscate her only weapon too.

So this blade had only one purpose.

I absolutely won't let you have your way with me.

Euphemia's eyes flew wide open.

The streetlights didn't glint off the sharp blade because it had been painted black. Euphemia, driven to despair, resolutely raised her free hand to slit her own throat.

+++

"IT reeks..."

Zelaide Silvergray slowed his car as it sped down the freeway. Sliding the silver convertible to a stop on the freeway's hard shoulder, he hopped out without opening the door.

Chances were the expensive car would be stolen right away without locking the steering wheel and tires, but he broke into a run without giving it a second thought. He reached maximum speed as soon as his right foot kicked off the pavement. His black coat didn't flutter, but soared behind him like a wicked bird's tail feathers.

“Hmph. That’s a Bijour’s stench. I’m in luck.”

Zelaide—Zel, as most people knew him, deeply inhaled the lukewarm air. His sense of smell was at least ten times sharper than a human’s. Smell was a hard thing to measure, so the precise difference was hard to know for sure.

Bijour were a particularly rare breed of Muta. Despite being reptilian, the creature walked on two legs and had the appearance of a slim woman. The odor exuded from its crimson, metal, scale-covered body was a prized ingredient in expensive perfumes, and its hide was highly valued for leather. Additionally, its meat was delectable and its teeth and claws were used in art pieces, making it a valuable creature down to every bone, tooth, and nail.

Unfortunately, Bijour were also extremely ferocious and nimble by nature, and highly intelligent for a Muta. Even worse, since they regularly hunted in groups, even an adult human male stood no chance against them when marked as prey. Their hunts were so well-organized that not even midsized guns were capable of taking them down, rendering small caliber firearms useless.

But what’s a Bijour doin’ in a place like this? I hear an engine. The rev sounds like a large vehicle. I’d put my bet on a semi. Somebody’s transporting the Bijour by trailer. Oh, they stopped. Humans...two young males...they’re coming this way.

Zel crouched down and ran through the plains like a wolf.

The capture and transportation of Bijours was strictly regulated. No respectable person or enterprise would transport a Bijour with just one vehicle at an hour this close to rainfall. In other words, capturing either—or both—human and Muta would benefit Zel. For he was a Hunter.

“I knew it. Luck’s on my side,” Zel whispered with a sinister smirk, stopping his full-speed sprint to crouch in the middle of the brush and study the actions of the men getting out of the truck.

He saw in the dark without issue, even from behind his black-tinted specs. The men hid on the side of the highway some kyros ahead of where Zel stopped his car, and they laid in wait for something. What in the frontier worlds were they waiting for three kyros away from the city at this godforsaken hour? Between the Bijour stench and the suspicious men, Zel may have just struck the

Hunter's jackpot.

Oh? Another vehicle is coming from the opposite direction. Normal car. Their target?

A white car came from the same direction as Zel, heading for the city. It bumbled along at a carefree speed without particularly bothering to make haste in the dark night.

The car's no different from unassuming prey about to fall into a trap. A woman's driving. Ah, what are you doing? Are you stupid? Do you want to die that bad?

Zel's fears were proved no sooner than he thought them as the white car came to a sudden stop when the men jumped into the middle of the road in front of it, waving their arms in wide arcs. The men pointed their guns at the car and dragged a petite woman from the driver's seat. The woman put up a good fight, but her struggle was in vain as they pulled her into the wild plains beyond the freeway.

She's still a young woman. Why did she have the misfortune of drawin' their attention? And what's a woman doing outside the city walls just before rainfall? Isn't she practically asking to be attacked? Well, it's got nothing to do with me. But is this related to the Bijour?

Zel hid in the taller brush and left a good gap between them as he tailed the men.

All right, I'll be watchin' for a bit to see where you go and what you do.

He spotted a small semitrailer before long. It was probably what the men had driven here in. The peculiar stench of a Bijour wafted from it. Since it didn't reek of putrid scales, the smell had to be leaking through the air ducts. There couldn't have been more than one Bijour inside.

Zel closed the distance while keeping a careful watch on his surroundings.

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched shriek. It was evident the kidnapping had been planned, but the woman hadn't grasped her situation yet. No matter how Zel thought about it, the woman couldn't have been an upstanding citizen if she was outside at this hour, but her reaction was oddly inexperienced for someone

so far out in the Wilds. Her hair came undone the more she resisted, sending thick blond locks tumbling down her back in a gorgeous cascade of hair that caught the eye even in the dark.

Well, that sucks. Poor woman was pushed onto the ground in no time. Now then, how to deal with this nuisance?

Zel quickly thought up the most logical plan: knocking out the men, taking the semitrailer with the Bijour inside, then selling the Bijour to the black market after he turned the thugs over to the authorities. He couldn't care less about the woman. His plan would inevitably result in her rescue anyway, but it was up to her to make her way to the police. Her car was still parked on the freeway.

Time to make my move then, Zel concluded, and took a step forward to enact his simple plan, when he spotted the pinned woman thrusting her fingers into the top of her hair. What he had thought was a simple hair accessory released a sharp blade from its comb.

And what he saw next would stay with him forever—

—beautiful eyes that were curiously clear as they fixed on the sinister blade.

Faster than he could think, “ah,” she raised her arm overhead and brought the blade down in a wicked arc aimed for her throat.



Before he knew it, Zel was already on the move. The tiny blade she swung down was as brutally sharp as he expected, and it pierced right through his palm where he caught it. But Zel paid the pain no mind as he swept his other arm toward the men.

“Huh...? Agh!”

The man groping the woman’s breasts over her ripped shirt flew backward and loudly plunged headfirst into a tall, spiky bush.

“Wha-?! Gah!” Surprised by his partner’s sudden departure, the other man jerked his head up from trying to pull down the woman’s pants. Zel grabbed his throat and squeezed out a toad-like croak from his crushed airway. He lifted the man off the ground by his throat as he flailed his short, puny legs.

“Who do you work for?” Zel asked in a low growl, slightly easing the pressure of his fingers sinking into the man’s throat. His canine teeth gleamed behind his thin lips.

“Guh! Ach!”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll crush your throat. Or would you rather I break your jaw? Messin’ you up so bad you can only eat tofu the rest of your life is no problem for me either.”

“S-Somebody...h-help me!”

“Oh? Your dick completely deflated, y’know? Would you like me to crush it along with your throat?”

“I’ll tell you! I’ll speak s-so...d-don’t k-kill me! P-Please...”

Zel’s lips quirked into a smirk under the black specs he wore despite the dark. “Wow, you’re filthy. Don’t drool on me, you piece of shit. Spit it out already!”

“We’re called Insects...we ain’t no more than Vermis...”

Vermis referred to small-time gangs made up of no-good punks, not much different from a group of delinquent street kids who never learned better. Basically, they were thugs who did subcontractor work under big-time crime syndicates until it went to their heads and they smugly gave their insignificant ragtag group of gangs a name.

“Vermis? Is that true? You aren’t Inferni?” Zel asked, dropping the name of the syndicate that viewed him as an enemy.

“I-I...dunno... What’s I-Inferni?” The man trembled and tried to shake his head as though he truly didn’t know.

“Doesn’t matter if you don’t know. Then why’d you assault this woman?” Zel gestured toward the woman with his chin. He glimpsed that she had somehow succeeded in pulling together her ripped clothing as she looked up at him from where she still sat on the ground. She probably couldn’t move yet.

“I dunno that either...! A man named Shank hired us to rape and kill the woman who was going to pass through this area just before rainfall... We were gonna be paid in Nightz. We accepted the job because he said he’ll give us a shitload of Nightz!”

“Hmm...”

Zel didn’t recognize the name Shank. In all likelihood, it was a fake name, and the man ensured that they never saw his face. These men really didn’t seem to have a connection to Infernum, the syndicate the Inferni were members of, so Zel lost complete interest in them. He was about to throw the man into the brush like the last one, when he suddenly got a deep whiff of a putrid odor. It was the stench of a Bijour getting excited.

“What *else* do you know? Tell me everything! Right *now*!” Sensing the Muta’s bloodlust in the darkness, Zel dug his fingers into the man’s throat.

“Ack! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you everythin’! That woman’s probably a member of some syndicate, don’t ya think?! She seems like the easiest target to knock off so that’s why she was picked!”

“Syndicate?”

“Y-Yeah. But I dunno the details. I was seriously only a hired man!”

Just what kind of syndicate? A different syndicate from Infernum? She’s awfully naïve for syndicate life.

“Anything else?”

“Nothing! I mean it! Spare me!”

“Hmph. Then return to your employer and give him the message to never go after this girl’s ass again. If you say it’s from Zel, he’ll know who you mean.”

“Zel...? O-Ok. I promise. I’ll never go for her again.”

“Good. Hm?”

Zel heard the grating sound of metal moving. He shifted his eyes to the parked semitrailer, where he saw the automatic shutter doors rolling up. Inside the container was pitch-black.

Two glowing red lights ominously appeared within the darkness.

The forest Muta, Bijour.

Tch. I screwed up.

“I guess your buddy woke up?”

Danny sneaked around to the other side of the semitrailer, wormed his way into the driver’s seat, and opened the container from inside the truck. The shutter door hadn’t rolled all the way up yet, but a small crack was more than enough space for the slender creature.

As soon as the Bijour slipped outside, the other man stepped on the gas and hightailed it out of there without his accomplice. The semitrailer looked like a panicked metal animal fleeing from danger.

“O-Oi! ...OI! Wait! Wait! Danny! Danny!”

The man’s cries were the trigger.

The beautiful wild Muta lunged through the air with enough jumping power to captivate a person. It leapt with the confidence of a predator that had marked them as easy prey. The pair of red eyes soared right above Zel’s head like warning lights of death.

In the next moment, the Bijour would flawlessly knock down its prey with its powerful hind-legs, and then rip out the soft windpipe with its sharp, curved foreleg talons.

But it was the lithe reptile that got flipped over and slammed into the ground. The Muta’s only weakness was said to be its long, thin neck. Zel grabbed it

there, then shoved it, neck and all, against the ground as its long tail and powerful hind-legs jerked wildly through the air.

This Bijour might've been a youngling as its size was no bigger than a petite human, but a Muta was a Muta. No ordinary human strength was capable of holding one down with a single hand, but Zel was no ordinary human. The paralyzed man on the ground beside Zel had fallen on his hands and knees, none the wiser about how he got there—Zel had chucked him aside to seize the Bijour.

"I wanted to take it alive, but, the situation is what it is," Zel remarked casually, as if he had only caught a stray dog, not a creature capable of taking down armed men. The Muta raged under his hand in a desperate struggle for life. Zel lifted his other hand to remove his black-tinted specs.

A pale glow emerged in the dark. His eyes were filled with a gleam more frightening than the Muta's evil red eyes.

The raging Bijour temporarily stopped moving, as if captivated by the glow. The uncanny sound of bone snapping echoed through the plains. Both legs of the violently struggling Bijour suddenly twitched then spasmed two or three times before thudding to the ground.

"Well, that sucked. But how could I have transported it? The trailer took off, and it'd be visible in my car—Oi... C'mon now."

"S-Somebody! Save me! Monster! There's a monster!"

When the gaunt man on the ground met Zel's eyes, he scampered backwards on the ground to get away. The moment the puny man had managed to clamber to his feet, he made a stumbling streak for the bright freeway, falling over himself. The shameful sloshing sounds coming from his pants hinted that he was wetting himself along the way.

Tch. He ran away. What a pain... But I don't care enough to chase him. Oh yeah. Zel turned around as he remembered the other human.

He had forgotten all about the woman too afraid to stand, watching him from the ground about 10 mols from where he stood. The young woman clasped her torn shirt in front of her chest, but her pure white neck and shoulders stood out

vividly to his night vision.

“You’re still here?” Zel sneered coldly as he put his specs back on.

Had the woman not been paralyzed with fear, she would’ve seen his fingers were trembling.

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AT the time, Euphemia had no idea what had happened.

Dying by her own hand would have been far better than letting the scumbags rape her till they were satisfied before tossing her as a nighttime snack to the most brutal of all Mutas on the planet.

Euphemia had chosen how to end her life in a matter of seconds, so fast that she would laugh about it when she remembered the incident later. She would always remember the time she had wasted dragging her feet, deciding and redeciding what to do with her life, like a bad joke considering how quickly she had come to a decision about ending that same life in that horrible moment.

I’ll be the one to end my life, with my hands! With that thought, she swung down the blade she had received from her sister for self-defense—or at least, she tried to.

Yet the instant when the beautiful blade sunk into her throat never came, and instead of pain, she felt the weight on her body lighten. First, the man tenaciously fondling her breasts vanished from view, then the man yanking down her pants disappeared.

How?

While Euphemia was overcome with surprise, loud cracks erupted from the thicket a good distance away, accompanied by an unpleasant toe-curling scream.

But she didn’t have the time or leisure to care. Euphemia somehow managed to sit up and scoot backwards.

She would’ve loved to run to her car parked on the freeway, but her legs buckled with fear whenever she tried to stand. For that matter, she didn’t even know whether the threat of assault was truly gone. The immediate danger

might have dissipated, but she definitely couldn't call her current situation safe. A massive shadow lurked 10 mols away, the broad back turned toward her.

The shadow belonged to yet another man, this one a good two heads taller than the other two.

He grabbed one man's neck and tossed him over his shoulder with ease. He constricted the other by the throat and held him up at arm's length with his right hand. The man dangled there as he lost the strength to fight back. The newcomer's strength was tremendous. In stature and physique alone, the two thugs were no match for his impressive figure.

Even in the weak glow cast by the streetlights, she could tell the man clad in all-black was impressively tall with long legs. In contrast, his head appeared unduly white in the dark because of his long silvery hair.

Who is he? What is he? The enemy? Or help?

"Who do you work for?" A deep voice growled. The tone was calm, but chilled to the core. The man hanging inelegantly by his throat croaked out a pitiful moan.

"If you don't tell me, I'll crush your throat. Or would you rather I break your jaw? Messin' you up so bad you can only eat tofu the rest of your life is no problem for me either."

"Your dick completely deflated, y'know? Would you like me to crush it along with your throat?"

"Wow, you're filthy. Don't drool on me, you piece of shit."

Unrefined phrases came out of the man's mouth with an odd pronunciation, but he surprisingly wasn't as vulgar as he could be. He was menacing the thug, but in a manner so flippant, Euphemia guessed he was doing it for kicks. He was simply enjoying the process of threatening someone he could easily snap in two if he felt like it. In which case, he was the dangerous kind of person after all.

That's what Euphemia sensed about him.

The conversation—if it could be called one—progressed in the direction of why the men had targeted her. She was very curious about that, so she clasped

her torn clothing together, lowered herself down as far as she could, and strained her ears to pick up on what was said.

Someone named Shank came up while Euphemia spied on them, but she had never heard the name before. She was positive this was all just one big misunderstanding anyway.

She was just a junior researcher at a public research facility, and while she didn't lack drive for her research, she had yet to produce any major results. She wanted to believe she wasn't worth being targeted, raped, then killed by hired killers.

"Then return to your employer and give him the message to never go after this girl's ass again. If you say it's from Zel, he'll know who you mean," ordered the man with hair that gleamed silver in the dark.

Zel? Is that this man's name? Forget this. I need to focus on getting out of here.

To Euphemia, both the man hanging by his throat and the man in black going by the name of Zel meant nothing. Whatever way she looked at it, neither of them were 100% respectable, trustworthy men. Compared to them, Euphemia, despite her somewhat flashy appearance, was an upstanding citizen to the bone.

A sickeningly sweet smell wafted her way from the darkness ahead just as she was about to force her trembling legs into action. Her various senses must have been numbed from everything that had happened to her, because she only now noticed the fairly loud mechanical noise. It was relatively familiar, reminding her of the electric door to the storage room at work.

"I guess your buddy woke up?"

Was he talking about the pervert who had been fondling her breasts? I thought I saw him catapult through the air. What a sickeningly sweet smell. Like an overripe fruit from the south.

Her mind stuck in sensory overload, Euphemia was absently inhaling the sweet smell when the semitrailer parked right beside her suddenly sped off toward the freeway with its tires spinning. The mechanical sound she'd heard

was the container's shutter door opening. The man she'd seen flung aside decided to abandon his friend and escape alone. Something that set her skin crawling loomed in the empty darkness left in the semitrailer's wake.

Two red lights gleamed just above the bush. They were the same unblinking lights she had seen through the small window in the container door. The sickeningly sweet smell permeated the surrounding darkness, even stronger than before.

Oh no! Is it the Bijour?! The one those scumbags were going to feed me to?!

The danger never left! The threat to her life had only gotten worse. Euphemia dropped her chin to her chest in utter despair. It was all over for her now—hope was lost. There was no escape. Not for her or the mystery man.

A savage Muta had been let loose.

“No...no...” Euphemia started hyperventilating.

This is awful. This is more than awful.

Two dangerous men were close enough to catch her, and an even more vicious Muta lay not much farther past them. The Bijour's metal scales emitted a dull glimmer. Its red eyes ascertained its surroundings before setting its sights on them.

How and where should she run in order to arrive home in one piece? The chances of her getting back safe were almost zero. Forgetting all about the fact that she had nearly committed suicide only minutes prior, Euphemia stared at the three separate life-threatening beings only steps away from her.

The Muta would have no issue slaughtering the two men. And then, Euphemia would be next. She just knew it.

The Bijour tilted its rangy neck. The gesture was a far cry from cute. And then it screeched a mind-numbing shriek. Two wicked red stars soared high into the air.

The Bijour had jumped.

What happened after that should've only occurred in the span of a few seconds, but when Euphemia reflected on the events later, they replayed in her

head as vividly as a movie on TV.

The tall man swung his right arm to the side, sending the man he had clasped by the throat flying. Then he cocked his head slightly, thrust his left hand high, and prepared himself to take on the fierce Muta descending toward his head.

Euphemia visualized the beautiful and baleful Muta she had only ever seen in textbooks.

The Bijour's hooked talons were well-suited for kicking off the ground into a high jump and for running up the side of trees. They were also perfect for tearing into its chosen prey.

The man twisted around and thwarted its overhead attack by grabbing hold of the Bijour's ankles, then used his shoulders to slam it into the ground. He straddled the Muta faster than Euphemia's eyes could follow, and locked his hand securely under its chin.

The Bijour never imagined its attack would be evaded. It fought back with its serrated tail and strong legs, but the tall man had twice the weight on the Muta, rendering it impossible to shake off his hold.

"I wanted to take it alive, but the situation is what it is," the man said casually.

Euphemia heard a snap that sounded like he broke the Muta's neck just before the vicious creature's body shot up and curled in on itself. After convulsing several times, the legs dropped to the ground first, then the curled-up tail thudded behind them, and it ceased moving at all.

It's dead.

Euphemia blankly watched the brutal end to the ferocious creature's life.

"S-Somebody! Save me! Monster! There's a monster!"

The gaunt man whose legs had also given out on him let out an ugly scream and scampered away. Euphemia wanted to do the same thing more than anything else.

But she couldn't.

The tall man stood and slowly turned around, not even giving the lifeless Muta another look. Euphemia was rooted to the spot, unable to pry her eyes

from the way he moved. Were his refined movements the manifestation of his confidence?

The “monster” wasn’t the Muta that just died. The man was the real beast.

The man who fled had called him a monster for that reason. Euphemia finally understood why. Steel-blue gems glimmered in the dark. The pair of eyes emitted a strong glow that rivaled, if not surpassed, the wicked red eyes of the slaughtered Muta.

“You’re still here?”

The man made a slight movement and the light of his eyes disappeared with his heartless words. He had put on specs.

But what I just saw...were they human eyes?

Euphemia was glued to the ground.

She couldn’t shake off the terror she felt when looking into his eyes. *But...they were so beautiful.*

At the end of that thought, Euphemia’s consciousness quickly gave away.

†Chapter 2: An Anxious and Unsatisfying Morning†

RAIN pelts the ground just before daybreak, cleansing the world at its darkest every single day. The flow of water blesses the earth with moisture and washes away any traces of the bloody hunts left by the beasts prowling the forests in the dead of night.

For humans, the rainfall becomes a silver curtain, concealing a criminal's hidden crimes, an infant's peaceful sleep, and a couple's romantic tryst. And then, with the dawn's light, the rains retreat. Such is the unbroken cycle, the never-changing promise between the heavens and the earth.

This is exactly why this world's dawn is so incredibly beautiful—no matter what atrocities and absurdities will smear the day ahead.

†††

THE sound of a slow drip mingled with the heavy beat of raindrops. The dripping, accompanied by the familiar aroma of roasted beans, was far more relaxing than the downpour.

Oh... Euphemia grinned, her eyes still shut. I know this smell. It's coffee, isn't it? Did I set my coffeepot on a timer last night? I can't remember. I really need a cup, but I'm so sleepy.

Her body felt heavy enough to sink into the bed.

I can sleep in. Today's my first day off in a while, and I came back home in a giddy haze from my spectacular research results. Yup, I'll just cuddle my favorite pillow and go back to sleep.

Euphemia rolled over in bed and snuggled up to her favorite pillow—or that's what she attempted to do.

Hm? My favorite...pillow? She frowned without opening her eyes. *It's harder than I remember. And it's got a weird shape.*

Her pillow felt like a thick log drilled into the ground. It was smooth to the

touch, but harder than a rock and had curves. She ran her hands down to where the log could conceivably branch out, and indeed, the solid object was connected to smaller, root-like objects. Euphemia sleepily contemplated what she was touching with her eyes still shut tight, forming deep creases in her brow. She was none the wiser that there was a pair of eyes carefully studying her.

Oh, I know! This isn't a pillow, it's a log! I've always wanted a long log-like pillow, but this is a pillow-like log! But what's a log doing jutting out of my bed?

Euphemia's eyes snapped open. Something hard was close enough for her eyelashes to brush against. What she had rubbed her cheek on definitely wasn't a log despite the similar cylindrical shape.

Shocked awake, Euphemia assessed the object her arms were wrapped around. It was a well-built arm.

Oh my gosh! What is this?!

"You're up?" a deep voice asked above her.

"Uh-heh?" she squeaked.

She craned her neck up to see the face of a half-naked man, much farther away than she thought, but still right above her. The man looked down at her from where he stood bent down with one hand thrust into the bed, and her hands were coiled around his muscular wrist. The awfully firm and solid thing she was feeling up had turned out to be his arm.

She stifled a cry and chunked away the arm. Naturally, it was impossible to throw an arm connected to a body. Sure enough, it didn't budge, and Euphemia was sent rolling back from the momentum of her shove.

"Oh my gosh!"

Euphemia quickly scooted sideways on the bed to get away. The perfectly fitted sheets wrinkled under her. The man cocked his head, curious about her reaction, but he didn't seem to mind his messed-up sheets or Euphemia's awkward escape.

"The rain will let up soon," he said abruptly and stood up straight, removing

his hand from the bed. He had an incredible body that bodybuilders worked a lifetime to achieve and models tried to imitate with nano-sculpting.

Wh-Who? Who is he?!

Euphemia mustered what little self-control she had and swallowed a shrill scream. Thankfully, she managed to keep quiet, but her mind was in complete panic mode. Her body froze with her hands clutching the comforter so hard her knuckles turned white. The man didn't move. The two stayed locked staring at each other for a long, silent pause.

"You've got nothing to fear. Though...I doubt saying that will help."

More silence followed.

The teal eyes studying Euphemia had a sharp glint to them, but they didn't strike her with dread. The man stayed perfectly still like a statue, his breathtaking muscles looked like they were chiseled from marble. It was as if he were trying to show her he meant no harm by not moving.

After a long silence, Euphemia's nerves eased up a little. She finally relaxed enough to shift her eyes away from the man's impeccable six-pack and take in her surroundings.

Stark-white walls made the spacious room bright in the half-light of early morning. Thanks to the light, Euphemia could see the man very well. His appearance was remarkably distinct in so many ways she found herself instinctively captivated by him.

Sharp features with a wild, almost animalistic bent were exquisitely arranged on his chiseled face. The glimmer in his teal-blue eyes was so alluring she couldn't pry her eyes from them again.

His long hair fell past his shoulders and its stunning silver-gray color stood out all the more against his swarthy skin. His skin looked like freshly tanned leather stuck firmly to refined, corded muscles.

He was an attractive man with an imposing figure that cast a shadow across the room. He could've been a model, for all Euphemia knew.

Meanwhile, he stared intensely at her with a mystifying expression on his

handsome face. His powerful eyes studied her. Neither spoke a word, captured in each other's eyes.

Eventually, the man tore his eyes away from hers and turned to the side. He let out a small sigh and shook his head, then brought his left hand over his mouth as if deep in contemplation.

The gesture was neither curt nor violent, but Euphemia felt such unexplainable dismay that she needed to put as much space between her and the man as physically possible. She sat bolt upright.

"Excuse me...who are you? And where am I?" The voice sounded too frail to be hers, but Euphemia was relieved she was at least able to talk coherently at a time like this.

"The man who happened to save you. And this is my house for the time being," a deep voice befitting of the man's appearance quietly answered her.

While his tone sounded gentle, a brief flash of what looked like fangs peeked out from behind his lips when he spoke. Euphemia's eyes opened as wide as physically possible.

"Saved me...? Ah!"

That's right! I just remembered! How could it have slipped my mind until now? How did I end up in this man's bed? It was because of last night, or rather what happened early this morning.

What happened several hours earlier came rushing back to her: the men who suddenly jumped out in the middle of the freeway; being threatened with a gun, pushed onto the brush, nearly raped, and then—

Euphemia reflexively wrapped her arms around herself in a tight grip. It did nothing to stop her from reliving the sensation of filthy fingers and tongues running over her skin. Nor did it stop the memory of their disgustingly hot breath against her earlobes or their vulgar snickers.

"Hey, are you okay?"

He put his large, solid hand on her shoulder, jolting Euphemia into the realization she was shaking so hard the bed trembled under her. Surprised, she

lifted her head and came face to face with the unfamiliar man. He had bent his towering body to lean over the bed to assess her well-being.

I feel like I've seen these eyes before, but something's different—right, they were glowing silver last night.

His eyes submerged her high-strung, panic-stricken heart in a cool, refreshing stream of pure water. Though his eyes had a cold color, they encased her in a warm blanket of kindness—the man's eyes held that kind of power.

And the large hand he rested on her shoulder was very warm. She became unaware of the passage of time, engulfed in a mysterious exchange of chill and warmth as it slowly silenced the raging storm of fear that had threatened to swallow her whole only moments before.

The man patiently waiting for her shoulders to stop trembling suddenly caught her eye and stared in awe. "You have huge eyes. They're unbelievably emerald."

"Eh? Eyes? Ah. Did you save me?"

"Didn't I just say so?" the man said dismissively, dropping his gaze from her eyes.

Following his lead, Euphemia lowered her gaze to her attire. She was still wearing the same pants, and a towel had been meticulously wrapped around her chest underneath the covers. She took a closer look to see her ripped blouse still clinging to her underneath the towel. In other words, aside from removing her shoes and wrapping her in a towel, this man hadn't touched her.

Maybe he's not a bad guy after all?

"Um...what happened to those men?"

"Beats me. They ran off somewhere. I don't know who they are, and I don't care. But I'd say with the way things went down they won't be attackin' you again."

That was a given. One man had been thrown 5 mols into a cactus bush and abandoned his accomplice to flee with their only means of transportation, while the other had witnessed a wild Muta killed barehanded in front of him. Anyone

who valued their life would do anything to avoid getting involved with this man again. While that was true, they hadn't targeted Euphemia just because she had been at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"But they knew that I would be driving on that exact freeway at that exact time!"

"Do you always return to the city from the Wilds at that hour?"

"Not always. Last night was an exception..."

"It was more this morning than last night," he corrected her. "Don't do it again. If you want to live, that is."

"I won't."

"....."

Euphemia's eyes were still lowered to her clothing, so she hadn't noticed the man's eyes widen partially before he averted them.

"Well, I did send them off with a warning. They probably were lyin' in wait to ambush you, but in my professional opinion, it likely won't happen again. So you can relax for now and leave the rest to the police."

Euphemia stayed quiet.

Did his warning have that strong of an impact among thugs and gangs? Euphemia couldn't deny his inhuman strength. But going to the police meant informing her older sister. That was bad. Very bad. Then again, if someone out there had marked her as a target, things weren't going to end with this one incident.

"What's wrong?" the man asked when he saw her shoulders droop.

"Nothing. So, about that M-Muta...what happened to it?" she stuttered, changing the topic.

"You remembered that part? I've already taken care of it. You don't have to know the details. Actually, forget the whole thing ever happened."

In other words, the man had attended to all sorts of things since she had fainted.

What in the frontier worlds did he do with that Bijour? For that matter, what does he mean by, 'I've already taken care of it.' I doubt he kept it as a pet. Does he mean he just killed it and left its remains behind? Did he dispose of the body?

Euphemia was a biologist specialized in phytology. That meant she mostly worked with plants, but she worked with living things on a daily basis, regardless. Dealing with the corpse of a dangerous and rare specimen required filling out a lot of troublesome paperwork with city authorities. She hesitated to ask him how he did it in such short order—he probably wouldn't answer her anyway.

"So, I know this is coming awfully late, but I want to thank you. Thank you for saving me," Euphemia said nervously.

She was gradually coming to understand he didn't mean her any harm—or rather, he had little interest in her and that made her feel just a smidge disappointed.

"Don't worry 'bout it. It's something I did on a whim anyway. Go home once the rain lets up. I parked your car in front of the house."

Euphemia watched him traverse the length of the room, uninterested in turning back to take another look at her. The man threw on a shirt he had tossed artlessly onto a chair. It was fitting that his every move attracted the eye like he was natural born movie star.

The tight, short-sleeved black shirt coiled around his thick neck, hugged his broad shoulders, and exposed his bulging arms. For all that, he had a trim waist, and his buttocks, Euphemia gauged, was probably tighter than hers. His leather pants clung to the well-defined muscles below his waist, and his long, toned legs ended in leather boots fitted with rivets.

His appearance was unmistakably that of a warrior.

Euphemia quickly tossed aside the comforter and scurried as close to the edge of the bed as her tightly wrapped towel would allow.

"But...wait! I don't know where this is! Where exactly are we?" Euphemia asked as she frantically scoured her mind for the name she'd heard last night. "Um, er, M-Mister...Zel?" The man finally stopped and turned his neck,

revealing a striking side profile.

“You remembered? You can just call me Zel. Leave off the honorifics.”

“That’s a pretty short name. Is it a nickname?” She doubted it was his full name. “I’m Eu—”

“*Don’t!* You don’t have to tell me.”

Euphemia’s eyes rounded when he impatiently interrupted her. “Sorry?”

“We’ll probably never meet again. Nothin’ good’ll come of you telling me your name. We’re in west Gothic City, District S. Take the road out of here to the east and you’ll come out on Middle Circle. This is the door to the bathroom, if you need it. Feel free to use it however you want. I left a change of clothes for you if what I have on hand is fine. I’ll get out of your way.”

The man said more in that one breath as he slowly retreated from the room than he had since they met. Once he reached the door, he poured coffee into a mug from the electric kettle set on top of the sideboard, and placed it on the table beside him. He hesitated by the door for some reason.

District S was an exclusive high-end residential area in Gothic City. Surprised, Euphemia took a good look around her. She hadn’t realized it before, but she was sitting on a king-sized canopy bed that was as the name implied: fit for a king. The furniture and appliances had a modern simplicity to them, but they were all top-end.

“Is this your place?” she asked, returning her gaze to him.

“You’re a nosy one. You’re not going to get anything by asking,” he muttered. “This is a spare house I normally don’t use. It’s not my place, it’s a rental. Drink some coffee if you want it. You don’t have to greet me again. Leave as soon as you’re done,” Zel stated bluntly, and left for real this time. The heavy wooden door with black varnish slowly closed, concealing the man in black behind it.

What’s his problem? The strength suddenly drained from Euphemia once she was left alone in the room. *Who in the colonies is he? He didn’t seem like a bad guy. At any rate, I can’t stay like this.*

Her blouse hung in shreds, her hair dangling in a tangled mess of half-braids.

She carefully slid off the bed and headed for the door he had pointed out.

The equally spacious bathroom appeared immaculate with its pristine white walls. The daily rainfall would let up soon, signaling morning's arrival to everyone who lived on planet. More than half the sky had grown bright with the coming dawn. The sun began to rise, the light of its newborn daybreak still shallow, like water at the river's edge.

There weren't any windows along the bathroom walls, but the ceiling had a skylight fitted with bars, where Euphemia watched the falling raindrops.

It was still dark, but she chose not to flip on the lights. The white bathroom would be filled with morning sunlight soon enough. Now that she stopped to think about it, the bedroom had large windows fitted with sturdy bars as well. Were steel bars part of the security package for the higher-end homes in District S? It seemed like an awfully outdated security measure for modern high-tech alternatives.

Wondering about it wouldn't get her anywhere, so Euphemia quickly stripped off her clothes and cranked the shower faucet all the way to the right. Hot water gushed forth in a luxurious waterfall from the showerhead.

A big jetted tub rested invitingly next to the shower, but while she wanted to slowly warm herself up, she hesitated to use it. Brand new expensive-looking shampoo, conditioner, and soap lined the shower shelf embedded in the wall. Euphemia took a second look to see a bottle of bubble bath next to bath salts and bath oils with flowery fragrances arranged on the shelf. It was inconceivable for a man as gruff and brusque as Zel to buy a bathing product set like this, so Euphemia concluded that a rental manager must take care of the place.

She ripped the paper off a bar of rose-shaped soap and diligently scrubbed her body with a loofah cloth. The soft woven surface of the dual-textured loofah foamed with delicate bubbles. A flick of the nearby controls triggered the sonic scrubbers to cleanse her deep pours while she scrubbed the areas where the sleazebags touched her twice. Even raking the exfoliating side of the loofah over her skin wasn't enough to help her forget the revolting sensation of their touch, but Euphemia preoccupied her thoughts with another matter. The best

method to overwrite fear was to experience something more impactful. In her case, that requirement was fulfilled by her encounter with the sexy man shrouded in mystery, and her current baffling situation.

Those two extraordinary elements may have very well saved her from falling into a miserable state of mind normally inflicted upon anyone who had experienced assault. By the time she turned the shower and sonic scrubbers off, she felt like she had returned quite close to her usual state of mind.

Euphemia pulled an oversized bath towel from the closet and spread it out to find it was, as expected, a famous brand-name towel with material so soft it felt like clouds on her skin. The high-quality genetically modified cotton-like material rapidly absorbed the water from her skin and hair and cleaned the towel at the same time. She quickly rubbed on the lotion on the shelf and borrowed the Eau de Cologne for a spritz or two while she was at it. The refreshing citrus fragrance was subtle instead of overpowering.

Since her hair was still wet, Euphemia decided not to put it up. She was going to go straight home and take another shower with her own products anyway, one shower wasn't enough to feel clean after what she went through, and so she wrote off doing anything with her hair. Next, she spread open the neatly folded shirt Zel had left on the shelf for her. It had to have belonged to him, because it was as big as a tablecloth with the arms spread out.

Wow, I thought it was going to be big, but this is huge! she mused, holding it against her chest to compare sizes.

Euphemia was on the petite side, but that only meant she was slightly shorter than the planet's average adult woman. In spite of that, the black shirt went right past her thighs and stopped just above her knees. The width of the shirt was on the narrower side in comparison to its length, but two Euphemias could have easily fit inside it.

She had to fold the sleeves close to a dozen times before she finally saw her hands. But she paid its size little mind as she pulled on her underwear and knocked the dirt off her amazingly intact pants before pulling them on as well.

The bathroom lacked any makeup, so she slapped her cheeks in front of the mirror to give her overly white skin a temporary red tint. Then she combed her

hair out more carefully than usual. Euphemia's gorgeous blond hair, which was slightly darker than normal because it was wet, reached her waist. Although her thick hair shone and felt like silk, she didn't particularly care for it. She always thought the color was too flashy.

Her similarly oversized eyes were vivid emeralds that looked like freshly grown spring moss, which gave others the impression that she was a frivolous blonde bimbo without any intelligence. That was the last impression she wanted people to have of her as a scientist.

Regardless of her woes, this was the face she was born with.

Euphemia gave up on getting all the knots out of her hair and put the brush down, picking up the towel she had used to give the wet bathroom a quick wipe down instead. She didn't see a washing machine anywhere, so she tossed the wet towel into the basket sitting on the floor.

No one was in the bedroom when she returned. She was disappointed even though she expected it. Did her mystery man return to his own room to sleep? From what he told her, he went through a lot last night.

She wouldn't achieve anything by thinking about him, so she picked up the mug of coffee he'd poured for her before she had gone into the shower. The coffee filling the big, heavy mug to the brim was kept warm by the mug's internal heater. The hot bitter flavor stimulated her tongue and brain.

I wonder why he saved me. He said he did it on a whim... Why did he even know I was going to be attacked in the first place? Thinking about it more carefully, the whole thing sounded too good to be true.

Euphemia was starting to doubt if it was truly a coincidence that Zel had been driving his car past the same area of the freeway at that hour of the night. After all, not many people went outside city limits just before rainfall.

At least, not normal humans.

That said, Euphemia had also been outside the city at that hour. *No one will be around*—she had made light of the situation, thinking it was free from danger without people. Her foolish naivety over a perceived security was already deeply impressed upon her by those who tried to rape her, but if a

powerless woman like herself could roam the Wilds, how could a man of superior physique and fighting technique doing the same be considered strange?

In retrospect, he had taken out two other armed men with less effort than it'd take to swat a fly.

He *also* single-handedly defeated the ferocious Muta as it leapt at him. Barehanded, too. That was not a human feat. And then there was one more out-of-place element Euphemia had confirmed with her own eyes.

In the darkest hour right before the rainfall, his eyes had glowed without a light source. They emitted a silver gleam.

Who in the world is he?

That question was all that filled her roiling thoughts.

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ZELAIDE stood by the second-story window watching the young woman walk toward the gate underneath the façade eaves.

A small Muta that had just returned from its hunt perched on his stone solid shoulder. About the size of a hawk, the bird-type Muta had been Zelaide's sole family since he found the injured chick and fostered it. This species of Muta generally couldn't be domesticated, except for the exceptionally rare occasion someone stumbled across an unhatched egg and didn't accidentally kill it. Not that it mattered, since Zel had known nothing about raising a Muta from the outset.

"Look at that woman's hair, Topsy," Zel spoke to the Muta lovingly nudging his cheek.

"Chwirk?" Topsy cooed in response.

Under the morning light just after the rains, Euphemia's wet hair shimmered like a crown. Zel had gently scooped up her hair out of curiosity while she slept on his bed, and discovered that her golden locks felt smoother than any of the most luxurious materials he'd ever touched. Silk and velvet had nothing on her hair.

The woman had thrown on the shirt he'd left out for her, and despite how laughably huge it was on her, she appeared mystifyingly dignified in his eyes. The luscious waves of hair she'd let down her back cascaded over his shirt like a golden river over black mud.

"Who knew such beautiful hair existed on this planet," he murmured.

She shouted something in a loud voice from the foyer before she left for good. He couldn't quite make out what she said because of the echo from the vaulted ceilings and the mezzanine, but from what he gathered, she was thanking him. As soon as he heard her voice, he left his bedroom, where he had confined himself, and returned to the room she had occupied until then. From that room he could look down on the front yard unseen behind the tall grove of trees out front.

The room had been neatly tidied up. She had also washed the coffee mug. While he felt a sense of unexplainable embarrassment over that, his sharp eyes picked up on the one mistake she had made. She left without the specs he had placed on top of the sideboard for her. The pair he had picked up off the summer grass last night.

Won't she trip if she can't see?

Zel swiftly scooped up the specs. He'd easily make it with time to spare if he ran right now. He held up the dainty frame fitted with light-purple hexagonal glass and looked through it.

What is this thing for? It's just normal glass.

Exasperated, Zel dangled the frame in front of his face. He was aware that, unlike his indispensable need for black-tinted specs, some humans wore specs without a prescription for the sole purpose of fashion.

Why does she try to hide those beautiful eyes?

The woman's bright emerald green eyes that looked like spring leaves against the sun was a rarity, even in the melting pot of different races known as Gothic City. Zel contemplated her unusual qualities, heedless of his own uniquely rare appearance. She had real blond hair and blemish-free porcelain skin. From any angle, he could tell she was a proper young lady from a good family who could

afford generations of gene editing. But that wasn't all there was to her.

Zel deeply inhaled.

The feisty woman hadn't lost her pride when she'd been pushed down by her assailants. Instead, pure determination had filled her.

If Zel hadn't noticed her eyes in that moment, he most likely would've never seen such a unique set of eyes in his lifetime. He would've never known the vivid emerald of the wide, hell-bent eyes staring at the blade meant to end her life. They had reflected brightly in the dead night, despite the fact that even he, who could navigate the dark with ease, couldn't tell colors apart in the pitch-dark.

Now he felt extremely glad that those gorgeous eyes didn't end up shut forever. He felt relieved to have made it in time. Even though he had thought nothing of her life up until the second he saw those eyes.

It doesn't matter...this'll be the first and last time we meet. She seemed like an authentic proper lady to me. I'd bet that's why somebody's targetin' her. Probably just a kidnapping for ransom money. Those brainless thugs weren't trained more than a monkey, and they called themselves Vermis. Probably just another one of the countless sleazy organizations infestin' this city.

Zelaide's heart grew heavier the more he thought about her. This was an exceedingly rare feeling for him, considering he had little interest in humans.

But why was that woman outside city limits at that hour?

Her location at that hour had been so unnatural that if they were relatives or close friends, he would've thoroughly grilled her about it. Even as strangers, he had almost questioned her.

He wondered what type of organization she belonged to. Extensive agricultural farms and large-scale factories did exist in the city outskirts. However, every farmstead, ranch, and factory was equipped with strictly managed residences for their overnight employees, which ruled out working there as a possible factor for why the pretty young lady was driving down the freeway in the dead of night.

What a strange, mysterious woman. She's done a hell of a job throwin' me off

my game.

Zel's instincts were screaming at him in warning—he mustn't get further involved with the woman. And his instincts had saved him countless times, and he trusted the intuition that kept him alive. Or more precisely, his intuition was all he could trust.

Polished gravel was laid out in the front yard instead of a manicured lawn. He had switched out the lawn for gravel to make it impossible for any attackers to hide the sound of their footsteps should they invade his territory from the outside. He had parked her white car in a corner at the end of the gravel path. Her tiny shoes crunched the stones below.

And then the woman's foot caught on the gravel and she pitched forward. Her damp blonde hair flew around her.

"Idiot. What are you doing?"

Is she blind without her specs after all?

Zelaide instinctively reached out his arms to catch her, even though the window frame was the only thing in front of him. His sudden movement surprised Topsy into flapping its long wings. Zelaide's silent prayer must have come true, because the woman caught her balance just in time and sheepishly laughed at herself before putting her hand on the car door.

Wow. She's laughing at herself...

He remembered how she had smiled softly right before she awoke too. She was so full of life that he found himself unintentionally enthralled by her.

But she looked pretty nervous when her eyes snapped open and she found herself face to face with him. He couldn't fault her for it. She had been violated by filthy thugs, had narrowly escaped an attack by the ferocious Muta, and to top it all off, she had lost consciousness and woken up next to him.

Any normal woman would've fainted again. Zel knew all too well what others thought of his appearance.

His height and muscles were easily twice the size of an average human male,

his skin swarthy. He found coordinating colors took too much effort, so he always wore black clothes, lurking as a dark mass even in the daytime. His purposely unmaintained, long ashen hair stood in stark contrast to the rest of him as it fell from his head in random directions.

And then there were his callous teal-blue eyes suffused with a sharp glint.

There wasn't a soul who wouldn't look away when he locked his eyes intently upon them. It didn't matter if he wasn't glaring at them. Ordinary, weak humans intrinsically discerned the dangerous aura around him and were careful not to look at or approach him while keeping a wary eye on him from a distance.

On the other hand, plenty of people approached him solely because of his idiosyncratic looks. The majority were creeps with shady histories and disturbing fetishes. After all, Zelaide's appearance made decent citizens tremble in their boots just from looking him in the eyes.

Most women would normally fear the worst for their chastity if they woke up with a beast of a man like him hovering over their bed. As it was, he'd tried his best not to look or touch her more than absolutely necessary.

He intentionally kept the conversation to the bare minimum in order to avoid scaring her any further. Yet, despite shrinking back from him with nervousness and suspicion, she had been very expressive. She had earnestly taken his advice to heart and looked ashamed of her foolish choice. He could've asked her a lot more, but he assumed she must've been exhausted, so he quickly ended the conversation and left the room to let her rest more comfortably.

From what he observed from the window, she had successfully used the shower and didn't seem to be cowering with fear. They hadn't broken into her car and he'd made sure her stuff wasn't stolen, so he hoped she was able to breathe a little easier now.

She's a woman with an insane amount of grit and resolve that you'd never guess just by lookin' at her. But this is goodbye. I'll never see you again.

Just when Zelaide thought she was going to enter her car, the woman swung her head over her shoulder with her hand resting on the door.

She looked up at him, squinting against the bright morning sunlight after the rain. He assumed she was checking out the building she was taken to. It was the obvious thing to do. The gate and fence didn't have a nameplate or address number on them, but she'd immediately know her whereabouts when she came out on Circle Line after driving some 200 mols down the main road.

She might come back another time to pick up the specs she forgot or to say thanks. There's a high chance she will if she's the daughter of a fancy family. I'm in big trouble if she does. I should probably leave this place for a while.

Truth be told, Zelaide knew he should've escorted her home after the frightening experience she went through. He hesitated to offer because it was wrong for a savage-looking man like him to know where she lived, and he knew the situation would be unpleasant in the off-chance her family spotted him. This house was located in a rich and exclusive neighborhood, so he knew she would be safe on her way back. It was a bad idea to throw either her life or his further into disarray beyond what had already happened.

Luckily for Zelaide, jobs came for him without pause no matter where he was, and he hadn't heard any rumors recently about the *Huntsman* showing up. His pockets were lined with more than enough cash. Disappearing for a few days wouldn't be a problem since he could contact his agent Palmina whenever he wanted.

Well, this is probably the last I'll see of her. Even if she comes for her specs, she'll give up and leave as soon as she learns I'm out. But I guess I'll get outta here for a while just in case.

Zelaide scratched the pterosaur's chin as he forcefully closed the lid over the incomprehensible sense of loss he felt.

"Topsy, mind sending her off in my stead?"

"Chwirk?" Topsy cooed in response.

"Come back and let me know if anything happens to her. Though from the look of it, I might just be overthinkin' things."

The woman glared his way for a while, but eventually scrunched her face up in a big scowl and stuck her red tongue all the way out before quickly slipping

into her car. Zel doubted she saw him, though her head was angled right at him.

What was that just now? Zelaide unknowingly raised the corners of his lips. *She didn't break. She hasn't lost that drive to deny her attackers victory one bit. I doubt we'll ever meet again.*

But that's for the best.

The engine roared to life and the white car took off, spraying gravel behind it. Zelaide saw her turn her head sideways to look back just before she drove out of the gates, and he instinctively jumped away from the window.

The sound of the vrooming car faded into the distance.

Tipsy soared high into the sky.

She left.

He deliberately hadn't asked for her name. She'd been about to tell him herself, but he'd rushed to stop her. Nothing would come of her telling him her name. He pretended not to hear the whisper inside that said he should've asked her. Not knowing each other's identity was how it was supposed to be, and it was for the best. Gorgeous blonde hair and emerald eyes. The red tongue she'd stuck out under the bright sunlight left a strange afterimage lingering with him.

She colored his world for but a moment, and that moment instantly fell to the past. That's all their encounter was.

Zel smiled dryly and left the window.

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"THANK you for saving me! You really helped me out!" Euphemia's voice echoed up the modern vaulted ceiling through the mezzanine. "Hello? Zel? How about you show yourself just once? I'm trying to say a proper goodbye before I leave!" She raised her voice even louder but her high-pitched shout only bounced off the walls, failing to bring even a shadow of the man dressed in all-black out into the open.

Euphemia threw the front door open and shouted over her shoulder one last time to be sure, "I really will just go straight home! Are you okay with that?!"

Naturally, her shout elicited no response, infuriating her to the point she

slammed the heavy door behind her in a fit of anger. Unfortunately, not even her little tantrum caused anything to happen.

What's his problem?! I get it, he doesn't want anything more to do with someone like me. Good-for-nothing jerk! I'm a pitiable woman who just barely survived murder! A gentleman would've escorted me home! Or at least to the car!

For all her blustering, Euphemia more than knew that was a selfish wish on her half. Her foolish actions had put her in danger, and Zelaide had never tried to appeal to her as a gentleman. Whether he was a gentleman or not, she thought his actions spoke volumes about his kindness, as he had not only saved her, but also brought her back to his home to rest. She didn't know how he had done it, but he'd also guaranteed her safety from those scoundrels.

Euphemia understood that much at least. It was just the irrational side of her that she couldn't control that was making her feel annoyed.

I'll start to hate myself if I keep these selfish thoughts up...

Crestfallen, she dropped her shoulders and kicked the gravel as she crossed the diligently maintained front yard until she came out where Zel said she would find her car. He had neatly parked her car underneath a large tree beside the gate leading out of the property.

How did he transport her car back to his house after he chased away the two men? Considering the situation, he'd had his own car, and while she didn't want to think about it, the Bijour's corpse to transport, so how had he gotten her car here too? Though his identity was already shrouded in mystery as it was, there were just too many baffling elements surrounding him.

I have to look him up as soon as I get home—Whoa!

Euphemia's foot caught on the polished marble gravel and she nearly fell flat on her face. She barely stuck her other foot out in time to keep herself from toppling over, but it was quite the ugly save. It aggravated her, but she started laughing despite herself when she realized she had pulled it off because she was wearing shoes with low heels.

Her car showed no signs of being damaged or ransacked. The purse she had

chucked into the back seat sat there, just as she left it. She opened the door through the fingerprint authentication lock, slid into the car on her small behind, and then gazed up at the building she had been inside for the past few hours.

“Wow.”

It was a luxurious white stucco, two-story house that was neither too large nor too small. Surrounded by just the right amount of space, the yard was landscaped with beautiful trees being tended to by several hovering drones.

The only part that bugged Euphemia was the sturdy bars equipped on every window, including those on the second-story, but they weren't ugly enough to ruin the beauty of the home, and she could be convinced of their necessity as a security measure in this city.

Didn't he say this wasn't his house though?

Euphemia certainly didn't think her mystery man would pick this picturesque house as his residence. He'd told her it was a rental, but did he live there alone? All of the toiletries left out were unused premium products. Did he have a proper housekeeper?

Or maybe a woman takes care of him. He looks kind of scary at first, but he doesn't seem like a bad guy, and it wouldn't be so strange for a man with an incredible body like him to have a patron or two funding his life... Right?

Though Euphemia didn't really understand why, she screwed her face up in a big scowl, and while she was at it, turned toward the house and stuck her tongue all the way out.

Feeling a little better, she started her car as if that would break her free of her brooding. She only now realized that her car was the only one parked at the house. What happened to his car? The house didn't have a garage, but it wasn't like Euphemia walked around the entire property, so she wasn't sure where else it could be. She couldn't fathom the man going anywhere without a car.

The car engine roared to life and gravel shot up behind it. The property gates opened automatically. She twisted her neck to see if the house had any identifying markers from the driver's seat, but naturally there wasn't a lot

number anywhere; not even a mail-delivery-drone box existed.

He's shrouded in mystery in every way! I'll commit this house's location to memory one way or another, so it doesn't matter!

Euphemia didn't want to linger now that she had left, so she stepped on the gas and floored it out of there.

The residential road wasn't very wide, but there was little pedestrian traffic because of the early-morning hour. Expensive residences lined both sides of the road, in rows of compact luxury homes instead of massive mansions. Perhaps it was best understood as a wealthy neighborhood where retired elderly couples enjoyed living out the rest of their lives in comfort. Either way, it wasn't the kind of neighborhood a man who exuded the exciting and alluring air of danger like Zel would choose to live.

Euphemia immediately came out on Middle Circle Line after driving for a few minutes, allowing the automated systems to take over after she set her destination. Middle Circle Line was the road in the center of the three circular routes concentrically surrounding Gothic City. Center Circle ran the inner route and Out Circle ran the course outside of it. The area within Out Circle was the so-called Uptown, where people from the middle-upper classes lived, and where many business offices, government administration buildings, cultural facilities, and universities were concentrated.

Downtown was located along Out Circle's exterior route, where the majority of low-income citizens lived and the normal residential areas and small-scale factories had been built. Like cities all over, there were dangerous, corrupt neighborhoods and blocks here and there in Downtown, but the affluent-at-a-glance Uptown was also considered a hotbed of crime. They just hid it better. For that reason, it was the unwritten law of the planet that everyone protected themselves regardless of age, gender, and wealth.

Beyond the city's towering walls were the Plains, which were often called the Wilds because of the roaming Muta.

Gothic City considered a circumference of 20 kyros around its walls as part of its territory, and that was where well-maintained large-scale factories and farmsteads expanded their businesses. Their products were consumed within

the city, with the excess distributed to other cities. However, despite its technical definition as a part of the city, farming, manufacturing, and production at the outside facilities were almost always done during the day except under extreme or special circumstances.

In that sense, Euphemia had committed the worst possible mistake ever. Even small children from Downtown knew not to go outside city walls after the sun set.

I had to! I just had to! This opportunity only comes once a year! I had no choice! It never even crossed my mind that something like that could happen... I think it's reasonable to say it's their fault. Sure, Erica might have a point calling me a rash person incapable of seeing anything around me. Now, I can agree it would've been a better choice to have just stayed the night at the official lodging provided by work, but...

Euphemia gently turned the steering wheel to the right switching from autodriven to manual. Her car was steadily approaching a part of the city she recognized. Before she knew it, the night had completely dawned into a new day.

I couldn't resist what a momentous occasion last night marked.

Last night, she had reveled in the beauty of the flowering Night Blooms cultivated in the laboratory greenhouse for her research.

Night Bloom flowers blossomed simultaneously on a midsummer night, only once a year.

As the name suggested, the thin petals emitted a pale light at night, creating a magical world of their own under the moonlight. Unfortunately, the delicate flowers withered the same night they bloomed. From its seeds, it was possible to refine the most hallucinogenic narcotic in the plant world.

Handling the plant was considered a serious taboo for obvious reasons, and the cultivation and distribution of it was strictly forbidden in the colonies. Years of research had managed to weaken its toxicity, opening it up to medical use under close supervision, but even that was limited to the Night Blooms cultivated by government-controlled research facilities and laboratories like Euphemia's workplace.

Last night was the only day they'd bloom this year.

I waited a whole year for this one night. I stayed the last three nights at the Dome until I was finally able to observe, for the first time, the moment a room full of Night Blooms opened.

When the moonlight had struck the tempered glass dome, the flower buds slowly unfurled. Before long, the dome had been filled with countless pale-flower lanterns, and the flowers swayed as if conversing under the ventilation system aimed on them to encourage pollination. It was an artificially made landscape, but the magical spectacle mesmerized Euphemia nonetheless.

Euphemia was a junior researcher at the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute's Applied Plant and Animal Research Laboratory. The top researchers of the laboratory studied plants and lichens that were useful to humans, including research on how to reduce Night Bloom's toxicity, which Euphemia focused on as the core of her research.

The institute only cultivated the amount necessary for medical and research purposes, but Night Bloom was an endemic, annual plant species that could grow anywhere on the planet in the right environment, so it wasn't surprising that people bypassed the strict regulations to secretly cultivate and circulate the narcotic plant on the black market.

The narcotic drug refined from Night Bloom seeds was popularly called *Nightz*.

Nightz had a strong hallucinogenic and tonic effect, with high dependency and addiction rates capable of breaking a person in a mere three months of regular use. Though it was self-evident that the government severely cracked down on the drug, there were endless loopholes in the system put in place on a frontier planet ruled by dazzling beauty and controlled chaos.

Nightz slipped through the system by changing its name and concentration to thoroughly permeate the lower levels of society.

As a general rule, Night Blooms were only observable in research facilities. The bewitching flower was so strictly withheld from society that Euphemia had only ever seen one specimen stalk in her university's botanical garden during her college days. She had wanted to see one bloom ever since and jumped at

the opportunity to record the flowers' growth over the past week since they first sprouted buds. She wound up staying the past three days at the laboratory, but it was well worth it because she had at long last observed the Night Blooms flower from beginning to end.

Most of the other researchers on nightshift with her were veterans who were already used to the blooming, even though it only happened once a year. Hence, while they hung out with Euphemia to partake in her excitement, it wasn't a big event to them, and they headed straight to the institute's lodging to sleep when the blooming period had ended and the flowers began to wither. But sleep eluded Euphemia who hopped in her car to drive home with her bubbling excitement at the forefront of her mind. Needless to say, she regretted what had happened after that.

