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First electronic publication February 2007

Chapter One

“Are you *insane*?”

Cambria lifted her head and stared in shock at her dark-haired boss. Dull red crept up his fleshy jowls and into his face, grey eyes narrowed with anger and his hand shook as he held out the inch-thick, buff coloured file she’d placed on his desk two hours ago.

“Sir?” She rose from her seat and stood with hands clasped.

Senator Heinrich Dortmund waved the offending file at her and she eased back. “My office. Now.” He turned and stormed back through the open double doors of his inner sanctum.

Cambria shuffled her feet on the grey carpet, confused by his reaction. She’d seen the Senator angry before, but nothing like this. He’d asked for research on the Judiciary and she’d obliged. She’d answered his question with explicit data, as requested. Nothing she could think of in her report should make him go off the deep end like this. Was there? It was a good report: researched to within an inch of its life. Had she missed something? Been in error somewhere?

Cambria worked as his research officer for six months. Any subject he’d raised, she’d gone to the library, documents room, archives, everywhere she could think of to get him answers. A surge of ice shot through her veins. Had she misinterpreted his questions? Wasted weeks of research on the wrong topic?

“Better not keep him waiting.” Missy Lane called from the desk next to hers. Missy headed the Senator’s staff. Nothing and no one got by without her knowledge. With her pale grey-green eyes, she could pin her staff to the wall and have them confess any misdemeanour they ever perpetrated. She was the terror of all the Senatorial staff for the World Council and Cambria was glad Missy was a friend, not an enemy. Missy personified efficiency.

Cambria gave her a wan smile. “Will he fire me? Or give me a good raking over hot coals?” Acid churned in her stomach and she suppressed a sigh. Before the year was out, she’d have another ulcer. Missy raised an eyebrow.

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” Cambria asked and Missy shrugged.

“It’s only a job.”

Cambria smoothed her black hair to make sure it hadn’t loosened from the bun, straightened her knee length emerald skirt and buttoned the matching jacket.

Taking a deep breath, she marched through the doors.

Senator Dortmund sat behind his lake of a carved oak desk, his expression thunderous. Matching oak bookcases lined two walls. On the left, floor-to-ceiling windows framed the snow-cloaked Swiss Alps; on the right, a deep red leather couch faced a smouldering fire. Thick, royal blue carpet lay on the floor, muffled her footsteps as she approached. The surface of the desk was neat, obsessively so, she thought. Everything lined up according to size and use, pens, desk calendar, coffee cup, clock, and banker’s desk lamp. Her file lay before him.

“Close the God-damned doors.”

She abruptly turned. Missy gave her a wink as she shut out the assistant’s area.

Cambria stood in front of the Senator. He didn’t invite her to sit. He glared at her instead and tapped a gold pen on top of the file.

“I asked you to research the case loads of the top ten Judicars, did I not?”

“Yes, sir.” Cambria was pleased her voice didn’t squeak. It came out calm and even, but she held her shaking hands behind her. Dortmund didn’t invite her to sit.

“I didn’t ask you for personal research.”

“No, sir.” *Where was this going?* She’d done as he asked.

“I didn’t ask you for any personal vendettas.”

“No, sir. I don’t understand. What is wrong with my research, sir?”

“What’s wrong? What’s *wrong?*” Dortmund’s voice got louder as he stood and leaned meaty fists on the desk. This close, she could see the sheen of sweat on his face. As she watched, a line of moisture trickled down his temple.

“Are you alright, sir?” She asked softly.

His gaze turned from furious to startled and he blinked. He eased his bulk into his seat. The leather groaned and the chair squeaked in protest. His voice was a sigh of inevitability, “Sit down, Ms Peterson.”

Cambria dropped onto the edge of the chair, hands in her lap. The Senator had lost his bluster and now sounded tired. Tired and, she looked closely into his face, scared. Why would her research *scare* him?

Dortmund resumed his nervous tapping with the pen. “Do you not read your own research?”

“Yes, sir. I read everything and collate it for you. Cross-references are noted as are dates of court appearances, resolutions, sentences, defendants, lawyers, witnesses, everything. I’m very careful in preparing it for you. Did I miss something?”

He waved her question away. “And you saw no pattern?”

“Pattern, sir? No. I collate the information in the same way, every time. If that’s what you mean?”

Dortmund pulled out a crumpled wad of handkerchief and wiped his brow. He frowned at the wetness and shoved the limp linen back into his top pocket.

The Senator, she saw, appeared uncharacteristically ruffled. His normally immaculate suit showed creases, his hair came loose from its tight braid, dark strands drifted around his face and sweat marks stained the colour of his white shirt.

“Sir, are you feeling well?” Her hand touched the edge of the desk and again he waved her away, but with a bitter snort.

“Of all the researchers I could have had, I had to get stuck with *you*.” He murmured.

“*Sir?*”

He brushed a hand over his hair, loosening the tight braid further. More wisps of black hair floated around his face. “Where did you work before you came to me?”

Cambria felt a surge of dread. “Uh, I was a researcher for the World Council, sir.”

He glared. “*Specifically*, I mean.”

Cambria shifted in her seat, heat crawled up her throat. “The, uh, Bureau of, ah, Political Security, sir.” She swallowed hard as he stared at her then gave a bark of laughter.

“Investigating politicians, huh?” His eyes narrowed on her again. “Are you here undercover?”

“No, sir. I resigned.” She shrugged. It wasn’t the first accusation of spying and it wouldn’t be the last. “I got fed up with the job; the liars, the cheats, the criminals.” Her shoulders drooped. “The accused always had an *excuse* and some of them got away with the most horrendous crimes, all in the name of ‘politics’. I’d had enough, sir and thought this would be a...” she searched for the words that wouldn’t offend the Senator, “less stressful job, sir.” She compromised.

“Less stressful,” he mused and studied the papers again. “You forgot your training, or ignored it.” He glanced at her and tilted his head. “Your work here,” he tapped the papers, “didn’t raise any alarm bells with you?”

“Well,” she chewed her lower lip, “Judge Bolingbroke does seem to have a lot of convictions, but that just means he’s harsher than most, less liberal, less willing to forgive. I admire that.” Her lips twisted in disgust. “Judge Ikara seems to think that society is to blame for a lot of his cases. He dismisses the prosecution arguments as if they are unimportant and directs many of his questions to the defendant, as if the defendant wouldn’t lie to save his own skin.”

“Yes.” The Senator nodded. “Given what you’ve just said about politicians, I believe you mean that. But, Ms Peterson, you should have looked closer at the Judicar. You should have been suspicious. You should have brought this to my attention *before* forming this report.”

Cambria was confused. The Senator had asked her to research the caseloads of the judicar. The report would go to the World Council for review. Twenty-four judges worked for the Council. They investigated war crimes, crimes that crossed international borders, international corporation financial misconduct, anything and everything that crossed borders and legal lines. The crime rate, however, was on the increase and the World Council decided to investigate the need for more judges. More judges, more investigators and maybe, the introduction of broader powers. Interpol could only do so much; within the law, that is.

“Sir, I did what you asked me to do, nothing more.”

“Ms Peterson, what you have given me goes way beyond mere research on case loads.”

“Sir, I wasn’t *asked* to look for patterns; I didn’t look for more than what you asked: What the case loads were for the judges and made a comparison.”

“Yes,” he nodded, “and a fine job you did, too. Unfortunately, you’ve managed to discover some... discrepancies.” He paused and looked out of the window. Cambria’s gaze followed his. The Alps’ majesty hurt the eyes; sharp white caps against a painfully blue sky and she looked back at the Senator.

“Have you shown this file to anyone else?” He asked quietly.

“Yes, sir. Missy Lane approves all my work.”

His head swivelled back to her. “No one else?”

“No, sir, it’s no one else’s business... yet.”

“But you left a trail.”

“Trail?” What was he trying to say?

“Information requests, sign in books, contacts within departments.”

Cambria shrugged. It was normal procedure. What had the Senator so worried? “Of course, sir. I’m not doing any clandestine research here.”

“But you have, my young friend. You *have*. And what you found will rock the Judicar and World Council down to its Armani-Gucci shoes.” He closed the file and took a deep breath. “This is the only copy?”

Cambria felt a chill ripple down her spine. She slowly nodded and he pushed the file to her. “Make copies. Hide them, send them wherever, but make sure there are copies that can be accessed. Do it now.”

She stood and he looked up at her. “Just so you understand *perfectly* the situation you have placed us: Judge Bolingbroke is corrupt. You can see that when you look for patterns. Study his cases and make note of the timings. Work fast, Ms Peterson, but find those convicts. No matter what the crime or charges, find those convicts and confirm they are where they are supposed to be. In particular, compare the cases of Sebastian Cortez and Deshandra Smith.” His eyes held hers, as if to convey the urgency of the task.

Cambria picked up the file and held it close to her chest. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t need to tell you to keep this confidential. Don’t talk to anyone about it. Secure this file and all copies.” He reached for his com. “I’m going to arrange some security.”

“Yes, sir.”

xxx

Cambria sat at her desk, the file still clutched to her chest. What had she *done*? *You forgot your training, or ignored it.* The Senator’s voice echoed in her head. *You forgot your training, or ignored it.*

She’d actually managed to suppress what she’d learned at the Bureau in her desperate pursuit of a normal life.

A job with Senator Heinrich Dortmund in Administration Policies felt like the perfect foil for all those long, frustrating hours; a *safe* job, a job that still had consequences, a job that didn’t mean life or death, conviction or freedom. A job that changed the way the World Council did business, streamlined it, and made it work more efficiently. There was satisfaction in that, wasn’t there?

As she sat there and stared at her desktop, she realised she hadn’t, quite, forgotten her training. She still performed as a researcher for the Bureau on a subliminal level but she’d ignored the results. All of her research over the past six months had the same tone: an investigative report, with all the i’s dotted and t’s crossed. Everything that the Senator asked for filled those reports. She never gave him a reason to ask for anything extra or a clarification of a point. It was in the self-contained and complete reports. No wonder he was so happy with her previous work and so unhappy with her now; she’d done her job *too* well.

She’d discovered something that could doom them both, and anyone else with whom she’d had contact.

Cambria peeled the report from her chest and opened it. Each of the judges had their own notarised section. She pulled out Judge Bolingbroke’s section. It felt thicker than the others, she mused. Why hadn’t she seen it?

I did ignore it, she thought, ignored it and suppressed any suspicions in an effort to do a good job; Admin Policy, a haven of corruption? No way. But I knew. Deep down, I knew something was off. Dortmund was right after all.

She set Bolingbroke’s section aside and slowly, page by page, fed the other sections into her duplicator. She set it for ten copies. She would have to copy Bolingbroke’s

later, after hours. There was no one around now, but that could change and she didn't want to be discovered with just that one section.

It would take time for the main file to copy and she glanced at her watch.

Two o'clock. Time for lunch. She locked Bolingbroke's section into a desk drawer and picked up her purse.

Missy had already gone for a meal. There was no need for Cambria to wait for her return; the office was often empty at this time of day. But Cambria felt uneasy about leaving the rest of the file running through the duplicator. She shook her head. The other judges' files were boringly correct; only Bolingbroke's held damning information and she'd get to that later. The copies would take an hour at least, so she shrugged and left.

xxx

Missy was typing up a storm when Cambria returned. She walked past the older woman and sat at her desk. The pages still churned out of her duplicator and the basket filled. She checked the indicator. There was half of one more copy to come.

"What did the Senator want?" Missy asked.

"Hmm?" Cambria turned her attention to the woman, and thought of what to say. "Oh, he thought I'd made a mistake with one of the report sections," she smiled. A half-truth was better than a lie.

"*You?* Make a *mistake*? Hah! Did you tell him he was wrong?"

"Missy!" Cambria said with horror, "you don't tell a Senator of the World Council he's... *wrong!*" She took a deep breath to still her pounding heart. "I merely suggested he look closer at the material. He looked it over and agreed that he'd... misunderstood the section." She gave the woman a smile that felt too brittle. "It's all better now."

The duplicator announced it had completed the job with a quiet tone and Cambria unhooked the basket.

"Need some help with that?" Missy asked.

Cambria glanced at her, then the basket. Missy had already vetted the file, so why did she feel uneasy? Maybe it was the Senator's suspicions and accusations that put

her on edge? She ignored the feeling and smiled. Missy regularly helped her collate copied files. She couldn't afford to be protective of the material now; couldn't afford to deviate from her normal routine.

"Sure, I just need them put into piles."

They soon had ten piles of paper organised and in colour-coded folders. Missy stood back a frown deepening the line between her grey brows. "These don't seem as thick as the original."

Cambria gave her the original file and Missy placed it against each pile. Her puzzled expression deepened. "I was sure this was thicker. Is there anything missing from it that the Senator needed?"

"No, he saw everything and handed it to me to copy. Everything is where it should be."

"Why so many?" Missy flicked through the file, scanning random documents.

"Distribution to the relevant parties, I expect." Cambria hedged. It was true, but she still had to decide where and to whom to send the file. Dortmund had given her no candidates.

Was that for his own protection? If he didn't know, he couldn't tell.

Cambria shook her head. It was just like the Bureau again. Suspicion, lack of trust and all that went with it. Why, for Gods sake, would the Senator be so scared? All he had to do was hand the file to the Judicar General and that would be that. The JG could take care of the rest. Unless... unless there was some reason not to *trust* the JG?

What the hell had she stumbled across? Corruption to the highest level of the judiciary?

And why didn't she see it when she was reviewing her research?

"I'll just look closer," she murmured.

"What did you say?" Missy asked sharply.

Cambria flushed. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Now Missy was looking at her strangely. "Huh?"

Missy shook her head. “Nothing, I just thought you said... never mind. There,” she patted the top of a file, “all done.”

“Thanks, Missy. I’ll just send these out via courier.”

“I don’t know, Cam, I still think something’s missing. Maybe I should check through it, one document at a time.”

“It’s the same size as the original, Missy, there’s nothing...” She couldn’t let Missy see what was inside the file. At the very least, she would discover that there were twenty-three sections, not twenty four.

“I know, I know, but I’d still feel better if I looked it over before they went out. Don’t want the committees accusing us of misinformation, now do we?” She grabbed the first copy and the original and sat at her desk.

Cambria couldn’t over-rule her boss. Nothing would go out until she signed off on it, and now her suspicions were aroused. How could she stop the woman? *Think fast, Cam.*

She slumped down into her chair with a sigh. “Oh. I suppose it’s protocol for your position.”

Missy put a finger on the page she was reading and raised her head. “What is?”

“Checking my work. I’ve only been here six months and I understand I’m still on probation here. I just thought you were happy with my work.”

“I am, Cambria, and I don’t need to check your work. You have demonstrated an ability for high quality research.” Missy watched her closely and Cambria made evident her glumness. Missy clucked her tongue in sympathy. “The Senator did a number on you, didn’t he?”

Cambria looked away and Missy sighed.

“I know he can be ferocious, but he really is a nice guy. It’s your first time on the carpet. I understand that, but you can’t take it personally. I assure you he doesn’t. He only wants the best from you and the best he has it. Didn’t you correct him in an oh-so-polite way?”

“Yes.”

“And wasn’t he satisfied that the error was his?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re still working here, so he didn’t fire you. In fact, he gave you more to do, I’ll wager.” There was an understanding twinkle in her eye and Cambria felt vaguely guilty.

“Yeah, he did.”

“There you go then.” Missy said with a satisfied smirk. “My going through the copies doesn’t mean he or I don’t trust your work. We do.” She clucked her tongue again. “Look at it this way: it is my job and the Senator’s reputation. That’s why I have to go through this. If there’s anything missing and it comes to the attention of the committee, all sorts of accusations will fly. You know how that can harm a Senator in Dortmund’s position. Now, why don’t you take those sorrowful baby-blues home early, hmm? I’ll send the first copy out tonight, if you leave me the list.”

Cambria swallowed. She hadn’t written the list yet. “I’ll just make it up now,” she gave Missy a sickly smile. This was why she hadn’t been a field officer with the Bureau: deception wasn’t her forte. How was she going to get out of this? By the time she finished the list, Missy would have checked the first copy. She could feel sweat bloom on her forehead as she bent her head to the blank page.

The first copy should go to someone on the committee or, better yet, one of the assistants.

No, I’ll send one copy to one of the clerks. They’d be confused as to why they received document, unsure about whom to question about it. It would delay anyone finding it. Yes. The first to a clerk. She checked the database, searched for a name that was similar to someone further up the chain. There: Personal Assistant to Senator Minh, Rupert Nguyen and level two clerk in Domestic Research, *Robert* Nguyen.

Cambria lips lifted slightly. At least one copy would be safe, if only for a while. Robert Nguyen, judging from his personnel file, was the kind of employee who, if he didn’t know, didn’t ask and would stuff the file somewhere... inconvenient.

Cambria worked hard to ignore Missy, but she kept flicking a glance her way.

Missy turned page after page, checking off documents on a third piece of paper. Her face was blank with concentration and Cambria watched her for a moment then returned to her list.

She could get away with three legitimate recipients; the others would be outside the World Council organization. But there was another problem.

The Senator thought the information she had uncovered explosive and potentially damaging to the Council and Judiciary. If the wrong people found out who knew about it, the repercussions could be deadly. Whom could she risk with such information? Who could protect themselves against the might of the government and legal system?

Her thoughts kept returning to her former job. Cambria knew covert operatives. They would fit the bill. They knew how to go underground if necessary. They would recognise what she sent them as important. She added another five names. That left one more. One copy had to go somewhere else and she thought back. She would have to pick someone no one would suspect. Someone with no connection to her, or, she allowed, a connection that was so tenuous as to be almost non-existent.

Childhood friends and acquaintances, schoolteachers and councillors, neighbours and friends of her parents; all were candidates.

The dual tone of her communicator startled her out of her thoughts. She slid a glance to her right, but Missy was still leafing through the pages.

She opened the com and stuck the bug in her ear. "Senator Dortmund's Office, Cambria Peterson."

"Hey, gorgeous." His voice was a velvet slide down her spine and she smiled. Cambria never tired of listening to him. She'd met Louis Boudreaux at a nearby café barely a month ago. He sat behind her, murmuring compliments that turned increasingly risqué until she'd blushed and turned to him. She thought she recognised those soft tones, but couldn't think of why.

His back was to her and he sat alone. At first, she thought he was reading aloud, or practicing lines to use on his girlfriend.

The stranger spoke into a cup of espresso. Cambria felt a lick of disappointment that he wasn't talking to her. His voice was rich, seductive and filled with dark promises. She turned back and he started again.

Her hands shook by the time she finished her lunch and stood. She'd taken one step away from the table when his hand reached out to grab hers and she looked down at him.

Eyes the colour of Belgian chocolate smiled up at her. His rich, sable hair had drifted across his forehead. But it was his smile that caught her attention. A smile that was familiar and strange at the same time. "*Chere*, did you not hear me?"

Cambria swallowed. "H... hear you?" She cleared her throat and his thumb caressed her wrist. Her mouth dried up.

"I thought I spoke loud enough, explained my intentions clear enough." His smile turned secretive and she felt the heat rise in her face again. Louis convinced her to have dinner with him and they'd been together ever since. And the familiarity? He was her contact in the archives.

She shook off the memories and returned to the present.

"Hey, yourself." She said and turned her back on Missy.

"Wanna take a break and go do something... wicked?" Images of just how wicked they could be popped into her head.

"Always, darlin', what have you got in mind?"

"Hmmm. Well, it involves whipped cream, strawberries, honey and champagne."

Yeah, she thought, those were the images, and she felt a sensual shiver ripple across her skin. It was if he was already touching her.

"Uh, huh." Her voice dropped. "You wouldn't be trying to corrupt me, would you Mr Boudreaux?"

"But yes, how clever of you." His husky chuckle had her licking her dry lips and swallowing.

"Uh," she flicked a glance at Missy. The pile of documents was down to the last few pages. "When would you like to arrange an appointment?"

"As soon as you can get free, *chere*, I have everything waiting for you."

"Your place or mine?"

"Yours. I prefer your... décor."

Cambria's apartment was done in lush colours. After growing up surrounded by drab and dirty concrete, steel grey skies and washed out and tired people, she was determined to have colour in her life; and colour she had.

But Louis was referring to her bedroom. She'd liked the idea of sleeping surrounded by vibrant colours. Her queen-size bed radiated explosive shades of reds and blues. She decorated the room with contrasting colours and she always felt better, no matter how bad her day, when she lay down on the bed and absorbed the richness of the rainbow.

"An hour." She said softly.

"Until then, *chere*. I shall await you." As always, his voice held promises, but she knew he would keep them. One thing he was very, very good at was... entertaining her. She still didn't understand the attraction, but after the first few weeks, she didn't care.

Cambria pressed the disconnect button and sighed. She shook of the burning anticipation and turned as Missy cleared her throat.

Cambria blushed and turned to the woman.

Missy was grinning and the heat burned darker in Cambria's face.

"I... he... we were just..."

"I can see that," Missy chuckled and thumped the first copy on her desk. "All clear. Why don't you go and... get ready." Her chuckle turned to a snicker.

"Thanks, Missy." Cambria turned away from her boss to hide what she was about to do. She opened the draw and slid Bolingbroke's file into her purse. She locked the draw again and stood.

"I'll, ah, see you, um, tomorrow," she stammered, her mind full of Louis, produce and what he could do with it.

Missy grinned at her again. "I hope you won't be too tired, we have the Senator's staff conference at eight sharp.

"No, I'll be here." She strode to the door and missed her boss's grin switch off.

A calculating gleam appeared and Missy turned to her own com.

“Yes?” A German accented man inquired.

“Confirmed. Immediate action required. Be advised, target has original.”

“Midnight. You know what to do.” And the man signed off.

Missy checked the time. The Senator would remain in his office for another two hours. She had that long to make her own arrangements, but first... She picked up the first copy of the files on her desk and page by page, fed them into the disposal unit. No one could reconstruct information once it had gone through the intense heat of disposal.

Chapter Two

Louis opened the door to her apartment before Cambria could put her key into the lock. It always amazed her that he knew when she'd arrived. He'd sworn he wasn't psychic, but Cambria always wondered. He was the kind of man who knew what she needed and he enveloped her into a hug before she could speak.

His hands smoothed up and down her back as she nuzzled his throat.

"Rough day?" He asked.

"A little peculiar, but nothing I can tell you about." She murmured and kissed the tanned column of his throat.

"So," he leaned back, "we feed you, we entertain you, we make you feel better." He touched his mouth to hers briefly and released her.

She stepped into the apartment and breathed deeply. Louis was cooking, and her mouth watered. "I'll go and get into something more... accessible," she said and he smiled with wicked intent.

"Please, something easy to peel."

Cambria gave him a wink and sashayed toward her room.

Louis came up behind her before she'd gone more than half a dozen steps. His voice tickled her ear before his hands slid down to her hips. "A walk like that, *chere*, will get you peeled very quickly indeed."

Cambria held his wrists, then moved his hands up her body to her breasts. "Maybe I want to be peeled. By a professional peeler, of course."

He pulled her back against his body. "I am, always, happy to oblige." And he walked her into the bedroom, all thought of food forgotten.

xxx

"I must go, Cambria," Louis whispered in her ear. Cambria woke from a light doze, but her body started to hum again at his words; the inflection of his accent stirred her as no other.

"Go?" She rolled to face him and his eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness.

"*Oui*. I am to work early."

Cambria glanced at the bedside clock. “But it’s only a quarter to twelve.”

“I know.” He leaned down and brushed her lips with his. “But if I stay, we will not sleep.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Her hand smoothed down his chest and lower. He lightly held her wrist to stop her, and he gave her a smile filled with regret.

“You have an important meeting tomorrow, and I,” he sighed dramatically, “I must work in the dungeon.”

She lifted a hand and gently ran it through his hair. It was a relief to know he was tempted, but a disappointment that he wouldn’t stay. When he’d first refused her offer, she’d asked him if there was someone else. He hadn’t laughed, but regarded her seriously and said that he would only stay when he was absolutely sure of his feelings for her. She’d felt disillusioned, but satisfied at the thought he was seriously considering a deeper involvement with her. His honesty was one of the things that attracted her to him. But now, when she needed him to be here with her, that honesty got in the way. “One night, Louis, one night you will stay?”

She could see his eyes narrow; he knew what she was asking, what a risk she was taking, what she was offering and he gave her a slow nod.

“One night, *chere*, I will stay forever.” His hand brushed down her body, then he rolled away from her and out of bed.

In silence, she watched him dress. His body was magnificent. She’d thought that he would have a nice body, but not the toned and tanned one he’d exposed to her that first night after their date. Watching the muscles ripple in his back and his buttocks was never a tiresome sight and she sighed.

“And what was that for?”

“I love to watch you dress,” she grinned and sat up, “and undress. It makes me want to come over there and help.”

He smiled at her and sealed his pants. “I feel the same way.” He fastened his watch around a tanned wrist, then donned his shirt and sat down to tug on his boots.

When he was done, he leaned over and gave her a soul-searing kiss. “Tomorrow? My place?”

Once her eyes had uncrossed, she licked her lips and gave him a nod. “Oh, yeah. This time, I will bring...” she tilted her head. “Flavoured oil, red wine, and... ice cream with chocolate sauce.”

Louis’s deep and rich laugh sent tingles through her.

Cambria got out of bed and put on a robe. She walked him to the door where they shared another deep kiss. It was more than affection, she thought, less than love. Whatever it was, it made her feel... just that. It made her *feel*. Nothing she could describe; nothing she wanted to describe. It was special, between her and Louis.

He stood at the door and looked at her, his eyes roaming her face, her throat, her hair and her face again as if memorising every facet, every flaw, every part of her.

Cambria cupped his jaw. “What is it?” She whispered.

He didn’t reply, although a small smile played around his mouth and he turned his head to kiss the palm of her hand. “*Adieu, amant.*” With one last look, he strode down the corridor.

Cambria slowly closed the door behind him and leaned against it. There was no doubt about it, the man was potent stuff; a man she was falling in love with. She shivered at the thought. He would change her life. Hell, he’d *already* changed it. Her problem was what to do about it.

Why should you do anything? A voice in her head whispered as she flicked off the entry light, plunged the hall into darkness.

“Because he has the key to hurting me,” she replied to the empty room. “And I gave it to him without any thought.”

She started to go back to her bedroom. A noise caught her attention and burst of fear held her frozen in place. Cambria shook her head. There was no one here, no way for anyone to break in without either she or Louis knowing. It was just the apartment settling in the night. She tiptoed into the lounge room, across from her bedroom. She saw the dark, shadowed furniture. Everything was still, hushed with the deepness of night, but she could sense... *something*.

Fear flashed through her. The very air felt different. Something or someone was in here. She had two choices: back into the hallway and out the door to a neighbour’s

and call the police, or allay her fears first and turn on the light. Her hand reached out to turn the light on.

Someone grabbed her right wrist and spun her, slammed her into the wall. She squeaked with shock and pain as her cheek hit the wall. She used her left hand to brace herself against the smooth surface. The man, she could smell his sweat now, wrenched her arm behind her and up towards her shoulder blade. It hurt and she cried out. He slammed her into the wall, grabbed her other hand and pulled that behind her, too.

Then she felt cold metal around her wrists and heard a grating, rippling click.

“What are you doing?” She cried out. “Who the *fuck* are you? What do you want?”

The man didn’t reply, but kicked her legs out from under her and she fell heavily onto the carpet.

He shoved the sleeve of her robe up and jabbed a syringe into her flesh. “NO! What...”

Her voice slurred, her vision dimmed, then went black.

xxx

She was cold. Shivers wracked her body as she slowly came awake. Somewhere she could hear water drops plinking into more water. Cambria tried to roll over, but her bound wrists stopped her. Her eyes opened as she remembered the attack in her apartment. Kidnapped! But, why? She was just a researcher; nobody important. Her family were estranged, she had few friends, Louis, but no money; at least, not enough to pay a ransom, so why... Yesterday came back to her. Bolingbroke?

Cambria rubbed her aching cheek against her shoulder and realised she was naked.

Where was her robe? Had they...? Her body ached with bruises, but she didn’t feel as if they’d touched her, but how could she tell?

She looked around the room. No, it was a cell - a small two-metre-by-two-metre cell. The walls were dirt-streaked concrete and the floor discoloured as if from damp. She lay on a bunk with a thin mattress. So thin, she could feel each wooden slat beneath her. Across from her was a thick metal door with a closed peephole.

Cambria struggled to sit up. Prison? It felt...

A key clattered in the lock and she brought her knees up to her chest to hide as much of her nakedness as possible.

A man in a black uniform with gold epaulettes walked in carrying an orange coverall. He had white blond hair and expressionless brown eyes. A scar bisected his chin to his lower lip. He tossed the coverall onto the bunk.

“Get dressed.”

“I can’t with these cuffs on.”

His hand lashed out and struck her sore cheek. Cambria tumbled off the bed and landed face first on the damp concrete floor.

The man shoved his knee into her back and unlocked the cuffs. Once done, he kneeled a little harder until she gasped. Then he stood and left.

Cambria rolled onto her back and winced. Why did he *do* that? She touched a finger to her bruised cheek. It felt hot and tender. She’d only reminded him... ah. Obviously prisoners weren’t supposed to emphasise stupid comments; that or he simply liked to cause pain.

She levered herself to a sitting position and leaned against the bed frame.

Until she knew what was going on, she’d keep her mouth shut and her ears open. Cambria pulled the coverall on and felt a lift in her spirit. It was prison garb, yeah, but she wasn’t naked anymore.

She climbed back onto the bunk. Missy was gonna be pissed at her for missing the meeting. And Louis, did he wonder where she was?

Someone would find her soon. This was a mistake. She’d done nothing wrong.

Hours passed and no one came. Her stomach rumbled, but no food came. She had no water, either. Cambria drifted in and out of sleep for a while, until she was fed up.

She paced the cell; to the door, to the bed and back again. This way and that way, backward and forward. It took only a few steps in any direction.

She’d checked the door, but it was solid. A metal plate covered the keyhole and the peephole remained shut. She put her ear to the door, but heard nothing. She tried the walls with the same result.

Total isolation.

The room itself held no surprises either: a bed, a bare light bulb behind a screen in the ceiling and a bucket in the corner.

Cambria slumped onto the bed. It had to be that damned file. Where was the protection that Dortmund was going to arrange? Was this it? To be held in isolation until Bolingbroke was arrested? It didn't *feel* like protective custody, it felt like criminal detention. So, if this wasn't protection, then she and Dortmund were too late in their discoveries; too late or someone had betrayed her.

Louis? That thought brought a jab of pain to her heart. He'd been anxious to leave last night. Had he known? But no, how could he? She never spoke about her work, just as he never talked about his, even though they both knew where the other worked. Their relationship was outside of the job. They had other things to talk about. Had that been a mistake? She'd only known him a month. What did she really know about him?

Enough, a voice in her head said.

Someone else, then. Dortmund knew. Missy, too. Every contact she'd asked for information knew a piece, but not enough to put the whole picture together.

A key in the lock interrupted her thoughts and she raised her head.