I mean, yeah it was stupid, but it was my first time being away from my apartment for three whole days. I just knew Mrs. Mayo wouldn't keep her mouth shut if I didn't come back soon, and things were only going to get more complicated if she tattled on me to Erica.

Euphemia normally returned home at a regular time, and the reason for that was her half-sister from a different mother. Her older sister Erica, the mayor of Gothic City, felt a strong sense of obligation toward her younger half-sister and she became incredibly annoying if Euphemia failed to contact her regularly.

Busy even at the best of times, Erica shouldered a heavy responsibility as mayor of one of the most populated cities on the planet, and it was Euphemia's firm belief that she didn't have to take on the burden of caring for her younger sister on top of that. But Erica's favorite saying was, "There's just us two sisters to look after each other," and she had taken it to heart by deciding where Euphemia would work upon graduation. She had even objected when Euphemia said she wanted to rent her own place. It had taken persistent, calculated persuasion to change her mind.

"If you feel that strongly about it, fine. You're an adult now, so I can allow as much as living alone. But you will live in the place of my choosing. That's my condition."

There was definitely a part of Euphemia that thought her sister was abusing

her authority, but thanks to that, not only was she able to immediately move into a comfortable apartment complex in a safe neighborhood, but whatever actions the mayor had taken had landed her a job with little to no overtime or nightshifts. It wasn't unusual for workplaces to be considerate of sparing young women who worked in the city outskirts from the danger of late hour shifts, but it was basically guaranteed for Euphemia when the mayor went out of her way to earnestly request it.

Thanks to her sister's influence, she hadn't been asked to work overtime once—until three days ago. And even that was more because her desire to observe Night Blooms in all their glory had propelled her to convince her boss, the laboratory director, into reluctantly granting her permission to stay. The lab technicians might've been surprised to discover Euphemia missing from the lodging in the morning, if they didn't just write it off as her leaving early for her day off, but never in their wildest dreams would they think she had fallen victim to assault.

In other words, the only people who knew that Euphemia had been attacked by sicko thugs were her and the man called Zel.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? It's hard to say...

She turned a corner and drove into a familiar area.

As to be expected at this hour, the number of people out and about had increased in the district located in the outlying area of Uptown, where many students and researchers lived. Some of the best schools, art galleries, museums, large theaters, and libraries called this district home, too.

But I have to be careful not to disregard the things I need to reflect on. And I need to think about it carefully!

Euphemia squeezed the steering wheel as she reviewed her actions and what she could've done better to avoid future mistakes. She arrived in front of her apartment still in introspection, and parked her car in the designated space before rushing up to her room on the third floor.

Euphemia's apartment was located in a new building, and her unit had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a separate bathroom.

Best of all, the security was tight. She couldn't have rented an apartment like this right away under normal circumstances. It frustrated her to no end, but she knew she was blessed, thanks to her older sister. She was also aware of the fact that she wasn't living as independently as she liked to believe. Euphemia strove to be objectively self-aware.

I just want to rest for now.

She unlocked her front door and was welcomed by the familiar interior, the furniture and knickknacks picked to her taste, the earthy fragrance of the herbs she hung by the window. Just seeing the familiar objects blanketed her in a sudden sense of security, and her exhaustion hit her like a ton of bricks.

Not only had she been pulling all-nighters, but she'd only gotten two hours of sleep in that man's house. Today was her day off and she didn't have any engagements, so she planned to take it easy until Mrs. Mayo showed up in the evening. Although Euphemia had urgent matters to think about, such as why she had been attacked and who had hired those men, she knew it was impossible to think straight without revitalizing herself.

This district received an A-class safety rating, guaranteeing its safety. Plus, the man who'd saved her said she should be okay for the time being.

Feeling like she wanted to wash the feel of them off her again, Euphemia went into the bathroom and filled the bathtub with hot water. She was consciously trying not to think about it, but being violated by those men had deeply scarred her, especially with the trauma still so fresh in her mind.

"What the heck...?" Euphemia unintentionally gasped when she stripped off her clothes and stepped into the separate shower to rinse off first.

She hadn't realized it when she'd borrowed the shower at Zel's house in the dark, but looking at herself in the bright bathroom lights revealed *marks* where they had touched her, gruesome marks left behind by their fingers and crushing grip. They had left behind red, blue, and purple bruises that stood out distinctly on her white skin.

"Ugh..." Bile rose up from her stomach. A sudden, intense wave of nausea hit Euphemia.

It was the fear she had subconsciously shoved back because she didn't want to look weak in front of her mystery man. But the human body was more honest than the mind. The moment her brain's avoidance response was lifted, the fear and revulsion came flooding back at the same time her nervous tension melted away.

Euphemia crouched on the floor and threw up. The coffee she drank earlier that morning turned into disgusting brown vomit as it spilled onto the shower tile. The hot water immediately washed it away, allowing her to throw up even more without worrying about it. Her body was wracked with the shakes, but she still didn't care.

Forget it! I won't fall apart over something like this! I just have to throw it all up!

Hot water continued pouring on top of her head, but her limbs felt abnormally icy.

After throwing up all the contents of her stomach, Euphemia turned off the shower and sluggishly submerged into the bathtub. Hot water filled the tub, but it still took a few minutes before she felt her hands and feet warm up. Euphemia pressed a button and added even more water while triggering the deep clean mode for the sonic scrubbers. She let the hot gush of water and ticklish vibrations run over her.

That reminds me...that man's hand was warm too.

Euphemia thought of the big hand he had placed on her shoulder. He hadn't stroked her back or tried to soothe her with a gentle touch, but had softly left it there until the shudders from the verge of being swallowed whole by her fear abated.

If he had rubbed the areas where those pigs touched me, it might have acted like a disinfectant... No, that's a bad idea.

She jumped out of the hot water as if trying to leave her stupid thoughts behind. Still, there was a piece of her that found some support in that feeling. It helped her get through her second panic attack in peace as strange as the thought was.

It'll work out...somehow.

Euphemia quickly towed off and reached out to retrieve her pajamas from the shelf, but she dropped her hand to the ground instead to pick up the black shirt she'd just tossed off. She put it back on; the feeling of being wrapped up in the oversized garment gave her an odd sense of peace.

She bound her hair and crawled into bed, where sleepiness washed over her out of nowhere. Euphemia realized at last just how exhausted she was.

The big shirt draped freely around her body, enveloping her in its dry touch. The freshly washed shirt didn't have a smell, but she buried her chin in the large neckline for comfort anyway.

"Zel... Zelaide."

When should I go return this to him...?

In the moments before she fell into the grips of sleep, Euphemia's thoughts centered on those silver-blue eyes emerging in the darkness as the beacon of light that saved her.

†Chapter 3: Beast Blood Zelaide†

EUPHEMIA got plenty of sleep after she crawled into bed.

Suffering assault at early dawn had inflicted a great deal of damage to her psyche and only added to the mental and physical exhaustion she had built up over the past several days vigilantly observing the Night Blooms.

When she woke up in the late-afternoon, she became painfully aware of how famished she was. Her housekeeper Mrs. Mayo would arrive anytime now. While Euphemia was always grateful for the food Mrs. Mayo brought, she still much preferred starvation to dealing with the overbearing woman's impassioned nagging.

Mrs. Mayo had already treated her to an inquisition more appropriate for a preteen granddaughter than a grown woman the other day, when Euphemia had sent a D-com message about staying at the lab for three days. Mrs. Mayo gave her an earful, going on about how she wouldn't allow it if Euphemia's older sister Erica didn't sign off on it—permission which Euphemia did succeed in obtaining—and then she had demanded Euphemia send her a D-com every night at the exact same hour.

I can't handle her! I absolutely, positively, can't take her crap right now!

But she still needed food, even if she didn't feel like fighting for it.

Thinking about it now, she'd barely eaten anything in over twenty-four hours. She no longer experienced an urge to puke at the thought of food, indicating her much needed rest had helped pacify the feelings of utter disgust and revulsion roiling inside her. She had recovered much faster than she thought she would.

Maybe this shirt helped the healing process? I've turned it into my pajamas for the day. Euphemia buried her fingers into the shirt she'd borrowed from Zelaide. *I'll deal with the immediate problem by eating out.*

Being away from home for three days paired with the fact that she rarely

cooked for herself had left her refrigerator empty of all but drinks. Plus, her thoughts spiraled down into a dark, depressing place when she was alone. Euphemia didn't want anyone coddling her out of sympathy, but she also didn't want to be by herself.

She reached over and snatched up her Interactive Handheld Terminal, referred to more often as an IHT, and tapped Mrs. Mayo's picture in her contacts.

"Hello? Mrs. Mayo?"

"Euphemia?! Are you back? I was worried sick when you didn't contact me last night. I was just getting ready to leave for your place," Mrs. Mayo's voice said through the IHT.

"Ah, I was just calling you about that. I'm stuffed for the day, so can I take a rain check until tomorrow?"

"Pardon? Did you eat out?"

"You can say that. I'm sorry I forgot to D-com you last night... I'll be sure to have you come over tomorrow. I'll go ahead and let my sister know."

"Oh my. I don't mind, but are you all right? Make sure you let Miss Erica know you stayed out for three whole days. You know what, maybe I should just head on over there and confirm you're okay for myself."

"No! Don't go through the trouble! I'm heading out to meet up with a friend, so it will be a waste of your time to come right now. I'll be sure to send a D-com to my sister afterward. I better get going. Thanks for everything and really, sorry for worrying you. I'm looking forward to what you make me tomorrow. Bye!" Euphemia ended the call in the friendliest manner she could manage through her guilt.

Sleeping for so long made her feel sweaty. Euphemia tossed her IHT onto the couch and sluggishly plodded over to her full-length mirror.

The horrifying marks left on her fragile skin had almost completely faded away. Her knees peeked out from under the hem of the giant black shirt. She twirled in front of the mirror for no particular reason, then stuck out her red tongue for no particular reason either, before stripping off the baggy shirt and

lobbing it into the washing machine with the gusto of a pro basketball player.

It's not a lie if I actually go out to eat with a friend! Okay, now I know what to do!

Euphemia was the type to immediately take action once her mind was made up. She took another shower and was toweling off when she realized her specs were missing, and rummaged through her purse to find the case empty inside.

They were my favorite pair, and they were expensive too! She was upset over the loss, but it wasn't a huge inconvenience because they weren't prescription lenses. She only wore them as a kind of prop, to make her appear more intellectual, since everyone tended to take her appearance to mean she was some sort of frivolous, ditzy blonde.

Euphemia remembered seeing the specs on top of the end table beside the bed when she woke up in Zelaide's house. She had positively forgot them there altogether.

Now I've done it. I was in such a shock at the time, it slipped my mind. Will he think I'm a stupid girl again? Then again, this could be my chance! Now I've got two excuses to see him—his shirt and my specs.

No longer concerned with her specs, Euphemia quickly set about planning her outfit. Putting her hair up didn't look good without specs on. That said, she hated how much she stood out in a crowd with the waist-length hair she couldn't cut short because of her older sister's nagging. Euphemia contemplated what to do for a few moments before deciding to part her hair and braid it down both sides of her face like she used to do during her university days. Throwing a hat on and going for a casual look would be enough to disguise what she didn't like about her appearance.

She considered contacting one of her girlfriends until she remembered that one of her university friends worked as a police officer.

Wei Lin-jie is trustworthy. I'm positive he'd be willing to look into Zel for me if I ask him to, Euphemia concluded, satisfied with her stroke of genius. *I'll send him a D-com now. I hope he worked the early shift today.*

Euphemia threw off her towel and set about picking out the clothes she was

going to wear.

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“**IS** that true, Wei?”

“It’s true. I wish you wouldn’t underestimate our information network like that, Mia,” Wei Lin-jie said, lowering his velvety voice to a whisper.

Wei’s hard chest accentuated with well-defined muscles refined by his daily training as a police officer defined his tall frame. Though he served in the Second Criminal Investigation Division, one of the most dangerous divisions of the Gothic City Police Force, he never forgot how to be charming.

He readily accepted Euphemia’s invitation to dinner and had joined her at a diner near the Central Police Department after his shift. Euphemia only had to mention Zel’s name and features to Wei before he effortlessly listed off the man’s full name and job.

“I don’t know his full profile since he’s outside my jurisdiction, but I’m familiar with the name. You don’t need me to look him up for you. Zelaide Silvergray’s a famous freelance Contractor, you know? His type calls themselves Hunters though.”

“Neat! So, what’s a Contractor?” Euphemia asked, leaning across the table between them.

“Contractor, bodyguard, mercenary, odd-job man—they go by many names and professions, but the gist is they undertake any kind of dangerous job that involves fighting.”

“Bodyguards? Mercenaries? Sounds like something out of the movies. Who knew those professions actually still existed?” Euphemia mused.

“Well, anyone can take on whatever public title they like. We live on a dangerous world far out on the fringe; bodyguards have plenty of work. You just aren’t aware of it because you’re an easygoing young lady from a rich family,” Wei said while he slurped the noodles wrapped around a cluster of vegetables like it was the most delicious thing in the world. Deep-fried chicken garnished the top of his bowl.

“The city might look peaceful from the top of a shiny, heavily guarded tower,” he continued, “but criminals swarm in droves beneath the bright lights. Countless criminal cases happen every day without public knowledge. That said, things have gotten better thanks to your older sister increasing the police budget.”

“Young lady from a rich family? Now that’s rude,” Euphemia protested, pointing her spoon at him.

“What’s rude about calling a woman a young lady? You just proved my point, because only a young lady sheltered from the rest of the world would complain about a compliment like that.”

“Hmph.”

Euphemia stuffed her mouth with seasoned rice wrapped in a fluffy egg. The mouth-watering dish had been doused in vegetable sauce and did wonders for her tired body.

A young lady sheltered from the rest of the world. Euphemia couldn’t deny there was some truth to his accusation. Knowing what Wei was getting at, she decided to drop the topic altogether.

The more important thing was that she had learned her mystery man’s full name.

“So he’s called Zelaide Silvergray...” Euphemia repeated to herself.

Zel was his nickname, not an alias.

“Why are you asking about him anyway?”

“Hm? A bunch of stuff kind of happened... I’ll tell you about it later. But first, is there any way I can see the data on him?” Euphemia pulled her IHT from her purse and propped it up on the table. “I’m asking too much trying to see police intel on him, aren’t I? Can I take just a teeny-tiny peek?”

Euphemia peered up at the taller Wei from under her newsboy cap she had positioned at an angle and blinked her long eyelashes. His cheeks flushed a faint shade of scarlet as he shook his head.



“No can do. Even if you beg me with those puppy dog eyes, it’s still no. Mia, need I remind you how you rejected me during our university days?”

“I totally forgot!”

“Ugh, this is why rich young ladies from the high security districts aren’t worth the trouble,” Wei teased, throwing up his hands in defeat. “Still, you don’t have to go out of your way to search the police databanks for information on him. I can’t show you our files, but you can look him up on the DataNet like a normal person, you know? He’s famous in his, uh, line of work. Let me borrow your IHT for a sec.”

Wei accepted the IHT from Euphemia and his fingers made quick work of the search screen. The search results popped up immediately, and he spun the screen toward her.

Zelaide Silvergray’s profile filled the screen next to his picture.

It’s him!

Euphemia’s eyes widened. On her IHT was a picture of Zel from the bust up sporting shorter hair, and some basic information listed in the text beside it.

Zelaide Silvergray

Gender: Male

Age: Unknown (has the appearance of an adult male in his early-twenties)

Place of Birth: Unknown

Physical features (approximate):

Height: 193

Weight: 84

Hair: Silver

Eyes: Teal

Skin: Swarthy, Scars of Various Sizes.

Occupation: Freelance Contractor and Muta Hunter. Both S Rank.

Job Requests will only be accepted through Palmina Nielsen of Negotiator
G.

Contact: xxxx-xxxx-xxxx

List of Primary Past Jobs:

.....

.....

nota bene: Beast Blood

“Beast? He’s a Beast Blood?” Euphemia asked.

“Yeah, he’s a Beast Blood all right. Kind of rare, aren’t they?”

“Beast Blood...”

Euphemia closely stared at his handsome profile image as if devouring every pixel with her eyes. Then she pulled the IHT toward her to swipe her fingers over the keys. The new search results popped up right away.

Beast Blood (Therianthrope)

A subspecies with a chromosome arrangement that is subtly different from humans. The occurrence rate is estimated at 1 Beast Blood to every 10,000 humans. The ratio between men and women is about 4:1. Their average life expectancy is 106 years (according to the current data of 20×× year). Though there is variance among individuals, Beast Bloods are generally physically stronger and larger than humans, with their physical abilities and senses far surpassing human base stock and does not cover class A or higher genetic sculpting. Their intelligence tends to be on par with or slightly lower than humans, but there have been rare reports of exceptionally intelligent individuals. Beast Bloods have a naturally aggressive and combative disposition. Their most distinct physical characteristic is that their irises glow in the dark. It has yet to be discovered why or how they glow.

While still unconfirmed, anecdotal data suggests Beast Bloods dislike alcohol and nicotine, and love animal meat. They are disinclined to conform, and display poor collaborative skills. Hence, although Beast Bloods born to human parents are granted citizenship, the majority seek out independence at an early age. Beast Bloods born to Beast Blood parents, on the other hand, might not have citizenship. Although it is possible for humans and Beast Bloods to copulate, there are few reports of children born from a mixed-species union, likely due to the longer lifespans of Beast Bloods and the fact these cases are underreported. Regardless, scientists have calculated that the offspring of such a union has about a 90% chance of resulting in a Beast Blood.

The following is a list of the most atrocious crimes committed by Beast Bloods....

The rest of the page featured a table filled with the names of Beast Bloods on the run or in custody next to the horrific crimes they had committed.

To Euphemia’s relief, Zelaide Silvergray’s name wasn’t on the list. She scoured the Data Net with several other queries, but it provided similar results. Every description on the species detailed their bestial nature and mentioned a wild, violent disposition.

But he didn't do anything to me. He was so reserved, Euphemia thought. Sure, he threatened those pigs, but he stayed calm and didn't act like he was going to violently kill them. Killing the Muta was more out of self-defense than anything else... If he hadn't, we would've been dead.

Beast Blood. No wonder why his eyes glowed so bright in the dark. That silver glow was tinged with a beautiful blue.

"Mia? Euphemia?"

"....."

"Hey! Mia? You okay? What are you zoning out on me for?" Wei asked, waving his hand in front of her face.

"Huh? Oops, sorry. What were you saying?"

"Why are you looking up weird stuff like Beast Bloods and Zelaide Silvergray? Those aren't topics you come across normally. Something happened to you, didn't it?"

"Y-Yeah," Euphemia admitted.

She should've expected as much from a police officer.

Figuring it was smarter to tell a certain degree of truth than to cover it up completely, Euphemia summarized the events of the prior night for Wei. She told him what she could remember of her attackers as well, but she omitted the part where they had nearly raped her, choosing to leave it at them forcing her out of her car at gunpoint. Their possession of a Muta might've connected to a bigger crime, so she left out the graphic details and gave a simple explanation about what she saw.

"I see. Zelaide was right; you did something extremely stupid and careless going out at that hour! It didn't end poorly for you this time, but there's no guarantee someone will always randomly show up to save you. Don't do it again." Wei told her the same exact thing as Zel after he finished attentively listening to her story. She had avoided mentioning the most horrifying aspects of her encounter, but wound up with a scolding for it. If Wei knew the full-extent of what had happened he would've addressed it completely differently.

“I’m regretting it all as we speak,” she admitted, playing with her braids.

Wei sighed. “I’m not sure that makes me feel any better. Still though, I agree with him. They might not have been targeting you personally, but this reeks of a syndicate’s handiwork. Normal Vermis would never deal in deadly creatures like the Muta. An even bigger syndicate subcontracted the work out to them. You said someone called Shank hired them?”

“Yeah. I don’t really remember what was said before and after his name though.”

“Hmm. *Shank*. Searching just the name doesn’t come up with anything that matches the kind of person we’re talking about,” Wei said as he flicked through the images on his IHT. “But there *is* a rich pervert who gets off on watching young women being raped and tortured to death. There have been cases of that. It’s nauseating to think about, but your case might be related. I’ll look into it more for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Anyways, I’m shocked by Zelaide’s actions. I guess it goes to show he’s got more than enough women lined up he doesn’t need to jump on every opportunity?” Wei muttered.

“What is that supposed to mean? What are you talking about?”

“Huh? You really amaze me sometimes,” Wei shrugged at Euphemia for missing the meaning behind his words. “Never mind. Just don’t ever roam around outside the city after the sun sets again. Don’t wander around inside the city after dark either!”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Ack, should you really be showing a face like that to a man you’ve already rejected? Not that it matters too much.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ll send you a D-com once I’ve looked into it more. Stay on guard in the meantime.”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you.”

“By the way, have you told your sister yet?”

“I haven’t. If I screw up how I tell her, she might force me to quit my job. She’ll at the very least strip me of my right to live alone.”

“I thought so. But I definitely think you should tell her, or more like, you have to. Even in the worst scenario, you know she’s not doing that stuff just to annoy you.”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

“Your sister is worried about you. So am I. I’m glad you chose to rely on me.” Wei reached out and brushed aside Euphemia’s bushy bangs.

“Yeah, thanks for everything.”

“Ha. Don’t look like a puppy left in the rain. I’ll send you home. Let’s head out.” Wei stood up and patted her on the shoulder encouragingly before leaving the diner. Euphemia smiled and followed him out.

It’s not the same.

Both hands that had touched her shoulder were big and warm, yet Euphemia felt there was something distinctly different between Wei’s hand and *his*. She felt the same way gazing at the broad back and shoulders walking in front of her too. *He* hadn’t been the least bit kind to her, choosing instead to remain unapproachable during their short time together. Yet for some reason, she hadn’t been able to pry her eyes from him.

Once Wei dropped her off in front of her apartment building and went home, Euphemia ran straight to her room.

She had left the lights on as a precaution, but promptly flipped them off and stood in front of her floor-length mirror. Obviously, the eyes in her reflection didn’t glow in the dark. Not like his did.

They were so beautiful—almost like shooting stars breaking through the night sky.

Yet, he immediately put on his specs the moment his eyes met Euphemia’s, disguising their radiance. Almost as if he were ashamed of his own beauty.

Being a Beast Blood explained Zelaide’s tremendous strength and his curt

attitude.

Euphemia specialized in plants and never had much knowledge or even interest in Beast Bloods, until now. But she'd encountered a Beast Blood woman downtown before. Her friend had elbowed her side when she stared in fascination at the wild beauty walking toward her with a well-rounded body and long, toned legs. The woman in question shot her a sharp glare in return.

What are you looking at? Her eyes had said.

Euphemia's encounter with the Beast Blood woman had ended there, but when the news came on TV several days later with a report about a Downtown Beast Blood prostitute's murder, the picture they aired was of the woman she had crossed paths with. The news anchor dispassionately mentioned that the woman had been a victim of the Beast Blood Hunts.

Even a sheltered young lady like Euphemia knew that Beast Bloods were a unique species. One of the articles that had popped up during her Data Net search stated that 70% of all mass murders on the planet were committed by Beast Blood males. She'd come across many articles denouncing Beast Bloods as detestable abominations.

If there was one Beast Blood to every 10,000 humans, then at least 100 of them should be living in Gothic City, given its population was one million. Did he count as one of those hundred?

He'd chosen the perfect occupation for effectively using his aggressive nature. Bodyguard and Muta Hunter jobs needed combative people. Not to mention the fact he lived in a stunning home spoke volumes about how successful he had to be to pull in that kind of money.

He said we won't meet again. He didn't want to know my name either.

He retreated from Euphemia without eye contact, as if he were afraid to become involved with her. He didn't show himself again after he left the room either.

"We'll probably never meet again."

His rusty voice lingered in her ears.

You're wrong. Euphemia lifted her head. The pale-blue sky reminded her of his eyes. *I won't let things end here. Zel—Zelaide Silvergray!*

Euphemia recalled the last image she had seen of him. *I'm coming to get my specs! And to return your shirt. Don't think for one moment you've gotten rid of me so easily!*

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FAST, rustling brush gave away the positions of multiple creatures scampering through the dense undergrowth.

This was the middle of the Wilds, far away from the city.

They've made this easy by surrounding me. Zelaide slowly opened his eyes.

Dusk deepened, dyeing the endless sky a reddish orange. It looked like the color of freshly split blood smothering the earth.

Spear-like bushes taller than Zelaide jutted from the ground without any gaps between them. He strode calmly through the sharp thicket. The predators stalking him rapidly closed in on his location, executing a series of agile maneuvers to surround him and cut off his escape route. Unconcerned by their antics, he trudged forward.

He eventually spotted a large boulder looming black against the fading colors of dusk.

Is that it?

Lightly bending at the knees, his feet pushed off the ground and Zelaide soared into the high reaches of the sky. In less than a second after leaping out of the sea of spear bushes, several dark shadows sprung into the air after him, invited by his sudden movement. The predators stalking him were feline Muta.

Whoosh!

Soaring through the air like a demonic black bird as his coat fluttered behind him, Zelaide took out the first Muta with the gun in his right hand. The gun was a high-precision handgun with a relatively small caliber for its size, the newest model capable of loading twenty bullets at a time.



The bullet blasted the first Muta away, and it let out a harrowing death shriek as it plummeted to the ground, blood trailing behind it.

Cancer—the rather small Muta species with soft fur and translucent membrane webbed between its forepaws and hindpaws. One should never be deceived by their fluffy, feline appearance, for they possessed two rows of razor-sharp fangs and normally traveled in packs of more than ten, making them a real threat when they attacked.

Zel shot a second and a third Cancer out of the air without even glancing at the first one he took out. He slowly descended to the top of the boulder as blood gushed like a can of spray paint with a hole in it from the Mutas.

Using his gun and the wire in his left hand, he took down the Cancers leaping at him without pause.

A weight was affixed to the end of the wire strings, already a dangerous weapon in and of itself, but Zel's smooth manipulation of the wire rendered it fatal. The Cancers that resembled adorable animals at first glance had their heads blown off and their torsos severed in half by the weapons Zelaide wielded, soaking the hard undergrowth with their blood.

It was the end of a sunny summer's day. The Wilds of purple dusk were instantaneously transformed into the scene of a gruesome slaughter.

Sheesh, there's no end to them. The client was right, there's some abnormal breeding going on here. Did the number of natural predators decrease? No wonder the people living here were desperate.

Burning through the bullets for his rifle, Zelaide tossed it aside and pulled a new gun off his back. Seething with primitive rage, the remaining Cancers waited with bated breath in the shadows of the spear bushes he stared down upon, their bloodlust unshaken by the bodies of their murdered pack mates.

There was never a peaceful night in the Wilds.

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AFTER Zelaide had succeeded in shooing away the feisty young woman he'd saved on a whim from his home, he contacted his personal agent, Palmina

Nielsen, for any available job requests. He hadn't cared whether it was bodyguard or hunter work, or even a hard labor job filling in at the docks—his only requirement was that the job got him away from Gothic City for a few days.

Palmina persistently asked if he had screwed up on a job or gotten involved with the wrong kind of woman, but she promptly dropped the topic after Zelaide ignored her and bluntly stated he would ask elsewhere if her agency didn't have any work for him.

"Okay, Zel. I get it. I do. So please don't accept any jobs that don't come through me first. It might not look like it to you, but I carefully select and research the jobs I send to you. You know that, don't you?"

Palmina's agency was located in the best district, near Gothic City's Center Circle. Decked out in the highest quality suit, Palmina swiped her IHT screen with her beautifully painted nails.

Zel scoffed. "Don't try to wheedle a sense of gratitude out of me, Pal. In return, I won't be picky about the job this time around. Do you have any work for me outside the city or not?"

"I do. Plenty of it. Let's see... How does a job providing private security to a bourgeoisie wife sound? She says she's being stalked by the different men she was cheating on her wealthy husband with. The pay's good."

"No women."

"What the heck? What happened to not being picky? You sound awfully choosy to me," Palmina quipped. But contrary to her words, her voice had a cheerful lilt.

"Sorry, no women is my one condition. I want nothin' to do with them for a while."

"Oh dear. Sounds to me like you really did run into trouble with a woman, Zel." Palmina's tone grew sharp. "Don't hide it from me. What kind of woman is she?"

"Nothing's there. I mean, nothin' happened," Zelaide replied as he fought to erase the beautiful emerald color from his mind's eye. "I just don't want the

trouble involved with women right now. Got anything else for me?"

"Hmm. Oh, how about something like this? It's a bit far from here, but Cancers are infesting the area near the farmland on the outskirts of Ajanta City. You might get to enjoy some hunting."

Ajanta City was a relatively small city in the middle of the Wilds, about 200 kyros south of Gothic City. The city was built by the people who had spent a great many years putting their blood, sweat, and tears into cultivating the Wilds, and they survived by providing grains and produce to metropolises such as Gothic City from their vast encompassing farmlands.

"Cancers? They're small," Zelaide commented.

"They are. They're a species of Muta that usually inhabits the Sea of Trees. Normally, they don't show themselves to humans, but for whatever reason, they've bred abnormally fast and have eaten through most of their natural prey. Three days ago, they broke into a poultry farm's battery cage, which unfortunately had a malfunctioning electric fence at the time," Palmina explained, summarizing the information provided on her IHT by the client.

"Almost the entire flock was devoured. Ten of the farmhands who tried to fight them off were injured. Several were severely injured. Luckily, no one died, but the reports state the infestation is large, so who knows what could've happened if the altercation hadn't occurred indoors."

"All I've gotta do is exterminate them?"

"That's it. Their numbers are far too great for one person, so there should already be several other Hunters on the job. But the pay isn't great. The job is below your skill level," she advised.

"Don't care. They'll have an easier time if I take out a hundred or so. Cancer meat is edible enough, and their pelts come off easy. That should be enough to counterbalance the losses sustained in the farmer's flock. Job accepted. I'll head right over."

+++

STILLNESS fell abruptly over the Wilds.

Had he already wiped them out? Or had they finally fled due to the sharp decrease in their numbers? Whatever the reason, the incessant barrage of leaping Cancers all but disappeared. Barely any of their blood had splattered on Zelaide, but the same couldn't be said of the boulder he stood on. It had grown slick from the blood pouring from the gaping wounds in brutally mangled corpses.

The sun had set on the area and stars twinkled in its place. Only the bottom of the indigo blue sky was tinged with red. Zelaide cast a shadow against that backdrop, the two silver-blue brilliant lights inlaid against his face shining brighter than any star twinkling in the sky above him.

Zelaide slowly stooped his tall body over to scoop up one of the Muta corpses at his feet. Blood dripped down it. Undeterred, he stripped its pelt with one pull.

Wind roared through the Wilds, rustling the dried bushes soaked in blood in the rhythm of a flute-like melody.

Stark against the sky was a man crouched on a bloody rock, greedily devouring the still-warm flesh of his fresh kill.

+++

ZELAIDE ended up killing 128 Cancers over three days. The three other hired Hunters took out 54 each, dramatically diminishing the Cancer population in the area.

The golden pelts stripped from the Cancers weren't luxury items, but the thick fur was still marketable, and the Cancer meat would fetch its fair share of coin. The farmhands with serious injuries were still in the hospital, but Ajanta City's government was pleased with the Hunters' results and paid their reward in full.

"Good work out there. You've really saved our necks. As you know, our city is sustained by our ability to produce food in the Wilds; it's a matter of life and death for our people to be able to safely work in the farmland outside city walls," the mayor said, glancing out the office window at the agricultural expanse beyond the fortress walls.

"I still wonder how the Cancers managed to multiply at such an abnormal

rate,” the first deputy mayor chimed in. “We’re aware they reproduce much faster than other Mutas, but these numbers are unheard of. We’ve hired a specialist to look into the matter for us as we speak.” He dropped his tone to something more informal, “I’ve been hearing rumors that similar things have been happening all over this planet recently.”

“We might hire you again for the next harvesting season,” the mayor said amicably, taking the rumors seriously. “I offer you our thanks on behalf of the entire city. Your lodging is on us tonight. Enjoy yourselves. However,” he paused, shifting his gaze to Zelaide, “please don’t lay a hand on any of our people. If you need a woman, we have professionals who can service you. They’re fine women who are used to comforting manual labor workers. I’d say they’re in better shape than women of the same profession in the bigger cities.” He had judged Zelaide as a liable risk to the city’s women from his appearance alone.

Black coat fluttering behind him, Zelaide left the mayor’s office without saying anything.

“Yo, Zel. Ain’t this a dull job for a man like you?” a man as large as a small mountain called out to him from behind.

The man was another Beast Blood in the same trade as Zelaide. He was of a similar height, but twice the size in width. Yet, he didn’t look fat despite his girth because of his frighteningly large muscles, which bulged from his taut frame like balloons. His appearance was exotic and inhuman, in ways only a Beast Blood could be.

The left sides of his eyebrows were split in two, like the tip of a snake’s tongue. Beneath those eyebrows, his right eye was an indistinct brown that contrasted the color of burning gold in his left. He wore his long, stiff brown hair with red tones ruggedly swept straight back from his forehead. Most of what he wore was a shade of brown, making him look like a bull from a time long past with his leather jacket, hat, and cowboy pants. Standing beside Zelaide’s all-black attire and silver mane of hair generated an air of danger, an invisible bubble that overtook the space around them. They were men whose alien aura made the other Hunters keep their distance.

“Shut up, Vulcan. I could ask the same of you. Aren’t the spoils from hunting Cancers too meager for somebody who’s always boasting of his own strength?” Zelaide quipped as if this conversation was the last thing he wanted to deal with right now.

“Damn right about that. But there ain’t too many jobs needin’ superhuman strength falling my way these days. Just doin’ what I need to for a meal. How ‘bout hanging out with me tonight?”

“Hmph. I’m heading back to my room.”

“Why? Buzzkill. Let’s have a drink for ol’ times’ sake.”

“No need. Hey, stop followin’ me! Buzz off.”

“C’mon, it’s just a little drink? You’re rolling in dough, you can afford it.” Vulcan wrapped his arms in a vise-like grip around Zelaide’s neck. “Buy me a drink, man!”

“I told ya to leave me alone!”

+++

FORCED to accompany Vulcan after all, Zelaide tipped back his glass from where he leaned against the bar counter in the city outskirts. He kept his face free from emotion, as usual.

Their inhuman features should’ve been hard to discern with their black-tinted specs on in the dark and gloomy bar, but there was no end to the women flocking around the conspicuously handsome men.

Men crowded the rest of the bar.

More than a few men shot jealous glares at the two Hunters attracting all the women, but none were willing to openly challenge Beast Bloods more than twice their size and physically endowed with enough strength to bench press a hundred men at once.

The pair’s conversation naturally drifted to their trade.

“How’s business been lately?” Vulcan asked.

“It’s anybody’s guess. Not too bad or too good. Not much has changed, but

life feels like it's gettin' somewhat easier than before," Zelaide answered honestly.

"Oh? How so? You're working outta Gothic City, right?"

"Yeah. It's hard to explain. Things have gotten slowly better since the new mayor came to town. The city kids and womenfolk agree too."

"Isn't Gothic City run by a female mayor? What's changed?"

"Nothin' big. She's cracked down on some corrupt government officials. The Boss 'round my place said as much. There's been a gradual decrease in crime from what I can see."

"Sounds like a lackluster approach."

"Ya can say that again. But you've gotta start somewhere, yeah? Reformation doesn't just happen with a bang. It'd be the perfect package if it makes business boom for me in the process," Zelaide said, rolling his shoulders. He took a sip of his amber drink and added as an afterthought, "Another big change is the city's new approach to handlin' Nightz."

"Speakin' of business, I've heard your mayor's policies are pushing lotsa people to the edge. Some brutes I was drinkin' with the other day had their drug trafficking route discovered. They were ranting n' raging that their years of work went up in smoke just like that, and that they'd kill the bitch responsible for it," Vulcan said, mimicking the thugs.

"A policy that benefits one person puts somebody else outta business. That's life. It benefits half-decent guys like us though."

"Whoa, that's one scary face you're makin'. You're souring your good looks, sexy."

"Stuff it, Vulcan." Zelaide scowled at Vulcan's teasing. What was sexy about a beast the size of a giant and the strength to match compared to humans? The young human men having a blast behind him were much more attractive than he could ever be.

Zelaide shrugged away the insignificant thoughts, caught the dark glass sliding down the counter toward him, and downed half of it in one gulp. He wasn't

sure if the burning sensation in the back of his throat and the bite dragging along his tongue was pleasant or unpleasant.

“You boys have amazing bods,” a woman with luscious black hair sitting next to Vulcan cooed as she ran a finger over his thick thigh. “I wonder if you’re even more amazing *down there*.” Her fake nails were a poisonous shade of purple.

“You can bet your pretty little fingers on it! Did ya think our size ended with our muscles?” Vulcan barked out a laugh.

“I didn’t. But you look like you’d be too heavy for me. I might just break, y’know?” she flirted.

“How ‘bout I let you ride on top then?” Vulcan had a habit of immodestly splurging on the most expensive liquor whenever he drank on someone else’s coin, and he downed his glass with wild abandon. He was liquored into the best of moods.

Another woman in a short dress with a low neckline scooped up a lock of silver hair flowing down Zel’s back. “Silver hair’s really rare. It’s super shiny. And it’s softer than it looks. Feels like silk.”

“Don’t touch me,” he growled.

Accustomed to angry men, the woman was unfazed by Zelaide’s clearly unhappy growl. “Oh my, you’re a scary one. But I know a good man when I see one. How about it, handsome? Wanna spend a wild night with me? I can guarantee you’ll enjoy it,” she invited, her voice hot and heavy.

“I’m good.”

“Huh? You’re good? I can’t let that slide. Who could’ve satisfied the woman-hater Zelaide Silvergray? Where’d ya get a woman? What shop’s she from?” Vulcan pestered, temporarily turning his attention from the woman feeling him up to his friend.

“She’s not a woman from some shop. I don’t have a woman to start with,” Zelaide muttered grumpily, shaking the ice in his glass. It was a strong shot of liquor, but he’d yet to ask for a third glass and there was more than half left in his current one.

That's right. Nothin' happened. Her bright emerald eyes and tantalizing red tongue...just caught my eye because it's not somethin' I see every day.

But those two contrasting, complementary colors belonged to only one person, and they came to life in his mind, accompanied by feline-like movements. He wanted to bury his hands in the back of her hair, tug her towards him, and suck on that soft, red tongue until it drove her crazy.

How would it feel to tangle my fingers in that gold hair and stare into the depths of those emerald eyes...?

“Hey, Zel? What’re you closing your eyes for? Is it your bedtime already, little boy?”

“Huh?” Startled back to his senses, Zel jerked his head up to find Vulcan and the others studying his face with great interest.

Zelaide panicked when he realized Vulcan wasn’t just teasing him—his head was on the counter, his hand still gripping his glass. What in the world was he trying to do during the few seconds he was in dreamworld? He was relieved he was wearing a long leather coat.

He finished off the rest of his glass in one gulp and tossed his coin on the counter.

“I’m leavin’,” he grunted.

“C’mon, man. Done already? Get that coat off, would ya? It’s damn hot in here.”

“Shut up!”

Beast Bloods were naturally intuitive and always perceptive. It was a given that Vulcan had picked up on the wild male scent radiating from Zelaide.

“Can you sleep as you are if you go home like that? Isn’t it better for ya to bring one home with you? Here.” Vulcan lightly pushed the woman toward him from behind.

“Ah!” The woman purposely tripped forward and nestled coquettishly against Zelaide’s rock-solid chest. Her perfect yet artificially dyed blond hair spread over his coat, illuminated by the dim bar lights.

“Sheesh! You’re so rough!” she complained over her shoulder while she wrapped her arms around Zelaide’s waist, not forgetting to casually press her voluptuous breasts against him.

“Stop. I’m not buying a woman.”

“You don’t have to pay for me,” she offered. “I’ll do you for the sheer pleasure of it. How about it, sugar?”

“Don’t need it.”

The deep red lips closing in on his were nothing close to the transparent red clinging to his memories. He turned his face aside, as if fleeing the kiss, and stepped out of her embrace.

“I’m leavin’. You can do what you want,” Zelaide said to Vulcan.

“Now that’s a real shame. I’ll just enjoy myself for the both of us, then. Thanks for the drink! I’ll hit you up again sometime!”

“Find somebody else.”

“Ouch, that hurts. Don’t you mind him, ladies! That’s just the kinda guy he is. I might not have his looks, but I’m far gentler. I’ll play with all three of you at once!” Vulcan howled with laughter and watched his friend stalk coldly out of the bar.

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STRANGE. *I haven’t felt like this in ages.*

Zel arrived at his assigned room, tossed off his coat and boots, and dived into bed.

Beast Bloods didn’t have a sex drive as strong as their appearances suggested. In contrast to their physical strength, which was twice that of a human’s, their libido was either on par with humans or slightly less. They didn’t marry according to the law as humans did. Their longer life spans played a part in what was known as a weaker species preservation instinct compared to humanity.

But some Beast Bloods experienced intense sexual urges during the excitement of the bloodbath after a slaughter or upon identifying their lifelong mate. There wasn’t any accurate comparative data on the phenomenon, and,

like with humans, individual differences were considerable, making it difficult to determine the exact cause.

How did this happen?

Zelaide moaned, desperately fighting off the urge to reach for his nether region. He couldn't stop his hips from squirming. This was a first for him. He didn't understand why he felt this way.

Of course, Zelaide was a man too—he wanted a woman at times.

But even then, his feet never took him to the human pleasure quarters. He felt no desire for human women. Not to mention, they were so slender, he feared they'd break like a twig beneath him. Under ordinary circumstances, he'd distract himself with other things, only ever pulling out his IHT to contact a friendly Beast Blood female when he absolutely couldn't withstand the pain. Then, once they'd finished the act, he'd leave right away. That should've been enough to keep his mind and body in check.

Dammit! Is this that breeding season thing they talk about? But doesn't that only apply to females?

Naturally, Beast Bloods were capable of having children, too.

Beast Blood women in particular had a certain season where they incessantly tempted men in order to conceive a child. This was called the breeding season. Some women begged Zel for his sperm, but he flatly turned them down. He didn't want to father a child with any woman other than his destined mate. And Zel had decided he didn't want a mate period.

But then there was *her*. The young woman with eyes the color of emerald gems—

“Ah!” The second he thought of her, a moan burst from him, heated desire growing in his lower region.

Is this that woman's fault? Can't be. I've no interest in women, especially human women. Her hair would stand on end if she knew a beast like me was gettin' aroused by the thought of her. This is wrong. This is terribly wrong, in so many ways.

“Run away, Zel! And forget all about this!”

The mental image he'd sealed in the back of his mind threatened to break forth—he rushed to reseal it. He inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled, until the air was free of his lungs. Repeating the same act several times helped to calm him to some extent.

This is happenin' because of all that blood while exterminating the Cancers. I haven't let loose like that in a long time. It's not unreasonable for it to have this effect.

Neither deriding himself nor deceiving himself had any affect, leaving him with no choice but to get up and stagger to the bathroom. Only the icy cold water pelting him with his clothes still on could subdue the impulses that were impossible to hold back regardless of what he tried.

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THE next day, Zelaide managed to regain his presence of mind after immersing himself in a few boring jobs once he finished his main job for Ajanta City, and he now drove down the freeway through Gothic City's front gate—Forzarin Gate—during the sunny morning hours.

About six whole days have passed since I left. I wonder if her things are gone. They should be.

Thinking the woman might come back for the specs she forgot, Zelaide had considerately hung them from the metal fittings on his front gates before leaving home, even courteously bagging them first. At first glance, it wouldn't look like more than a trash bag hanging from his gate, removing most of the danger of theft. No one ever came to his place. The young woman would be about the only person to come with a purpose. And he was positive the smart woman would pick up on the message he'd left for her. Put simply, the message was, “hurry up and go on your way once you take these.” He wasn't particularly confident in his intelligence, but he thought it was a pretty good idea on his part.

It's been a week. If she was gonna come, she would've already done it. If she hasn't, I can just get rid of them myself.

It didn't take long after he entered the beautiful tree-lined Uptown street at dawn to feel disappointed in just how naïve his idea had been.

He had driven all through the night until the rains let up. After finally returning home, Zelaide reached out for the biometric sensor to open the gate when he spotted Euphemia sitting on the ground, sleeping in the shadows of his front gates.

"Dammit! What the hell is her problem?!" Zelaide groaned, grinding his teeth.

That proves it—I'm cursed.

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THE display screen glowed bright in the dark room. Reclining in a comfortable chair, a man stared at it. In his hand, he held a fancy cut-glass cup featuring clear colors and delicate patterns.

The luxurious, spacious room lacked signs of being lived in.

Although the screen gave off a bright light, the scenes unfolding on it were too gruesome for any sane person to look straight at. Several videos took turns playing on the display, automatically shifting to the next one when the previous finished.

The film quality varied from pro to amateur level, but the contents of the videos were all the same: a man or woman running for their life, under attack by bloodthirsty Muta. Muta cornered the humans whose eyes were wild with fear, and sunk their fangs into their throats before they could squeeze out a scream, ripping their bodies to shreds while several other Muta hungrily devoured the entrails spilling out from their lifeless forms. Every video on the display was the same gory scene, cut from different locations and times.

In other words, there were many victims to this horrifying crime. Some videos also showed scenes of women being raped by men before being fed to the Muta. It was precisely because there was no sound that the fear and despair filling their wide eyes was transmitted directly through the screen. These were videos a sane person wouldn't be able to watch for more than a few minutes

before throwing up.

But the man watched in pure ecstasy. The liquor in his cup grew warm from his palm, his lips yet to touch the glass. The videos only became increasingly more gruesome and gory, blood spraying from the victims' onto the camera lenses during some shots.

Suddenly, the man sat up. He had watched every appalling, bone-chilling scene without batting an eye until he had reached out to pause one particular video. He operated the control board with his fingers and rewound the video.

He stopped rewinding at the scene of a young woman underneath two men in the night plains.

She was a young woman who looked like she had only taken her first steps from being a girl into womanhood. Her shirt was ripped, exposing her white skin under the dim light. The woman violently struggled for her life, but her supple limbs were seized by filthy hands. It was only a matter of time before her body was violated. She swung her head to both sides to see if there was anywhere to run, and her bitter, tear-filled eyes locked on the camera for a moment. It must've been just a coincidence, but the man paused the video right there.

I...know this woman.

The video was horribly shaky with a bad blur. He didn't know the time or place the video had been taken, but he had no doubt it was filmed very recently. He could never mistake this woman's feisty face. He hit play again.

The expression of the woman on the screen suddenly became serene, as though she had come to some sort of peace with herself. Then she thrust her hand into her hair, pulled out a small object, and raised the hand clenching it above her head. A split-second later, a gloved hand came out of nowhere and stopped her, casting a black shadow over the video. Something had stood in the way of the camera.

Without realizing he was drooling, the man pressed his nose against the screen to make out every pixel he could. His hand shot to his groin where he began to caress the naked flesh, and he patiently waited for the image that would bring him sheer bliss. But the dry summer grass was the only image

displayed when the camera came back into focus. The man clicked his tongue impatiently and upped the volume. It was unprecedented for him to care about sound when he normally got off just by watching. Were they talking close to the camera? The sound quality was captured better than the video.

“Wow, you’re filthy. Don’t drool on me, you piece of shit. Spit it out already!”

“We’re called Insects...we ain’t no more than Vermis...”

“Vermis? Is that true? You aren’t Inferni?”

“I dunno that! A man named Shank hired us to rape and kill the woman who was going to pass through this area just before rainfall...”

“Return to your employer and give him the message to never go after this girl’s ass again. If you say it’s from Zel, he’ll know who you mean.”

Zel? Zelaide Silvergray? I’ve heard the name before. He’s a famous Beast Blood. This pisses me off. He just happened to show up at the right time?

The man returned his attention to the screen, but his pleasure was denied him because events were already at an end.

It didn’t take long before someone had opened the container door from the driver’s seat and a Muta prowled out of the open shutter. The trailer must’ve taken off at the same time, because the ground on screen began to sway and shake.

Damn it all! Something more interesting might have happened! What happened to the girl? Did the Beast Blood Zel defeat the Muta? I can’t tell from the video. But—

How fascinating.

The man sneered.

They were probably just some low-ranking thugs, but he had to figure out who had sent him this video right away. And then he needed to seal their lips forever. From the conversation he overheard, the thug was Shank’s lackey. Shank was likely the alias for one of the syndicate’s top brass. The man wasn’t familiar with it, but he knew it was a name used with hired hands. He’d know who it was in no time once he looked into it. By all appearances, the girl had

escaped safely, but her identity was already exposed to the underworld.

She's a woman with an expression that leaves a lasting impression.

The man rewound the video many times, replaying the scene capturing the moment of her clear determination. He did the same thing throughout the entire night, comforting himself with every replay. And within him grew the keen desire to see her face in person. He *had* to take action immediately to make that happen. But he needed to be as careful as possible. Being too hasty and rash was taboo.

Just before the rainfall signaling the end of night let up, the man reached for the IHT on the table beside him.

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SOMETHING adorable was curled up in a ball below the automated dual-panel gate. Her hands were wrapped around her jeans-covered knees, her small buttocks planted firmly on the cold concrete. Zelaide couldn't see the expression hidden beneath her moss-green casket cap, but she appeared to be sleeping.

Does this woman have zero sense of danger? Does she think just because this is a rich neighborhood, it's safe for a young woman to sleep outside in the early-morning hours? Bloody hell! Somebody needs to give her a stern talking to! Danger aside, sleepin' with her butt on the cold concrete in those thin clothes is bound to chill her to the bone, even in summer. Even I know young women shouldn't freeze!

Zelaide ground his teeth and slammed on his horn in a fit of anger. The sharp blare of the deep bull horn ripped through the moist air, wet from the rains.

The woman's shoulders jerked from the sudden noise and her green cap slid from her head. She acted just like a small forest animal. Her emerald eyes lit up and sparkled the second her darting gaze landed on the irritated Zel leaning forward on his steering wheel.

"Welcome home," she greeted with a grin.

"You," he growled.

“You’re late. Oh wait, I guess that’s technically wrong, since it’s morning now. Maybe I should’ve said good morning instead,” the woman prattled, pushing to her feet. She casually dusted off her butt.

“Why are you here?”

“That’s no way to greet someone. I wanted to return this to you...” With both hands, she casually passed a black shirt wrapped in a fancy paper bag through the car window to the man who embodied a bad mood.

“You could’ve just tossed that over the gate and been done with it.” Zelaide tiredly accepted the paper bag and chucked it into the back seat.

“I wanted to give it to you directly. And I wanted to properly thank you for what you did for me.”

“Ok, I’ve heard it and got my shirt back. Go home.”

“I haven’t said thanks yet!”

“Then hurry up and say it so you can go home.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I *won’t* be thanking you.” Her emerald eyes glimmered. He seemed to have upset her, but Zelaide still wouldn’t budge.

“Huh?” he grunted.

“You’ll send me right on home when I do, right? So I won’t say it,” she reasoned.

“I don’t understand you. What did you even come here for, girl?”

“I’m not ‘girl,’ I’m Euphemia.”

“What?”

“Euphemia Ashencourt. It’s my name.”

“That’s a ridiculously fancy name. What do you hope to achieve by tellin’ me?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to tell you.”

Zelaide answered her with silence.

“You’re Zel, Zelaide Silvergray, yes?” Euphemia continued, bending at the

waist to peer into the driver's seat through the window. Zelaide covered his face with one hand as if displeased to have his name discovered.

"That's just the name I use. I don't have a legal name."

"You don't?"

"It's a meaningless topic. Ok, you've had your fun, move outta the way. I need to park my car inside."

Zelaide ignored the woman staring in awe at his heavily armored sports car and slid his car through the front gate when she stepped aside. He had opened the gate by remote just enough to fit his car through. When he looked in the mirror, he saw her jogging alongside him.

"Sweet ride. Where do you usually park?" she asked, running to keep up with him.

"There's a garage on the side of the house," he answered without much thought. "Hey, why're you following me, girl?!"

"I told you my name is Euphemia, not girl. My friends call me Mia. You can call me that, too."

"Have you listened to a word I've said, girl? I'm tellin' you not to follow me inside!"

"And have *you* listened to a word I've said, hm? I'm *Euphemia*. This is the third time I've told you my name."

"It doesn't matter how many times you tell me. O-Oi! Don't come on my property without permission! Don't stand in front of the garage door! It's dangerous!" Zelaide protested, getting out of his car when she stood unmovable in front of his garage door. "What's your problem?"

"Didn't you just release the lock on this big door? Why isn't it opening?" Euphemia had spotted Zelaide shutting off automode and was eagerly trying to open the garage door herself.

"It opens. Here," Zelaide said, grasping the inconspicuous handle and sliding the door to the side with shocking ease.

"Oh? Oh my stars!" she squealed.

“You’re easily distracted.”

“H-How? How is this possible?! A door that opens sideways? Is this for real?”

“This is how they did it in the old world. Satisfied yet?” Zelaide flashed a grin.

Euphemia couldn’t find the words to respond. The man who’d shown her nothing other than dark brooding smiled for the first time. It only lasted a millisecond, but a millisecond was enough.

“Wow.”

When he smiled, his sharp, wild facial features wrinkled at the corners of his eyes and his cheeks dimpled in a sudden friendly expression.

Oh my stars. Can a person (or Beast Blood, rather) change this much with a smile? It’s completely different from his usual iron-faced demeanor.

“What’s wrong? Hurt somewhere? You’re starin’ into space.”

“Pardon? Oops, I’m okay! Some amazing system you’ve got in place here! Has anyone seen through it yet?”

“Not a soul. Then again, they’d be pecked at by Tip the second they passed through the gate unwelcome.”

“Who’s Tip?” A sudden gust rushed behind Euphemia’s back, she turned around to see a small shadow charge past her with earth-shattering speed, brushing her bangs. “Ack!”

Zelaide held out his arm, intercepting the small shadow. “This is Tip. Tippy.”

Euphemia was nearly startled into falling over, but she managed to hold her ground. The bird-shaped Muta with razor-sharp talons and a bone-crushing beak landed on Zelaide’s shoulder and eyed Euphemia with the same level of suspicion as its master while it folded in its wings.

“This? Isn’t this a...Muta? A Tipsilox, if I’m not mistaken.”

“So I’ve heard. I call him Tippy. I’m the only one he’s friendly to. You’ve escaped being clawed by his talons because I’m with you. Isn’t that right, Tip?”

“Chwirk? Chwirk?” The Muta quirked its head to the side in feigned innocence

as Zelaide stroked its chin. They seemed really close.

“You’re called Topsy? How do you do? I’m Euphemia. I’m not a bad human, so please don’t peck out my eyes.” Euphemia smiled at the bird-shaped Muta. “I’ll show myself inside,” she said to Zelaide, briskly walking inside his house without reservation. The memory of her last visit still fresh in her mind, she had a general idea of the house’s layout.

“Hey! Who said you—” Euphemia quickened her pace inside the house with Zelaide’s flabbergasted voice at her back, “—can go inside, girl!”

For some reason, the security system didn’t click on. Perhaps he left it to his flying security guard? Or maybe he had clicked off the system when he pulled into the driveway.

I’ve successfully managed to barge in! Go me!

Behind her cheerful façade, Euphemia was sweating bullets. Her heart hammered in her chest.

The last time she remembered being this nervous was during her university oral exam. She strongly believed Zelaide wouldn’t become violent with her, but she was being annoying enough that it wouldn’t be unreasonable for him to snap and throw her out at any time. Her knees threatened to buckle if she didn’t put on a tough act by pretending to be a naïve girl who couldn’t read the mood. She was shaking in her boots even now.

But at least it was worth it to wake up early every day for almost a week to see him.

Euphemia had assumed since she’d met him during early dawn she would be more likely to catch him if she dropped by his house first thing in the morning.

She figured a man doing a dangerous job like Contractor and Hunter work would work through the night and come home in the morning. Obviously, she had learned her lesson from her last night outing and only left her house once daybreak colored the sky. She donned what weapons and protection she could think of, and parked her car as near as possible without arousing suspicion.

But I don’t have much time today. I have to head to work soon.

The day after she had dinner with Wei, she had put in a request with the laboratory director and her direct boss, Kreutz Burhardt, to switch her schedule to the late work shift for an entire week. Since she normally worked for six hours, the late shift had her working from just before noon until the evening. On the other hand, the early shift went from early morning until just before noon. Normally, the two shifts would be coordinated between the laboratory staff to make a proper work schedule, but this was the one time where Euphemia was grateful to have her sister's authority. She knew all too well that she had played foul by using her sister's prestige for this.