The same guard walked in. He had manacles in his hands. Another guard came in behind him, grinning with expectation.

Cambria sat up.

"Hands."

"What's going on?" She asked and eyed the man. She didn't want to be hit again, her eye had already swelled almost shut and throbbed painfully.

"Prisoners will not speak." He replied. He closed the manacle around her wrist and repeated the process with her other wrist. Then manacles clicked shut around her ankles, a chain between wrist and ankle restricted her walk to a shuffle.

At least we're going somewhere.

The guard gripped her upper arm, hauled her upright. She took a step forward to steady herself and nearly fell. The manacles were too close together for a proper step.

“Out,” the other guard said and lifted his baton as if prepared for an attack.

Cambria frowned at him. She wasn't dangerous, so why were they treating her as if she'd jump them at the first opportunity?

The blond guard poked her in the back with his baton and she did a quick shuffle to keep from falling.

Poke, shuffle, poke, shuffle. The guards ignored her requests to leave her alone. She could only go as fast as the manacles allowed, but the guards didn't care.

The white corridor walls reflected dull light from the single bulbs set every few feet above black metal doors.

At the end of the corridor, a barred metal door automatically swung open and she shuffled on to carpet. She went down another corridor and told to stop in front of a blank wooden door.

The blond guard reached around her to open it and she shuffled through.

Cambria's eyebrows lifted in surprised. She was in an office, of sort. A blank walled office. It held a clean grey meal desk and a chair. Behind the desk was another door with a five-drawer filing cabinet next to it.

Poke. “Stand in front of the desk four paces back,” the guard demanded.

She glanced over her shoulder at him and he raised the baton. The second guard came in and closed the door. He stood next to it.

Cambria watched the second door. Now she would get answers.

It suddenly swung open and a short, stocky, sandy-haired man entered. His pale blue eyes stared into hers with satisfaction and malice.

He wore the black robes of the judiciary and her heart sank. His Honour, Sir Ranald Bolingbroke. The man she'd admired for his hard stance on crime.

“What the hell is this?” She demanded and the blond guard whacked across the back of her knees. Cambria crumpled to the ground and the judge laughed.

“Get up, you stupid bitch. Nice shot, Moeller.”

Cambria lifted her head and glared at the judge. “You'll never get away with this.”

He flicked his head and the two guards lifted her to her feet.

“Such a cliché, from an apparently intelligent woman. But to reply: I already have.” He smirked and sat behind the desk.

She shrugged off the guards’ hands. “You can’t hold me prisoner. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Ah,” he smiled and the dimples in his cheek deepened. He had a sparkle in his blue eyes that didn’t bode well for her. “I can’t have you interfering with the judiciary, you know.” His British accent was more obvious now.

“I haven’t interfered with anything.” She shuffled forward, was dragged back by the guards.

Bolingbroke shook his head with mock sadness. “Tsk, tsk. Lying to a judge, another charge, I think.”

“Another? I haven’t been charged with *anything*, yet! I want my lawyer.”

Bolingbroke and the guards laughed. Cambria stared at them. What was so funny?

The judge finally wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Oh, I don’t think we’ll involve lawyers in this.” His smile faded and she could see determination in his expression.

“You can’t hold me without charge.”

“I can, I have, I will.” Ice coated his voice and there was winter in his eyes. “Your research could have been very bad for me. Now, it won’t be.”

She stared at him, stunned. He *knew*. She hoped Missy sent at least one copy out otherwise she had the only proof in the original report.

“Now you understand. Yes, I’ve been aware of Dortmund’s little exercise, but it has come to nothing.” He tilted his head. “Well, no, not nothing. It has caused me a moment’s inconvenience. An inconvenience I’m about to fix.”

“What are you going to do?” Her mind scrambled for a way out. Only two people knew, *in toto*, about her report: Dortmund and Missy. An ugly suspicion surged into her mind. “What have you done?”

Bolingbroke cleared his throat, leaned his elbows on the table and stared into her eyes. He ignored her.

“Cambria Jaxentia Peterson, you are hereby charged and convicted of the assassination of Senator Heinrich Alfonse Adolphus Dortmund.”

“What? *What?* NO! I *didn't!*” She shuffled forward again and once again, the guard knocked to the ground. She fell onto her elbows and tried to rise. One guard placed a knee in her lower back, his baton under her chin and held her head up. Bolingbroke came around the desk.

“That you did,” he continued with a smile, “murder him by bashing his head in. The trashing of his office was nice touch, I think. It looked like someone killed him in a rage. Why? Well, who knows and who cares. He’s dead and you’re guilty.” He perched on the edge of the desk and stared down at her as she struggled to breathe.

“As for all your research, well, no one can read ashes, now can they?”

Her eyes widened and tears of betrayal surged. *Missy.*

“Oh, yes,” he said as he saw the truth dawn in her eyes. “I have moles in all departments. I’ve kept an eye on your recent work. But of course I couldn’t do anything until I had my own copy. Unfortunately, it arrived too late and I had to take care of the Senator and you. Shame, really, but like I said, I can’t have anyone interfering with the judiciary. I know much about many people. No can be allowed to touch me, Cambria, no one. I have a lot of work to do. And in case you think there is anything out there to condemn me, we found your section on me. Very detailed.” He nodded, “And very, very good work.”

“You... son... of... a... bitch!” She said through gritted teeth.

“Your compliments aside, we must think of an... appropriate punishment, don’t we, boys?”

The two guards chuckled.

“You... can’t...” The guard tightened his grip on the baton and her vision turned blurry and red at the edges.

Bolingbroke tipped his head and cupped his ear. “What was that? Surely, you’re not trying to tell me what I can and cannot do?” He adjusted his position so he was sitting fully on the desk, his legs gently swinging. “I’m a judge; a hereditary judge. A position handed down in my family for five hundred years. Bolingbrokes are no one to be trifled with, I can assure you, madam. I can do whatever I damn well please.

And it pleases me to get rid of you. Ease up Moeller; I don't want her dead. Yet." He nodded his head and the guard relaxed his grip slightly.

Cambria coughed and dragged in a gulp of air. The guard ground his knee into her lower spine and she whimpered against the pain.

"Having you disappear is good. Mrs Lane can take care of any questions people are likely to ask." His twisted smile chilled her. "But having the World Council run around trying to find out who did it and why will be even better." He took a deep breath. "Of course, records of your conviction will never see the light of day." He chuckled. "It's all so delicious. I will, of course, demand justice and the like." He waved a hand in the air.

Cambria remained silent and Bolingbroke glanced down at her.

"That's better. Now," he tapped his chin, "where to send you for the term of your natural life?"

"Beterix?" One guard suggested and Bolingbroke pursed his lips.

"No, too tame. We wouldn't want Ms Peterson to be too comfortable after all the trouble she could have caused me."

"Trantis?" Moeller provided.

"Wouldn't last a day," Bolingbroke murmured. "No, it has to be some place where the prisoner can spend a long, long time thinking about whom she tried to betray. A place where there are those of a... similar attitude." His legs swung faster, closer to her face and she lifted her head away from his feet. "A place where she can think on all she's lost, but still be a *functioning* member of a community." He snapped his fingers and glared down at her.

"Tudor, I think, yes. Tudor's the place for you, my girl."

"Where...?" The baton returned and the guards grabbed her hair to hold her still.

"Tudor." He grinned secretively. "A place, I understand of some beauty and some... peril. But you can't have beauty without the beasts." He looked at the guards. "You know what to do."

"You're... *insane!*" She choked out as she glared up at him.

His face twisted into hatred and his booted foot lashed out and caught her on the temple.

Sparks flashed in her vision and she slumped in the guard's arms.

XXX

This can't be happening.

Cambria lay on cold ground and she opened her eyes, stared at the white walls and lowered her gaze. Someone had dressed in jeans and a blue, long-sleeved shirt. On her feet were heavy hiking boots. Everything smelled brand new.

She sat up and a guard came over, gripped her in a headlock while... what did Bolingbroke call him? Moeller... lifted an injector.

Cambria didn't struggle as the implant shot into the muscle above her collarbone.

"A guarantee that you'll never return." He smirked. "It'll explode if you try."

He released her, dragged her upright and turned her to face a shiny metal door.

How could my life spiral out of control so fast? She wondered and swayed as the guards released her.

One gave her a shove and stepped back. She glanced over her shoulder at them.

Both nodded their heads, indicating the door. Moeller raised a black pistol, aimed it at her midsection.

How can I get back to the place I was yesterday, the day before, a week ago?

She stepped up to the door and wiped her sweating palms on her jean legs.

Cambria reached out and touched the doorknob. It warmed under her palm and she pulled her hand back. Once again, she glanced over her shoulder.

Moeller smiled. It wasn't friendly or encouraging, but smugly told her she had no choice. Whatever was beyond the door was her destiny as Bolingbroke had decreed it. Evil bastard.

One day, she promised herself as she gripped the knob again, one day I will return and make that shit pay; and all his minions, too.

The door swung inward to reveal a dimly lit passageway leading to darkness. A dull red light blinked over the threshold and she stepped inside.

For a third time, she glanced back and Moeller shoo-ed her with his pistol.

She couldn't see the end so complete was the blackness. The red light only reached a few feet, beyond that, darkness beckoned and she swallowed. Her throat was dry, her stomach empty and her head ached, but she took another step forward and released the knob.

The door swung shut and there was a click as it locked.

She spun around and felt for the knob, but there was only a metal plate. She was on her own.

Cambria braced herself against the door, faced the unknown. At least the light... it blinked off and she suppressed a scream as pure fear-filled adrenalin shot through her system.

She wasn't afraid of the dark, just *this* dark. She couldn't go back, only forward and she pushed away from the door and took a scraping step forward. Then another.

Eventually, she reasoned, there must be an exit. Although, Bolingbroke seemed to be the kind of evil shit that would lock her in a room and throw away the key.

Beneath her feet, the floor vibrated and she reached out to touch a wall. It, too, was vibrating.

She listened and a strange tonal and high-pitched whine assaulted her ears.

Cambria ignored it and staggered through the blackness, her hands held out in front of her in case she bumped into something.

The whine grew louder the further she walked and she pressed her fingers to her ears. It muted the sound, but dizziness rocked her. To combat the staggers, she touched her left elbow to the wall. The vibrations felt stronger, but she wasn't dizzy anymore.

A sudden flash of light blinded her and she shut her eyes.

When she opened them, she was surprised to be on her back, fingers no longer pressed to her ears and the tunnel streaming with light. It hurt her eyes and she squinted against the brightness.

"Come on now, lass, time to go."

She lifted her head and the shadow of a giant of a man stood in a doorway a few feet from her. Where had he come from? Where was she? She was going to be late... She rubbed her eyes, pressed thumb and forefinger into the sockets.

“You’re not dreaming, girl.” The giant said as if reading her thoughts. And she remembered. The prison, Bolingbroke, the guards and the shiny metal door.

Cambria sat up and he reached down a dinner plate-sized hand to help her up.

“Who are you?” She asked hoarsely as she rose on unsteady legs.

“Manor. I’m here to help you.” He guided her through the door and she stopped in shock.

She was in some kind of *fortress*. But that wasn’t *possible!* The World Council building was in the centre of Berne! Nothing so archaic within the city!

Massive, black blocks created a thirty-foot wall. A ten-foot wooden gate interrupted the wall and a metal grid with spikes stopped halfway down. The gate dwarfed a much smaller, more ordinary door. It felt as if she were in a medieval castle.

She turned back, but Manor closed the door, so she looked up. The cliff rose hundreds of feet above her. The sky was a deep blue; the light from the sun tinged the rugged cliff face with orange. Was close to sunrise or sunset?

“Where the hell am I?” She asked and looked up at him. He had to be seven feet plus, with dark unruly hair and a gape-toothed smile. His chest was massive as were his shoulders.

He was thickly muscled and standing like a tree in front of the brushed metal door.

“Welcome to Tudor.” His blue eyes held sadness as well as a welcome.

“And where is that?”

Huge shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Could be the Domino Sector or the Warrington Sector, I dunno, but on Tudor...”

“The... the what? *Where?*” She fisted her hands on her hips.

He opened his mouth to reply but her stomach rumbled loudly and he glanced down at her belly instead. “Hungry, huh? I’d like to say it’s a long way, but,” he jerked a brown thumb at the door, “it’s only a hundred feet.”

Cambria stared at him. “What. Are. You. *Talking*. About?”

He held her arm lightly and drew her away from the door. “I think you need some food first, then I’ll answer any questions you might have.”

Manor led her to another door set into the cliff face. Inside was a large room, almost comfortable with rough-hewn furniture of a dark wood and a fireplace. *Fireplace?*

He helped her into a seat and turned away, scooped something out of a pot that hung above the fire.

Cambria saw barrels stacked on one wall. Supplies, she thought. The second wall was stacked with boxes. The third wall had another door. This one was open and she could see an unmade bed.

The giant set a wooden bowl, filled with steaming stew, in front of her and a metal spoon. She stared up at him and he grinned.

“We’re not totally primitive here, you know.” He went into the bedroom and came out with a metal jug and two mugs. He thumped them down on the table and closed the door.

“Eat, eat,” he urged. “I’ve already had mine.”

She scooped up some of the stew and tasted it. It tasted... odd, spicy, but not overly so, and savoury, with a hint of something almost familiar. Her stomach didn’t care and she finished the bowl quickly. He raised an eyebrow at her and she nodded with a sheepish grin.

Cambria couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten something so... well, different.

He refilled her bowl and handed it to her. Then he filled two mugs and put one next to her bowl. He raised his in a toast and drank his own mug.

“Ahhhh. Those ‘pillars sure know how to make a brew.” He said with satisfaction and refilled his mug.

Cambria waited until she had finished her second bowl before launching into her questions.

She pushed the empty bowl away from her and held her mug. “Thank you, that was delicious.”

“You’re welcome.” He nodded.

“Um...”

“What’s your name?” He cut in.

“Oh,” she felt heat rise in her face with embarrassment. *Poor manners, Cam, very poor manners.* “Cambria Peterson. Pleased to meet you, I think.”

He grinned at her qualifier and gripped her hand. He shook it once and released her.

“You have questions.”

“Yeah.” Cambria shrugged, unsure of where to start. Where. “Okay, you said we are at Tudor.

Manor shook his head. “No, I said we are *on* Tudor.”

She felt all the blood in her face drain and her vision dim. Surely, he didn’t mean... *On Tudor? As in another planet? No. It couldn’t be true...* There was no such technology... It took days, weeks, to get to another planet.

“Hey, now,” Manor held her hand and rubbed it gently. “You’re not going to faint are you?”

“No, no,” she said vaguely. “No, I don’t faint.”

He patted her hand and pushed her mug closer. “Have a drink, you’ll feel better.”

Feel better? Better to have her feelings totally numbed.

She took a deep draft. The brew tasted rich and yeasty, just the way she liked it. She gulped down her mug and Manor poured more into it.

Cambria’s eyes watered and she belched. Manor laughed at her embarrassment.

“Excuse me,” she murmured and he patted her hand again. “Sorry. I’m *really* sorry, but you said we’re *on* Tudor?”

His big head nodded. “Yeah, although it’s full name is Penal Planet Tudor. It has a B classification. That’s for convicts who need re-adjustment, permanent or otherwise.”

“What does that mean?”

He looked closely at her. “What were you sent here for?”

Cambria felt her expression freeze. “That snake Bolingbroke set me up for murder and...” Manor was shaking his head. “What?”

“You’d be surprised how many people come through here pleading their innocence, claiming they were set up, falsely accused, wrongly convicted, received a too harsh a penalty or something like it.” He levelled a glare at her. “His Honour is a great man and I won’t hear you trash him.”

“But...” He held up his hand, forestalling her reply.

“You were sent here for murder, and a murderer you are.” He said it with such finality, she doubted even a confession from Bolingbroke himself would sway his belief.

“I am not a killer.” She said through her teeth and bumped the tabletop with her fist.

“You’re here. You’re a convict. Anyway, what was the question? Oh, yeah: re-adjustment. What that means is: you stay here until someone decides you’ve been rehabilitated.”

“And how many have been released?” She asked, already knowing the answer.

Manor blinked at her and she could see his face take on a dull red sheen. “That’s not my job. I’m just here to help inmates into the country.”

“How many do you know of?”

His massive shoulders shrugged. “Not my job, so I don’t care.”

Cambria doubted anyone found freedom, not if ‘his honour’ had anything to do with it.

“Okay, let me ask you this: how many inmates are Bolingbroke’s?”

“I don’t know that either. A lot of them are, I suppose, but you are all here serving a sentence that he thought fit and just. I hear a lot of convicts abuse him, but what he is doing is right.”

She opened her mouth to protest then closed it with a snap. It would do no good to get Manor off side, not if her plan to get his help was going to succeed.

“Okay, we’ll let that subject slide.” He gave her a curt nod. “What do I need to know to survive here? Where are the others?”

“I’ll kit you out with a survival pack. As to where the others are...” he gave another shrug. “Some are in the ‘pillar village, others have disappeared into the wild. What you do once you leave here is up to you.”

“How long do I have?”

“You asking me when I’m gonna kick you out of the fortress.”

Cambria nodded.

“As soon as you’re ready.”

“I hope that day never comes,” she murmured and finished her beer.

“Oh, it’s not so bad out there, don’t worry about it. I’ll give you everything you’ll need for the first week.”

“Can I come back if it’s not enough?”

The side of his mouth lifted in a smile. “No.” He poured more brew.

“No?”

“You won’t find this place again, once you leave.” His eyes lit with sympathetic understanding of her fears.

“Why not? If I’m rehabilitated, aren’t I going to come back here for release?”

“Because it has stealth technology that activates when you leave and, as I said, releasing inmates isn’t my job.” He lifted his mug and down the contents in two swallows.

“And no one has returned.” She pressed.

Manor shook his head and pointed to her shoulder.

Cambria raised her hand and felt for the lump near the join of her collarbone and upper arm.

“That,” he explained, “means you cannot approach the fortress. As long as you have that I can track where you are.”

“And if I find another way?”

“There *is* no other way.” He sighed. “Look, even if you took it out, it would do you any good. You need a special code to go back.” His words chilled her. A plan had formed, but he’d destroyed it with one sentence.

“But don’t you have one?” She asked. She thought he was the caretaker here, a kind of prisoner that was a trustee.

“No, actually, I don’t.” He grinned at her over his mug.

“So how will *you* get back, you know, when you go on holidays, or retire, or need to go home?”

“Someone will come for me.” He said it with such conviction that Cambria believed that he believed that. If he was an ally of Bolingbroke, however, she knew he was here until he died.

She shook her head. “Bolingbroke would never...” She trailed off at his expression and cleared her throat.

Manor was an easy man to talk to, or, perhaps she’d imbibed more of the brew than was wise. Cambria didn’t care. She wanted to get good and drunk before she went out into the wild. She pushed her empty mug forward and a gleam came into his eye.

“More?”

She nodded and he rose from the table to retrieve another jug.

“So,” she said cheerfully as he filled her mug. “I have a chip that stops me from coming back here. You *don’t* have a chip and know that someone will come to get you whenever you need them. That means you have a communications device, correct?”

His gaze narrowed. “You cannot get me to tell you how to escape. You won’t be able to leave.

Cambria nodded. “Yep, I know. I’m just throwing possibilities at you.”

“Why? Accept your fate; it will be easier if you do.” He said with suspicion.

She looked him in the eye and tried to swallow the fear. “Because I’m afraid,” she whispered, “and I need you to give me some hope,” her eyes filled with hot tears and she cleared her throat, “some hope that maybe someday, I can go home.”

Cambria turned away from his sympathetic expression and guzzled down the rest of her mug. She picked up the jug with two hands and poured another.

He gently took the jug from her and filled his own. “All right,” he said, “I’ll play your game, at least until you pass out from drink.”

She gave him a crooked and trembling grin.

“No communicator.” He said and gave her a wink.

xxx

Louis sat at his desk, his head in his hands and despaired. Here, in the dungeon, he could let his emotions out. No one came down here, not deliberately. They called for information and he sent it, but no one visited. It was a gloomy place, filled with documents, paper *and* electronic.

He could let his anger and frustration out, shout as loud as he liked, no one would hear him. She’d left him. Cambria had left him and he hurt, as he’d never been hurt before. She hadn’t even the courtesy of talking to him before packing up and moving back to United America. How *could* she? After all they’d shared, how could she just pack up everything and *go*? Even her boss, Missy Lane, was shocked. He sympathised with the poor woman. First, the assassination of the Senator, and then Cambria resigns, leaves without a word; all within a couple of days. Did she know something about the Senator’s death? Was that why she’d vanished? But no, he wouldn’t believe *that* of her.

The World Council was in uproar over it, the Judiciary swearing vengeance, but so far, no suspects. No clues either.

He didn’t care about that. All he cared about was the hurt; the physical pain he felt whenever he thought of her. Maybe he could try to call her. Find out what went wrong.

He’d thought they were perfect together. They... fit. Yes, that was it. They fit. Fit well enough that he was beginning to think he couldn’t live without her in his life. But maybe he was wrong about that? He remembered the look on her face when she’d asked him to stay.

One night, Louis, one night you will stay? He could have sworn he'd seen her heart in her eyes. He wasn't wrong. She'd *made* him believe. *One night, I will stay forever.* He'd meant it, damn it; meant it to be the next night.

He lifted his head from his hands. He *meant* it. He wouldn't let her go without a fight, without an explanation. He would track her down. He was good at that: hunting up abstract information. If she truly didn't love him, he would let her go, but not, damn it, until he heard the words from her lush mouth, seen the truth in those blue eyes.

No, he wouldn't let her go so easy, and if she thought to forget him just as easily, she would find out how determined he could be.

Louis reached up for the first cube of personal information and loaded it into his reader. *I will find you, there, no matter where you are, I will find you.* With that promise, he began reading.

Chapter Three

Someone roughly shook her shoulder and Cambria groaned. She lifted an eyelid and shut it against the harsh light of day.

A great hulk of a man kneeled down next to her, held out a mug of something that smelled... awful.

“So, it wasn’t a nightmare, after all.” She whispered without opening her eyes. Her head throbbed badly and queasiness churned in her stomach. She wondered if she could just roll over and throw up. What *was* that stuff last night?

“Nope. It’s real. You’re here, I’m here and it’s time you got up and drank this.” His voice was gruffer than yesterday and she wondered if he was suffering from a hangover like her. “Come on, open your eyes.”

She squinted at him. It was real and she sighed.

“Drink this before you do anything else, Cambria, you’ll feel better.”

She eyed the mug suspiciously, but took it.

Manor helped her sit up and the room spun. She shut her eyes and drank the liquid down.

It was bitter but she finished the brew with a grimace. “That’s...” she choked out, “awful.”

He handed her another mug, this one filled with water. “That’s what you get for getting as drunk as a lord.” Manor grinned at her and she scowled as she drank the water.

“Why aren’t you hung over?” She put the mug on the floor and cradled her head in her hands.

“Because I’m used to it.” He shrugged. “A lot of convicts have the same idea as you did. Get drunk and maybe all this will go away. Or, get drunk and maybe I’ll let something slip.”

She grunted and put a fist into her lower back and stretched. “Jeez, I’m stiff.” Her head felt better, and the queasiness receded.

“You’re choice. If you don’t remember, you said if you were going out into the wild, you might as well get used to sleeping on the ground.” He helped her stand.

“Huh. No,” she carefully shook her head, “I don’t remember that.” There was a lot she didn’t remember, but there *was* information drifting across her mind. Useful information.

She sat at the table and Manor placed a bowl of strange looking fruit in front of her.

“Remember what these look like. They are staples here and if you forget you could starve or poison yourself with something you don’t recognise.”

Cambria stared at the purple, green and yellow fruits. “Can’t you give me a survival book?” She looked over at him as he sat down with his own breakfast.

“Yes, it’s in your pack.” He jerked a thumb at the door. Next to it, leaning on the wall, was a faded green backpack that was half her size. It looked stuffed, heavy and well used.

“What else is in there?”

Manor shrugged and bit into the long purple fruit. Juice trickled down his chin. “Spare clothes, tent, cooking stuff, a weeks supply of trail rations, survival book for Tudor, medical supplies, some other stuff you might need.”

She stared at the pack and shivered at the implications. She’d be on her own. She was going out there, into an alien landscape, all by herself, with all sorts of wild and strange animals. There would be no help from the fortress once she left.

“I can’t do it.” Her voice shook. Panic, hurt and fear welled up.

“Sure, you can.” Manor calmly and wiped his chin.

“No, it’s impossible...” She shoved away from the table and began to pace with frantic steps. “I don’t go camping. My idea of roughing it is a hotel room without room service... London nightlife is as wild as I get... Look at these boots.” Cambria swept her hand down. “I don’t travel this way, I catch jet shuttles; I *don’t* walk or hike.” She lowered her voice, “I can’t, Manor, I just can’t do this.” She raised pleading eyes to him. “Shoot me now. Because there is no way I’m going out there!” She stood, every part of her shaking.

“Hey, now.” Manor stood and touched her shoulder. “It’s not so bad, you’ll do fine. I put instructions and directions in there as well. You’ll do okay.” He guided her back to the chair.

“I’m gonna die,” she slumped back into her seat, dejected.

“Eventually.” He said calmly and nodded. Cambria gaped at him. “We all do... eventually.” He shrugged.

“Great,” she said with disgust, “a philosopher.” She rested her crossed arms on the table and laid her head on her forearms.

“Give it a shot for a few days. If I haven’t heard of you by then, I’ll send someone to rescue you.”

She lifted her head. “Rescue?”

“Well, sure. Exile isn’t supposed to be execution, you know. The ‘pillars are very helpful and friendly, they’ll look after you.”

“Pillars?”

“The indigenous species here. They’re sentient and understand what we are trying to do here.” He picked up a round yellow fruit and devoured it.

“How will I recognise them?”

Manor chuckled. “Don’t worry, you’ll know them when you see them. Now eat up, you’ve got to get going and I’ve got to prepare for the next convict.”

The fruit was... interesting. The long purple thing was refreshingly tangy, the yellow was bland, but had the texture of grapes, the green was sharp, as she expected. She ate everything and was surprisingly full when she’d finished.

Cambria didn’t want to go out there. Not alone, but Manor picked up her pack, opened the door and waited.

Slowly, she stood and looked down at the table and the breakfast bowls. “I could...”

“No, I’ll take care of it,” Manor cut her off gently.

Her shoulders slumped and she walked ahead of him out into the courtyard. Manor closed and locked the door.

The giant gate opened to display the top of a luxuriant, green forest.

Manor put a hand on her shoulder and she looked up at him.

“Th... thank you, Manor, for your courtesies.” She said. He nodded and handed her the pack. It thumped to the ground, unexpectedly heavy.

Manor helped her put it on and steadied her when she threatened to fall over backwards.

He lightly held her arm in his massive hand, guided her through the gate and beyond. Her footsteps were heavy, raised dust clouds as she shuffled across the dirt.

“Good luck.” Manor said and turned, walked back to the fortress. He gave her a brief wave before his hand lowered, hovered, then dropped. The gate slowly closed with a crunch of gears and he went inside, stood and watched her.

Cambria watched the doors close until Manor was lost from sight. She walked back, put her hand on the stone wall. It felt warm to the touch, but strangely smooth; not one protrusion for a climber to use.

Then it vanished and she was facing the cliff, forty metres away.

Manor had said it was stealthed, that much she remembered. She scanned the cliff looking for a landmark. It was rugged, with rocky protrusions. The rest of the rock face was the same, she thought. But what did she know about geology?

Sighing, Cambria turned away and faced the forest. *Here I am*, she swallowed hard. *Live or die, girl, live... or die.*

xxx

Louis slowly walked down the carpeted hallway to Cambria's door. He placed a hand on the wooden surface.

“Hello, young man,” a hoarse but elderly voice called from behind him. “Are you the new tenant?”

He turned to her. Her face was a road map of lines, her hair grey-yellow from smoke that drifted up from a cigarette held between nicotine-stained fingers. She was a small, thin rail of a woman and as she waited for a reply, lifted the cigarette to her lips and sucked at it.

Louis stared at the glowing end. “No, ma'am, I was looking for the woman who lives here.”

She waved away blue smoke, “Oh, she’s been gone for days. Removalists came in yesterday, took everything away. Sad, really, she was such a nice girl.”

“Sad?”

“Oh, yes. She took ill a few nights ago. Ambulance came and took her away. Guess she didn’t make it.” She squinted through the smoke and studied his face. “Sorry, I guess you didn’t know. Were you close?”

Louis nodded. “Yeah,” he said over a lump in his throat.

She touched his arm and the smell of old and new smoke drifted around him.

“I’m sorry, young man, really sorry.” Her faded brown eyes filled with sympathy. She looked back into the open door of her apartment. “Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“No, thank you. I wonder, though, how you know all this.”

She gave him a crafty smile. “I watch out for the neighbours, of course. Nasty city we live in you know, criminals everywhere.” She withdrew her hand suddenly and eyed him warily.

Louis rubbed her upper arm. “I am not a criminal. We are... were...” he glanced at Cambria’s door. “We were... involved.” He lowered his eyes to hide their expression. Missy had lied to him.

“She... she was...” He lifted his gaze, let grief into them, “*everything* to me.” His lower lip tremble before he firmed them.

“Oh, honey.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and he struggled not to breathe in the rancid smokiness. “I’m sorry. It’s just that those paramedics didn’t seem to be... well, not very caring.”

“What did they do to her?”

“Tied her down, they did, and raced out of here as if the demons of hell were on their tail. I didn’t see any marking on the ambulance either. So it must have been one of those private hospitals.” She looked up at him, sympathy in her pale brown and yellow rimmed eyes.

“Thank you, Madame, I will try the... hospitals and the morgues.”

The old woman stepped back into her doorway. "I hope you find her. But come back and visit me anyway."

"Yes, I'll do that." He lied.

Her door closed with a snap.

An ambulance that wasn't, a dead Senator, a lying PA, his woman missing. Those thoughts spiralled in his head but the only question he could ask himself was:

Why?

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and walked back down the hall. What had Cambria been working on that would cause such a reaction? Why her? What did she know and how could he find her.

His attempts to contact her family proved a dead end. Her father died during a riot in Rikers following his conviction for murder during an armed robbery. Her mother disappeared three years ago, but had numerous drug and prostitution convictions. Her older brother... executed for mass murder and her younger brother... a drug soaked addict in Atlanta.

It gave him the shivers to think of the family she'd come from, what poverty-stricken cess-pit she'd managed to climb out of. How had she done that? He knew next to nothing about her. Louis realised his mistake.

A mistake he would rectify once he found her. For now, he had another lead and he was going to pursue it to the ends of the Earth.

xxx

"Your Honour," the tall dark-suited man bowed at the door way. "His Excellency, the Secretary of the World Council."

Bolingbroke stood behind his desk and bowed his head as the Secretary strode through the doorway. He was a short man with white hair, piercing blue eyes and tanned skin. He held his hand out to Bolingbroke who leaned across the table to shake it.

"Please, Your Excellency, have a seat."

The Secretary waved the offer away. "No time, Ranald, I'm here to find out how your investigation is going into the murder of Heinrich."

“Ah, well, there is nothing further, Your Excellency.”

“Nothing? No forensics? No clues? No suspect? You have nothing?” White eyebrows lifted in surprise and Bolingbroke suppressed a smile.

“No, sir. Whoever did this was a professional. Not a clue was left behind.”

“But you must have something, *anything* I can take back to the Council.”

“Well...” the judge hedged, luring the Secretary.

“Come, man, tell me *something*...”

Bolingbroke sighed. “It grieves me to say this, Your Excellency, but there are indications of... irregularities within the Senator’s office.”

The Secretary’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of ‘irregularities’?”

“Nothing concrete as yet, sir, just a hint here and there of... irregular investigations being conducted out of Senator Dortmund’s office.”

“And what are you doing about it?”

Bolingbroke lifted his shoulders in an elegant shrug. “What we can, of course. We are doing our own investigating. Trying to discover what was going in his office.”

“Humpf. I’m not sure I believe it.” The Secretary said. “Heinrich Dortmund was one of the most trusted and honourable members of the Administration.”

“And thus in a perfect position to undermine certain elements of the Council, sir.”
Gotcha, Ranald thought as he saw a new suspicion creep into the mind of the Secretary.

“Keep me informed.” The Secretary turned and strode to the door in a whirlwind of energy.

Ranald’s blond assistant quietly closed the door behind the Secretary and turned to the judge.

“That went well, sir.”

Ranald chuckled. “Yes, it did, didn’t it?” He resumed his seat and his assistant went to the sideboard and poured a drink for his boss. He placed it in the judge’s outstretched hand.

Huntress

“They’ll all be busy creating rumours once Griggs returns to make his report to the Council. Dortmund’s name will be mud by the end of the week and by next week, they’ll be saying good riddance to a corrupt Senator.” He sipped his drink. “Ah, Moeller, it is tough being a trusted member of the judiciary.”

Chapter Four

Cambria followed the well-worn path through the lush forest and down a steep incline, slipping, sliding and scaring herself badly, to a sandy-banked creek that fed a large, deep pool of water. She shrugged out of the pack and sat with a thump, breathing heavily. The pack made a good back rest and she wriggled against it.

She felt hot, sweaty and ached all over.

The sun hung high in the sky, heating the land and raising the humidity. Small insects buzzed around her and she tiredly slapped at them.

Cambria eyed the creek. The crystal clear water beckoned, but until she studied the survival handbook, she wasn't going near it. In fact, now seemed like a good time to open the pack and see what Manor had given her.

She twisted around and unsealed the first pocket. It held a small, collapsible lamp and tray. The next pocket she explored, higher on the pack, stored the small, slim, red-covered book with black writing. *Basic Survival Techniques for Tudor*.

She dragged her legs up and opened the book. It had an index so she flipped to it and looked up 'water'.

Quickly reading the paragraph, she grinned and put the book back. Then she stripped off her shirt, jeans, boots, socks and underwear and crawled to the water. She stuck her face into it first.

It was marvellously cool, so she slithered further in, ducking her head under the water.

For an hour, she played in the clear, refreshing water before crawling out and lying on a rock to dry.

She dozed, dreamed of home and Louis. He was holding his hand out to her and smiling, but every time she reached for him, he stepped back; still smiling, still holding out his hand.

A shadow flickered across her eyelids and she snapped awake.

The sun had passed the zenith and was flickering through the canopy of the trees.

Cambria sat up and sucked in a breath. Her skin had turned bright red.

She carefully slid off the rock and curled her toes into the warm sand. Standing in the shade, she looked down at her body, her legs and held her arms out. Lobster red all over her front, lily-white on the back.

A chuckle escaped and she winced at the tightness of skin on her face.

Rule number one, she thought as she walked back to her clothes, find sunscreen. Rule number two: *don't* sunbathe naked.

She stepped into her panties, flinched as the elastic pinched her sensitive skin, then pulled on the shirt, there was no *way* she was wearing a bra. Her jeans slid over her sensitive skin, felt uncomfortable so she left the snap undone.

The socks rubbed the burned tops of her feet and she expanded the tabs on her boots until they were loose enough not to rub, but tight enough to stay on her feet.

The pack was going to be another problem. She didn't think she had the strength or the willpower to lift it onto sore shoulders. It would chafe something fierce.

Cambria scanned the area. She needed somewhere to camp for the night, and this place seemed safe enough. There was only one path and that led back up the hill.

It was steep enough, that momentum had pushed her most of the way down from the fortress.

She heard no birds nor seen animals. No fish in the water, either. Did that mean this spot was safe enough for her? She knew *nothing* about camping; and camping on a strange planet was beyond her comprehension. Better to stay put and read the book.

Now that she'd made the decision, she removed her boots again and wriggled her toes in the soft sand.

Cambria sat down and pulled the book out.

The sun was low in the sky and a chill breeze blew by the time she finished reading. But she was satisfied.

There were creatures out here, *Komatsues*, that could hurt her, even kill and eat her, but they were, apparently, very far away and not native to this area.

With that thought in mind, she pulled out the lamp. Study of the book taught her it was a miniature camp stove and not a lamp at all.

She rummaged through the main pack. It had clothes, a tent she had no idea how to erect, a thin sheet made of a shiny material and a long flat pack of trail rations. In one of the side pockets, she found the knife. She pulled it out of its' sheathe. One side was a wicked blade, curved to the tip, the other side had a serrated edge before the true, flat back of the knife.

The hilt had two metal loops on either side and a leather bound grip.

Cambria turned the weapon over, gripped it firmly. If she'd known the pack had this... she would have... what? Killed Manor and try to go back home?

She snorted. Manor would sort her but good, or she'd arrive back at the door she'd come through and who knew who would be waiting on the other side even if she could have found a way through the handleless door.

No, Manor would have disarmed her very quickly indeed. He must be experienced in getting convicts out of the fortress, otherwise he wouldn't have been chosen for the job.

It grew dark and she re-sheathed the knife. No, Manor had given her the knife for a purpose and she should have thanked him for it and the rest of the supplies.

A yawn snuck up on her. She'd leave the tent for tonight and wrapped herself in the silver sheet. It warmed with the help of her body heat and she soon dropped off into sleep. *My first day in the wilderness*, she thought vaguely, *I wonder how Louis is doing?*

xxx

The list of Administrative Policy seemed endless to Louis. Policies on office furniture, on office supplies, on occupation health and safety, fire procedures, even tea room policies. He was obviously looking at the wrong list, he thought and moved to the next agenda.

Here was a section-by-section list of duties. He found Cambria's position easy enough, but finding out what she was working on would need a little more finesse, he mused.

What he needed was the agenda for upcoming Council meetings.

He scrolled through more lists, searching for... something, *anything*. Nothing he'd seen so far appeared dangerous. The agenda for the next meeting would deal with the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, crop augmentation in Africa and water distribution in the South American basin. Nothing of interest to the Senator.

The following meeting's agenda was empty.

He pulled up the Senator's committee list. He was on a few, but they were minor roles: The World Banking Corporation, International Law and Order, The Status of Displaced Persons, Refugee Advocacy, Arms Minimisation and South Pacific Health Reform.

Another schedule listed when the meetings of all his committees were due to meet. If he couldn't decide which committee held the most danger, and some of them seemed iffy, then he would look at what they were looking at.

Senator Dortmund was only joining two committee meetings in the next six months: Refugee Advocacy and International Law and Order.

The RA committee was to discuss border control and refugee facilities in Fortress Europe.

The ILO was looking at increasing the number of magistrates within the Judiciary. He brought up the list of discussion topics for each meeting. Nothing on the first list had Senator's name, but the second list did.

For a committee to make a decision, it had to have the relevant information to discuss first. The Senator needed to know everything the judges did and why the topic had come up for discussion. Was crime so rampant the judges were overworked? That would be one issue. Another would be the judges and how well they coped with the pressures of the job.

The Senator was presenting a research paper on case loads and their effects on the judges.

Louis sat back, stared at the screen and felt a shiver of fear. This was too easy, he thought and glanced around the darkened rows of files. No one came down to the dungeon; he had no reason to feel uneasy. But he did.

This was his job. He pushed away from the computer, walked the long rows, checked for intruders and failed to find any. *Paranoid, much?* He thought with a wry grimace.

Requests for information came to him via his com unit and he sent the relevant documentation with a courier. But no courier came until he called for one. This was his bailiwick, one he'd worked hard to get. Information was his stock in trade, he knew where everything was, could, eventually, hunt down any information he needed for the Senators.

He glanced at the ceiling, felt the weight of those decision-makers three floors above him. Down here quiet ruled.

Why did Dortmund's presentation unsettle him so?

Case loads was an innocuous subject, but he instinctively knew he'd found the biggest clue of all to Cambria's disappearance. What did he do about it?

He walked back to his desk and printed out three copies of the agenda. The first, he put into a new file marked, 'Agenda'. The second he also put into a file marked, 'The Cumbria Protocol', a camouflage title. The third copy, he folded and put into his pocket. He'd start a file at home.

What next? He checked his watch: an hour past knock off. He had nothing else to do and nowhere to go but home. His shoulders slumped a little as he realised he missed Cambria; missed her with a deepness he couldn't shake.

Next was to find Cambria's report. She would have completed it well before the presentation to the committee in two weeks time. There had to be a record of it somewhere.

Louis flexed his fingers and bent to the keyboard. If it existed, he'd find it.

xxx

Cambria felt hot and she rolled over, a sheet of searing pain flashed over her body and she groaned.

Her puffy eyes opened and she squinted at her surroundings. Her skin felt tight, bruised and sore.

She flung the sheet off her and unbuttoned her shirt. Her skin glowed a fiery dark red and throbbed with a dull ache. Two days on a new planet and she'd woken to a throbbing head exactly twice. What would tomorrow give her?

Cautiously, she sat up. Each scrape of clothing hurt so she stripped everything off, slowly, with a lot of cursing, until she was sitting naked on the sand.

The sun beamed down on her, its malicious heat scorching her sensitive skin.

Cool, clear water beckoned and she plunged in, sighed with relief, as she swam in the deeper water, drinking every now and then.

Today, she would have to find more appropriate shelter; a cave or a building or something. Manor said there were others here. Maybe she could find them.

But, she mused and flipped over to breast-stroked around the pool, they were convicts.

Manor hadn't said what kind of convicts. They could be murderers, serial killers, war criminals, *rapists*. Her mind created thin, ugly, scarred men and women with dangerous attitudes and cruel expressions. By the time she shook herself out of her daydreaming, she'd firmly decided that she wanted nothing to do with them.

If she had to survive this world alone, she would. No more wussing about around the pool, as nice as it was. She needed proper shelter; that's what the book said. The weather conditions on the planet could change quickly to violent storms and since she didn't know exactly what part of the planet she was on – except for being near the tropics, even she knew that – she should take every precaution and act appropriately.

Cambria strode out of the water. She would put her clothes on now. It would be better to wear slightly damp clothes than risk further burning.

She reached out for her shirt and stopped, her fingers touched the material. The hair on the back of her neck rose and she stood straight, gripped the shirt in front of her, scanned the surrounding forest. *Something was out there, watching.*

She saw nothing and no one around to cause this unease, and yet she didn't feel like she was alone.

The forest was still, as if holding its breath. She'd heard no animals yesterday, but that didn't mean there weren't any out there now. Cambria shuffled closer to her pack and withdrew the knife, without taking her eyes off the forest.

Of course, she didn't know how to use it, but whoever or whatever was out there didn't know that.

The shirt dropped from her hand and she bent into a crouch, as she'd seen action stars do at the Dvid theatre. Her eyes searched the jungle, studied each part for movement. Isn't that what you were supposed to do? Look for what was different or movement?

Her gaze drifted over a fallen log to the trees, then darted back. The cold heat of fear spread through her body. A creature, an *alien* creature, about three feet long, lay along its length. It was the same dark brown as the bark, its black claws digging into the rough surface with a quiet skritch as it realised she was watching. It had four limbs she could see and assumed the other four were on the other side of its body. Its head was wedge-shaped and its orange vertical pupil eyes blinked at her.

Short dark bristles ran down the length of its spine and two tufts came out of the top corners of its head.

The creature raised itself and swung around on the log so it was sitting. A tail curled around its body. The limbs folded across its body and it appeared... relaxed. But then its mouth opened, revealing sharp, pointed teeth and it... hissed at her.

Cambria gripped her knife harder, firmed her stance and swallowed. If it was going to attack, she was going to be ready; to fight or run, whichever seemed the best idea. Sweat bloomed over her skin and she trembled.

The creature threw back its head, lower limbs braced on the log and continued to hiss. If she didn't know better, she could have sworn it was laughing at her. Its mouth was wide and head jerked up and down as if enjoying a good belly laugh. One pair of limbs clutched around its middle. Another pair lifted into the air and the third pair, claws retracted, slapped the log.

It raised one of its top limbs and wiped its eyes before hopping down from the log.

"D... don't come any closer!" She waved the knife and the creature stood still, its tail flicking back and forward in agitation, or mirth, she couldn't tell.

“Sssilly human.” It hissed.

“Oh, shit!” Cambria stumbled back, tripped on her shirt and landed on her butt. It spoke to her. *In English!*

She held the knife out. “S... stay away!” It was hissing again.

The creature... undulated towards her. It lifted its front section up then down, the middle section then rose and fell, and its end section did the same. As she watched, its colour changed from the dark brown of the log to the pale colour of the sand. Cambria swallowed against a dry throat. The knife shook, weighed her hand down, but she wasn't letting it go.

The creature out of reach, but close enough to be a threat. “I am friend.” It said and sat up on its hind limbs to watch what she would do next.

Cambria scrambled to a crouch. “I don't know what you are.” She said, wide-eyed with fright.

It pointed to its chest. “Haariss.”

“Haariss?”

It carefully and slowly formed its words. “I am called, Haariss.” It pointed a clawed digit at her. “You are called...?”

“Cam. Uh, Cambria.”

“I am here to help, Cam-uh-Cambria.” It gave a slight bow.

She grimaced. “I am called, Cambria.”

Haariss nodded. “I am here to help, Cambria.”

“Why?”

Haariss tilted its head and grinned, showed sharp, triangular teeth. “All humans need help.”

Cambria stared but didn't reply. Haariss nodded as if coming to a decision. It rose on its legs and went to her pack, Cambria scrambled away from it.

Haariss rummaged in her pack and drew out a metal mug. It went to the pool, filled it, then returned and offered it to her. She looked at it, then the creature and didn't thing.

“Drink.” It placed the mug near her on the sand, and then it turned its back and wriggled into the forest.

Cambria sighed with relief. She held onto the knife and picked up the mug. Her throat was so dry. She gulped the cool water, drained the mug and scrambled to the pool for more, eyeing the forest.

Haariss had disappeared. The forest settled into silence and she pulled out a ration from her pack. She gnawed on it, grimaced at the taste and stared into the foliage. She didn't want to be surprised again. When she'd finished her food, she refilled her mug. Had she ever been this thirsty?

“Ssssoother.”

Cambria jerked away from the voice, dropped the mug and knife onto the sand. The creature stood just beyond her pack, held out a thick vine that dripped a pale viscous liquid. He offered it to her and she slowly backed up to the pool edge. Why wouldn't this creature leave her alone?

“Ssssoother for the ssskin heat.”

Cambria stared at it. It moved so quietly, blended into the surrounds with ease, yet offered her no violence. Did that mean it wouldn't harm her? Not after getting a drink for her and trying to be as non-confrontational as possible. Cambria tentatively approached, ready to run, reached out for the vine and sniffed the end. It had no discernible perfume.

“Will help burning.”

She touched the oozing end. The liquid was thick and cool. She glanced at Haariss and it nodded vigorously.

Cambria held the vine over her arm and allowed a drip to fall on her skin. The relief was immediate. The gel tingled, then the spot went vaguely numb and she smoothed more of the stuff on.

“Ssqueeze vine.” Haariss instructed.

When she covered herself in the stuff, she sat down and Haariss sat closer to her.

“What are you?” She asked and wanted to take the question back. How rude of her.

“I am ‘pillar.” Haariss jabbed a claw towards its chest.

‘pillar? *This* was a ‘pillar? The sentient species indigenous of the planet? Now she studied the creature, she could see a vague resemblance to a *caterpillar* and she raised her eyebrows. She would have expected the word to be an insult, but Haariss seemed to be quite proud of the name.

“How are you going to help me? How did you find me?”

“Take you to my village.” Haariss nodded, then leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. “How did you sssee me?”

“I looked for what was different.” It seemed a lame reason given that she didn’t know what this world was supposed to look like.

Haariss nodded.

“Ah, can I ask you, um, a personal question?”

“Perssonal question?”

“Yesss. I mean *yes*.” The heat of embarrassment crawled up her face. She blessed the fact that her face was already a brilliant shade of red. She waited until the creature nodded. “Are you a girl ‘pillar or a boy ‘pillar?”

“Girl? Boy?” The top limbs moved upward in a shrug.

“Er, male or female?”

“I am male. Would you like to sssee?” He stood and was about to lift his tail.

Cambria covered her eyes. “*NO!* No, that’s all right, I’ll take your word for it.”

She peeked through her fingers. Haariss was sitting down again, looking vaguely disappointed.

“Are there others like me?” She asked to cover her discomfiture.

“Yess. At my village. Why did you want to know if I was male or not?” The ridges above his eyes lowered as if puzzled.

“Because it seemed rude to refer to you as an ‘it’.” She explained.

Haariss tilted his head, not understanding.

“So I can say him, or he, not it. That would be rude.”

Haariss shrugged again and looked around. “We musst go.”

Cambria followed his gaze. “But we’re safe here aren’t we?”

His eyes blinked at her. “No.” He rose and went to her pack. It was almost as tall as he and he looked up at her. His eyes travelled over her body and Cambria remembered she was naked. He didn’t seem to be concerned.

“Otherssss not like you.”

“No?”

“No. They have a protrussion,” he pointed to her groin, “here. They don’t have lumpsss.”

He pointed to her chest and she felt her face heat again.

Cambria covered her eyes again, then dragged her hand down her face. “I am female. They must be male.”

Haariss looked away as if unimportant and started towards the forest. But Cambria wondered at his reaction. Were there no human women here? Was that the reason Manor had given her the hunting knife? For protection? Bolingbroke was vindictive enough to send her to a male dominated planet and the world of Tudor suddenly became a more dangerous and sinister place.

“Wait!” Cambria called and Haariss stopped and twisted his upper body towards her.

“How far is your village?”

“It iss one and a half ssunss.”

Cambria stood and regarded him with a puzzled expression. A sun and a half?

He turned fully to her. “Ssun comesss up. Ssun goess down. Ssun iss above uss.”

“A day and a half, you mean.”

Haariss repeated his explanation and Cambria sighed. A day and a half of carrying the pack.

“Let me put some clothes on and I’ll follow.” It wasn’t as if she had much of a choice so she quickly dressed then crouched down to lift the pack.

She grunted as she rose. It was heavy, but the straps didn’t chafe as much as she expected. The vine juice had numbed her skin nicely, but she couldn’t help wonder

what kind of damage she was going to do. By the end of the day, she'd be screaming with the pain. The gel wouldn't last all day, would it?

Haariss led her into the forest. Beyond the log he'd been sitting on was another path and he followed it without slowing his pace.

He was remarkably fast and soon, he wriggled around a corner on the narrow, bare strip of dirt and lost to her sight by the lush, green foliage.

Cambria hefted the pack and struggled on. She came around the corner, but couldn't see the 'pillar. She was about to call out to him, when a hiss came from her left. Haariss lay flat on the ground. He lifted a limb and beckoned to her.

"Hide." He said when she crouched down to him.

"What's wrong?"

He made another hissing noise that she could only assume was in his own language.

"Danger?"

"Yess, hide, quickly... There." He pointed to a waist high shrub.

Cambria stepped over him and lay down behind the spiky bush.

"Head down. Lie sstill. Do not move. Closse eyes." He commanded and she put her face to the ground.

The earth smelled musty and rich, spicy. She breathed deeply and exhaled. The fragrance made her light-headed and she suppressed a giggle. The throbbing in her legs and lower back eased and it was good to be lying down.

She could hear the forest now; the rustling of the leaves above her, the creak of branches and the... snuffling of a creature as it searched through the loamy undergrowth.

Remembering Haariss command, she kept her face down even though she wanted to look at what was coming.

Claws clicked on rocks or twigs. Haariss had claws. Was that him? She wanted to look, but would wait until her guide called to her.

What would happen if she *did* look?

Another snuffle and a snort. It was closer now. Cambria felt the shrub shake and hot breath, reeking of meaty decay, washed over her. A carnivore! She held her breath, resisted gagging and tried not to move. The shrub shook, more fetid breath washed over her.

Oh please, oh, please, oh please go away!

Her calves spasmed with cramps and she buried her face into the dirt and clenched her teeth. Slowly, carefully, she stretched her feet out to ease the cramps, prayed the animal wouldn't notice.

Cambria felt as if her lungs were about to burst by the time the animal moved away. She carefully eased her breath out and slowly dragged another one in. The smell of rotting meat lingered.

She heard a subtle scrap and a slither, like scales across rock. Haariss touched her shoulder and she started.

"It's gone." He whispered.

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He was on his belly and at her eye level.

"What was it?" She whispered back.

Again he hissed at her and she frowned.

"Bad. Eat you. Eat me."

"How big was it?"

His eyes travelled down her body. "Half of you. Fat ass, ass," he looked around and pointed to a tree that was twice as wide as she was. "Ass that. Big teeth."

Cambria shuddered and sat up. "It won't follow us?" She rubbed her aching calves.

Haariss shook his head. "No. Gone now. We go." He undulated back to the path and Cambria levered herself up with the help of a log lying next to the bush.

Her leg muscles twinged, but she didn't dare reach down. She would probably topple over if she did. She flexed her booted feet, stretched the abused muscles.

"Come!" Haariss called.

Cambria adjusted the pack and followed. She glanced down the path but couldn't see where the creature had gone. The claw marks scratched into the dirt was evidence enough.

She shivered and walked after Haariss.

So much for being a safe world, she thought. But then, why would she think Bolingbroke would tell her the truth about anything?

xxx

It wasn't here. Louis slumped back in his seat. There was no record of Cambria's report. Destroyed? Reasonable to think so. All he could do now was recreate what she'd done. Did he know her well enough to do that? Did he understand her thought processes enough? Could he remember what she asked for?

He brought up the personnel files of the magistrates and scrolled down. He would start alphabetically. Louis flicked a look at his watch. It neared midnight and his stomach rumbled. With his finger and thumb, he rubbed his eyes. It would be better, he decided, to start his search in the morning. Wherever Cambria was, he hoped she was safe.

He turned his machine off and strode down the corridor of files to the door. He turned back and listened. All was quiet, all was as it should be and he patted the piece of paper in his pocket.

Tomorrow he would hunt those judges down and pick apart their lives. If one of them proved the source of Cambria's disappearance, they would rue the day. If they were not... he would start again.

Chapter Five

“Mr Robinson, what on *Earth* did you *think* you were doing?” Bolingbroke asked the orange-garbed man at his feet. Ranald didn’t expect an answer. The groundskeeper from his estate had a gag stuffed in his mouth. Moeller had his knee in Robinson’s back and the baton under his chin.

“My daughter is off limits to the likes of you. Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find out about it?” The man blinked rapidly as he breathed raggedly through his nose.

Tears dripped from the corners of his mud brown eyes.

“No one touches her unless I give my permission. I’m sure you understand that now. And no, she doesn’t know her own mind unless I tell her. *I* control my family, *I* decide what goes on there; I decide *everything!*”

“Sir.” Moeller looked up at him and Ranald tried to ease his harsh breathing. This... *worm*, thought he could dally with his daughter, did he? Well, no more. He stretched his fingers, splaying them from the fists he’d formed.

“Now, then. What to do with you?” He glared down at the man, then glanced at the locked door to his office as he heard raised voices.

“Send him to Trantis.” He ordered and watched as Moeller dragged the man up and hauled him through another door, behind the desk.

Ranald smoothed his coat jacket and adjusted his tie before opening the door to his reception area. His daughter leaned over the desk jabbed a manicured finger into his assistant’s chest.

“Now, then, precious, what’s all the ruckus?” He asked and the woman turned to him. A flush crept up her porcelain skin and anger came into her blue eyes.

“Daddy, my name is Ranalda, please use it. I’m too old to be called ‘precious’.”

Ranald walked over to her and kissed her cheek. “You’ll always be precious to me.” He flicked a glance at Dempster. “Hold my calls please, James.”

“Sir.”

He hooked an arm around her waist and guided her to his inner sanctum. “Come into my office and tell Daddy what he can do for you.”

“You can tell me what you’ve done with my fiancé.” She announced as she strode across the carpet and sat down in one of the leather seats.

“Fiance? I didn’t know you were engaged.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek again.

“Who is it? That up and coming young Senator from France? Or maybe that Financial Adviser for the World Bank? Oh, I am pleased for you, my dear.” He sat next to her, clasping her hands in his. “We shall have the wedding at the estate. Catered, of course. Oh, if only your mother were alive to see this...”

“Daddy, it is none of those superficial wanna-bes.” She pulled her hands from his and stood to pace in front of him. “It’s... it’s...” She took a deep breath and faced her father, braced for his reaction. “Dane Robinson.”

Ranald blinked. He tilted his head, sure it was joke, but his daughter stood in front of him, perfectly calm, determination in her eyes. He grinned, then laughed. Ranalda was always good for a laugh, he thought, and this was the biggest one.

“If you don’t want to tell me, okay. But, please, couldn’t you have picked someone else to joke about?”

Ranalda fisted her hands on her hips. “I’m not joking, father. Dane Robinson is the man I’m going to marry and is...”

Ranald surged to his feet, his face flushed with anger and gripped her upper arms. “No. Not now, not ever will I allow such a... worthless piece of humanity into my family.”

“I’m over twenty-one. Over twenty-five, in case you’ve forgotten, and I *will* marry whom I choose, not you.”

“Over my dead body, you will!” He shook her once, then again.

“Let me go!”

Ranald pushed her away and she stumbled back, rubbing her arms. “Listen to me father, because I will say this only once. I will marry Dane Robinson and there is nothing you or anyone else can do about it.”

Where did this rebellious streak come from, Ranald wondered. He'd never considered his daughter spoiled, or wilful. Ah, yes. Her mother. Licentious, treacherous whore that she was.

"Oh?" He said softly, "Do you think so?"

He saw uncertainty creep into her eyes before she glanced away. She walked to window and back again, her long blonde hair swung around her shoulders. "Yes, father, I think so."

"I will decide whom you're to marry. You will not disgrace this family. I will *not* let you."

"I, I, I!" She sneered. "It's all about you, isn't it?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Yes, actually. It's my duty to maintain the dignity and prestige of this family and I will perform that duty to the best of my ability. One day, it will be your turn and I expect you to fulfil those duties as I have: with grace and pride."

Ranalda strode to the door and Ranald smiled indulgently as she understood how things were and would always be. She turned at the door, one hand splayed across her stomach, the other opening the door. "Well, *Daddy*, you failed. Dane Robinson is also the father of my child. So to hell with *you!*" She slammed the door behind her before Ranald could find an unscattered thought.

Pregnant? Is that what she meant? His baby girl was *pregnant?* To the groundskeeper? He staggered back against his desk. No, it *couldn't* be...

He fumbled with his communicator so great was his rage. "Moeller."

"Sir?" Came the reply.

"When you're done with that piece of shit, find and detain my daughter. Sedate her, take her to Gonzalez and have him rid her of her bastard child. After he's done the job, have her confined to the Innisbruk Sanitorium."

"Yes, sir." Came the bland reply, as if Bolingbroke's request was for extra stationery.

He closed the unit and bowed his head. *Saved*. He was saved. No one, not even his daughter, would sully his reputation. Ranalda would learn obedience to him. He

would have to retrain her. He couldn't afford to have a wayward, disobedient child in his family.

He lifted his hand and wiped it down his face. For the thousandth time, he wished he had a son. Hell, maybe he should just sell her into to slavery and adopt a boy.

xxx

The village lay between two ridges on a slope. Huts with finely woven roofs of pale yellow grass spread out down the incline.

From where they stood, she could see humans moving between the huts.

She was exhausted and sore; muscles ached and skin burned under the weight of the pack and she desperately wanted to put it down.

Haariss crept down the pathway and she followed at a shuffling pace.

Hissing from various 'pillars greeted them. Was a new human such a frequent occurrence that it had lost its entertainment value? She wondered. The human men stopped their work, stood in clusters and stared at her, muttered to each other and watched as she walked by. Her neck prickled and she swallowed hard.

All the humans were men, white, dark, golden-skinned. Cambria lowered her head and followed Haariss.

He guided her to a hut and slithered under the door flap. Cambria brushed aside the cloth, waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The hut was small, barely the size of her apartment bedroom. It had a thin legged wooden table with an odd, circular device sitting in the centre. Behind it was a finely-crafted chair. In the corner, lay a long mat with coverings. That was all: a table, chair and a bed. Across from her was a covered window.

"Ssleep, resst." Haariss said. "Will come for you; for food later."

"Thank you, Haariss." Cambria peeled off the pack, winced as the straps scraped along her skin and dropped it to the floor.

"Be back with ssoother." He scurried off, but Cambria ignored him. She dropped down onto the bed, face first and fell asleep.

xxx

She woke to someone rubbing her lower legs and she groaned at the relief.

“Nissse?” A different voice said and Cambria glanced over her shoulder. She was naked again. She didn’t have the energy to move, but she *did* have the energy to demand answers.

“What are you doing and where the hell are my clothes?” The ‘pillar rubbed her lower leg again, eased the tightness.

“On the table, Cambria.” It spoke as carefully as Haariss had, enunciating each word separately and slowly.

She looked over and saw everything neatly folded and her boots sat under the table.

Cambria eased herself up onto her elbows as the ‘pillar worked its way up to the back of her thighs. The creature had retracted its claws and used its knuckles on its upper limbs.

“What’s your name?” She asked. This ‘pillar was similar to Haariss but its eyes were more yellow than orange.

“I am called, Dooriss.”

“And you’re a female?”

“Yess.” She crawled between Cambria’s thighs and massaged her buttocks. It was a curiously sensual feeling and Cambria swallowed, prayed the she’d finish soon.

She rested her head on her crossed arms. “This feels good.” She murmured.

“Musst prepare you.”

“For what?”

“Introduction.” Dooriss reached her lower back and Cambria groaned. “Musst move freely. Haariss bad for making you walk like thiss.”

“What? I could have ridden something?”

“No, but not walk sso far, so fasst.”

“Huh. Tell me, do all of you speak English?”

“Yess. Firsst convictss teach uss.”

“How long ago was that?” Her eyelids drooped as the rippling massage reached her shoulders. She lay flat as Dooriss climbed onto her upper back. The creature was surprisingly light.

“Many moonss ago. More than I have sseen. Or my mother, or her mother. We are friendss with humansss.”