And so, she had waited every morning for him for five whole days.

By the time daybreak's light broke through the diminishing rainfall, Euphemia exited her apartment, hopped in her car, and parked it beside a park within walking distance of his house. And then she waited for him to come home in the shadow of the tall, wide driveway gate, lingering up until the last minutes before her work shift every day. Today was her last late shift.

This is really what it means for something to happen just in the nick of time.

Euphemia was exhausted from her repeated early mornings and late nights. It was as clear as day to her that if Zelaide happened to return home while she was away, he'd never come out to greet her, even if she rang his bell. If she really wanted to see him, she had to catch him in the brief moment before he entered his driveway.

And that's why Euphemia had done her best to make it happen this week.

She was proud of her career and would never let her work quality suffer. After all, she had finally secured the privilege of observing the Night Blooms' flowering. She had acted selfish by having her work hours changed to the late shift, and she didn't want to inconvenience work more.

As she traversed Zelaide's hallway, she took an intuitive turn to the right. She opened the pristine door at the end of the hallway, revealing the kitchen she suspected to find. Zelaide could've caught up to her within a few strides had he felt so inclined, but he hadn't tried to stop her yet.

The kitchen was spacious and bright, but it showed little sign of use. Euphemia, knowing she was being rude, promptly opened the large refrigerator

door.

Aha. It's just like mine.

That is to say, there was barely anything inside aside from drinks.

Euphemia was studying the contents of the fridge with great interest when her arm was suddenly tugged on from behind and the refrigerator door was slammed shut in front of her face.

“Don’t get carried away! What the heck is a young lady raised in a proper home doin’, rummaging in somebody else’s fridge?! And don’t ya forget, I never said you could come inside either!” Zelaide shouted, her actions greatly disturbing him.

“Oh, good point. Sorry. My curiosity got the better of me. I don’t look the part, but I’m actually a researcher, and was curious about what you normally eat... But I’ve overstepped my bounds. I’ll be leaving then,” Euphemia said all at once, ducking her head. She turned dejectedly back toward the door she had just entered through.

Even she realized she’d make him hate her if she pushed any further.

But apparently, her decision blindsided the fierce-looking Zelaide. “Huh? You’ll what?”

What’s with this woman? She just bulldozed her way into my house and now her attitude’s reversed and she wants to leave? I haven’t said anythin’ out of the ordinary, right? For that matter, why’s she so relaxed around me when normal humans tremble in fear or avoid me like the plague? She’s just gonna rummage through my place then leave like the wind? But I guess...this is for the bes—huh?

GRUMBLLLLLE!

Zelaide’s all-too-perfect hearing picked up on a slight yet curious sound.

GROWWWLL!

“Oh no!” This time Euphemia went bright-red as her hand shot to her loud growling stomach. “I’m so sorry!”

Her dejected saunter for the door had been her best attempt at luring him into stopping her from leaving, but her rumbling stomach was unintentional. Overwhelmed with dismay, Euphemia turned a deeper shade of red and broke into a run for the door. As a proper young lady, she felt her heart break having the sound of her growling stomach as the background music for her once-in-a-lifetime precarious gamble.

Just because I woke up early and skipped out on breakfast doesn't mean my stomach needed to choose now of all times to act up. I'm such an idiot! Stupid! Dimwit!

"Want to eat before you go?" His deadpan voice stopped Euphemia in her tracks. "You sound like you're starving."

She timidly looked back and her eyes met his.

"I am, but are you sure?"

"You're choosing now to be modest? Follow me."

Euphemia wasn't sure if it was amusement or exasperation she heard in his voice.

She contained her bubbling excitement and followed him, curious about what food he had to offer when she had only seen drinks in his refrigerator. She watched him, brimming with curiosity, as he returned to the kitchen and fetched several retort pouches from the built-in cabinet and brought them to her. He even had a pack of vacuum-sealed preserved bread.

"Do you stock up on food?" Euphemia asked, taking a seat in front of the kitchen counter. She placed her casket cap on the bar seat beside her. The golden hair cascading down her back in braids like a swift-flowing waterfall stole the man's attention.

I can't tell if she's a woman with good or bad manners, Zelaide thought, exasperated with her.

"Me?" he asked. "Never. Pal takes it upon herself to leave food lying around without me askin' for it."

"Pal? Is that your girlfriend?"

“My agent.”

“I see.”

That reminded Euphemia of the name she saw listed in the database with Zelaide’s profile. The name Palmina Nielsen had stayed with her because it was a woman’s name. Pal had to be her nickname.

So they’re intimate enough to call each other by nickname?

Euphemia suppressed the urge to ask him a bunch of different questions. She didn’t want to incur his disfavor by being nosy when he had showed her a side of kindness she never expected.

Meanwhile, Zelaide skillfully emptied the retort pouches on top of the plates he’d pulled from the cabinet without her noticing, and tossed the plates in the microwave. The newest model microwave was capable of heating up several dishes at once.

“Oh wow. Everything looks amazing.”

He placed several dishes in front of her in a matter of seconds. Steam wafted from the top of a red soup and a savory-smelling loaf of bread.

“Thank you for the food,” Euphemia exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

“What’s that all about?” Zelaide asked, eyeing her.

“My older sister taught me about this old custom where you give thanks with your hands put together before you eat.”

“Heh.”

“You aren’t going to eat?”

“Coffee’s good enough for me.”

“You’ve got such a big body though. Don’t you get hungry?”

“I already ate,” Zelaide muttered evasively, casting his gaze to the side. “Time for you to eat, too.”

“Wh—” Euphemia swallowed the question before it left her mouth. She was about to ask him where he ate and with who.

That was close! The curiosity bug is getting the better of me. He still hasn't let down his guard around me. I have to watch what I say right now.

"How long have you been waiting there for?" Zelaide put a question to her this time.

"Since dawn. I took the proper precautions. I have the latest personal safety alarm model on me too."

"Don't tell me you've been comin' by here ever since that day."

"I have. Ever since two days after that incident, to be exact."

This morning marks the seventh day since the attack, so she's been coming by for five days? Zelaide concluded.

"Why have you been doin' that?"

"I don't know, really. But I'm interested."

"Interested? In what?"

Zelaide poured the freshly brewed coffee into a cup. To Euphemia's surprise, he dropped a single sugar cube into his cup and stirred. Did he have a sweet tooth despite his fierce looks? She didn't have the courage to ask.

"You're a Beast Blood, right? Your eyes were glowing when you saved me."

"What's that got to do with anythin'?" Zelaide asked defensively.

"It was...a first for me."

"The first you've seen a Beast Blood? We don't get involved much with proper young ladies like you, after all." Bitterness stronger than his coffee coated his tone.

"I thought it was gorgeous. Breathtakingly so."

"Huh? Gorgeous? What is?"

"Your eyes. They're teal right now, but they were silver then. I thought they were breathtakingly beautiful when they glowed silver-blue. They were the only illumination in the pitch-black darkness, so I—"

"Wanted to see it again?" Zelaide cut her off. "Gimme a break."

“I’m a biologist who studies plants, a phytologist to be exact. I’m still just a junior researcher, and I guess it’s not directly related, but I love any kind of rare living creature.”

“I sure am a *rare species*, aren’t I?” Zelaide snapped. “Want to gouge out my eyes and submerge them in formaldehyde for your research then? Or would ya rather skin me and study the culture on a Petri dish underneath a microscope?” He spoke in an offhanded manner, disparaging himself. Euphemia immediately regretted her poor choice of words.

“Don’t talk like that. I’m sorry for calling you a specimen; I messed up. I’m not very good with words and my sister is on my case for it all the time. But I won’t lie. I did want to see it again. No, I wanted to see *you* again. Very much so.”

Zelaide said nothing.

“I mean it. I wanted to see you,” Euphemia repeated to get her point across to him.

†Chapter 4: A Troublesome Situation†

WHAT'S she going on about? This naïve, rich young lady. I'm not even human. I'm a Beast Blood and an outlaw Contractor, which isn't a respectable occupation by any means.

"I wanted to see you," the woman stubbornly repeated. "So I waited."

"Don't be stupid. What do you get from seein' me?"

"I got myself a nice hot meal," Euphemia replied as she munched on the bread she had dipped in the red soup.

"Scuse me?"

"Just a little joke."

"Go home the instant you finish eating!" Zelaide was fed up—she was *boasting* about getting a free meal at his expense. He downed his coffee in one gulp.

"I will. I've got to go to work, so I'll be out of your hair soon, but I have a favor to ask of you first."

"You want a favor from me?" Zelaide grunted out, scowling with utter disgust. He looked so disgusted it gave her the impression it was somewhat contrived. "I don't even want to know, but shoot. What do you want?"

"I want you to become friends with me."

"Not happening."

Aw, an instant rejection.

The air went out of Euphemia's expectant heart, deflating it in one go.

"You could've given it a little more thought..."

"No need."

“Because you have lots of friends?”

“Because I don’t need any friends!”

“Oh, *I see*! Thanks for the food!” Euphemia tossed her hair over her shoulder and piled her empty dishes together as she stood.

There was a large dishwasher beneath the barely used, brand-new sink. She pulled down the door with a click and found it looked spanking new as well.

“Let’s see, the dishwashing tablet goes in here,” she muttered as she fumbled with the dishwasher.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m just gonna toss out the dirty dishes anyway.”

“You’re going to *what*? How could you even think of doing something so wasteful? You should never toss out a plate this nice! Did you know you can use ceramic dishes for decades if you treat them well?” she informed him like an infomercial.

Even Euphemia, whose housekeeping skills were already less than praiseworthy, was astounded by Zelaide’s complete lack of common sense when it came to maintaining a household.

“You don’t say,” he replied, unimpressed.

After Euphemia locked the detergent tablet in place, slid the dishes into the racks, and fiddled with the settings, she had nothing else to do. Zelaide twirled the empty cup in his large hand as he contemplated something or another behind his unreadable expression.

Euphemia glanced at the clock—there was still time before her shift. She shut the dishwasher door with her hip and glanced around the roomy kitchen for something she could use as a conversation starter. She happened to spot a beautiful white box sitting on a display shelf above the kitchen counter. The intricately engraved box was out of character for a rugged, bearlike man who spent his days working as a Contractor and Hunter. It looked like it was crafted from a rare stone. Euphemia didn’t care much for the decorative gemstones used in jewelry, but she had a considerable fondness for mineral rocks.

She approached the shelf for a better look.

Is it made out of alabaster?

“So pretty.”

Euphemia wasn't too tall, but the second she stood on her tiptoes and reached for the box high up the shelf, a tornado of black and silver swept her feet from under her, knocking her on the ground.

“Eh?!” she squeaked.

Five whole seconds passed before Euphemia realized she was stretched out on the floor with a wrist pinned. Zelaide was on top of her, wearing a terrifying expression.

“Do not touch anything without asking!” he roared.

Euphemia was seeing him angry for the first time; her mouth fell open more from surprise than fear. They'd only met twice, but he had never reacted to her actions with overt anger, and merely treated her with indifference and annoyance. He hadn't even lashed out at the thugs who had attacked her.

“I'm sorry,” Euphemia sincerely apologized, realizing she must've made a serious blunder.

She always made the same mistake: charging headfirst without thinking whenever something caught her interest. It was a bad impulse. How many times had her sister scolded her for it?

A shadow fell over Zelaide's face from where he held himself up on his knees above her. His glacial eyes radiated a faint light, just like they had on that night.

Ah, this is what I wanted to see. I wanted to see these eyes, but I've messed it all up. He's furious right now. I have to apologize. I'll apologize as many times as it takes for him to forgive me. Even if I have to prostrate myself and press my head to the floor—wait, the floor?

Moving only her eyes, Euphemia finally registered the full situation.

What's with this position? What in the colonies is happening to me? she marveled.

She was lying comfortably with her back on the cold tile, sandwiched between the legs of the hulking man peering down at her from above. Moreover, his

large palm was supporting her back. No wonder she hadn't felt the shock of pain when he had pulled her down by her wrist. He had held her up in the split-second before she hit the ground.



That said! This scene would make any unwitting bystander immediately call the police: an angry giant of a man pinning a young blonde to the floor beneath him. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, Euphemia didn't feel any fear, despite the fact that she had been violated by those thugs a few days ago. He was holding her down with heated, intimidating eyes, yet curiously, fear never surged within her.

Instead, they stared into each other's eyes like idiots.

But the moment was fading as she became aware of the gradual pain growing in her wrist. Left with little choice but to make him stop, she knocked her free hand against his rock-solid chest.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have touched your stuff without asking. I won't do it again, so...would you mind letting my wrist go? It kind of hurts."

"Wrist...? Ah! AAAH!"

At her touch, Zelaide finally realized the position he was in and he scooted away from her as fast as someone who had been stung by a bee.

"No! It's not what ya think! I-I w-wasn't trying to do anything to you!" he stammered.

"I know you weren't. I did something bad. It's only natural you would yell at me for it."

"Th-That's not why," Zelaide continued. "Can you stand? Are you hurt anywhere?" Zelaide took Euphemia's hand as she pushed herself into a sitting position and helped her gently to her feet as if she were a delicate crystal. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"I'm fine. You protected me from hitting the ground. I'm not hurt."

Zelaide maintained a rigid silence.

"Is it really important to you? The box, I mean."

"Box? Ah, this thing? No. It's a dangerous item." Zelaide glared at the box on top of the shelf, his face hard.

"Dangerous? This beautiful little box?" Euphemia's eyes rounded.

"It's filled with poison," Zelaide answered shortly.

"Poison? Like poisonous poison?"

"Yeah. If you're a plant scientist you should be familiar with the stuff. It's a poison taken from Lyunone."

"Lyunone! The deadly poison that targets the nervous system? Do Hunters use poison too?"

"I don't. This was sent to me anonymously a while back. It's set to spring poison-tipped needles at whoever opens the box."

Euphemia stared up at the beautiful white box. No one would stop to consider that such a dainty little box could be packed with a poison capable of killing an adult in under ten minutes. Almost anyone would feel an urge to open it and see what pretty items were tucked away inside its alabaster confines.

She wanted to know why someone had sent this deadly item to him and what they intended by it, but Zelaide clearly wasn't going to tell her. He merely glared daggers at the box, his expression dark.

To him, it was a present meant to kill him. Was his work so dangerous it attracted assassination attempts on his life? Did it really garner that much hatred?

"And that's why you told me not to touch it?" Euphemia ventured.

He was trying to protect me again.

"Why do you keep such a dangerous object lying around?"

"I thought it might come in handy someday... But I didn't account for somethin' like this. I'll dispose of it later."

Zelaide cautiously picked up the box and moved it to a higher shelf. *She won't be able to reach it here, no matter how hard she tries. She'll be safe. It should be safe. Wait a minute. Am I actin' on the assumption that she'll come to this house again?*

"You don't have to do that. I won't touch it again. Don't get rid of it if it might be useful later," Euphemia said, pushing her disheveled hair up and off her face. Now where did her blasted hat go?

“No, I’ll dispose of it today—hey, that spot’s bright-red!”

“Where?”

Zelaide pointed to Euphemia’s wrist, his eyes wide. Wondering what was up, she dropped her gaze to find his fingers had left red marks on her wrist.

“Oh, you’re right. It’s no biggie,” she said nonchalantly, waving the hand to prove her point.

“Don’t dismiss it! Hang on for just a second. Pal should’ve left medicine somewhere. I know it’s around here somewhere.” Zelaide rummaged noisily through the drawers on the opposite side of the room. “...Found it. For sprains and abrasions. This is the stuff.” He came back with an unopened tube of medical cream. Was every consumable good in this house brand new?

“It doesn’t hurt one bit. I don’t need any medicine. Besides, it’s my fault to begin with.”

Zel ignored Euphemia’s protests and gently took her hand to spread the white medicinal cream over her wrist in an even layer. His hands moved with the care of a glassmaker working on a delicate piece, though there was a boyish awkwardness to his touch. She could tell he was treating her as gently as possible, unlike the reprehensible douchebags who’d left similar marks on her body nearly a week ago. Though the marks were the same, the sheer disgust that had brought up bile and the sweet ticklishness she felt now were as different as day and night.

Ah, oh no. What is this? My heartbeat sounds off. I hope he can’t hear it. I’ve heard his species has great hearing though.

Zel was too focused on rubbing in the medicine to notice Euphemia’s heart palpitations. After a long while, he deemed his work satisfactory and stopped massaging in the cream.

“I couldn’t control my strength because it was so sudden. Sorry. I’m fully aware a man like me shouldn’t do somethin’ like that to a fine lady like you. I hope it doesn’t leave a mark.”

“I d-don’t think it will. Looks like a small bruise to me. Besides, I don’t mind if it leaves a mark. I’m not a model.”

“You should mind. Does it hurt to the touch?”

“Nope.”

“You’ve got a tiny hand. And it’s so soft. You *really* need to be more careful. That last incident and today’s shows you’ve got a real lack of self-awareness when it comes to danger. Do you even understand who you are?”

Zelaide finished with the medicine and started wrapping a thin bandage around her wrist. Euphemia thought he was exaggerating.

“Of course I do. I’m Euphemia Ashencourt. Twenty years old. I graduated school with half-baked grades. I started working for the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute this year and—”

“I’m not talking ‘bout your personal history,” Zelaide interrupted. “I’m referring to your looks. You’re a pretty young woman. You’re just asking sexually starved men to devour you when you wander around the freeway or empty city streets alone at night. You’ve got zero sense of danger and zero ability to look out for yourself.”

“I think I have plenty of sense and ability,” she retorted.

Warm feelings filled Euphemia even as she argued with him. As she suspected, Zelaide possessed a tenderness unthinkable from his appearance alone. He had a wicked tongue and a curt manner to be sure, but Euphemia grew confident he wasn’t the kind of man to hurt someone weaker.

My eye for people is surprisingly accurate.

“You sure ‘bout that?” Zelaide asked.

“Yup, I am. I’ve got a discerning eye.”

“It’s nonexistent from what I’ve seen,” he muttered. “All done.” Zelaide released Euphemia’s hand, the bandage secured.

“But you didn’t even try to taste-test me.”

“Come again?”

“Like I said, it didn’t happen with you.”

“But I...!”

“Yes?”

“Err...I’m not a human male so it doesn’t apply to me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re undoubtedly human. From what I researched, Beast Bloods and humans just have slightly different chromosome arrangements. I’ve just learned this myself, but every human has some likelihood of producing a child with chromosome abnormalities. Their children are still genuine humans though, right?”

“But those children don’t have eyes that glow in the dark, do they?”

“Well, no...but is there a need to be concerned with that? They’re very beautiful eyes.”

“No, they’re not. I’m no art critic, but even I know that the word beautiful is reserved for girls like you. Your hair, for instance. It looks like it was created by the sun.”

Zelaide put his hand on Euphemia’s shoulder and turned her toward the mirror on the wall, where he scooped up a lock of her hair that came loose of her braids and tangled his fingers in it, slowly combing them through. Her long hair smoothly came undone between his fingers.

“And when it comes to the color of your eyes—here, take a look out the window. It’s the same color as green leaves under the sun. Agh, what am I even saying? We were talking ‘bout your lack of danger awareness. Oh, right.” He lifted his head as if he suddenly remembered some pressing business.

“Yes?”

“Did you get your specs?”

“I did, thank you. I didn’t expect to find them wrapped up in the newspaper.”

“I thought it was risky leaving them out like that, but I couldn’t come up with a better way.”

“I won’t complain since I’m the one who forgot them. I’m fond of those specs though, so I was happy to get them back.”

“Why are you wearin’ specs without prescription lens? They pose more of a danger by impairing your visibility if you can actually see.”

“Because I look stupid without them—no, well, I *am* stupid, but...”

“You don’t have them on today.”

“Only because I’m here. They’re in my purse right now. I already showed you my stupidest side, so I figured there’s no point now...”

“You are stupid. And senseless at that.”

“Hey, senseless is worse than stupid.” Pouting, Euphemia stuck out her lower lip, revealing the wet, pink underside.

Blood hell! Why is this woman so defenseless?! She should know what kinda creatures Beast Bloods are after doin’ a little research. Why is she trying to get close to me when she knows what I am? I don’t get her. And it doesn’t help that she’s as shameless as they come. The second I let down my guard she goes touchin’ my stuff... It’s been forever since I last felt the pit of my stomach suddenly drop like that. If I had been a second too late...

Just thinking about what could’ve happened to her brought a sour flavor to his mouth.

Zelaide was fairly certain an Inferni had sent him the dangerous box. Infernum was a secret society of humans who harbored extremist hatred toward Beast Bloods. Members of the group were called Inferni. Most Inferni had lost family and other loved ones to savage, criminal Beast Bloods, but their fixation on their victimization had morphed into deep resentment that led them to regard even innocent Beast Bloods and Beast Blood children as a danger to society necessitating extermination.

Beast Bloods who made a name for themselves as Contractors and Hunters like Zelaide were regarded as monsters they needed to kill to avenge those they’d lost. Zelaide saw them as nothing more than an extreme nuisance, but they unrelentingly and frequently sent him death threats and dangerous items. Most of what they sent hadn’t stepped outside the bounds of basic harassment. They were gung-ho about harassing him at a distance, but none had the guts to invade his home. At least that had been the case until recently.

The box they’d sent this time around had cost too much time, effort, and

money for typical harassment. One of the deadliest poisons in the colonies laced the inside of the expensive box. Zelaide likely wouldn't have sensed the danger if he hadn't caught whiff of a slightly irritating odor. Somebody had put too much thought into this elaborate death trap. He kept the box around for his investigation into who had sent it, but he never imagined something like this would happen.

Zelaide had felt a surge of fear in his gut when he spotted the young woman stretching innocently for the box. His body had moved faster than his brain to push her away from it. He hadn't expected to knock her onto the floor—she was too light to withstand the impact of his push. The next moment his eyes were riveted on her golden hair spread like angel wings across the floor and her wide, surprised eyes. Though her normal expressions weren't particularly noteworthy, every once in a while she'd take his breath away with one striking look. And he was captivated by her, every time.

I'm the idiot. How does this make me any different from those scumbags? Hey, stop. Stop it, he told himself as he traced her plump, soft lips with his rough index finger. Euphemia stared at him, staying perfectly still.

My finger—it's moving on its own. I'm not telling it to do this...but...

"Soft..."

Is she walking around exposin' these soft gems to the world? That's extremely dangerous.

CHOMP!

"Huh?"

Zelaide's finger was enveloped by those soft lips...and that wasn't all. Something hot and wet ran over his fingertip.

Startled, he yanked his finger out. Those tantalizing lips pursed with disappointment.

"I thought you were going to kiss me," she said.

"Ki—"

"A friendship kiss," Euphemia quickly added on when she saw Zelaide shiver.

A friendship kiss? Do friends normally kiss? Hold on, when did we become friends?

“Do you...want me to kiss you?”

Zelaide was internally shocked to hear his voice come out gravelly and hoarse, like it belonged to someone else. Shocking things happened all the time when he was with her. His gut instinct was right—he needed to avoid getting further involved with this woman. He had made a grave mistake.

“Is that so wrong?”

“Ugh...”

His knees buckled when she primly thrust up her chin, as if begging him to take her lips, bringing their faces closer. Only a gap two fingers wide remained between their lips. Zelaide was in a world of panic.

Meanwhile, Euphemia was in a similar state of panic on the other side of her blank expression.

It's not my fault! Aren't you supposed to kiss after one person traces the other's lips and that person licks their finger? Why is he backing away like I'm some sort of banshee? I had no choice but to cover up with the friendship kiss thing after that! If he doesn't make a move soon, we'll be stuck like this forever!

The moment their hesitation and awkwardness reached its peak, an IHT enthusiastically belted out a mood breaking tune.

+++

IN the center of Gothic City was the administrative district where the facilities comprising the backbone of the city were concentrated, including city hall, the senate building, and police headquarters.

With spires imitating religious buildings from millennia past, the antiquated exteriors of the government buildings clashed with their practically structured, modern interiors. Security for these stronghold buildings was topnotch, but keeping with their antiquated exteriors, the high-tech facilities maintained some classic security measures from the bygone days, including several inconspicuous gates.

Euphemia entered city hall just past noon through a gate few knew of, which looked nothing like an entrance under even the most careful observation.

Of course, the appearance and location of the gate was its only inconspicuous feature. Once inside, the advanced security system prevented passage with several layers of high-tech doors requiring numerous complicated security codes and biometric scans.

Good grief, this is such a long process and I haven't even eaten lunch yet. Why did they have to make this place so difficult to navigate?

Some of the documents Euphemia had come across about her father's ethnic history revealed that long ago, in the metropolis of a small island nation on a distant planet, they had built entertainment facilities called *Ryotei*, maze-like buildings purposely constructed to help customers forget the problems of their transient lives as they lost their way inside. She doubted her government had based this building on the historical concept, but it sure felt that way every time a winding passageway seemed to solely exist to make people get lost.

A female secretary she knew was waiting for her once she passed through the first security block. She was the closest aide to Euphemia's sister. The prudish woman guided her through the circuitous building to where the mayor was working.

Euphemia's older sister was in the middle of the viewing room at the far end of the vast floor dedicated to her use.

"Thank you for coming, Mia. I apologize for summoning you here when you must be busy."

Euphemia, having been made to walk a long distance before finally reaching her sister's location, now perched primly on the edge of the massive couch her sister directed her to. Erica didn't remove her eyes from the digital panel before her, her beautiful fingers restlessly swiping around the top of it.

"I'm sorry, I'll be done soon. Please wait."

Euphemia was wearing an ID card on her plain suit and had pulled her hair up in the government official style tight bun. Her familial relation to the mayor would be unperceivable even if someone barged into the room and saw them

together. To begin with, even if Euphemia kept her usual appearance, most couldn't tell they were sisters because they looked nothing alike.

Arghhh...

Euphemia stifled a quiet sigh. It'd been a while since she last came here. She conscientiously kept her posture prim and proper. Her unwillingness to be here wasn't showing, was it? She did her best to keep her face straight.

It had been two hours since she left Zelaide's house.

Euphemia had pulled away from him with the speed of a bullet when the IHT rang in his kitchen.

They had drawn close enough together for the tips of their noses to brush. Interrupted, she quickly slapped her hand over her wrist IHT and saw it was a direct call from her sister. Erica rarely, if ever, contacted her at this hour. Zelaide had already jumped away from her like a startled cat.

With impeccable timing, his IHT rang right after hers and he wordlessly left the room, giving Euphemia space to speak with her sister.

And here she was now.

"It's been a while, huh?" The mayor poured the drinks herself. She had brewed a high-quality green tea instead of the usual coffee served in most government offices.

"Yeah. Sorry. I keep forgetting to contact you on a regular basis, too." Euphemia brought the flowery teacup to her lips in anticipation; she often struggled to brew the stuff properly herself. The somber room featured noticeably exotic decorations from other cultures placed here and there. Needless to say, it was decorated to Erica's tastes.

"Oh no, Mia, did you hurt your arm?" Erica's lips turned down at the corners when she noticed the bandage wrapped around Euphemia's wrist.

"Oh, this? It's nothing to worry about. I didn't break, sprain, or cut it. It's just a bruise. The person who treated it went overboard, is all. Anyways, can we get back on topic?" Euphemia waved her wrist around to show it worked fine, and quickly changed the topic. "I was really surprised to get your D-com. Is

something wrong? I've heard how busy you've been lately."

"I have been busy, but even the mayor gets time off."

"Is it okay for you to use your precious time off on me?" Euphemia asked without inflection.

"Yes. I want to."

Euphemia's older half-sister, Erica Saionji, stood from her humongous polished office desk and bowed her head.

Euphemia believed her sister had picked up her gallantry and mannerisms from their father. And that wasn't all she inherited from their father—she had inherited the glossy black hair Euphemia secretly admired and his calm, black eyes, imbuing her with the aura of a mature woman who could get a job done well, regardless of whether she was trying to appear as such. Of course, it wasn't just appearances; Erica was a capable woman of boundless talent. Both sisters were beautiful in their own way, but they looked nothing alike, even though they shared the same father.

Their father was the descendant of a black-haired ethnic group known as the Japanese. Though they were a minority group on this planet and had intermarried with many other ethnicities over the years since arriving, the group of people with black hair, almond-shaped black eyes, and ivory-white skin were still called Japanese to this day. While they shared the same father, Euphemia looked like her mother and the porcelain-white color of her skin was about the only thing she had in common with Erica.

Erica's mother had passed away while she was still in school. Euphemia's mother was their father's second wife. Their father had also passed away a few years ago, leaving Euphemia as Erica's sole living family member, aside from her young stepmother.

"I'm worried about you," Erica stressed. "I could never apologize to your mother enough if something happened to you, Mia."

"Worry isn't even in that woman's vocabulary," Euphemia retorted. "You should know what kind of person she is. I have no doubt she's kicking back under the sun somewhere smoking a pipe, wondering what to waste Dad's

money on next.” Euphemia disparaged her mother in good cheer. Her mother was living a comfortable life traveling the world free of care, on the inheritance her father had left behind.

“She probably is...” Erica made no attempt to defend the woman. “Still, I’m sorry for suddenly calling you here like this. I also feel bad for making you take time off work. I’ve sent word to the director and laboratory ahead of time.”

“Don’t sweat it. Only my boss knows about my relation to you. Though my coworkers all think I got the job through connections—and they aren’t wrong—so most of the jerks think I’ll only be there temporarily, anyway. But I take my work seriously and work hard. I succeeded in observing the Night Blooms during their flowering period, and I am going to start a full-fledged experiment into crossbreeding the flowers until we can establish a nontoxic seed—”

“You have good goals,” Erica softly cut Euphemia off without changing her demeanor. “But...I received a report from Mrs. Mayo this morning.” She opened the large IHT panel affixed to the wall instead of the one on her table. Euphemia’s stomach lurched.

“F-From Mrs. Mayo? ...Wh-What did she have to say?”

“She informed me about you not returning home for a full three days during your observation of the Night Bloom’s flowering period. The report only gets weirder when she said you were supposed to spend the last night at the laboratory, but suddenly changed your plans and returned by car in the dead of night. It’s all on record, yet you didn’t return to your room until late the next morning.”

Euphemia answered her sister with silence.

“Something happened, didn’t it?”

“...Nothing big,” Euphemia faltered as she averted her gaze from her sister’s keen eyes.

“Is that so? Then tell me every last detail about that nothing big. It’s no use lying. Your face gives everything away,” Erica said to her younger sister, her beautiful face settling in a stern look reserved for corrupt government officials.

She’s mad at me...

The bread and soup Euphemia had eaten at Zelaide's house swirled inside her twisting stomach. Ever since she met her friend Wei the day after she was attacked, she kept herself busy in her own way by spending every day persistently visiting Zelaide's house and going straight to work from there.

In other words, she'd used her self-imposed busy schedule as an excuse to keep postponing the painful act of confronting her sister about the fact that she had nearly been raped on the side of the freeway. She dreaded the inevitable: her sister forcing her back into living in the mayor's house if she screwed up her report. But most of all, Zelaide had caught her full attention. So she'd continued pushing it off day by day, neglecting to tell Erica until she was called in. And Wei had warned her about this, too.

I screwed up big time again.

Euphemia's shoulders drooped. Mrs. Mayo was a perceptive woman, and Erica was twice as perceptive. Erica must've investigated Euphemia's unusual actions and assumed she was involved in something dangerous simply by seeing her bandaged wrist. And Euphemia's attitude had only confirmed her suspicions.

Accepting her fate, Euphemia retold the events of the other day in detail, all the while thinking her sister probably already knew most of what she had to say before she said it.

"Why didn't you tell me right away?" Erica's tone suddenly became harsh.

Being a politician, she was a professional at changing her tone of voice and demeanor to fit the moment. Euphemia knew her sister loved her, so she endured the fear that urged her to run from the room screaming. This was one of the main reasons why she'd taken her sweet time coming here to have this conversation.

"...I'm sorry."

Euphemia had been apologizing like this a lot lately. She gnawed at her lower lip. Everything resulted from her own thoughtlessness. She deserved a scolding or two.

"I didn't want to worry you when you're so busy... And I didn't want you to

drag me back home.”

“Well, I thought it had something to do with that,” Erica acknowledged without any anger in her voice. She intently observed her younger sister.

“It was my fault...that’s what someone said.”

Wei and Zelaide, the two men in her life, had told her that.

“Mia, come here.”

Euphemia slowly walked over to the side of Erica’s desk. Erica stood from her chair and circled around the desk. She reached out her long arms and pulled Euphemia’s shoulders in for a hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe...”

“I’m sorry.”

Erica was taller than most women in the colonies and Euphemia’s head only came up to her chin, allowing her to deeply inhale her sister’s familiar perfume. She could never catch up to her amazing sister no matter how much time passed. But that never changed the fact her older half-sister loved her with her own strict, yet kind sensibilities.

“How could you return home alone using the freeway in the dead of night? ... Never do such a reckless thing again.”

“I’m sorry, Erica. I promise I won’t.”

Erica released Euphemia and peered into her emerald eyes.

Erica’s little sister was the spitting image of her stepmother. She hadn’t begrudged her father when he’d brought home a much younger second wife twenty-one years ago. Ten years had passed since her mother’s death, and Erica was a mentally mature seventeen-year-old at the time. There was no more than a seven-year age difference between her and her stepmother, but even with completely different personalities, they never clashed and readily viewed each other as family.

The little sister her stepmother gave birth to not long after their marriage was terribly endearing, and Erica had doted on the little one who chased after her with everything she had in her own way. Her stepmother wasn’t very interested

in childrearing, so Erica had taken it upon herself to raise Euphemia alongside her wet nurse and governess.

“Do you know everything?” Euphemia asked, knowing the answer.

“Probably the majority of it. You weren’t...in shock?”

“My body shook uncontrollably and I puked a lot at first...but I’m okay now. Even I’m startled by how fast I recovered.” Euphemia didn’t mention that her quick recovery was thanks to Zelaide.

“I heard the person who saved you was a Beast Blood,” Erica abruptly changed the topic as if she had read Euphemia’s mind. Euphemia’s heart skipped a whole beat.

“Eh? Uh, yes, I guess so. I didn’t find out until later.”

“What did you think of him? He seems to be quite famous.”

“He looked like a scary man to me at first...but I found out right away that he wasn’t a bad person despite his dangerous career. I believe he’s trustworthy,” Euphemia related, gently stroking the bandage on her wrist.

“Goodness gracious. How could you immediately trust a man you barely know? Once you set your mind on something you can’t see it any other way. It’s bad habit of yours. But perhaps your intuition is right this time since you’re safe—and that’s all that matters.”

“Turns out he’s a Contractor...”

“I’ve heard. His line of work will never run dry with this planet being the way it is. I’m partially responsible for the slow restoration of peace and order to this city, too.”

“That’s not true! You haven’t done anything wrong, Erica. The ones in the wrong are me, for having zero foresight, and those douchebag criminals! I’ve put in a report with the police at least.”

“With Wei Lin-jie? That was your one sound piece of judgment during this whole ordeal.”

“Harsh...but you’re right. They had illegal possession of a Muta—a Bijour. I told the police what they and their semitrailer looked like. They’ll get caught in

no time if they're driving that thing around." Euphemia forced a smile to reassure her sister. But Erica shook her head, her expression grim.

"Unfortunately, things won't end as easily as you hoped," Erica confided, drawing her well-groomed eyebrows together as she pointed at the IHT panel. A written report appeared on the screen.

"What do you mean?"

"Apparently, a man's body, torn to shreds, was discovered in the Plains thirty kyros away from the city, approximately two days ago. While the police were investigating whether it was a murder or an accident, another man came begging for protection yesterday... This is him." Erica swiped her finger to the side and the display screen changed. She opened another window and brought up a picture of a man's face.

"Ah!"

It was the man who'd tripped over himself running away after witnessing Zelaide kill the Bijour with his bare hands. The name Pete Kansas was displayed beneath his photo.

"With this, we can assume the dead man was murdered. When the man in this photo, Pete, learned of his accomplice's death, he came to the police offering everything he knew in exchange for protection because he feared he would be next on the kill list. Is there no mistake he is one of the men who attacked you?"

"Ugh...yes."

Euphemia thought she had shut her fears away, but she felt instantly sick to her stomach. Not missing the color draining from her sister's face, Erica promptly changed the screen. Text came up on the display instead.

"You have to listen to this, okay? This man is a resident of this city and is a member of a small-time crime syndicate called Vermis," Erica explained while looking at the display. "His rap sheet includes larceny, extortion, rape, and well, pretty much everything else to make him a piece of shit, but murder isn't one of them. He's already in custody, so what he did to you will be the last crime he ever commits. Of course, he has no idea who you are. But the police connected

the dots.”

Euphemia was learning for the first time just how capable Gothic City’s analytical team was. She guessed Wei caught word of both the murder case and Pete’s tip-off and connected it to the information she’d relayed him about the place, time, and circumstances under which she had been attacked. Now both men who’d assaulted her had gone somewhere beyond her reach. She wouldn’t have to worry about them ever again.

So why is Erica worried?

“What did you mean things won’t end as easily as I hoped, if one of my attackers is dead and the other is in custody?” Euphemia voiced her greatest suspicion.

“The man who was murdered was called Danny.”

That’s right. One of the men from that night went by that name. Euphemia silently nodded.

“It appears the murdered Danny had participated in multiple atrocious crimes of a similar nature to yours. All at the request of an employer,” Erica said.

“Then...are you telling me what happened that night wasn’t a one-time thing? Is a big syndicate behind it?”

“Correct. The men were filming your assault with the semitrailer’s back camera for a reason. Danny, the man who fled in the semitrailer, was found dead in the Wilds without anything on his person. Neither the semitrailer nor the camera data are anywhere to be found. In other words, the video with you on it has already been handed over to someone. I think it’s safe to assume it was the men who killed Danny.”

“The video of me was...?” Euphemia swallowed the bile rising in the back of her throat.

Just thinking about it made her nauseated. Was there really video evidence of her being pushed onto the ground with two men on top of her? Of her clothes being ripped off and those filthy hands and tongues running over her skin?

Euphemia shivered and ran her hands over her trembling arms.

“I’m sorry, I’ve forced you to remember a horrible thing. But do you understand what this means now?”

“...Yes.” Euphemia fought to regain her calm.

She didn’t realize how parched her throat was until she tried to swallow. She had finished off the cup of green tea Erica poured for her, so she walked over to the pitcher of clean water in the corner of the room and poured herself a glassful, which she chugged until it was empty. The pure, cool liquid seeped through her body, somewhat alleviating her nerves.

“The problem is if this video gets out, right?” Euphemia assumed once she stopped shaking.

If Euphemia was just anybody, it would end with her disgrace alone. Destroying the name of a junior researcher wouldn’t cause any larger commotion or influence on society. But Euphemia wasn’t just anybody—it was the honor of the *mayor’s sister* on the line.

“Sh-Should...should that video go public, it would only bring you trouble...”

If a video of the mayor’s younger sister nearly being raped went public, it would sully both the mayor’s name and political campaign.

“Haah,” Erica sighed loudly. “I have been trying to tell you it isn’t as simple as you think.”

“What? Can you spell it out for me then?”

“You don’t have to worry about it causing problems for me. You need to reflect on your thoughtlessness and how it escalated events, but don’t you for one minute think it’s your fault. The criminals are at fault. You are a *victim*, Mia, not a culprit. I can easily shut down any argument anyone has that says otherwise.”

Euphemia waited to hear the rest of what she had to say.

“The real problem is if—or in this case, *when*—the true culprit arrives at the conclusion that you are my young sister. Chances are, you will be in far greater trouble and danger than I will be.”

“Why’s that?” Euphemia tilted her head and sat back down with another full

glass of water.

“I have many enemies. A large number of people have feelings far beyond discontent—hostile feelings, should we say, toward my policies, and there are more than a few among those working in dark sectors who want me dead for tightening the regulations as of late. If any of them were to learn of this—”

“So it *would* cause problems for you, after all—”

“Listen to me until the end, Mia. Your safety is being threatened more than my policies. This isn’t a problem of a video leaking, it’s a matter of life or death,” Erica bluntly rebuked her younger sister, whose expression had turned dark.

“My life is being threatened? I mean, sure, I was the victim of some scary stuff, but the culprits have already been taken—”

“There are people out there who will think it’s easier to go after you than to directly attack me, especially if they want to threaten me where it hurts.”

“I can’t believe anyone would go that far...even if they’re against you.”

Few people knew that Euphemia was Erica’s younger sister. Only a select number of trustworthy people like the mayor’s closest aide, Euphemia’s superior at work, a few close friends, and Mrs. Mayo knew the truth. Then again, there was no guarantee the information couldn’t get out. Someone desperate enough to find out could figure it out if they dug deep enough.

Erica shook her head, her slicked-back bun staying perfectly in place despite the motion. “Sorry, but I am not as optimistic as you. Mia, you are in an extremely precarious position. And I am responsible for you... So I have taken the appropriate measures.”

Erica turned around and pressed the interphone button on her desk. “Yes, ma’am?” answered a clerical voice.

“Where is he?” Erica asked.

“He is waiting outside your office.”

“Let him in.”

“Erica? What’s going on?” Euphemia asked.

“Mia, I have hired someone to protect you in my place for the time being. Out of my own pocket, to be clear.”

“...You did *what*?”

Her question went unanswered as the door opened and Erica’s secretary escorted a man inside before leaving. The answer ceased to be of importance as soon as she saw who it was.

“Zelaide Silvergray...!” she exclaimed, her jaw dropping.

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IS she walking around exposin’ these soft gems to the world? Shouldn’t that be illegal?

Warning bells went off inside his head at the sight of her vulnerably thrust-out lower lip. Yet, she sucked his finger into her mouth and went as far as licking it with the tip of her hot tongue... He couldn’t move. He couldn’t even avert his gaze.

I want to touch her. But how should I do it? She’s a human woman. Not a tough Beast Blood female. She’s downright different from a beast like me. I’ve got zero experience in this area—I’ve no clue how to handle her. Do I just softly press my lips to her? Or do I suck on them hard until they swell red with my kiss?

Stop it! Zelaide restrained himself at the last second. He was close enough to feel her breath on his face. *This is nothin’ more than lust! She isn’t the type of girl a filthy beast like me should touch.*

Stop it! Stop yourself! Zelaide argued with himself, all the while locked in a passionate stare with the alluring woman. *But I can’t take my eyes off her... ahh...*

The dismayed man was saved by an electronic theme song from an old movie. Euphemia’s IHT watch was ringing.

Zelaide pulled away from her at the speed of light. As if on cue, his IHT began vibrating, and he took the chance to flee the room.

It’s a job request! Thank the moons. This is for the best. The moment is over! Now I can return to my normal self and get back to work, he thought, excitedly

tapping his IHT.

“Hello, Zel. Do you have a minute to talk? Sorry for bothering you the moment you got home from your job in Ajanta, but an urgent job came in for you.”

Zelaide jumped on the job opportunity. “That you, Pal? I don’t care. I’m itchin’ to work.”

“Glad to hear it. But you need to know this is the kind of job you can’t easily turn down once you hear the details.”

“Is it from a troublesome source?”

“Yes. But the pay is outstanding. The job is simple bodyguard work, but for a long duration. They want to decide on the exact duration after you’ve met.”

“Interesting. I’m guessing since you can’t turn it down the job’s comin’ from a city official?”

“Your guess is right. It’s from the mayor.”

“The mayor?”

“From Mayor Saionji.”

“That’s a real big-shot. Is the job to be the mayor’s bodyguard?”

“No. It seems to be bodyguard work for the mayor’s relative. I don’t know much more than that. The job requires you to meet for more information. They wouldn’t answer any of my questions. It ticked me off quite a bit, but she wasn’t as oppressive as I would’ve expected. They want to meet you first before anything else. It seems like you can’t refuse the job once you hear the details, so your only opportunity to turn it down will be right after you meet in person. But, to be honest with you, I don’t want you to refuse this one. Simply accepting a job from the mayor will bring prestige to your name and make future jobs a *lot* more convenient.”

“...I get the logic behind it. I just have to meet them first, yeah?”

“That’s how it goes.”

“I’ll meet the client. The type of job doesn’t change the fact I want work.”

“This is a good trend for you. You were more pessimistic about jobs like this not too long ago. Something happen again?”

“Not really.”

“Do you need me to restock your house?”

“I’m not short on anything. I’ve always thought the stuff you left around was useless, but...some things actually came in handy.”

Like the food and medicine.

“Oh? It’s rare for you say that. I’m glad to hear it though... Say, why don’t you tell me more about what came in handy after you hear about this new job? It’s been a while since we last had a meal together...” Pal’s voice grew quieter over the IHT.

“When I have the time, Pal. I’m satisfied as long as you provide me with work. I’ll do the job and handle any unexpected trouble that comes my way.”

“...I see. That sounds just like you... Okay, I’m counting on you to do the job well then.”

And the result of taking that job was—

This?!



Grinding his teeth, Zelaide cursed himself for unknowingly waltzing into this place.

Before him was the young woman he'd parted ways with that very morning. Her shimmering hair was in a tight ball behind her head and she wore the specs she took back from him with a dark suit. She was probably trying to look more mature, but her efforts unfortunately did nothing of the sort. On the other hand, she was a full-fledged adult. The lips he'd nearly pressed his own against two hours before were puckered and shining with an ample amount of lip gloss.

Is this what you meant by a job I can't refuse, Pal? I resent you for this.

The young woman's already massive eyes widened even further as she gawked at him. He thought her eyes would fall out of their sockets if she stared any harder. They'd make for a stunning pair of marbles.

"Welcome, Mister Silvergray. I'm Erica Saionji. I serve as this city's mayor. This here is my younger sister, Euphemia Ashencourt."

"Hello," Euphemia reluctantly greeted him after being formally introduced by Erica.

Zelaide stayed perfectly still. He and Euphemia must've come off as visibly awkward to Erica, because she smoothly took over the situation by addressing him further.

"I heard the full details from Euphemia just now. You have my deepest gratitude for saving my little sister from the brink of danger the other day. She is my one and only sibling and my dearest family member. I honestly tremble to think of what would have happened to her had you not passed by at that time. According to her, you are a very trustworthy man..."

...So she says, when she already looked into him long before asking me, Euphemia thought as she narrowed her eyes on Erica. She must've heard about what I was doing from someone like Mrs. Mayo and learned I was visiting Zelaide's house through those channels. Then she conducted an investigation into him. Well, I can't complain about the direction this is taking.

“This was supposed to be about a job request, Miss Mayor,” Zelaide said in a voice flat enough to dash Euphemia’s hopes.

Is he angry? Like, really, terribly angry? But I’m not the one responsible for this!

“It looks to me like I have no choice but to accept the job. Make it brief,” Zelaide said curtly.

“You’re absolutely right. I’m glad you are a man quick on the uptake. I see your agent Miss Nielsen already filled you in on the details.” Erica moved the conversation along, unfazed by the man’s bluntness.

“I only heard it was bodyguard work for the mayor’s relative,” Zelaide answered in a surly tone, having already arrived at the worst possible conclusion about where this was going.

“That is the job at hand. I heard you don’t take on jobs you dislike, so while I know it was rude, I took precautions by giving Miss Nielsen the bare minimum amount of information. The job is simple. I want you to protect my younger sister, Euphemia, for the time being.”

Euphemia didn’t know whether to be happy or horrified. She wanted to know more about Zelaide, but she didn’t want him to hate her.

“She certainly is a thoughtless young lady.” Zelaide’s eyes sharply turned on Euphemia. His cool blue eyes were like glacial ice without their silvery glow, freezing Euphemia to the core. “Why don’t you start by tellin’ me the whole situation without hiding anything? It’s not like I can refuse the job now.”

Do you actually want to refuse it? Euphemia wondered.

“Tell me,” Zelaide said to the disheartened Euphemia, keeping his words short and brusque.

“Me? ...Um, err, well... It seems like one of the men from that night was killed...and the other ran to the police...and they found out some stuff from that...I think?” Euphemia fumbled over her words as she spoke, her head hanging so low her chin nearly touched her chest.

“Good grief, Mia! No one can understand what you’re saying when you put it

like that. Are you sure you're a scientist? Forgive her, Mister Silvergray. Allow me to explain instead."

"That would be a wise decision."

Erica's explanation was perfectly to the point. Zelaide's expression grew grimmer as he quietly listened and shifted his gaze from Erica to Euphemia. His good looks made him twice as scary when he glared at her.

"They didn't get more information out of the man named Pete?" Zelaide quietly asked after contemplating the new information.

"It doesn't seem like it. He's currently in police custody...though he's there for more than just protection, as he's committed many other crimes that will surely have him tried. He felt being sentenced was a better option than being killed," Erica elucidated.

Gothic City was the first of many cities on the planet to outlaw capital punishment. The most severe punishment on record was 570 years of penal servitude.

"When they discovered Danny's body, how much time had passed since he was killed?" Zelaide questioned.

"Two days at least," Erica answered, glancing briefly at her IHT screen.

"Hmm."

Six whole days had passed since the night of Euphemia's attack. The man who'd escaped with the trailer had reported back to his superior after arriving at their secret base of operations, and it took three days for that choice to backfire on him, leading to his erasure. Two more days passed between when he was killed and his corpse was abandoned, and when the authorities had discovered the corpse. And then Pete had sought asylum with the police yesterday after learning of his partner's death. The number of days matched. In other words, at least four days had passed since the video data made its way to their bosses.

That reminds me, Zelaide thought, calculating the days, *that about adds up with the amount of days she started visiting my place too.*

“Is something on your mind, Mister Silvergray?”

Zelaide turned toward Euphemia to answer Erica’s question. “It’s practically a miracle nothing has happened to you yet. There’s a chance poor video quality took them time to fix up before it was viewable, but you’d better believe they know who you are.”

“Ugh...”

Even if they know, what should I have been doing instead? Groaning was about all Euphemia could do.

“You believe so too?” Erica asked in her place.

“It’s obvious. Sorry, but I’d only think of the worst-case scenario at this point.”

“And what is the worst-case scenario to you...?”

“The most likely case is them usin’ this featherbrained little lady as the key to threatening you out of the mayor’s chair. *How* they’ll use her is the real question.”

“Use me? ...You mean they’ll spread that shameful video of me?”

“You wouldn’t need me if we were dealin’ with people who stopped at a cute little prank like that.”

“I agree,” Erica affirmed with a grave expression.

Euphemia was having a hard time following the conversation even though it was about her, and about something deadly serious at that, too. She bit down on her lower lip in frustration.

Is it just me or are these two hitting it off in a weird way? Their height and style is oddly similar too... They’re completely different types, but almost seem synchronized...

Zelaide was as different from Erica as fire was from water. Zelaide was the embodiment of all things wild and untamed; Erica was the image of poise and virtue. Despite these differences, Euphemia couldn’t help but see a strange parallel between the two: Zelaide, clad in black, physically dominated the room while Erica, flawless in her own black suit, matched Zelaide’s physical presence with her own impressive height and assertive attitude. Euphemia likened

Zelaide to a battle-worn knight under the command of a stern queen, Erica.

Am I letting my imagination run too wild here?

She raised her eyes from the ground and met a pair of teal eyes. He looked as displeased as ever.

He never did agree to be my friend when I asked after forcing my way into his house. Between our first meeting and this morning, he must think of me as an annoying, shameless, and stupid woman. I bet he doesn't want to have anything to do with me if he can help it. He's been curt to me on more than one occasion. And on top of that, he's being forced by the mayor to accept a troublesome job, which he can't refuse even if he wants to. I just know he's upset over that already.

"...You're practically proving you haven't given a single thought to this with the way you're actin'," Zelaide suddenly snapped at Euphemia, shaking her out of her unproductive fantasy of him and her sister.

"Uh, umm... I'm sorry?"

"Huh? That's your answer?" His exasperated tone made her feel like shrinking in on herself. She really was proving herself to be a featherbrained little girl.

"Wh-What was the question? I'm sorry. I don't really understand what you want from me," she said feebly.

"Forget it. I won't ask you again. Miss Mayor," Zelaide shifted his attention away from Euphemia.

"What is it?"

"How many cretins in this city bear enough of a grudge against you to target your life? Leaving out your typical political opponents."

"Probably dozens, if not hundreds."

"Figured as much. I've caught word of some of the hate recently, too. Seems like your methods have dealt a serious blow to people running dirty, illegal businesses. They're all the greedy, vindictive types. You can be as sure as the wind blows that they won't hesitate to use whatever they can if they've gotten their hands on something they can threaten you with."

“I believe so too.”

“Hold on a minute!” Euphemia shouted. Their eyes gathered on her. “Can you do me a favor and talk a little less cryptically about it? Let me get this straight: they *will* come after me to use me in a ploy against Erica, right?”

Zelaide rolled his buff shoulders and nodded once as if to say, “the stupid girl is only understanding this now?”

“Okay, I get that much. But they wouldn’t be so rash as to kill—”

“You think they won’t kill you?” Zelaide interrupted.

“Will they kill me?”

“They will in the worst-case scenario.”

“They will? Oh my shining stars! That’s horrible!”

“You’ve learned firsthand how many sickos there are out in the world willin’ to do horrible things to people,” Zelaide said without mincing words. He didn’t hold anything back.

Euphemia had nothing to say in return.

“That’s how the world works, Mia,” Erica interjected. “I know it feels unfair, but I’m protected by secret service agents at all times, and every block around my location in city hall is secured by several layers of constantly evolving security, including the latest in biometric and genetic scanners. The heads of the city are rarely in danger as long as we don’t leave this building.”

The cities on this planet closely resembled individual kingdoms. Ultimately, the mayor was king over a population surpassing a million people. Though mayors were elected, their authority reigned supreme during their incumbency. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say the fate of the city hinged entirely on the mayor’s vision and capabilities until either their term in office ended or they were forced to retire to take responsibility for misgovernment.

And once they decided to retire and withdraw from government, the mayor could then aid the campaign of the successor they nominated in the next election. Statues erected of mayors who had left their name in the history books decorated Central Square and remained a symbol of citizen respect to

the day; mayors embodied such a role in this world. There was only one assassination of a mayor to date, which had taken place just around when the colonists had begun setting up the new form of government on this planet.

The mayor was hard to target without setting an elaborate trap, and family and relatives were generally moved to live within official residences inside the administration district, the safest place in the city. Euphemia's situation was a rare exception.

But Euphemia had her own grievances about the situation. She'd finally discovered what she wanted to do with her life after a lifetime of constant undervaluation due to her frivolous looks and rash conduct. One horrific experience didn't merit giving up everything she had worked for. She was self-aware about her stupidity, but she wasn't a weakling or a doormat.

Besides, it's not too bad if he'll be by my side protecting me... Huh. I'm happier than I thought about this...

"Or would you rather come home and live with me again?" Erica challenged. "You're capable of pretending to be a secretary, no? You can greatly reduce the amount of trouble we have to go through by doing that."

The number one option Euphemia didn't want to hear flew right out of her sister's mouth while she was immersed in her thoughts.

"That's the *one thing* I'm absolutely against! I want to work the job I chose myself!"

"I knew you would say that."

"Is that so wrong? I mean, you can't say for sure something will happen, and while I've certainly had a sickening experience, the culprits are both in a place they can never hurt me again... Plus, my work has finally reached the next level. You should know that best of all, Erica. My goal is to put an end to the world's narcotic infestation. I want to do my best in the world of microscopes to help others, just like how you work your hardest for the city and its citizens."

"Mia..."

"I'll stop being careless, too. And besides, it takes a pretty big leap of faith to connect me to you, Erica. We have different last names and look nothing alike."

I've always wished we did though...

"So I—"

"Okay, that's enough," Erica said over her. "I think you inherited father's stubbornness even more than I did. It's exactly because I believed you would feel this way that I requested Mister Silvergray serve as your bodyguard."

"You make it sound like everythin' was decided from the start. Though from the looks of things, it was," Zelaide commented with disdain.

"Yes, indeed it was. Prioritizing my sister's safety and taking her independence and freedom into account, I came to the conclusion that you were the most qualified person for the job. Mister Zelaide Silvergray, please protect my little sister."

"I'm a Hunter specialized in Mutas, not humans. Let's be clear, bodyguard work isn't my specialty. I won't say I have no experience at it, but I'm not the best in that particular field. I'm not good with humans."

Zelaide looked to Euphemia standing her ground in the middle of the room. She didn't look more intelligent by donning a stiff suit ill-suited to her petite body or by wearing fashionable specs. But the way she pressed her lips together in a tight line and glared at both the mayor and him with the corners of her eyes creased left yet another gripping image with him.

"How do you feel 'bout this?" Zelaide asked her. "Do you want me to be your bodyguard? You probably don't know this, but havin' a bodyguard means you're being monitored and confined at all times. I guarantee you it'll be beyond inconvenient."

"Inconvenient...?"

I don't mind being inconvenienced by you, Euphemia thought. This was the first time she'd met someone who sparked her interest to this level. She'd gone above and beyond the thinkable for herself when she forced her way into his home and practically begged him to be friends. And now that same man was about to take on the role of her protector. Could this be fate at work? Euphemia came to a quick decision.

"I'm fine with that. I don't want to be a problem for my sister and I don't want

to quit my job either. But I could do without the danger. So, Zel, I would like you to protect me.”

“Hmm,” Zelaide hummed thoughtfully.

...Meanwhile, he was in complete panic mode on the inside. Her choice had finally pushed him up against the wall with no way out.

Crap! At this rate I'll wind up even more of a confused mess because of these emerald eyes. I have to do whatever it takes to make this unappealin' for her. I need her to be the one to back outta it.

Zelaide leaned against the wall with a somber attitude. “That being said, I’ve got unreasonable conditions of my own. I won’t accept the job unless you agree to them.”

“Please tell me what they are,” Erica prompted.

“First, you’ll have to move into my house,” Zelaide said confidently to Euphemia.

“I have to move in with you?”

“Yeah... Listen here,” Zelaide walked briskly up to Euphemia and glowered down at her with the most contemptuous look he could conjure as he began to break the situation down for her like he would a preschooler, “if I take on the job of your bodyguard, I’ll have to drop you off and pick you up at your workplace, too. You won’t quit no matter what, right?”

“Of course not. You heard me say it before, didn’t you? I may have gotten my job thanks to my sister’s influence, but I’m gonna do my best for the world too.”

“‘Gonna’? Look here, it’s great that you’re serious about a cause and all, but the more willful and selfish you are, the harder my job becomes. You *will* follow my instructions during the time I’m in charge of your safety. And you can be positive there’ll be many instructions you won’t think are fair.”

“I’ll obey every command you have!”

“Can you handle comin’ to my house and living there? Nasty rumors are going to spread.”

Turn me down! Turn it down!

"I can live there... I will live there!" she answered right away, dashing Zelaide's hopes.

This little lady isn't putting a fraction of thought into it! You're gonna live under the same roof as an adult man!

"I agree with the necessity of that decision."

No way, you too, Miss Mayor?! You should be suspicious of me before any unknown criminal! I'm a Beast Blood!

"You seem to be a trustworthy person. I may not look the type, but I have an eye for people."

Nope, you don't.

Zelaide heaved a heavy sigh. "There's more. You'll be restricted from going out aside from your job."

You want to play around, right? A girl like you should have fun dates and shoppin' trips. Hurry up and back out of this! Please shoot it down already!

"Oh, I don't mind that. I don't have many friends anyway. I'm satisfied if you'll become my friend in return. I said the same thing this morning."

"This morning?" Erica asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, this morning. I actually went to his place to thank him for saving me."

"You did? Then it looks like the matter is settled, Mister Silvergray." A composed smile spread across Erica's face. What the twinkle in her eye was saying was evident: Checkmate.

Zelaide looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. *She's saying I have to accept no matter what?*

"...Fine," Zelaide conceded.

"You'll do it then? Thank you so much, Mister Silvergray." Happiness colored Erica's countenance for the first time.

"Drop the mister, please. I'm a Beast Blood, not a gentleman. I'm just Zelaide. You understand what that means, don't you?"

"I believe I do. In that case, Zelaide, allow me to repeat myself. Please protect

my younger sister.”

“...As you command.”

A job is a job. This is work, and the kind you can't refuse. This is basically what happens when the rich and powerful hold your skills in high esteem.

“...Don't worry,” Zelaide said to Euphemia. “I'll do my job well now that I've accepted it.”

“Should I start packing to move in with you?” Euphemia sounded ecstatic.

“Look, this isn't a game. We aren't playing house,” he warned her.

“Yeah. I might be a real airhead, but even I'm coming to understand what this means.”

“You don't understand a thing. You might experience a fate far more horrifying than what happened to you before.”

Euphemia remained quiet.

“Miss fancy sheltered young lady, you didn't forget about nearly being gang-raped and fed to a Muta the other day, did ya? You can consider things worse than that to be the norm for you now.”

“I don't know about that. I mean, the douchebags from that time just happened to be the worst kind of thugs—”

“Scum of their level are all over the place.”

“...Really?”

“Really. There might even be scoundrels coming for you with methods I don't know 'bout. You're staying at my place to prevent that. Your apartment is unreliable. I'm sure you hate the idea, though.”

“I don't hate it.”

“Well I hate it! From the bottom of my heart. But it'll be the safest for you to stay at my house for now. I've got a good security system, but the fact that it's my house alone will make most too afraid to approach.”

“I see. That is reassuring,” Erica said, impressed.

“I’ll also be responsible for dropping you off and picking you up from work. But we go our separate ways durin’ your work hours as long as nothing unusual happens. Municipal facilities are outside my jurisdiction. The Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute has the top security system, yeah?”

“Of course,” Erica answered. “Unregistered individuals can’t even pass through the first gate. Strict security checks are conducted if they are to proceed farther inside. Isn’t that right, Mia?”

“Yes. I’ll be safe as long as someone doesn’t drop a big bomb from the sky and blow us to smithereens,” Euphemia helpfully supplied.

“And I’d fare ‘bout as well as the gate when it comes to a big bomb,” Zelaide concluded. “At any rate, I’ll handle my personal matters durin’ your work hours. Send me a D-com once you’re off work. I’ll come get you.”

“...Okay.”

“I’m relieved to hear all this,” Erica commented, an entertained look on her face as she watched their exchange.

“It’s too soon for you to feel relieved. You should know, I cost a fortune.”

“And I have a private fortune saved up. To be perfectly honest with you, I believe the better course of action would be to have her quit her job and go live at my villa in another city, but this girl is stubbornner than she looks and won’t listen once she’s made up her mind. It’s my fault for spoiling her all these years.”

“At least you’re aware of your sins... So, what’s the job duration?”

“Good question... As you may be aware, I still have some time left to my term. But I’ve only finished about half of what I set out to do, so I plan to run in the next election as well... In the meantime, I would like to entrust my younger sister to you for a three-month period.”

“Very well.” Zelaide accepted the job, his voice grave.

On the opposite hand, Euphemia was jumping with joy on the inside. “Now that you’ve accepted the job can you quit the crap and call me by my name? I’m not ‘you,’ ‘girl,’ ‘little lady,’ ‘young lady,’ or whatever else you might call me. I’m

Euphemia. You can call me Mia too. Okay? Zel. Mister Zelaide Silvergray!”

Zelaide unleashed yet another deep, troubled sigh.

She’s annoying... But I’ve gotta do this now that I’ve accepted.

Ominous winds were blowing in around them. And something between the two of them was on the verge of blossoming.

†Chapter 5: A Peculiar Housemate†

“**THIS** is your room. Use it however you want,” Zelaide said in a gruff voice, placing the hard-shell suitcase Euphemia brought with her in the middle of the room. That was the first thing he’d said in the past few hours. Hearing his voice alone was enough to make her happy, and she twirled around to take in the room in its entirety.

“This is the same room I used when you saved my life, right? It’s nice. Thanks!”

This marked the second time she came to his house today.

Euphemia had never fathomed the possibility of this happening when she visited his house earlier in the day. Just when she’d thought she could spend time with him after waiting six days since their initial meeting, her time was cut short by an urgent call from her sister. But the most shocking revelation of the day had been her unexpected second reunion with him at city hall.

Once matters were settled at city hall, Euphemia had immediately left for her apartment, where she hastily shoved the items she needed most into a suitcase. Then she vacated the apartment room she had called home to begin her new life. Erica would take care of contacting her housekeeper Mrs. Mayo and putting things in order for her move.

Zelaide watched her the entire time.

Naturally, he hadn’t helped her pack, choosing to instead lean against the wall with his arms folded, his head turned away. Yet, once she finished stuffing what she needed into her suitcase, he picked it up without her asking him. During the drive back to his place, he stayed quieter than a mouse, his expression flat, careful to never make eye contact with her. She tried multiple times to start up a conversation, but it felt like she was talking to a stone wall. Eventually, she accepted that it was futile and fell silent.

Now that he had finally said something to her, she felt a little relieved. He

may have come to despise her, but at least he hadn't decided to never speak to her again.

"Just leave a note detailing whatever you don't have enough of."

"I can't bring it up with you directly?" Euphemia asked the man's capacious back, as he tried to retreat from the room. She wasn't going to let an opportunity to talk escape her so easily.

"I don't know anything 'bout female products. If you leave a note out, I can pass it on to Pal. And let me remind you of our agreement: you *will* obey my instructions while you're under my protection. Especially while you live in this house," he stressed.

Euphemia's heart lurched when Palmina's name came up. The way he spoke of her didn't make it sound like they were anything more than Contractor and agent, but he at least trusted the woman to some extent.

"When can I meet Miss Pal?"

Zelaide unexpectedly stopped on his way out the door and looked back at her. She'd hit on a topic he was willing to talk about.

"Can't say for sure. She usually comes and goes while I'm out."

Does he accept and reject jobs over his IHT then? I doubt Zelaide would trust someone he's never met in person before, so he must meet up with her when necessary. Maybe they only talk about work when they meet...no, probably not. Euphemia let her imagination run wild and became depressed by where it went.

She couldn't pester him with questions yet; the number of times they had met and talked could be counted on one hand. She wanted to know as much about him as possible, without frustrating him.

I want to get to know Zelaide better! she earnestly thought.

"I see... Then what else should I be careful of while I'm here?" Euphemia asked to drag out the conversation.

"First, don't interact with me more than absolutely necessary. We will eat and sleep separately."

"Can't we at least have breakfast together? I'm not a good cook, but I can

make a mean toast. I can fry up some decent eggs too.”

“Don’t need it. If you want to cook, cook for yourself and eat when you feel like it. I’ll have various ingredients stocked up for you.”

He’s going to rely on Pal for that too? I wonder what she’s like.

“Second, always bring me with you when you leave the house. Even if just for a few minutes.”

“But earlier you told me to refrain from ever going out.”

“To the best of your ability.”

“I assume I can’t even meet up with my friends?”

He just looked at me with a face that said, “Is this girl stupid or what?”

“...You can.”

“Pardon?”

“You can meet your friends if ya want. I’m no expert, but don’t young ladies like you need entertainment to survive?”

“Are you sure it’s okay? I don’t think I’ll go out too much anyway. I don’t have many friends.”

“If you say so.”

“I’ll listen to anything you tell me to make your job easier, so please let me go shopping once in a while.”

“You can go. I’ve done bodyguard work for celebrities before. I wouldn’t be any better than a third-rate Contractor if I can’t keep you safe outside of the house.”

“Neat! You’ve worked for celebrities! Did you ever work for someone I might know?” Euphemia brimmed with curiosity.

“Couldn’t say.” He shot down the topic.

One of the celebrities who’d hired him was actually a very famous actress at her wits’ end over a male fan-turned-stalker.

Nothing happened for a whole month, until the desperate man snuck into a

movie press conference, seeped his clothes in oil, lit himself on fire, and charged toward the actress. Zelaide had gotten in his way and beat him up before he could do any damage. Fortunately, the actress was unharmed and the man's burns hadn't been serious because he'd used too little oil. The job had been no big deal to Zelaide, but similar incidents kept happening, and the actress eventually fell for his looks and work ethic. In the end, she became a stalker herself, putting Zelaide in a frustratingly sticky situation.

Even Zelaide couldn't put up with her overzealous, passionate appeals for his affections; he contacted Palmina and disappeared for a few weeks, like he did after meeting Euphemia. He saw no reason to bring these series of events to Euphemia's attention, so he said nothing.

"Hm...that makes sense. I should've guessed as much." Euphemia nodded with a serious expression, respectfully writing off his silence as having to do with a confidentiality clause between Contractor and client.

"Don't get involved with me outside of—"

"But," Euphemia cheerfully spoke over him, "I think it's best for us to get along rather than not, since we'll be housemates for a while! I won't push a topic if it's uncomfortable for you, so start up the occasional conversation with me when you feel like it."

"I have nothing to..."

...talk to you about. The last words fell short because his eyes met hers. *Annoying.*

"I'll be waiting... Okay?" she insisted, blinking those big emerald eyes up at him.

"...What a pain..." Zelaide muttered as if all the life had been sucked out of him. He left the room with his black coat fluttering behind him, signaling the conversation was over.

Left behind, Euphemia had little to do other than unpack her clothes and accessories from her suitcase and straighten up the room she would call home for a while. The room was the same as the last time she had visited—it looked brand new, like it'd just been built yesterday, and otherwise unlived-in.

Euphemia felt a tad relieved to see it hadn't been used since the last time she was there. Judging from their conversation just now, despite Zelaide's attractive looks, he wasn't the type to bring a pretty woman home with him.

But he's going to be with me the entire time for three whole weeks, right? So... what's he going to do about women during that time? I'm not really sure how it works for him.

Oblivious as she may be, even Euphemia understood Zelaide had reluctantly accepted living together with her.

Was it possible for an adult man with such a wild air to him to survive three whole months without enjoying a woman's company? Was it even healthy to? She found that hard to believe, even with her meager knowledge on the topic. Their contract left him relatively free to do what he wanted while she was at work, making it possible for him to drop by his girlfriend's house when he felt like it...

I don't want that!

Euphemia chucked her empty suitcase deep into the back of the closet with enough force to put a professional basketball player to shame. A loud ker-thwack echoed through the empty room.

I absolutely don't want him to do that!

But Zelaide had a right to his privacy. He had the authority to restrict her actions, but she couldn't meddle in his business. Probably.

Euphemia knew it—she was starting to fall for him.

Men had confessed their feelings to her many times. She tried dating some of them out of curiosity, but the majority were only attracted to her looks and immediately sought physical intimacy the second she showed any special regard for them. The one time she tried a physical relationship with the most decent seeming guy, she completely lost interest.

Ever since, she quickly shot down any member of the opposite sex and took care to distance herself from all who felt untrustworthy. In return, men viewed her as a stuck-up prude, while women wrote her off as an insufferable slut who burned through men like tissue, resulting in malicious bullying from both sides.

Thus, Euphemia's experience in the love department wasn't as rich as her appearance led people to believe. Her experience with relationships was so lacking it was safe to say she had barely any friends her age, much less a boyfriend.

Her friend, the police officer Wei who'd provided her with information a week ago, was the sole exception to the rule. She couldn't see him as a potential love interest and had graciously turned him down when he confessed to her, but the lighthearted and honest Wei had insisted that he didn't mind staying just friends. That made him one of Euphemia's few, cherished good friends, who had stuck around. It was just like her not to realize the heartbreaking position that put Wei in whenever they were together.

In that sense, while Euphemia's dating experience wasn't much to write home about, her experience wasn't so lacking that she couldn't figure out her own feelings. She wanted to know about Zelaide, to a fault, and found it unbearable not to see him when she wanted to—the signs of a budding love.

But while a person was free to fall in love with anyone, a relationship took two. So from here it was a battle of charm, effort, and willpower.

Euphemia heard something bump against the window while she plotted how to win him over. She lifted her head and saw the bird-shaped Muta from earlier perched on the window frame. Tipsilox were a nocturnal species, but it appeared this one became active around sunset.

"You're...Topsy, right? Are you heading out for a meal?" she asked the Muta.

She couldn't imagine Zelaide buying pet food and feeding the carnivore out of a bowl, so she assumed it hunted for its own meals. Small as it was, a Muta was still a Muta. It probably preyed upon the rats and bats creeping about in the dark beneath the city's deceptively clean surface.

When Euphemia took a step closer, Topsy thrust its beak towards her and growled in warning. Yet, for all that posturing, he didn't fly away but remained close to observe her. He was curious about her yet cautious. Bars were secured to the windows, but it was still possible to open the glass. She could crack the window and throw a cookie out for him. But Euphemia was smarter than that. She knew never to rush with a living creature one had no experience or

familiarity with. Topsy had simply come to check out the new addition to his territory. He'd eventually come to be friendlier with her once he realized she wasn't a threat to him.

She was just getting her feet under her, but she was a biologist nevertheless. Proud animals needed more time to grow used to someone. But once they accepted a person, their trust wasn't easily broken.

"I bet you're just like your master," Euphemia said quietly through the glass. Topsy spread its thin wings and soared into the darkening sky in a matter of seconds.

Indeed, Zelaide, like Topsy, wasn't the type to appreciate being kept or fettered. He and Euphemia were still little more than strangers. He was welcome to be cautious and intimidating around her—she would win him over in due time.

He can meet his lover if he has one (though I hate the idea of it), Euphemia seriously thought to herself. But I wish he would pay me a little attention too—er, I mean, I'll work hard for him to take an interest in me too! I have three whole months to make it happen!

From what she had seen, Zelaide didn't think too fondly of her. Or perhaps, more than it being a problem with her, he just didn't like humans. But he was the type to see a job through. She already knew he wasn't a bad guy. He possessed his own form of kindness.

With that said, there isn't much hope for these feelings. Still, if the chance isn't zero, then I'll regret it less if I take action rather than let the opportunity slip by. And the time is now. This is a time when you just have to go for it. Like how the same tedious experiment that appears impossible at first can produce results after running it a hundred times. All right, with that decided, I'll study since I have no other obligations at the moment.

Euphemia picked up an academic book and began reviewing past data on the cross-fertilization of Night Blooms to make up for the unexpected time she had taken off work.

Research into the endemic Night Bloom species didn't date back far. The endemic plant species had transformed from beautiful flowers into a dangerous

temptation around the time the processes of colonization and exploration had evolved into developing a new culture and civilization, unique from the other colonies. Current research stated the discovery and spread of Night Blooms as a powerful narcotic had only happened over the last few decades. The use of it as a narcotic had spread fast and wide, becoming deeply entrenched on this planet and beyond. People only began to recognize the dangers once the slow yet ever-growing dark shadow it cast on the forward progress of the pioneering colony was conspicuous.

The Night Bloom flower was breathtaking on the one night it bloomed a year, but the narcotic extracted from its pulverized seeds, Nightz, undeniably played a role in bringing great misery to the people on this planet. Minimizing the damage Nightz caused was only one of the many jobs undertaken by researchers like Euphemia.

Euphemia didn't voice it often, but she deeply respected her older sister Erica and loved her more than anyone else. She believed reducing the harm of Nightz was the one thing she could do for her sister's noble cause, considering she couldn't bring much to the table otherwise. While research into Night Blooms was proceeding slowly, they were making progress nonetheless. Researchers had succeeded in developing a drug to counteract strong dependence the narcotic induced, initiating comprehensive selective breeding to reduce the toxicity and number of seeds, and discovering a natural enemy to the flower in a certain species of mold. Incidentally, Euphemia's laboratory specialized in research of the latter.

"How many times have I reread this same paper...?"

The crowning achievement of the last few years was the success in breeding a Night Bloom strain nearly incapable of producing seeds. Euphemia was reading the thesis Maurice DeLay had published on the topic last year.

Under normal circumstances, tiny seeds formed inside the fruit the plant produced following the shedding of its flower petals. Distributing a strain of Night Blooms with fewer seeds would have major effects on the narcotic industry, which manufactured Nightz by pulverizing the seeds and refining the subsequent milky liquid into a highly addictive narcotic.

However, the new strain with limited seeds was still in its infant stages. Eradicating the indigenous strain of Night Bloom growing throughout the Wilds was thus impossible, with the finite numbers of the new strain. The science still had long ways to go, but Dr. DeLay's research from Romanesque City was the most advanced and up to date.

Naturally, the eradication and suppression of Nightz required the work of not only scholars, but the police force and military as well.

At present, cases of authorities burning down hidden cultivation fields, cracking down on the circulation of seeds and Nightz, and arresting growers and dealers came to public attention at least once every month. As a matter of fact, these methods were expedient, practical, and easier for the public to comprehend. But merely combating criminals and the immediate danger wouldn't rid the world of the deep-rooted Nightz and the destruction it wrought.

Their straightforward, steady approach to research is smart. I wouldn't have thought to plant the seeds in an ice nursery for an experiment. Euphemia enthusiastically dissected the thesis paper.

The fruits of effort lay not only in the results, but also the process itself. Which meant the saying, "There's no such thing as wasted effort," was true. Euphemia loved thinking that way.

On the other hand, she had no idea what her experiment in love would entail.

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"**I'LL** be waiting for you... Okay?' she says?! Dammit!" Zelaide exclaimed from the other room. He threw his brawny body onto his gigantic bed. He was angry to the point of feeling sick.

What's goin' through that fancy girl's head when she says stuff like that?! She's an idiot. I knew it before, but she's dangerously stupid for somebody so smart. Why would she say that when she knows I'm a Beast Blood? ...But even if she's dumb in common sense, she's still a biologist. Maybe she's just curious 'bout Beast Bloods as a species? That's just as bad...

Zelaide groaned. Just her presence made his body temperature skyrocket and

his breathing grow shallow. In other words, his reactions were—

Just irrational male impulses!

With his hatred of women, Zelaide strove to avoid touching the opposite sex as much as possible. He lived free of lust's trap outside of taking care of his physiological needs.

So why the hell am I havin' this freakin' issue now?

She must never notice. Zelaide clenched his fists. This sheltered young lady was under a fanciful misunderstanding after he'd rescued her from the arms of danger. The event had fed into the fantasies harbored by women of her age and stature; she viewed him as one of those invincible heroes from the old world movies. There was no other believable reason for a pretty woman to want to become friends with a Beast Blood.

But what 'bout in reality?

Zelaide laughed mockingly at himself. Beneath his sour expression, he'd desperately struggled to endure his desire to pull her slim waist up against him. A desire he now needed to suppress for three full months. He had to protect her from his filthy, wild male impulses.

It's hopeless. I'd better get in touch with Manuela while the girl's at work.

Manuela worked as a Beast Blood prostitute and she was the only woman Zelaide had sexual relations with. He figured she'd dispel his temporary delusions without having to think about it.

I accepted the job. I have to protect her through to the end. From her enemies...and myself.

Zelaide gritted his teeth as he stared at the sterile ceiling.

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THE following day, Euphemia commuted to the laboratory on the city outskirts in Zelaide's car. His car was granted permission through the research institute's first gate located directly off the freeway ramp, letting him drop Euphemia off on the premises in front of the second gate erected outside of each individual laboratory sector.

Only a few select people were permitted through the second gate, so this method was less conspicuous. She could enter the building without drawing much attention if he dropped her off in a less used area and she chose her walkway correctly.

Unfortunately for Euphemia, luck wasn't on her side today.

Sonia Marcell, Euphemia's coworker from the same lab, spotted Euphemia getting out of the car upon exiting their building after working the nightshift. Sonia's curiosity exploded over the handsome man she briefly spotted in the driver's seat in the few seconds it took Euphemia to shut her door.

Sonia pulled Euphemia aside and unleashed a waterfall of questions. "Hey, Mia! Who in the world is that hunk? Your boyfriend? Why did you come together? Did you spend the night with him?"

"Good morning, Sonia. No good morning for me before the inquisition? Weren't you on your way home? And what are you doing coming out the back door, when you left from the front entrance every other day?"

"What door I leave from is up to my discretion. I just felt like going out the back," Sonia sassed, skillfully evading Euphemia's reverse prying. "What's the big deal? How about we get a coffee right now? I'll treat you! So *spill*!"

Sonia was a different kind of blonde bombshell from Euphemia with her model-worthy height and ample curves. She joined the same lab two years before Euphemia, granting her the senior position.

Blegh. Euphemia swallowed her agitated sigh.

Sonia was normally the uncommitted type who went right home after getting off nightshift. For all her skill as a researcher, she was equally arrogant and confident. Euphemia had always found herself thoroughly despised by women like Sonia.

Reluctant to make an enemy of Sonia by dismissing her offer, Euphemia decided to join her for a cup of coffee at the automatic café that was open all day, every day. She chose an ice coffee perfect for quickly finishing off.

"So, who's the hottie?" Sonia cut right to the chase, leaning expectantly close.

“Someone whose care I’ve been put under due to family circumstances.”

I’m not lying, Euphemia thought as she came up with evasive answers.

“Interesting. What’s your relationship? Oh yeah, you took yesterday off work. Is he the reason why?”

“He’s why, but...our relationship is more of the employer and employee type...I guess?” Euphemia went with an honest answer. “We’re living together to make things more convenient for us both. You have your answer. Don’t ask any more.”

The unyielding statement seemed to annoy Sonia. Euphemia didn’t let it bother her as she downed her ice coffee in one go. Sensing Euphemia was about to leave, Sonia moved in for the kill.

“To be clear, he’s not your boyfriend or boytoy, right?”

“He *is* not. But don’t even try. He hates that kind of thing!” Euphemia emphasized, her tone overly defiant and defensive. Times like this really made her hate how rash she could be; it was practically guaranteed Sonia would harass her now.

Thinking she had to get out of there soon, Euphemia said, “Thanks for the coffee,” and left her seat, but Sonia chased her down the long hallway.

“Hmph. I don’t get what you mean, so not my problem. If he’s not yours, mind introducing me to him? He wouldn’t mind me hitting on him if you set us up, right?”

“I will not. Or more like, I can’t. I don’t want to meddle in his life like that, and I promised I wouldn’t. Zel and I decided on that together.”

“His name is Zel? Weird name.”

“Seems like it’s a nickname,” Euphemia admitted, feeling like she had a slight advantage over Sonia. Seconds after saying it, however, she immediately started hating herself for it. She wasn’t forbidden from bringing him up, and she’d only mentioned his nickname, but she still felt horrible for exposing Zelaide’s name right off the bat.

“Cool. What’s his real name?”

“Don’t know,” Euphemia said, careful not to let the lie show on her face—she was a bad liar.

“Someone’s on the defensive. Are you that worried I’ll steal him from under your nose?” Sonia taunted.

“I honestly don’t know.”

All I know about him is his name and species, Euphemia lamented internally.

“I’m free to strike up a conversation with him on my own time even if you won’t introduce him to me, yeah?”

“...What?” What was she getting at?

Someone patted Euphemia on the shoulder while she was trying to come up with a way to fend off the all-too-aggressive Sonia.

“Good morning, you two.”

It was their coworker from the same year as Sonia, Ronaldo Garcia. Already dressed in casual attire, he seemed to have just come off his shift too.

“Oh, it’s you, Ron. Good morning,” Sonia greeted him with a wave of the hand.

“Sonia, you’re one scary woman with how eager you are to wage war in the morning. Why don’t you save the battle for another day and hurry home? Don’t you usually race home without looking back?”

“Are you picking a fight with me, Ron? I just decided to go home after taking a nap today.”

“Your boyfriend isn’t picking you up today? Weren’t you always excited for him to pick you up? Oh, wait, that stopped recently, didn’t it?” Ron said, casually getting in a jab.

“I was not. Leave me alone!”

“Sorry if I poked a sore spot. So, back to what you were talking about—is it true? I’d be in a real bind if a cutie like Mia got herself a boyfriend.”

“Good for you then. She says he’s not her boyfriend.”

“Mia, is that true?” Ron looked over his shoulder to ask Euphemia, but she

was long gone. “Oops, she’s gone. Wow, she left so fast you can see skid marks on the floor. Sucks for you, Sonia.”

“Shut up, would you?!” Sonia watched Euphemia zoom down the hallway feeling vexed she had lost her chance.

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VARIOUS research facilities and testing sites were scattered throughout the sector secured by the massive first gate. Second gates surrounded other large zones of varying sizes, located vast distances from each other for security purposes. Euphemia and those from her laboratory worked within the Applied Plant and Animal Research Laboratory behind one such second gate.

The interior of the structure was divided by specialty field, with long corridors connecting each section. One side of these corridors was equipped with a moving walkway, but Euphemia rarely used them. She watched two of her coworkers step on one and quickly pass her by as she hurried down the side of the corridor reserved for walking.

Sonia is crazy. She always gets like this when she spots a good-looking man. She makes me sick.

Although they were researchers by trade, few people dedicated their lives to their research like the professional researchers of millennia past, who had made colonization possible. The younger generations were comparatively uninhibited, with many performing perfunctory motions during work, just to rush home the moment their hours were over. Quite a few of the young male researchers invited Euphemia to dinner through superficial attraction, and almost as many female colleagues loathed her for it. Both the men and women at work were extremely annoying; all she wanted to do was keep a fine line between her work life and private life.

Her brain finally swapped modes once she changed into her research top and bottom and pulled her cap on. Obviously, her specs were on too. She briefly thought about how she wished Zelaide could see her dressed like the scientist she was.

I might not look dumb dressed like this. I wonder where he’s headed right now. Nothing would come of mulling over it, so Euphemia headed for her lab.

Her coworkers were already busily going about their work.

“Good morning,” Kreutz Burhardt, the laboratory director, immediately greeted when she came into view. He earned a name in the lab for his keen sense that allowed him to correctly guess a person’s identity even when they walked up behind him.

“Good morning, Director Burhardt. I’m sorry for suddenly taking the day off yesterday.”

“Don’t be. It’s all good. I was informed in advance. I haven’t heard the details, but it sounded like you were in quite the predicament.”

“Yes, you could say that...” Euphemia wasn’t sure how to answer him. She was horrible at deceiving people. Concern filled Burhardt’s light-brown eyes. He seemed truly worried for her.

“A beautiful young lady such as yourself needs to be especially careful.”

“I don’t have to be as careful as my sister, at least. I’m normal compared to her.”

The only people who knew she was the mayor’s younger sister were the president of the entire Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute, President Murakami, and her direct supervisor, Director Burhardt. Murakami had been entrusted with Euphemia by Erica and assigned her to her desired department.

Overseeing the laboratory she worked for was the talented and competent Burhardt, the man rumored to be the next institute president. Burhardt specialized in fungi as a researcher, but he currently managed the Applied Plant and Animal Research Laboratory as laboratory director. Euphemia strongly requested this department because it researched both animals and plants. She believed she was steadily proving herself, though she’d indeed received some special treatment in the beginning.

“Hahaha! I can’t say you’re wrong. But be careful. Bad guys are everywhere these days. They’ll target you, and not just because of your sister,” Burhardt lowered his voice to a whisper. “I heard you were attacked by some thugs. Is that true?”

Euphemia was considerably shocked he knew that much. Did Erica tell him?

“Did you hear about it from my sister?” she asked.

“Indirectly and briefly. But you know, I was shocked when I realized you had suddenly disappeared that night and later learned from someone else that you’d already gone home. Didn’t you put in the request to use the on-site lodging? I was relieved to hear you were safe, but you worried me sick.”

After observing Night Blooms flower that night, Euphemia’s excitement and awe had made her too restless to sit still, so she pretended to return to the lodgings and instead took off in her car for home. She hadn’t thought anyone would pay any attention to her.

She didn’t know Burhardt realized she left. The fact she’d been attacked was supposed to be a classified secret off the record.

“I’m sorry... Are you also aware someone will be dropping me off and picking me up from work from now on?”

“Yes. You’re talking about your bodyguard, correct? Someone trustworthy, I hope?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“I see... But be very careful.”

“I will. Thank you. I have been reflecting on how careless I was. But I have him protecting me now, so I should be fine,” Euphemia told him, her voice firm. Burhardt’s grim expression didn’t lighten.

“You trust people too easy.” He shook his head and placed his hand on her shoulder. His hand was very warm, and Euphemia felt that it conveyed how greatly he cared for her and their workplace. “But he must be an incredibly reliable person for that sister of yours to accept him... How long will he be with you for?”

“Three months, for now. Apparently he’s a very famous and capable bodyguard. He will come to take me home, too.”

“Three months, eh? You should be safe then. Introduce me to him sometime.”

“You’re the second person to ask me that today,” Euphemia said with a shrug.

EVERY morning thereafter, the silver car escorting Euphemia to and from work was found on the roads inside the institute premises. Watching Euphemia casually wave her hand at the driver's seat before walking into her building was gradually becoming Zelaide's daily routine. She gracefully walked away with her shoulders back and her head held high each time, leaving Zelaide to wonder what magic trick she used to keep her long hair wrapped in a tight bun at the back of her head.

"Hmph. You like to act like a full-fledged career woman, don't you, princess?" Zelaide snorted on the other side of his black-tinted windows.

I don't think there's much goin' on in that pretty little head of yours though.

Zelaide didn't have any other requirements to fulfill once Euphemia went to work. His activities and any other jobs he took to earn some extra cash were up to him. Though his first priority was always to drive away before the foot traffic increased. A young researcher had given him a funny look not too long ago. Zelaide started his car and passed through the first gate back onto the freeway.

His contract with Erica stipulated he guaranteed Euphemia's safety outside of her work hours, but he was otherwise unfettered while she worked. The contract included several minor clauses, but that was the primary condition. She normally worked during the day, which reduced the potential danger, even for working at a facility on the city outskirts beyond the wall. In addition, the security of the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute, one of the most important scientific facilities on the planet, fell under Gothic City's responsibility. Military facilities and bases were built nearby to double down on the security.

So Zelaide drove back to Gothic City. He used voice commands to control the IHT installed in his dashboard while he steered the car.

"It's me, Manuela," Zelaide spoke into the microphone installed in his steering wheel without glancing at the picture of the person who popped up on the screen.

"Hi, dollface!" a husky voice with a honeyed lilt answered him. "It's been a long time since I've heard from you, Zel. You've left me without your pleasure

for far too long. What have you been up to lately?”

“Can you come to the usual spot right now?” Zelaide cut straight to the point without humoring the small talk.

“At this hour of the morning? Are you on the way back from a bloody job? ... All right, I don’t mind. I have an opening.” The professional woman that she was, Manuela didn’t pry or balk at his demands.

“I’ll be there in ten,” Zelaide answered, his voice clinical as he stepped on the gas.

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THREE days had passed since Euphemia started living with Zelaide.

“Thank goodness, the workday is done and over!” Euphemia praised herself for another job well done.

Euphemia’s specific laboratory was conducting research into preventing the spread of Night Blooms, the deadly source of the narcotic Nightz. Destroying the harmful plant’s natural habitat, such as by sabotaging the soil and sunlight, was most effective in hindering growth, but applying the method on a wide-scale was easier said than done.

Researchers had theorized that destroying their ecological niche artificially with fungi or drugs would have a considerable effect, but heedlessly spreading drugs or micro-organic pathogens in the wild ran serious risks of affecting other plants, animals, farms, and subsequently humans. Hence, it was imperative for researchers to proceed with caution when introducing anything new to the open environment. Furthermore, no one really knew for sure how the Wilds might mutate something.

Several laboratories within the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute worked with Night Blooms, but Euphemia’s laboratory researched organisms practical for developing widespread countermeasures against Night Blooms, ranging from fungi to insects and animals. Put simply, they focused on the discovery and rearing of plants and animals that could eat Night Blooms as their primary source of food.

Euphemia was primarily responsible for rodent research.

Her major in university had been practical botany, but she loved animals just as much. That made this laboratory a perfect fit for her, because it allowed her to research both Night Blooms and animals that would be beneficial for Night Bloom extermination. Euphemia had already experimented with several rat and squirrel species, but she'd yet to discover a rodent that would happily choose to eat the Night Bloom seeds with their low nutritional values. It'd be one thing if there was no other food available in the wild, but it was hard to develop a natural predator to Night Blooms when plenty of other, more nutritious food sources were available.

Euphemia did have one hope—a species of Mongolian gerbil extinct in the wild but bred inside laboratories. She handled the adults. They were so fragile and tiny that five of them fit on her palm, but their teeth were sharp and they greedily devoured seeds. Euphemia's research goal was to breed the Mongolian gerbils, which weren't an indigenous species to this planet, and raise them with Night Bloom seeds as their staple diet. Doing so, she believed, could shine the first real light on the dark calamity brought about by Nightz.

The real impediment to her research was the low reproduction rate of Mongolian gerbils compared to other rodents. Furthermore, since they were a valuable species barred from being taken outside the laboratory, Euphemia was forced to constantly obtain permission and repeat contained experiments, all without successfully proving her theory. Regardless, she worked on her personal research alongside her other lab work.

Every morning, Euphemia began her day by peering into the cage containing the ten Mongolian gerbils she was given permission to work with.

“Good, you're eating. Is it tasty?”

The gerbils consumed Night Bloom seeds with a vigorous appetite. Skillfully snapping open the shell, they pulled out the inner meat and munched through it with blinding speed. Would these adorable gerbils also ignore the innutritious Night Bloom seeds if more delicious nuts were available to them? The theory couldn't be proved one way or another without releasing them into the wild for observation. In any case, rodents were creatures that couldn't live without having something to munch on.

I'll try asking Director Burhardt for permission to conduct an experiment in an outdoor farm again. I think they present a much lower risk than Nightz, provided they don't cause a massive disturbance to the local ecosystem.

Euphemia held on to hope even as her shoulders sagged with the miserable thought of the mountain of data and experimental evidence she needed to justify a permit for conducting experiments outdoors.

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“WHAT’S with the parade?” Zelaide growled, annoyed to see three young women lined up beside Euphemia.

They all stared with rapt attention at the man who looked like he had walked right off the pages of a wild photoshoot for a women’s magazine. His gravelly voice sent shivers down their spines. Heading up the group was Sonia. Lately she had given up her habit of going straight home to stalk Euphemia when she was about to leave. Euphemia usually shook off her pursuit, but had been firmly ensnared today because Sonia had gained the support of their other coworkers.

“I’m so sorry. I told them not to, but they followed me anyway.”

The second gate, which usually had very few people accessing it, now bustled with single women. Zel seemed unfazed standing before them.

“I see... Let’s go,” he said.

“Hey, didn’t you say you’d introduce us?” Sonia piped up, her voice effervescent.

“I said nothing of the sort!” Euphemia objected.

“Oh, really now? Forget it, I can introduce myself. Hey there, *Zel*. I’m Sonia,” she purred, drawing out the sound of the name she’d shrewdly remembered from Euphemia’s slip-up.

Sonia had changed from her casual work attire into a sexy outfit. She must’ve had her locker stocked with clothes for different occasions. Although she wore a coat over the little black dress that didn’t reach her knees and had a low neckline, she boldly pushed it aside the moment she caught Zelaide glancing her way to show off the curves she took pride in.

Zelaide's attitude didn't change. He tipped his head to her once and swiftly turned his back on her.

"I see. Bye," he said dismissively.

Sonia wasn't going to give up that easily. Undaunted, she walked right beside Zelaide as he urged Euphemia to the car, sidling up to his opposite shoulder.

"Wait. Your relationship with Mia is just business, right? How about dinner with me after you drop Mia off?"

"I want to join you too," another female coworker joined in.

"How about we all go together then? Isn't it tough for you to handle three women at once?" said Ronaldo Garcia, stepping out of the shadows. Ronaldo had a talent for appearing out of thin air. He slipped shamelessly in between the group women.

Euphemia was at her wits' end.

"What? You guys didn't run this by me first! You're really putting me on the spot," she protested.

"You can go if you want to. I hate eating out," Zelaide shot them down. "Hurry up."

"Um, okay..." Euphemia mumbled before a tiny cry escaped her lips.

Ronaldo had put his hand on Euphemia's shoulder, pulling her towards him as she was hurrying away to keep up with Zelaide's large strides. Zelaide spun right around at the sound of Euphemia's small cry. The type to easily get carried away, Ronaldo wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"...*You*..." Zelaide growled.

"Now, now, boyfriend. Don't glare at me like I'm on your hit list.... Oh, and my name is Ronaldo. I'm Mia's coworker—the one she calls Ron. Should I just call you Zel? Zelly? Can you clear something up for me? You aren't dating Mia, right?"

Euphemia panicked when Zelaide shot her a dirty look. "No! Don't get the wrong idea! I haven't said anything! They all got curious about you when they saw your car!"

“And that’s why we’re inviting you out for a drink, to satiate our curiosity.”

Zelaide glowered unhappily at the man pressing up close to Euphemia from behind. Ronaldo was tall and young, though he looked small next to Zelaide. Their physiques were completely different; Ronaldo had a researcher’s body, while Zelaide possessed the well-defined muscles associated with his job. But the sociable Ronaldo didn’t seem the least bit put off by the fact Zelaide could break him in half.

“I won’t go. Don’t use me to fill in your free time. We’re—I mean, I’m a busy person. Ok, we’re goin’ home for real now. Don’t try to stop us again. If you want to grab a drink, come up with the time and place in advance and I *might* consider going. Bye,” Zelaide said sharply over his shoulder, grabbing Euphemia’s wrist and pulling her away from Ronaldo’s grasp.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed.

“See you next time, Zel! You *must* join us next time!” Sonia called after him.

“Mia! I’ll send you a D-com later!” Ronaldo shouted.

They called out to the two departing backs as a last resort, their desire to get involved incorrigible.

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“**IS** this research facility always like that?” Zelaide asked Euphemia.

“Like what?”

“Treating people like rare animals.”

“No, umm...” Euphemia fumbled with her words. In one sense, he wasn’t too different from a rare animal, but she refrained from saying as much. He drove the car comfortably down the empty freeway. The dusk sky spreading behind Gothic City was breathtaking.

“Everyone came to check you out because you’re stunning, Zel. Most of the people working there are what you can call research maniacs or geeks, and the majority don’t have any normal friends outside their coworkers. Like me. Sonia might be a different story though.”

“Definitely seemed like a gathering of oddballs to me. Especially that man. He

looks like the player type, throwin' himself all over you like that. Guys like him spill secrets like a leaky faucet. Be careful not to let him in on anything."

"Will do. For the record, I hate Ron. He's not a bad worker, but he always follows me around and he's super clingy. He'll hit on anyone as long as they're female. He's a pig." Euphemia pursed her lips to check her indignation.

Zelaide felt like Euphemia, who shouldn't have known anything about the acts he committed earlier, had seen right through to his shameful side. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He restlessly twitched in the driver's seat, adjusting himself into a different sitting position.

After dropping Euphemia off in the morning, he'd gone straight to the high-class Beast Blood prostitute Manuela, quickly satiated his lust, and immediately left.

He only committed the act necessary to vent his sexual desires, without the sweet-smelling oils and the alcohols meant to awaken his carnal urges. Even without the extras, touching a woman's soft, warm skin for the first time in a long time and ejaculating the heaviness building up inside had helped to lighten the weight on him.

Manuela had skillfully guided him to climax in a way only a professional could. She hadn't asked any questions or said anything unnecessary; she knew he only used her as a way to vent his pent-up sexual cravings. Zel was grateful for that, and once he'd paid her, he washed his body clean—he hated having another's smell on him.

But as he walked through the district with chic rentals, he realized that while the pent-up frustration inside him dissipated, the weight on his heart and mind had grown ten times heavier. And he had rushed to town after coming to the conclusion that he'd feel better after satiating his sexual desires, too.

Damn it! I'm such a filthy sleazebag!

Wanting to at least get some work done after his rendezvous, Zelaide had headed for the Uptown district where Vermis, members of Vermis, gathered to drink and party in the middle of the day. All throughout the afternoon, he went around gathering information on the man who died and criminals dealing in dangerous Muta.

He shouldn't feel guilty for doing what was practical physically. He didn't need to worry about the young woman he was protecting catching on, and even if she did, there was nothing for him to be ashamed of. Or so he kept telling himself, but it did no good to erase the disgust roiling through him.

Wait, why do I even care what she thinks?! I haven't done anythin' wrong. Right?

"What's wrong?" Euphemia asked as they pulled into the driveway. She was curious as to why Zelaide fell silent.

The gates detected the signal emitted from his car and opened without a sound. The IHT screen within the dashboard flicked on with the security system's camera feeds from inside and outside the house.

"Your security system amazes me every time..." Euphemia marveled.

"It's a good one. I never used it until now, since it wasn't necessary for just me." Zelaide watched the moving footage on the screen flickering with small lights, confirming no one had invaded the house or dropped something suspicious off while they were out. "...Everything looks clear."

It was quite the spectacle to watch the high-tech car drive through the heavy, outdated doors that opened soundlessly. The sun was still high in the sky. Zelaide quickly disappeared somewhere after parking his car, so Euphemia headed to the kitchen for a cup of tea, when she came across two large boxes left on the floor.

"...This isn't something suspicious?" she asked, surprised to find boxes inside for the first time since living there. Someone had come inside while they were away.

"Yeah. That's food," Zelaide answered, appearing behind Euphemia without her noticing.

Euphemia had polished off all the food he had lying around the house and the food they'd gone out to buy together.

"It'd be a pain to buy food every day, so I arranged it with Pal to have food brought here for you. There's probably food you can eat as-is and food you'll have to prepare to eat. Use what you want and throw away what you don't."

“Nice.” Euphemia hummed.

By prepare, he meant food she needed to cook. Driven by her curiosity, Euphemia opened the refrigerated boxes and found pre-prepared food and lots of ingredients inside. Seasonings, spices, and condiments were included as well. A variety of cookware, such as pots and pans, filled a different box. Euphemia didn't cook much, but she felt like her dignity as a woman was on the line if she didn't make something after having everything perfectly prepared for her. She knew it was old-fashioned thinking, but it didn't stop her from feeling that way all the same.

I can't screw it up too bad if I make a stew...I hope.

Anyone should be capable of chopping up meat and vegetables and boiling it in a broth, and Euphemia had experience making the tomato flavored stew Mrs. Mayo had walked her through before. Hoping Zelaide might eat with her, she turned around with a smile on her face, but he was gone already. He had left as suddenly as he came; he only appeared to inform her about the food.

Grr! I won't lose! I'll get right to work after I take a bath. I might be able to lure him out if the food smells amazing. Euphemia suddenly found herself wondering about his eating habits. *But what does he normally do for food? He maintains an incredible physique, so he has to be eating something, but I've never seen him eat.*

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“...I have to be careful.” Zelaide was lying back on his bed, the only piece of furniture in his massive bedroom. The heavy boots he had stripped off his feet lay on their sides on the floor.

He hadn't furnished his room with anything other than the bed. He had no need for a dresser because he either tossed his dirty clothes or left them on the floor for Palmina to send out for cleaning. He showered in the morning and evening to remove the beastly scent, but he'd never filled the bathtub before.

Is Tipsy still asleep? It's almost evening.

The tiny pterosaur hadn't stopped by to see Zelaide yet. The spacious second-story was silent—except for one place.

Good hearing could sometimes pose a problem too. Zelaide could clearly hear Euphemia taking a bath in the bathroom down the hall. She seemed to have a habit of taking long baths, because he heard the bathtub filling with water and the sound of her washing her body and hair before submerging in it. Even heard her humming to herself. He seriously wanted to leave the house, but while his security system was flawless, he couldn't leave her home alone when night was coming.

Zel wanted to hold his pillow over his face when he thought of the three months ahead of him. He was starting to think smoldering his lust with Manuela in the morning didn't do him much good. Normally, he could keep his desires in check for a month at least after having sex once. Zelaide was so indifferent to having sex with women that Vulcan, his fellow Hunter and Beast Blood, worriedly asked if there was something wrong with him upon learning how long Zelaide could go without.

Damn it all! Don't come out.

He shouldn't close his eyes. His senses would only become sharper. Zelaide glared at the cornice molding on the cold ceiling, but it did nothing to stop his past from permeating his thoughts.

They were memories of a past from so long ago he barely remembered it.

His mother had been raped by human men in the middle of the street, then killed. It'd been the work of the secret society Infernum. Zelaide had watched the whole thing, from beginning to end, from his hiding spot behind the dumpsters. His mother had secured his escape by acting as bait. Her eyes met his the moment they killed her. It happened so long ago he couldn't even remember what her face looked like, but the look in her eyes had burned into his mind and never left him.

Ever since that day, having sex with a woman out of lust and hatred became the biggest taboo within him. That's why he kept physical interaction with women to the bare minimum. Zelaide wasn't even capable of being kind or making them happy like Vulcan. He felt filthy for harboring any sexual desires toward a woman.

Since Beast Bloods lived longer than humans, they grew out of their innate

aggression and destructive desires, a nature that made them even more alien to the colonists, and instead stabilized their mentality by paying prostitutes to pacify their bestial needs. But Zelaide had yet to come to terms with his sexual needs. Moreover, Euphemia appeared to him like a high-class lady with an immaculate soul. How dare he look at her with dirty thoughts?

She's the kinda person who'd never get involved with a man like me under normal circumstances. And yet, look at the situation we find ourselves in. I don't know how things will play out from here, but I know I'm a threat to her. That said, if I resign from this job, she'll be preyed upon by even more savage, merciless men. And she'll be easy prey at that. If our encounters are anythin' to go by, I highly doubt she has the ability to protect herself. I've no choice but to continue being her guard.

This is humiliating.

Zelaide heard light footsteps when he rolled over in bed.

It sounded like Euphemia had gotten out of the bathtub and was skipping down the stairs. As he thought, she was humming away. She was ecstatic when she saw the boxes Palmina left for her, so she was probably going to cook something. The thought reminded Zelaide of his hunger and that he hadn't had anything to eat since morning. Not just this morning either—he hadn't eaten much the past few days.

Food'll have to wait until after she falls asleep.

Zelaide was used to enduring his hunger; waiting wasn't much of an issue for him. He'd be happy not to eat for another two to three days if it meant she wouldn't have to see him lusting insatiably for her like a piece of meat.

It varied greatly depending on each individual, but meat made up a Beast Blood's staple diet. They were also capable of eating intricately cooked meals, and those with a smaller percentage of Beast Blood in their genetics could even subsist on normal food. But Zelaide's parents were both strong Beast Bloods, though he didn't remember his father. In other words, he was a purebred Beast Blood. His instincts made him crave raw meat dripping with blood once every few days.

Palmina arranged for a fresh pack of meat to be sent by a vendor once every

two days. He needed the meat sent to him fresh because it would lose all meaning to his instincts if it were refrigerated. Of course, now that he was living with Euphemia after accepting the mayor's job request, he'd instructed Palmina to separate his food from hers and leave his box in the garage.

But this is odd, Zelaide thought. I've been unreasonably hungry ever since I got involved with that girl. I can't stop wanting to sink my teeth into a hunk of meat.

He didn't know if it was tied to his recent surge of sexual desire, but Zelaide was definitely starving for something.

That woman's going to be the end of me. Dammit. Zelaide gave up and closed his eyes.

Just then, his senses were pierced by the sound of a tiny scream and the smell of blood.

†Chapter 6: Tainted Blood†

BLOOD!

Zelaide was struck hard by the faint smell of iron in the air. But he didn't smell anyone new in the house. No enemy could break in without him noticing.

Then what the bloody hell caused this?

No sooner did Zelaide spring from bed than he bolted from the room. He traversed the lengthy hallway in five giant strides, feet bare, and leapt right over the mezzanine railing to skip the stairs. Faint noises were still coming from the kitchen. Not the sounds of a pistol, something softer.

"Euphemia!"

"Whoa!"

Euphemia nearly fell on her behind from surprise at the sight of the giant man bursting into the kitchen, nearly shattering the heavy wooden door in the process. If she hadn't left her knife on the cutting board, she might've dropped it and sliced open her foot. As if it wasn't bad enough that she'd already cut herself seconds prior.

But even in the dead center of this bizarre situation, what had Euphemia reeling in shock was one remarkable detail.

Did he actually just— "Are you okay?!" With one stride, Zelaide came to her side.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!"

—say my name?

"I smelled blood! What happened?!"

"Huh? Blood? Um, uh...you mean this?" Startled by Zelaide pressing in close to her, Euphemia held up her left index finger to show him. Blood trickled down the side of it, drawing a straight line from the tip of her finger. Light flashed in

Zelaide's eyes at the sight of it.

What? Euphemia's thoughts froze. He pushed her against the counter, nearly tipping her back. Tightly gripping her left wrist, he sucked her index finger... inside his mouth, and mindlessly licked the blood from it.



Did this kind of thing happen often in this kitchen?

Zelaide sucked on Euphemia's finger with his eyes closed, like a baby drinking its mother's milk or a kitten lapping milk from a bowl. Quite a bit of blood gushed from the tiny cut on her finger.

She'd stabbed her finger with the tip of a paring knife while trying to cut the sprouts out of a potato. It had created an awfully deep, albeit small, cut in her finger, hurting her so bad she cried out in surprise. She shouldn't have attempted something new like cooking in a place she was unaccustomed to—just as Euphemia was thinking that, Zelaide had exploded into the room looking like death was on his heels.

A man's tongue was surprisingly soft. And hot. Zelaide was clinging to her slender wrist with both hands, thoroughly licking away the blood oozing from the wound every few seconds with a prayerful gesture. His red tongue was like a living creature of its own. His firmly shut eyes with surprisingly long lashes casting a shadow on his chiseled face, was a sexy sight to behold.

Th-This is...

In a sense, what he was doing could be taken as a sexual act. Sure, the other day Euphemia had sucked his finger into her mouth too, but she was just messing around at the time and hadn't gone far before letting his finger go. Zelaide seemed unaffected by the act as well.

Is doing it versus having it done to you that different? Zel was unaffected when I did it because he didn't feel anything towards me, right? Why is he doing this to me now? I'm so confused...

Thoroughly confused, Euphemia barely prevented her knees from buckling by digging her toes into the floor. But she was at her limit. Shudders coursed through her body as his wet tongue flicked her finger from top to bottom. The stimulus wasn't meant to be that strong, but all the blood in her body grew hot, radiating heat throughout her body from his touch.

Aah...it's no good...I'm at my limit...

"Ahhh..." The moan escaped from her lips quietly, almost subconsciously.

The man's eyelids peeled back and he jumped backwards like she had slapped him. "Wh-What was I..."

All rational thought had flown out the window when he saw blood trickling from her white finger.

What did I just do? Zelaide's hands shot to his mouth, holding back the feeling of bile rising in the back of his throat. His stunning silver hair stuck to his suddenly sweaty forehead and his swarthy skin paled.

"I...I...I..." He slowly retreated until his back hit the wall, then bent forward as if about to puke.

A gap formed between where there was none before. There was something about the way he was acting; the gap transcended the physical space between them.

Euphemia still didn't understand what had happened, but she could tell Zelaide was in a maelstrom of panic and confusion. It wouldn't be a long shot to say he was scared to death. With his hands painfully covering his face, he breathed heavily and erratically.

What's wrong with him?

The source of his panic seemed to lay with the fact that he had licked blood off of her. Sure, it startled her, but all he'd done was lick the cut on her finger, not treat her violently.

"S-S...orry... Sorry!" he squeezed out through ragged breaths.

"...Zel?"

"I...I didn't mean to...! I'm sorry..."

"Uh..." Euphemia was at a loss on how to handle Zelaide's distress, but she quickly regained her ability to speak competently. "Listen, I'm not angry at you." She spoke to him like a mother to her young child. "Don't panic."

Zelaide edged his back up, faltering, "...That's not it. It's not what you think... I wasn't...tryin' to do anything, uh, indecent to ya..."

His rationality had vanished the moment he glimpsed her blood, and he greedily slurped it up with insatiable desire. Euphemia was unaware, but his

manhood was excitedly rising inside his leather pants—even now.

“I told you, I’m not mad.” Euphemia stood up straight and approached the man whose eyes wildly darted around the room as he curled in on himself, like a child afraid of being scolded. She wanted to do something to set his fears at ease.

“Stay away! I...” Zelaide wrenched his eyes away, avoiding her gaze.

“I’m okay. I just nicked my finger on the knife and drew a little blood. The blood stopped, thanks to you. I shouldn’t have been cooking when I honestly suck at it.” She carefully reached out to touch his hair, but he retreated another step as if scared of her touch. A mountain of a man was afraid of a girl less than half his size, and wouldn’t even look her in the eyes. His shoulders quivered almost imperceptibly.

“Zel?”

“Sorry... But don’t look at me, please. I’ll get better soon.” He grimaced painfully before whirling around and fleeing the room with the same insane speed he showed up with.

“Wait! Hey, Zel!” Euphemia quickly ran after him, but he was already gone from the hallway and stairs.

She went upstairs and stood in front of his bedroom door. Knowing she shouldn’t just go inside without permission, she dared to call out to him and took a peek through the cracked open door, but he was nowhere to be seen. Euphemia found herself dumbfounded by the nearly empty room beyond the door. It reminded her of a monastery.

“What’s with this room?”

In center the massive room sat a gigantic bed—and nothing else. As the sole piece of furniture, the four-poster bed was impressive, but beneath its canopy was a stiff mattress without any pillows, blankets, or sheets. Euphemia thought she was being rude, but she boldly walked over to his bed and tested the mattress with both hands. There was something distorted beneath. She struggled to move the heavy mattress aside and uncovered two large survival knives, jammed in the space between the mattress and box spring.

The steel blue sheen of the unsheathed blades hazily reflected Euphemia's face. Featuring a double saw edge and serrated spines, they looked strikingly adept at killing someone in one hit. She picked one up and felt the cumbersome weight of it in her hand—the blades were clearly combat weapons.

“Oh my shining stars.”