“Mmmm...”

“Roll, pleassse.”

“Huh?” Cambria yawned as Dooriss climbed off her back.

“Roll, pleassse, musst do front now.”

Cambria turned to lie on her back and stared at the hut ceiling. She couldn't see any gaps in the woven material.

Dooriss started at her toes and Cambria resisted the urge to wriggle. She was ticklish and the pillars soft knuckles pressed into the arch of her foot. Cambria giggled.

“What isss wrong?”

“You're tickling me,” she giggled again and Dooriss moved to the top of her foot and ankle.

“Bad burn.” Dooriss undulated to the door and picked up a long tube of vine. She brought it back and showed it to Cambria. It was the same as Haariss used.

The sting eased as Dooriss applied the gel and she wondered how long the sunburn would last.

When Dooriss reached her midsection, she couldn't help but laugh and writhe under the creature's knuckles. Dooriss fell off and stood on her hind limbs, wringing her hands. “Hurt? Did I hurt you?”

Cambria wiped her eyes. “No, I told you, I'm ticklish.” Dooriss tilted her head.

“When you touch me, sometimes it makes me laugh.”

“Thiss iss bad?”

“No.” She reached out and touched Dooriss on one of her upper limbs. “It's very good, but I can't stop.”

“I can sstop rubbing.” She held out the vine, uncertain.

Cambria took it. “Okay, I’ll rub the rest of this stuff on myself.”

Dooriss back away to the door.

“Thank you, Dooriss, I feel much better.”

The creature bobbed her head and escaped under the door cloth.

Cambria hoped she hadn’t offended the little creature and lay back onto her bed. She did feel better. The gel had numbed her burns, she’d had some meaningful sleep and she was safer here than out in the wild.

She knew it had only been days, but it felt like weeks. Again, she wondered what Louis was doing. What had he been told? She shook off those thoughts and sat up. She could do nothing about him and he could do nothing for her. She was here, he was there, and never the twain should meet.

That made her sad, so she slowly got to her feet and rubbed the gel onto her chest, shoulders and face.

Then she rummaged around in the pack and donned fresh clothes. They were the same as the shirt and jeans on the table, but they were clean.

A quick knock rattled the doorjamb as she tied the laces of her boots. “Come in.”

The man who ducked through the cloth was tall, broad and suntanned. He had blonde streaked dark hair and pale, pale grey eyes. He had a long nose with a bump in the middle and his mouth tilted in a smile.

“Hello,” he said in a deep voice.

“Hi, there.” She stood and put the chair under the table. “Can I help you?”

“I’ve come to help you, actually.” His eyes travelled over her and she felt uncomfortable under his gaze. She turned her back on him and lifted the window covering to allow more light. She used the hook set at the side of the frame for the finely woven material.

The man cleared his throat. “Uh, I’m Excalibur Jones.”

She turned back to him in surprise and shock. She stared at his outstretched hand then at his face. Anyone who had access to the media knew who he was, but what was a serial killer doing on a mild planet like this?

“Excalibur... J... Jones?”

He shrugged, the movement making his shirt stretch tight across well-formed muscles.

“Can’t have a name like Jones without something exotic to go in front of it.” He deliberately misinterpreted her reaction to his name. His teeth were very white against his tan and Cambria took another step back and bumped into the wall.

His smile faded and he dropped his hand. “You’ve heard of me.”

She nodded slowly.

“Well, they convicted the wrong guy.” He braced his fists on his hips. “I’m no more a serial killer than you are an... assassin.” He grinned without humour.

“What? W... where did you hear that?”

“Haariss. He heard from Manor. Haariss goes up there whenever there’s a new inmate and gets all the good information. He arranges for some of the supplies up there, too.”

Cambria stared at him, unable to think beyond *serial killer* and *mass murder*.

“Come on, Ms Peterson, you need something to eat and an introduction to your new companions.” He went to the door and glanced back at her. “I have to warn you, though, you’re the first woman sent here. Every other inmate is male, so you’d better be able to defend yourself, or get a...” he glanced meaningfully at her bed, “protector.” He lifted the flap and left, left Cambria to make the decision to follow him or not.

She stared at the door. She couldn’t stay in here forever. Maybe she should at least meet everyone before... before what? Before someone jumped her? She shivered as her imagination took over. She shook off thoughts of men lined up outside her door, waiting for their turn. That *wasn’t* going to happen.

Bolingbroke was going to pay for this. A functioning member of the community? Cambria trembled with rage and helplessness.

She would *kill* herself before she let any of them touch her. Besides, she wasn’t *completely* helpless.

Huntress

Cambria reached down and withdrew the sheathed blade from the pack. She shoved it down the back of her jeans, winced at the scrape against tender flesh. She would ask Dooriss about some kind of a belt to hang it from later. But for now, she wouldn't be totally unprotected, she decided and left the hut.

The sun shone low in the sky and camp fires glowed up the centre of the village.

Each fire had a 'pillar and a couple of humans loitered near the flames. The smell of cooking meat and other things tickled her nostrils. Her stomach growled with hunger and she walked towards the fire across from her hut.

Jones sat on a three-legged stool and watched her approach. He smiled when she stopped in front of him and she wondered what he was thinking. Did he see her as a future murder victim... or a playmate?

Chapter Six

Judge Anderson was a middle of the road kind of Judicar, Louis decided. He handed down judgements in line with the popular opinion of the public rather than making daring judgements of his own. He was a professional butt coverer in Louis's opinion. Some long prison terms, some short and some medium length. Anderson wanted to please everyone. He had changeable politics too; whoever was in power, he bowed to their particular brand of justice.

It disgusted Louis, but all that meant was Anderson was weak-willed and unlikely to have anything to do with Cambria's disappearance. He made three copies of his documents and filed them.

"Yo! Louie!" A muffled voiced called and he blanked the screen. That voice was... familiar.

"What?" He rolled back from the desk and went in search of the voice.

Maurice Joubert, dressed immaculately in a pale grey, silk Armani-Gucci suit leaned casually against file rack. His brown hair carefully combed back from a widow's peak, his salon tanned face broke into a smile showing superior white and dentist-straightened teeth. Dark green eyes gleamed with humour.

"Why do you stay down here, eh?" He straightened from his leaning and casually walked towards Louis. "You look like shit."

"*Merci, Maury, que vouslez-vous?*" Louis rolled down the sleeves of his shirt and sealed the tabs at his cuffs.

"Ah, is that anyway to greet an old friend?"

Louis rolled his shoulders and sighed. "*Bien,*" he held out his hand and Maurice shook it.

"What can I do for you?"

"I have come to take you away from all... this," he waved a manicured hand and wore an expression of faint disgust. "For a while at least."

Louis glanced over his shoulder, "I can't. I'm busy."

"No, *mon ami*, not too busy to have lunch with me, surely?" Maurice patted his chest in mock offence and Louis grinned. His friend never changed. Always the joker.

But this, his work, was too important to cast aside. The longer he took to find out what Cambria worked on, the longer she remained out there, alone. He wouldn't think of her as dead; that way lay madness.

She was an obsession. All he had to do was think of her lush body beneath him and his determination to find her strengthened, as it did now.

He looked at his friend. He hadn't seen Maurice for months. Usually, they would call and connect, and yet here he was, braving the grime of the dungeon to invite Louis to lunch.

Maurice was a man who thought working was for the lesser people and couldn't understand why Louis persisted in having an occupation.

"What are you up to?" Louis asked, suspicious.

"Moi? What? I cannot come to your..." he looked around with a curled lip and brushed a non-existent smear of dust off his sleeve, "job, and ask you to dine with me?" He made 'job' sound like a dirty word, which to him, it was.

Louis sighed. He would get no peace until he acquiesced to Maurice's request. He could always question him over lunch; subtly, of course.

"I don't know, I'm kind of..."

"Who is she?" Maurice asked with a knowing glint in his eyes.

"Who?"

Maurice patted his arm. "She must be something to have you buried down here resisting all my efforts." He sighed so dramatically that Louis rolled his eyes. "Ah, to be in love. You will introduce us, of course."

"I'm not..."

"Then it is settled. Get your coat. We will go to Carte Blanche. I will await you upstairs."

With no quick comeback, Louis walked back to his desk, shut down his unit and lifted his coat off the back of his chair. He brushed it down, reassured himself that a copy of the file was in the inside pocket.

“I’ll be back, *mon amour*.” He promised the blank computer screen and what it represented.

xxx

As they waited for their meals, Louis and Maurice spoke of inconsequential things. Louis knew to wait until the end of the meal before Maurice would tell him what the lunch was really about. And, true to his instincts, Maurice sat back and studied his cognac before speaking.

Louis waited, swirled his own brandy.

“So, who is this woman who has you working so hard?” Maurice asked, eyes on the swirling liquid.

“What makes you think I would work hard for *any* woman?”

“You have that look about you.”

Louis looked over the rim of the glass. “And what look is that, Maury?”

His companion grimaced with distaste at the nickname. “Please, I am a respectable member of society. I am *Maurice*, now.”

Louis let out a bark of laughter. “Ah, *Maurice*. You will always be Maury to me, running the streets of Paris, looking for easy marks and easier money. Just because you hit the mother load with your previously unknown parentage, doesn’t mean you have changed much on the inside. You are still looking for the easy way.”

Maurice leaned forward and lowered his voice. “True, my friend, but now I do it in the service of the Council.”

Louis gaped at him and leaned forward to him. “*What?* What are you up to, Maurice? You have no interest in the Council. Not then, not now, not ever.”

“Ah, but they made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“What, apart from money and you have plenty of that, could they possibly offer you that you would willingly put yourself under their control?” This close to Maurice, he could see a fine sheen of sweat on the man’s forehead. “What are you up to, *my friend*, that has you sweating?” He asked softly.

Maurice licked his lips and sipped his brandy. “You are looking into things that do not concern you, Louie. I’m here to give you a warning to stop.”

“Stop?” Louis gave him a lopsided grin. “I can’t stop sending information to the Senators or anyone who requests it.”

Maurice’s eyelids drooped to hide his thoughts. “That is not what I meant and you know it.”

Louis felt a chill down his spine and sat back. “What do you know, Maurice?”

“All I can tell you is that you are meddling in things that will get you killed or worse, exiled.”

“Exile? *Bah*. What do I care of that? I can live anywhere, you know that.”

“That is not the exile I mean.” He leaned back in his seat as the waiter brought the bill and strolled away. “Do not search for Cambria Peterson.”

Louis felt all the blood drain from his face. “How do you know about that?”

Maurice raised an eyebrow. “I know a lot of what you’ve been doing and I’m here to tell you to stop. To borrow an American idiom, you will screw things sideways if you persist.”

“I can’t stop, Maurice.” He drank his brandy in one gulp; the liquid spread warmth throughout his chilled body.

Maurice studied his friend then slowly nodded. “I can see she means much to you.”

Louis looked into his friend’s eyes. “Everything, Maurice, she means... *everything* to me. That’s why I can’t let this go.”

“You have to.”

“No, Maurice,” Louis shook his head. “I can’t let this go. People are lying to me, facts are wrong and things just don’t add up. I will *not* give her up, Maurice.” Louis found himself leaning across the table, glaring at his friend.

“No one is asking you to.” Maurice replied quietly. “We are asking that you not interfere and that you be patient.”

“Patient? For how long? And who is ‘we’?” Louis narrowed his eyes. “What do you know about this, Maurice, and no more bullshit.”

“Louis. I would tell you if I could. All I *can* tell you is to stop looking for Cambria, stop looking into the judges or the... consequences could be dire.”

“You... you are *threatening* me.” Louis’s eyebrows rose in shock.

“*Oui.*” Maurice acknowledged with a sigh. “There is more to this than one woman, *mon ami*, and I can’t let you screw up years of work. Leave it alone. Forget this woman, move on to someone else.”

Louis kept his mouth shut and stood. He looked at his friend and shook his head.

There was no sign of the mischievous boy he’d once known. Before him sat a man determined to his job, no matter what it cost anyone else.

“*Merci*, for lunch, Maurice.” He walked away without glancing back.

xxx

Cambria knew Jones watched as she ate. The stew was good, fragrant and spicy with some unknown meat. She didn’t want to know what it was, just ate while Excalibur Jones’s eyes roamed over her body, his gaze lingering here and there.

Others noticed her, too. They drifted by, some close enough to brush her back to see what she would do; others gave her a wide berth. Every one of the men had seen her, but none approached yet. She assumed it was because she was in the company of Jones.

She scrapped the last morsels from her bowl then sat it down next to her own stool. A ‘pillar wriggled closer, picked up the bowl and spirited it away. Jones handed her a mug filled with hot, dark fluid.

“What’s this?” She sniffed the brew.

“It’s the closest thing we can come to coffee.”

She took a tentative sip. “Not very close.” She said and Jones laughed.

“You’re right, but it tastes pretty good anyway.”

Cambria nodded. It *did* taste good; slightly bitter, slightly sweet.

It tasted closer to hot chocolate than coffee.

“I won’t tell you what it’s made of, but the ‘pillars drink a lot of it. Well,” he shrugged sheepishly, “they drink a lot of it now we’ve improved it.”

Cambria glanced at him and returned to staring into the fire.

“But I can see you’re not terribly interested in culinary pursuits.”

“You’d be right.”

He gave her a wide smile, his eyes still travelling over her body and she shifted in her seat.

“What do you want to know?” He asked.

“Tell me about the men.”

“Which ones?”

“I don’t want to know anything particular, generalisations will do.” She sipped the brew.

Jones studied her for a moment. “Okay. They’re all convicts - you know that. Some of them are robbers and some are murderers. Jenkins, Debrowski, Chien, Tiquiri and Vangana are all rapists. You want to be careful around them.” He made no offer to protect her, just took her question at face value.

“How will I know them?” She asked and stared up the line of campfires.

“They will, no doubt, find you.”

Adrenalin surged and she glanced at him, he was smiling again as if he would enjoy having her whether she wanted it or not and she looked into his eyes. She’d better establish some rules, here and now, no matter how much she trembled inside at the thought of a confrontation with one of the men. She would not be a victim.

“Make no mistake, Jones, I will categorically *kill* anybody who comes near me without an invitation.” She tried to sound tough but judging from his expression, she failed miserably.

His smile turned to a grin. “You’ll try, anyway.”

His arrogance stirred her anger and she felt a sneer form on her lips. She quoted a character from one of her favourite old movies. “‘There is no try; do or do not.’ I’ll do what I promise.” Cambria straightened her shoulders.

His grin slipped away as he studied her. “I believe you. Others won’t.”

“Then we will have bodies on the ground.” *God, she hoped not!* She wasn’t a killer like her brother, but...

Jones nodded slowly. “Just one will be enough to warn the others, I think.”

Cambria looked away, disgusted and disappointed. She couldn't believe she'd said that. She was plotting murder and *he* approved!

Did she have the courage to follow through with her threat? Cambria thought of what would happen if she didn't. It wouldn't be just one of them; if she showed any weakness, it would be *all* of them and she clearly pictured what they would do to her.

She looked up the line and at the men who cast speculative glances at her. Did she have the courage, she asked herself again? Yes, she decided, the alternative was too awful to think about. But Jones's comment was made as if they had reached an understanding. She would kill one of the men and he would be satisfied she could protect herself. She felt sick at the thought. He trapped so neatly into the assassin Bolingbroke had made her out to be.

She couldn't trust anyone here. Well, no one human. The 'pillars were friendly and helpful. Surely, there was a sting in their tail, too?

"What about the 'pillars?" She asked.

"What about them?" Jones stared into the fire, deep in thought.

"How dangerous are they?"

He turned a startled glance to her and lifted an eyebrow. "Not dangerous at all."

"They have claws, they can camouflage themselves. I think you should explain."

The side of his mouth lifted at her imperious tone. "They genuinely want to help us. Why, I don't know. They're indigenous to the planet, the top of the evolutionary tree. They feed us, clothe us, give us a roof over our heads. In return, we protect them from the nasties in the forest and hunt for them. We help them... evolve, I guess, technologically speaking that is. Every new arrival has something useful in their packs."

"We do?"

"Yeah, I think it is Manor's way of thanking them for looking after us. Without the 'pillars, we would die within a week of arriving here. There are too many creatures out there in the forest that will kill and eat us." He offered the pot to her and she held out her mug.

"How long have you been here?"

“Is that an idle question or do you genuinely want to know?” He filled her mug and replaced the pot by the fire.

“A genuine interest.”

“Well,” he scratched his chin, his fingers rasping against the stubble, “four years, four and half years.”

“Have you tried to escape?” Cambria wished she’d kept her mouth shut. He was a serial killer! She didn’t want to be anywhere *near* him. What would the world do if he escaped?

“Yes. And it’s not possible.”

Cambria’s hand reached up to her shoulder. “Implant?”

Jones nodded. “We all have them.”

“Has anyone else tried?”

“Sure they have.” He rested his chin in his hand, his elbow on his knee and looked into the fire. “Last year we had a newbie. Swore blind he was innocent. Some judge took a dislike to him, accused him of thieving and sent him here. We believed him, of course, everyone here says they’re innocent. He marched right back up to the fortress. We never heard from him again.”

“So, maybe he succeeded?”

“No. Haariss came back and said there was blood everywhere on the path that leads up to the fortress. I suspect he panicked when one of the pigs came along and ran. You don’t run with pigs, you hide, you stay as still as possible or they *will* find you. They’re omnivorous. About the size of our domestic pigs but with wicked claws and tusks. You don’t mess with ‘em. Either kill ‘em – they make good eating – or hide from them. They’re your only choices.”

“I think I may have almost met one of them.”

Jones glanced at her and nodded. “Possible. They haunt the pathways looking for the ‘pillars.’” He watched as one the little creatures undulated by behind Cambria.

“They are, apparently, also good eating.”

He saw the expression on her face and chuckled. “No, we *don't* eat them, but I understand that when humans first arrived, they hunted the ‘pillars until an understanding was reached.”

“An... understanding?”

“One particular ‘pillar was apparently good at languages and learned English. When he replied to some comment someone made, they realised the ‘pillars were sentient.”

“So, maybe they’re helping because they don’t want to be eaten.” Cambria commented.

“True, but *quid pro quo*. They help us and we help them.”

Cambria nodded. The encampment settled into the quietness of night. Only she and Jones remained at the fires. Everyone else had disappeared, even the pillars, and she glanced back at Jones. He had a speculative gleam in his eyes.

She stood and handed him her mug. “Thank you for the food, drink and conversation. I’m going to turn in.”

“Need some company?” He asked and smiled up at her.

“No, thank you.” She stepped away from the fire.

“Let me know when you’re ready.” He called after her as if it were inevitable and she stopped.

Cambria slowly turned back to him.

“Better me than some of others here.” He gave her a wink.

“If I am ever ready, it will be by invitation only. Don’t fuck with me, Jones.” He chuckled at her reply.

“You’d better forget him, whoever he is, because you are here *forever*.”

His laughter followed her as she returned to her hut.

Once inside she looked around. The object on her table glowed with a pale orange light. One of the ‘pillar’s must have lit it, she thought and began to peel off her shirt.

The tabs on her shirt were half undone when she realised the door had no lock. How was she going to keep the men out? If they ganged up on her, she lost.

Individually, she might be able to take them, but all together, she had no hope.

Cambria had to sleep, but she wasn't a particularly light sleeper either. She had to set up some kind of an alarm.

Someone had unpacked her gear. The pack sat squashed flat in the far corner of her hut. All of the equipment and clothes were neatly stacked on new shelves, above her bed and on the wall above the pack.

Cambria reached for her utensil kit and unsnapped each piece. Then she hunted around for something she could use as string. Inside the medical kit, she found a roll of black thread.

She tied the knife, fork, spoon and square dish to individual strings and pinned them to the wall above the door.

If anyone tried to enter, they would jangle. Cambria figured it would give her enough time to grab her knife and defend herself.

She tugged off her boots and socks, then slid her jeans down her legs. Her sunburn had turned a rough and dry dark brown with reddish-pink patches. She was going to peel. In a couple of days, she would look like she was shedding her skin and she grinned. Unattractive, very unattractive.

Someone, she assumed Dooriss, had left her another vine. She stripped off the rest of her clothes and lathered herself with the numbing gel. Maybe she would get lucky and the stuff would add moisture to her skin and stop her from the dreaded 'peel'. She didn't think so, but hope sprang eternal.

Cambria wriggled under the finely woven blanket and tucked her knife under the flat, reed-stuffed pillow.

She prayed nothing and no one would try to come through the door. She didn't want to kill anyone, and she wondered if she truly could take another human's life

Chapter Seven

Louis stared at the computer screen and wondered how Maurice knew what he was doing. Was his unit bugged? How could he find out? He didn't relish the thought of totally disassembling the unit; he didn't know enough about the internals to be able to put it back together again.

He sat with his hands hovering over the keyboard. Maurice knew way too much. Did that mean he was a part of some covert organization? What would happen if he *did* continue his search? He'd already said he didn't mind exile and he'd tasted prison as a boy. Neither punishment scared him.

Was there a way to circumvent the surveillance Louis now knew Maurice had on him?

Louis slumped back in his seat and thought hard. If he couldn't use the research unit in front of him, what else could he use?

He snorted in disgust and looked around him. He had miles of paper documentation. The unit wasn't his only source of information. But the task was daunting. He knew if he loaded up the electronic file registry on the judiciary, Maurice would know. He would have to do it manually.

With a sigh, he rose and walked down to the back of the room where the book registers were. Part of his job required him to not only update the *electronic* register, but the *paper* one as well. This was the back up system in case of long term power failures.

The registers filled a complete wall. Two centuries worth of files were in this cavernous room and the registers guided the seeker.

Anything further back was archived in another building.

His eyes followed the years. He had to think of the next judge on his list. Anderson was a bust, but would Auteil be the man? He closed his eyes and concentrated on the list. Jacques Auteil, a magistrate for forty years. Louis had only to search the records for the previous ten years. His eyes popped open and found the first register.

It would take him days, maybe weeks to find all the information on all the judges. It was all he had, now that the electronic records were denied him.

He dragged the book down and began to read.

XXX

“I told you he wouldn’t let this go. What would you have me do now?” Maurice asked his grey-haired boss.

“He is tenacious.” Montague murmured as he watched the monitor.

“You have no idea how tenacious Louie can be.” Maurice nodded as he watched Louie thumb through the register and make notes with a... pen. Maurice smiled.

“He ignored your warning.”

“As I expected. Louie is his own man and I think he loves this woman very much.”

Montague snorted with disbelief. “No woman is worth risking what he is risking.”

Maurice coughed into his hand. “Monsieur, a man in will love risk *everything*.”

His boss studied him as if gauging the veracity of his remark then grunted. “Can we recruit him?”

Maurice replied with a Gallic shrug.

“You know better than anyone else, what is your opinion?”

“I think that if he is allowed free reign in searching for Ms Peterson, he will find her.”

Montague laughed. “There is no way he could. Even this section cannot locate her or the others who are missing. Why do you think he,” he waved at the screen, “can find what we cannot?”

“Because he *is* tenacious, Monsieur. Because he has all the information he needs to at least find Bolingbroke. If he can find one corrupt judge, he will find others. It’s what he does, and he does it very well.”

“Hmm.” Montague watched the man on the screen and came to a decision. “We’ll let him find out as much as he can for the moment. I want you, personally, to keep an eye on him. When he has the information, let me know. I’ll make a decision on how to proceed then.” He flicked his wrist in dismissal without glancing at Maurice.

“Monsieur, Louis Boudreaux may very well find more than we want him to.”

Solemn dark blue eyes turned to him. “We will deal that if he should discover more than is healthy for him.” Montague swivelled in his red leather chair and leaned his forearms on the desk. “If you think it is necessary, protect him.”

“Can I give him any hints?” Maurice grinned.

“I thought you said he was tenacious?”

“He is, but I would rather he find only what we want him to. A man in his position has access to all sorts of data.”

Montague frowned. “What is it you’re suggesting?”

“That we be honest with him.” He nodded at the screen. The camera followed Louis as he made his way down one of the dim corridors of files. “I can assure you, Monsieur, that once he has found Ms Peterson, he is going to go on a hunt for me.”

“I watched your interview, you gave nothing away.”

“Ah, but I did. Louie knows me better than anyone else.” He gave another shrug. “We ran together as boys. He knows my attitude to the Council, to authority in general and he cannot reconcile me working for them. No, he knows something is wrong and he will find out.”

“I disagree,” Montague shook his head. “You will continue your surveillance. If it becomes necessary, and I mean *absolutely* necessary, only then can you interfere directly.”

Maurice opened his mouth to protest, but Montague raised a hand. “No. *This time*, you will do as I have ordered.” He levelled a deadly glare at Maurice. “If I find out you have disobeyed, I will rescind your exile order and send you Trantis myself. Is that clear?”

Maurice swallowed and nodded. Louie would laugh himself stupid if he ever found out the Gendarmes caught up with him. One last job for the infamous *Le Chat* and it was a set up. His choices were few: He could use his burglary skills for the Council or he would find himself on a planet few survived.

It wasn’t Maurice’s fault the guard decided to capture *Le Chat* himself. From what the Gendarmes told Maurice, the guard acted without authority and that was the only reason Montague had decided to cut him a break.

The guard's death weighed heavily on Maurice, still did. He could remember clearly the light fading from the man's eyes when Maurice slammed the heel of his hand against his chest.

How could he know the guard had an irregular heartbeat? No one knew, not even his superiors.

Maurice stood over the man, stared in shock, as the gendarmes rushed into the room and cuffed him.

"*Oui.*" He said now and left to make his arrangements.

xxx

The noise was subtle; a quiet scrape of metal against metal, but it was enough for Cambria's eyes to open and slide her hand under her pillow.

She held the reassuring weight of the knife in a back hand grip and watched the door cloth.

The fork and spoon slid together as someone pressed against the cloth.

Customer number one, she thought and slid from beneath the warm covers. The night air chilled her skin but she crept to the opposite side of the door and waited.

A hand crept around the edge of the cloth and searched for the implements. Cambria gripped the knife tighter and raised it to her chest, blade out.

Thick, masculine fingers brushed the spoon, then the fork and held them together with two fingers. When his hand held all the cutlery, the man cautiously moved further into the room. His eyes went immediately to the bed and widened.

Cambria flicked her wrist and slashed out. The man yipped as the blade cut across the back of his hand. He dropped the cutlery and stepped into the room. His eyes narrowed as he found her. The cutlery rattled noisily as he entered further and grinned at her with a gap-toothed smile.

Fetid air washed over her and she lifted a hand to her mouth and nose.

They were barely two feet apart and his grin turned to a leer as his gaze roamed over her with avarice.

"Sweet," he snarled. "It's been a long time, but worth the wait. Come here, bitch."

Cambria shook her head and backed up. She couldn't do it after all. "G... go away!"

The man laughed, his stinking breath wafting to her. "I'm gonna fuck you hard, bitch and you're gonna love it." One hand reached down to cup himself, the other reached out to her. "Don't make me come over there."

"Don't touch me!"

"C'mere, I said!" His dark eyes bored into hers and she showed him the knife, pointed it at him. "I'll kill you! *I will!*"

"With that little thing?" He sneered and tossed his long, lank hair back. "Put it down before I take it away from you. Better yet, why don't you lie down and spread your legs for me. I got me some meat just for you." He dropped his threadbare trousers and exposed his erection. "If you're real nice, I might even let you suck me off. A pretty mouth like that's only good for one thing."

He grabbed his penis in one hand and slowly walked towards her. "Come on, girlie, one fuck and I'll leave you alone."

Cambria heard the lie in his voice over the frantic beat of her heart. She shook her head, understood she had to do something before he reached her.

She lowered the knife. "You... you won't hurt me?"

"Course not. We're just going to have some fun, is all." He murmured, as if trying to sooth a wild animal. "Just some harmless, satisfying fun."

She let him come closer, though he scared her down to her bones.

His hand landed on her shoulder, drew down to her breast and squeezed. "Nice. Soft." He murmured quietly, then his other hand dived between her legs and his fingers jammed into her. Cambria jerked the knife up. The blade sank into his upper stomach and speared his heart with astonishing ease.

He stared at her, released her and clutched at her hand around the hilt, tried to drag in a breath. He dropped to his knees, looked up at her and fell onto his side, sighed out his last breath and sank into death.

Cambria waited but he didn't move. A fine trembling began in her knees and travelled up her body. She slumped into the chair, eyes still on the body.

She'd done it. Accidentally, by instinct, yes. But she'd killed a man. She'd taken a human life, yet she felt numb, as if her emotions had switched off.

The time she'd spent on the streets of Chicago had served a use after all. She hadn't left that part of her life behind after all. For once, she was glad. She'd spent years trying to forget, now she was grateful. Bad blood will out. Wasn't that what one of her neighbours had said when her brother arrested sent up for murder? Was she truly like them after all?

Cambria sighed. For the moment, the lack of feeling was useful and she'd use it.

What did she do with the body?

She really had no other option but to put it on display as a warning to the others.

Kneeling in front of the man, she tugged the blade out. Blood flowed over her wrist and hand. She wiped the blade on the man's clothing and put it aside. Then she rolled his body towards the door and turned it so his head was at the door.

Cambria peeked outside. There was no one about, so she dragged the body through the opening and arranged it across the doorway, face up.

No one could ignore him or the bloody hole in his chest.

Satisfied that she'd done what she could, she made sure the alarm system was still in place and went back to bed.

XXX

Cambria didn't go back to sleep, but fell into a light doze, her ears attuned to any movement outside and, though the night was filled with silence, sleep eluded her.

Eventually, light began to creep around the cloth-covered window and she heard the quiet noise of the pillars starting the fires.

When she heard human murmurs, she rolled out of bed, her knife still gripped in her bloody fist.

She would have to clean the blade properly before re-sheathing it.

Cambria rubbed her arms; the morning felt chilly. The rough scrape of her hands had her glancing down. Her skin flaked off like dandruff and she glanced at the table.

Another vine lay in the centre and she glanced at the doorway. Was the corpse still there? The pool of blood had disappeared from the doorway. Or, more specifically, covered by a light dusting of dirt.

She looked closer and saw the sweep marks. The ‘pillars? How had they managed to enter and do that when she listened for movement all night?

Cambria shrugged. She would ask later and lathered the gel over her body before dressing. She would have to wash; herself and her clothes.

She unhooked the alarm and stepped out into the morning light. The man was gone. Only ‘pillars moved around the fires and she went to closest blaze.

“Hello.” She said and sat on a stool.

The ‘pillar was different from Haariss and Dooriss. It had pale yellow eyes and she was beginning to understand that eye colour was a defining feature of the species. No two pillars had the exact same eye colour.

“I am Moreriss,” the creature said and bowed its upper body. It reached down and dipped a mug into a pot that sat on a tripod over the fire. It carefully wiped the side of the mug and handed it to her.

“Thank you.” It bowed again and continued to stir a pot that sat next to the fire.

Haariss, Dooriss and Moreriss. All English names with ‘pillar pronunciations.