This was Euphemia's first time seeing such a wicked knife. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She felt like she had caught her first glimpse into the real nature of his work.

Danger chases him even when he's asleep.

Feeling like she saw something she shouldn't have, Euphemia carefully returned the blade to its hiding place under the mattress and moved the mattress back in place. No doubt various weapons were hidden all around the room and the rest of the house, though she had never noticed them.

Euphemia straightened up after adjusting the mattress and swept her eyes around the empty room. She'd come this far in invading his privacy—going further wouldn't make a difference. Defiantly making excuses for why she needed to be there, she took it upon herself to study his room some more.

She threw open the walk-in closet doors to find nothing but black clothing hanging from the neatly arranged racks. The natural, organic smell of the finest leathers tickled her nose. The hanging clothes largely consisted of leather jackets, coats, and pants, some sporting decorative metal buttons and zippers for a stylish classic look. Undershirts and other cotton shirts hung on a separate rack from the leathers. Every piece of clothing was blacker than ink and looked either as if they were new and unused, or recently brought back from the cleaners.

Two pairs of durable and hefty, full-grain leather boots stood upright under the clothing racks. Several types of holsters for guns and knives hung on the walls, some with knives and pistols already equipped. The shelves on the back wall were dedicated to large firearms of varying calibers. Euphemia had the suspicion the guns were loaded, but even she wasn't stupid enough to touch any gun, loaded or not. She gently closed the closet doors and glanced around the room again.

She couldn't find a single thing meant for peace and relaxation. Taking a look inside the master bathroom as well, she discovered with little surprise that it contained nothing but new soaps and white towels, the bare minimum.

"How exactly is he living his life?" she muttered, her voice echoing off the undecorated bathroom walls.

Euphemia knew nothing about Zelaide aside from his name. Not even his age. Would he tell her if she asked?

I couldn't even ask him if I wanted to right now.

Disappointed, Euphemia left his room with her shoulders hunched. Zelaide showed no signs of coming back. But searching for him, she knew, would be a waste of effort. If he didn't want her to find him, she wouldn't. Her only option was to wait until he chose to show up again. She reluctantly returned to the kitchen and saw her half-cooked meal, reminding her of her empty stomach.

I'll make something to eat and wait for him. He might be hungry when he comes back.

This time with care, Euphemia picked up the sharp kitchen knife. She plopped the vegetables and meat she'd done a horrible job of cutting up into the pot and turned on the fire. Hopelessly anxious about when Zelaide would return, she returned to the hallway every few minutes with no luck. Had he left her completely alone in the house?

Why did Zel look so sad and horrified? Was he that shaken up by the fact he licked my blood? He had taken Euphemia by surprise, but it hadn't bothered her. There has to be something more to it.

She knew it was pointless to think about it, but she couldn't stop herself.

Zelaide was condemning himself for what he'd done to her, no question about it. But he wouldn't tell her *why*. He never told her anything about himself. Certainly, as a Beast Blood, it wouldn't be strange for him to keep many secrets from humans. The two things he was vocal about were his lack of trust in others and his distaste for humans in general. Whenever Euphemia thought she'd discovered his gentle side, he immediately returned to keeping her at arm's length. And it didn't take a scientist to hypothesize he treated the

majority of humans that way, not just her.

I wonder how he treats Pal. Is it any different?

Pal was the only other name he ever mentioned. On more than one occasion, at that. Judging by what he'd told her, Pal freely entered and exited this house quite often. Euphemia hadn't seen her once since moving in, so she figured Pal visited while the master of the house was away. But it wouldn't be unreasonable if she occasionally chose to drop by to discuss work matters. Maybe she didn't show herself because Euphemia was around now.

What's she like? How close is she with Zel? Is she pretty?

Zelaide never mentioned Pal's looks or personality. Yet, Euphemia could tell the woman was skilled at her job from the way she managed the house and *especially* from how Zel spoke of her. He probably trusted her more than anyone else. If he didn't, he would've never let her inside his house. Would Euphemia eventually meet her?

The thought wasn't a pleasant one for Euphemia, though meeting her could present an opportunity to ask about Zelaide.

The stew began to boil while Euphemia's mind wandered, bringing her back to reality. What else could she do right now? She decided to concentrate on cooking for the time being. After skimming the scum from the soup, she poured in her roux.

Euphemia picked up a glass jar. Inside was a seasoning called curry paste, which, according to Erica, made any meal delicious no matter who used it. Apparently, the seasoning had been invented by her paternal ancestors on a faraway planet. Euphemia remembered the packaging from the time Erica had showed her how to make curry, so she decided to give it a try.

Before long, a delectable scent wafted from the food despite her sloppy cooking. Euphemia hoped Zelaide would come home if he smelled it.

I need to learn more about Zelaide and Beast Bloods. I can't get close to him unless I do.

Regardless, at least one thrilling thing had happened in the past hour. Zelaide had called out her name for the first time when he burst into the kitchen. Up

until now, he never called her anything other than “you,” “girl,” “lady,” and “woman.” Maybe he’d unconsciously said “Euphemia” in his moment of panic, but it didn’t change the fact that he said her name.

Hey, maybe I’ve made progress after all.

Euphemia’s lips tugged into a small smile.

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THE flapping sound grew closer. Topsy spread his thin, membrane-like wings and awkwardly alighted onto the rooftop. He was good at taking off and flying—not so much at landing. Zelaide held out his arm, and Topsy happily climbed up to his shoulder.

Over their heads was an endless expanse of indigo. The stars weren’t all that visible towards the end of summer, but the moonlight made up for it.

“Lucky you, you’re free.” The man sitting on the large roof scratched Topsy’s head as the Muta nestled up against his face. Topsy basked in his attention and let out a content chwerk. “You’ve got it made, Tip. You don’t gotta live by concernin’ yourself with others. Well, you’re a little less free than your friends in the Wilds, but you’ve got far more freedom than your average human.”

Topsy inclined his head and made a questioning sound, then started tugging on Zelaide’s hair with his beak.

“Nah, don’t worry ‘bout me. Enjoy your flight! The night’s long.” Zelaide stroked Topsy once more, then swung his arm out for takeoff. The Muta easily took flight, impressing Zelaide by soaring through the air.

Is she asleep yet?

Noise came from the kitchen while the young woman was boiling something, but two hours or so had passed without a peep from the house. Zelaide sprung to his feet, stretched, and hopped from the roof into the backyard. He’d turned on all the security sensors since Euphemia moved in, making it faster for him to jump down than walk on the ground. He soundlessly landed in front of the garage, temporarily disabled the sensors, and manually opened the door. He didn’t turn on the lights.

The garage was wide enough to fit two cars and a large motorcycle with room to spare. Zelaide advanced deeper inside to where a blue box had been stashed between two toolboxes. He popped the lid open and was hit with the strong stench of fresh meat and blood through the vinyl pouch. Thrusting his hand into the pouch, he ripped off a handful of meat and bit off a chunk with his sharp canine teeth. The slimy and chewy sounds of his meal filled the room, sounding barbaric to his ears.

See? I'm a repulsive monster. He crushed the meat between his teeth with a loud splat. *That's right. This is who I am.*

He masticated the bloody meat. Flavor was unrelated. He was a Beast Blood. This was his food. His eyes glowed bluish-silver. There was no question about it: he was a fearsome monster, not a *person*.

With each swallow, the hunger in his stomach and heart gradually abated. He was more famished than he initially thought. The bloody meal consumed him.

“...Zel?”

His hand jerked to a halt at that ghost of a voice; only his eyes shot to the side. He didn't have to look to know who it was. Why hadn't he noticed the small form and its slight presence?

“You're here, aren't you?”

Her voice echoed very gently in Zelaide's ears.

Shit! Why didn't I notice her? I thought she was asleep!

Terrified, Zelaide dropped the chunk of bloody meat from his hand. It landed with a loud splat on the concrete.

Had he been so starved his senses betrayed him? He frantically swallowed the lump of meat in his mouth and kicked the box at his feet, dropping the latch in the process. He rubbed the blood off his stained lips and slowly turned around to where Euphemia's petite figure stood in the doorway. She hadn't changed into her pajamas yet. Instead of walking into the room, she waited for a reply. He might still have a chance to wiggle free without her finding out about what he was doing.

“I was takin’ care of some business. It’s filthy over here, so stay out,” he answered her in a deep snarl. He wanted to make it clear he was rejecting her presence.

“No... I’m coming over to you now.”

“Stay away!” he ordered. The petite shadow slowly moved toward him regardless.

“Zel...”

“I told you to stay away!” Zelaide yelled with pure venom.

The petite shadow shrunk back from the anger in his voice. Then he heard something metal flip over and skid across the concrete as the shadowy figure pitched forward. Humans were ridiculously helpless in the darkness Beast Bloods easily maneuvered through. Euphemia had tripped over something in the corner of the garage and was hurtling to the ground.

“Ack!”

“O-Oi!”

Sturdy arms were holding her up a split second later. The bare arms underneath her were thick, their muscles flexed to hold her aloft. Zelaide roughly helped her back on her feet.

“Whoa!”

“Didn’t I tell you to stay away?! Get out of here now!”

He pushed her away, turning his face aside. Euphemia clung to his arm, desperate to stop him from dismissing her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But I wanted to know! I want to know!” she pleaded.

“Know what?!” he snapped back.

His head was pounding. *Hurry and go away! Please go...I’m begging you...*

Zelaide had nearly been brought to his knees when he caught her. The sweet scent enveloping her body assaulted his nose. Her long, wet hair trailed over his exposed skin. And then the young woman had to go and wrap both arms around his, clinging to him with his arm anchored between her breasts. The

soft, round pillows enveloping his arm made his blood flow backwards.

Their silent battle continued for minutes before Zelaide lost the will to fight and slumped hard against the wall.

Please, please just stop givin' off that sickeningly sweet, tantalizing smell.

Zelaide groaned and let the tension slip from his muscles. Sensing the change in him, Euphemia relaxed her embrace on his arm and gazed questioningly up at him. He closed his eyes, putting out the glowing lights she would've seen in the dark garage.

"I want to know about you...even more than I do now," she persisted.

"...Nothin' good will come to you for knowing 'bout me." Zelaide mustered his remaining willpower to reach out and pry the girl from him; his final attempt at resisting. But Euphemia didn't budge, letting his hand merely rest on her shoulder.

"Zelaide..."

"Don't look at me like that... Don't look at me period," his deep voice came out sounding weak. "You shouldn't touch me. I'm unclean. I'm utterly filthy!"

Zelaide covered his face with his other hand as if to hide from her. This was the first time she'd ever seen him act so weak. The giant beast of a man who could kill Mutas with his bare hands was shrinking in on himself like a child abandoned by their mother.

Slowly regaining her composure, Euphemia noticed the smell of blood permeating the garage. Though she couldn't see too well, she made out the shadow of a large box at their feet. A distinct stench—the heavy and festering scent of a slaughterhouse—rose from the box.

She quickly caught on—this was what he was trying to hide from her.

"Why? You were eating, right? Nothing strange about that."

"...You don't understand... An upper-class, refined lady like you could never understand... I'm a Beast Blood tainted by blood."

"Zel..." Euphemia placed a hand on the solid arm she was certain was there in the pitch-dark. Zelaide trembled.

“Please don’t touch me... I’m filthy.”

She ignored his feeble request and gently stroked the back of his hand. Zelaide growled deep in his throat in warning as he clenched his fist, but slowly, her touch made him relax and his fist unfurl.

“...Zel?” she called his name with a whisper of a voice. “I’m fine, if that’s what you’re worried about. See?”

Euphemia’s hand steadily ran up his arm. Zelaide leaned his back against the wall like he was stapled to it, his hand glued to his face.

“It’s okay...you aren’t filthy.”

“.....”

“...I like you. How could I not when you’re so strong and kind?”

Zelaide stayed perfectly still. Euphemia dropped her hand to hold his wrist in both hands. His wrist was so thick her fingers couldn’t wrap all the way around it.

“Do you dislike it when I do this?” She felt an almost imperceptible vibration from his wrist that she took to mean he lightly shook his head. “You don’t? Then why won’t you look at me?”

“Because...isn’t it obvious...aren’t you disgusted by me? I was devouring fresh meat drippin’ with blood.”

“I know.”

“You know? ...You’re a thoroughbred lady from the elite of society... Aren’t ya repulsed?”

“Not in the least. You touching me doesn’t bother me one bit. I mean, haven’t we been touching each other since we met?” Euphemia pointed out.

“...Only when it was unavoidable.” Zelaide gingerly placed his free hand on top of her hands around his other wrist. Euphemia’s heartbeat sped up with the feeling of his large, warm hand encapsulating hers, but her hopes were dashed as he gently removed her hands from his wrist.

“But don’t you see? Nothing’s happened because you touched me. Besides,

I'm no proper young lady from an elite family. I'm just a junior researcher. This is normal. Everyone does it," Euphemia objected in the calmest voice she could manage, in spite of the hammering heart she feared Zelaide's sensitive ears would pick up.

"How are you not a young lady from an elite family, when you're the mayor's sister?"

"My sister's unrelated to this."

"That sister of yours is who paid me a pretty chunk of coin for your protection, y'know?"

"Oh yeah...hahaha..." Euphemia always tripped herself up by speaking before thinking. Still, that wasn't the problem at hand. "...Anyways...what I'm trying to say is...whether you're a Beast Blood or not one is unrelated. I like you for you—er, as a friend," she suggested, thinking that was the best place to start from. She prepared herself for rejection. At long last, he opened his eyes.

Gorgeous... I knew it, he's stunning...

"How did you know I was in here?" Zelaide abruptly changed the topic.

"Yeah, about that... I actually took some time to seriously think about the reason you don't eat anything after you left. I haven't seen you eat once since I moved in. I thought maybe you eat somewhere during the day while I'm at work, but something felt off for that to be the case. You can't go out at night because I'm home. I was sure there was something else to it. A reason why you can't eat around me..." Euphemia explained, her eyes riveted on his.

"I know I don't look or act like one, but I'm a junior researcher, so I borrowed the institute's research database and dug through the research documents for some information. It was hard because there's not much research on Beast Blood nutritional intake, but it was enough to come up with a hypothesis. I calculated the necessary nutrient and calorie intake for someone of your build and muscle mass... So naturally, I deduced that if you didn't want to be seen while you eat, you must be eating away from the main house while I sleep. And then, I theorized you don't want to be seen because you eat something different from the rest of us."

“I see... And? What was written in that database?”

“There wasn’t much recorded about eating habits. Current research hasn’t placed much value on studying diet, so I decided to construct my hypothesis by taking in to account the possible sources of nutrition according to evolutionary probability, as Beast Blood genes trace back to this world’s original inhabitants... The major flaw with this approach is that it’s hard to generalize based on species as complex as ours, since eating habits tend to vary on an individual basis.”

“I don’t know the complicated, science-y reasons behind it. All I can say is that I occasionally...have an insatiable hunger to eat that stuff. I know it’s disgustin’, but I can’t resist it... I’m sorry ‘bout earlier... Refraining from eatin’ for so long made my mind go blank with hunger when I saw your blood. I normally never do that. It must’ve been scary. Sorry,” Zelaide murmured, his voice softer than a whisper.

Who knew he could sound like this too.

“I told you, I’m cool with it.”

“You’re *cool* with it? You do realize I was slurpin’ up your blood, don’t you? How can that *not* be frightening as hell?”

It bothered Zelaide more than Euphemia could’ve guessed. He acted deeply ashamed of his natural food inclinations, like a teenage girl fretting over a blemish on her skin. His life must’ve been fraught with suffering because of it.

“Just so you know, humans eat meat too. Ever hear of steak tartare? It’s made from raw ground meat and served as a high-end dish. I love eating meat too,” Euphemia said in a cheerful voice to put his mind at ease. “To eat that meat, we have to slaughter the animal, skin it, and clean it as well. People who feel bad for the animals won’t touch meat at all. It all comes down to a matter of taste. Take my father’s people for example. They have a habit of thinly slicing raw meat and fish and eating it together with strong additives called soy sauce and wasabi. We each have our own ways of consuming meat, but it’s not that different from what you’re doing. If I had one complaint, it’d be your table manners. They aren’t the prettiest. You’re eating with your hands...while standing in a corner of a dark garage.”

"I can't argue with ya there." Zelaide's throat rumbled with nervous laughter.

"So why don't we eat together when you're hungry?" Euphemia suggested.
"I'll make it look pretty on the plate for you. I don't mind one bit."

"Are you offering to teach me table manners?"

"You've got a problem with that?"

"You're a funny one, princess."

Euphemia put her hands on her hips and stuck out her tongue. Zelaide laughed again. It was a short laugh, but the deep rumble sounded amazing on the ears. Not being able to see his face in the dark was disappointing. Euphemia wanted to hear him laugh more, even if just a little. She wanted his voice to grace her ears once again...

"Hey, come on now, all you've said is 'you,' 'princess,' and 'lady' this time!" she complained. "Just call me by my name already! You said it earlier tonight!"

"What?! I did? When?" Zelaide was genuinely surprised.

"Back when I cut myself. Remember when you busted into the kitchen?"

"I busted in because I thought you were under attack..."

"That's when you said my name. You called out, 'Euphemia!'"

Zelaide held his tongue.

"Say it again," Euphemia hounded him since he was hesitating. For whatever reason, she sensed she had the upper hand on him tonight.

"...Eu..."

"Yes, yes," Euphemia joyfully urged him on.

"...Forget it."

"Why?!"

"Your name is insanely difficult to say. I have no education. I can't pronounce elegant words like your name," he argued, forgetting he pronounced it just fine earlier.

"Then call me Mia. Most people do."

“That’s worse.”

It was too hard to tell in the dark, but he seemed to be frowning.

“Why?!”

“Those people call you that.”

“What people?”

“Your coworkers. The blonde lady and smug dude.”

“Well, yeah...we’re close in age.”

Wasn’t it only natural for them to call Euphemia by her nickname?

“Yumi,” Zelaide abruptly said.

“Pardon?”

“Like I said, Yumi.”

“Why Yumi?”

“It’s easier to say. You’re Euphemia, so I took the Yu sounding part and Mi part to make Yumi. Nobody calls you that, I bet.”

He’s saying my name with that gravelly voice of his. A nickname meant only for his use... That fact alone was enough to make Euphemia want to cry.

“They don’t. But I think...that’s a common name among my father’s people.”

Her father’s ethnic group possessed a fairly unique culture, and she’d spent a lot of time learning about it by reading every book she could get her hands on to feel closer to her older sister, who had inherited one hundred percent of that ancestry.

“You don’t say.”

“Yup, I like it. Call me Yumi. And to seal the deal...”

“What now...?”

“This is...like a ritual gesture...”

“...?”

“I really hope you will accept it. I want you to believe me when I say I don’t

hate you... So...I sure hope you don't hate me either..."

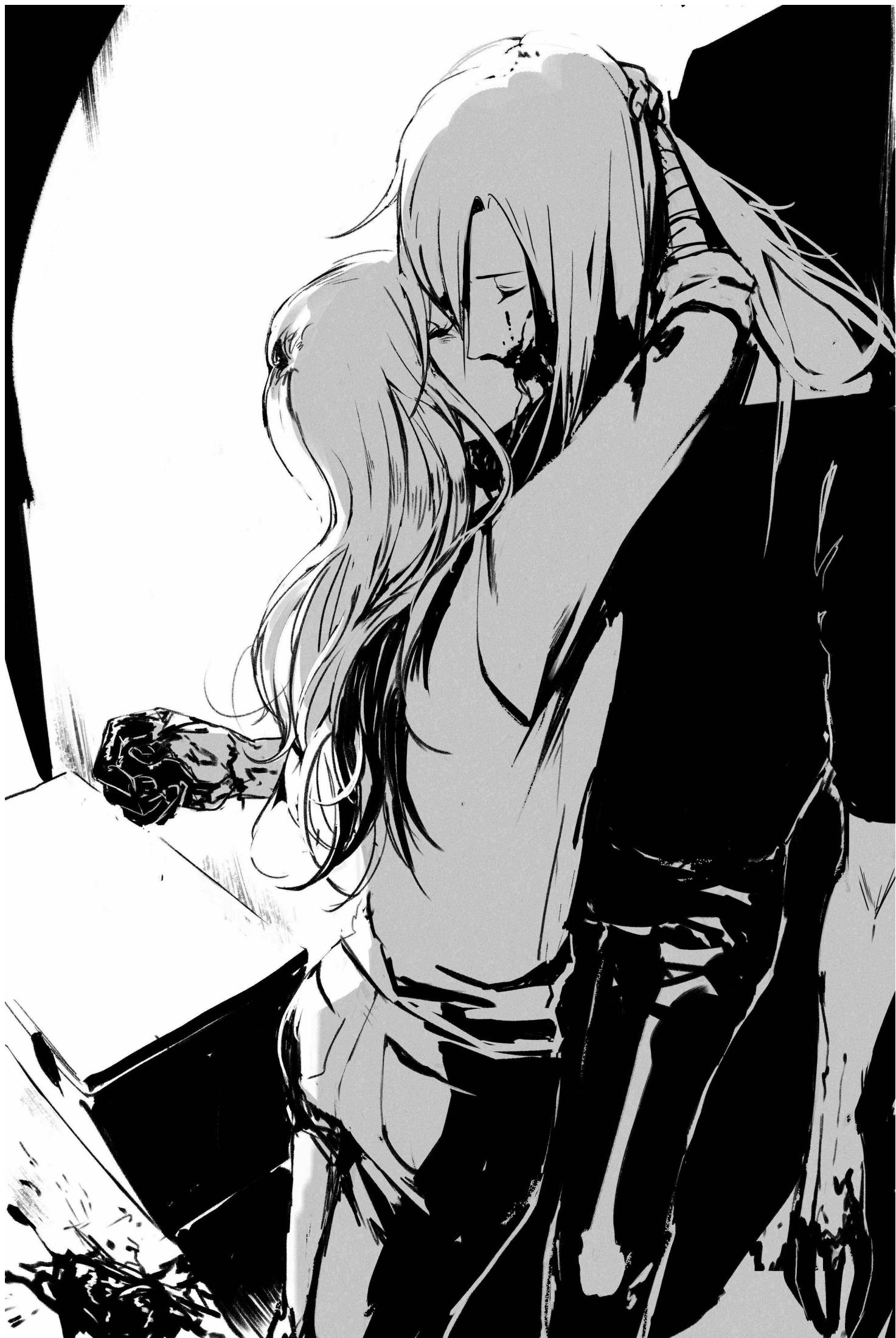
Euphemia could tell her cheeks were flushing bright-red in the dark, the heat rising to her earlobes. Did Zelaide see all of her with his sharp senses? It'd be terribly embarrassing if he did, but now that she had said it, she couldn't take it back.

"Zel..."

She blindly reached out her hand and immediately encountered smooth skin. From the feel of it, it was probably his cheek. Muscles tensed under her fingers. But he quietly let her have her way with him, without pushing her away like before. Pleased, Euphemia reached her hand a little higher and slipped her fingers into his mane. Dark-silver in the light, his hair felt softer than it appeared, and her fingers slid through the fine strands. When she dug her fingers in, he slowly leaned down with her guidance. The potent smell of blood clung to his lips. It was too dark to tell, but she didn't need to see to guess the area around his lips was smeared with bright-red blood. And it didn't bother her one bit.

"I like you, Zel."

Euphemia heard him sharply inhale. She still didn't hesitate to kiss him. She had a general idea of where his lips would be, but she was a little off the mark and ended up kissing the corner of his lips. He only flinched a bit. Euphemia moved her lips over and kissed him in the right spot this time, twining her arms around his neck.



Their touch lasted for but a moment, but it was enough. Her hand moved back down to caress his cheek.

“This is a kiss signifying that I like you. I hope you come to like me somewhat, too.”

“...So soft...”

The cheek muscles under Euphemia’s palm moved. He might’ve smiled. Unable to see a thing despite her efforts, Euphemia was left feeling like she had missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime sight.

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THE thick darkness of night was at its deepest shade just before the dawn. Rain fell in the interstice left between the end of night and the start of morning, hiding the moon and stars with heavy clouds.

There were irrefutable things that stirred only in these darkest hours as opposed to the dead of night.

Zelaide was lying face up on his bed. What he called a bed was actually a stiff mattress with no covers. The bed in question belonged to the house’s former owner, who had splurged on a pointlessly huge box spring and mattress that was roomy enough for Zelaide to sprawl out. The bed came with the house, but the pillows and sheets hadn’t and he never purchased any. He normally stripped off just his boots and jacket and indulged in a short sleep of two to six hours. Beast Bloods were generally light sleepers and capable of quickly falling asleep when they laid down. Tonight was an exception for Zelaide.

This is where she touched...

He pressed his fingertips to his lips. His calloused fingers were incapable of recreating the delicious softness of Euphemia’s touch. He tried to recreate the feeling anyway. They’d touched for but a moment, but the feeling was burned vividly into his memory. Remembering it made his blood quicken.

Why can’t I think of anythin’ else these days? ...Is it because she’s a woman? Didn’t Manuela satiate my need for women yesterday? I should be able to

contain my desires for another month.

Zelaide was failing to fully comprehend the situation he found himself in. He should've satisfied his sexual urges and his stomach's natural urges as well—he had eaten to his heart's content only a short while ago. Yet, for all that, something was still lacking. *Tortuously* lacking. For someone who wanted to always have an accurate understanding of where he was situated, these circumstances were extremely unpleasant.

That reminds me... Zelaide recalled the short conversation he had exchanged with Manuela.

His companion Manuela was a natural-born, thoroughbred Beast Blood as well. Yet Zelaide had never smelled blood on her. "Isn't it necessary to consume flesh and blood as a Beast Blood?" he had asked her, finding the lack of blood strange.

"It was like that for me in the past. But I haven't had the urge to eat meat since starting this line of work," she readily answered. "If I get a craving, I can satisfy it with a small amount. Normal cooked food will do for me most of the time. Maybe it's because of all the sperm I receive on a daily basis? Either that, or I've gotten too old to experience the same kind of desire?"

Manuela certainly had quite a few years on Zelaide, but it was too soon for degeneration to have an effect. Degeneration in Beast Bloods was similar to the physical deterioration in aging humans, occurring once they reached their seventies. Setting that possibility aside, if what she had said was true, could frequent intimacy with the opposite sex reduce Beast Blood hunger pangs for both flesh and sex?

"Hehehe. You're still a young pup who hasn't known the comfort of many women. So let me let you in on a little secret. Ever hear of the Dek'Shen reproductive cycle? Beast Blood women who've been sexually satisfied or have had children can get by just fine without binging on meat. I don't have to eat anything for days after having sex with you because your sperm is especially potent..."

"All of us women have an innate need to reproduce and are stuck in the vicious Dek'Shen cycle until we have a child or are engaging in the acts that lead

to one. That said, men and women experience the cycle and desire differently, so as a woman, I can't say for sure what's troubling you. But the one thing I can say for sure is that even men won't have the same level of lust if they've satisfied their role in the cycle," Manuela told him, teaching him things he never knew before.

So if I don't want to be driven to the brink and accidentally expose my ugly side, I have to fulfill my role as a Beast Blood male in the Dek'Shen Cycle by constantly havin' sex with women? She said she wasn't bothered by it...but I am.

Unused to deeply analyzing things, Zelaide flipped over on the bed, the springs squeaking under him.

Does that mean I have to keep havin' sex with women I don't want or love just to stop my craving for meat? Disgusting. That's more repulsive than eating raw meat.

Zelaide continued contemplating the problem, his two eyes emanating silver light like stars in the darkness.

Was there no method out there capable of putting an end to his appalling lust and hunger? Would the Dek'Shen Cycle dictate his life forever?

He had nowhere to go for an answer. It wasn't as if there was a book on the Dek'Shen Cycle, and Euphemia mentioned nothing about it when she talked about her research into Beast Bloods. Just like Vulcan loved to tease him, Zelaide wasn't the type to pursue women. Human women weren't even a passing thought for him, and he refused to do anything with a Beast Blood woman unless he was going to lose his sanity to the cravings. He felt guilty whenever he had sex with women because it reminded him of the way his mother died. He found his Beast Blood propensity for raw meat equally detestable.

So I'm basically stuck in this damn cycle with no way out?

He had to sleep with women if he didn't want to eat meat; if he didn't want women, then he needed to feast on raw meat like some sort of animal. Were those the only options available to male Beast Bloods? Euphemia's work database probably knew more about Beast Bloods than Zelaide knew about his own species. He hadn't even known about the Dek'Shen Cycle until Manuela

told him.

“Damn blood... Wait, hold on.” Zelaide shot up in bed as he arrived at a sudden realization.

What if I become intimate with a woman I’m fond of and who’s willing? A woman I’m fond of... Who would...?

Peering through the darkness, he stared at the door.

One annoying woman was sleeping just beyond this door. A strange woman who’d pressed her lips to his not too long ago. She rolled around in bed like she couldn’t fall asleep for an hour and then hadn’t made a sound since after midnight.

What if I asked her? Didn’t she say she liked me earlier? I know she said it. Is it possible if I ask her properly...? No way. I must be mad. As if somethin’ that convenient would ever happen. How could I be so stupid to think about askin’ a human female...? Reason objected his hopes. It didn’t stop the idea from appealing to him though. He slowly rolled off his bed and slipped from his room.

I ain’t gonna do anything weird... Just gonna check in on her. I want to see if she’s sleeping well after the shock I gave her earlier...

The left end of the hallway—that’s where Euphemia’s room was located. He stood outside her door, feeling for her presence inside, when he heard the regular breathing of someone in a deep sleep. He swore he’d turn right around and leave if her door was locked. When he gently pushed the door to see, a thin space opened up with no resistance.

She didn’t lock the door! I knew it, this girl has zero sense of danger. That’s a huge problem! He realized the irony of his thoughts, being the man sneaking into a grown woman’s room in the dead of night. But when he really thought about it, he could break down the door with one hand if he seriously wanted to. Locks served little purpose.

But it still comes down to that thing...what’s it called? A d-deterrent? Anybody can come waltzin’ inside like this! Gah!

The sweet aroma of vanilla and honey that hit his nostrils the second he

opened the door nearly took his breath away. At the same time, the sexual desires he managed to resist earlier came flooding back in full force. Steeling himself from turning tail and fleeing the room, he slunk over to her bedside like a cat on the prowl. The magnificent canopy bed looked like an impenetrable fortress.

It's okay. I haven't done anythin' wrong yet. I'm not an animal who'll attack her in her sleep. I'm just gonna watch her for a few seconds. Just gonna check on her, that's all...

He placed one knee on the bed and peered down at Euphemia comfortably stretched out on the bed, sound asleep. Since it was midsummer, she was only clothed in a short spaghetti-strap pajama shirt with a thin sheet lightly draped over her.

How can she sleep comfortably in a strange man's house? Stupid woman!

Her disheveled hair fanned out over her pillow. This was the second time he watched her sleeping.

Never in his wildest dreams could Zelaide have imagined this situation when he'd first laid his eyes upon her, but a strange feeling came over him as he gazed upon the young woman, the same woman who held fast to her pride even as she trembled with fear in front of her attackers. Here she was on his bed again, sound asleep with a tranquil look on her pretty face. Deep, tantalizing breaths escaped from her slightly parted lips. She was the embodiment of purity.

Zelaide shook his head. *That's it—I can't ask her. It's too much to ask for her help based on some random theory. A beautiful, fine woman like her would be wasted on me. A lowlife like me should just stick to chomping on meat and sleepin' with prostitutes. So...*

...just a little. I'll head back to my room after touching her a little. Zelaide gently stroked Euphemia's soft cheek with the back of his finger. *Sorry. I'll give up on the idea. So forgive me for this one thing.*

Zelaide affectionately moved the hair off her face, placed his elbows on either side of her face, and slowly bent down. He tenderly nuzzled his rough lips against hers, then sucked on them, tugging them gently into his mouth. Her lips

tasted like they were made of sweet nectar. After enjoying the sensation of brushing her lips with his, he licked the plump, red flower petal she often teased him with.

Aah...sweet...it's so sweet...

Euphemia's eyes snapped open just as Zelaide became entranced. In a heartbeat, her eyes, flashing emerald in the illumination cast by the nightlight, focused on him, and her face melted into a dazed, blissful smile. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Mm...Zel...? I love you..." she whispered. A second later, her arms fell back onto the bed. She had fallen right back to sleep.

"Huh?"

Oi, what the hell? Don't give me that. That's too much! ...She didn't do that on purpose, did she? She's talkin' in her sleep! She's half-asleep, huh...she's really asleep...

Below him was her peaceful face, white throat, and supple limbs, spread out to welcome him. She slept confidently, as if nobody would interfere with her beauty sleep.

"AGH!"

Sparks suddenly coursed through Zelaide's body, electrifying every limb. Surging up from the deepest depths of his being, the current pierced his brain with a single word—a command from the primeval half of his body, his pure instinct.

"...Impossible...it can't be. How...how can this happen...?"

To Zelaide's dismay, he knew what the electrifying feeling meant. "This ain't possible...there's no way!"

Glittering silver light gleamed in the darkness.

Wrong. It's gotta be wrong. She's human. We're not even the same species!

He clenched his large hands into fists. Pain coursed through his body until it eventually gathered in his center.

Shit! There's only one explanation for this sensation. I thought I'd never encounter it... Dammit all! It's irrefutable. Instinct tells me this feeling is—

“Chwirk! Chwirk! Chwirk! Chwirk!”

Zelaide's thoughts were abruptly interrupted by Topsy's alarm screech.

His screech sounded surprisingly close. Reflex launched Zelaide right into combat mode. He leapt on the bed and positioned Euphemia protectively under him.

Enemy attack?!

He honed his senses and nerves to needlepoint accuracy. But he couldn't smell or sense another human in the house. His ears picked up on short snatches of something small bumping around in the adjacent room, concurrently with Topsy's alarm screech and the clamor of fluttering wings. Human or not, a threat had made its way inside the house.

But how...?

Zelaide's house originally belonged to one of Gothic City's men of influence. The solitary man possessed enemies galore, steering him towards a paranoia that had him equip his house with an excellent security system usually not found in buildings of this size. Zelaide had purchased the house after the man died, when it was put up on auction for an outrageous price. Once he purchased the place, he scrubbed the system and devoted a year to reworking it to fit his lifestyle. It was near impossible for human or drone to infiltrate the house without either Zelaide or the super security system noticing.

The girl stirred beneath him.

“Mmm? Why's it so heavy—Whoa! Zel?! What's wrong?!” she cried out.

“Quiet!”

Zelaide scooped up the shocked Euphemia and stuffed her under the bed. The bed frame was constructed from durable materials that would provide temporary defense against physical attacks. As the situation currently stood, the enemy wasn't attacking. Topsy's high-pitched screeches and flapping wings were the only noises.

“Don’t leave this spot until I give the okay!” Zelaide ordered, drawing the dagger from the holder on his back as he headed for the door across from the bed.

The adjacent room doubled as a bathroom and changing room. He held his knife in the reverse grip position, the edge facing outward. Something small was struggling on top of the bathroom tile; Topsy wasn’t the only creature inside. Zelaide didn’t recognize the smell. Quietly, he opened the glass door. Immediately, he identified two small Muta tumbling around on top of the bathroom tile, entangled in a fierce struggle.

“Tip!” Zelaide kicked the door open the rest of the way and stepped inside.

Topsy flew to the ceiling at once, a small chunk of bloody meat dangling from his beak. The potent stench of freshly spilled blood hung over the bathroom floor.

“What the...?”

Something sinister was squirming on top of the tile. The alien creature looked like someone had connected two wine bottles together by the neck. Zelaide crouched down and snatched up the Muta flailing around on the floor. He quickly discovered suction cups and suckers attached to its serpentine body. The suction cups had muffled any sound of its break-in. Creepier yet, this Muta lacked any organs capable of making sound.

“What the hell is this thing?”

Where did it slip in from? Zelaide’s eyes shot to the window—it was ajar about the space of two fingers. The sucker Muta had suctioned its way up the house’s outer wall and snaked inside through the narrow gap in the window. Blood spurted from the thing’s neck where he gripped it; Topsy had dealt it a fatal blow. But the bloody Muta violently whipped its head around to take a chomp out of Zelaide’s wrist with its wide mouth full of dagger-like teeth. It was still wildly ferocious, even after sustaining a fatal injury. The thing was a pure incarnation of the planet’s ferocity.

Who the hell released such a nasty thing?

Zelaide hurled the Muta on the tile and crushed its scaly head under his heavy

boot. A nasty crack resounded beneath his foot and blood spewed out, spraying all over the room. Topsy flew down from where he waited near the bathroom ceiling with a flutter, and landed softly on Zelaide's shoulder. While vigilantly keeping lookout over his territory from the night sky, he had noticed the impending threat creeping up the walls before anyone else.

"Good job, Tip. Hurt anywhere, buddy?"

Topsy gave a small cry. Zelaide examined him and found a tiny tear in the membrane coating his wings. Either he tore it when he forced his way inside through the narrowly cracked window or the serpentine Muta had ripped through it with its fangs. Zelaide would have to tend to his friend's injuries later. Euphemia came first. He rushed back into the bedroom to make sure nothing was on the floor with her.

"You okay?!" he shouted.

"Yeah... Can I come out now?" came a relatively calm voice from the carpeted floor beneath the bed. From the look of it, she had patiently obeyed his orders.

"Yeah. I don't sense anything else inside. You did good waiting it out."

Euphemia crawled out from under the bed to see Zelaide with Topsy perched alertly on his shoulder. Both Beast Blood and Muta were still wary of their surroundings.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

"Someone targeted this estate. Don't turn on the lights yet."

Euphemia silently sat on the edge of the bed. Zelaide's answers were too short for comfort, but kicking up a fuss wouldn't help. Carefully analyzing the situation was the priority.

"You left the bathroom window open," Zelaide said.

"Whoops... I opened it to air the room out...and forgot to shut it. But it was just a crack, and I thought it'd be okay because there are thick bars on the outside... I'm sorry. Did something get in?"

"A small-sized Muta snuck inside by crawling up the exterior wall. It's a type I've never seen before. Things coulda gone south without Topsy."

“Oh no...” Euphemia covered her mouth with her hand.

“I didn’t notice it either. The nightlight worked against us this time. The enemy noticed the open window and sent a Muta inside to—Tch! Who knew Muta like that existed? I screwed up big time,” Zelaide spat, his voice oozing with regret and irritation.

Someone was watching the house with a powerful night-vision scope. He thought a rich residential area would be safe, but the enemy, or the enemy’s allies, were stalking them from somewhere nearby. Nothing like this had ever happened before, so he let down his guard around the possibility.

“A Muta slipped inside? What kind?”

“Looks like a short snake with weird bumps. Ah...I killed the thing already, don’t worry. But don’t go in this bathroom for a while. I’ll dispose of the corpse. Won’t leave any traces of it bein’ there.”

“Okay...thanks... But does that...does it mean I’m under constant surveillance?”

“Either you are or I am... Plenty of bastards are gunning for me too.”

“For you, Zel? Why?”

“Because I’m a Beast Blood Hunter. There are more people who hate us than cockroaches livin’ in the slums.”

Infernum’s members especially despised Beast Bloods, and Zelaide had dropped a hefty amount of coin on this house to escape their obnoxious attacks. But he left that detail out for Euphemia’s sake, since there was no point in scaring the girl more. A dead Muta in her bathroom was frightening enough for one night.

“We’re probably safe for the rest of the night. Never open a window again. Bullet-proof glass is meaningless if the window’s open. There isn’t a suitable sniping location ‘round here so the chances of a shooting are low, but that won’t stop them from sending in rare Muta like this one or tossing in gas canisters. Don’t flip on the lights when you bathe at night. Keep the curtains shut at all times and never stand near the windows. They can see your shadow from outside,” he warned her.

“That’s a lot to take in at once...”

Isn’t he being overcautious? What proof does he have that the Muta was set on us by the enemy? Couldn’t it just be a coincidence?

Zelaide snorted at her remark and scoffed, “This is why people raised in shiny towers are a pain. You don’t have to like it. Just do what I say.”

“Okay...”

If the man who had sworn to protect her said to do something, she probably should. For the first time, Euphemia felt scared of their situation. Zelaide said he’d dispose of the corpse, but she felt it was her duty as a biologist to examine the dead Muta first, especially since it could give them a lead. The work required creeped her out and gave her the chills.

“...Tch.” Zelaide watched Euphemia shudder in silence until he couldn’t take it any longer. He sat down beside her and pulled her slender shoulder towards him. “It’s not wrong for you to be scared... I’m tellin’ you to be cautious as your bodyguard just for that reason, lady.”

He roughly rubbed the top of her head. He was treating her like a child, but that was for the best. Otherwise, he might not be able to control himself.

“Yumi...you mean?” Euphemia quipped. Dissatisfaction colored her tone, but Euphemia was certainly reveling in satisfaction as she leaned against his broad chest at his insistence. The fear she felt before steadily faded. He had saved her yet again. She was safe as long as she stayed with him.

“Yeah, I did...Yumi.” The usual strength brimming in Zelaide’s voice was absent.

For he had already come to realize the truth.

Droplets of rain fell from the sky in a cadence. It was the hour of purification, washing away the depravities and horrors of the night. Daybreak was just around the corner.

Yumi—Euphemia.

That was the name of his *mate*.

†Chapter 7: Signs of Confusion†

“**ZELAIDE** Silvergray?” That Beast Blood?” The man swiveled his chair away from the monitor he’d been watching with rapt attention to look behind him.

An excellent air-conditioning system kept the dark, extravagant room comfortable, but its lack of windows rendered the air stale and claustrophobic, despite the vast space. The man slowly rose from the leather chair, poured amber liquid into two crystal glasses, and placed one glass in front of the man facing him. His graceful movements, which clashed with his big, muscular frame, seemed calculated.

“This fine liquor was brought here by the colonists from the old world. You can’t get your hands on this stuff anymore.”

“You honor me. Now, regarding the information I’ve brought—you know of him?” asked the other man. He was wire-thin in comparison. His rimless glasses reflected the white light of the monitors, making his already enigmatic expression even more elusive.

“I’ve seen his ugly mug before, as he’s gone out of his way to make a name for himself among those Beast Blood bastards. So, what about him?”

“Our sources say he’s accepted a job guarding the girl you have taken a fancy to. Adding insult to injury, I might add, the girl is cohabiting with him in his house.”

“Well, well.” The man rolled the bitter malt liquor over his tongue. “That’s some news, all right. That *thing*’s got Mayor Saionji’s little sister under his wing, eh? Suppose it makes sense when you think about it—assuming it was him who saved her from the brink of danger, that is, even if just by coincidence. Saionji is an annoying woman distinguished for her quick decision making.”

“Indeed. The other day I undertook some measures to shake things up a little, to see how they would react. Forgive me for acting first before consulting you on the matter, sir...but I didn’t want to report back to you without any definitive

data on the situation.”

“I don’t mind. So? What measures are you talking about?”

It was this generous attitude of the bigger man that accorded high regard among his subordinates, who always treated him with the utmost respect.

“I received word from our watchdog that a window had been left cracked open. Such a grievous breach in his defenses had never occurred before, so I took the opportunity to send a small Muta I happened to have on hand into the building. You see, dealing with such creatures is my specialty.”

“I see. You played a crafty card; one they can’t trace back to you. Good. While I doubt he’s been deceived, those dipstick bizzies down at the cop shop can’t do shit without evidence to discredit the chance that the Muta slipped in coincidentally. Plenty of yuppies purchase small illegal Muta as pets, and cases of those creatures bounding into their neighbor’s property are quite common. Rather impressive handiwork, really. Ingenious, I’d say. So, any results?”

“Not much that night. No gunshots or screams were heard, so I believe the Beast Blood skillfully killed it. There is *one* thing of note though...I wouldn’t call it a *big* change, but the relationship between the two shows subtle signs of greater intimacy.”

“Ooh? And your basis for that is...?”

“Nothing definitive. You could call it...my intuition, sir. I wouldn’t take offense if you dismiss it as unscientific, as there is a dearth of data for the claim.”

“It is certainly unusual for you to suggest anything without generous data... But I wouldn’t call it unscientific. Isn’t observation the foundation of your career? If what you say is true, then...” he trailed off into contemplative silence as he stared at the swaying liquor in his glass.

The thinner man across from him was accustomed to this behavior and sat silently so as not to disturb his train of thought. After a while, the bigger man downed the rest of his drink and smiled with amusement at his patient audience.

“Sir?” his subordinate prompted.

“Interesting.”

“...You find it interesting, sir?”

“I do. For better or worse, the two people I have my eyes on for different reasons are conveniently together. What else could this be dubbed as but *interesting*?”

“If you say so...” the thin man sighed. “What would you like me to do now, sir? Should I monitor them a while longer?”

“Good question. Don’t take your eyes off the lass for now. You won’t spot her alone for some time, but her youth will be her vice. An opening will present itself in due time,” the man said in good humor, before his tone suddenly changed. “So she’s getting it on with a Beast Blood? Sick. She must be as brainless as she looks. Too bad. The face she made when she chose death whet such a deep craving; I have to see it again up close, by all means. All the more if she’s related to *that* woman.”

The man poured himself another glass and watched the liquid swirl before murmuring further, “...Okay, give it to me straight. Did that vile Beast Blood shag the living daylights out of the lass already? She’s probably no virgin, but she *is* the little sister of Saionji, who runs a high integrity campaign. It’d be hard for her to go tramping around like a wanton slag.”

“Forgive the correction, but,” the thinner man demurred, indifferent to the incongruity of the other man’s vulgarity and his polished voice befitting of his fine surroundings, “they have displayed no signs of being in a sexual relationship, at least publicly. Though the intimacy between them has comparatively increased, the girl merely appears infatuated with the rare specimen, while the Beast Blood treats her with the businesslike protocols required of his contract. The girl is unskilled at masking her emotions, so I believe I will know if something else develops. At the moment, you could say she is simply attracted to his exotic physical appearance. The other women around her are squealing over him too, but the Beast Blood acts indifferent towards women.”

The man concluded his observations and tasted the alcohol in his glass. One glass of this liquor corresponded to several months of rent for a blue-collar

worker. Though it did nothing for him as he put the glass right back down.

The man across from him looked longingly at the remaining liquid gold before scoffing, “Ha! The Beast Blood probably prefers banging big burly women cut from the same skeevy cloth. I’ve heard they have violent sex. That’s where the saying ‘screwing like a Beast Blood’ came from.” He shook his head in disgust. “...Hmph. I don’t give a rat’s ass about the grotty beast, but I want to meet the lass...by *accident*, if necessary. Just make it happen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But I think we best wait until everything is in order before we force a rendezvous, in the real sense...” the man hinted, a lewd smile quirking his lower lip. “...On another note, about business in Out Circle...”

Out Circle was the area beyond the highway running the outermost loop around Gothic City, also known as Downtown. For the most part, the less affluent working classes lived in Downtown, which was predominately occupied by average apartment complexes. However, a good section of Out Circle was home to rampant crime and their disreputable perpetrators. The grander the city, the grander the shadow it cast on its outskirts.

“Do you have new orders...?”

“Yeah. Tell Infernum’s leader to green-light his Inferni to run riot up and down the city. Give him pure Nightz, not the laced stuff, as payment. I don’t mind if some die.”

“I see. You plan to prevent the mayor from achieving reelection by destroying the public’s sense of safety.”

“What kind of daft conclusions are you drawing? Preventing her reelection is paltry—I want to hack that woman off this city’s throne. Erica Saionji *will* betray her noble ideology and shamefully resign before reelection. Everything she’s achieved to date will be turned on its head.”

“...As you wish, sir.”

“Good. Tread carefully though. ‘You can never be too careful’ is my creed in life,” the man said with a deep smile. For some reason, his perfectly smooth smile reminded the thinner man of a snake.

“...If you say so.”

“I expect great things from you, *Shank*.”

+++

“**THAT** takes care of the stew!” Euphemia exclaimed, shutting off the flame under the large stockpot. Letting the stew stock sit in the fridge for half a day, she believed, would bring out the flavors. The number of dishes she could cook had increased recently, though most of her recipes were hard-to-fail stews and soups.

Two weeks had passed since she began living with Zelaide. The weeks passed uneventfully without danger, aside from the one bizarre time the rare Muta infiltrated the bathroom. The peace and quiet felt anticlimactic. That said, Zelaide never let down his guard and made sure to constantly check the security system and patrol several times a night. On the other hand, a normal citizen like Euphemia couldn't keep vigilant for long, and she recovered from her fears as if they were never there in the first place. If anything, she was struggling with a different kind of fear: that Zelaide might lose all interest in her if nothing happened again.

That attack might not have been meant for me. She hated the simple-minded part of herself that was quick to make assumptions.

The relationship between them hadn't gone anywhere after that night, but it hadn't regressed either. Euphemia felt more attracted to Zelaide with every passing day, while he seemed to have come to accept her presence. *For now.* She understood that any progress, no matter how slim, was worth celebrating. On a rare occasion, Zelaide even dined with her.

But it's human nature to always want more.

Euphemia didn't know whether it was because he was a Beast Blood or if it was personal preference, but Zelaide didn't eat unless he was hungry. Hunger only struck him once every three days, and he consumed a large amount in one sitting. If he felt the need to refrain from eating, he could go for a whole week on nothing. Euphemia conjectured this was feasible because of the strong genetic similarities Beast Bloods shared with the original species inhabiting this planet. Humans also had a history of fasting when food was scarce; she

wondered if the original species had adapted to the short food supply in their own way. Lack of documentation on the species played a part in their incomplete understanding of Beast Bloods.

So Euphemia made an extra-large portion of food for dinner every third day. Oddly enough to Euphemia, Zelaide barely touched vegetables. He especially avoided uncooked vegetables. Though he didn't complain about their inclusion and would even eat a little if she insisted on it, he wouldn't touch them if she left him to his own devices.

Euphemia assumed he didn't have a vitamin deficiency with his raw meat diet and decided not to push human food standards on him. Since he was more likely to eat chilled, thick soups, she did lots of research to make up for her lack of cooking experience and learned recipes from Mrs. Mayo, increasing her repertoire of soups and stews with vegetables and meat.

As for the raw meat, she neatly sliced it up and served it on a nice plate at the dinner table. Supposing Zelaide didn't cook his meat for a reason, she took care not to ruin its raw quality by dressing it in sauces or seasonings like one would with traditional tartare, and chose only to copy the plating and cutting technique. What Zelaide thought of it was beyond her, but he ate what she made for him without complaint. For all she knew, he could be eating in a dark corner somewhere without her knowledge, but she believed his willingness to eat together now was huge progress.

But the more progress she made, the greedier she became. She wanted him to view her as a woman, if only a little. There was little question Zelaide had become more talkative, which for him meant he replied to her questions and conversation topics. He was now properly interacting with Euphemia instead of ignoring her. But he hadn't touched her once since their "friendship kiss," and avoided her room entirely. She wasn't sure she had the right term to describe it, but he was acting like a "perfect gentleman" in those regards.

A "gentleman Beast Blood" has an odd ring to it. Is it all that wrong for me to wish something more would happen since we live under the same roof?

Euphemia placed the dishes in the dishwasher and shut the door hard. She had the day off and no other plans, so she intended to spend the whole day at

home. Zelaide said he was going out for a bit and took off in his car that morning, leaving Euphemia home alone.

He had brooded over the odd Muta attack for some time before tinkering with the house's security system. Someone was probably monitoring their house day and night, keeping her from even going for a walk through the neighborhood for some air. It was suffocating at times, but the situation had been brought upon her by her own negligence, so Euphemia couldn't complain.

But I'm skeptical they'll try anything funny in broad daylight. Doing so would just be asking to get caught. This city's police force is supposed to be one of the best, after all.

Euphemia wasn't particularly worried inside the house, since contacting her sister and the proper authorities would be easy if necessary. Besides, Topsy was nesting somewhere inside the house, too. Tipsilox were nocturnal Muta, but that didn't necessarily mean they slept the entire day. They possessed a keen sense of smell and reacted on the drop of a coin when they caught whiff of an unfamiliar scent in their territory.

Left with nothing to do after preparing dinner, Euphemia reached for her IHT to write up her research report draft. She could have gone to her room to work on it, but she found the kitchen more relaxing. After all, she would know right away when Zelaide returned home.

I probably shouldn't ask him where he went or what he did. She shook the bad idea from her head and swiped her finger across the IHT key panel. She flicked her finger across the screen until a video of her lab's Mongolian gerbils displayed. They were vigorously munching on Nightz seeds. *I should really think about reporting this to the director soon.*

The experiment was still under an individual researcher's restraints, but she would receive a budget and the permission to expand its scale if the administration recognized her work. Director Burhardt, who understood her experiments' value, might push her to present at the next planning meeting.

Euphemia buried herself in work for hours, thinking it was about time to distill her experiment results into a conclusive report.

...Which is why she failed to notice the quiet sound of heels clacking on the

tile floor, steadily advancing in her direction.

When she lifted her face from her IHT, she was surprised to see a woman standing in front of the kitchen door.

“...Wh-Who are you?”

“Oh...you must be her,” the woman said in a calm voice, seemingly unaffected by Euphemia’s presence.

Strangely enough, the woman reminded Euphemia of her older sister Erica, an impression made stranger by the fact they shared nothing in common besides their tall and trim figures. Brown hair tinged with silver swayed around her shoulders. Her eyes were a darker shade of brown, and while her skin was light, it had a shade of pink in contrast to Erica’s cream white. Finally, she was clad in an elaborate pants suit that screamed expensive, brand-named clothing. It was a style neither Euphemia nor Erica would ever wear.

“Who are you? No one can come inside this house without Zel’s express permission,” Euphemia said sharply as her wariness skyrocketed.

The automatic gates leading into the property wouldn’t open for anyone or any car not registered in the system.

The woman answered Euphemia’s barbed tone with the smile of a businesswoman. “And did you not consider the possibility that I am one of the select few with permission, Mayor Saionji’s little sister?”

“What?”

“I’m Palmina Nielsen, Zelaide Silvergray’s agent. He calls me Pal. Nice to meet you, princess.”

“Eh? Pa—” Euphemia gaped at the woman.

Zelaide had mentioned Pal’s name on more than one occasion, but this was Euphemia’s first meeting with the woman, and her surprise only doubled to find that she looked completely different from what she had imagined.

Palmina was the only other person Zelaide ever spoke of, which was proof of his trust. It had stoked a sense of jealousy within Euphemia at first, but since he had stopped talking about her over the past two weeks, and Palmina displayed

a meticulous attention to detail with the supply deliveries, Euphemia came to believe she was a much older woman.

The woman before her, however, was an attractive and alluring woman of maybe a slightly younger age than Erica.

“Miss Pal?! You’re Miss Pal?” Euphemia sounded like a broken record.

“Yes, indeed I am. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Euphemia Ashencourt, younger sister of Mayor Saionji.”

Palmina held out her beautiful hand as she smiled at Euphemia. Her fingernails were manicured into perfect half-moons and painted with an elegant light-purple gel. Euphemia held out her smaller hand in return, her own nails unpainted and unbuffed with oils. She avoided putting anything on her nails due to the sterile environment of her workplace, and she was never really fond of nail polish to begin with.

“I-It’s nice to meet you too,” Euphemia stammered. “Sorry about my initial reaction. I didn’t know enough about you to tell it was you on sight.” She was at a loss about how to respond adequately when the other woman had said her name before she could introduce herself.

“It’s fine. It’s Zel we’re talking about. I figured he left you in the dark like that.” Palmina silenced Euphemia’s fumbled excuses with a composed smile as she placed her purse on the counter and retrieved a cup from the cupboard with habitual ease. Considering she referred to Zelaide by his nickname, their relationship seemed close. “I’m going to pour myself some tea. Don’t worry, this is something I always do.”

“Always...?” Euphemia asked, watching her fill the cup with hot water from the water boiler on the pristine countertop.

“Yes, always. He dislikes people in his territory so I make a point of not running into him while he’s home. But you know, I’ve been coming here to confirm that the deliveries arrived on time and in mint condition once a week since long before you started living here. You never noticed until now?” Palmina asked, hiding the skepticism in her voice as she tore open a tea bag and submerged it in the steaming water.

“I didn’t... I knew the supplies were delivered once a week, but...I didn’t think you visited the house on the same day, Miss Palmina. Or that you came alone...” Euphemia said, pausing as she spoke to carefully pick the right words that would hide her surprise.

“Oh, you aren’t wrong. There are days I come with others from the agency to make the deliveries. But Zel absolutely despises strangers, so I’ve done my best to minimize outsider visits. As for me, you could say I’m *special*. I’m welcome to come inside whenever, on the most part.”

Euphemia didn’t miss the emphasis Palmina put on the word special. No woman would. What she meant by it was clear.