“How do you get your names?” She asked as she sipped the same brew that Excalibur had given her last night.

Moreriss blinked. “We have a list of names to usse.”

“And they all end in ‘s’?”

Moreriss nodded and Cambria wondered if they got the joke. She looked at him. Probably not. Their names seemed gender specific for which she was grateful. It meant she didn’t have to keep asking if the ‘pillar was male or female.

“Is there anywhere around here I can wash my clothes and me?”

“Yes, Cambria. I can take you or arrange for a female to accompany you.”

Did all the ‘pillars know who she was? “Could I take Dooriss?”

Moreriss nodded and resumed his stirring. She tried to think of a subject and glanced back at her hut.

“Uh, Moreriss?”

“Yess, Cambria?”

“The dead man lying outside my hut...” She began.

“Hass been removed.”

“Why?”

He blinked his pale eyes and tilted his head. “He wass no longer alive. He made a mess.” His yellow alien eyes stared at her intently. “He wass tasty.”

Cambria stared at him in shock and horror. “You mean you... *ate him?*” Moreriss grinned showed the sharp rows of teeth in his mouth and she shuddered. Better behave while she was here.

“He made a mess.” He repeated.

Cambria frowned. He made it sound like mess was a bad thing. She looked closer at the encampment. It was spotless. No rubbish; every thing carefully maintained. The area surrounding of the campfires was swept. Every hut displayed clean walls and she shook her head.

“I’m in tidy town.” She murmured. A head came out of a doorway, four huts up and turned towards her. Excalibur Jones grinned at her and stepped out.

She watched him approach, unsettled by his confident gait. What was it about him that disturbed her? Apart from him being a killer. She wondered. He was handsome, no doubt about it, but he *murdered* people. She didn’t believe his protests of false conviction. He was a man to be wary of. Then again, Niall, her brother had hugged her, kissed her forehead, told her to be good, before he went out and slaughtered somebody.

“Good morning, Cambria, Moreriss.” He nodded to them and sat.

“Jones.” She acknowledged cautiously.

He accepted a mug from the ‘pillar and drank half of it down before turning his attention to her. “Heard you had a little... action last night.”

Cambria raised her eyebrows. "From whom?"

Jones grinned at her. "Oh," he lifted a shoulder, "I hear all sorts of things around here, from numerous sources."

She glanced at Moreriss who patiently stirred his pot.

"We have an understanding."

Cambria looked back at Jones. His face was devoid of expression. Even his eyes were blank. She knew in that moment, without a doubt, that he could kill without remorse, without hesitation and that he truly *was* a killer. The question was did he kill for pleasure or necessity?

"What?" She swallowed against nervousness. "Anything and everything that goes on this camp they're to tell you?"

Humanity leaked back into his eyes and nodded. "Security precautions."

"But you didn't stop that man from trying to get to me?"

"No. I wanted to see what you would do." He turned his head and held out his mug.

Moreriss refilled it.

Cambria held hers out and the 'pillar filled it. She didn't take her eyes off Jones and waited for him to explain.

He watched her watching him and it Cambria looked away first. She wasn't brave enough to challenge him.

"Why?" She finally asked.

"Because if you're going to survive here, you have to fend for yourself. Your little display last night will either warn the others off, or they will try something else."

Moreriss handed him a bowl of fragrant white porridge. Then he handed Cambria a bowl.

She sniffed at it, then picked up her spoon. It didn't matter that the stuff tasted good, it wouldn't matter if she disliked it; she was here, she had to eat. Like Jones said, she had to fend for herself.

"Now what?" She asked and blew on the porridge to cool it, before taking a mouthful. It tasted sweet, with a smooth texture.

“Now we see how brave the others are.”

Cambria looked over to him a nasty suspicion forming in her mind. “I thought you said I would only have to kill one of them.”

Again, he shrugged. “You’re the only woman they’ve seen. Some have been here for years.”

She stared at him.

“Life can be pretty boring sometimes.”

Cambria snorted and spooned more breakfast into her mouth. “So I’m what? Entertainment?”

“It was certainly entertaining last night.” He said.

“You... you watched?”

Jones grinned at her. “Most of us did. We saw him go in, we saw you bring him out again. That is some sweet ass you’ve got there. You also won me some trade, for which I thank you.”

He bobbed his head at her and Cambria felt heat rise in her face.

Cambria put her bowl down, appetite gone. She was living amongst men for whom rape and death meant nothing but entertainment with her cast in the central role meant everything.

“Jesus.” She whispered as she realised she might have to kill someone every night; for as long as they wanted to send someone up against her. She didn’t want to kill *anyone*. She just wanted to survive and find a way back home. Now, her life expectancy had just been shortened significantly.

“There are rules.” Jones said as if they were discussing a game of football and not her life. He scraped the bottom of the bowl and he held it out for more as if Moreriss was his own personal slave. Maybe he was, Cambria thought sickly.

“Rules?” She asked faintly.

“Sure. One at a time. We want to be fair about this.”

“Fair. *Fair?*” Cambria stood, her hands clenched into fists. “You’re talking about my life! About me killing people, or them raping me... What is *fair* about that?”

He gave her a charming smile and she resisted the urge to smack it off his face.

“If you’re going to live in the village, you have to abide by the rules, Cambria.” He said her name slowly, softly, rolling it around his tongue as if he enjoyed the flavour.

“You *bastard!* I’m outta here.” She turned to go but his next words stopped her.

“And where would you go? Back to the fortress? Even if you found a way in, Manor would just toss you back to us. Out there? Into the wilderness? You have no knowledge of what’s out there and with no protection you wouldn’t last two days.”

Cambria looked at him. “So, let me test my understanding here. I can either go out into the wild and survive by myself with all the beasties, or stay here and kill or be raped. That about it?”

Jones nodded and grinned at her.

“Until what? I kill you all?”

Jones laughed. “Won’t come to that. You’ll submit.” His grin vanished like he’d thrown a switch. “Sooner or later.”

Fury and outrage had her stepping back lest she use the knife on the smug-faced Jones. “You have no idea what I’ll do. I will *kill* myself before I submit.”

He looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “That’s a little extreme, don’t you think? Come now, it’s a little fun for me and the boys. Who knows, you might even enjoy the challenge, the chase and the prize.”

“What I think, Excalibur Jones, is you have no idea who you’re messing with and no idea about how far I will go to protect myself.”

He studied her for a moment. “You going to finish your breakfast or can I have it?”

Cambria turned away and went back to her hut.

xxx

Louis carefully turned the page. It was a transcript from a trial two years ago where an alleged thief protested his innocence and presented a rock solid alibi. Judge Bolingbroke replied that no alibi was going to stop him from doing his job.

The transcript had showed there were six people in the court: The judge, unrepresented defendant, a prosecutor, court reporter and two guards.

Louis was sick with outrage at the judge's attitude. It was the fourth case he read with similarities in that the same five people had presided over a case. Guilty or innocent, it didn't matter to the judge and Louis had a growing list of names to investigate.

He could find no record of what happened to the defendants once the judge had brought down his decision of exile.

Tapping the page, he leaned back in his seat. Should he take the four names and hunt them down or continue and compile a list of cases and people he had... disposed of in less than legal ways?

But would a list of names and case numbers lead him to Cambria? Louis chewed on his lip. The best answer he could come up with was: eventually. He bent his head to the file and continued to read, to write notes, unaware of the tiny camera lens above him that recorded everything he was reading.

Chapter Eight

Cambria sank down into the cool water. Dooriss lay on the bank of the water pool and appeared to be asleep.

The ‘pillar was eager to leave the settlement and relax on the sand. “Itsss hard,” she said, “to keep the camp alwayssss clean.”

Cambria didn’t ask why. She just wasn’t interested; her life, Jones, the men and what she could do about it all, did.

Dooriss didn’t mention the man she’d killed either and if she didn’t raise the topic, Cambria was perfectly willing to let it go, too. She had moved on to more important things: like trying to think of a way to turn her hut into a fortress. She dived under the water and surfaced, brushing her hair back out of her eyes.

The idea of constantly being under attack scared her. She didn’t trust Jones and his ‘rules’, but there was no way to convince the men not to touch her. She had no time limit and no areas were off limits.

Could she ask the ‘pillars for protection or was that the humans’ job? So far, she had seen nothing to threaten the village, but she hadn’t been here long enough to see anything.

Cambria swam back to the bank and picked up the purple vine Dooriss had placed there for her use. She sniffed at it and touched the gel that was leaking out of one end. The ‘pillar had assured her it was soap and it certainly smelled like it. It was spicy with a hint of floral.

She shrugged and squeezed a small amount onto her palm. She rubbed her hands together and bubbles foamed around her fingers.

She stood and covered her body in soap, rubbed hard with sand to slough off the dead skin of her sunburn. She heard a soft hissing and glanced over to Dooriss.

The ‘pillar lay very still but her eyes focussed on the forest. So much for privacy, Cambria thought and continued to rub her skin.

Her knife lay on the sand next to her. She reached down, picked up more sand to rub on her legs, and took the opportunity to scan the forest where Dooriss indicated.

Two faces peeked through the foliage, both human, both male, both middle-aged and both grinning like maniacs.

Cambria ignored them and continued rub with the sand; her upper thighs, her stomach, her breasts and shoulders.

When she finished, she crouched down and heard a soft noise like a sigh. She resisted turning to the men. As long as they stayed where they were, they were safe, but if they approached...

Her hand gripped the knife and she turned and dived into the water. She came up out of the water like a dolphin, splashing in the sparkling water. A glance towards the bushes showed the men watched her avidly. They had pushed through the foliage slightly to watch her.

Cambria ducked under the water again and came up closer to the shore. She heard a gasp and turned in that direction. The men pulled back and ducked down, but she knew they were still there. Dooriss's head faced that direction. She looked back at Cambria and one pale grey eyelid closed and opened in a wink.

Cambria felt the tug of a grin as she sat on the bank, put the knife next to her where the men couldn't see and reached for the vine. She poured more into her hand and lathered her hair. She tipped her head back, her breasts thrusting out as she rubbed the gel in and massaged her scalp.

She knew it was provocative, knew there could be a reaction from the men, but she just didn't care. The sun was warm, the water cool and it was a beautiful spot. For the first time since landing on this miserable planet, she felt beautiful and she was going to let any male interfere with that.

Satisfied they'd had enough of an eyeful, she slithered back into the water and rinsed off.

When she came out again, Dooriss handed her another finely woven piece of cloth to dry off with. She did so with slow deliberation and Dooriss hissed again as if she was laughing.

Cambria dressed and re-sheathed her knife at her hip. Neither mentioned her performance for the men. She sat down next to Dooriss, rubbing her hair with the cloth.

“You know, this is the finest weave I have ever come across,” she said and held the cloth out.

“We weave it.” Dooriss nodded.

“It’s beautiful.” She brought it closer and saw a pattern of leaves. “Did you do this?”

“No, the weaverssss did.”

“Does everyone in your tribe have a particular job, then?” She went back to rubbing her hair dry.

“Yesss. I clean. Moreriss cooksss. Haariss carriesss. Deeniss watches. Kerriss buildsss.

“And all of you have, ah, staff. I mean you’re not the only ones to do your jobs. There are others.”

“Yesss.”

Cambria pulled out a small comb from her pocket and began to run it through her hair.

She tugged at the knots and Dooriss made another hissing sound.

“No. Ssstop. You do it *wrong*.” She said and stood up. She went behind Cambria and she heard a slight scraping noise before Dooriss dug six clawed limbs into her hair. She tensed at the slight tugging, but relaxed as the ‘pillar combed her hair. “How you keep hair untangled without clawsss iss beyond me,” Dooriss huffed as if Cambria was a child, but she let the ‘pillar work in silence, enjoying the sensation.

Her hair was soon smooth and knot-free and Cambria twirled it into a pony tail and secured it with a woven band.

“I guess we’d better get back,” she said and stood. Her clothes, strung out on bushes were dry and she folded them.

Dooriss picked up the vine and used her teeth to seal the open end. She passed it to Cambria.

They both walked back to the encampment without sparing a thought for the two watching men.

Jones waited for her by her hut. He stood in front of the doorway with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Can I help you, Mr Jones?” Cambria asked and pushed the door flap aside.

She put her clothes onto their appropriate shelves and wait for his reply. She glanced back and saw him standing at the doorway holding the flap up.

“What are you doing?”

“I haven’t been invited inside. Would you come outside and share some Ssoclar with me?”

Cambria stared at him. A gentleman serial killer? She didn’t think so. What was he up to?

She shrugged. “Okay.”

He held the flap for her and she ducked under his arm.

She heard him breathe deeply as she went by him and ignored his soft muttering.

Moreriss stood at the fire, stirring his pot, but he stopped long enough to pour two mugs of the beverage.

Cambria took one as she sat and waited for Jones. She glanced over her shoulder at him.

He had his back to her, staring down at himself. His knees flexed slightly and the material covering his butt slid tight.

She resisted an urge to smile and returned her attention to her brew.

Finally, Jones stepped to the other side of the fire and sat down. Cambria flicked a glance at his groin and grinned into her Ssoclar, enjoyed his discomfit. Maybe the two men weren’t the only ones watching her bathe. *The perverts.*

Jones cleared his throat and thanked Moreriss for the brew.

“I, er... how are you settling in?”

“Fine.” She said, wondering at his tactics. He’d been carelessly scary this morning. Was he now regretting warning her of what was to come?

“And the food. Do you like the food?” His expression was earnest. Another personality?

“Yes, Jones I like the food, I like the Ssoclar, I like the pillars. Now, enough of this chit chat and tell me what you really want.”

His gaze heated; not with anger but with the heat of a man appreciating the look of a woman. Cambria held his gaze without flinching.

The heat increased as he turned his eyes to her body, undressing her slowly.

When he returned to her face, the lust in his eyes was clear.

“Okay.” She said. “Now that we have that out of the way, the answer is no. What else?”

He blinked, the heat turned off and he laughed. “Not to be intimidated, are you?”

“I have too much to lose.” She said, thankful he hadn’t seen her terror last night.

“Yeah, I suppose you do.” He nodded. “All right then. We know where we stand.”

“We do?”

“Yes. You know that every human male in this encampment will try to bed you, willing or not. They will try every method known to achieve that. I know that you will defend your... virtue with every thing in your arsenal.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “And I’m about to give you something more to add to your defence.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” he drained his mug and handed it to Moreriss before standing. He held out his hand to her. “Come with me.”

“Why?” She asked and gave her half full mug to the ‘pillar.

“Because it is time to give you a job. And that job requires weapons.”

Cambria stood and Jones dropped his hand. “You have a problem with courtesy?”

“No, Jones, I have a problem with men.”

He chuckled. “We’ll go this way.” He said and walked up the line of campfires.

xxx

Louis knocked on the ornate wooden door and stepped back to wait. There was no sound from within and he knocked again. A house like this would surely have staff, yet there appeared to be no one home.

The two storey house, mansion, he thought, took up enough space to build four homes. It was a quiet neighbourhood, with similar constructions partially hidden by fir trees. Deep sloping roofs to slough off the snow, bright red brick with white trim, the occupants had to be relatively wealthy to afford such homes. This one, however, had an air of desolation and quiet neglect.

He leaned sideways and caught a glimpse of the interior through a window. He could see a colourful couch and a sliver of a coffee table, but the place felt empty.

Maybe they were around the back? He thought and walked down the stairs to the side gate. It opened with a squeak and he walked into the back garden.

It was immaculately kept, with the edge of the lawn neatly trimmed and the flowers pruned to within an inch of their lives. He didn't know what the plants were; he knew nothing of botany.

No one enjoyed the beauty, but through the open garage door, he heard the tinny sound of a radio and the occasional male curse.

Louis stood in the opened doorway. A black Mercedes-Citroen rested on two tyre ramps and grey coveralled legs stuck out from beneath the chassis.

“Hello?”

His greeting caused a clang and another curse, but the legs moved from under the car and the man slid out.

“What?” The man glared at him, frowned, then his face filled with anger and sneering hate. “What the fuck do you want? Haven't you people done enough?”

“Excuse me?” Louis said, nonplussed.

“You take my son, now you want me? Well, you can go and take a flying...”

“Sir, *sir!* No. I just wanted to know where your son is so I can talk to him.”

The man studied him for a moment then rose, rubbing his hands on an oil-stained cloth. “I don't know what you're talking about.” He said calmly and walked further into the garage.

Louis followed him. “Mr Dubois, your son was convicted of theft.” That earned him a glare and he held up one hand. “I know he was innocent, I have the proof here.”

Dubois snorted. A short, sharp sound filled with disbelief. “So *what?* The judge saw the same thing and still sent my boy away.”

“Yes, sir and it’s not the first time he’s done it.”

Dubois stopped rubbing his hands and looked at Louis. “What are you saying?”

“I’m telling you that this wasn’t the first time Bolingbroke used his power to send an innocent man to prison. I’m going to stop him.”

A bitter smile curled Dubois’ lip. “Prison. Is *that* what you think happened to Pierre?” He shook his head and tossed the rag onto a cluttered bench. “No. Pierre was *exiled*.” He leaned down to a bar fridge and pulled out a tube of beer. He tilted it at Louis who nodded. Dubois tossed the tube and got another one for himself. He stood for a moment, lost in thought and then came to a decision. “Come out into the garden and sit.”

Louis perched sideways on a lounge facing a grieving and angry father.

There was a double hiss as both opened their tubes. They didn’t speak until after long swallow of the brew.

Dubois sighed. “Pierre was only twenty-two when he was sent away. Twenty-two and so naïve about the world and the nasty people inhabiting it. I tried to convince him an apprenticeship with a judge was a bad idea, but he wanted to go into the judiciary and,” he shrugged, “he was determined. What could I do? Bolingbroke was eager to take the boy under his wing. The judge doesn’t have a son, you see, only a daughter. He swore he would look after the boy, teach him the judiciary and one day, maybe, Pierre would become a magistrate himself. My boy graduated from Harvard top of his class, had his pick of jobs, but he wanted to go into government. Wanted to work for the World Council where he could do some *good*.” He drank down his beer and retrieved two more.

Louis sipped his drink, wondered whether Dubois planned to get rip-roaring drunk. Rene Dubois painted a very different picture of the boy from what Bolingbroke said in court. The judge all but frothed at the mouth with vitriol.

Rene handed him a second tubes and slumped down on the lounge. “Where was I? Oh, yeah. My boy was filled with idealism, an obsession to do good. He was with the judge for, oh, three months? Before he came to me with concerns about how the judge

did business. I said not every thing in the legal system was easy to take. He looked at me strangely and left. About a month later, I got a personal call from... what was his name, the judge's assistant, Miller, Muller, no Moeller saying Pierre had tried to rob the judge and was going to be charged. I wanted to pound his face in. I was *outraged*. I visited him once. And he said to me," he tipped the tube up to his mouth again and drank. "He said to me he had done nothing wrong. I replied he must have done something to earn the judge's ire and Pierre... he looked real scared and said that the judge had exiled some poor bastard for not cleaning his car properly. That he'd exiled someone else for cutting him off in traffic. And that he'd seen some odd papers in the judge's office."

He raised his head and Louis could see the betrayal and deep sadness in his solid brown eyes.

"Moeller then came and said if I repeated any of what Pierre had said, not only would I never see him again, but I would be taken as well. He laughed and said no one stood against the judge, he was too powerful and had eyes everywhere. I believed him." He finished with a sigh.

"And you've never told this to anyone? Never mentioned it even in passing?"

Rene lifted his head, his eyes filled with defiance. "No. My wife, she left with my other children because I did nothing. I have nothing left."

Louis glanced up at the two story house.

"Hah. What is a house with no one to fill it? All I have is silence now, no children laughing, no wife to... well." He lowered his head. "You can take me away now, I have nothing left."

"Mr Dubois, I'm not here to take you away, I'm here to confirm your story and to try and find Pierre. I have a record that says he went to..." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Tudor. Do you know where that is?"

"The only people who know where he is, are Bolingbroke and Moeller. They're the ones who punished him; they're the ones who sent him away."

"But do you recognise the name? Tudor? Do you know anything about the place? Have you heard from Pierre at all?"

Dubois frowned then crushed the tube in his fist. “It seems... familiar. Come into the house and I will do a search.”

He stood, wavered a bit, then took a deep breath and slowly walked to the house.

Louis followed him through the back door and into the kitchen, noticed the spotless counters, stove and sinks. Rene led him to a book case filled study. Against every wall stood bookcases; on every shelf, bound books. A rare thing.

“Inheritance,” Rene remarked as he glanced at Louis slack-jawed expression.

He stood at his desk and turned his personal unit on. “What was the place again?” He asked.

“Tudor,” Louis murmured staring at the titles. The book case before him held mechanic books, the hard back versions. Louis didn’t touch them, they were rare and e precious. Books on all sorts of subjects, from gardening to mining to astronomy and everything in between lined the shelves. He’d never seen so many books in one place outside a museum.

“This is,” he began, “this is... *amazing*.”

Rene grunted with agreement. “This collection has been handed down from generation to generation. One day, it will be Pierre’s. I hope.”

Louis’s fingers hovered over the spines, tempted to touch, but he didn’t.

“That’s odd,” Rene said behind him and Louis glanced back.

“What? Where’s Tudor? It sounds like it should be in the British Isles, or Americas.”

“No,” Rene said faintly.

“Hmm, in Africa then, or perhaps Australia?”

“No, it’s nowhere here. It’s nowhere on Earth.” Louis turned at the sound of despair in Rene’s voice. The man’s eyes had filled with tears.

“What is it, Rene?”

Rene turned the screen towards Louis and he blinked.

The screen held a star map and a blue icon was blinking. He looked closer and saw the tiny letters. “No. That’s not possible...” He leaned against the desk.

Pierre Dubois was on another *planet*? How? When? He pulled out the piece of paper and made a note to check departure lists and passengers. As he wrote the last word, a feeling of dread rose.

“Can you check these other names for me?”

Rene looked blankly at him. “Others?”

“Yes.” He looked at his list. “Beterix, Trantis, Welfor, Khazari.”

Rene typed in the names and the screen split into four different star maps, each with a blinking icon.

“That’s why I couldn’t find them,” Louis murmured.

“Huh?”

Louis glanced away from the screen to Rene’s pale face. “I have four others listed as exiled to these places. I did an international person search and couldn’t find them. I had no idea that they weren’t here on Earth at all. I just thought... well, I didn’t know what I thought. Everyone is in the database somewhere. No one can just disappear.”

“What will you do now?” Rene asked staring at the screen.

“I don’t know.” Louis said with growing despair. “I don’t know.” He repeated.

“Do you want a down load?”

Louis’s eyes snapped to Rene’s. “Can I? Without anyone knowing?”

“This is an isolated unit with my own historical software. No one knows about it.”

Louis felt his shoulders slump. “Then it’s not compatible with any other system.”

Rene gave him a small smile. “I’ll give you a copy of my own updated version. It will run on any unit.” He pressed a few buttons and a small cube dropped from the bottom of the screen. “Can you get my son back?” He asked and handed the cube to Louis.

Louis winced at the question, but looked at the man and replied with honesty. “I don’t know, Rene, I just don’t know.” Now he understood what Maurice meant when he suggested Louis was setting himself up for exile. What else did Maurice know?

Maybe it was time to look up his old friend and get some answers from him. He picked up the cube. “Do you mind if I make some copies of this?”

“No.” He sighed. “Do with it what you will.” He sounded so dejected, so hopeless that Louis had to resist telling him that he would find his son. Louis didn’t know if that was true, but his mission had just expanded.

XXX

Maurice watched as Louis shook Rene Dubois’s hand and got into his vehicle. His friend had found out more, faster than Maurice had given him credit. But what would he do with the information, and what had Dubois told him? The truth about his son’s disappearance? That would lead him nowhere. It was time Maurice paid another visit to his old friend.

Chapter Nine

Bolingbroke studied yet another boring document when he heard a tap at his office door.

“Enter.” He called without looking up. He knew who it was, but every visitor had to understand where, in the line of importance, they stood; always and ever, beneath him.

He signed the warrant and lifted his head. Moeller waited patiently before him. Bolingbroke didn't invite him to sit.

“Ah, Moeller, how goes my kingdom?” He leaned back in his seat, the leather creaking.

“Sir, it goes well. Your palace nears completion. We had a few problems, but the High Priest brought in more slaves to maintain the schedule.” Moeller allowed a small smile. “It is glorious, Your Honour, simply... glorious.”

Bolingbroke grinned. All of his plans were falling neatly into place and there was no one to stop him. Well, once he got rid of *one* little problem there'd be no one to stop him.

His dream of ruling his own planet was within reach.

Sheer dumb luck had one of the scientists who pioneered Project Banish appear on his docket for continued traffic offences. Gerald Duck asked to speak with His Honour privately and explained what he did and what he could do for the judge.

Project Banish appealed to Bolingbroke. He was, after all, descended from judges who sent convicts to America and Australia. The project did the same, but the convicts found themselves even further away; to distant planets where they could do what they could to survive, just like in the new lands of the 18th Century.

That steep learning curve had produced some of the world's best people from the American and Australian descendents. The hope was that, in learning to survive and colonise new worlds, the convicts would throw off the criminal mind and make something of themselves and their new home.

Duck read him well; Bolingbroke was growing disenchanted with the law and longed for something more. The scientist handed it to him on a silver platter and built

the judge his very own Banishment Corridor. He had given him star maps, planet profiles and co-ordinates.

Bolingbroke himself travelled to some of those far-flung worlds. He didn't care about the extreme secrecy of the project, nor had Duck. All *Duck* wanted was to save his own neck.

Once Bolingbroke and then Moeller became familiar with the workings of the Corridor, the judge obliged the scientist and sent him to Moray, a world of mild climate and primitive people, to pave the way for Bolingbroke's permanent arrival.

Now, his day of inauguration as King/God approached and his heart pounded with anticipation.

Moeller cleared his throat, dragged Ranald away from his dreams and back to the harsh reality of now.

"Yes, well." He said quietly and drew in a calming breath. "Thank you, Moeller, for the update." He paused for a moment, caught in the tail of his dream, and cleared his own throat before returning to business. "Have you any word of my daughter?"

Moeller shifted his feet, uncomfortable and suddenly sweating. "No, sir."

Bolingbroke firmed his mouth, scowled at his assistant.

"She's disappeared, sir." Moeller said quickly. "She left this office, went down stairs, got into her car, drove down the palisade and... vanished, sir."

"Who was assigned to following her?" The judge asked with deadly calm.

"Ah, Thomas, sir."

"He goes to Gondor, is that understood? He *goes* to *Gondor* and never returns!"

"Sir." Moeller braced to perfect German military attention.

Bolingbroke had half risen from his seat. Now he settled comfortably back into the leather. "Find her, Moeller. Obey me in this." His eyes held a glint of warning and Moeller nodded.

"Now, then. To something else that has attracted my attention. We have a slight problem with our records, Moeller," he levelled a glare at the man. "I was assured that all court records would be expunged. I find this is not true. I want you to go to the

Council Dungeon and detain a man called,” his eyes flicked to the document before him, “Louis Boudreaux. I want you to get the information he has and destroy it. I want you to find *all* the information relating to me and destroy it. I want Louis Boudreaux on my planet working as a slave in forty-eight hours. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

Bolingbroke flicked his fingers at the man in dismissal and returned to the sheet in front him. He vaguely heard the door close but ignored it. How had this Boudreaux tracked him down? What tipped him off?

The judge’s hands trembled slightly. If this nobody tracked him, then someone else could. Whom had he told? What did he know? Maybe he should get Moeller to beat the information out of him. His assistant was very good at... interrogation.

Yes, he would have Moeller interrogate the man, then when he’d been squeezed dry, send him to Moray.

Bolingbroke stared out of the window. *Moray*. Stupid name. He would have to find a more appropriate one. A name that spoke of strength, dignity and honour.

He chuckled. Why, he would call it the obvious. A planet should be named after its first King/God.

xxx

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Cambria stood with hands on hips and stared into the ‘armoury’. It was a small building, further down village and similar in size to the accommodation huts, but made of thick wood and stone.

“No, indeed. We have come a long way in providing protection for the village, and these weapons are how we do it.” Jones waved a hand at the racks of spears, cross bows and standard long bows.

“No guns?”

“We don’t have the knowledge and without the ingredients for gunpowder...”

She turned to him. “In all the years this planet has been occupied by humans, you’ve had no armourers or military people?”

“The closest we came was a medieval hobbyist, hence the bows.”

“But surely, you’ve had a blacksmith or two?”

Jones turned from the armoury and walked between two other huts. He took her down a path and she heard a quite whooshing sound. Black smoke belched into the sky and they came into a clearing with a three-sided stone and wood-slat roofed shed.

A stone well, or what looked like a well, stood in the centre of the shed. Sparks flew upwards with each whoosh and she saw a large man working black bellows. The man was half naked, his enormous chest and protruding stomach gleamed with sweat. He was black - not from the soot, but his skin, dark as midnight. Short, tight curls sparkled with beads of moisture as he pushed down on the bellow arm.

“That’s Sam.” Jones said.

“Sam.”

Jones shrugged and gave her a wicked grin, his eyes filled with humour. “Short for Sambo, he objected to the term, ‘nigger’.”

Cambria gaped at him. “You *can*’t use words like that! They were outlawed a hundreds of years ago.”

“That’s on Earth, not here.”

“But...”

“Cam, get used to the idea that you are not in Kansas anymore. Sam is the only black here, like you’re the only woman. The difference is, your problem is more difficult than his. If an archaic, racist name is the worst he can expect, he’ll take it.”

Cambria reluctantly agreed.

“Yo! Sam!” Jones shouted over the noise of the bellows and the hiss of metal in water.

Sam glanced up then returned to plunging hot metal into water. He pulled the steaming blade out of the water and turned to an anvil, pounded the blade with a mallet.

Cambria watched him work amazed at how large he was. He had to be close to seven feet tall, built of fat and muscle. She swallowed. If he came after her...

Jones crossed his arms and stood three metres from the shed. Even here, gusts of hot air gusted out. “This is our foundry. Sam is trying to develop metal weapons strong enough to use against some of the larger animals here. He hasn’t found the right mix yet, but once he sets his mind to a project, he doesn’t give up.”

He stepped into the foundry and drew an arrow shaft and bow off the wall. He came out and handed them to Cambria. “These are his latest. The tips are metal as are the tops of the wooden bow. They’re stronger and sharper than anything we’ve had. Now, he’s trying the same mix for swords.

Cambria studied the arrow head and ran her thumb across the edge. A thin line of blood appeared and she sucked the cut.

“Anything messes with us will be met with these and the bows are powerful enough to send an arrow right through some beasties.”

“And you want me to learn how to use them.”

“Yes. We only have a limited number of people here who can be warriors. We are now one less.”

Cambria glared at him. “You sent him to me to test me. Don’t blame me for his death.”

“I don’t, I’m merely stating facts.”

She glanced away from him. “Moreriss said that he... that the pillars... that...” she swallowed.

“*Quid pro quo*, Cam, like I told you. We ate them when we arrived, so they... return the favour when necessary. The pillars abhor mess, I’m sure you’ve noticed. They also use every asset at their disposal. That’s why Jenkins was breakfast to them.”

“Jesus,” she whispered, “what kind of a world am I on?”

“One where survival of the fittest *means* survival of the fittest, Cam.” His eyes had warmed with a sympathy she didn’t trust. Jones would use her. An asset, he’d said, that was all she was, an asset to ensure the survival of the encampment.

So be it. She’d learn how to use the weapons, would beat off anyone with ulterior motives, defend the camp *and* she’d find a way to return home.

xxx

Louis stepped out of the building into the soft night. The summer days were the best in Switzerland and the very air eased the tension in his shoulders. He rotated his neck, felt the slight crackle of his spine.

He'd done all he could to find Cambria. He'd found more than he'd bargained for, much more. He'd found a corruption that made him ill: A megalomaniac judge whose ego knew no limits. Louis knew he would have to step carefully. A judge like that would have a great deal of influence and staff to take care of messy details, like him.

Louis walked down the street to the car park. He'd been careful in his search. Since Maurice turned up, he knew someone watched him. Only one of his searches showed up on the log and that was the international person request. Everything else he found in the paper register and documents. He left no electronic fingerprints and he grinned. His smile slipped away as he wondered what he could do about the information he'd compiled.

But, who could he go to for help? How could he get those people back?

Maurice wouldn't help; he'd already warned Louis off. Dubois gave him all the information he had. Louis couldn't work out how those people got to the planets. He didn't find any record in the out-going prison shuttle lists of the legitimate convicts.

How could he find out? There had to be *something*, some trail he could follow.

He walked a fine line and knew, instinctively, someone would come for him.

Louis stood in front of his car door. The information was somewhere all he had to do was find it.

He got into his car and started the engine. Bolingbroke was the key. He handed down the sentences. Louis had to come up with a plan to talk to him. No. That would get him into trouble. He had to get into Bolingbroke's office somehow and search his files. That would take planning, but hell, he had very little else to do.

Satisfied he'd come up with a plan, he drove towards his home.

xxx

The bow string twanged and Cambria sucked at her throbbing fingers. Jones stood next to her.

He raised an eyebrow and aimed his own bow. "Come around here and watch." He ordered. Cambria glared resentfully at the back of his head, but did as he asked.

She stood a few feet from him. "Look at my stance, look at how I hold the bow, the way I hold the arrow against the string.

Cambria did. His technique differed from hers, more professional, she thought. It looked easy after seeing Dvids, but obviously a lot harder in reality.

Jones released the shaft and the arrow flew straight to the centre of the tree stump twenty metres away.

"Give it another go and I'll assist you this time."

He proved an able teacher; but she couldn't learn it properly. She sucked at it. The arrow bounced along the ground, sailed over the target and her fingers felt swollen.

"Practice," Jones said stepping back, "practice makes perfect."

He gave her the crossbow. "Try this." He said with a sigh.

Cambria learned quickly.

"Practice with each for two hours every day." He instructed.

"Why?"

"Because we need you up to speed for patrols and you need to be proficient in case any one decides Jenkins' death was an accident."

"An *accident*?"

Jones lifted one shoulder. "I thought so. So will others."

Cambria shook her head. "Keep them away from me, Jones, keep them *away*."

"I don't control them." Jones smirked.

"Yeah, you do. They all do what you ask of them."

He pursed his lips. "True." He turned to walk away. "First patrol tomorrow at day break, be ready," he tossed over his shoulder.

He was gone before she could tell him there was no way she would be ready. But she held her tongue. He *knew* she wasn't ready; he was messing with her again, testing to see what she was made of, playing his damned games again.

Well, she had her knife and she knew how to use it... sort of.

Cambria picked up the crossbow and worked with it until her fingers and shoulders ached. Then she stopped. If she did any more, she'd be too stiff to be of any use tomorrow.

Maybe that's what he was counting on: that she'd over do it and he could accuse of... of what? What *was* his game? That she would demonstrate how useless she was as a warrior and, by default, was only good for one thing?

She would die before she became the camp whore. She felt comfortable enough with the crossbow and had already demonstrated she could kill with her knife.

The sun moved lower through the trees. Time to head back.

She retraced her steps up the trail to the encampment. Men sat around the campfires and conversation stopped as she walked by. Their eyes followed her as she strode to her own campfire. Moreriss quietly stirred his pot.

He handed her a mug of Ssoclar as she sat. Cambria ignored the men and waited for her evening meal.

She had no visitors during the night, but sleep proved elusive. The waiting was the worst, she thought as someone rapped knuckles on her doorframe before the glimmer of sunrise.

"What?" She called.

"Patrol." An unfamiliar voice called and she rolled out of bed.

She put on fresh clothes, strapped the knife sheathe around her waist and stepped out into the gloom of early morning.

Moreriss was in his usual position and Jones spoke quietly to him.

She sat down and took her mug from the 'pillar.

Jones turned his pale eyes to her. "Are you ready to go?"

"Breakfast first?" She asked hopefully and he nodded.

"Not tired? Didn't over do it yesterday with all that training?"

Cambria stuck out her hand and wriggled her fingers. "They're fine." She said and he grinned at her.

“Good. Once you’ve eaten, we’ll head out.” He studied her for a moment. “One hint, Cambria. When you’re out there, if you see anything larger than a ‘pillar, shoot it. Shoot it *dead*.”

She nodded. Now he was giving her clues. Anything larger than a ‘pillar. Did he include humans in that?

XXX

Bolingbroke stood at his window and stared at the mountains. They were truly beautiful but compared to his new kingdom these were mere hills. *His* world was more beautiful than anything Earth could offer and he doubted he’d miss it. In fact, he would barely spare Earth a thought once he was gone.

It wouldn’t be long now, he thought, until he received the recognition he deserved. Undreamed of wealth and respect awaited him, slaves he could treat anyway he wished, power over life and death; and that, was an irresistible lure, an aphrodisiac he could almost taste.

The door opened and closed behind him, but he didn’t turn. His faithful assistant, Moeller. He wondered what the man would think when he discovered he wouldn’t be joining the judge. He was just one more loose end to tie up before his departure.

“I have a job for you.” He said and turned away from the sparkling vista.

Moeller stood straight and waited.

“I have decided to... clean up some of the problems. To that end, I want you to... set in motion situations where the Banished will eventually be wiped out. Can you do that?”

Moeller tilted his head in thought. “Yes, sir. Which planet do you wish me to start on?”

Bolingbroke waved a hand. “I don’t care, the one that is easiest, I suppose. Whatever. Just get it done. I want them all dead.”

“Yes, Your Honour. I’ll start immediately.” He bowed and left.

Bolingbroke returned his attention to the mountains. He supposed he should have asked Moeller for an update on the whereabouts of his daughter. But he no longer cared what happened to the whore. She was no daughter of his to debase the family

name like that. She had no honour, no dignity and no pride. Wherever she was, he hoped it was extremely uncomfortable.

He'd cleared out her bank accounts, sold her home and furniture. She had no money and nowhere to go. She would either come to heel or disappear into the underworld of crime and prostitution. It was no better than she deserved for betraying him.

He rolled his shoulders. A new life awaited him, concubines galore. He was still a relatively young man and he could breed more respectful children.

xxx

Five men and Cambria made up the patrol. Each member held a bag of heavy metal spikes, but no one explained their use. Cambria slung the crossbow over one shoulder, a quiver of arrows hooked into the left side of her belt, her knife on the right. The water bottle hooked at the back with a soft bag of food rations tied next to it.

She walked down the path between the men, as if for protection. Jones explained to her that the weakest always walked in the centre. He was trying to get a rise out of her, sting her pride, but she knew men were physically stronger. She had no problem with that. When it came to using muscles, men were just that better. She had no wish to die, and if the men were willing to sacrifice themselves, well, who was she to stop them? But when it came to wile, there she had an advantage. She'd use her brain to get out of trouble where the men would simply use brute force.

As if he'd read her mind, Jones chuckled and led the patrol out.

The forest was quiet. The planet didn't have any flying animals. They were either ground or water dwelling.

The idea of carnivorous fish out there made her shudder. Jones laughed at her pale expression. The others hesitated, but Jones' natural humour had them chuckling, too.

Her head swivelled back and forth as the group continued down the path. Up ahead, Jones held his arm up, his hand in a fist and the troop stopped.

She tilted her head to listen but heard no sound. It was a remarkably silent planet. A week on this planet and she was at ease with the lack of noise.

Cambria watched Jones as he lifted a log out of the way and went through, indicated everyone should follow.

When she passed him, she saw metal spikes, like thorns, jammed into the log. The gate attached to a fence that displayed larger wooden spikes sticking out in both directions. The fence meandered into the forest and disappeared into the foliage.

Jones and the others formed a circle and she joined them. The last man through closed the gate.

“Okay, listen up.” Jones said when the last man muscled into the circle. “We have a new member,” all eyes turned to her, but she kept her gaze on Jones. “For your benefit, Peterson, we will break into two groups of three and walk the perimeter. You saw the gate and the fence. Our job is to make sure there hasn’t been a breach anywhere. If you find one, two will fix it and one will stand watch. Is that clear?”

Cambria nodded.

“All right then, Chien and Debrowski,” he gave her a knowing smile, “you’re with Peterson.”

Cambria felt the blood drain out of her face as she glanced at the leering men. Jones had set her up again. Why did he do this? She wasn’t going to let either of them touch her. She swallowed her disappointment. She wouldn’t play his game; or more precisely, she wouldn’t play the way he expected. But, they would have words when they got back.

“How long will it take to walk the perimeter?” She asked calmly and Jones raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“A day. We’ll meet at the southern gate.”

“And if we meet a beastie?”

Jones chuckled and the others followed. “Why, kill it, Ms Peterson, *kill* it.” His expression was all innocence and she knew he meant that if either of the ‘beasts’ accompanying her got out of line, she had his permission to kill them.

Both Chien and Debrowski grinned like all their Christmases had come at once.

Cambria turned back to Jones and raised an eyebrow at him. He gave her a slight nod.

The message was received and acknowledged. He fully expected her group to return with either one or two members missing and accepted it.

“Let’s do it.” His mouth snarled in challenge, but his eyes filled with humour. A look that was just for her.

Chapter Ten

Cambria, once again, walked between two men. Debrowski, a tall, thin and wiry man with luxuriant auburn hair and green eyes, had point; Chien, shorter by a foot, with obsidian eyes and hair and a faint yellow caste to his skin. He walked silently behind her.

She kept checking to make sure he was still there so quiet were his footsteps.

Dobrowski had no such qualms about stomping through the jungle. His attitude was one of taking everybody on, no matter how many. He'd managed to disturb some of the creatures in the undergrowth, but they moved too fast for Cambria to get a look at them.

"Here," Debrowski moved towards the fence. His voice sounded unnaturally loud and she started.

The wooden post leaned to the side and the cross bars lay on the ground. Some of the spikes had broken off.

"How do we fix it?" She asked quietly, her eyes continued to survey the forest.

"You hold the post, and Chien and I will... reinsert the cross bars."

Chien chuckled behind her, closer than she expected and she stepped towards the post, tried to appear nonchalant.

"Okay," she said with a tight voice.

She put her hands and shoulder to the post, shoved it upright. When she was sure it would hold secure on her shoulder, she put her hand on her knife. The men couldn't see, all they saw was the upright post.

The men flicked a glance between each other and approached. She gripped the knife tighter and pulled it slightly out of the sheath as she watched them.

Chien gave her a half smile and picked the bottom cross bar. He shoved it into the slot and gave her a feral grin. He picked up the next one and shoved that in, too. The action brought him very close to her face.

Cambria stared into his dark eyes as he drew in a deep breath. "You smell nice," he murmured and stood, turned away. She watched him through narrowed eyes as he

used a curious looking circular object to punch out the broken spikes. He replaced them with out a word or another look at her.

His concentration was total, but he had a small smile on his face that had nothing to do with humour and everything to do with his own dreams.

“Move out,” Debrowski ordered once the job was done.

They moved into their positions and Cambria wondered which of the two men was the more dangerous: Chien, with his quiet manner or Debrowski, who telegraphed his every move?

By the time they had reached the next break, Cambria’s shoulders were screaming with tension. Chien, she had decided, was the deadlier of the two. She would never hear him coming and having him walk behind her was more nerve wracking than anything else she’d ever done.

All day they walked, mended the fence. The hot sun was beyond the zenith and crawled slowly down the sky. Cambria unhooked her water bottle for a drink. It was half empty, but they’d return to the encampment within the next two hours, if all went well. The fence appeared in good condition, with only a few broken spikes, the tips stained with a dark green fluid. Debrowski explained it was blood from the animals of the forest. Humans were the only red blooded animals on the planet.

Debrowski called a halt. This time, Chien stood guard. The cross bars were broken in two, as if some large animal had charged through or stomped on it. She looked at Debrowski.

“How do we fix *this*?” She asked and he grinned at her, pulled an axe from his belt.

“We make new ones.” He turned from her to study the trees, found a likely candidate and began to chop at the base.

Chien crooked a finger at her. “We stand guard while he does this,” he said softly.

“Okay,” she looked around. “I’ll stand guard over there.” She pointed to the other side of the tree and Chien nodded.

As she stood, her back to the men, all she could hear was Debrowski’s heavy breathing and the thunk of the axe as it bit into wood. She had to trust the men to do their job and not come after her. She had no idea what was more dangerous: turning

her back, or the creatures of the forest. All she could do was expect either eventuality. But the stress was killing her! Tiredness crept into her muscles and she knew that if the men detected any weakness, they'd pounce.

She loaded her cross bow and it rested in her arms. Her focus was on the forest, not the men behind her.

Cambria focused, listened beyond the noise of the axe.

At first she thought she'd misheard the faint snuffling. Then it came again and she raised her crossbow, snagged the safety off with a click, all tiredness gone under the sudden pounding of her heart. To her right, she heard the same click before Debrowski's axe bit into the wood again. He must have seen Chien, for the chopping stopped and all three listened.

The snuffling came again and Cambria scanned the area, watched for movement. It sounded like the one she and Haariss hid from on her first day.

The lower foliage rustled three metres away and her finger tensed on the trigger, but she had no clear target. More snuffling and a pause. Sweat trickled down the side of Cambria's face. Her eyes, her focus followed the shaking foliage.

A fat, triangular face came out of the undergrowth, huge tusks curled up from its lower jaw and down from its upper. It snarled at her and her finger jerked on the trigger. The bolt flew true and struck the beast between its pale green, vertical slit eyes.

Cambria lowered the cross bow, pulled the string back into its notch. It was hard work but fear lent her arms strength. She reached for another bolt from her quiver and snagged it.

Her eyes searched the undergrowth as she lifted the bow to her shoulder again.

Then, something behind her crashed through the jungle, roared in fury and Chien shouted a warning. Cambria half turned.

She had a glimpse of claws and threw herself to the side. The creature hit her and her whole body sang with pain as she hit the ground. The crossbow flew from her hands and the beast rolled over her. Grey dots speckled her vision and she cried out. She wouldn't *die* this way and blinked her eyes clear.

Her left arm went numb and she struggled to pull the knife.

It slid out of the sheath before the creature stopped rolling and she screamed in fury and terror as she plunged the knife into its thick neck. She pushed the blade down, sliced through thick hide.

Cambria rolled over its body as claws lashed out at her. She got to her knees and dug the blade into its neck, dragged the blade towards the ground with as much strength as she possessed. Blood spouted in a fountain and she turned her head away.

The creature slumped, with strange huffing sounds and still she didn't stop until she was almost elbow deep in its meaty neck as she carved its head from its thick shoulders.

She heard nothing except her harsh breathing and the sound of her knife grinding against bone.

Cambria fell against the still warm body and dragged in blood-tainted air. She lifted her right arm and wiped her forehead. Her hand ran with dark green blood, her arm up to her elbow coated with the stuff. Warm bits of flesh stuck to the knife and her fingers.

She dropped to her knees and vomited. She hurt all over. Her left arm hung limply and she braced herself with her right, the gruesome knife still clutched in her fist and emptied her stomach.

When she felt the spasms stop, she sat back on her heels. If anything or anyone had come upon her while she was tossing her cookies, she would be dead. But silence reigned.

Chien. Debrowski. Where were they? Were they alive?

She lifted her head but couldn't see over the bulk of the animal.

Cambria used the carcass to stand. She leaned on the cooling bulk, rested her burning cheek and closed her eyes, exhausted.

She felt worse now than when she'd killed Jenkins. Liquid trickled down her face; she ignored it and searched the area where she'd last seen Chien and Debrowski.

Chien rested on his knees, Debrowski cradled in his lap.

Cambria staggered around the body. Already small insects hovered over the neck wound. She glanced away from her handiwork and swallowed hard. She never knew she had such violence in her. Maybe she was more like Niall than she thought. She was alive, though and the beast wasn't. Everything else was gravy. That thought brought another swirl of nausea to her stomach.

She ignored the feeling and carefully approached the men. Chien ignored her.

He stroked his companion's forehead.

Blood, *red* blood, spotted Debrowski's face and her eyes drifted lower. His chest and abdomen were torn open, his guts spreading around his body like a dark pink flower.

Bright red blood splashed Chien, too, but he ignored it, continued to stroke the dead man's forehead and whisper to him.

Cambria stood before him, gory, dripping knife in hand.

"Chien." She called softly.

He lifted blank eyes.

"He's dead." She whispered.

His eyes cleared and he looked down at his friend. "Yes." He replied hoarsely, "I was saying a prayer for the dead. He will go on to the next existence in peace now." He gently lowered Debrowski's head to the ground.

Cambria swayed and tried to focus her eyes on him. Chien was still a danger to her, she couldn't pass out, not here, not alone.

Chien stood and tilted his head at her. "You are hurt."

"It's not so bad." She replied.

Chien slowly nodded his head. "Yes, it is." He reached behind his back for his water bottle. Cambria watched him. She felt... distant. Detached from whatever he was going to do. She felt strange as if in a dream.

He reached down and pulled Debrowski's shirt off him. Cambria felt as if she should say something about desecrating the dead man, but she didn't have the energy. Everything slowed down.

Chien tore off a clean section of the shirt and dampened it with the water. His hand reached out in slow motion to her face and she watched his hand come.

His touch was gentle as if he was afraid to hurt her. But wasn't he a rapist? Didn't he enjoy violence, at least violence against women? Her gaze held his as he continued his slow strokes of her jaw. She saw him wince before he ducked his head and wet the cloth again.

This time he moved around her and she heard him sigh.

She made a noise in her throat when he touched her this time. Flame roared up her back and her vision faded to black.

Chien stared down at the fallen woman, his hand still raised to dab at the blood coating her back. Claw marks slashed across her shoulder, deep enough to expose the bone. She was totally at his mercy. He could do what ever he wanted and his gaze moved from her to the beast. He lowered his hand and walked over to it.

She had all but decapitated the beast. Blood still oozed from both sections, a thick haze of insects fed on the wound. Chien moved around to the creature's front. He reached down and tugged the arrow from an eye. His aim was true, but it hadn't been enough. He acknowledged that now. The woman... no, he could call her Cambria now. She had proved herself; earned his respect.

Cambria had taken care of the beast. Between them, they had killed it, but Cambria had dealt the final deathblow, he had merely semi-blinded it.

He wiped the arrow on his jeans and tucked it back into the quiver. Cambria lay where she'd fallen. He could do nothing for Debrowski, but maybe he could save her. Save her for future use. She would be grateful, of that he was sure, but how grateful? She had proven herself deadly. Was he willing to risk his life to have her? A smile slowly spread across his face and he knelt next to her. Yes, he was willing to brave her knife and her ferocity. He looked beyond Cambria to the bush and the smile slowly faded. There lay another beast, an arrow firmly implanted between its eyes.

One pig and a komatsu? Setting up an ambush? His respect for Cambria rose another notch as he understood she had slaughtered both animals. Not a woman to take lightly. A killer. Like him.

XXX

Louis unlocked the door to his apartment and switched on the hall light. He secured the bolts at the top and bottom of the door. Now he felt a little safer. He sighed as he tossed his keys into a bowl centred on the hall table and strode towards the living room.

He needed a drink before he could sit down and formulate a plan.

Loosening his tie, he switched on the lights over the bar and strode towards it.

“I could do with one of those, too,” a voice came from behind him and he spun around, eyes wide with fear.

“How did you get in here?” He asked Maurice.

Maurice shrugged and grinned. Louis knew the answer: Le Chat strikes again.

He pulled out a bottle of brandy and showed it to Maurice who nodded. He poured two drinks and brought them over to the sitting area.

Maurice reached for the glass and leaned back against the couch, perfectly at ease.

“To what do I owe another visit?” Louis asked and sipped his drink.

Maurice studied him for a moment, lifted his glass in a toast and said: “Bolingbroke.”

Louis choked on his brandy. He coughed until Maurice stood and slapped his back.

Louis glared at him with tear filled eyes and wiped his mouth. “What...” he cleared his throat. “Who did you say?”

Maurice resumed his seat. “The Honourable, Sir Ranald Bolingbroke.”

Louis stared at his friend and kept silent.

Clicking his tongue, Maurice sat forward and placed his glass on the coffee table. “I know you know who I mean, you’ve been investigating him and that has come to the attention of some nasty people, including Bolingbroke himself.”

“But, but... I was careful. *No one* knows what I’m doing.” He gulped more brandy. The liquid warmed his belly, but the chill in his soul remained.

“Tsk, tsk, Louis. And what did you think would happen once you’d searched the international person register with particular names?”

“That’s standard procedure! It’s a part of my job to find people.”

“But not *these* particular people. Think about it Louis, and think *rationally* this time. If I have bugged your unit, surely other people would have too?”

Louis nodded slowly. He'd been naïve in the extreme. He thought he'd covered his tracks. What he said was true: searching for people was a part of his job. Sometimes, Council hearings need testimony from actual witnesses. It was his job to find them. He'd thought himself so clever at mixing convict names amongst legitimate witnesses. Now, and he had no doubt, Bolingbroke was on his tail.

“What am I going to do?” He asked, stared down into his empty glass. He stood and went to the bar, refilled his glass. “Well?” He glared at Maurice. “You wouldn't be here if you didn't have an idea.

“Give me all your information.” He made it sound like a question, a joke even, but Louis shook his head.

“You know that won't work. Even if I tell them I haven't got it, they'll do something to me, like send me off planet.”

All expression left Maurice's face. Louis rarely saw that look, but it usually meant Maurice was going to do something someone wouldn't like.

“Excuse me a moment.” Maurice said and rose. Louis watched him go into the kitchen.

Well, that was strange, Louis thought. He'd fully expected a reaction from his friend, but that wasn't it.

A knock at his front door turned his head and he glanced at the wall clock. Now, who would be calling at one o'clock in the morning? He'd taken a step away from the bar before he realised the only people who came a'calling this early in the morning, or late at night, were people up to no good or the police.

Maurice came out of the kitchen his ear glued to his com unit. He held up his hand to stop Louis from going to the front door.

“They're here,” Maurice said into the unit. He nodded once. “Okay.” And hung up. The unit went into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. “Get your info, we are leaving.”

The knock sounded again, louder this time.

Louis stared at Maurice. “Go, go and get it now!”

Louis snapped out of his shock. Maurice wasn't the man he grew up with. He wore an air of danger about him, all trace of the careless and carefree dilettante gone.

Louis ran lightly into his study, climbed onto his desk and shifted a ceiling tile. He fished around and touched the light-weight cardboard of the file. He tugged it out and held it in his teeth while he replaced the panel.

Maurice came into the office as he was dusting off his pants. He held his hand out for the file. Louis shook his head. "This is mine."

His friend gave him a brief smile and went to the window. He looked down into the street.

"There's a black car parked in front of the building. One man, leaning against the driver's side door." Maurice turned to him. "Can't go out that way, is there any other exit?"

"No. All the windows face the street." Louis replied.

"I imagine he's armed," Maurice said watching the man.

The pounding on the front door grew louder and the two men looked at each other.

"Okay, we'll go out the front." Maurice said with a cool smile. "Go and talk to them, find out who they are and what they want. Maybe we can get around them. If they come in, run into the living room, you got me?"

"But..."

Maurice grabbed his upper arms. "Listen close. Trust me now as you have never trusted anyone before."

Louis looked into his friend's eyes. They gleamed with a determination to see him safe and he nodded once. He tucked the file down the back of his pants and Maurice grinned at him.

"Who the hell is it?" Louis called as he walked down the hallway.

"Police, sir. Open the door."

"What the hell for?" He slouched against the wall, close to the door and glanced over his shoulder. Maurice gave him a wink and ducked out of sight in the living room. "Don't you know what time it is?"

“Sir. Open this door.” The voice on the other side sounded impatient, he thought.

“Ya gotta warrant?” He watched as the door knob moved. He tilted his head at a scratching sound near the lock, but he had bolted the door, top and bottom with industrial sized bolts. No one came through the door unless armed with a battering ram.

He heard the man talking to someone, but couldn't make out the words. Louis waited to see what they would do.

The first gun blasted jolted him away from the wall. The bullet took out the lock and there was a thump as someone tried to bust open the door. The bolts held. Another shot took out the upper lock. Again, someone slammed against the door. The door and frame held as if made of rock.

“Hey,” he called, “you're not the police! I'm calling them now!” He wouldn't have to; no doubt, his neighbours were on the com unit right now.

His ears rang from the loudness of the gunshots. He waited. Nothing happened until Maurice tapped his shoulder.

“They're gone; we'd better get out of here too.”

“The real police are probably on their way...” Louis said.

“And you don't want to explain that file to them or what those men wanted.”

If they returned, Louis wanted to be far, far away. He nodded and unbolted the door, opened it, stuck his head into the hallway. Empty.

The neighbours knew better than to look when someone had a gun.

He followed Maurice down the back stairs. In the echoing stairwell, he could hear the faint sound of sirens and hesitated. Maurice gripped his arm and hauled down the rest of the way. “Don't flake out on me now,” Maurice commanded.

Louis allowed Maurice to drag him to a silver sedan. He opened the door and got in, crossed his arms as he waited for Maurice to get in the driver's side.

He expected Maurice to peel rubber as he moved off, but he didn't. He pulled away from the curb slowly and drove to the speed limit, didn't glance at the police cars that sped by him, heading the opposite direction.

Louis turned in his seat to watch them squeal around the corner to his building.

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“Somewhere safe.”

Louis sat and watched the streetscape, unconcerned. Maurice wouldn't hurt him, he thought. But he felt the first twinge of unease when Maurice left the city.

“Maurice?”

His friend didn't reply, only firmed his mouth.

“Maurice, where are we going?”

“Like I said, somewhere safe.”

Louis waved at the windscreen and beyond. “There is nothing out here.”

Maurice nodded and flicked his indicator on. “Remember that.”

“What?”

Maurice didn't reply. Remember that there's nothing out here? What kind of a cryptic comment is that?

The car drove onto dirt with a thump and without slowing. Maurice handled the car like a rally driver and Louis held on. He remembered other rides with his friends, through the streets of Paris in a stolen car trying to outrun the local gendarmes. More often than not, they managed to escape, hiding in one of the many alleyways. They'd leave the car and laugh like loons. Those were exciting times, he allowed, but he was an adult now, with a responsible job, a respectable reputation. Was he throwing it all away now, all for a woman?

With a start, Louis realised that her image in his mind was fading and he concentrated on resurrecting as many memories as he could. He couldn't lose her; he was all she had to get her home, to get her back. He wouldn't fail her.

While he was busy thinking of Cambria, Maurice drove through a rusted gate and continued. The road smoothed onto asphalt and they were still in the wilderness.

The shadows of the mountains surrounded him and he had to press his face against the window and look upwards to see the stars. Where the hell were they?

The stars winked out suddenly as they entered a tunnel. The headlights shone on the road and reflected the concrete sides of the tunnel as they drove downwards. Ambient light gleamed from around a bend and Louis glanced at Maurice, then back to the road ahead.

The tyres squealed as the car went around the bend and Louis's fingers dug into the leather seat.

The tunnel expanded and Maurice finally slowed. Ahead he saw a giant dull metal barrier, blocking the road. Four armed guards raised their rifles at the car. The gate completely sealed the tunnel with tonnes of solid steel, as if to resist a missile. Louis shook his head. What was so important here that it required a thick steel gate, abject secrecy and gun toting guards? Louis ran a few scenarios through his mind, but nothing settled.

Maurice stopped the car at the direction of the lead soldier and fished in his pants pocket. He pulled out a card, lifted it. The soldier approached, the other guards kept their rifles steady. Maurice handed the card to the guard who nodded and stepped back. He waved them on, without a glance at Louis.

Grinding noise echoed in the tunnel and the steel barrier slid into the mountain.

“Welcome to Project Banish, Louie.” Maurice's teeth flashed white.

Chapter Eleven

Someone stroked her hair and Cambria slowly woke, realised she lay on her stomach. No, not stroking, combing and she sighed. She dreamt of pale eyes and sun streaked hair again.

Excalibur Jones. What kind of a name was that anyway? Who named after a mythical sword?

A familiar voice apologised, then searing heat touched her back and she groaned. She tried to move away from the nerve roasting agony, but couldn't move. The anxious stroking turned to a rippling sensation as if someone with many hands brushed her hair. The heat vanished and an aching, deep throb began. Lethargy crept over her. But there was something important she had to remember, something that could mean her life or...

“Cambria?” A voice whispered in her ear.

Ah, Dooriss, but what... Her eyes opened slowly, as if weighed down by sand. She had trouble focusing on the small alien face in front of her. She blinked a couple of times, but the face continued to waver.

Dooriss moved away and Cambria saw the dimly lit interior of her hut. Her gaze shifted to the door. Darkness.

The 'pillar returned and lay down in front of her. She held a slightly bulging brown oval-shaped bladder between her claws. Stuck in the top was a tube Dooriss nudged Cambria's lips.

“Drink.” Dooriss ordered softly and Cambria opened her mouth. The liquid was warm, blood temperature, and she stopped sucking. Why did the word 'blood' make her shudder?

“Drink,” Dooriss urged and she continued sucking. Why couldn't she hold a coherent thought in her head? Where had her energy gone?

The fluid worked its magic and she closed her eyes. She was too tired to mutter a word of thanks and she sank into sleep.

Something large and ferocious chased her. Her heart pounded, her legs pumped as she tried to get away. She heard screaming then sudden silence, the thick moist sound

of someone stabbing into meat. Cambria could smell it, feel the slipperiness of warm meat oozing between her fingers. She couldn't see anything, just feel, smell and hear.

Everything faded and she became aware of her own breathing, of soft conversation further away, of footsteps retreating.

Cambria opened her eyes. Daylight streamed in under the door. Dooriss undulated towards her and lay flat, her eyes filled with concern. It was funny, Cambria thought, that she was beginning to read the different facial expressions of the pillars. Each not only had different shades of eye colour, but also up close had as many expressions as humans did.

“Good afternoon, Cambria.” Dooriss murmured.

“Hi, to you too, Dooriss.” Her throat was bone dry and her voice came out as a hoarse whisper.