This woman likes Zel... There was no mistaking it. Any woman could tell: Palmina was staking her claim. The question was, how did Zelaide feel? The way he spoke of her to Euphemia didn’t even hint at any romantic tension. But what if he was just being considerate of Euphemia?

“Oh, were you cooking? Is this stew? Looks good. Are you a good cook?” Palmina asked, removing the lid and looking inside the pot without asking. Euphemia suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

“No, I’m horrible at it,” she admitted.

“Oh? But can you eat this much?”

“I made his portion as well...”

“You did?! Zel eats the food you make?” Palmina asked, sounding surprised.

“He does. Only when he’s...hungry, though.” Euphemia gingerly chose her words. Palmina probably knew Zelaide better than she did, but she wasn’t going to risk exposing his secrets.

“But how? ...He’s—” she started to say something but caught herself in time, “...never mind.”

“I know. Beast Bloods primarily eat raw meat. He eats that too, of course. Lately he will eat with me if I slice up the meat and serve it to him on a plate... But he also has a fondness for boiled foods and will eat a small mountain’s worth if I serve it chilled.”

“Wow. I’m surprised... Are you okay? You saw him eat, didn’t you?”

“I’m fine. You can’t tell by looking at me, but I am a researcher.”

“Hmm, but I’m pretty sure you’re doing something he doesn’t like. Are you positive you aren’t forcing your selfish whims on him?” Palmina accused, giving Euphemia the evil eye. “If you are, I want you to stop it this instant. Contrary to his wild appearance, he endures a lot of crap, especially from selfish employers who push unreasonable demands on him.”

“I’m fairly certain I haven’t pushed or forced anything on him... I mean, I doubt I could if I wanted to,” Euphemia sincerely countered. Some part of her wondered if there was some merit to what Palmina accused her of. “You know Zel very well, right, Miss Palmina?”

“Yes, I would say I do... I have been working with him for a long time now.”

“How long ago did you meet?”

“Let me see... I met him around the time I arrived on this planet, so...roughly twelve to thirteen years or so, I’d say.”

“Seriously?! Wouldn’t Zel still have been just a kid back then? You’ve known him since he was a boy?”

Palmina appeared to be in her thirties. Euphemia didn’t know Zelaide’s exact age, but he looked much younger than Palmina. No matter how she did the math, the two of them would’ve met while he was still in his early teens. Was Zelaide doing dangerous work as a Contractor and Hunter at that age?

“Do you even know how old he is?” Palmina asked, laughing when she saw the doubt on Euphemia’s face.

“I don’t know. I never asked him.”

“You haven’t, huh? Then let me ask you, how old does he look to you?”

“Umm, let me think. He looks a little older than me, so maybe around twenty-five? I’m going just by looks.”

“You’re right—that is what he *looks* like. I don’t know his exact age either, but I would say he’s at least close to forty.”

“What?!” Euphemia’s cry echoed through the kitchen. “No way! That’s impossible! I can’t believe it. How can that be? I mean...”

Zelaide’s skin was taut and smooth with no blemishes, wrinkles, or patches. He had sharp eyesight; his movements were keen and nimble in spite of his long limbs, and at times, he possessed the grace of a dancer. Most of all, his wild beauty could only belong to a young man.

“I don’t blame you for being surprised. Beast Bloods have no concept of birthdays like humans do, so it’s hard to know their exact age, but he told me twenty years had already passed since he became aware of himself when he met me.”

Another ten or so years had passed since then. It was hard to determine age from self-awareness, especially if the notion differed between species, but tentatively taking that to mean around age five would certainly put him at around forty years of age now.

“I don’t believe it... He’s a middle-aged man with those looks?” Euphemia asked in disbelief.

“Hahahaha! No, he’s not,” Palmina replied through her knowing laughter.

“Care to explain why not?”

“You really don’t know anything, do you? Well, I shouldn’t expect you to, I guess. Beast Bloods are a species with little care for the concept of leaving records, so most knowledge on them comes from what humans have observed and studied. Are you aware that they are objectively a species with a longer life span than humans?”

“I am. A good number of books and papers have been written on the topic.”

“Right. It’s a relatively well-known fact. What’s surprisingly unknown, however, is the fact that there’s a huge gap between a Beast Blood’s real age and their appearance.”

“...How so?”

“This is just my conjecture, but...do you still want to know?”

“Yes, I would love to hear it.”

“Okay. But take what I say with a grain of salt, because there is massive variance between individuals. Most research says Beast Bloods live an average of 120 years. I’m not a scholar, so don’t quote me on this, but my theory is that they age slower mentally, in proportion to their longer lives. Or is it easier for you to understand if I say it takes them longer to become adults? Plus, the 120 years is only based on a recent article with a small sample for the data. So Beast Bloods may actually live far longer. But you see, when I first met him, he only looked a few years younger than he does now, but his personality was completely that of a child. If we suppose his appearance at the time was that of a twenty-year-old, his mentality would be at the level of a ten-year-old human child. At least that’s the impression he gave.”

Euphemia was too surprised to speak.

“Ten years have gone by since then, so...yeah, I would guess it was only five years of growth mentally, putting his mental age at...let’s see, no more than late-teens? Obviously, this is just my guess, and I don’t have access to data comparing humans to Beast Bloods, so it’s not a sure thing.”

Teens? That Zel is a teenager?! Doesn’t that make him much younger than me? Euphemia reeled in shock.

“The problem with Beast Bloods is while they are still mentally children, they look like adults. Being forced to live according to human societal customs all their lives while feared for their virile, powerful physique fosters them only with experience outside the interpersonal realm, which is why they often appear to speak and act in ways we find difficult to understand.”

“...But Zel is so tough and calm all the time...”

Zelaide tried to hide his eating habits like an ashamed teenager. Did that support Palmina’s theory? The data at hand was too meager to derive an accurate analysis.

“He is. In his case, I think he’s always possessed a strong force of will and emotional control. But he’s always come off as a very sensitive young man to me—almost like that of a boy. Oh, well, none of what I’m saying is backed up by scientific fact—forget it, what am I even rambling on about? I only came to check on the state of the house today. ...I didn’t know you would be here, after

all.”

“Well...I happened to have the day off today.”

“I see... I’m still in shock, to tell you the truth. I can’t believe the Zel I know is living with a woman in his own home... I’m the one who introduced the job to him, so I can’t complain, but I didn’t think it would lead to this.”

“I’m with you on that one. I also didn’t imagine things would end up like this, and I spend my days surprised by all sorts of things. But I feel safe with him... and my older sister has her hands full at work.”

“I’m sure... You and Mayor Saionji give off completely different vibes. Few people are even aware she has a younger sister. You don’t appear in the public as her sister, do you?”

“Yes, we keep things this way on purpose. I never wanted to benefit from my sister’s accomplishments.”

“But you ended up benefiting from it after all.” Palmina lifted her shoulders in a refined shrug, rendering Euphemia speechless.

Euphemia knew she was being a burden on Zelaide and her sister, but having it pointed out by a bystander rubbed her the wrong way. Palmina immediately followed the remark up with a smile.

Euphemia stared at the smile, wondering what lay behind it.

“I’m sorry,” Palmina apologized, smile still intact. “I couldn’t help myself from teasing you.”

“Haah...” Euphemia sighed. “I’m used to it. Plenty of people take it upon themselves to tease me.”

“Mostly women, I’m sure.”

“...Yes.”

Palmina’s business smile shifted into a small, real one at Euphemia’s honesty. *She isn’t a bad girl*, Palmina thought. *But I must stop her from developing a horrible misunderstanding nonetheless.*

“Be careful,” Palmina warned. “Make sure you don’t fall in love with Zel.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard my theory. He’s no different from a boy right now. He’s very pure and young on the inside. And on top of that, he is ridiculously easy to hurt.”

“Like you said, that’s nothing more than your theory,” Euphemia retorted.

“Perhaps. But the one sure thing is his hatred for humans. I don’t know the details behind that either, but I’m fairly sure he went through something horrible as a child. Zel doesn’t speak of it much, and he loathes it when someone asks him about his past, you see.”

“.....”

“I believe Zel knows these circumstances are inevitable due to the nature of the job. He’s a nice guy even when displeased, so he might not treat you bad, but be careful not to indulge in his kindness. With how young and pretty you are, there’s no need for you to go taking an interest in some Beast Blood. Get the picture?” Without even waiting for an answer, Palmina flipped her hair over her shoulder and walked away as if to signal the conversation was over.

Euphemia stood in a blank daze, alone in the middle of the kitchen.

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AROUND the same time Euphemia was confronted by Palmina, Zelaide was on the outskirts of a district known for its metalwork, located in a corner of Out Circle.

The sector closest to the fortified outer walls of Out Circle didn’t have the best reputation. Among the crowd of serious blue-collar workers were workmen who ran a secret workshop underground dealing in the kinds of dangerous weaponry and machinery that was hidden from the public.

Zelaide received word from his usual vendor that the small modified pistol he had ordered was ready for pickup, so he stopped by the underground workshop to retrieve it. He couldn’t accompany Euphemia packing the large hunting rifles and high-caliber shotguns used for hunting Muta.

“Somethin’ bad is in the air...” Zelaide muttered.

This sector was usually bouncing with sordid activity, yet not even the shadow

of a person lingered on the street despite being midday. Some people had been present on the street before this one, the most conspicuous being the youngsters idly wasting their time, unburdened by the responsibilities of work. Quite a few were high on Nightz, and several had even approached Zelaide thinking he was a dealer with his all-black attire.

Nightz... It's infiltrated deep into this area as well.

Zelaide sped up his pace, keeping a cautious eye on his surroundings. He had long since noticed the cloying bloodlust directed his way.

"...Got business with me?" Zelaide growled threateningly in the middle of the short, filthy backstreet.

It was a threat. Most Vermi and outlaw hunters felt instinctual fear at the sound of his growl and would retreat before causing trouble. It was only ever those who knew him who wouldn't withdraw.

Zelaide was surrounded by five men. Backed up to an old factory wall, this backstreet was the only place without anyone within a ten mol radius. He had chosen to address his attackers here with that knowledge.

I wish for once I was wrong 'bout why an area's been deserted. They chose somewhere with noisy machinery to drown out their presence.

Zelaide bent his knees, lowering into a fighting stance. Two men with the telltale markers of Vermis were in front of him, three behind. Several more were watching from hiding.

Vermis was the general catchall for the dangerous gangs living off of the major cities. Word had it that Mayor Saionji's hard work had massively decreased their numbers in Gothic City over the past two years. The downside to this, the news had reported, was that the surviving Vermis had formed cabals, some of which were beginning to use high-powered weapons to carry out terrorist attacks on the city. It wasn't hard to follow the trail to recognize that the only way they'd gained access to this technology was through connections with the syndicates.

To Zelaide's right was the factory's filthy wall, spray-painted with graffiti; to his left, the walls of several crammed together old buildings. Circle Line towered

above the dozens of illegal cables obstructing the narrow sliver of sky. It was dark against the sunlight, but beautiful nonetheless. The stark contrast to the peaceful, clean scenery inside of Circle Line was ironic.

“Who hired you?” Zelaide snarled.

No one answered.

“Well, not like I expected an answer.” Zelaide shrugged his strong shoulders.

Seeing as they’re targeting me when I’m alone, they’re unrelated to Yumi’s case.

“You guys look like Vermis to me. Were you hired by Infernum?”

They didn’t answer his question. Instead, they closed the circle around him. Zelaide’s teal-blue eyes locked on the man in the middle with the large tech gun—he was the most dangerous one there. The others were dressed in flashy studded leather, but only this man was dressed in all-black like Zelaide.

“Aw, giving me the cold shoulder? Somebody’s mama didn’t teach ‘em proper manners,” Zelaide taunted.

“Filthy Beast Blood scum... You’re an eyesore,” spat the man in a red jacket standing the closest. He fell right for Zelaide’s taunt, and his subsequent line of curses was the battle signal.

The two large men closest to Zelaide charged at him, brandishing bat-sized hunting knives in both hands. Light flashed every time their knives whirled through the air; they were athletic and sliced through the air with a practiced, sharp whoosh. Zelaide retreated while dodging the four knives from both directions, never letting his attention drift away from the men at his back. He knew they were waiting to put a bullet in his back the moment he devoted his attention to the knives lashing out at him.

Zelaide slid a hand inside his coat as he leapt a good distance back, drawing his favorite knife from the holster around his thigh.

Luring the man with persistent, wide swings dangerously close, Zelaide twisted around and thrust his knife through the man’s black glove as he slipped by him. The knife carved through the leather, spraying blood everywhere. He

gouged out the flesh between the man's thumb and fingers.

Screaming in agony, the man dropped his knife to clasp his right hand and withdrew from the fight. The other man rushed in from the side without delay.

"Get your ass back to the Wilds, monster!"

The set up played exactly as Zelaide anticipated. Within a fraction of a second of sensing a gun cocking at his back, he grabbed the wrist of his lunging assailant, crouched down, and used him as a living shield.

BANG!

"AGH!"

A dry crack echoed through the deserted backstreet; a daring shot without a silencer. The bullet hit the man in the stomach. Zelaide tossed him away and let the wire strings equipped on his wrist fly. It coiled around the signboard of the building across the way, propelling him through the sky at the speed of an arrow. He confirmed the locations of his enemies as he ascended.

Two in the street and one more in a tiny back alley.

Zelaide pulled out his gun as he pinpointed his enemies from above. Sniping a target while moving rapidly through the air was a near impossible task, but Zelaide easily pulled it off with his keen eyesight and catlike reflexes.



BANG! BANG!

“GAH!”

“URGH!”

Both men stumbled back, screaming as bullets ripped through their palms. Never again would their dominant hand carry anything heavy. Attacking the hands and fingers was Zelaide’s signature move.

Even after being shot, the man in all-black, likely their leader, vindictively drew his left arm back and flung needlelike weapons at Zelaide as he alighted on top of the building’s eaves. Five or six needles soared toward Zelaide, trailing silver light.

ZING!

The set of loosed needles were knocked to the ground with an earsplitting shriek akin to nails on chalk. Zelaide deflected every needle with a flick of his rewinding wire strings.

Or so he thought.

His black leather jacket ripped and blood dripped onto the street below. His wire had failed to reach a single needle in time. It had grazed his left upper arm.

“Tch!” Zelaide clicked his tongue at the inconvenience as if it were no more than a mosquito bite. Beast Bloods possessed a high pain tolerance. “Aw man, look what you’ve done to my jacket. Pay up,” he said, firing his gun once.

The man dropped to the ground this time, fainting in agony while gripping his groin. Zelaide had shot him in the crotch. He was done for without immediate medical attention. Only one more remained.

“AAAH!” The man turned to run, but Zelaide smoothly landed five mols in front of him. “EEK!”

He barely managed to catch himself as his knees gave out and pulled out a large gun with both hands. Perhaps he wasn’t as much of a coward as he seemed.

“You and that leader of yours ain’t normal Vermis.”

The man gulped loudly.

“You’re Inferni.”

“Th-That’s right. I’m Inferni,” the man acknowledged as cold sweat ran down his face.

“Do you despise me?” Zelaide asked, his voice neutral.

“*Damn straight* I despise you. I despise all Beast Bloods. My pops was killed by a Beast Blood!” the man hissed.

“That’s a pity. But I’m not the one who offed your dad.”

“Doesn’t make a difference... All Beast Bloods are wild beasts—*ARGH!*” The man took Zelaide’s fist to the cheek and rolled over backwards. Several of his front teeth fell onto the road, trailing blood behind them.

“You’re right. I am a beast. But how’s that make me any different from scum like you? Huh?” Zelaide kicked the man in the stomach, sending him into the air. He heard a dull crack which probably came from the man’s ribs breaking in several places, but he didn’t care. “TALK! Who’s your ringleader?! Spit it out or I’ll crush your lungs!”

“...Gueeeh!” The man glared daggers at Zelaide as blood spilled from his mouth. Hatred burned in his eyes.

“TALK! Do you want to die?!” Zelaide shouted, enraged. He placed a heavy boot on top of the man’s chest.

“Guaah...kill...me! Filthy...Beast Blood...scum!” Despite his fatal injuries, the man screwed up his face and spat on Zelaide’s boot. “M-My...comrades will...avenge me. By exterminating every last damn Beast Blood...see?”

Zelaide glared down at the man, anger flashing in his eyes, but he eventually removed his foot. “Shit! Just die on the street like the dog you are!” he shouted, slamming his fist into the ground next to the man’s face. The man lost consciousness.

Zelaide stood and scanned the area. The men curled up in pain on the ground were glaring at him contemptuously, but appeared to have lost the will to attack. They had all sustained fatal injuries.

“Listen up, scumbags! If you live, tell your ringleader: ‘You call us beasts, but you only prove that *humans* are the real beasts by attacking us!’”

Zelaide’s fury echoed through the backstreets lit by the midday sunlight.

†Chapter 8: Humans and Beast Bloods†

ZELAIDE didn't return home until dusk.

The police rushed to the scene after receiving word of an attack in Downtown, but he wasn't the type to quietly sit around waiting for them. Instead, he sent a D-com to Manuela and quickly made himself scarce by disappearing from the backstreets. He was familiar with the area, and he found little activity in the rest of Out Circle once he slipped out of the eerily deserted metalworking sector.

Zelaide walked for a distance, keeping an eye on his surroundings, until he came across the den Manuela had directed him to and vanished inside. She arrived soon after him but left at his request to pick up new clothes. While she was out, he showered off the stench of blood and gunpowder smoke clinging to his body.

"Here are the clothes you wanted," Manuela said, handing him the clothes when she returned. "Sorry it took me a while. Not too many stores carry your size."

"You have my thanks. Here's payment." Zelaide threw a roll of cash on top of the table without counting it, as was his custom.

"I feel bad always accepting so much from you... Would you like to do it before you go?" the prostitute invited, seductively swaying her hips.

"Not today."

"Oh?" Manuela directed a gaze brimming with curiosity at him as he shrugged on a new black leather jacket over his black shirt.

His clothes reeked of blood and a nasty gash ruined the sleeve of his leather jacket, but she couldn't smell it on him after he rinsed off. Manuela assumed Zelaide was in the middle of yet another dangerous job. It didn't interest her, and she spared no concern for his injuries, either. Beast Bloods stopped bleeding fast, and the wounds would likely heal by tomorrow.

But Manuela's keen sense of smell picked up on something out of place—something having nothing to do with blood or sweat. She narrowed her golden eyes beneath her thick eyelashes.

"What?" Zelaide grunted.

"I knew it. You...aren't giving off a male scent right now."

"...You can tell?"

"Any female Beast Blood can tell."

Zelaide had nothing to say about that.

"Did you possibly find your mate?"

"...Who knows?"

"Looks like you won't need me to comfort you anymore."

"...I don't know. But thanks for everything, anyway."

"None necessary. It's my job... To be honest, it does feel kind of lonely to lose you. You're going to become a better man by the day now that you've found your mate."

"Enough 'bout me. Is your kid well?"

Manuela's irreplaceable treasure was her ten-year-old son. Beast Blood women could only bear one child, which was why the Dek'Shen Cycle drove them crazy until they gave birth.

"Yup, he's a spunky one. He's starting to resemble his late-father more with every passing day. A good man, that one was," Manuela said, her voice melodic and lyrical. Her son's father had been her mate.

Like most of their species, her mate had worked as a Hunter. He lost his life in a trap set by human Inferni. Manuela would never take another mate again, for Beast Bloods bonded for life.

"Gonna raise your boy as a Hunter?" Zelaide asked, zipping up his jacket.

"Nope. He's a relatively docile boy. Makes me wonder who he takes after. He reads these difficult books I can't even begin to wrap my mind around. He loves to study, even though he can't attend school like human children. I would be

thrilled if he became a dashing Hunter like his father, but you never know when a Hunter will die, so I want him to choose for himself. My line of work lets me know things are becoming especially dangerous these days.”

“Because of Nightz?”

“Definitely the Nightz. The price dropped to dirt cheap recently; even the young kids can get their hands on it as easy as candy. If that’s not bad ‘nough, rumor has it Nightz are slowly spreading through the upper-classes too.”

“Is that intel from a client?”

“Pretty much, yeah. But I don’t care about them. As long as nothing happens to my boy, I couldn’t care less about humans. I only work this job for that boy, anyway,” Manuela admitted frankly.

“I see... Then use this to buy him more books,” Zelaide said, pulling another wad of cash out of his pocket and placing it on top of the table.

“This much? Sorry for the trouble, but I gratefully accept.”

“Bye, then.” Zelaide turned to leave.

“...Zel?” Manuela called after him.

“What?”

“Just so you know...you are always welcome back here...if you need me. Things still aren’t going well between you and your partner, right?”

“...How do you know that?” Zelaide clipped, a sharp bite to his tone.

“I told you, it’s ‘cause I’m a Beast Blood female... We can tell. You smell lonely.” Manuela offered him a gentle smile. It wasn’t the smile of a woman trying to wheedle her way into a man’s heart, but of a mother looking after her son. “I can tell.”

“Is that so?”

Zelaide suddenly realized he’d never sleep with this woman again. Not just this woman either—never again would he sleep with any other woman other than *one*.

Is this...what it means to find your mate? Zelaide’s pupils constricted.

Something began to stir in the depths of his heart.

“Zel? Is it possible you...” Manuela let the question hang when she saw his taut cheeks.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not that. I haven’t gotten myself a mate yet. I’m just tired from an annoyin’ job I accepted. See you around, Manuela.” Zelaide waved with an intentional amicability as he walked out of the den.

The door shut behind him and his heavy footsteps faded into the distance. Manuela continued to stare after him for a long time. “You poor child...”

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“**WELCOME** home. You’re pretty late today,” Euphemia commented, looking up from the stovetop when he walked into the room. It looked like she had been cooking the entire time Zelaide was away. Red stew simmered inside the pot, its contents nice and thick from stewing since the afternoon.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that. Things took longer than expected... Did somethin’ happen?” he asked.

“You could say something did and didn’t happened.”

“Which is it?”

“Well, Miss Palmina came while you were out, Zel.”

“Pal did? Why?” Zelaide asked, sniffing the air. The lingering scent of Palmina’s perfume had been cleared away by the running exhaust hood and the delicious smell of soup filling the kitchen. Beast Bloods possessed much sharper senses than human, but were outmatched by Muta.

“To restock and check the supplies, she said.”

“Oh yeah, forgot to tell her you would be here today. She normally comes when nobody’s home.”

“Yeah, that’s what she said. How do you guys discuss work then? Isn’t Miss Pal your agent, Zel? I know you can talk anytime by IHT, but aren’t there delicate jobs you can only discuss in person?”

“I drop by her office for those. I don’t want people in this house if I can help

it.”

“So I’m a nuisance, huh?” Euphemia said softly. “Sorry...” Her delicate brow wrinkled with dejection.

“No... I wasn’t saying that ‘bout you. You’re...how do I put it...well, special.”

“I’m special...?”

“Yeah, you’re a job from the mayor...”

Oh, he meant that kind of special. The excitement ballooning in her chest deflated faster than it inflated. *He probably wouldn’t tell me even if I asked him what he thinks of Miss Palmina.*

Sharp pain stabbed at Euphemia’s chest as she fought to keep her features schooled. *Palmina said she’s special to Zelaide too. Do our “specials” share the same meaning, or not...?*

“I mean,” he continued, “I have to protect you no matter what.”

“Yeah... I’m depending on you... But, Zel?”

“What?”

“Did something happen? You’re wearing different clothes from this morning.”

“Huh? Oh, I ran into a bit of trouble... I changed because my clothes got dirty.” Zelaide removed his jacket as if nothing was wrong, but Euphemia immediately spotted the injury on his upper left arm.

“Oh no! You’re hurt! Were you attacked?!” she cried, running over to him.

“Attacked? Nah. You’re blowin’ it outta proportion—it wasn’t anything big,” Zelaide said quickly to placate her. “Just a little brawl. This cut’s nothin’ more than a scratch.”

“But it’s a pretty big cut. A knife wound? ...No, from the looks of it, this was the work of a smaller, sharp weapon...”

“It’s a scratch. Just screwed up a bit. It’s stopped bleeding, it’ll heal soon. But hey, you really do have the eyes of a scientist. You can tell weapon types just by lookin’ at the injury?”

“I perform dissections sometimes, so I’m good with knives...” Euphemia

dismissed, opening the cabinet she had seen him store medicine in before. “Were you attacked by people involved with the douchebags who attacked me?” The cabinet was packed to the brim with brand-new medical items, and she found the bandages right away. She picked the widest bandage with antibacterial cream already on it.

“Probably not. I ran into Inferni, members of the Infernum Syndicate. They indiscriminately attack every Beast Blood they see. I doubt they’re connected to you, Yumi.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But either way, they won’t be moving anytime soon, so it’s all good. Ah, I don’t need ya to look at my wound. I don’t want anythin’ excess getting in my way.” Zelaide dodged Euphemia as she reached out to tend to his cut, and pointed at the bubbling pot. “Anyways, I’m starved. Can we eat that yet?”

“...It’s ready. But shouldn’t you at least wrap a bandage around it? Doesn’t it hurt when your clothes rub against it?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Zelaide replied, circling to the other side of the table to escape Euphemia’s touch.

Euphemia gave up tending to his wounds and pulled out the bowls. She mulled over his odd behavior as she ladled heaps of soup into his bowl.

He’s acting strange. It’s almost like he’s on edge...

Euphemia could guess the ambush was worse than he alluded to. In all probability, the Inferni who’d attacked him were human. She didn’t know much about Infernum, but she’d heard stories about a group that targeted Beast Bloods out of resentment and who viewed Beast Bloods as subhuman savages. If being attacked by people like them was common for him, then perhaps Palmina wasn’t lying when she said Zelaide hated humans.

She also said that there’s a huge discrepancy between a Beast Blood’s real age and mental age.

According to Palmina, Zelaide was actually around forty years old, despite looking like an attractive young man in the prime of his youth. Yet, she claimed his mental age could be in its teenage years.

No matter how Euphemia looked at Zelaide, his face lit by the dwindling sunlight, he was a magnificent adult. His stunning silver hair framed the sharp features of his face.

“Gorgeous...”

“Huh?”

Apparently, she’d uttered what she was thinking aloud. Euphemia turned red — and if she wasn’t mistaken, Zelaide bashfully averted his gaze from her.

“Are you gonna give that to me before the sun sets?”

“Oh, sorry. D-Do you want some bread?”

“Yeah.”

Euphemia put down the bowl and picked up the bread knife.

“I don’t feel safe with you holdin’ that. Be careful, will ya? Want me to cut it instead?” Zelaide offered, watching Euphemia trying to cut the long loaf of bread into thin slices suited for dipping.

“I can do it... I told you I’m used to knives.”

“So says the woman who cut her finger last time. And don’t dissect the bread.”

“I am *not* dissecting the bread.”

I knew it—he’s acting nice, even if his choice of words is on the rough side. Is he being nice because it’s me? Am I the only special one out of all the humans he hates? Or is it the more obvious reason, that it’s because I’m his job?

As she pondered the matter, Euphemia realized Zelaide had barely looked at her since he came home. He had rejected her touch when she tried to bandage his cut. Maybe she really was a nuisance to him. If that was the case—

It’d break my heart...

“Yumi?”

“Hm? Oh my stars!” Euphemia returned from her ruminations to discover she had cut up the entire loaf of bread. Oddly enough, each slice of bread was perfectly cut to the same size. “I accidentally overdid it. Can you eat it all?”

“Yeah.”

Euphemia handed him the bread on a plate and quickly returned the knife to the knife block.

That was bad. I'm the one acting funny.

“U-Um, on another note...you're welcome to turn me down if you aren't okay with it, but my coworkers who you met before have been on my case about wanting to eat out with you—Ah! Never mind! Sorry!”

She spoke the truth—everyone at work (especially her female coworkers) suddenly started acting all friendly with her since they laid eyes Zelaide. They would randomly start up a conversation as if they were friends, then end it by insisting on eating out with him.

But Euphemia backtracked mid-sentence because she realized it was the worst possible time to bring it up. She was panicking—there *had* to be a limit to how clueless someone could be! Humans had just inflicted wounds on him, yet here she was, inviting him out to eat with more humans.

Dummy! How could I be so stupid?! Zel hates humans!

“Um, forget about it! It's a bad idea. You must hate the thought. It's obvious you would, this is just a job to you. Everyone's been pestering me to ask you when you can make it, so I just had to ask to carry out my part to get them off my case. So, I'll just turn them down and tell them you don't want to.”

“I don't mind.”

“...Come again?” For a second, Euphemia couldn't comprehend what he said. She gaped at him.

“All I have to do is join them for a meal once. That'll get them off your case, right? I'm good with that. I'll go for you.”

“You will? Really?”

“Yeah. On two conditions. Pick a smaller restaurant facing a road with an unobstructed view. And keep the place and time a secret until just before the meet up. You can never let down your guard.”

“Okay!” Euphemia was beside herself with joy over Zelaide's unexpected

agreeability.

She was positive she was burdening him and he would only put up with this once, but she was genuinely happy about it. She had been locked indoors for weeks. Euphemia wasn't an extrovert by any definition, but she grew bored only ever leaving the house to go to work.

This will be the first and last time. I'm going to make whatever memories I can with Zel, even if he only thinks of me as work...before our time together ends forever.

Euphemia began cleaning the already clean kitchen, hiding her desire to hum a song and do a little dance. Never the least bit aware of Zelaide's eyes intently following her back.

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"ZEL! Over here!" Euphemia ran over to Zelaide with a big smile.

He turned around as if he only just noticed her, but of course his ears had discerned the sound of her running toward him from a distance. Several more pairs of feet followed behind her at a slower pace—all the lighter and clack-ier sounds of other women.

Picking her up in front of the laboratory's gate was already a part of Zelaide's daily routine, and he knew how to avoid drawing attention. Problem was, hiding from people purposely making a beeline for him wouldn't go over well.

"Zel, baby!" Sonia, Euphemia's beautiful coworker, shoved Euphemia out of her way to greet him, hearts in her eyes.

Since their initial chance meeting, Sonia had managed to get Zelaide to remember her name after tenaciously hounding him every day. But no one, aside from Euphemia, knew him by any other name than Zel.

His name wasn't known to the general public, but the name Zelaide Silvergray was infamous among his peers, so Euphemia paid extra care not to say his full name in front of her coworkers to avoid unwanted prying from them.

"I'm so thrilled you accepted my invitation today," Sonia purred. "Let's drink to our heart's content tonight!"

“Hey, Sonia! What do you mean it was *your* invitation? Huh?” Euphemia retorted in a tight voice.

Today was indeed the day of the dinner party Euphemia’s coworkers had relentlessly pestered her to invite Zelaide to—or rather, to feature him as the guest of honor.

Ready and waiting to make advances on the tall, muscular man dressed in all-black leathers inappropriate for a dinner party, Sonia clung to Zelaide’s arm wearing a skimpy dress with a daring slit that went up to her thigh. Euphemia outright frowned at her coworker’s excessive antics.

“Didn’t you hear I don’t like alcohol?” Zelaide smoothly slipped out of Sonia’s hold and placed a reasonable distance between them.

Seeing him act like that gave Euphemia mixed feelings. His clever, casual escape just went to show how many women he must have dealt with in the same way. Sonia, on the other hand, didn’t seem to read anything into it.

“In that case, let’s eat! The fish at this restaurant is to die for. Let me sit next to you, ‘kay?”

“Then I’m claiming the other seat next to you!” another female coworker chimed in—Cora. She was one of the lucky few who had broken through the deadlock by raffle. Everyone who wanted to go had thrown their names in a hat, hoping to be picked as one of the two women going to the dinner besides Euphemia.

“Hey! Don’t decide things without me!” Euphemia protested, butting in between the two women.

“Oh, why don’t you just sit in front of him then?” Sonia suggested, a smug smile on her lips.

“What?! In front? Wh-What do you want, Zel?”

Euphemia had been looking forward to eating out with Zelaide, but her female coworkers had kicked up such a fuss once they began making plans that she was forced to restrict the outing to four people, including her and Zelaide. Sonia had agreed to the compromise, determining that fewer rivals increased her chances.

Their laboratory didn't have many female employees, so it took Euphemia by surprise to find that the majority of them wanted in. The research institute's strict policies on conduct during work hours had prevented them from openly airing their obsessive interest in Zelaide sooner.

"Yumi sits next to me." Zelaide's brusque grunt put an immediate end to the scramble for sitting rights. He wanted her by his side so he could protect her at all times, should things go south.

Cora shot Euphemia an annoyed look.

"Sounds like fun. Can I come too?" Ronaldo, the uncomfortably friendly researcher, invited himself into their conversation.

"...Don't crash our party, Ron." Sonia threatened, but her icy glare had no effect on him.

"Ouch, that's cold. Doesn't it make for a sorry party with just ladies? With me, it'll be three to two. You get two pretty ladies on your arms," Ronaldo said to Zelaide, "and I'll happily take the one. You'll be my one, right, Mia?"

"Nobody will sit next to you, loser." Sonia put her hands on her hips.

"...Can I intrude too, then? That will make it a fair three and three," came an unexpected male voice from behind the group. "I was able to finish my work early for once today and I would love to have a proper meal."

Surprised by the calm tenor of his soothing voice, they turned around as a group. It was Euphemia's direct superior, Director Burhardt. He strained a small smile at the young researchers gaping at their germ-specializing laboratory supervisor.

"Director!"

"Whaaat?! The director wants to join?!"

"Geeeh!"

Everyone aside from Zelaide had something to say about it.

Ronaldo was baffled too. "You really want to come? That's unusual."

"I thought I should go out with you guys once in a while...is that a bad thing? I

love to hear about what our younger members have to say whenever I get the chance.” Burhardt looked over the group with a gentle smile.

“Don’t be silly! We would love to have you join us!” Euphemia exclaimed.

“She’s right!” Sonia agreed without missing a beat. “You’re the object of everyone’s secret admiration, Director! We all talk about how you act much more like the institute’s president than the actual president does!”

With his approachable personality and contagious enthusiasm for the job, the slender man in his forties was one of the most popular members of middle management at the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute. Director Burhardt was undoubtedly the strongest candidate for the next president presiding over the entire institute.

“Thank you... Are you all right with me coming?” Director Burhardt’s nearly colorless eyes shifted to Zelaide.

Although the Beast Blood had listened to the whole conversation from beginning to end with guarded suspicion, he simply gave a cool nod of the head before snatching up Euphemia’s hand and walking off.

The rest of the group followed after the pair in high spirits.

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THE party of six entered one of the smaller restaurants in the area. Young customers filled most of the available seats in its bright and fancy dining room. It was easy to keep an eye on the activity inside and outside the restaurant despite the booth seats that divided the interior. The main street was dyed orange from the setting sun.

Euphemia followed Zelaide’s rules to a T and hadn’t told anyone their destination until they arrived. She let them bask in the restaurant’s chic design as they settled down around a table close to the entrance.

The table wasn’t big enough, so Zelaide sat alone at the far end. On his right sat Sonia, who was sending him winks and amorously hiking up her dress every second she got. On his left sat Euphemia, and next to her, Burhardt. Across from them were Cora and Ronaldo.

Drawn to their attractive, conspicuous group, young men and women seated farther inside the dining room approached their table and tried to join in their conversation. More than half had their eyes locked on Zelaide.

To their disappointment, Zelaide only gave short, disinterested responses to their attempts at conversation, and when the food arrived at their table, he drank nothing, choosing to devote his attention to scarfing down the foods he liked.

“Wow, you eat like a machine...” Sonia remarked. “Makes sense with how much you must work out to maintain that six-pack of yours.”

“I don’t work out.”

“You don’t? Were you born with a six-pack? And with this pretty silver hair too?”

Sonia scooped up a lock of Zelaide’s silver hair, but he ignored her by shoveling more food into his mouth. He always let his hair grow as it pleased until it annoyed him, whereupon he’d take a pair of scissors to it at random. And still, his hair retained a silken beauty any movie star would have to spend hours in a dressing room to achieve.

“You’re like a silver wolf. I’ve only ever seen a taxidermy wolf before.”

“...Do me a favor and don’t touch me,” Zelaide said, his voice rumbling from a suppressed growl. “I don’t like it when people I don’t know touch me.”

“Whoops, sorry about that. How long do you have to know someone for that to change? Does that just apply to people you aren’t on friendly terms with?”

“Everybody other than me counts as people I don’t know,” Zelaide gruffly asserted and tossed a fried shrimp in his mouth. The possibility Euphemia might be listening never even crossed his mind.

Is that true? Euphemia’s shoulders trembled. Do I fall under that category too? Does he actually not want me to touch him?

“...or so I was thinking, but—Mia?”

“...Oh, I’m sorry, Director Burhardt. I was working through a problem in my head...” Euphemia lied in an attempt to cover up her emotions.

“And here I thought you were listening.” Burhardt offered her a sympathetic yet exasperated smile. “Were you thinking about work? Speaking of which, you disappeared somewhere during lunch break today, didn’t you? If you don’t keep your passion for work in check, you’ll make yourself sick.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. What was it you were trying to tell me?”

“I was proposing that we increase the scope of your research some more. I found your last report of great interest, you know.”

“What?! Do you really mean that?” Euphemia’s attention was instantly stolen by her boss despite her curiosity about what was happening between Zelaide and Sonia.

“Yes. Looking at your results as of late, I believe it’s about time you break free of the restrictions we place on experiments for individual research. You’re a devoted researcher who’s been hard at work ever since you came to our lab. I’m planning to submit a budget request to President Murakami.”

“A *budget*! Oh my goodness...this is a dream come true. To think those Mongolian gerbils will see the light of day before long...”

“I wouldn’t say your dreams have been realized just yet. The budget won’t be much at first. You can get started by moving your pet gerbils to that room that’ll be opening up soon in the Third Experimental Breeding Pavilion. That’ll give you quite an upgrade in size and equipment. That said, your other work duties won’t change, so you’ll be busier than ever before. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes!” Euphemia exclaimed, absolutely ecstatic.

Up until now, Euphemia had conducted experiments in the main research building using a dozen of the Mongolian gerbils permitted for individual research use, but the breeding pavilion allowed multiple experiments to be conducted simultaneously. In short, Euphemia could form a research team. She now possessed the resources necessary to increase the number of gerbils, upscaling the size and number of experiments. And an even bigger budget would be bestowed upon her if she showed results with the first. This was a huge step forward for her research.

Eradicating Nightz was of principal concern for the Applied Plant and Animal

Research Laboratory, so the research institute granted massive budgets to research that produced results. Several of the successes had already been put to practical use as a small seawall against the tidal wave of calamity Nightz wrought.

“Are you certain? You are aware it will increase the number of hours you have to spend at work, yes? Will you be okay after *that* incident?”

“I don’t mind! You have my sincerest gratitude for your concern, as the one who worried you so.”

By *that* incident, Burhardt was referring to Euphemia’s brush with death several weeks ago. He had been worried sick about her at the time, and he remained considerate of her to this day. So for her direct superior to ask her to commit more time nonetheless felt like he was truly acknowledging her ability.

“How will things change?” Zelaide cut into the conversation. “Explain.” He had grasped the entirety of their conversation despite looking like he hadn’t been listening at all.

Burhardt looked a little off-put by a Beast Blood addressing him. “Let’s see, I would anticipate the biggest change to be an inability to always return home at a regular time, like she does now. It’s a natural development for those who become team leaders.”

“Me, me! I submit my name as a team member for her team!” Ronaldo loudly interrupted their conversation. “My team’s project has reached a lull, so I’m more than open for taking up something else in addition. Director, please do a man a favor and let me on Mia’s team. I love dem rodents!”

“You, Garcia? Well, I’ll think about it.”

“Then I want in too!” Sonia piped up, leaning toward them from across the table. She had been keenly listening in on their conversation while flashing wily smiles at the young men gathering around their table. “Since I’m joining her team, Zel, you’ll need to drop me off at home when she keeps me late...‘kay?”

“Hahaha! Look who’s a popular lady, Mia. You secured yourself a team in less than a minute,” Burhardt chuckled.

“Err... I don’t know...” Euphemia wasn’t happy to have volunteers with ulterior

motives, but she couldn't complain to their faces with the director sitting there giving his endorsement. She reluctantly turned to her two coworkers and bowed her head. "...I'll be counting on you then."

"Great," Burhardt approved. "But don't push yourself too hard. Back out if the task is too much for you. You have reckless tendencies," he admonished, the corners of his eyes crinkling. His compassion brought Euphemia joy.

"Don't worry, Director Burhardt. I'll proceed carefully..." Euphemia assured Burhardt, then turned to her coworkers. "Okay, Ronaldo, Sonia, please assist me in my research. Now that we are a team, I am requesting your wholehearted devotion to producing results for this project."

"Now you're talking!" Sonia cheered.

"You can count on me!" Ronaldo agreed.

Her two coworkers had hit it off immediately as soon as they realized they had something to benefit from each other.

"I'll send you two my research data tomorrow."

"By all means," Ronaldo said.

"Let's toast to Team Mia!" Sonia, who had shrewdly ordered a new bottle of wine, held up her glass with a surprisingly earnest expression. The rest of the young men and women repeated the toast in chorus with her.

Euphemia felt her team members were a tad on the undependable side, but even the lowliest of researchers knew the research into the eradication of Nightz wasn't a game. She was beginning to have hopes for this impromptu team.

Now with a common goal, the team members suddenly clicked with one another, and the meal went on with everyone in good spirits. Things were really starting to kick off for their dinner party.

Burhardt nodded to his partying subordinates with a knowing smile and turned his attention to Zelaide. "So...you're a Beast Blood."

Zelaide glanced at Burhardt before returning his gaze to the water in his glass.

“Sorry for staring at you. This is my first time seeing a genuine Beast Blood up close... I’m a biologist, but Beast Bloods are entirely out of my field of expertise. With that said, I find them *especially* fascinating. Ah—forgive me, I spoke out of line again. Being a scientist for a long time has a way of making one speak like this... It’s one of the vices from spending too much time with Petri dish cells. Have I offended you in any way?”

“Not really. Look all you want if I’m that fascinating.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer then. I must say, you have a remarkable body. I don’t want you to think of me like Sonia, but...do you mind if I touch you? I won’t if you would rather I don’t,” Burhardt asked with diffidence.

Euphemia was too busy hitting it off with coworkers talking about the progress her experiments had made to pay attention to their conversation.

“Only if you wipe your hands first,” Zelaide agreed.

“Absolutely astounding... Your muscles are so limber and flexible despite the sheer amount of muscle mass you have. Humans simply can’t gain muscles this way. I can see why you are called a Beast Blood—these muscles *are* beastly. And you’re very attractive. The girls have good reason to swoon and flock over you. You’re like one of the males of a sexually dimorphic species that develop ostentatious looks for the sole purpose of attracting females.” Burhardt made the comment in good humor, but Zelaide didn’t miss the slight malicious undertones in his voice. The Beast Blood’s teal eyes narrowed. Their eyes clashed for a brief moment.

“I heard you work as a Hunter,” Burhardt said through the tension, as if making small talk.

“I’m just a hired bodyguard right now.”

“Right. Mia needed one because of the thugs who nearly assaulted her a while back.”

That was incorrect—she hadn’t just been nearly assaulted, she *was* assaulted and very close to being murdered.

Burhardt continued, “I know about Euphemia’s circumstances and background to a certain degree. It’s fascinating that a Beast Blood like you is

serving as her bodyguard.”

“It’s work.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? ...You know, despite her frivolous appearance, she’s actually a very serious girl on the inside. Or, how should I say this to make myself clear? Don’t get any funny ideas or convenient delusions. Would it make more sense if I tell you I want you to keep your relationship as work only? Ah, this comes across as excessively rude to you, doesn’t it? I just don’t know how to put it... I’m terrible when it comes to words.” Burhardt put his hand to his chin and rubbed it between his thumb and index finger as if to prove he truly was at a loss for the right words.

“I’m well-aware. I’m a Beast Blood. You don’t have to warn me. I wouldn’t go for some human woman either way,” Zelaide grunted in a deep voice to the stammering Burhardt and finished his glass of water with one swig.

He suddenly heard a small cry in her direction. A young man who’d joined their table had pulled Euphemia off balance, forcing her on top of his lap. It took the full force of every ounce of reason inside Zelaide to suppress the fiery impulse surging from deep within.

“But it’s also my job to prevent worthless pests from crawling all over her, so try not to be too offended,” Zelaide declared to the dumbfounded Burhardt, his eyes flashing silver-blue. He shoved off his chair.

Awed gasps suddenly erupted from his vicinity. The women in the restaurant had all been struck breathless by the man who now stood at his full, daunting height. Zelaide paid them no heed as he raised his long legs and hopped clear over the table.

Euphemia’s head jerked up at his striking arrival. “Zel?”

“We’re goin’,” he announced as he pulled Euphemia off the man’s lap with one hand. Shooting a death glare at the young man frozen with an idiotic grin plastered on his face, Zelaide pressed his lips to Euphemia’s in one smooth motion. A loud smack of their lips locking together filled the restaurant.

Euphemia wasn’t the only one reeling in shock. The public display of affection committed by the extremely handsome man had stolen the eyes of every

person in the room.

“Don’t put your hands on her. It’ll make me angry,” Zelaide declared, scooping Euphemia up into his big arm and carrying her. “C’mon, you’ve had your fun, right? I fulfilled my obligation.” He made his way out of the restaurant with large, swift strides.

Gleeful cries and longing stares from every woman inside chased after his back, smitten by Zelaide’s daring display. Burhardt watched in silence as the strong, corded muscles of the Beast Blood’s back left the restaurant.

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A silver car drove through the shopping district within Middle Circle, lit by the remaining daylight. Zelaide smoothly turned the steering wheel, accelerating onto Circle Road. His side profile accentuated his flawless contours and stone-cold beauty.

But appearances don’t always reflect their contents, as Zelaide was actually a mess. He grappled with the torturous feeling of rising panic over Euphemia’s alarming silence—Euphemia, the normally annoying woman who spoke in a sunny voice all the time.

The blonde beauty sat stupefied in the passenger’s seat, her full lips hanging half open.

“Oi...Yumi.”

“...Hyah?”

Euphemia’s incoherent reaction worried Zelaide even more.

“Hey!” Zelaide raised his voice, unable to take the uncomfortable mood any longer. His perturbed shout brought her back to reality and she turned dreamy eyes to the Beast Blood.

“Ehe?” She still didn’t make a coherent sound.

“Don’t be mad! I’m sorry!”

“Eh? Mad? Who? Why?”

The rose-colored fog finally cleared from Euphemia’s eyes. She’d been on

cloud nine the whole time, replaying Zelaide's kiss in her mind over and over. Meanwhile, those same lips which had given her such pleasure were turned down at the corners like a child awaiting his punishment.

"...Did you hate it that much? The, uh...er—kiss thing. You were struggling to get away because you didn't wanna be on top of that man's lap in the restaurant, right? It pissed me off and made me feel like I had to do it. That, uh...*friendship kiss* thing."

"Friendship...kiss?" Euphemia repeated, the wind quickly going out of her sails.

"Yeah. You gave me one before, remember?"

"....."

"Humans will put their bodies on the line to save their friends, yeah? Did I have the wrong idea?" Zelaide spoke with all seriousness, but the truth was that he hadn't had the leisure of even thinking things through when it happened.

Only two things had stopped him from slamming his fist into the face of the man who pulled Euphemia on top of him: consideration for Euphemia as the younger sister of the mayor, and not wanting to draw attention to them inside a fancy restaurant. His actions resulted in them standing out in an entirely different way, but what was done was done.

"I thought he'd give up if I kissed you."

"...Oh. I see."

I got all excited for nothing. Why do I feel a hole in the pit of my stomach, like I just lost something important? Euphemia wondered, folding her hands together on top of her lap.

"I should have guessed... I thought it was weird." Crestfallen, she slouched in her seat. Zelaide glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Not at all. It made me happy, not mad. I mean, Zel, you said you don't like touching other people, and you pointedly dodged my touch when I tried to see your cut the other day. I like you, Zel. It makes me sad when you avoid me like

you did then.”

So I'm happy, even if it was just a friendship kiss. I'm super happy if he's starting to view me as someone closer to him. I won't tell him that though.

“That wasn't...because of you.” Zelaide was mentally sucker-punched by Euphemia's lonely smile. He needed to concentrate on his driving, not her face. “I'm not really—”

“You don't have to make up excuses for my sake,” Euphemia interrupted. “You went along with my selfish request today and even kissed me. I can't complain... Anyways, Zel,” she said, quickly changing the topic, “you were talking up a storm with Director Burhardt, huh?”

Euphemia feared that further discussion into the reasons behind Zelaide's actions would knock her down into an abyss of depression, so she pushed it behind them.

“It's rare for him to be so open and talkative with someone he's just met.”

“He wasn't open and talkative. It was more like probing,” Zelaide said softly, searching for the right word to describe his encounter.

“Probing? What for?”

“He seemed to hate me—or rather what I am: a Beast Blood. He doesn't trust me as your bodyguard, Yumi.”

“I can't see why... He's always so gentle and nice to his subordinates, and passionate about work...”

“To his *human* subordinates.”

Euphemia didn't know what to say to that.

“Well, it doesn't matter either way. I'm used to bein' hated and resented by humans. But you love your job, right? Your work is going well with him as your boss, yeah?”

“Yeah... He's finally beginning to recognize the merit of my work...and it's not because of who my sister is.”

“You guys were talking 'bout some kinda new research. Won't that make you

busier than before?”

“Should I not have accepted? Since increasing my workload will increase yours as well.”

“Nah, it’s a part of the job. Sounds like a good deal for you, too.”

“Yup, it’s a great deal! I want to help this planet out! Isn’t it amazing that teeny-tiny narcotic-eating gerbils could be the answer?”

“That’d make ‘em a gerbil narc force then.”

“Yup! My platoon of Gerbil narcs will save the world! Ahaha!” His rare attempt at making a joke had tickled Euphemia pink. “Oh yeah! I had some extra time during lunch today, so I did a little secret digging of my own.”

“You mentioned that earlier. What were you digging into?”

“I was looking into that creepy snakelike Muta that snuck into my bathroom.”

“I remember the thing. It looked like bottles with suction cups and scales. You were able to find it?”

Zelaide had unfortunately disposed of the corpse right away at the time, which had given Euphemia the hard job of relying on his memory of its appearance to look it up.

“Yup.”

“I’m surprised you could figure it out.”

“Right?! That’s your fault! You just had to go and chuck the corpse down the disposal when I *explicitly* told you to keep it for me to examine!”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that. What’d you find out?”

“It’s a rare species of Muta called Chude. I found several pictures, but I scoured our database and couldn’t find any specimens among the institute’s collection.”

“I’ve never seen one before or heard of any Hunting jobs for ‘em.”

“Our specimen collection is supposed to be the best on this planet. I thought there was something more to it, but I couldn’t access the information with my personal IHT, so I used anormally untouched RUN to access a higher-clearance

databank. It'll leave a record that I accessed it though."

"Did it do you any good?"

"Oh yeah. Get this: that species of Muta has been extinct for a long time. Records say it went extinct 200 or so years ago. That coincides with records of a sudden glacial freeze. As a sensitive creature, it couldn't adapt to the changing environment and died out."

Zelaide put words to the most obvious contradiction. "It's extinct? How did it end up in our bathroom then? Sole survivor or somethin'?"

"That's where things get interesting. I found record of researchers at the time preserving the valuable Chude eggs and sperm through vitrification for cryopreservation—they froze it, in other words. Believe it or not, our institute has them in a special storage facility."

"What?" The air around the Beast Blood grew sharper than a blade. "The Bio Institute is keeping somethin' like that?"

"Yup. The question is: how does that play into what happened? Could it be possible someone stole the eggs, defrosted them, and then incubated the fertilized eggs? They would need delicate equipment *and* the exact facilities to pull it off though... And it would take a significant amount of prep work to infiltrate the institute. Doing it inside our laboratory would make the whole process easy... Do you think someone stole the Chude after secretly fertilizing the egg with the sperm and hatching it?" Euphemia deduced, working it out in her mind. "If they did...I think it would be impossible for someone unaffiliated with the institute."

"You're sayin' it's an insider job? Any way to find out who it could be?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't know how to find out without help. I'm too scared to ask anyone for help though, if there really is someone on the inside. It could be *anyone*."

"Good call. So, where are the sperm and eggs stored?"

"Somewhere inside the research pavilion that handles Muta. Thing is, it's completely outside my field. The Muta laboratory is extraordinarily large. And research institutes like ours close off their sectors even to people from related

sectors.”

The Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute was the culmination of monumental achievements and profound knowledge. In addition to its individual research facilities dedicated to specific fields, the institute also housed state-of-the-art laboratories, vast storage facilities, and entire experimental farms in its extensive territory. Very few people were even aware of all it encompassed.

“What about that boss of yours? I’d only risk it if you can trust him, though.”

“Director Burhardt? I’m not sure about him. He might be willing to help, but it’s not easy for me to ask. He just promised to put his neck on the line for my research project, so I have qualms with requesting something else on top of that...”

“Then what about asking your sister?”

“You think we should go to her too, Zel? I was actually just thinking the same thing. Erica should have more than one path available to her for finding out the truth. But it bothers me to think that I’ll wind up unable to do anything on my own again. I hate always having to rely on someone else...I really do.”

I’ll end up just like the kind of person Pal said I am. Euphemia heaved a monstrous sigh and drew her lower lip between her teeth.

“What are you so hard on yourself for? Isn’t it smart to use whatever tools and opportunities you have access to? Don’t forget, you’re up against some sadistic thug gunning for your life. And if that’s not bad enough, nobody can guarantee anybody’s safety if there’s a traitor running ‘round inside that advanced facility of yours. The mayor has plenty of reasons to cooperate with you.”

“You know what, that’s a pretty good argument!”

Zelaide’s blunt and pragmatic words knocked the weight right off of Euphemia. She instinctively sat up straight when she caught him glancing at her, his hands steady on the steering wheel.

“Yeah...yeah, I’ll do that! I’ll bring it up with Erica as soon as I can.”

“You do that.”

“Okay!” Euphemia nodded her head, when—

KA-BOOM!

Fire suddenly erupted in an explosive boom one block in front of their car.

“What the-?!”

“Don’t stick your face out!” Zelaide barked, grabbing her arm and pulling her back into the seat.

There had been some kind of explosion. People on the sidewalk instinctively ducked down as a heat wave shot out a second after the sound. An unsettling vibration ripped through their accelerating car.

“Oh my stars!” Euphemia cried out, sinking down against the passenger’s seat.

“Hold onto your seatbelt!”

The cars in front of them came to a sudden halt one after the other as their automatic break systems kicked in. Zelaide swerved the car into a side road, skillfully dodging the other vehicles.

“What happened?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Sounded like a huge accident...if it was an accident.”

“And if it’s not an accident?”

“It’s an incident,” Zelaide said, his voice hard. “I know you’re curious, but now’s not the time. I’ve hit the switch to black out the windows. It’ll help, but don’t go sticking your face out.”

The silver car advanced smoothly down the park road with an unobstructed view of its surroundings. Barely anyone was outside. The presence of a normal summer dusk spreading beyond the windshield beckoned them with a false sense of security, like the explosion had never happened.

Unfortunately, things were in a horrible state several blocks ahead. From the look of things, it was likely people had sustained fatal injuries or died. Zelaide

kept a watchful eye on their surroundings as he pulled the IHT off his dash and pressed it into Euphemia's hands.

"Look into what happened, Yumi. I have to keep my eyes peeled."

"Okay. Our location..." She swiped her finger over the GPS map. "...So, around here. I'm sure those who witnessed it are talking about it on the DataNet. Give me ten seconds." She quickly operated the screen with her fingers, springing up countless images within seconds.

"What'd you find?"

"Nightz..." she answered, her voice bleak.

"Nightz?" Zelaide repeated, his tone sharp.

"Yes. It looks like a Nightz addict walked into the middle of the intersection with a bomb of some sort and blew himself up. Two cars crossing the road were caught in the blast... Reports have several people dead, including the bomber. More will be posted later."

"How'd they know the bomber was a Nightz addict?"

"Because the man shouted that he was going to take revenge on the people who wouldn't give him Nightz as he leapt into the intersection."

The highly addictive, dangerous narcotic secretly circulating through Gothic City was to blame yet again. The gorgeous Night Bloom hid a terrifying darkness capable of leading mankind astray within its ostensibly innocent seeds. Though Euphemia's sister Erica had promised the public she would eradicate Nightz in her campaign pledge, and word had it that the police were steadily squashing the drug networks, secret demand brought unscrupulous stashes, creating a source of new tragedy.

Blaring sirens came from afar and began to gather at the scene. Emergency vehicles arrived one after the other. TV stations would follow soon after.

Just how much damage had been done? The shopping district was always full of people at this hour. Had children and the elderly been swallowed up in the blast?