Dooriss presented her with a brownish-red bladder. Hadn't she seen that before? She couldn't quite remember. She sucked on the straw and drank thirstily. Instead of feeling sleepy, she felt a surge of energy pulse through her veins.

She made a move to rise, but Dooriss reached out a gentle hand to stop her. “Cambria isss hurt. Musst sstay down.”

Images of the beast returned, dark green and warm blood flowing across her hand, the claws at it struck out at her. Debrowski lying on the ground, his insides spilled across the leaf strewn ground, Chien holding him in his lap and she felt every drop of blood leave her face.

“Gently, Cambria, gently. There isss nothing here to hurt you, only Dooriss to help you heal.”

Cambria blinked rapidly and Dooriss stroked her hair again, pushed it away from her face. “Calm, you musst remain calm and ssstill.”

“How badly am I hurt?” She asked in a whisper. She could still feel her toes wriggle, her knees bend, her hips slightly twist, but she could see none of it.

“Clawsss,” Dooriss hissed and placed a hand on her shoulder, then gently cupped her jaw. “Bone deep.” Dooriss kept her eyes on Cambria's.

“Help me up,” Cambria ordered and started to move. Pain streaked down her back, spiked her shoulder and she resisted the urge to scream and roll into a ball. She closed her eyes against the sudden surge of tears. The jabs of sharpness eased to a dull throb.

“Cambria musst resst.” Dooriss continued to stroke her hair and her brow.

“How...” she swallowed against the nausea left in the wake of pain, “how did I get here?”

Dooriss nodded, relieved Cambria wouldn't try to move again. “Chien bring you.”

Cambria widened her eyes. “*Chien?* Why?”

A puzzled expression rippled across the ‘pillar’s face. “You were hurt, assleep, he bring you in. Esscalibur bring you in here, fished you up...” She looked a little abashed. “Needle and thread. Told me to ssstay, watch, help you.”

She'd been at Chien's mercy, why hadn't he taken advantage? Jones, she could understand, he wanted her willing or not, but had his own set of obscure rules. She couldn't see him jumping her bones while she was unconscious; Chien, on the other hand... she couldn't understand him. Maybe she should ask. But something else was bothering her and only the ‘pillar could answer her question.

“Dorriss, why would you help me heal, when I know that... that if I die, you and your people will have f... food?”

The creature frowned at her as if offended. “Death comesss to all of usss, but we do not hasssten it. If it happenss, we ussse it; we do not... you are...” She started to wring her hands in distress and Cambria didn't know what to do to ease her discomfort except to apologise.

The light in the room flashed brighter as someone stepped into her hut.

Dooriss turned her head then moved aside. Cambria rolled her eyes up to Excalibur. He crouched down in front of her and put a hand on her brow.

“How do you feel?” He asked.

“Like shit.”

Cambria expected a smile, but he frowned. “Your temperature's still up.” He turned to the ‘pillar. “She needs more nutrients, Dooriss, would you arrange that please?”

She didn't hear the 'pillar leave, Excalibur turned back to her, his hand smoothed down to her jaw. "Any difficulty talking?"

"No."

He nodded and sat back on his heels. "It's going to scar. The gashes were too deep for the sealant. I had to use old-fashioned needle and thread, *then* cover it with the sealant. I don't think the scars will be bad, but they will show. I'm sorry about that." He had genuine regret in his eyes.

"Where is the scar on my face?"

He slowly drew a finger down his own jaw, from the edge to his chin.

"I don't feel it." Cambria said and his eyes filled with something akin to sadness, an emotion she didn't ascribe to him. "Good thing I've never been particularly vain. Not that I'm any great shakes in the attractive stakes anyway." She still felt a spike of pain in her heart though. Every woman had vanity; it was just a matter of degree. She looked away from him, her nose twitched and her eyes stung.

"It doesn't matter to me," he said, regaining her attention.

"Of course it doesn't," she said bitterly, "you'll take me ugly or not. All you and the others need is a warm, moist and tight receptacle."

He tilted his head. "I suppose I have given you that impression."

"Are you saying it's not true?"

"No, I'm not, but..." he hesitated.

"But what? Either you and your men see me as something to fuck or not, there is no inbetween."

"Chien is impressed with you."

She blinked at the *non sequitor*. Excalibur eased his legs out from underneath him and sat cross-legged.

"He will not touch you, he says. Tiquiri and Vangana are undecided."

"Well, there's a surprise. Why?"

"Chien sees you as a warrior." He lifted a shoulder and pursed his lips drawing her eyes to them. "He has a peculiar code of ethics. He says you proved yourself a warrior

out there, by killing the komatsu, by cutting it up, nearly decapitating it. That kind of violence impresses him. You're classified as a fellow warrior according to him, and he doesn't dally with his companions whether they are male or female."

"That makes a twisted sort of sense, I guess." She allowed. "What about the others?"

"Oh, you impressed them too, but for Tiquiri and Vangana, it would have been more impressive if you'd *walked* back to camp. I don't think they quite believe Chien's version. Of course, they're not going to say that to his face. He'll cut their livers out and fry it with onions if they do."

"Okay. What now?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are those two assholes going to try and jump me while I can't defend myself?"

Some of Jones's humour returned. "Oh, I think you'd acquit yourself quite well against them, but no, they won't come near you. No one will until you're up and around again."

"And what will stop them?"

Jones' eyelids drooped and his gaze narrowed. "I will."

"So, I'm safe until you give the go ahead."

"Yes."

Dooriss wriggled up to her. She had neither heard nor seen the 'pillar come or go. They were silent, like the forest.

"I'll leave you to rest." He rose with one fluid movement and her gaze darted to the musculature of his thighs.

Dooriss caught her attention before Excalibur saw her look. He left her alone with the 'pillar.

"He isss handsssome?" She prodded Cambria's mouth with the straw.

Cambria sucked on it and drank down half the fluid before answering. "Yeah, he's a goodlooking, evil, manipulative, arrogant, son of a bitch."

"But he isss your bitch, now?"

Cambria chuckled, then laughed, ignored the pain rippling along her jaw and back.

She stuck her head in the pillow and laughed some more. She hadn't heard anything so funny in a long time. When she was done, she looked at Dooriss.

"You cry. Why do you cry, Cambria? Pain?" The creature's limbs fluttered around her head and shoulders as if unsure of which part to comfort first.

Cambria grinned. What would Excalibur think of being called her bitch? Well, she mused, they *were* in a prison of sorts.

"No, Dooriss, only pain when I laugh. Remember when you tickled me?" Dooriss washed three sets of palms together in worry. "Well, it's the kind of the same thing. Your comment was funny, so I laughed. It's what we do when we are amused."

Dooriss nodded and untangled her hands.

"No, Dooriss, he is not mine, nor do I want him to be. I have someone back home," and she realised she'd barely spared Louis a thought since arriving. Was she truly getting used to the idea of Tudor? No, she still planned to return, it was just that Louis no longer felt a part of her overwhelming need to get home.

That saddened her. Louis was a good man, an intelligent, attractive man and an inventive lover. So why was her image of him fading? She dragged up some memories of the two of them together, but that time seemed long ago, like an episode in her life she no longer needed and had consigned to her memory.

Excalibur's face drifted in her dreams now; Excalibur she wondered about. He just wanted a female body and hers was the only available one. Cambria had needs, too, that she ignored. If she slept with one, she'd have to sleep with them all and that was unacceptable.

Dooriss fed her the rest of the nutrients and she was tired enough to go to sleep almost immediately. A thought drifted by her consciousness. A thought about how to get home, but she was too exhausted to latch onto it.

XXX

Louis stepped out of the car after Maurice shut off the engine. Ahead, a metal door set into the curved concrete wall.

Maurice joined him, then stepped forward and knocked twice.

A squad of troops jogged out and surrounded Louis. One lifted his jacket and removed the file. Another grabbed his hands and cuffed them behind him.

“Maurice, what’s going on?” He didn’t resist. He’d trusted Maurice this far.

“Bring him.” Was all his friend said and was pushed in the back. He followed Maurice down a well-lit corridor. Metal doors studded the length, but Maurice stopped halfway down and knocked. It opened and Maurice signalled to the guards.

The one on his left gripped his upper arm and dragged him forward through the doorway.

This room held a grey metal desk and a chair on which sat a soldier.

He looked at Louis, nodded and indicated another door to Louis’s left.

The guard dragged him through it. “Hey,” he called over his shoulder, “What the fuck are you doing, Maurice? *Hey!*” The door clanged shut. Maurice heard him, he was sure, but he kept his attention on Louis file the soldier gave him.

The sense of betrayal lodged thick in his throat. How could Maurice do this to him? Trust him as he’s never trusted before? Oh, the pain struck deep as the guard thrust him into a barred room and shut the door. The clang of metal on metal had him focusing on his surrounds. A jail cell. Three sides were concrete, the fourth made up of floor to ceiling bars.

No window, only bunk with a dark grey blanket and stainless toilet. He wasn’t dangerous, why had Maurice done this to him?

“Hey!” He shouted. “Let me outta here! *Hey!*”

“Keep it down,” a feminine voice said with a sleepily English accent from the next cell.

“What?” Louis pressed his face against the bars, tried to see the other prisoner. All he saw were more bars fronting cells.

“I said, keep it down. I’m trying to sleep here.”

Louis edged to the left side of the cell trying to see around the bars. “Who are you?”

“Ranalda Bolingbroke. Now, shut *up*.”

Louis reared back in shock. What was *she* doing here?

Had Bolingbroke's people captured him after all? Maurice *worked* for him? For *him*, knowing what he'd done?

Louis slumped onto the bunk. He was done for. Some far distant planet would be his home and no one would know what happened to him. No, that wasn't right. Dubois would know, but wouldn't, couldn't do anything for him.

"Shit," he sighed and rolled onto his side. No, that wasn't right. Bolingbroke's daughter slept in the next cell. Maurice's people must have captured her. As a hostage?

The cuffs cut into his wrists as he shifted to his back. The light above him flickered twice then went out leaving him in semi-darkness.

As he lay there, he went through the steps that had brought him to this point. His failures glared in hindsight, but he couldn't see anything he could have changed for a different result.

His eyelids drooped and he heard a slight hissing noise. He sat up, swayed with sudden dizziness. Gas? They were *gassing* him? Why? It was his last thought as he slumped back onto the bunk.

xxx

When he awoke, he felt dizzy and a massive headache pounded the inside of his skull. He lifted a hand to rub his temple and stopped. The cuffs were gone and someone had covered him with blankets.

He groaned and sat up. Movement at the cage door brought his head around. Maurice leaned casually against the open door jamb and Louis' mouth formed a sneer.

"What do you want?"

"Ah, *mon ami*, a good word, a thank you, a smile, any would do." Maurice had donned his urbane personality but Louis had no patience for his former friend's affectations.

"Fuck off."

Maurice laughed and unlocked the door. "Come, we have a meeting."

"With Bolingbroke, I assume." He lowered his legs to the floor and gingerly got to his feet.

His head ached like he'd gone on a serious bender the night before and he raised his hands to temples and closed his eyes.

"You assume wrong." Maurice curtly replied.

When Louis opened his eyes, he saw the top of a spray and quickly shut them as a thumb depressed the button. He dragged in a breath and choked. His legs wobbled and only Maurice's hand stopped him from falling.

"Antidote," Maurice said and held him steady. "The head ache will go shortly."

"What did you do to me?"

"Just a little something to help you sleep and to cure any... bugs you might have picked up. Has a wicked after effect, but this spray gets rid of it."

Louis stood straight as Maurice tossed the can in the air and caught it again. "Just another benefit of Project Banish."

"You mentioned that last night. What is it?"

"Come with me and I will show you." Maurice urged.

Louis shrugged. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. One thing was true: his headache was gone.

Maurice led him to the left. The cell next to him was empty.

"What happened to Ranalda?" He asked as they went towards another door.

"Who?"

"The woman in the next cell. Where did she go?"

"I don't know, Louie, she's not my responsibility. Contrary to popular belief, I don't know everyone and everything that goes on here."

He unlocked the door and they walked onto carpet. This area was more comfortable, an open office space with desks and deep chairs, large screens on the walls showed pictures of various scenes: mountains in one, a seascape in another, and a sunset over the desert in a third.

They walked past the occupied desks. People spoke in serious tones on com units, and other desks were empty. No one spoke to him, or glance at him.

Maurice stopped at a carved wooden door and knocked. He straightened his tie and smoothed down his jacket. Louis eyed him curiously and Maurice caught him looking.

“Time to meet the boss; I’ve got to look my best.” He grinned then changed the expression to one of sombreness as he heard the call to enter.

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Louis stepped into a large office. On every concrete wall a picture hung, either of people or places. Some he recognised, others were distinctly alien. He turned his head and faced the man sitting behind the desk, his hands folded in front of his face.

“Sir,” Maurice said. “Louis Boudreaux. Louie, this is Lord Alexander Montague, Sector head of...”

“Enough, Joubert,” Montague said in an upper class British accent. He dropped his hands.

“Sit, Boudreaux.”

Louis looked at Maurice who gave a slight nod. Louis sat in the square-backed and uncomfortable seat and crossed his legs as if he were in an interview with a senior officer.

“So, you’re the idiot who jeopardised years of work.” Montague began.

Louis resisted the urge to glance behind him to Maurice.

“No, I’m the man looking for my girlfriend.” He replied calmly. He heard a choking noise behind him but didn’t turn. Montague, however, firmed his lips and leaned forward on his desk.

“I say you’re an idiot and an *idiot* you are. Do you have any idea how many people you placed in danger with your search? No, of course not, you selfishly pursued your own agenda to the detriment of anyone else.” He dragged in a deep breath. “I should have you locked up for security breaches that border on treason.”

Louis uncrossed his legs and glared at the man. “I did my job...”

“*Bullshit!* You pursued a personal agenda even when warned off! You thought with your *dick!* No woman is that good a fuck that you should ever... *ever*, disobey a directive of the likes you were given. People could have died, been exiled, while you

were playing romantic hero.” Montague and Louis were both standing now, leaning on the desk, but on opposite sides, glaring at each other and breathing heavily.

“I don’t know who you are,” Louis said, voice filled with rage, “I don’t give a flying fuck! I will not stand by and let a pissant judge with delusions of grandeur screw up other people’s lives! Did you even *look* at the material I gathered?”

“That’s the only reason you’re not rotting in some jail cell.” Montague eased back slightly. “You’ve been of some use to us and I expect you’ll be useful again.”

Louis blinked. “What makes you think I’m going to do anything for you?” He sneered.

Amusement flickered across Montague’s face. “Because you have nowhere else to go, no money to get there with, and nothing to do when you get there.”

“What are you talking about?”

Montague gave him a feral smile. “As of this morning, Judge Bolingbroke has issued an arrest warrant for you. He has frozen your bank accounts, sealed your apartment and is, as we speak, searching your home and office. You are a hunted man, Boudreaux.”

“But how...”

Montague’s eyes flickered to Maurice. “Didn’t you explain this to him?”

Maurice cleared his throat. “Yes, sir, I did.”

“You mean bugging my equipment?” Louis asked. “I knew that was a possibility, that’s why I searched the paper records.”

Montague scowled at him and he shrugged. “It was the only other way to get information.”

“I’m aware of that. Now, tell me, how did you get the list of planet co-ordinates?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Louis felt a small amount of satisfaction in denying this man and protecting his source. Dubois wouldn’t be betrayed by him.

“You can and you will, because if Bolingbroke finds out first, that person is dead, or exiled. Exiled, if it tickles Bolingbroke’s fancy, dead if he’s in a pissier of a mood. And I assure you, Mr Boudreaux, your continued freedom is pissing him off.”

Louis thought about Dubois and his large, empty home; his large expensive car that went nowhere. Maybe the man would be better off making a new start on another planet, but Louis wouldn't be responsible for the man's death. How could he trust Montague, though?

"Let me remind you, Boudreaux, that we are the good guys."

"I don't know that." Louis replied.

Montague raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "If we weren't, you'd be in front of Bolingbroke. If we weren't we wouldn't have spent considerable assets to assure your safety. If we weren't you'd be dead or on some miserable God-forsaken planet wondering how the hell you got there. I have no desire to explain things to you when you have been foolish in the extreme. But trust in this: if you do not give me the information, it will be more than just one man who's life will be forfeit."

Louis stared at the man. His fire-blue eyes burned with determination and with warning. He clenched his jaw and looked away, ashamed of himself. This was no Dvid.

"Dubois. Rene Dubois. His son was taken by Bolingbroke, sent to Tudor."

Montague and Maurice exchanged glances and made notes. "Confirm these, Mr Joubert, and get Dubois into protective custody."

"Sir." Maurice said and left.

"Now, then," Montague carefully placed his pen on the desktop, "what am I going to do with you? I can't let you go, you know that."

Louis nodded. If he left, Bolingbroke would find him and he suspected there was nowhere he could hide. The stakes were too high.

"You've demonstrated an ability to find information without using the usual channels."

Again, Louis nodded.

"We'll set you up with a work station and accommodation." He pressed a button on his desk before Louis could reply.

"Maureen, I'm sending you a recruit, make him comfortable."

“Sir,” came the tinny reply.

“I haven’t agreed to anything yet,” Louis said.

“Then you *are* an idiot. I can, of course, send you back outside, if you really want to go.”

Louis held his gaze and recognised the truth of his words. Montague would release him if asked.

“I’ll stay until someone does something about Bolingbroke,” Louis said and stood.

“Fair enough.”

A middle-aged woman came through the door without knocking. She was tall, elegant, with grey-streaked shoulder length brown hair and mild blue eyes. She gave him a smile, ignored Montague.

“Good morning, I’m Maureen Smith, and I’ll be your guide today.” She held out a slim hand. Louis took it without thinking.

“Louis...”

“Boudreaux, yes, I know, dear. Shall we go?”

Louis glanced over his shoulder. Montague studied his paperwork. “After you, Ms Smith.”

Chapter Twelve

Cambria leaned on the doorjamb of her hut and closed her eyes against the throbbing in her shoulder. It had taken just about all of her strength to get this far.

With her arm in a sling, she felt confident she could get up and down without any bother. She'd been wrong. And, against all Dooriss protests, had got to her knees before managing to stand upright. Dooriss fell silent and watched her.

She got to the door and stopped. Where had her energy gone? Why did she feel so weak?

Excalibur Jones sat at the fire, watched her with a blank expression. She took no encouragement from him, but neither did she feel as if she was in trouble. She could make it to the fire without falling down, surely.

Cambria took one hesitant step away from the door, then another. Slowly, carefully, she walked to her stool. Who knew it took so many back muscles to walk? Each step brought a ripple of pain.

She lowered herself to the stool. Moreriss held out a mug to her and she accepted it with thanks.

Her hand shook a little as she sipped the brew. Excalibur continued to watch her without a word. She looked up the line of campfires. Every human face turned to her.

"I don't have the implant anymore, do I?" She asked without preamble.

"No. You do not." Excalibur replied.

"That doesn't make a difference, though, does it?"

"The implants tell Manor who is alive and who is dead. He sends us minimal supplies, like clothes and boots. Food, water and shelter we can get. Without the implant..." He lifted his mug to his lips and drank.

"He has to contact Earth somehow." She mused. "But he said he didn't have a communicator. That means someone comes through the gate for a list of what he needs and then returns.

Jones narrowed his gaze at her. "How do you know this?"

"I asked."

“You... asked.”

“Yeah. I think he thought I was too drunk to remember, but I do.”

“And what are you going to do with this information?”

She glanced away from the fire to his face. He had a speculative gleam in his eyes. Cambria shrugged. “I’ll think of something.”

“I’m sure you will,” he murmured. “But why tell me?”

“I don’t think I can get into the fortress on my own. I also need someone to subdue Manor.” She said and wondered if she should be approaching Jones with her plan.

Watching him now, with his serious, contemplative expression, it was hard to remember he’d been convicted of ten vicious murders. He’d said he was as innocent as she was, but even if she asked now who his trial judge was, he could say Bolingbroke because it suited his purposes.

So why trust this man with the knowledge of how to return?

“I can see your point, but it still needs a lot of planning.” He said with hooded eyes.

“Agreed, but I don’t have a lot to do at the moment. In fact, I think I’ll go and rest.”

“You do that. Moreriss?”

The ‘pillar reached into a pot next to the fire and drew out another of the bladders. He handed it to her. She smiled her thanks at him.

Jones stood and helped her stand. Cambria felt too shaky to reject his help. He kept his hand on her elbow and walked her back to her hut. He eased her into the chair and Dooriss made distressed sounds as she crawled up into Cambria’s lap. “You do too much. You are not ready.” She chastised and began undoing the tabs on her shirt.

“I’m okay,” Cambria said to her as the ‘pillar reached the top tab on her jeans. The creature’s hands were fast, as if she thought if she could get Cambria to rest, then her sojourn outside hadn’t happened.

Jones cleared his throat and she looked up. His gaze went to her chest. A line of exposed skin all the way down to her navel caught his attention and she saw his hands clench into fists at his sides.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Jones.” She said and his eyes slowly lifted to hers.

He nodded. "I'll bid you good night then." His voice was hoarse and his face gleamed with a light sheen of sweat in the low lighting.

Cambria's eyes flicked south, his arousal evident against his jeans, but with her one quick look, he turned and walked out.

"Drink," Dooriss urged. "It growsss cold."

"Huh?" Cambria stared at the door and she felt heat crawl up her face as she glanced down at the 'pillar. She sipped the warm liquid.

Dooriss crawled off her lap and unsealed her boots. Cambria toed them off and stood.

She eased off the sling, peeled herself out of the shirt carefully, winced at the sharp throbbing in her shoulder.

Dooriss dragged her jeans down and she stepped out of them. She finished the nutrient and laid the empty bladder on the table.

Cambria got into bed and Dooriss shut the lamp off.

She was, for once, glad the word 'mirror' wasn't a part of the 'pillars vocabulary. She didn't want to see the damage done by the... what did Chien call it? A komatsu? What did it matter? What she'd told Excalibur was true, she wasn't vain but there had to be something around to cover the scar.

She slipped into sleep and dreamed of Jones and his gentle hands.

xxx

Louis sat at his station and began the process of locating 'rogue' planets. He didn't see the point, but the sooner he found them on the star maps Dubois had given him, the sooner he could get to the... other work.

He'd thought Montague would give him busy work, but he soon realised that the job offer was genuine.

Behind him, on another desk, were three, three-foot high stacks of documents. Once he had catalogued the planets, it was his job to sort through those files and find the evidence against the defendant and hand that information to the legal officer. If the legal officer deemed the defendant innocent, Louis would then hunt down the where and when of their exile.

He might find Cambria's name listed there, but he didn't hold much hope. Unfortunately, he had to start with the oldest file first. They had been out there the longest and were in most need. It would take days, if not weeks to have every name in the file determined by the legal officer.

He shook his head, prayed Cambria was safe. That she was looking after herself, that she was alive.

xxx

Cambria raised her arm and felt the pull of the scars and an aching twinge in the muscles.

Chien recommended exercise to get her arm moving again. He'd patiently explained and demonstrated the movements she should make.

After the first hour, she was ready to curse him, but during the following days, her flexibility returned. He had smiled at her thanks and run a finger along the scar on her jaw.

Cambria tensed, and he withdrew and bowed. "The mark of a warrior," he said and left her to her exercises.

Excalibur knocked on her door frame and stuck his head in. "Could I talk to you out here, please?" He left before she could reply.

She sighed and met him at the fire. Chien sat next to him, sipped Ssoclar.

Cambria reached out and took her filled mug from Moreriss. He always seemed to know when she was coming to the fire, no matter what time it was, and had her mug ready.

She sat across from Excalibur.

"Cambria, tell me about the patrol." He asked.

She raised her eyebrows. In the weeks since her injury, he expressed no interest in what happened; asked no questions.

"What do you want to know?" She glanced at Chien, who returned her gaze with a bland one. She couldn't read him.

“We’ve had more attacks on our patrols and there is something systematic about it. Can you tell if that is true of your attack?”

Again, Chien and Cambria exchanged glances.

“We were fixing a fence,” Cambria began after a nod from Chien. “Chien and I stood guard while Debrowski cut down a tree to use as a replacement.” She sank into the memories.

“I heard... I heard something in the foliage. It was a pig. It saw me and I shot it. Then I heard something behind me, I turned and... and...” She was sweating she realised, a cold, clammy sweat that slid down her spine, chilling her as she remembered.

“I saw the small creature too and aimed,” Chien said in his quiet voice. “But I as did, I heard something else from beyond the fence. I turned but it was too late. The komatsu charged. Debrowski spun. The animal gutted him and went for Cambria. I fired.” He shook his head. “I thought both dead. Cambria wasn’t. When I reloaded, she was carving it up. I went to Debrowski and gave him last rites; a prayer for the dead.” He tilted his head. “Was it organised? Was the pig a lure for us so the komatsu could trap us? It is possible. It killed one and nearly killed another. If it had succeeded, it would have turned on me. I do not know if I could have destroyed it by myself.” He hung his head.

“There is no shame in knowing your limitations, my friend,” Jones said.

Chien slowly lifted his head, denial clear in his eyes. He opened his mouth but Jones cut him off.

“We’ve had two more patrols attacked. They were not as fortunate as you.” Chien lifted an eyebrow at the comment.

“It was skill that got us home, not *luck*.” He stared at Jones until he nodded.

“Agreed. What I want to know is why these creatures are displaying organisation when they have shown no such ability before.”

Cambria and Chien remained silent. They had no answers.

“I do not want to lose more men,” Jones mused, “but it is our job to defend this village.”

“Can you send out larger patrols, with better weapons?” Cambria suggested. Jones studied her.

“I can send more men, arm them with spears, but I don’t know whether they’ll want to go.”

His remark earned a snort from Chien and Jones turned his gaze to him.

“For years these men have had an easy life.” Chien said. “They have had no problems out there, and use the pillars for whatever they want. Now the job becomes what it should be and they turn squeamish.” Dark fire lit his eyes. “We have an agreement with these people. It is time to pay up for all the work the ‘pillars have done for us.”

Jones nodded. “Maybe the idea of safety in numbers will satisfy them.”

“You don’t think so?” Cambria asked.

“It will in the short term.” His empty gaze held hers and she saw the sociopath peeking out. “It will also be a test to see if the animals are indeed organised and can plan better traps. If that turns out to be true, the three of us will go hunting for the leader.”

Chien nodded, but Cambria wasn’t so sure. “The *three* of us?”

“We three are the only warriors who have proven what we are capable of. It will be us who hunts.”

“That will make the rest of the men happy,” she grumbled.

“Yes, they will be safe. For a while.”

Cambria frowned at him, but Chien nodded. “They are coming for us.”

It was a moment of perfect understanding between the two men. Cambria felt excluded from the exchange. The men grinned at each other with feral anticipation.

“Yes, Chien. They are.” Jones said with anticipation.

xxx

Cambria began her afternoon exercises by the fire and chatted to Moreriss. The ‘pillar was in a conversational mood. He enjoyed the morning discussion. The tension in his body relaxed and he flowed with an ease she hadn’t seen before.

“It will be good to be sssafe.” He said, stirring his pot, his eye ridges lowered and the tufts on his head drooped.

“Hmm.” She said. “What’s wrong, Moreriss?”

“I do not wisss to worry you.” He lowered his gaze to his pot.

“Come on, Moreriss, what’s the problem? I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s bothering you.” She stretched her arm out and turned her shoulder inwards then outwards. The twinges were lessening.

“My family.” He said.

“What about them?” She asked and dropped her arm. Her muscles twitched and she reached over her shoulder with her right hand to rub what she could reach.

“I do not know.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They live a sssun away. I do not know if they are sssafe.” He muttered.

Cambria stopped rubbing. It hadn’t even occurred to her that there were other villages.

But she supposed there must be to stop interbreeding. This village was her whole life. Exploring what was beyond the borders hadn’t tempted her, nor had she wondered about it since her first night here.

“Are there humans at the other villages?” She asked and Moreriss nodded.

“Then they will protect their own.” She went back to rubbing her shoulder.

“There have been no wordsss.”

“No words? You mean there hasn’t been a courier or a messenger?”

“No. I do not know of any who have come for five ssunsss.” He said and his tufts drooped lower.

“Have you spoken to Jones?” Moreriss shook his head.

“Speak to him, Moreriss, maybe he can send someone.”

The ground trembled slightly and she looked away from him. Sam strode down the path.

He towered over her, blocked the sun.

“Hi, Sam. Take a seat.”

Sam lowered his bulk to a squat. “The stools won’t take my weight,” he grinned, flashed even white teeth. “I’m fine like this.”

“Then have some Ssoclar.”

Moreriss was already handing the giant man a mug.

“I would like your help,” he said after taking a sip.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Excalibur tells me you’re not ready to go back on patrol.”

“He hasn’t mentioned it.” She said, but didn’t disagree.

“I’ve made some swords that I think will be strong enough to use against the komatsu. I can’t fight myself, so I was hoping you could help me.”

“I don’t know anything about sword fighting,” she said.

“No, I know that. No one does here. But I can teach you while we test the metal of the swords.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a shot,” she grinned at the man. He seemed so harmless for all his size, but she never forgot that she was the only woman here. Should he decide he wanted her, there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop him. His sheer size would overwhelm her. For that reason alone, she always kept her knife by her side. Chien had cleaned, sharpened and returned it to her.

Sam finished his brew and stood. “Tomorrow morning, then, we shall try to increase our arsenal.” His eyes held an unholy gleam. “I shall look forward trying you out.”

With that cryptic comment, he strode back up the hill while Cambria stared after him. What the hell did that mean?

xxx

Dooriss worked the kinks out of her shoulder. If the ‘pillars ever went to Earth, Cambria sighed, they would make a fortune in the massage industry.

“Done.” Dooriss wriggled off her back and Cambria rose to her elbows.

“You are a positive master at massage, Dooriss.”

“Thiss isss a good thing?”

“Oh, yeah.” Cambria resisted the urge to stroke Dooriss’s head, but you didn’t pat another sentient being, like you would a dog.

Dooriss’ mouth widened, showed sharp teeth. Cambria knew it was their version of a smile, not a snarl.

“Thank you, Dooriss, I’ve got to go and meet Sam.” She rolled off her bed and stood.

“You not do too much.” The ‘pillar admonished.

Cambria pulled on a clean shirt. How Dooriss managed to clean her gear was beyond her, but there was always a fresh shirt, jeans and underwear ready for her every morning. It was something she could get used to. “I won’t, mother,” she grinned at the ‘pillar.

“See that you do not.” Dooriss waved a clawed hand at her.

Cambria finished dressing and went out to breakfast. There was another ‘pillar stirring Moreriss’ pot.

“Hello,” she said and sat down.

The ‘pillar eyes were almost pink as it stared at her. “I am Hooruss.”

Hooruss, *Hooruss*. Cambria went through names in her head. Horus? Horace? Yeah, that fit. It was a male. “Good morning, Hooruss, may I have some Ssoclar?”

He filled a mug and handed it to her, then scooped porridge into a bowl for her.