Unforgiveable... Euphemia chewed on her bottom lip.

“My research will *definitely* produce results. I can’t stand watching Nightz cause more suffering than it already has,” Euphemia said decisively.

“...But tons of people are addicted to Nightz. Won’t you end up as a target if word of your research’s success gets to them, Yumi?”

Being the Mayor’s sister, Euphemia already had a massive target on her back from Erica’s political opponents. Drawing the ire of irrational druggies was the last thing she needed.

“Isn’t that what I have you for, Zel?”

“Me?”

Their car was already cruising through the eastern district, where Euphemia and Zelaide’s neighborhood was located. As expected, the aftermath of the explosion hadn’t reached this far; people were walking calmly down the streets. Relief lifted some of the tension from Euphemia’s shoulders.

“Yup, you. Erica hired you for three months, but can’t we extend that? I’ll work hard to earn the money to pay you.”

“Do you have any idea how much I cost?”

Hiring a first-rate Hunter for a whole day would, on average, cost a blue-collar worker from Under Circle about a ten days’ salary. In addition, Zelaide was rank SSS. In other words, he stood at the top of the best of the best.

“No idea. Are you pricey? Do you give a friend’s and family discount?” she ventured.

“No.” Zelaide swallowed a sigh and drove the car through the soundlessly opened gate.

At her wits’ end, Euphemia stared at him. She would have to quit her job and return under her sister’s protection if he washed his hands of her.

The corners of his mouth turned up in a doleful smile, which he hid by not looking her in the face. “But I’ll protect you anyway. I’ve gotten this involved with you already. If you were hurt in any way...”

I’d be the one who couldn’t stand it.

Zelaide let his comment trail off, but what he did say was enough for Euphemia. Her face lit up brighter than the setting sun.

“Do you mean that for real? Can I pay you back after my research makes it big? Honestly, I don’t want to put a bigger debt on my sister.”

“Do you honestly plan on making it big?”

“I do! I will!” Euphemia grinned at Zelaide’s exasperated question.

“Okay, I’ll look forward to that day. Take care of my retirement for me.” Zelaide ducked out of the driver’s seat the moment he pulled into his driveway, his strong shoulders held wide as he made long strides toward the entryway. Euphemia skipped up the steps as she chased after him.

“Leave it to me! I love you, Zel!”

“GAH! Hey, don’t cling to me! Let go of my arm!” he shouted as Euphemia wrapped her arms around his. A tiny pterosaur soared happily down from the skies above and circled over them.

“Chwirk! Chwirk! Chwirk! Chwirk!”

“Tip! We’re home!”

In the moment, Euphemia forgot all about the men trying to kill her and the tragedies around her, and reveled in the ultimate bliss of simply being alive. The front door welcomed them in and quietly closed behind them as Gothic City moved on, accepting the evening as it did every other.

†Chapter 9: Crash into the Wilds†

THE following day, Euphemia headed to Mayor Saionji's office on the highest floor of city hall using her designated route. She had the morning off work. Zelaide escorted her to the office and waited for her to finish in a separate room on the same floor.

"...And that's the gist of things, Erica." Euphemia finished giving her long report and sipped the light-green tea the mayor had poured for her. This was her favorite tea because of its soothing qualities.

Every night, Euphemia sent reports to Erica through her IHT, as the mayor was too busy to answer the phone most days. Erica did take the time to call Euphemia twice a night to check in on her whenever possible, but they always kept those conversations neutral in the off-chance someone was listening. This was the first time the sisters had met in person since Erica hired Zelaide as Euphemia's bodyguard.

"I see... So a Muta that should have been extinct infiltrated the house. And there's a high chance that Muta was stolen from a high security zone within the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute. Then, at the beginning of the week, Mister Zelaide turned the tables on his attackers, the Vermis and Infernum members, in Out Circle's District Y. Obviously, the attackers filed no reports, but a hidden witness, a resident of the area, called the police, who investigated the scene after the fact. And last but certainly not least, you happened to coincidentally pass by an area where a Nightz addict set off a bomb just yesterday... This is an astounding report for less than a month's work," Erica summarized as she viewed the data.

"Don't forget about the progress made with my Mongolian gerbils either," Euphemia emphasized, ignoring the bloody events her sister read aloud. She changed out her tea leaves for fresh ones and poured herself another cup of tea. Reusing the delicate ceremonial-grade tea leaves destroyed their taste and color.

“Yes, yes. Your gerbils...” Erica left a note about the gerbils on her IHT with her perfectly manicured fingers while she pondered the situation. “I have to say, incidents keep happening to you to a shocking degree... It’s almost like—yes, like you’re being watched. Not just *like*, but we can be positive you *are* being watched.”

“Well, yeah, we can chalk the first incident up to someone targeting me, but we don’t know if the rest were all related to me. The second incident was 100 percent targeting Zelaide. The third is little more than coincidence.”

“You know, Mia, I find it very difficult to be as optimistic as you. We didn’t have all the details on that strange Muta during your last report. Did you call it a Chude? Things were too perfectly arranged—they attacked you with a creature kept in the laboratory you work for. If that wasn’t ominous enough, they even took the time and effort to incubate the frozen eggs and sperm before stealing it from a high security facility. They are clearly trying to get under your skin without killing you outright. Put simply, they are threatening me through you,” Erica told her little sister in a stern tone.

“...You think that’s possible?”

“I am positive it’s the case. The enemy is implicitly warning me that they can take your fate in their hands at any time. The only reason why no physical harm has come your way yet is because Mister Zelaide is always by your side, and when he’s not, you’re safely locked away inside that fortress of a house of his. So the reason why they attacked him is most likely to...yes...”

“Erica, quit trying to scare me with the theatrics.” Euphemia put her hands on her arms and shivered.

“Theatrics? I’m speaking normally. And don’t interrupt me—where was I? Right, the enemy has decided to eliminate the Beast Blood Zelaide who’s thwarting their ability to directly lay their hands on you. Getting rid of him is to make double good on their threat.”

“But Zel told me that Infernum is an assassination organization that’s only hostile towards Beast Bloods. What do they have to do with me?”

“Everything, little sister. Because I have no intentions of allowing any assassination organizations to exist in my city.”

“So basically, your political enemies and Infernum are connected somehow?” Euphemia inferred.

“It’s more than possible. I’ve imposed strict city-wide policies against crime, criminals, and crime syndicates, so it’s only natural that I’ve incurred the wrath of certain circles. I have also made speeches and policies advocating for Beast Bloods.”

“You have?”

“Yes. The first thought many have of Beast Bloods is that they’re atrocious criminals denoted by their name, but the fact is that Beast Bloods commit far fewer crimes than humans do. It’s just that the crimes they have committed are always so extreme they result in wide press coverage. The vast majority are already convinced Beast Bloods are dangerous criminals based solely on their distinctive personalities and physiques, further exacerbating the problem.”

“Zelaide is a kind person. And a fine gentleman...too much of one if you ask me,” Euphemia grumbled.

“Sounds like my eyes didn’t deceive me then...” Erica remarked as a blush redder than a beet overtook her hopeless sister’s face. She had anticipated Euphemia would be attracted to him.

“You’re never wrong, Erica.”

“I wish that were true... Back to the third incident, the one that occurred yesterday. You said you kept the restaurant a secret from the others until your party arrived, but you were inside for close to two hours, right? After confirming your location, they could have mapped out your probable route home and detonated the explosion there hoping you would fall victim to it.”

“Hold on! That was a suicide bombing, no matter how you look at it! One by a Nightz addict! Plus, it was a huge tragedy involving many people who had nothing to do with anything, several of which who died... They wouldn’t go that far—”

“I’m not going to scratch it from the list of possibilities while there is room for doubt. We must wait for the police to conduct their criminal investigation for more information... Cases involving Nightz have been increasing exponentially

as of late, so we do have to consider it from that angle too... How are things with your cop friend?"

"You mean Wei Lin-jie? I keep in touch with him."

"He seems like a trustworthy person."

Erica's comment was like a knife to the gut for Euphemia. Her sister would only say that if she had not only scrutinized his personal history since birth, but also his parents' lineage.

Poor Wei... I'm really sorry. My sister now knows your preschool grades.

"He's been my friend since university. He can be a bit weird at times, but he's a really great guy with a strong sense of justice."

"Says the woman who rejected him?"

"...You even looked into that?" Euphemia slumped in her seat, despairing over how elaborate her sister's intelligence network was. Erica paid her no attention and brought the data up on the wall monitor. A young man in uniform with black hair appeared on the screen.

"Oh, this is a recent picture. He's handsome. What a waste."

"You're right. That's Wei for you, acting all serious for his picture. He's actually pretty attractive like this," Euphemia agreed.

"Okay, enough gushing. We should take the clearest route to our enemy... The incident with that snakelike Muta, the Chude, needs to be investigated under absolute secrecy. We can find our first clue there if we tread carefully. The enemy shouldn't know you have information on that Muta just yet."

"Yes, they shouldn't. Highly classified materials aren't viewable with a normal employee ID. I accessed it with the special ID you gave me...and that ID is top secret."

"Be extremely careful. That ID is a strictly confidential piece of information you can't even share with your direct superiors. Only President Murakami knows of it. Don't tell anyone at all, even Zelaide."

"Having that ID really paid off this time around. We learned that someone involved with the crime syndicates has infiltrated the institute."

President Murakami knows, huh? I wonder why Erica favors that old man. Euphemia thought back to the handful of times she had encountered President Murakami. *Now that I think about it, he's the same ethnicity as Erica. But he's such a plain man, you would never know it by looking at him.*

"Yes, indeed it did. I'll get in touch with President Murakami immediately and have him investigate the matter in the strictest secrecy."

"Okay. Well, I kind of hate to burst your bubble, but everyone knows President Murakami as a nice guy, but not a very dependable one. He's quiet and never speaks up during meetings. People lacking filters refer to him as 'Mister Yes Man.' He originally hails from a field that is completely irrelevant to biotechnology, right? Director Burhardt has way more popularity and support from employees by a long shot."

"Borrowing the words of Mozart, neither a lofty degree of intelligence, nor imagination, nor both together, prove a man is worthy of a position of power. Did you know that one of the requirements for intelligence agents of the old world was a nice, gullible demeanor?"

"Really?! Are you implying that President Murakami is actually a clever and capable man of many talents?" Euphemia struggled to believe it.

"Did I say any such thing? Don't look into this matter further. You're so terrible at keeping secrets that I sometimes wonder if the saying 'open book' was made for you," Erica said, shaking her head. Then she changed the topic again. "On to your rats."

"They aren't rats! They're Mongolian gerbils!"

"Yes, those things. About your research—"

"I'm going to continue even if you order me to stop, Erica," Euphemia rushed to interrupt, sensing Erica's doubts. "Listen, I may be close to an earth-shattering breakthrough in the extermination of Nightz if I keep on this path. My instincts tell me so."

After all her effort, Euphemia finally formed her own team at the Biotechnology Institute she had aspired to for years. She couldn't bear it if she was forced to resign before realizing her ambitions. The job had become

available to her due to her sister's connections, but the accomplishments after that had all been the result of Euphemia's efforts.

"Isn't this the same *instinct* that hasn't yielded anything so far?" Erica raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Until now it hasn't. But things are going to be different now—how can I put it so you understand? I feel like I've been reborn? Made a fresh start in life? It's like I have a clear goal to work towards... Like I'm *brimming* with motivation," Euphemia explained, working out her feelings as she voiced them.

"...I suppose it's because of *him*?"

"Geh... You think so? I do," she admitted. Euphemia couldn't make light of her sister's intelligence enough to even entertain the idea that she could skillfully get herself out of this one. They were talking about Zelaide, of course.

"Have you fallen for him?"

"Yeah...probably. I haven't told him. Zel thinks of me as work and doesn't care much for humans... But I think he might be opening up to me a little more lately."

"There isn't a professional in this world who would lay a hand on their client."

"He said he'd protect me through to the end. He might be my friend after this case is settled," Euphemia argued defensively against Erica's cold analysis.

"You will end up hurt either way. I acknowledge and accept Beast Bloods, but I don't deny they are a different species from humanity."

"...I can't speak for all Beast Bloods because I don't know anyone else, but Zel is an incredibly sensitive person. He seems to have mixed feelings towards humans, but...I can tell he's a sincere man."

"Be that as it may, I advise you against becoming serious about him. I believe he—they—are a people we shouldn't become involved with on an emotional level. It's for this express reason I plan to protect them under the law."

"...But..."

Erica, you're too late. I'm more than half serious about him.

Euphemia decided to keep that information to herself. The crucial matter at hand wasn't love, but the enemies gunning for her life, her sister's reputation, and Zelaide. And if these enemies turned out to be one and the same...

Euphemia held her head up high with newfound determination. "You're doing the right thing, Erica. Cracking down on crime shouldn't be thought of in the same vein as Beast Bloods."

"I agree. All right, let's set this topic aside for another day. You should be smart enough to know now isn't the time for love games. On another note, I understand your feelings on the gerbils. I'll permit your research. Strive hard to bring about results." Erica knew how to scold and reward her little sister all at once.

"Really?! I'm so happy! I'll do my best! I'll keep at it until the eradication of Nightz becomes a sure possibility!"

"Don't be silly, Mia... You don't have to take it that far." Erica's lips curved into a slight smile as she watched her younger sister's honest display of joy.

Erica was allowing Euphemia freedom because she gauged the situation as still being within acceptable limits, but should she be so inclined, stealing away her sister's freedom was as simple as flicking a few keys on her IHT. Such an action would obviously be for the protection of her beloved family member.

But she could let Euphemia run free a while longer. Zelaide was an excellent bodyguard, and most notable of all, Euphemia's presence in the Biotechnology Institute would prove most beneficial if there truly was a traitor among their ranks.

The Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute was one of Gothic City's most vital facilities. Leaving her sister inside the institute would mislead the enemy into believing their cover was still safe, thereby increasing the chances that they would eventually give themselves away.

I'm fairly positive it's someone close to Euphemia. A boss, a coworker, an acquaintance... They've long since wheedled their way into her life. She said several people jumped on the opportunity to join her gerbil research team. She's the type to hang out with lots of people superficially, so I have to watch out for her, Erica concluded.

“Don’t overdo it. You’re the kind of person who has eyes for nothing else once you set your mind to something, Mia.”

“I know, Erica. You do your job as mayor to protect this city. And I’ll do what I can as a scientist.”

“Be extremely cautious... Don’t slack on your reports. I’ll get in touch with you whenever I learn something new as well, so please, please be careful... I have no family aside from you.”

Erica poked her little sister in the cheek as worry lines creased her face.

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IT was long past noon by the time Euphemia left city hall with Zelaide after sitting through Erica’s long list of concerns. Today, Euphemia went straight to the car instead of pestering Zelaide to take her out somewhere to eat like usual.

“Are you really goin’ to work now?” Zelaide asked without a word of complaint about being made to wait for hours. Was the glimmer of worry she saw in his keen teal eyes a figment of her imagination?

“I am. My time off only covers the morning shift and I don’t want to fall behind because of those people... Are you against me going?”

“...No problems here.” A smile briefly touched his lips and he stepped on the gas. “I’m gonna gun it. Ready?”

“Ready!” Euphemia cheered. “Wow! It’s so fast! This is awesome!”

“Make sure your seatbelt’s on tight!”

Euphemia’s bright emerald eyes shone like spring moss in the sunlight, delighting Zel. The car quickly sped through Center Circle and barreled through Largo Boulevard en route for Forzarin Gate. Largo Boulevard divided Gothic City from north-to-south, with “Largo” referring to the musical terminology for “broad and slow.” But the silver convertible cruised down the boulevard in the complete opposite manner, sailing through traffic under the hands of a skilled racer. Forzarin Gate’s spires came into view in no time. They passed through the gate check onto the freeway running out into the Wilds beyond.

Large facilities and factories dotted the landscape outside the fortress city.

The Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute that Euphemia worked at was among them. The car comfortably cruised along the open road. At this speed, they *should* have arrived at the institute's first gate in less than twenty minutes.

"Tch!" Zelaide loudly cursed as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "Yumi, get down!"

Euphemia immediately sank down in her seat and covered her head without asking any questions. She knew she had to obey without protest when Zelaide used his no-nonsense tone.

Zelaide concentrated all of his senses on the biker gang speeding toward the freeway from the open plains rolling left and right along the road. The motorcycles had suddenly appeared, kicking up a cloud of dust on the horizon.

The massive walls protecting the cities and outlying facilities on this world didn't extend to their connecting freeways. Strict checks were required for entrance into any of the isolated, island-like city fortresses located in the sea of the Wilds, but this planet lacked the resources to extend the protective walls to the dangerous freeways linking the inhabited territories. The armored walls reached only a dozen or so kyros outside a city.

The biker gang weaved through the oncoming traffic. It might've been easy to dismiss them as thrill seekers on a joyride in the Wilds, if not for their coordinated formation and utter disregard of the law, along with the safety of those around them. These were hired professionals.

Two on the right, three on the left. How to handle them? Zelaide calculated the possible routes he could take.

Many vehicles entered and departed Gothic City, one of the planet's largest, most high-tech cities. Eighteen-wheelers hauling heavy cargo took up the most space at this hour, and Zelaide floored it as he weaved between the lanes to get around them. There was ample space between the lanes going opposite directions to prevent accidents, but resources were too precious to spend on a formal buffer between them.

What's going on? The muscles in Zelaide's arms look tense. Euphemia felt nauseous, as if she were on a roller coaster without the ups and downs. She stayed low in her seat as she strained her ears in an attempt to better

understand what was going on. The pleasant hum of the engine cranked up to a roar as the car accelerated. She wondered if they were getting close to hitting the car's top speed. Something, or someone, was coming after them—that much was clear. As Erica had said, these incidents were happening too frequently to be anything other than suspicious.

Zelaide growled deep in his throat. *Dammit. The other vehicles are in the way. Can't steer how I want.*

The car zoomed down the road at record speed, and they flew past the research institute where Euphemia worked. A good distance lay between them and the city. The facilities and factories would gradually decrease in number the farther they drove. Cruising at this speed for half a day would bring them to Romanesque City.

They won't take it that far. They'll make their move once the other vehicles clear out.

Experienced bikers followed them on large, armored motorcycles, staying hot on their tail at a set distance. Then, when the traffic had diminished enough, they seized their chance. The two motorcycles on the right of the freeway nimbly crossed lanes, infiltrating the safety zone without so much as a cursory glance at the vehicles driving towards the city to tail Zelaide's car directly in the middle lane.

Their guns were visible, but the bikers didn't open fire. Not only was it dangerous to drive with one hand at these insane speeds, they likely had intel on Zelaide's armored car. The riders rode low against their bikes, waiting for the perfect opportunity.

Out of nowhere, an eighteen-wheeler the size of a freight car swerved in front of Zelaide, forcing his silver, armored convertible to slow down.

The armor on the front of the motorcycle immediately behind them parted, and a front fender spear jutted out both sides. They were planning on shredding the car's tires. The rider's face wasn't visible through the black-tinted face shield of their helmet, but Zelaide imagined a wicked smirk there.

This rider's job was to drive parallel with Zelaide for the moment it took to render the wheels of his vehicle immobile. Finishing him off would be left to the

other bikers. The motorcycle pressed in close with confident steering.

Zelaide flipped the switch on his steering wheel. Staying low with her hands over her head, Euphemia felt a gust of wind whoosh through the car. Some part of the car had opened up.



BANG!

The next second, there was a loud, low-pitched boom overhead. Zelaide had fired his gun. Euphemia clasped her hands over her ears, but it did nothing to stop her from hearing the subsequent squeal of tires, the sickening thud, the crunch of metal skidding across asphalt, and the agonizing screams muffled by the car's armor. When she tried to edge up to look at what had happened, Zelaide yelled at her as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

"DON'T LOOK!"

The sense knocked back into her, Euphemia ducked her head below the window again—but not before she glimpsed a motorcycle skidding across the freeway, trailing dust in the rearview mirror. That was all she saw. She had missed the moment where the rider went flying, crashed and tumbled on the road, and was pulverized under a truck driving too fast to avoid them.

One down.

Zelaide had picked up the short-barreled rifle beside the steering wheel and shot through the switch-operated opening in the convertible roof. It was quick work involving little precision aiming. And it had done more than take out the immediate threat. The motorcycle had blown a tire and skidded sideways down the paved road, creating chaos in traffic going both ways and blocking the path ahead for the bikers behind them. This mitigated attack from the right, but in less time than a single breath, three motorcycles caught up to attack from the left.

They're leavin' their friend to die?! Zelaide feared who he was dealing with.

The normal vehicles driving ahead of them started turning off the ramps to the last few facilities on the outskirts before there was nothing but Wilds for hours. He raced his car through the space like a bullet. At once, the surrounding cars disappeared from view in one tide. Alas, motorcycles, with their better mobility on the freeway, had the advantage. Zelaide stomped on the accelerator as hard as he could.

"Yumi, I'm swerving sharp to the left. Hold on tight!" Without waiting for her reply, Zelaide cut the wheel hard to the left.

We're gonna die! Euphemia swallowed a scream as she frantically hung on for dear life against the relentless centrifugal force making the world spiral around her. The nauseating spin ceased in seconds, replaced by jarring vibrations in her seat as the car drove off-road. Zelaide had veered off the freeway into the Wilds.

Bushes and rocks protruded up and down their path. A four-wheel drive was more stable than two-wheel when it came to off-roading in the Wilds, but Zelaide spotted the bikers drawing their guns beside the car before he could change drives.

They started firing away at the car in a barrage of bullets. But using guns with little recoil to maintain balance cost them firepower—the bullets only grazed the armored car's silver paintjob. The pair was safe for now, but Zelaide didn't know what other weapons they might be carrying.

TCH! Damn pests!

Without a moment of hesitation, Zelaide drove through a thicket of shrubs with thorns as sharp and long as daggers. The bikers hot on his heels slowed down. Zelaide spun the car around, opened the roof again, and shot one of the motorcycles as he drove by. The vibrations from the bumpy terrain were worse than the paved freeway, throwing his aim off, but the bullet did its job, knocking the rider off balance and sending his motorcycle crashing hard into the deadly thicket.

The sturdy vines wrapped around rider and motorcycle like barbed wire. The biker wouldn't be moving any time soon.

Two down, two to go.

It was Zelaide's turn to play chase. Euphemia stayed curled up in a ball in her seat without making a peep since the first time he'd yelled at her to stay down. Sliding back and forth in her seat had undone her tight bun and tousled her hair.

"Don't worry, Yumi. I have the advantage. Don't lift your head up yet."

"Got it!"

Her voice didn't shake. Zelaide's lips curved up in a grin.

That's right. This woman is tough. So tough that she stared down the blade she was about to thrust into her own neck despite nearly being killed.

"Good answer. Can you put up with a lil' more?"

"Sure can!"

"Perfect!"

The motorcycles ahead of him split to the left and right. Without a second thought, Zelaide cut the wheel toward the biker he identified as the inferior driver.

I'll finish him off before they can attack us from both sides.

The right biker panicked and shot at the windshield over his shoulder—twice, then three times, creating round cracks in the bulletproof glass from the close proximity. White distorted Zelaide's surroundings, hindering visibility. The car strayed from its path.

Thinking Zelaide had sustained damage, the rider looked over his shoulder. He didn't realize he was heading smack into the low branches of the aptly named Hanging Tree.

"This is why you should always watch where you're drivin'."

Before Zelaide even finished his snide remark, a thick protruding branch smacked the rider in the back of the head, throwing him off his motorcycle and onto the rocky ground. The branch didn't send him flying too far, but he laid there immobile.

"Three down, one to go. Now then, how to wipe him out?" Zelaide's callous planning was interrupted by a roaring noise closing in overhead.

The *thump-thump-thump* grew louder.

"What now?!"

"Sounds like a helicopter." Euphemia confirmed the approaching vehicle in the rearview mirror from her seat. "Another enemy? No, that's..."

Anyone and everyone on this planet could recognize the logo painted in gaudy colors on the side of the heavy-lift tandem rotor helicopter.

“The TV station copter...” she muttered in disbelief.

“To the motorcyclist and car driving below! Stop this meaningless battle right now! All of your actions are being caught on camera by our Renaissance TV cameras. You’re more than welcome to continue your illegal acts of violence in the Wilds, but you do so with the knowledge that we will air what we have caught during our evening news show with zero edits!” announced a charming tenor over the roar of the latest-model helicopter. The voice was easy to make out because of the high-power loudspeaker.

The rugged bikers relentlessly tailing Zelaide scattered in all directions like cockroaches.

They executed a brilliant retreat from the area. Zelaide patiently watched. When he determined they weren’t returning with reinforcements, he parked his car behind a rock outcrop.

Tapping the round dents in the bulletproof windshield with the tip of his gun, Zelaide opened holes to see the sky. There was no risk of their faces being exposed to the cameras with the car’s shielded windows, but he took the extra precaution of taking his black-tinted specs from his leather jacket’s inner pocket and sliding them on. His mouth was set in a hard line.

“Smart choice.” The alluring tenor changed tones upon seeing Zelaide’s parked car, its threatening quality giving way to mirth. The helicopter descended. Switching into a hover, it maintained its drift for landing.

“That voice... I feel like I’ve heard it somewhere before. Don’t you?” Euphemia commented, remaining in her bent down position since Zelaide hadn’t given the okay. “It’s so attractive it’s actually grating. Where have I heard it?”

“How would I know?” Zelaide said, his response brusque.

“Well, well, would you look at that? Our biker friends are on the run. We took perfect shots of your daredevil stunts, so pop open a bottle of expensive champagne and enjoy your claim to fame on the 7 p.m. news!” the man said over loudspeaker to the fleeing bikers, then turned his attentions to the car.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say the parked silver supercar is the victim

here. Though in the end they looked more like the perpetrators, but hey, legitimate self-defense isn't a crime. Still, I gotta say, that's one hell of a car you've got there. This is why you went and drew the attention of moronic Vermis, you know. I know it's hard, but you'd do better to try and not stand out too much from the crowd!"

The man took a breath after essentially blaming them for being attacked, and switched topics. "Listen up, people below! This helicopter has some important figures on board. We're about to land on the empty patch of land up ahead per their instructions, so stay put in your sports car. Oh yeah, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Renaissance TV's ace producer, Arthur Molina. I'll be simply honored if you say you've heard of me before!"

The helicopter steadily alighted. The roar of its rotors shook the ground, but the man's clear voice amplified by the microphone easily danced above the thundering noise. His elegant way of bragging overwrote the bloodlust in the air.

Euphemia was surprised to hear him introduce himself as Arthur Molina, the famous nightly news producer. Molina not only worked behind the scenes but appeared on shows as a commentator, spreading his face as widely as his name.

The turn of events did nothing to soften Zelaide's hard expression or move his finger from the gun trigger.

The heavy-lift helicopter hovered over the flat, empty patch of land ahead, and its skids landed. Dust whipped into the air and scattered. Shortly after touch down, the side hatch opened and men in protective body armor filed out in formation. They looked like Gothic City's Guardians, the term for special security teams, but there was something acutely off about them. Chances were the TV station had hired this private Guardian team at their own expense.

"It's probably safe, but don't get out just in case," Zelaide told Euphemia, who fortunately had a frame small enough to curl underneath her seat. He slowly opened his door part of the way to hear what they had to say.

A young, skinny man hopped out of the helicopter behind the guards, wearing a jacket bearing the TV station's logo. He was quite the looker, with his chiseled jawline and his blond hair tied in a loose ponytail at the base of his neck. He said

a few things to the guards and signaled something to the small window behind him, where the cameraman and other staff were likely waiting.

After putting on this little show, the man finally turned toward Zelaide and smiled. “Hi there, buddy. You ran into some bad luck there, huh? But as you can see, I’ve put my identity out there for you. The camera drones are still flying around, but if you’re smart about it, we can cut this segment out. Come on, won’t you put an end to this the easy way and show yourselves? You heard me say there’s an important person on the heli, yeah? He says he wants to talk to you—you guys? Seems to me he knows one of you.” Molina beckoned with his finger behind the heavily armed guards. He was purposely acting in an exaggerated manner to sound out how far he could push Zelaide.

Zelaide glanced down at Euphemia under the seat. “Got any idea who this guy’s friend is?”

“My guess is as good as yours. Molina’s a commentator with a lot of exposure, so I know him from TV, but I don’t know him personally. He said he’s with an important person, right? Maybe an acquaintance of my sister?”

If he is, then it’s especially bad if he goes public with this footage. Euphemia grimaced.

“Dammit, this is gettin’ to be a pain in the ass,” Zelaide cussed. He reluctantly kicked the door open to reveal his head and chest over the door, keeping the gun in his right hand hidden.

Dry winds from the Wilds brushed through his mane of silver hair. Eyes bluer than the sky pierced through the self-proclaimed ace producer.

“Well, I’ll be damned! You’re a very handsome man,” Arthur Molina drawled, fanning his face with his hands in a dramatic fashion. The human man’s antics did nothing to take the edge off the Beast Blood’s intensity. “I bet you’ll just *pop* on camera. I’m looking forward to checking the footage later. Though I gotta say, while you’ve got a great face, your eyes could scare the hair right off a kitten. And then there’s what you’ve got in that hand of yours. Being cautious is fine and all, but I sure hope you won’t be using that gun! I’m unarmed here.”

Molina tilted his head to the side, seeing right through Zelaide. For all his tomfoolery, he had a keen eye and good instincts.

“So says the man surrounded by armed guards,” Zelaide demurred, raking his eyes across the squad armed to the teeth with the latest body armor and guns.

“Well, I can’t very much show up without them, now can I? Like I said, we’ve got a heavyweight flying with us. Do a man a favor and don’t do anything violent here. I promise we won’t suddenly tip the cops off or anything.”

His earnest request seemed to lack sinister intentions, as his team could overwhelm Zelaide five-to-one if they wanted to. Zelaide wordlessly placed his short-barreled rifle on the driver’s seat and stepped in front of his car door. It went without saying that Zelaide remained cautious; he still had pocket pistols, boot knives, tactical knives, push daggers, his trusty wrist-wire, and other concealed weapons hidden all over his body, invisible to the naked eye.

“Thanks, pal.” Molina smiled. “Sorry for being unreasonable. But dang, you’re big. Tell me, why would anyone be chasing you like a starving dog after a bone? Was it for the car, after all? Or maybe I’m looking at this all wrong and they just have unique tastes? Though I can’t blame them, you’re *such* a hunk the term ‘Adonis’ should be brought back into use just for you.”

“You talk too much. Quit talking in circles and tell me why you’ve kept us here,” Zelaide demanded, fed up with the news commentator’s jabbering.

“We’ll take over the explanation from here.”

Zelaide narrowed his eyes on the two men in suits stepping out of the helicopter behind Molina. They had to be the “heavyweight” VIPs Molina was going on about. One gentleman was tall and skinny, while the other was on the larger side and heavily built.

The larger of the two walked in front of Zelaide. “You put us in a bad spot if you’re grumpy. Wouldn’t you say we practically saved you both? What a fortunate coincidence that we happened to be flying overhead just as the chase was on! I didn’t have to look twice to tell the bikers were at fault, so I borrowed the power of the media and backed you up.”

“What a relief you were okay...” the skinny gentleman said in a flat voice.

“Who are you people?”

“ACK!” Seconds after Zelaide asked his blunt question, the driver’s door

suddenly opened and Euphemia tumbled out. She had been spying on them through the small crack she had opened in Zelaide's door, when the shock of seeing familiar faces made her lose balance.

"Oi!"

Zelaide caught Euphemia in a magnificent display of explosive force a split-second before she hit the red dust-covered ground. He swiftly hid her behind his back, away from the men's curious eyes, but she jumped to stop him.

"Whoa! Zel, it's okay. I know these people." Euphemia leaned on Zelaide as she found the strength to stand again after being tossed around like a ragdoll during the high-speed car chase.

"Oh! Why if it isn't—"

"So it was Lady Euphemia, after all!"

"It's been a while, Mister Ingalls," Euphemia greeted. "And it's a pleasure to meet you in person, Mister Haydn." Both men respectively nodded in greeting.

The man lacking any distinctive features aside from his lean figure and his light-brown hair smoothed back, was Haydn. Compared to him, the redheaded Ingalls was larger in both girth and height. Both gentlemen were in their forties and wore similar dark-colored suits, but the impressions they gave greatly differed. Ingalls' eyes sparkled with curiosity, while Haydn's expression was an iron mask.

"I am embarrassed to have you find me in such a predicament." Euphemia dropped into a curtsy like Erica had taught her a lady of her station should, all the while praying she pulled it off properly. "We were suddenly attacked on my way to work."

"Oh? How unlucky for you," Haydn said, his voice monotone and flat. "They looked like a Vermis gang of no-good thugs. They've been picking up in activity lately. Your attackers were likely Nightz addicts who were high and out of their mind. None of which is an excuse for them to throw away their lives like that... several *did* die during your little car chase. All because you didn't hold back." Colorless eyes burrowed into Zelaide. His remark still didn't elicit a reaction.

"It was a thrilling show you put on, all right. You've got some guts there,"

Ingalls remarked. Contrary to his looks, he had a deep voice that was pleasing to the ears.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Molina chimed in, smoothly joining their conversation. Molina seemed to find the dynamic between the high-society gentlemen and Zelaide entertaining. “The bikers had high-caliber guns and didn’t hesitate to open fire on his car, so it’ll be counted as legitimate self-defense on his part. If not, we have plenty of proof from our footage and the bullet holes in his car.”

“Who are you?” was all Zelaide said in response. He refused to take their bait.

“O-Oh, let me handle the introductions,” Euphemia interjected, slipping between the men to do something about the strained air hanging over them. “Zel, the taller gentleman there is Mister Ingalls. He’s the director of Gothic City’s Plains and Wilds Development Bureau. I had the opportunity to meet him twice in city hall with my sister. This gentleman over here is Mister Haydn. If I’m not mistaken, he’s the CEO of the First Continental Logistics Company. He’s a famous businessman who does a lot of off-world trading. They’re also both active city council members, and plan to run for mayor during the next election...I believe...”

To put the matter another way, the two men were Erica’s political adversaries.

Realizing her own position as she introduced them, Euphemia couldn’t refrain from trailing off the last bit of her introduction. *Holy crap...did I just put myself in another bad spot?*

How would footage of the current mayor’s younger sister in a high-speed chase with a biker gang affect Erica’s campaign? Being the victim wouldn’t mean much if the news commentators spun the story differently.

“Um, thank you very much for coming to our aid. As I said before, we were attacked by the biker gang the moment we exited onto the freeway. I honestly have no idea what was going on....”

“So it appears.” Ingalls, the man Euphemia knew personally, responded first. “We started filming about halfway through the act. The kerfuffle looked rather out of control, so I asked Molina here to wire the clip to the police

headquarters, Guardian headquarters, and directly to the mayor's IHT."

"Pardon me? Are you saying my older sister already knows about this?"

"This chopper here is the TV station's. Or one could say it actually belongs to Mister Haydn's company. We happen to be on our way back from campaigning in Romanesque City. Seconds after we sent the video, Mayor Saionji issued us urgent orders to protect the silver car. But never in our wildest dreams had we imagined the mayor's younger sister would be inside!"

"...Oh, I see," Euphemia replied politely.

"What in the great colonies is going on here? They must be off their rockers, to even think about targeting the mayor's sister. How did you get mixed up with such a disturbed crowd? Really, now, please don't tell me you've gotten involved in something messy at the cost of your sister's reputation," Ingalls chided.

"Um...I don't believe that's the case. I'm in a bit of a complicated situation right now..." Ashamed of being treated like a small child, Euphemia's cheeks flushed scarlet.

"Thank the stars for your luck. We really chanced upon you in the nick of time, you know. You've narrowly escaped death. This isn't an armored chopper, but it's equipped with the best cameras on the market—enough to intimidate the worst of fellows. As you saw for yourself, a simple warning over loudspeaker made those Vermis think twice. They'll be sorry all right, since Molina and his staff were simply licking their chaps at the opportunity to film a real-life car chase. You can expect to see the edited footage airing on the evening news," Ingalls went on, casting a purposeful sidelong glance at her. Haydn nodded, his expression blank.

"Seriously?!"

Haydn summarized the situation for her. "We've reported it to the police, so they should be racing over here in the next few minutes, likely from Forzarin Gate's station. Don't look so pale. It would be hard to see what you did as anything other than legitimate self-defense. Granted, the corpses will be dealt with as unidentifiable. Still though, why are you so rash? What careless mistake did you make to catch the attention of such scoundrels? The man with you

seems to be a Beast Blood. Is that why?"

His accusation was made in the same dispassionate tone. Haydn was running in the next election as Erica's opponent, so it was unavoidable that he would leverage any weakness of hers he found.

"Like I told you, I have special circumstances..." Wanting to prove she wasn't some frivolous rich girl, Euphemia quickly patted down her unruly hair and pushed her specs up the bridge of her nose.

Zelaide was watching the events unravel a slight distance away, apathetic. Haydn's accusations had reminded Euphemia that both of the men before her opposed the integration of Beast Bloods into society. This was the time to use her position and get them to think more favorably of Beast Bloods like Zelaide.

"From the company you keep, you must have some *truly* dire circumstances," Ingalls said dryly.

"Bahaha! Or maybe you were just getting hot n' heavy with that manly stud of yours? Young women love to have their fun, after all." Compared to Haydn, who was being surly to the bitter end, Ingalls' attitude was honestly less offensive than his word choice.

Their attitudes aside, now was the time to clear up any misunderstandings.

"He's my hired bodyguard. As I mentioned before, I am on my way to work after visiting my sister in the city."

"So *that's* what you were doing. I do believe I recall something about you being employed by an institute on the city outskirts. As I'm sure you're now well-aware, both inside and outside the city have grown dangerous as of late. Your older sister's public safety policies seem to have reached their limits these days."

A fierce glimmer overtook Euphemia's emerald eyes. "Please bring your complaints directly to my sister."

"Haha, our apologies. You see, we can't help ourselves, for we are ever so eagerly awaiting the moment your sister slips up." Ingalls shrugged with a smile.

"No need for any apologies. I won't deny my carelessness in regards to

several things, but as you can see for yourself, my bodyguard did a remarkable job of protecting me. I am safe right now because of *him*.”

“...A Beast Blood bodyguard, eh? Mayor Saionji’s thought process is a mystery to me. Isn’t he a double-edged sword to her campaign?” Haydn scoffed, drilling Euphemia with his stone-cold eyes.

Euphemia couldn’t endure this a second longer; she wanted to leave their presence that very instant. She was sure reporting the news to Erica from work wouldn’t pose a problem, since there was little doubt her new friends had long since informed her sister of her safety. Erica would have her hands too full for the day after this to deal with Euphemia.

“Will you be returning to the city now?” Euphemia asked Ingalls, the easier one to converse with of the two.

“Yes. Molina will be hosting a debate between your sister and us tonight—a live debate, on the telly.”

“...I apologize for any inconvenience,” Euphemia started, “but could you be so kind as to not mention any names related to this incident? To be blunt, I don’t want you blowing this up on the air. I understand I’m asking for a lot given that I’m the one involved in this unfortunate round of events, but please, won’t you hold off on making a move until after you understand my situation...?” Euphemia pleaded as politely as she could.

Internally, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She had essentially armed Erica’s political opponents with ammunition against her image as the mayor safekeeping the city’s peace and order. Police were already on their way here, but victims, unharmed or otherwise, weren’t required by law to stay at the scene when incidents occurred in the Wilds. It would be catastrophic to force them to stay away from the relative safety of the highways and freeways, where there was no guarantee they wouldn’t suffer an attack from another outlaw, or worse, any carnivorous Muta prowling for their next meal.

They knew her identity and she had somewhere to be. Future orders would necessitate Euphemia’s testimony in any case, so it wouldn’t hurt to leave as soon as possible.

“Well sure, the whole thing happened in the Wilds, and we aren’t monsters. We can gloss over the finer details. You’ve left a trail of corpses in your wake, so there’s no getting around handing the authorities the details, but you’re fine and dandy about leaving those things off air, right, Molina?”

“Of course. We’ll go ahead and air it without the incriminating scenes and personal information. It’s disappointing for me as a producer, though. Especially since mister tall, dark, and handsome over there would make for one killer show... But I’ll make do with letting the professionals work their magic with the shots we’ve got,” Arthur Molina teased, winking at Euphemia. When he looked at the Beast Blood behind her, he offered but a shrug—Zelaide was glaring at him with the scariest face yet.

“Then, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I must get to work. While this may sound irresponsible, please direct any further comments or complaints to my older sister,” Euphemia said, her voice coming across weaker than she would have liked.

“You’re going to the office after what you’ve been through? Allow us to return you home to your older sister by helicopter,” Haydn offered. “We won’t make a scene of it. These are the Wilds; traveling by helicopter is far wiser. These series of events must have been a traumatizing experience for a pretty young lady such as yourself. Take the day off. The Beast Blood over there can take care of himself, I’m sure.” He placed a reassuring hand on Euphemia’s shoulder, his icy demeanor softening for the first time. Regardless, his venom for Zelaide didn’t escape her.

Even if Erica was his political opponent, he couldn’t simply leave a young woman in the Wilds without tarnishing his reputation. But Euphemia had no interest in his offer.

“I’ll be fine. I can’t take up my sister’s time more than I already have, and I have business I must attend to today,” she flat-out rejected. Zelaide tugged on her arm from behind, knocking Haydn’s hand off her shoulder.

“I’ll protect her until the end.”

A fierce glint flashed in Haydn’s colorless eyes, but he said nothing. In his stead, Ingalls replied from where he and Molina were inspecting Zelaide’s car.

“All the props in the world to you and your gallant title as a bodyguard, but how do you suppose you’re going to protect her with your car in this state? You can’t see a lick out the windshield.”

“The windshield’s all that’s broken. Autopilot can handle the rest.”

“Well, it’s one hell of a car, all right,” Ingalls conceded.

“...Hmph.” Haydn’s plain face twisted with contempt.

Euphemia rushed into a deep curtsy. “Thank you for your most generous offer. I’m afraid I must attend to some very important research, so I must be on my way. Once again, thank you very much for helping us.”

“Start your helicopter up *after* we leave,” Zelaide directed coolly. “Else you’ll dirty my car more.” He led Euphemia back into the car with those words in his wake.

Once he confirmed all the men had piled back into the helicopter, he kicked up the engine. The silver car took off at an impossible speed and was soon but a dot on the horizon.

“...So that’s what they call a Beast Blood, huh? Pretty impressive stuff,” Ingalls said to Haydn.

“So they say. Mayor Saionji is a troubled woman. How could she let a dangerous man—no, *Beast Blood*—guard a relative?”

“Fighting one evil with another, perhaps?”

“Ingalls, I’m afraid you’re sorely mistaken. You’d best pick your words more carefully.”

“How am I mistaken?”

“That man is a Beast Blood. He is not human. We merely permit his meaningless existence out of the kindness of our hearts.” Haydn paused. The helicopter rotors began to spin. “He is nothing more than a filthy parasite.”

“I won’t dispute the danger of their existence, but you might be taking it a tad far, there...”

“Hmph... The curtains on Saionji’s reign will close soon. Let us return now.”

The heavy-lift helicopter ascended with an explosive roar. But no matter how they strained their eyes in search of the silver car carrying the wild Beast Blood and beautiful young woman, it was long gone from the Wilds below.

†Chapter 10: Laboratory in the Dead of Night†

IN late-summer, the Wilds were but a series of dry, rocky mountains dotted with dried out scrub bushes.

A large semitrailer showed up on the service road off the freeway leading to the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute. On its side was “Nojima Motors,” painted in big, bold letters. This was Gothic City’s notorious “Nojima’s Workshop on Wheels.”

Zelaide had put in the call for immediate, no questions asked service, while offering an unprecedented amount of money.

“‘Sup, Sir Beast Blood, I’m ‘ere at the speed of light at your beck n’ call!” the young auto mechanic greeted as he slid from the driver’s seat and took off his dirty hat in a gentlemanly gesture. Always quick on the job, the small man thrummed with energy.

After Zelaide safely dropped Euphemia off at the laboratory, he had returned to the Wilds to contact an auto shop he frequently called upon to make repairs whenever his car was damaged. Under normal circumstances it was advisable to return to the city and leave the car in Nojima Motors’ Out Circle garage, but the situation was far too urgent. Zelaide needed his car to pick Euphemia up after work, and he couldn’t bring her home without the safety of his car.

“Wowie kazowie! Ya’ve really done her in good this time, boss man. I know ya said so over the D-com, but it’s somethin’ else to see the swankiest shock-resistant, bulletproof windshield cracked like a spider web... How close was the shooter? On top o’ the car? Car’s a beaut, too. Poor thing.”

“Shut it. Quit ramblin’—fix it, already!”

A normal human would be shaking in their boots before the disgruntled Beast Blood, but the mechanic shrugged it off.

“Sure thing, boss man. Aw darn, the body’s nicked up somethin’ sorry. And owwie, ya’ve blown the key sensor off—that’s gonna be a pain to fix. The

chassis and internal-combustion engine look almost as good as new. Yup, that's Pop's work for ya. So, I can repair her within five hours. But I won't be hitting the road home till nightfall at this rate, and ya know night's *real* dangerous. The fees for comin' out here are gonna cost you a pretty chunk of coin, mister boss man."

"I'll pay double. Repair it in three hours and get your ass home."

"Wouldn't expect any less of my rich n' generous Beast Blood pal!"

No sooner was the topic of money broached than the mechanic schooled his expression and promptly drove Zelaide's car into his Workshop on Wheels, where he quickly set about his work with an assistant who waved at him before getting to work. Zelaide had been doing business with Nojima Motors since the time of the young mechanic's father.

He shifted his attention away from the mechanic and turned his back on the hisses, clanks, bellows, and drumming of first-rate machinery.

They were in the Wilds right behind the research institute, where mostly small-scale laboratories stood in a row. Euphemia's work for the day was inside one of these buildings. Naturally, the premise was surrounded by tall fortress walls, blocking the buildings from view.

I'll sneak inside and check on her if she takes too long.

Zelaide couldn't afford to leave Euphemia's side right now. Or to be more accurate, he couldn't stand to be away from her anymore.

He glared resentfully up at the towering white walls. Getting an idea of the facility's layout in order to better tackle any problems that might arise in the near future—suddenly felt like a very important item on his agenda.

Even after everything that'd happened, Euphemia had stubbornly marched right into the laboratory, motivated to continue her work. Of all things, her last words to him were that she'd be out late today.

She could try layin' low for a while, but given what just happened! Stubborn woman!

The truth was that he didn't want to let Euphemia out of his sight. But Zelaide

couldn't enter the research institute through the front door when he was a Beast Blood.

Erica had given him a top-secret PIN capable of overriding the gate security system in case of emergencies, but it'd defeat the purpose if he went around flaunting it in front of others, so it wasn't an option at the moment.

Impatience and irritation were overtaking his emotions, but now was the time to watch and wait.

Should anything happen, Euphemia would contact him. The GPS locator on her confirmed she was less than a mol away from him. Zelaide wanted to believe she was at least safe within a research institute where only people with security clearance could gain access.

But what he wanted to believe and how he actually felt were two different matters altogether.

Dammit all! Why am I so pissed off? Zelaide kicked a rock with his heavy boot.

He already had the twenty-digit free pass PIN completely memorized. The PIN wasn't the only thing Erica had given him, either—she'd even handed him a personal ID card granting entrance into the deepest, most secure rooms of the institute.

Under normal circumstances, authorized personnel of public institutions, including the Municipal Biotechnology Research Institute, passed through each gate by biometric scans of the iris and genetic identification, but institute presidents and government officials occasionally issued special IDs, activated only for a select period of time with finite uses.

The ID card Erica had given Zelaide was only good for the duration of his job as a bodyguard, but it was a genuine ID card from the Office of the Mayor herself. It went without saying that any building entered or gate passed, in addition to the number of times used and the time of day, would all be thoroughly logged. Responsibility for which would fall on Erica.

Erica had taken these measures to respect Euphemia's ardent desire to bring the project entrusted to her to fruition—even if it meant staying overnight at the laboratory—while simultaneously providing Euphemia with the closest

protection possible.

The mayor's got some crazy foresight, all right. I can move as I want with this ID of hers. Protectin' Yumi might not have been possible otherwise.

The biker gang had attacked them the instant they left the city's fortified walls, which meant their enemy had a clear picture of what Euphemia and Zelaide were doing and when. In other words, his enemy this time around wasn't after him alone—they were targeting him *and* Euphemia, as a unit. More precisely, he thought of it as an attack aimed at Erica via her little sister.

If the mayor's biological sister falls victim to a horrible crime, it'll plummet the mayor's popularity, since she's made improving public safety the pillar of her policies.

That was the enemy's goal.

There's no mistakin' it. That biker gang was Inferni pretending to be Vermi.

Without any outside help, Vermi were no threat, even in large Vermis groups. They were little more than common lowlifes encroaching every major city; they accepted jobs from anyone, as long as it padded their pockets with money or Nightz.

Infernum's Inferni were an entirely different breed of criminal. They lived upright lives among normal citizens, only giving in to violence when Beast Bloods were involved. As a general rule, they avoided stunts that would put other humans in danger.

The only thing Inferni and Vermi had in common was that no member took action alone. Inferni's sworn enemies, Beast Bloods, possessed the strength of more than ten men, so they brought numbers to combat that strength.

Inferni traveled in groups ranging from five to several dozen when hunting down Beast Bloods. Not even the police grasped the full extent of the syndicate's operations. It was unclear how many subgroups moved within Gothic City, and rumors had it that some of Infernum's bosses ran with them.

But that isn't all there is to this. Hunting a Beast Blood like me's one thing—goin' after the mayor would be biting off more than they can chew. No, Infernum's just the tip of the iceberg.

The real enemy was an even larger crime syndicate, one inducing the very crime that plagued Gothic City, that shook the city's municipalities by stirring up chaos. The situation was already far beyond Infernum. At the core, they were but a newly cut terrorist group with an axe to grind with Beast Bloods. The true threat reigned over Vermis and Infernum and controlled them both.

Zelaide gnashed his teeth.

Whoever the real enemy was, they had deeply penetrated Gothic City's syndicates and crime organizations.

There's a mole near the mayor. Somebody in the upper ranks. They couldn't have turned up with such perfect timing otherwise.

The day's events had heightened Zelaide's sense of danger.

The number of employees working inside Gothic City's city hall, including the chefs, cleaners, and garbage men, exceeded 2,000, but the number shrunk significantly when narrowed down to those working directly with the mayor. The spy had to know about Euphemia's regular reports and her private contact routes, which narrowed the pool further. Only the mayor's close aides and another select few around her could know the minute-by-minute details of her schedule.

It's probably safe to say even Yumi's drawn similar conclusions by this point. She's probably sending a report to the mayor now.

If the annoying men in the helicopter were telling the truth, video footage of the car chase had reached Erica. Just looking at the data would be enough to tip Erica off that there was a traitor in her close ranks. He didn't need to know her super well to know she was already digging into it. Problem was how fast she could weed them out.

Attacks are gonna be the norm for us now. Infernum, Vermis, other gangs. Fine, bring it on. Saves me the trouble of smokin' them out. Might even get my hands on a lead to the head honcho. But...Yumi...Euphemia's different.

Zelaide didn't care about what happened to him. But the last thing he wanted was to put Euphemia in danger.

She's not a woman who deserves to be hunted like a wild Muta or a Beast

Blood like me... She's a small, pretty, and bright woman from a good family. I have to...I have to do something about this alone.

Zelaide glared at the dazzlingly bright city lights fading into dusk beyond the horizon. Time had passed as he ruminated, and now the curtain of darkness was slowly closing over the Wilds. The Beast Blood's eyes were beginning to emit a faint glow.

That's right. She's the kinda woman who deserves to be protected by the government's best agents in a safer, more comfortable location. To begin with, I was only hired for three months. There's two months left. I'll find a way to protect her throughout. But after that...

Zelaide's broad, reliable shoulders trembled.

I have to return Yumi to her world.

Something broke deep inside the Beast Blood's chest as he came to that conclusion. Returning her to her world meant separating from her. Permanently.

Guess that means I'm single for life? Zelaide smiled bitterly, feeling like he was chewing on hot sand.

The human system of marriage didn't apply to Beast Bloods, so the entire concept and its related emotions were pointless to them. But even so, the Beast Blood's instinctual *need* for their destined mate was much deeper and heavier than any relationship ratified by paper.

Most Beast Bloods living without their destined mate spent the rest of their lives devoid of partners or children.

"What other choice do I have?"

The night breeze stole his heartbroken whisper.

Maybe Zelaide could still end things in time. After all, if they continued down this path, he may very well end up as the greatest threat of all to Euphemia. Zelaide was still a young Beast Blood—he was aware of his intense, wild urges as a male.

The height of summer had passed, and there was a chill in the air. The last

traces of the sun slowly faded below the horizon.

The autoshop semitrailer parked in the distance looked like a black panther crouching in the Wilds. Repairs would finish before long.

I have to pick up Yumi soon.

The Beast Blood prowled slowly into the night.

+++

“YUMI.”

When Zelaide entered the designated laboratory, Euphemia was furiously working away at the laboratory table—or at least he assumed that’s what the wide table with various apparatuses on it was.

He watched her figure from behind as her hands protected by skintight gloves picked up the small animals, placed them on a metal plate, glanced at the numbers on the meter, and typed the data into the terminal. No other lab technician was present.

Research laboratories ran twenty-four seven, so somebody was probably working somewhere else in the building like Euphemia, but their numbers had naturally dwindled as the clock ticked on past midnight. It was thanks to the late hour that Zelaide had entered the building unnoticed.

“Hi, Zel. I’m glad you got inside okay.” Euphemia gingerly returned the strange, restless animals to their cage.

“Yeah. What are you doing?”

“I’m weighing the Mongolian gerbils. There are more of them now, so it’s taking me longer. I should be done soon... Wait, *what?*” Euphemia’s words gave way to a laugh when she turned toward him.

Zelaide looked utterly cramped and uncomfortable in the white lab coat he was wearing. The look was perfected by the matching white hat he wore to conceal his silver hair. He pulled the hat off, letting his hair fall to his shoulders.



“What’s with the getup?” she asked, hiding her laughter behind her gloved hand.

“Just ‘cause the place is deserted doesn’t mean the security cameras aren’t working. Figured the way I look would set off alarms, so I borrowed what I found lying around. Thought I’d look less suspicious at a distance with this on...” Zelaide mumbled excuses as he shirked off the lab coat. His earlobes turned light-pink.

Euphemia continued giggling. The way he looked and acted was at odds with what Palmina had said about his mental age being equivalent to a human teenager.

“Too bad. You looked good in it...”

An attractive man with a wild air clad in a pristine, white lab coat was the subject of more than a few women’s fantasies. Zelaide had effortlessly pulled the look off. Euphemia wondered what Sonia would’ve said if she saw him.

“No way I look good in a lab coat. I’m an uneducated Beast Blood,” Zelaide grunted morosely.

“An education has nothing to do with it...trust me,” Euphemia said, her voice quiet as she returned to her work.

She was typically nothing but a ball of optimism and spunky energy, but for some reason Euphemia seemed distracted and pensive tonight. Zelaide instinctively took a step closer to her dainty back.

“...Sorry ‘bout how today played out. Did you get hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t injured. I think your car was in far worse shape. How’s it doing?” Euphemia asked over her shoulder with a smile.

“Won’t run till tomorrow morning. Damn grease monkey lied to me!”

Word from the mechanic holed up in the auto-repair semitrailer had reached Zelaide’s IHT just after sunset, while he was standing at the edge of the Wilds.

The skilled mechanic had been able to repair most of the damage inflicted by the biker gang, but he apparently brought the wrong model sensor circuit board with him.

Zelaide couldn't speed through the Wilds with Euphemia on board if there was a blind spot in his defenses. Intimidated by his silent glare, the mechanic apologized profusely and said he would return to the city to pick up the part. But going into the Wilds late at night when the savage Muta were most active was too dangerous, so he said he would return with the circuit board first thing tomorrow morning.

A D-vid from Euphemia arrived just as Zelaide had grudgingly finished parking his car behind an outcropping and concealed it under the surrounding brush with the intentions of spending the night inside the vehicle.

Euphemia appeared spent and dispirited through the screen, but hearing Zelaide's news seemed to have the opposite effect of what he expected. Relief had washed over her face as she told him she'd stay the night at the laboratory and asked him to come to the designated building.

Passing through security was a piece of cake with the PIN and ID from Erica, but Zelaide's appearance stood out like a sore thumb. Choosing a time with the least number of people, Zelaide had taken the route Euphemia indicated had little foot traffic, and cleared his way through each security checkpoint with his personal ID, making his way to the laboratory where she was waiting. He borrowed his lab coat and cap along the way.

The clinically white buildings arranged in rows on the massive premise featured a disparately complex layout, and laboratories handling dangerous animals and pathogens were built apart from the rest. Still, it was no hassle for Zelaide to find the general section where Euphemia was working with his night vision.

She was in a room at the far end of a one-story building that was relatively small compared to the rest. It was the exclusive laboratory and breeding room assigned to Euphemia's research team.

"I'm firing that grease monkey," Zelaide grouched from where he stood near the door.

"Hasn't he worked for you for a long time?"

"Roughly twenty years. But his old man was better."

“...T-Twenty years?” Euphemia was lost for words hearing that out of the mouth of a man who looked no older than his mid-twenties. But his perception of time was clearly different as a Beast Blood who aged slower than humans.

Zelaide took Euphemia’s sudden silence to mean something else. “You look bothered... My fault?”

“No, you’re not the problem, Zel. I think I’m more discouraged than bothered, really. It’s just that it’s hard for me to go home after what happened today... I know I’m being inconsiderate by wanting to work more at a time like this, but I’m glad things turned out this way... I feel bad for worrying Erica though,” Euphemia confessed while she returned the last gerbils to a temporary cage. She needed to return the gerbils to their proper breeding cages as the next step. But, for some reason, Euphemia wouldn’t turn back to face Zelaide.

“Did the mayor say something to discourage you?”

“No... I spoke to her by D-vid earlier, but she was nothing but worried sick about me. She asked me if I got hurt and how I’m doing mentally...because I was probably the target of this attack.”

So even an optimist like Euphemia had grasped that much of the situation, Zelaide noted, staring at her slender neck as she hung her head. Her hair was pulled back, but the fashion specs were off. She was usually so aggravatingly defenseless, but he found himself at a loss seeing her down in the dumps like this.

“Nothin’ good comes of beating yourself up. Cheer up.”

“Yeah, I know. But I saw the news earlier. I watched Erica debate Mister Ingalls and Mister Haydn. Remember how they mentioned they were having a live debate tonight? Did you watch it, Zel?”

“I didn’t.” Zelaide didn’t have a habit of watching TV.

“They both railed hard on Erica. Haydn was especially critical. He laid into her, saying that her term was coming to an end with her yet to make good on her campaign promise to restore public order, that the crime and narcotics are still as bad as ever. That Molina guy hosted the whole thing like he was getting a kick out of it. Erica refuted their criticisms to the best of her ability. But it’s hard

to argue when it's a fact that crime rates have skyrocketed as of late. People in the audience criticized her too."

It had been a ruthless evaluation for Erica Saionji, the first mayor in Gothic City's history to openly oppose crime and substance abuse.

Erica's political measures were of the slow and steady variety, but they had resulted in positive change until recently. Incidents involving assault weapons had transpired only once during Erica's term, a drastic decrease from before she took office, and her policies succeeded by requiring a well-vetted license for carrying most lethal weapons.

Needless to say, there was no end to the lowlifes who wiggled their way free from the law's net, but crime syndicates were on the decline. As for Nightz, not only were the police cracking down on its use and sale, but copious amounts of money had been directed toward a massive budget for this research institute, thus allowing scientists to tirelessly tackle the source of the calamity from various angles, such as by implementing selective breeding to reduce the Night Blooms' numbers.

However, since Erica had become the target of two new political opponents, atrocious crimes were unquestionably on the rise from a few localized events. Nightz was often involved in the background of these cases as well.

During the debate, Haydn and Ingalls had thrust that fact and the hard statistics in Erica's face. Although the public debate was hardly a flawless victory for her opponents, it still ended with Erica's loss.

"...That's why you don't want to go home?" Zelaide surmised.

"Yeah... I've started to think that maybe the increase in crime has something to do with how I was attacked first... It's all because I was so stupid that night..."

Euphemia was referring to the night from a month ago that'd brought Zelaide into her life, and he was almost certain now that the events of that night had indeed acted as some sort of catalyst, propelling things into motion in the background. But he didn't think she needed to hear that right now.

"Overthinkin' things won't do you any good. It's got a way of impeding your decision making. And don't get it confused; you're the victim here. You always

were. Even if that night never happened, criminals would still do crime, druggies would still be snortin' drugs."

"But—"

"Look, I'm sure you're aware of this already, but there are definitely scumbags after you. And they're in cahoots with the scum who resent me. Kicking their asses would take out both of our enemies in one go... So we're in this together."

"Do you really...think that? Can you think that way?" Euphemia looked up at him with a stark-white face. Her big eyes wavered in the laboratory's overly bright indoor lights.

"I do. I'll protect you, Yumi. I'll protect you through it all," Zelaide promised, his lips pressed in a hard line.

Even if our separation is at the finish line.

"...!" Euphemia's face crumpled as his reassuring words hit her.

"H-Hey!"

Unable to resist, Euphemia leapt into Zelaide's chest, sending him into a flustered panic. Not even a Beast Blood's intuition could predict her actions.

"Zel...Zel. I'm sorry. I dragged you into my problems... If it was just you, you could wipe the floor with those douchebags, but I'm holding you back..."

"...You aren't holding me back..."

Putting their life on the line to protect their mate was a matter of course for Beast Blood males. This was now very much his problem too. Even so, Zelaide desperately fought the urge to lift his arms and wrap them around the woman clinging to him.

Euphemia continued in an unsteady voice, "But it's true I can't do anything to help... All I could do earlier was hide under the seat and shake..."

"And there's nothin' wrong with that. You'd throw me off my game if you tried to fight without knowin' what you're doing... C'mon, weren't you gonna put those gerbils somewhere?" Zelaide grabbed Euphemia's shoulders and gently pushed her away from him. He grimaced at the sight of the little gerbils

squirming inside the cage.

“Do they bother you?”

“They creep me out.” Zelaide averted his eyes with disgust from the restlessly squirming little rodents. “Those are the Mongolian gerbils you go on ‘bout, huh? They’re tiny little things. Somethin’ creepy ‘bout them, even though they’re smaller than my finger...”

Suddenly, the power went out in the laboratory and the emergency lights kicked on, giving Zelaide a jolt.

“What?!” he yelled.

“It’s not a power outage. The power system automatically goes into this mode at night,” she informed him.

In order to save energy, the lights were set to die down at a specific time across the board, unless someone overrode the system for a room. Without his specs on, Zelaide’s eyes instantly glowed.

For all Euphemia had grown accustomed to seeing them, their beauty never failed to awe her—she couldn’t resist staring if she didn’t stop herself. She chose to shift her gaze to the cage Zelaide had turned his back on.

“Do you hate rodents, Zel?” she asked to distract from gazing into his eyes.

“Rather than rodents...it’s seein’ a cluster of tiny creatures crawlin’ all over each other inside a cage...”

He didn’t seem to be joking. Now that Zelaide mentioned it, Euphemia could see how the sight of rodents crawling on top of each other, tumbling off, wiggling their noses, and squirming around could disgust some people.

Still, Euphemia was surprised to see a magnificent specimen of a man shrink away from the cage like a teenage girl from a spider. It wasn’t every day she saw him like this. It was pretty entertaining in its own right.

“Mongolian gerbils are the smallest species of rodent. Believe it or not, they can eat three times their weight in Night Bloom seeds a day. Even better, they don’t drink water. They’re perfect for the Wilds,” Euphemia boasted, earning a doubtful sidelong glance from Zelaide.

“You’re tryin’ to eradicate Nightz with these things?”

“You bet. I’ve only recently gotten their numbers over fifty, but I plan to breed them to greater numbers... They say ‘multiplying like rats’ for a reason! Once I get their population into the thousands, I can put them to use in practical projects. I’ve got my own team now, even if there are only three of us on it. While I can’t say much for their personalities, Sonia and Ronaldo are proficient scientists. Ronaldo in particular has written an award-winning thesis on genetics. His behavior leaves much to be desired, though.”

“He disgusts me.” Deep creases formed in the bridge of Zelaide’s nose as he recalled the man who was overly familiar with Euphemia.

“Me too.”

“Okay, so say you succeed in gettin’ rid of Nightz, won’t you have a rodent problem next?” Zelaide cringed as he imagined a countless number of small rodents chomping on him.

He was used to taking on bigger and stronger enemies, but it was extremely difficult to kill tiny creatures when they banded together by the thousands, the ability to crush dozens in one hand notwithstanding. The nocturnal Mongolian Gerbils were still darting around the cage as they spoke.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. By only releasing males into the wild or making them infertile through gene manipulation that kicks in years down the line, we can reduce any threat the rodents pose, so...”

“You can do that? You’re amazing, Yumi. You’re smart, like I thought.”

“I’m not smart. And aren’t you the one who’s always thinking I’m acting stupid?”

“Well, you can be stupidly rash at times... Hey, how far are you gonna take that?”

Euphemia placed the gerbil cage on a steel pushcart. “I’m returning the gerbils to the large breeding habitat inside that back room... Hold on a moment, I’ll open the lock. This door requires biometric authentication and a separate PIN number. We keep dangerous, rare, and almost extinct animals at the institute, so there’s strict security in place to prevent them from falling into the

wrong hands,” Euphemia explained, pushing the cart toward the door at the back of the lab room.

“...If security’s so strict, how’d the enemy sneak that snakelike Muta out?” Zelaide wondered aloud, turning the possibilities over in his head.

“...That’s the real question, isn’t it? Erica said she’s looking into it via a trustworthy route...”

The thick steel door opened, and Euphemia slipped inside the breeding room at the back of the laboratory. Inside the room wasn’t pitch-black, but it was very dark due to the dim blue lights used for sterilization. Nocturnal animals by the hundreds called this room home.

This was a breeding room specifically for rodents and lagomorphs, with various types of rabbits and rats kept in rows of observation cages along with larger breeding habitats embedded in the walls. High-powered ventilation ran at all times, preventing the unique odor of tightly packed animals from permeating the air.

The breeding room was spacious and sterile. The back of the room had a space set up for the lab workers to rest, likely out of consideration for days requiring twenty-four-hour observation.

Euphemia ran a tube from the small window in the breeding habitat to the carrying cage Zelaide held for her, and dropped a tiny rodent down it. Far too many Mongolian Gerbils for comfort were inside the breeding habitat. It appeared they were housed in separate cages only once their numbers passed twenty.

“Pft, Zel? Do they scare you that much?” Euphemia asked the nervous Beast Blood through a giggle. He was holding the cage out to her with his arms stretched as far from his body as possible.

“Yeah... They weird me out. Lookin’ at them makes me feel itchy all over,” he admitted honestly, keeping his eyes trained on the ground away from the rambunctious rodents.

“Aha! So even you have a phobia! That’s good to hear, really, makes me feel closer to you. Don’t worry, I’ll close the blinds over the cages. Oh yeah, feel free

to rest in here if you like. This doubles as an on-call room, so there's a bed. A lot's happened today..." Euphemia pointed to the back corner of the room.

A simple twin-size bed was on the other side of the open blackout curtain. It was put to use during overnight experiments and in-room observations.

Zelaide briefly glanced at it before returning his gaze to Euphemia. "You plan on stayin' here tonight?"

"Yeah...I've logged it with the system. I'm going to spend the night here. There's proper lodging on the lot, but too many people come and go from there. We won't get much more than a light nap in here, but no one will come until morning. It's nothing great, but there's food, too. See?" Euphemia opened a cabinet crammed with packaged food on the other side. Hot water was always available in the boiler, and so were several varieties of drinks.

"Got all your bases covered, huh? I don't need food. You can eat if you're hungry, Yumi."

"I'm good for now, too. Hey, it's hard to settle down if we stay standing... Why don't you come over here?" Euphemia invited, plopping down on top of the large table in the middle of the room as if she always sat there. Small tools for experiments were scattered on top of the table, making it hard to call it clean or tidy.

"O-Ok." Zelaide walked over to Euphemia, trying his best not to pay any mind to the rodents and their watchful, beady little eyes. He sat cross-legged on the floor a few steps from the table instead of sitting next to her.

"You're sitting on the floor?"

"Yeah. I prefer it this way."

Euphemia's heart dropped at the thought he didn't want to sit next to her, but Zelaide had his own concerns. Euphemia's loss of confidence had aroused his desire to protect her and an even stronger desire to be one with her. He didn't have enough faith in his self-restraint to sit right beside her at a time like this.

"Where are the security cameras? You'll have trouble on your hands if they see me here," he asked in search of a distraction.

“It’s okay. Cameras are over there and there, but I changed the angles during lunch to only focus on the cages. This is the breeding room, so it won’t arouse suspicion. I turned off the sound, too.”

“...And why did you do that?”

“To spend time with you,” Euphemia blurted.

“Don’t we spend time together every day?”

“Yeah, but you won’t come near me unless you have to, Zel. Times of crisis aside.”

“Of course I won’t. I’m no gentleman, but I’m not gonna initiate contact with a lady without good reason.”

“Killjoy.”

“Hey now, think of your standin’ when you say that, Miss Mayor’s Little Sister!” Zelaide goaded the pouting girl.

“I do think about it. All the time. That’s why I’m so depressed. This stupid little sister is standing in the way of her successful sister’s future!” Euphemia burst out, then, desperate to do something about the awkward mood, began restlessly tidying up the tabletop.

“I’m leavin’.”

“Fine! Have it your way! Don’t let the door hit you on the way out!” Euphemia wheeled toward him. “You don’t have to waste your time hanging around me. It’s probably safe in here, anyway. Just come get me at the gate tomorrow morning!”

Those eyes, again. They mess with my head. She pretends to be strong when she’s really scared on the inside. Her mind and heart are trembling—as they should be. She witnessed horrible murders and was almost killed herself just a few hours ago. Zelaide squeezed his hands into tight fists.

“Shit! Fine! ‘Probably safe’ and ‘not safe at all’ are two sides of the same coin. The enemy’s very likely lurkin’ somewhere inside this facility. I’ve got little choice in the matter if you’re set on stayin’ in this dinky room. I’ll spend the night here too! Because it’s my *job*!” Resigning himself to his fate, Zelaide

turned his face away from her.

Euphemia broke into a broad smile. “You mean it?”

Zelaide said he’d stay because it was his job, but that still meant he was going to be at her side the entire night. Things might’ve turned out this way by accident, but Euphemia counted her blessings. She had succeeded in getting him to spend the night in the same room as her, when she thought the best she could get was him taking up guard in the laboratory.

After all, Zelaide strove to avoid getting deeply involved with a human like Euphemia—or that’s how she saw it.

“I’m glad. Thank you, Zelaide. Try to put up with being in the same room tonight.”

Though they lived under one roof, Zelaide never entered Euphemia’s room without permission, and he had no reason to stay by her side inside his house, with its SS-class security hiding behind its elegant veneer. Well, outside of that time Euphemia had carelessly left the bathroom window open and accidentally let in a dangerous Muta, that is.

“Anyways, it’s weird nobody’s inside this building. Careless, much?” Zelaide remarked, while thinking asking him to put up with sleeping in the same room alone was a tall order.

“You could say that. There’s less people and security in this sector because it handles relatively harmless animals compared to the other laboratories. The security for the food development sector and the bacteria research sector is something else. Still, there’s usually some people around. I guess days like this happen sometimes. I can’t really say what the norm is because I rarely ever work the nightshift.”

“Are you gonna work it more often now?”

“I can’t stand it if I’m given special treatment forever because of my sister’s influence. Besides, I’m in a unique position, because while my original concentration is in plants, I’m approaching my Night Bloom research through mammals. I’m hoping to act as a bridge between the two fields. Kind of like a pioneer,” Euphemia explained, pride filling her voice.

Zelaide listened attentively on the floor. His eyes glowed silvery blue in the dim lighting. His glow was much brighter than the blue light sterilization, gradually making Euphemia more restless.

“Hey...um, do you mind if I change the topic, Zel? There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a while...”

“Yeah?”

“Umm...what is Miss Pal...to you, Zel?”

“Pal?”

Zelaide didn’t understand why Palmina would come up at a time like this, but he didn’t care what the topic was as long as it took his mind off the sweet fragrance wafting from Euphemia. He couldn’t even bring himself to look her in the eyes since sitting down.

“Askin’ what she is to me sure is a weird question... She’s an agent I’ve worked with for a long time, I mean...I don’t know any other agents, which makes her an important business partner to me.”

“Important... I see. You trust her a lot then.”

“Trust is a human concept. It’s not the same for us, but if you call feeling like you can leave somethin’ to another person ‘trust,’ then yeah, that.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Kinda fuzzy on the details. Think some Beast Blood introduced her to me when I was still a kid. I’m just another cash cow Beast Blood to Pal.”

I don’t think that’s true. Euphemia didn’t voice her opinion aloud. Palmina absolutely harbored special feelings for Zelaide.

“Don’t you like her?”

“Haa?” Baffled by her unexpected question, Zelaide jerked his face up against his better judgment. He stared at her white face, drawn tight by the solemnity of her question. With the side of her face illuminated by the sterile blue lights, Euphemia appeared anxious and apprehensive to his eyes.

“...Well, you don’t get along with humans much, do you? Wouldn’t you have

to like her since you've associated with her for that long?"

"Palmina's an important business partner...that's it."

"What about me then?"

"What?"

"Do you protect me because it's your job?"

"...What good comes of askin' me that? Alright, I'm stayin' here like you've asked, be a good girl and get some sleep over there," Zelaide directed, angling his chin toward the bed. He tried not to look at her.

"Do you hate me?"

"I don't hate ya."

"Do you like me?" Euphemia persisted.

"Oi, give it a rest!" Zelaide deliberately raised his voice to throw her off—sitting here was becoming more uncomfortable by the second.

But Euphemia showed no sign of backing down. Her emerald eyes were wide open, harboring some sort of secret in the dark.

Stop this...Yumi. Don't arouse me more than this... I'm begging you.

But the Beast Blood's silent prayer didn't reach her. Euphemia slid from the table and sat in front of him. Dizziness overtook the recoiling Beast Blood.

"I won't. Because I like you a lot, Zel. If—and I mean if—you have even the slightest hint of a feeling for me then...won't you take me right here?"

In that moment, the Beast Blood's life blood grew hot.

Euphemia reached out and brushed Zelaide's cheek with her hand. Goosebumps ran the length of his body; it was near impossible to shake off that hot, soft hand. It was as if it were made for him. Even without her alluring touch, her sweet aroma had been toying with his brain the whole time since he entered the room.

"...Don't. Get away from me, Yumi." The words he hoarsely squeezed out with the remaining tatters of his self-control were perceived by the object of his affection in the complete opposite way he intended. Euphemia's slender

shoulders went taut, and her heartbroken gaze pierced through him.

“You do hate me, don’t you? I’m so sorr—” her voice trembled.

“I DON’T!” Zelaide hurled those short words at her right as she tried to pull away, tears misting her eyes. Euphemia flinched, afraid of his callous outburst. Zelaide wanted to punch himself.

Everything he ever did or said backfired on him. Frustrated with his lack of tact, Zelaide reached out to stroke the frightened figure in front of him, but even that backfired by igniting the flame inside him into an erupting volcano. He was wearing skintight leather pants and the beast below was screaming to be freed.

He heard Euphemia hiccupping with suppressed sobs.

“Grrr!” he growled more at himself than her. “Sorry I yelled at you. But so much ‘bout this is wrong... Don’t cry, Yumi. I don’t know what to do when you’re crying...” The Beast Blood’s hands trembled, hovering between touching and not touching her.

Damn it all! Can I be any more disgusting?!

Zelaide was being tortured by the competing urge to yank Euphemia into his arms, and the frustrating knowledge that he had to push her away. His indecisive feelings threw his mind into chaos, tossing him about like a dingy lost at sea during a furious storm. And the heat at the core of his body had finally hardened.

I shouldn’t have stripped off that handy white robe-thing.

“Zel...?”

“Yumi...you’re human, and a proper young lady from a powerful family. You shouldn’t be so quick to tell a Beast Blood like me that you like me or want me to take you.”

“...Why not?”

“Why not? You can’t figure that out for yourself? We live in *different worlds*, is why.”

“No, we don’t. We are both lifeforms in the same world, on the same planet.”

“If that’s your reasoning, then the gerbils and rabbits here are the same. But you wouldn’t tell a rodent you love it or that you wanna have sex with it, right? That’s how it is.”

His easy-to-understand example forced Euphemia to bite her tongue while she searched for the right words to contest his point.

“See? For the duration I’m hired, I’ll be your bodyguard and maybe a decent friend, but that’s ‘bout all our relationship’s gonna amount to, Yumi.”

“You’re trying to tell me our relationship is business only?”

“...Did you forget that your sister approached me with a job contract?”

“I see... Your relationship with me is contractual...your relationship with Pal is contractual... Are humans just business partners to you, Zel?”

“.....”

“Zel, will you never...will your kind never love humans?”

“We...we won’t. Probably...” Zelaide wrung out his affirmation with a staggering amount of effort. All the while silently wishing, *if only that were true. How good that’d be.*

But his own body and actions in this moment were proving how very wrong he was. He didn’t want Euphemia to approach any other man or to utter their name.

Zelaide’s mate was this young human woman.

A human’s possessiveness couldn’t even begin to compare to a Beast Blood male’s territorial behavior. Beast Blood males felt a primal surge of uncontrollable anger that made them want to tear apart any other male who tried to touch their bonded female mate. It was perhaps the main reason why Beast Blood males killed each other.

Humans, however, ran by a different set of rules. Humans formed society based on rules and laws they agreed to. Killing a human was child’s play for a Beast Blood, but there were far too many instances of humans banding together to chase down Beast Bloods for murder, administering capital punishment, and in the worst cases, lynching them in a mob.

To Beast Bloods, humans were a troublesome nuisance. And Euphemia was one of those humans. But, deny it all he like, Zelaide's instincts screamed that she was his lifelong mate.

The only reason why the man who touched Euphemia indecently during the dinner party was still alive was because Zelaide had stamped out his fiery rage in the last second out of consideration for Euphemia. His instincts would've normally resulted in him tearing the grinning idiot apart, and then engaging in mad, wild sex with his blood-covered mate.

Nevertheless, his natural instincts were lost on the human Euphemia. Mystified by his silence, she tilted her head and looked up at him.

"But it'd be a different story with a Beast Blood woman?"

"Y-Yeah. Yeah, that's right." Zelaide frantically wove his words together through the fog jamming his mind. "You probably had no idea, but I frequent a professional."

"A professional woman? Like a prostitute?"

"Yeah. I'm no saint. I'm a male, I have sexual urges like a man should!" Zelaide spat as if the words were poison on his tongue.

Euphemia was no child; she understood that a male's sex drive was different from a female's. While she didn't know how much stronger a Beast Blood's sex drive was, humans had had pleasure quarters and red-light districts since time immemorial. There, women pleased a man as long as he could pay.

If humans, with their weaker libido, already possessed such a culture, then it wasn't strange for Beast Blood men to have women working the same profession as well, even if their numbers couldn't compare to the human side of the business.

But understanding the logic of something and reconciling oneself with it were two completely different things. Euphemia knew she'd suffered a shocking blow.

"You...do?"

"I do. Get it now? I'm a filthy mongrel, right? I disgust you? Well good. That's

the kind of dirty man I am.”

“.....”

“So stop tryin’ to wheedle your way into my life.” Zelaide’s attitude made his words closer to an entreaty than a demand. “A proper man’ll take the role of your mate some day soon.”

“Mate? What kind of mate?”

The word was rarely used in normal conversation, and Euphemia picked up on the underlining emphasis. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that it held a special meaning to his people.

“Tell me what mate means to you,” she asked of him, mustering all her courage. Zelaide brooded over it for a long minute before carefully choosing his words.

“...A ‘mate’ is the one and only lifelong partner to a Beast Blood... Putting it in human terms would be like, uh, married until ‘death do you part’? A spouse you never divorce? But it’s far heavier for us. Our mate is our entire being...more important than our own life? That’s why when our mate dies, we won’t move on...it’s just that one person for us till we die. It’s ‘cause of that that Manuela, the woman I frequent, works as a prostitute for her son, but will never fall in love with anybody. I let her do her job, and I have no special feelings for her. She’s not my mate.”

“...Basically, it’s like the ‘mate’ in *soulmate*?” Euphemia deduced.

“Yeah...you can put it that way. Not sure which word came first. I’m not the brainy type, after all.”

“Beast Bloods are a mysterious species.”

“Mysterious? Don’t ya mean primitive and savage to the bone? That’s what most humans think of us.”

“Most humans don’t know a thing about Beast Bloods either. Okay, so then... then...where’s your mate, Zel?”

Please say you haven’t met her yet. Please say you haven’t met her yet. There’s no chance for me against someone like that.

“Beats me...dunno... I’ll probably never meet her in my lifetime.”

In reality, his mate was right in front of him, unknowingly tempting him with a honey-sweet scent. Either way, his answer seemed to relieve Euphemia’s worries for whatever reason.

“Will you know right away? When you meet her.”

“Yeah, I will. I probably will. It’ll be completely unexpected and I won’t even see it comin’.”

In the Wilds during the lawless night: who was it that had captivated him with emerald eyes more beautiful than the gleaming blade she held aloft, in the second she prepared to take her own life rather than fork it over to the Muta—and the other scum even more inhuman?

“Zel? The way you put it...makes it sound like you already found her...your mate.”

“D-Does it? I’m just relatin’ somebody else’s experience,” Zelaide lied, averting his eyes from her questioning gaze.

AGH! Why must there be so many lies between us? he lamented.

“Okay, then if we look at what you said another way...then you can, you know...do it with someone who isn’t your mate, right?”

“Do what?”

“...You know...like what you do with the woman you frequent...that means you do it, right?”

“...I usually work as a Muta Hunter. My blood boils sometimes after a hunt... Some of our women take care of the wild, excited males without mates. I know how it must sound to you, Yumi. But that’s what a Beast Blood male is—*filthy*.”

“Look, humans have people working as prostitutes and call girls too, you know? One of the books I read said it’s one of the oldest professions in history. But that’s not what I was trying to say... If you can do it with a woman you don’t love...then there should be nothing stopping you from doing it with me.”

“Yumi! Do you hear yourself right now?!” Zelaide’s eyes bulged at Euphemia’s outrageous suggestion. She might think he couldn’t read her expression, but

this feeble darkness did nothing to obstruct his vision. Deep red dyed her adorable earlobes.

His mate—his darling woman—was blushing redder than a cherry and smelled sweeter than one too.

Zelaide's mouth went dry and the column of his throat undulated. But the girl bashfully hanging her head had no way of knowing the strong man's faltering feelings.

"I like you a lot, Zel. I don't mind if it's just once, just hold me."

"You..." Zelaide's voice sounded so hoarse, he doubted it was his. "Do you even understand what the hell you're saying?"

"I understand completely. If it's by your hands, Zel, I don't care what you do to me—"

"Don't be stupid! How many times have I *told* you, I'm a Beast Blood?! That's not somethin' that should touch a pretty princess like you!"

"And how many times have I said that I *like* you?! Being your friend is a big fat lie! A lie I told to protect my hurt pride. I'm *in love* with you!"

"You've got it all wrong! You never think things through!"

"How rude! I'm a scientist! I don't make baseless claims!"

"And *where in the colonies* can you possibly find a scientist as cute as you? HUH?!"

"Well, SORRY! Cute scientists do exist, you know?! ...Wait, what?"

"What?"

Their argument suddenly stopped.

Does that mean Zelaide thinks I'm cute? Euphemia had been talking back at him by countering every argument he made, so now she had to pause and take a moment to carefully study him to be sure.

He was bent over with one hand covering his face, looking like he'd majorly screwed up. Was she just imagining the slight flush on the nape of his exposed neck?

He might just be...hopelessly adorable...

“...Muta wrought Wilds take me!” he cursed.

“Zel?”

“AGH, I can’t take it anymore!” He suddenly tugged on her arm and she smacked her nose hard against his broad, solid chest.

“Ow!”

“Why?! You just *had* to go and ruin all my hard work! You can say all that because you don’t know how I feel holdin’ back!”

“Zel? Zel?? Did it bother you that much? Me saying I like you?!” Euphemia was flustered out of her mind. This was her first time seeing Zelaide this intense. This was the same man who’d acted calm and composed when he took out the biker gang that same afternoon.

“Shut up! Don’t say another word! Damn it all!”

“Zel...Zelaide...answer me.”

“Don’t look at me with those eyes...!”

Eyes glittering with anguish; silver, glowing faintly in the room’s darkness. How much more stunning that radiance would be if the room was pitch-black. Euphemia knew of their true beauty intimately.

Zelaide, however, was speaking of *her* eyes.

“I don’t have any other eyes to look at you with... Sorry?”

“I’m the one who should be apologizin’... I honestly wanna take you so bad it’s driving me mad... Shit!”

“Then do it, right here and now.” Unable to wait any longer, Euphemia entwined her arms around Zelaide’s drooped neck. “You can do whatever you want to me. You can even take a bite if you’re hungry...” she offered, tilting her head to expose her pretty white neck to him.

In the dark, his glittering eyes flew wide open.

“...I don’t care anymore. I’m not holdin’ back any longer! It’s not my fault if you regret it later!” No sooner did that hoarse shout rip from his throat than

Zelaide's long arms shot out and squeezed her against him. In a single raspy groan, his lips smothered hers in a hungry kiss.

"Ah! Mm...mnnh..." she whimpered.

Their lips collided over and over with wild abandon until, gradually, the kiss melted into something tender, with his lips softly, carefully enveloping hers. He ran his tongue over her bottom and upper lips, tasting her; his hands searched fervidly over the entirety of her body, committing her shape and warmth to memory.

"You feel...ahh, I can't get enough...you fit me perfectly."

Euphemia responded by knotting her fists in his shirt and pulling him harder against her, the space between them closing as her curves melded to the shape of his muscles. They held fast to each other and matched the rhythms of their bodies, Euphemia's tongue searching his mouth, his tongue entwining hers in a game of cat and mouse.

They pulled apart temporarily to take deep, ragged breaths before diving back in for a fiercer, passionate kiss. Cupping the back of her neck, Zelaide tilted his face and met her mouth with his, greedily tasting her. Their eyes locked with electrifying heat every second they paused for a breath.

"Gimme more...I'm parched," Zelaide grunted.

Euphemia lifted her chin to meet his demand as Zelaide changed the angle of his kiss. His hot, wet tongue slipped through her parted lips, seeking her out. It tangled with hers and caressed it, raptly indulging in her honey sweet saliva. And then he deepened the kiss again, sucking on her tongue with an intensity that made her cling to him, weak in the knees.

A delirious giddiness spun Euphemia round and round, the delicious shivers casting a thickening fog over her thoughts. If this was what a kiss was meant to be like, then every kiss she'd ever known before had been little more than child's play.

This is a real kiss. A Beast Blood's kiss. He's going to eat me up, Euphemia thought, twining her fingers in his mane of silver hair. Ahhh...I'd be happy to be eaten by him. If that's what it takes to be one with this beautiful man.

The fervent, urgent need to kiss slowly swallowed her ability to think. Zelaide was far taller than Euphemia, and his hips were flush against her stomach. Her heartbeat raced to feel the intimate shape of his desire pressed into her.

In spite of people's impressions of Euphemia as a femme fatale with her stunning beauty, she'd actually had very little romantic experience. She experimented once with the man she dated in university, but he neither excited nor pleased her one bit. Their lack of chemistry led to their break up.

Ever since, Euphemia believed she was a woman indifferent to love and love-making. Never before had she felt a man's body this close and desired it with every fiber of her being.

"Yumi...argh, Yumi... Dammit, *I want you*...Yumi!" Moaning her name, Zelaide ran his hands over the contours of her body, lightly scraping his teeth down her neck in a cadence of nibbles. His every touch sent thrilling shivers through her, arousing her even more.

They sank onto the floor in a close embrace still lost in their fervent kiss. Interposed firmly between Zelaide's knees, Euphemia couldn't move. Instead, she leaned all of her weight on him, overjoyed to tears to find his strength could support them both.



“Mm...” Zelaide moaned, intoxicated. Apparently Euphemia’s lips and saliva contained some sort of element capable of sending his self-control and sanity rocketing into outer space.

He thrust his fingers into the golden chignon behind her head. Twisting his fingers ever so slightly brought those luscious locks tumbling down with the sweetest scent to tickle his nose.

He groaned softly, deep in his throat.

Zelaide no longer possessed the self-restraint to carry Euphemia over to the on-call bed several paces away. He put his fingers on the snap buttons holding Euphemia’s unsexy, white lab coat together and in one jerk, tore both it and the shirt below open. Buttons exploded in every direction to the tune of ripping fabric, bouncing off the walls and surprising the caged rodents into running frantic circles. Needless to say, they were both too caught up in the moment to care.

Zelaide’s eyes riveted on the exposed, supple white flesh before him. He’d never looked closely at a human woman’s skin before. Plenty of women drawn to his fascinating looks had invited him to their beds, but human women had never amounted to more than passing scenery to him. They always looked like they’d break under his touch, rendering even the simple thought of embracing something so fragile an unpleasant one.

And yet, look at where he found himself now.

“Incredible...you’re whiter than milk,” Zelaide whispered as he nuzzled his cheek against her bared, voluptuous breasts, intoxicated. His hot breath brushed over her skin, sending Euphemia squirming with tantalizing shivers.

Euphemia was trembling from conflicting emotions—she wanted to cry with shame on the one hand, and on the other, thirsted for his touch this instant.

“Zel—Ah!” she gasped out a ragged breath.

His long fingers gingerly traced the contours of her breasts. By no means was it a potent touch, but the stimulation was more than Euphemia could take. Flustered, she sharply sucked in her breath.

He's looking at my breasts...

By no standards were her breasts small, but she nonetheless feared they wouldn't be enough to satisfy his large palms. His fingertips sunk into her soft skin, like marshmallows to his touch. Euphemia didn't know if this was how it was supposed to be, but she couldn't fight the sense that a Beast Blood woman's skin would be firm and taut.

"*Mmn!*" she moaned, the sound ripped from her lips with the sudden, intense stimulation from his fingers. Her whole body tensed. Zelaide brought his lips to the nape of her neck and sucked hard.

Euphemia threw her head back so far that her hair touched the ground. Zelaide supported her back as he leaned over her. Illuminated by the blue lights, his silver hair was dyed a bewitching blue that sent delectable shivers down her spine.

He's going to eat me. I'm going to be eaten by this silver wolf.

As he tasted Euphemia's skin, Zelaide earnestly rocked his waist, grinding against her. She felt the size of his manhood through his tight leather pants and shuddered in anticipation of what was to come.

But why doesn't he just take me already? He's clearly burning with the need to do it.

Zelaide had only been rough in the moment he ripped off her clothes—he'd only relished in the taste and touch of her skin since. He hadn't even sucked on her nipples. As it went, he was already a hundred times more a gentleman than any human man she had been with.

Getting impatient, Euphemia nearly pushed her breasts against his solid chest.

"...Yumi? Does it hurt?"

For some reason, the glowing eyes peering uneasily up at her from between her breasts looked terribly young to her.

"I'm fine." Euphemia smiled to reassure him. What if this fine figure of a man who looked like he had walked right off a gravure wild photoshoot actually had the mental age of a teenager?

“This spot makes an incredible sound...” Zelaide whispered, pressing his cheek against her chest. Her heart was unquestionably pounding away against her ribcage like a fast beating drum. But Euphemia couldn’t do anything about it. She’d be on a one-way trip to the hospital if someone took her blood pressure right now.

“Yeah. My heart is pounding.”

“Are you okay? Are you sure it’s not because you hate a monster like me touching you?” he mumbled.

Discovering just how much he was considerate of her even at a time like this helped Euphemia make up her mind. Zelaide probably never realized, but Euphemia originally lured him into this room precisely because she wanted to be alone with him like this. She wouldn’t even think about turning back now.

“I like it. I’m just...a little nervous is all. Don’t let it stop you. All women get a bit embarrassed. Zel, you can do whatever you want with me,” she reassured.

Even if it’s only this once. I’ve loved him from the moment we met, I won’t have any regrets. I want to be the first human woman he holds.

For all of Zelaide’s kindness and gentleness, he’d never view a human as a love interest. And Palmina mentioned that something horribly traumatic must’ve happened to him in the past. Likely at the hands of humans.

Nothing could be done about it; she couldn’t ask him to fall in love with a human like her who knew zilch about Beast Bloods. But Euphemia wanted to accept everything he offered during their precious time together. That was her strongest desire, her deepest wish.

“I’m fine. Take me.”

“But...”

The cowardice that ran contrary to the intensity he’d shown when he wildly ripped her clothes off was the epitome of adorable to Euphemia. She caressed his head like a nurturing mother.

“I want you to. Okay? Don’t hold back. Us human women are made of pretty sturdy stuff too.”

“.....”

“Zel...”

“Tell me right away if you don’t like it.”

Euphemia simply smiled at him without answering, and Zelaide resumed his loving caress. As he rained kisses over every corner of her soft, fair skin, he solicitously pulled down her jeans, then her lacey underwear. Once he removed all her clothing, he scooped her up into his strong arms and sat her on top of the work table. Shrugging off his leather jacket, he spread it over the table as a blanket, and slowly pushed Euphemia down. Then, still standing, he entered the space between her legs and rocked against her.

“AH!” Euphemia instinctively let out a moan from the sweet stimulation the hard, cold leather gave her.

“Sorry, Yumi!”

“D-Don’t be. Your leather pants tickle... Won’t you take them off?” she invited, her cheeks a rosy red.

“N-No. If I take this off, I’ll...” Zelaide left his sentence hanging and resumed devoting himself entirely to pleasuring Euphemia as he ran his hands over the contours of her breasts. With loving caresses of every type, from kisses to licking, nibbling, and nuzzling, he brought Euphemia closer to climax.

But for some inexplicable reason, he never even tried to touch the most critical location. Anxiety gradually built up inside Euphemia. Were her fears coming true in the worst possible way—was her human body failing to arouse him?

“Zel...?” she whispered, a silent question unspoken. “Ahn...!”

His forefinger furtively stroked that untouched spot, for all of but a second. Euphemia glanced up at him as he wholeheartedly licked his finger with his eyes closed.

“Amazing. Every part of your body is sweeter than any nectar, but your nectar is on a whole other level,” Zelaide mused, spellbound. He knew for sure that every body fluid oozing from this woman was the same. Her saliva, blood, even

her tears.

Euphemia cried out in a voice she never knew she could make.

“I’ve consumed your fluids. A part of you is inside me now. I can never be apart from you again. No matter how far away you are, I can find you,” Zelaide whispered, kneeling on the floor as he diligently licked up the sweet, sweet nectar escaping her body. His satisfaction and excitement was even greater than Euphemia’s, who was at her climax.

This was how a Beast Blood male showed both submission and dominance to his mate.

He wasn’t even aware that what he was doing was called foreplay. The desire to please a woman in such ways was foreign to Zelaide, who viewed sexual intercourse as nothing more than a temporary antipyretic. Rather, he believed it part of the inevitable urges of a male Beast Blood. This symbolic action, too, was part of his identity as a hideous monster.

With a click of metal, Zelaide freed his belt from his pants. What he released from its prison wanted more than anything than to thrust into Euphemia’s warm moist folds. He wanted nothing more than to acknowledge her for the first time as his mate, the one he wanted nothing more than to protect. But going through with such an act would undoubtedly put Euphemia through unimaginable pain.

Like hell I’d do that to her. I don’t want to hurt Yumi with this lethal weapon, Zelaide thought strongly. Not yet. I can still restrain myself. I need to protect her to the very end. Enduring is a mate’s responsibility.

What a tangle of sweetness and numbness accompanied the act of persevering before his mate. Zelaide bit down hard. His sharp fangs sliced through his own lips, spreading the taste of blood over his tongue. Drunk on Euphemia’s scent and nectar, with her perfect white skin before him and her body presented on the table ready and waiting, he climaxed in bliss, ejaculating into his hand.

“Zel?” Sensing his odd behavior, Euphemia lifted her head.

“Don’t say a thing. This is good enough for now. I won’t let anybody hurt you,

not even myself. So let me drown in the taste of you a bit longer. If you don't mind a man like me, that is."

"...Can I continue to like you?" Barely dressed in anything, Euphemia looked imploringly up at him.

"I don't mind."

Their lips met together once again. Their wet kiss was already like intercourse to them.

The room was filled with their wet and heavy sighs and the peculiar sound of rodents scurrying around. Both sets of creatures were occupied with an important part of life.

Suddenly, bright blue lights illuminated their youthful bodies with a strange bluish-white.

By the time Zelaide had lovingly explored every nook and cranny of Euphemia's delectable skin and brought about her own blissful orgasm, their snuggling was abruptly shattered by the heartless blare of the emergency alarms shaking the room.

But the high-pitched, ear-piercing warning siren stopped as abruptly as it started, leaving behind only an indescribable ringing in their ears.

Eventually, a woman's voice came over the intercom and broke the silence. "The emergency alarm was set off by a malfunction in Block B's administrative building. This is not an emergency. I repeat, this is not an emergency. There is no threat. The alarm has been stopped." It was a synthesized, electronic voice, not a person's. The calm voice normally meant to set people's minds at ease only threw the barely dressed Zelaide and Euphemia into a terribly awkward moment.

"Uhh..." Dressed in little more than her ripped shirt and lab coat, Euphemia sat up on the table. Zelaide jumped away from her like she was on fire and sank down against the opposite wall.

Avoiding Euphemia's gaze, he kept his head down, eyes trained on the ground. The massive body that'd filled her view like a solid wall of muscle was now shrinking away from her, as if trying to become as invisible as possible.

Taking his actions as a rejection, Euphemia's explosion of excitement dissipated like air let out of a balloon.

"Zel...?" she asked, her voice small.

"...lad..."

She strained her ears to pick up the faltering voice coming from across the room. "Come again?"

"This is for the best. If we kept goin', I could've hurt you... I said, I'm glad this happened."

"What does that—"

"Yumi," Zelaide strained, slowly turning his back to her. "Sorry, but could ya look the other way for a bit?"

"But..."

"Yumi, please..." Zelaide pleaded, his sturdy, broad back looking forlorn as he slumped forward. He was rejecting her with his entire body, almost like a pouting child after receiving the scolding of a lifetime.

Euphemia perceived there was nothing more she could do in this moment. Without another word, she stumbled about and picked up her clothing before heading to the rest space in the back of the room. She couldn't fight off her depression as she rummaged through the closet for one of the spare lab coats.

Why the heck had the emergency alarm, which rarely ever went off, chosen now of all times to malfunction? It was late at night. Did someone inside the administration building accidentally hit the button? They had impeccably horrible timing if that was the case.

After all her pining, Zelaide had finally touched her—*embraced* her—and now their relationship had gone back several steps with him putting an even greater distance between them.

Cursing the careless idiot who'd ruined their moment, Euphemia fixed up her appearance. Zelaide had sent her shirt buttons flying, so she pulled on the spare lab coat and buttoned it in front of her shirt. Her pants were intact, at least. Now she looked presentable. She peered into the small mirror attached to her

locker and saw a white face on the verge of crying staring back at her. Her tousled, disheveled hair was a mess.

Yet, for all that, Euphemia found herself carefully staring at her reflection because the coquettish face she normally hated appeared a little more mature for once, drawn around the edges with the sadness she felt. After a while, she pinched her cheeks, forced a smile, and laid down on the couch.

Giving Zelaide some space seemed like the smartest thing to do right now. And it'd taken her until now to realize just how tired she felt.

How unlucky can I be?

It had been a horrible day.

Euphemia squeezed her eyes shut.

It was my first time trying to seduce a man, too.

The only silver-lining she could see was Zelaide had acknowledged her as a woman for the first time. Maybe he'd only fallen victim to her seduction or perhaps he acted out of pure curiosity. Either way, he'd indicated their futures didn't only run in parallel lines.

It won't be long. I just have to wait a little while. If I wait, the rain will fall and wash everything away. A terrible day will always come to an end. The rain falls, morning comes, and another work day begins. I just have to start over from there. I'll have plenty of opportunities ahead of me. As long as I don't give up, Euphemia reassured herself until she fell into a deep sleep.

+++

“...!”

Dammit! Quiet down already you damn beast! Despite having only just released himself, the Beast Blood let out a heady breath as he squeezed the heated monster down low. But it just wouldn't go down.

This is for the best. I don't wanna see Yumi cry in pain from this abomination. Hell no! This is a good thing! It's all good...

Zelaide gasped as he grappled with the desire that refused to abate. This was an act he'd never committed before meeting Euphemia, but he felt compelled

to give in to it now. That was how wild the flame was burning within him.

Aaah, Yumi...Euphemia! My one and only mate...!

He howled. Sweat trickled down his chiseled jaw.

Ever since he ended up alone with her in the laboratory, he desperately wanted to jump her, expose her sweet, soft skin, and thrust into her. The feeling only amplified when he entered this room full of voyeur rodents, hurting him where his leather pants squeezed taut, forcing him into a desperate struggle not to moan.

Yet his struggles had been in vain because she told him to TAKE HER.

A human woman, one born to the upper echelons of society as the mayor's younger sister, wanted him, a barbaric Beast Blood. And she was the same woman he acknowledged as his mate. If the emergency alarm hadn't sounded, Zelaide may have lost all self-restraint during their explorations and defiled her.

But for all his self-denial, he couldn't deny that Euphemia's moist lips and hazy eyes wanted him bad.

AGH! Damn...it all! Yumi!

His manhood exploded again. In the moment of reaching the edge, he felt himself inside an imaginary Euphemia, her body welcoming him in as they both orgasmed in union. In reality, she was sectioned off by a curtain after being hurt by his rejection.

Sorry. I'm so sorry. I can never apologize enough for making you my mate. I wish it was some mistake...

Zelaide snatched up the roll of paper towels on the table and wiped the cloudy white fluid from his body. His hand was drenched in the liquid seeping through the soft paper. By all appearances, his urges had finally quieted down. He wiped the sweat from his brow, ignored the remnant desire burning below as he shoved it inside his leather pants, and tightly latched his belt as if sealing it within. With one look around, he noticed the area was splattered with that same stickiness. He'd had a lot built up. Careful not to leave any traces behind, he diligently scrubbed the floor with a wet paper towel.

Shit! Look at me. I'm a beast on the inside and out. It's a real blessing you didn't have to deal with this thing, Yumi. It'd be a waste for your first to be with me.

Zelaide could tell himself whatever he wanted, but his instincts continued to scream over his thoughts, insisting that Euphemia was his one and only mate.

Euphemia's pretty boy coworker had only teased her the other day and it was enough to fill Zelaide with seething rage. He might've killed the man right there and then if he had tried to touch her. That wasn't the only problem now, either. Was it even possible for him to keep this restless beast in check for more than a few days while they were living under the same roof together?

Zelaide slammed the drenched paper towels into the wastebasket in the corner of the room and perked up his ears.

Peaceful breathing came from the other side of the curtain. Euphemia seemed to be asleep. Contemplating what to do, he eventually approached her with quiet footsteps after washing his hands. Euphemia was sleeping curled up in a ball on the couch. A thin blanket slipped from her shoulders.

"Yumi..." Whispering her precious name didn't wake the sweet girl. She was in a deep slumber. Today had been a traumatic day for the virtuous woman.

Zelaide pulled the blanket over her. Staying in the small room with her enticing breathing was foolish. It didn't take a genius to know it'd only further stir the beast he'd worked so hard to placate.

You're important to me. So important I can't lay my hands on you, Yumi.

Zelaide gently ran the back of his finger along her soft cheek before leaving the small rest space. He made eye contact with the rodents frolicking around inside the cages in front of him. They gawked at the Beast Blood with curious, beady little eyes.

"Can't anybody tell me what to do..." he murmured.

You're my woman, but I can't make you mine...

The tiny rodent noses twitched as they sniffed the air. Moisture mingled with it—rainfall was close. Zelaide grimaced at the rodents, resigned himself to his

fate, and plopped down on the floor.

I'll stay here till daybreak. I'll leave before the humans start work. His mind made up, Zelaide leaned against the wall, protecting Euphemia's peaceful sleep.

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A man's snickering filled a small room. The low noise leaking from the various machines in the room and the light emanating from the white and yellow gauges performed a mechanical play in that tight space.

Clad in a white lab coat, the man held up a dark glass in dim lighting. "Did you think all was safe just because you turned the security cameras and muted the sound? Naïve, naïve, spoiled princess. I've bugged every room you might enter with high-powered mics as a precaution. Though what a shame I don't have video to go along with these sounds." The man pressed the replay button.

"This spot makes an incredible sound..."

"Yeah. My heart is pounding."

"Are you okay? Are you sure it's not because you hate a monster like me touching you?"

"I like it. I'm just...a little nervous is all. Don't let it stop you. All women get a little embarrassed. Zel, you can do whatever you want to with me."

"But..."

"I want you to. Okay? Don't hold back. Us human women are made of pretty sturdy stuff too."

"Yumi...argh, Yumi... Dammit, I want you...Yumi!"

The man's cackling filled the room once again. His shoulders shook with his mirth. "Good grief. I'm speechless. This could make for one nauseating soap opera. This will surely please him... Sorry for bothering you kids just when the action was getting good."

He'd turned on the emergency alarm at the precise moment when the young couple's feelings and bodies had reached a climax, putting an end to their love making. He didn't need video to know how flustered they must've been.

“So, so sorry. You were almost there, too. But how could I let the two of you enjoy this delicious moment without us? Besides, he’s sure to enjoy your chastity, so I wanted to save it for later. Even if you aren’t a virgin, you practically act like one. I can tell by watching you. Can you be any more obvious of a woman, hm?”

His finger pressed the replay button again. Their shallow, ragged breath conveyed their heated moment even through the cold microphone.

“Lucky kids. How nice it must be to be young. Well, not that I’m too old myself. But wow, what an incredible sample you’ve left behind for me. This is an unexpected yield. Thanks, Mr. Beast Blood. I’ll be along later to gratefully collect it,” the man muttered to himself while pulling several Spitz tubes from the desk drawer.

“I’m amazed you could restrain yourself in front of that girl. Guess that’s a pro for you? Such a good boy. But maybe it’ll negatively affect your job outlook in the future if you lay a hand on your client. What a situation you find yourself in, having to live under the same roof as a woman you harbor affections for without laying a finger on her. Any normal man would become frustrated under those circumstances. Even more so for a young Beast Blood male, with their virility.” The man began chuckling again. “*Poor thing*. Interrupted just as the shackles were finally coming off. Any other man in your situation would...”

The man fetched his IHT and put in the number he had memorized. As the newest technology on the market, the receiver was capable of picking up even a whisper. A man’s shadowy form appeared on the transparent screen in a matter of seconds.

“Hello? It’s me. I watched the live debate on TV tonight. Very entertaining... Yes, it was a magnificently eye-catching car chase. Great camera work. Just like watching a movie. One of the audience members shouted, ‘Is it all right to let a crime like this off the hook?!’ That part was great. The production was perfect. Yes...indeed...no, they’re completely behaving now. Things took an amusing turn. Yes...like cats forced to back off.” The man sounded delighted.

“That’s...only natural. But I was able to obtain some remarkable data. It’s a real shame all I have is the sound, but I should have it to you by tomorrow at

the latest... I'm sure it will fit your tastes... Yes, I know. I'll be careful. Oh, and I've thought up a wonderful idea... Yes, very much so. Would you mind informing me of the Beast Blood's actions in detail from now on? He should be mostly under surveillance while outdoors. Yes, the plot is already mapped out. Yes...yes...then until next time."

The man pushed away the IHT after the call ended and turned his eyes out the window. Most of the windows in the laboratory opposite of the courtyard were dark. After a while, something pelted his window.

Giant raindrops. Rain always fell on this planet at the darkest hour of night. Such was the sacred ritual of this world.

"Ah, the rain's here. Daybreak will arrive soon. And when it does we will have such fun, oh yes..."

The rains transitioned to a downpour. The world would be soaked for several hours.

When the pitch-black darkness breaks, what would the new day bring?

The man's laughter was hidden behind the heavy rainfall.

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FOR humans, the rainfall becomes a silver curtain, concealing a criminal's hidden crimes, an infant's peaceful sleep, and a couple's romantic tryst. And then, with the dawn's light, the rains retreat. Such is the unbroken cycle, the never-changing promise between the heavens and the earth.

†Afterword†

GREETINGS to all my readers in North America and abroad! It's a pleasure to meet you for the first time. I'm the author, Sato Fumino. I'm a workingwoman who loves reading, movies, manga, and anime. Thank you very much for picking up a copy of *Beast † Blood*. I have published eight different stories in Japan so far, but *Beast † Blood* is my first work published in English.

I have loved and adored works of science fiction ever since my father introduced them to me as a child. Of course I have Japanese favorites, but I also became engrossed in reading American science fiction classics such as the masterpieces by Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury, and I love *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* (old school, I know).

Incidentally, science fiction isn't a very popular genre among young Japanese women compared to contemporary romances, historical romances, and fantasy.

You probably can't classify *Beast † Blood* as a hard science fiction story, since there's no space travel or robots. But I wanted to tell a story young women would enjoy by incorporating my favorite science fiction elements, including an interspecies romance, foreign worlds, and fictional dinosaurs and beasts.

Beast Bloods are my original Near-human creation. They are a species with a long life span, and they experience time differently from humans. They are beautiful, powerful, and pure. But it's that same purity that makes them fragile.

What kind of love would come from a Beast Blood encountering their one and only lifelong mate, and what if that mate turned out to be human?

The pair's eating habits and sex lives would surely differ, and a stable, mundane lifestyle might actually prove a burden on the Beast Blood, whose days are normally full of danger and excitement.

The storyline for *Beast † Blood* took off as I contemplated those things.

While crafting a plot about rains that fall only before daybreak, fortified cities

illuminating deserted wildernesses, and flowers glowing in the night, I envisioned a gorgeous Beast Blood running through those settings.

And then there's the heroine. Compared to the story's hero, Zelaide, Euphemia might lean more toward the ordinary, if we had to classify her. Nevertheless, I made sure to never have her stray from the "woman who keeps marching forward" heroine archetype, a woman who never betrays what she earnestly believes in.

The scene at the beginning where she chooses death rather than submit to being raped by gangsters might be too much of a traditionally Japanese ethos, but the Japanese of the past were a people who chose honorable deaths at all costs.

Of course, there is nothing good about that, but I wanted to suspend an alluring space in time, in the final moments of radiance exuded by a person who makes the extreme decision to end their life and deny others their victory. That brilliant light is exactly what captivated Zelaide.

Beast † Blood is a tale about the love, trials, and adventures shared by two people whose lives entwined at that very moment. And there is still plenty of story left to tell. I hope everyone overseas will enjoy seeing how their adventures play out! Until next time!

2019. 2.28



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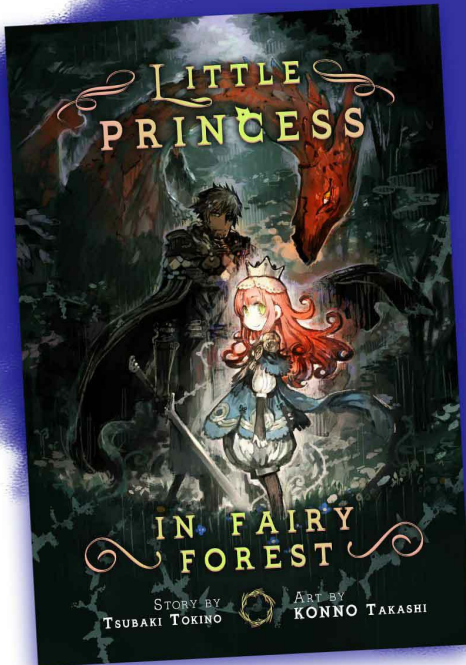
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LITTLE PRINCESS IN FAIRY FOREST

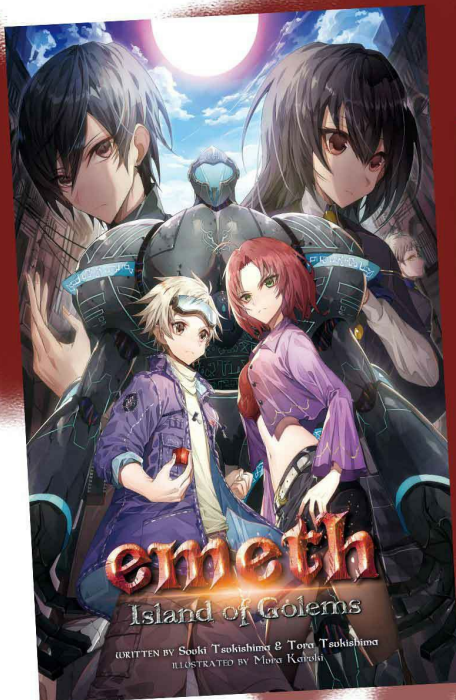
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