“Where is Moreriss this morning, I hope he is not feeling unwell?”

“Moreriss preparss for hisss journey.”

“Journey? Where is he going?”

“Home.” Was Hooruss’s reply. So, he was going to his home village. Cambria hoped Excalibur was sending someone with him.

And speaking of Excalibur, here he comes. Warmth crept up her body as she watched his athletic walk. He moves like a cat. All grace and sinew.

He sat at the fire and reached out a hand. Hooruss had his mug ready. Did all the pillars do this for him, like a monarch and his servants? She wondered then tossed the thought aside as unworthy.

“Moreriss told me of his problem. You’ll go with him.” Jones said.

“I’m going to be practicing with Sam on his new swords this morning.” She accepted the bowl from Hooruss and began to eat.

Jones nodded. “I know. Moreriss won’t be leaving for two days.”

“It takes that long for him to get ready?”

He gave her a brief smile. “No, he must do a... spiritual preparation, I guess you’d call it. He is praying to his gods for safe travel and the safety of his family.”

“Who’s coming with me?” She asked and had another mouthful.

“No one. You go alone.”

The spoon hovered halfway between her mouth and the bowl. “Alone.”

“Yes. You raised the subject with Moreriss when he didn’t wish to speak. You offered him help and he has accepted. His journey, therefore, becomes your responsibility. But it is poor timing.”

“Well, shit.”

Jones grinned at her. “Yeah. I can’t send anyone with you. He has given his trust to *you* and you accepted it. It must be... uh, ratified, I guess.”

“Ratified? You mean confirmed?”

“Kind of. It is a journey where his life will be in your hands. If you fail him and he’s killed, you will be an outcast. No ‘pillar will assist you again.”

“You are joking.” She looked at his expression. “No, I see you’re not. I don’t understand this. Why not provide more protection?”

“Because this is between the two of you.” He grinned. “It’s a kind of marriage.”

“What? I didn’t... I’m not... No. *No way!*”

“Calm down. I said it was a *kind* of marriage, not that it *is*. Moreriss has decided that out of all of us, only you can protect him. You will be forever his... master, for want of a better word. He will do anything for you at any time.”

Cambria rubbed a hand over her forehead. “Jesus. I don’t want a *slave!* I just wanted to help him contact his family! That’s why I suggested he talk to *you!*”

“Well, if you complete this journey, you will have. Fail and you will be caste out.” His eyes lost all humour. “I wouldn’t like that.”

“Neither would I,” she replied her voice sharp. How had she gotten into this mess?

Obviously the old adage of no good deed goes unpunished was true.

“I can’t get out of it?”

“Nope. It’s a great honour amongst the pillars.”

Cambria looked at Hooruss. He nodded his agreement, looked at her with respect in his eyes and she rolled her own.

“So,” she rolled her shoulder, “whether I am ready or not, I’m going out into the wilderness filled with beasties who want to eat us.”

“You’ll do fine.” He rose and patted her shoulder. “Don’t linger here, Sam is waiting. And he is a man who doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Cambria grunted. Excalibur’s hand was warm. Her skin tingled even through her shirt and he trailed his fingers along her upper back as he walked away.

xxx

Cambria wandered down the path to Sam’s foundry. *I am going to die out there, with Mooreiss*, she thought glumly and raised her eyes to the clearing.

Sam was lining blades up on a table outside. He heard her coming and lifted his head.

“Why so down?” He asked, his voice a soft, deep and dark velvet. He genuinely sounded like he cared, but she knew all the men, except Chien, would use any method to convince her to bed them. Maybe it would be a good idea to stay at the other village. Then again, her problems would start all over again. Better the men she knew, and who knew her...

“I’m going with Moreriss back to his village.” She said and studied the blades. He’d made quite a few, from Roman short swords to French Epees and a medieval broad sword. And... was that a *claymore?*

“So I heard.” He said. “We’d best get in as much practice as possible if you’re to take one of these with you.” He rumbled and lifted a sword of medium length. “This is based on the medieval sword.” It was a little longer than the distance between her hip and calf. He handed it to her.

It fit closely into her hand and she stepped back to swing it.

The balance felt different from her knife and the blade flashed in the morning sun. She lowered it.

“How does it feel?”

“A little odd, actually. I’m used to my knife.”

“Just remember that you don’t have to get quite so up close and personal with this one.”

He picked up another sword of equal length and turned to face her.

“Now then, since we don’t have a lot of time, I’ll show you some basics. You won’t be coming up against another swordsman; you’ll be defending yourself against an animal - one with cunning, granted, but an animal all the same. Now, draw your knife. We’ll do both.”

By the end of the day, Cambria sported painful nicks across her knuckles, wrists and forearms. She didn’t complain. Sam had shown her a lot of useful attacking moves. He’d even showed her some rolling moves courtesy of his martial arts training.

“A drink of water, I think.” Sam was sweating as much as she was under the warm sun.

She hadn’t managed to touch him with either blade, but she’d come close.

“Yeah,” she huffed and stood straight.

“You learn quickly. Tomorrow we will work some more.” He said as he strode towards the foundry. He poured her some water from an oversized bladder. It was warm, but it was wet and for that she was grateful.

“Thank you, Sam, you’re a good teacher.”

He grinned at her. “You’re a long way from being a master, but I think I have taught you enough that you won’t be totally defenceless while you’re out there.”

His grin slipped away. "I want you to come back."

Cambria felt a shiver of fear as she saw the look in his eyes and read his intent. "I don't want to have to hurt you, Sam." She said and stepped back from him.

Sam looked startled for a moment then his humour returned and his laugh was big and booming. "Oh, Cambria, do you really think you could take me?"

She gripped the knife and sword and crouched slightly, prepared for an attack. "I won't let you touch me, Sam. Not you, not anyone else."

"Oh, put them away, girl, that's not what I meant."

Cambria remained as she was. She couldn't afford to be taken off guard by this large man.

Sam leaned on the wall of the foundry and crossed his massive arms over his chest. He watched her for a moment then sighed. "Cambria, I think your ego could do with a slap or two." He said and planted his fists on his hips. "Not every man here wants to fuck you, you know." Her aggressive stance didn't change. "I am not interested in you. As a woman, I mean."

Cambria stood a little straighter, puzzled.

A smile crept across his face. "I'm not interested in women *at all*, never have been." He shrugged.

Cambria gaped at him. "But... but you're so..."

"Hmm? I'm so, what?"

"Well, masculine. I mean look at you." She placed the sword back on the table without turning her back on him. She didn't quite believe him just yet.

"You're big, strong, handsome..." A flush crept up her cheeks.

"Some people appreciate that," he grinned, "even some men. But thank you for the compliment."

His eyes shifted over her shoulder. "And here comes my lovely partner right now."

She glanced back and saw a tall, thin man walking down the path. She hadn't seen him before. He had dark hair and latte-coloured skin, darker than a suntan but lighter, much lighter than Sam's midnight colour.

“Well, I feel like an idiot,” she said as the man walked past her without a glance and hugged Sam. He stood next to him and Sam’s tree branch arm rested around his shoulders.

“Cambria, this is Juan. Juan, love of my life, this is Cambria.” He announced her as if she was some kind VIP. Juan dipped his head to her.

“How come I haven’t seen you around, Juan?” She asked.

Sam answered for his partner. “Juan is not able to protect himself from the others. So he stays out sight from those who would do him harm. He cannot speak, so I don’t know who hurt him.”

Cambria tilted a questioning gaze at him.

“Juan arrived before I did. Someone cut out his tongue after raping and beating him. Since my arrival, no one has touched him, but he still refuses to be with anyone but me.”

“I don’t think any one would dare.”

He flashed a smile again and pulled Juan into a hug. “That’s the idea. I would like him to know other people.” His face fell into determination. “You, for example.”

“Me? Well, sure, I guess.”

“You misunderstand me, Cambria. You have proved yourself perfectly capable of defending yourself. Jenkins found out the hard way. Chien, the messy way and I have discovered this to be true simply from the way you hold and use a blade, be it long or short.”

“You want me to *protect* him?” Cambria was astonished. Surely, the big man could do a better job than her?

“Yes. But that is not the only reason I want you to return. You’re an able pupil, perhaps you’ll make an effective teacher for the other men. I can’t teach them all in the time we have.”

Cambria frowned. “In the time we have? What do you mean?”

“Jones didn’t tell you.”

“Told me what?”

Sam rubbed a protective hand up and down Juan's arm. Juan looked up at Sam, a look of concern on his face. "The 'pillar scouts have reported movement of herds of komatsus headed towards the villages."

"If he knows this, then why is he sending me with Moreriss to his village? Couriers must be coming in."

Sam shook his head. "That's different. What you have with Moreriss is a journey rite. It has nothing to do with the scouts."

"But Moreriss told me..."

"Anything he could to get you to offer help. He wants to be yours. It could have been something as simple as stirring the pot for him, or helping him cook. He chose the least favoured and most dangerous option available to him." He gave her a sad smile. "It is a measure of how much he wants to be yours. It is, in the 'pillar way, a compliment to your skills. No 'pillar wants to be out there on their own, not willingly."

"But Haariss is out there all the time."

"Haariss is the exception. It's his job. He's a scout and scouts are different to the others."

"How?"

"Haven't you noticed he can change his skin colour? How many other pillars have you seen change?"

"Well, none."

Sam nodded and squeezed his arm around Juan.

"So, will you come back and help me protect my mate?"

"I don't understand why you want me, but yes, I'll come back and help you." She looked at him sideways, "as long as it doesn't mean *you'll* be my slave, too."

Sam's big booming laugh filled the clearing and even Juan grinned up at him. "No, Cambria, it is merely a favour." His laugh faded. "It is a burden I have placed on you. With the komatsus heading towards the villages, Excalibur needs all the fighters he can muster. Me, included."

Huntress

“I’ll be gone, what? Two days. One there and one back. Will that be enough time?”

“It will have to be Cambria.” He looked lovingly at Juan. “It will have to be.”

Chapter Thirteen

Cambria's nerves stretched tight as she approached the southern gate.

Moreriss undulated behind her, unconcerned. His absolute faith in her was a scary thing. She'd never had anyone rely on her so much and she prayed she was up to the task Moreriss had set her.

Rather than opening the gate and making noise, she climbed over it. The sword at her side was unwieldy and she had to hold onto it as she went over. She had yet to get used to its weight on her belt.

Sam provided a leather sheath for her, but she still had a potentially fatal slowness in drawing the blade. He also demonstrated how to clean it. It wasn't so different from how she treated her knife; it just took more time.

"Time to go," she whispered and Moreriss climbed onto her back. His claws hooked into her shirt as if she were the last life line. And in a way, she was. "Keep an ear out," she said and began to jog down the path.

A 'pillar's hearing was much better than a humans and she was trusting him to warn her of trouble. With the komatsu roaming around threatening the villages, she needed a warning of any danger. She still didn't want to kill anything, concealment was her preferred option, but if there were no place to hide, she wanted time to get her crossbow out and ready. She felt more confident with that weapon and her knife. The sword, well, she would see.

After an hour, she slowed her pace. Her rhythm felt good, but she was still a long way from her usual fitness. She could feel the brush of Moreriss' head against her hair, as if he were hiding in the thickness.

"You okay, Moreriss?" She felt him nod. "You ready for a break or shall I keep going?"

"Go on." He muttered.

She walked for another hour, listened to the forest. Moreriss was becoming heavy, but she didn't want to put him down to walk, he would slow both of them down. 'Pillars just didn't move as fast as humans except when they wanted to hide. Or so she'd seen.

Moreriss riding on her back cut the travel time. By how much time she didn't know, but the sooner she returned, the sooner she could help with the defence of the village.

"Ssssss!" Moreriss whispered and she came to an abrupt halt, listened hard. She slowly drew out her blade and Moreriss crawled down off her back.

He faced the direction of the southern gate. "Follow. Sssomeone followsss."

Cambria crouched down to him. "Human or beast?"

He blinked his eyes at her. "Humansss." And wrinkled his nose.

"How many? Is it a patrol?"

Moreriss tilted his head, stared at her. "Two."

Who the hell would leave the safety of the village to follow her? What could they possibly want? Did they carry a message from Excalibur? She slowly stood and stared down the path. No. Jones wouldn't send her a message for any reason. He was a sink or swim kind of a guy. And the village had done fine without her before her arrival, so it couldn't be about defence. No, this wasn't anything to do with Excalibur and everything to do with what she was: a woman.

She had taken out Jenkins. Debrowski was dead and Chien saw her as a warrior, not a woman. That left the other two rapists; Vangana and Tiquiri.

Moreriss tugged at her pant leg, to get her attention. She looked down at him.

"We go now." He said and she nodded. She wouldn't take both of them on at once. She wasn't sure she could. One success did not a hero make.

Moreriss swarmed up and held on. She turned and began to jog. She didn't want to kill them, but she wondered if Excalibur meant her to solve his problem of lazy men. If she could get rid of the undesirables in the camp, he would be a happy man and he had the kind of Machiavellian mind to think something like that up.

She'd proved an effective killing machine. Had defended herself against man and beast, he must be laughing up a storm over that. There had to be some reason why he couldn't get rid of those men who he despised, otherwise he would have done the job himself or had one of the other men do it for him.

Alternatively, she mused as she ran, if the komatsu were out here, maybe they'd take care of her problem. She grinned a little at that. Wile over brute strength.

The sun hung low in the sky when Moreriss drew her attention to a gate up ahead. It was similar to the one in her own village, but larger, much larger and better built.

No one guarded the gate and she saw no patrols. Since the gate was unmarked, she could only assume animals hadn't attacked the village. She put her shoulder to the log construction and pushed it open.

Once on the other side, she closed it and walked down the path. She felt safer and Moreriss must have too, for he unhooked his claws and wriggled down to the ground.

Cambria slowed her pace.

"Anxious to get home?" She asked and he looked up at her.

"Yesss. It will be good to sssee family." He fell into silence.

The sun dropped below the horizon when Moreriss hissed again. "Humansss." He said and scrambled up her back.

"Where?" She glanced over her shoulder, back towards the gate.

"Ahead."

"A greeting party." She murmured and unhooked her crossbow. She loaded a bolt into it and held it behind her back.

The man that stepped into view on the path was tall and broad. Not the size of Sam, no one could be *that* big. He had dark hair and dark eyes. In one hand, he held a spear, in the other, three pieces of rope. Each piece ended with a ball.

He stopped three metres from her, his gaze travelling up and down her body as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Two more men came up to stand behind him, spears pointing at her.

The lead man stepped forward until he was a couple of metres from her. Still his gaze travelled over her, or parts of her; from groin to breasts, with the occasional flick to her face.

"We'd heard rumours but didn't believe them." He murmured.

"Of what?" She asked loud enough to have his eyes dart to hers. He licked his lips.

"That a village had a woman."

Moreriss rose above her shoulder and hissed at the man. He raised an eyebrow.

“Brought a companion, I see.”

“I’m not here for your benefit,” she said, “I am here for Moreriss’s. We are on a journey of rite.” Her hand rested on her knife hilt.

“Is that so?” He leaned on his spear, ignoring her stance. “Well, I’m sure we can find something to... entertain you with while you’re here.” His grin was lascivious.

“I’m not here to be entertained, either.” Her finger moved to the safety on the cross bow.

“Maybe you’d like to entertain us, instead.” He grinned, speaking to her chest.

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“That doesn’t seem to be very friendly.” He stood straighter.

“You have no idea how... unfriendly I can be.”

“Boys? Don’t you think we should welcome our... guest properly?” He pointed the spear at her with one hand and swung the balls with the other.

Cambria showed him the crossbow and he grinned.

“You can only shoot one of us.”

“You’ll be first pal,” she drew the knife and aimed down her arm with the crossbow, “and the next one gets gutted.”

“And yet one of us will still have you.”

“No, he won’t.”

“That sounds like a promise. Is a little tenderness that abhorrent to you?” He widened his stance.

Cambria knew he was trying to distract her with talk, but he had the wrong girl if he thought that would happen. “Not tenderness no, but you should wait for an invitation.” Her finger began to squeeze the trigger.

Hissing came from both sides of the path. ‘Pillars arrived and surrounded each man. Another group wriggled in front of her, a dozen different coloured eyes stared up at her, she could feel the weight of their gazes, but she didn’t look away from the man. The balls stopped spinning as he lowered his arm.

The men stared at the pillars swarming around them. A voice came out of the pack. A pack of pillars? The thought made her smile.

“Why are you threatening this warrior, Weller?” One of them asked.

“Threaten? No, of course not,” he held his spear upright and tucked the string of the bolos into his belt. “She is our guest.”

“Lie, Weller. You would attack a warrior.”

Weller acknowledged the accusation with a nod and Cambria flicked the safety switch on.

“She is the first female of our species that we have yet seen. We would like...” He looked uncomfortable.

“To mate.”

The ‘pillar turned to her. It had colourless eyes. “Are you willing to mate with the other humans?”

Cambria glared at Weller. “No, I am not. I am on a journey rite with Moreriss, nothing more, nothing less.”

A murmur ran through the crowd and all ‘pillar eyes stared at her. Moreriss rose and straightened.

“Isss thiss true, young phelar?”

“Yesss.” Moreriss said and wriggled down her back. Other pillars hissed and squeaked at him in greeting. She couldn’t tell if they were happy or not, but none of them attacked him.

She heard her name amongst the sibilant sounds.

“Come, Cambria, we greet you.”

The ‘pillars turned as one and began to move past the men. Cambria followed, her eyes on the men. They returned her gaze with quiet promises in their depths. All three of them would try for her tonight and she nodded at them, accepting their challenge. She had no other choice.

Cambria was invited to share Moreriss’ family hut. She gracefully declined, pulled the ‘pillar aside and explained the situation to him.

“I do not want you or your family hurt by something that is a human problem.” She said. Moreriss looked at her sadly and nodded. He showed her to another hut, near the stream than ran by the village. He bid her a worried good night and left her alone.

The layout was exactly like hers back in her village: A table, chair, lamp and bed. She lit the lamp, sat in the chair and waited. The crossbow lay on the table, safety off, the naked blade of the sword next to it and her hand rested on the hilt of her knife. She didn't have long to wait and shook her head.

Surely, they weren't that anxious? Why not wait until she was asleep?

There was a knock on her doorframe.

“Come in.”

Weller stepped inside, but she heard the slight scuff of other booted feet outside. How many were out there? She wondered but kept her eyes on Weller.

She stroked the grip of the cross bow without taking her eyes off him. “What can I do for you, Mr Weller?”

He licked his lips, nervously. His eyes went from the crossbow to the window, to her and she knew where the others were. Like Debrowski, Weller telegraphed his moves. “I'm... ah, here to apologise.”

Cambria waited and he repeated his glance: cross bow, window, back to her.

“I was out of line and I'm sorry for it.”

“Threatened you with expulsion did they?”

“Yeah.” His shoulders relaxed as if signalled. “No one wants to go beyond the borders, not alone.”

“You've heard, then?”

“About the komatsu massing? Oh, yeah. We've spent the last couple of weeks making the border higher and stronger.”

Cambria nodded. It's what Excalibur should have organised, but she wondered if he'd had enough men for the job. Or did he have some other plan? It wasn't her problem; Weller and his cronies were.

“Any ideas on why the komatsu are doing this now?”

“None whatsoever. They’ve never done it before, according the ‘pillars.” He took a step forward.

“Stay where you are, Mr Weller.”

He swallowed, but gave her a confident smile. “You don’t have to be like that you know. Not here. We just want to show you a good time.” He held out his hands, as if he were unarmed. She knew better and moved the crossbow into her lap, the bolt pointing directly at him.

“You just don’t take no for an answer do you.”

“We haven’t seen a woman since we arrived. And you have your choice of men back at your own village. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind sharing.”

Cambria’s voice was winter cold. “First of all, it’s not up to *them*, it’s up to *me*. And secondly, I am no one’s *whore*. Not the village’s and certainly not yours. Now, take a step back before you’re apologising again, or dead on the floor.”

His expression turned ugly. “You can’t take us all on. Not and win.”

“Do you really want to find out the hard way what I can and cannot do? Do you want to be further exiled?”

“No one’s going to tell. Not you and not one of my men.”

She tried one more time to get him to see reason. “I’m due to leave with Moreriss in the morning. How will you explain my disappearance, if that’s what you have in mind?”

“I’m gonna say you left without him.”

“Not up on ‘pillar culture, are you? I can’t leave without him, and he can’t leave without me.”

“Then he’ll stay.” He flicked one more glance at the window and nodded. He stepped forward, but Cambria was already throwing herself sideways as she fired the crossbow.

The bolt hit him squarely in the chest and he dropped to his knees. The stringed balls hit the wall.

Cambria rolled and came up onto her knees clutching her knife. She put her foot on the crossbow end and pulled the string back, dropped another bolt in place before the next man came through the door. It was one of Weller's companions. He glanced at the dead man and lunged for her.

She fired and the bolt hit him in the throat. His momentum carried him into her as he fell.

Cambria pushed the body off her as the third man reached her. She slashed out with the knife in a backhand sweep. Blood gushed from the wound in his throat.

He fell back, clutching the wound, gurgling as his life leaked out.

Cambria crouched and watched the door. It had taken her less than twenty seconds to kill three men and she was appalled. Not enough to relax her stance, but she was horrified at her efficiency.

No one else came through the door, but she waited anyway.

There was a shuffling outside and a fourth man stepped in. He was tall, with blonde hair, blue eyes and a broken nose. A scar bisected his left eyebrow and cheek. He didn't approach her, but glanced at the dead bodies before his attention rested on her. He had his hands behind his back as if he were a teacher walking the classroom, inspecting students' work.

"Show me your hands." She demanded and he held them out. Empty. "What do you want?"

His voice, when he answered, was surprisingly deep and rich. "To make sure you weren't being bothered. I was, obviously, too late." He waved a hand at the bodies.

The third man was still gasping wetly for breath, his eyes rolling madly in their sockets as he pleaded for help. Cambria and the man ignored him.

"Yeah, you're too late." She stood and laid the crossbow on the table, but watched him.

"I mean you no harm."

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard that." She shook her head. "Who are you?"

“Batson,” he took a step and held out his hand. Cambria lifted her knife and he flicked his hand back. “Sorry, that was risky of me. I’m Gregor Batson.” He gave her a smile, but she didn’t relax.

“What do you want?” She repeated.

His smile vanished under her curt tone. “Like I said, I mean you no harm and I’m here to assure you that no one will harm you tonight.”

She lifted her eyebrows and glanced at the men.

Gregor sighed and stepped back. He opened the cloth door without taking his eyes off her. A dozen pillars wriggled in. They lined up in front of him and eyed the bodies with something akin to hunger.

“Breakfast,” she murmured. “I’ve supplied them breakfast again.”

“I gather you’ve done this before.” Gregor said.

Cambria nodded. “Once.”

The ‘pillars all looked up at her as if asking her permission. She waved a tired hand. “Have at it.”

They wriggled their way under the three bodies.

“That is one of the most unsettling things I’ve ever seen,” she said watching the bodies undulate out the door. Especially since one of them was still clinging to life. “Wait.” She called and the parade stopped.

“Take the first two. I want to give this one the *coupe de grace*.”

“Why?” Gregor asked. “He wouldn’t have shown you any mercy.”

“That doesn’t mean I have none in me.”

“I could debate that,” Gregor said under his breath but she heard him. The ‘pillars wriggled out from under the man and she held the blade upright against his heart. She looked into his eyes. They were wide with fear and she slammed her hand down. The knife went through his sternum like butter and speared his heart. He arched up once, then collapsed to the ground.

Gregor stared at her when she stood and indicated the pillars could take him away.

“What now?”

“You did that without flinching. How can you do that without *flinching*?”

Cambria shrugged. She couldn't explain what she didn't know, but maybe her genetics were starting to show. Maybe this was how Niall felt every time he killed someone; this... nothingness, as if it were just business.

The man was suffering, but she wasn't sociopathic enough to let the 'pillars have him while he still lived. That would be too cruel. Weller started this, but she'd made damn sure she had finished it.

Gregor stared at her with something too close to horror. His mouth opened and closed as if he didn't know what to say. She sat down and pulled the water jug to her.

She dipped her cleaning cloth into the water and began to clean her knife. “Was there anything else?”

“No... No, I was... no.” His expression faded. “I'll make sure the men don't bother you. Tell them what I've seen you do. They won't come near you.”

She wanted to sneer at him, at them, for being cowards, but all she wanted was to clean her weapons and go to sleep. She still had two would be rapists out in the wild to contend with and she needed to be ready.

“Thank you,” she said, but didn't look up to see when he left.

xxx

True to his word, Gregor kept everyone away from her. She had a good night's sleep for a change and for that alone she was thankful. But only the 'pillars arrived to escort her to the gate.

They swarmed all over Moreriss with friendly affection. He rolled around with them, rippled over the groups of smaller 'pillars, the children. At the gate she turned to them and searched out the one who had spoken yesterday.

“I'm sorry to have brought human problems to you. Sorry that I have taken three of your guards from you in your time of need.”

“Do not worry yourssself. Thossse who were breakfassst were not warriorsss only...” It conversed with two other 'pillars. “They were no good. No ressspect, no honour. We are grateful to you for our mealss, it wasss a generous guesst gift.”

Cambria blinked. She hadn't known she was supposed to bring a gift for them. Then again, they had shown her a sort of hospitality. If the men hadn't shown up, what kind of a gift could she have given them? She shook her head. It was a moot point now.

She bowed to the 'pillar and it bobbed its head in return.

Cambria shoved open the gate, then closed it behind her. Moreriss climbed up onto her back. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, Cambria." He said and she began to jog. Her eyes watched the forest and the path she travelled. Somewhere out here, Tiquiri and Vangana waited. Beyond that, there were the komatsu. She hoped she didn't meet either.

Cambria jogged through the morning. It was a good run. Her night's sleep had refreshed her better than she had expected. Her muscles felt warm and loose and she thought she could run forever.

Eventually, she slowed to a walk. The sun was high and bright. Moreriss nestled against her shoulder, asleep, which surprised her. She would ask him why when he awoke.

All around her was silent as she reached for her water bottle. She tipped it up and drank half of the bladder. It was cold and refreshing. She sighed with relief and re-hooked the bladder to her belt.

Cambria slowly became aware of a change in the silence of the forest. She couldn't pinpoint what felt different, only that it did. Casually, she reached for her crossbow and flicked the safety off.

She turned her head slightly. "Moreriss? She whispered and he snorted, but came awake. "What's out there?" She asked and he dragged in a deep breath.

"Death," he whispered back at her.

"Where?"

He lifted a limb and pointed down the path.

Cambria walked carefully, her finger on the trigger and her right hand resting on the knife.

She came around the corner of the path and halted. Her hand left the knife and gripped Moreriss' mouth shut. He'd been about to hiss.

She looked at him and he nodded to her. Slowly, quietly as possible she drew the sword. It had a longer reach than her knife and she didn't want to get any closer to the komatsu than was possible.

Now that she wasn't hurt or her eyes blinded with rage, she could have a better look at the creature.

It was as big as an Indian elephant, with mottled brown skin; much larger than the other one she had killed. Eight clawed limbs raised it up from the ground. It looked, in fact, like an overgrown version of the 'pillars. It faced away from them, had its' head down, nudging the body of a human. Which human she couldn't tell.

Cambria studied the forest. She couldn't see a way around it and it didn't seem to want move any time soon. Could she take on another beast? Did she have any other choice?

A quiet rustle of leaves to her left turned her head to face the new threat. A pale, sweaty and blood streaked face looked out at her. Vangana. That meant the body was Tiquiri. She recognised Vangana as one of the men who had spied on her while she bathed.

The creature heard a noise and had raised its head, sniffed the air. Slowly, it turned, saw her and bellowed. She'd run out of time and options.

She quickly re-sheathed the sword and drew the knife. For once, she was thankful it hadn't rained. The dirt of the path was soft and dusty. Vangana's face had disappeared and Moreriss scrambled down her back and dived into the foliage after him. She had a moment to be astonished at her abandonment before the beast charged her. She tossed the crossbow aside.

Cambria yelled and ran at the creature. When she judged the right distance, she threw herself into a baseball slide and slid under the creature's head. She lifted the knife, gripped it in two hands and jabbed it into the soft underbelly. Momentum did the rest. Dark blood gushed from the upper belly to genital wound. Organs slipped out, spread along the path and the smell was atrocious. The beast collapsed and slid a little further before stopping.

It lay still.

Cambria held her sleeve to her mouth and climbed slowly to her feet. Her heart thundered against her ribs, as if it would come out of her chest. She raised a trembling hand to wipe her mouth. Her hand was covered in green muck and she flicked the stuff away.

Vangana and Moreriss came out of the bush. Vangana bent down and picked up her crossbow. He held it at his side as he walked towards her, his eyes on the dead creature.

He passed the remains and walked backwards, kept it in sight, as if it would rise again. When he reached her, he held out the crossbow to her all without his gaze leaving the butchered creature. His eyes were wide, shocked and staring.

Cambria attached the weapon to her belt and reached for her water bottle. She cleaned her knife as best she could then stuck it back in its sheath.

She turned away. Moreriss clambered up her back and she started to walk down the path, past what was left of Tiquiri and onward.

Vangana came up behind her. He wasn't close, but he was close enough. She wasn't afraid of him. He had proven himself a man for whom danger was anathema and she suspected he wouldn't try anything with her after what he'd just seen. Some times, it was good to be scary.

He padded behind her, saying nothing.

Moreriss occasionally glanced at him, but Cambria ignored him. She increased her pace until she was jogging. Whether Vangana kept up with her, she didn't care.

Soon she was in the zone, her rhythm even. She decided it was an excellent way to work off the adrenalin and fear that pumped through her system. They made good time.

Vangana huffed and puffed behind her, but she doubted he wanted to be left behind so he made the effort to keep up.

The southern gate came into view. A man stood guard on the other side, his sword drawn, waited for them.

"Where's Tiquiri?" He asked of Vangana.

Vangana leaned on his upper thighs, dragged in gulps of air. “Dead.” He said quickly and continued to breathe hard.

The guard nodded and opened the gate.

She and Vangana walked through.

“Sheeiit,” Vangana said and leaned on the fence. Cambria kept walking.

“That... woman...” She heard Vangana say between breaths, “is... murderous.”

“She killed Tiquiri? Then why are you still breathing?”

“No, she gutted one of those komatsus without a by your leave. No hesitation.”

“You are so full of shit.”

“I’m... telling... ya...”

Cambria smiled as the voices faded. Let them think of that what they will.

As soon as they reached her hut, Moreriss scrambled down and went to his cooking fire, hissing and squeaking at Hooruss.

Cambria left him to it and went to her hut. It was as immaculate as always and she slumped down onto her chair. She peeled off her belt, allowing everything to drop to the floor.

Dooriss chose that time to come in and she put all her hands against her body. “Messs,” she said. “Do not make messs! Jusst cleaned.”

She shuffled over and began picking up weaponry. She placed everything on the table.

“Sorry, Dooriss, I’m just bone tired.”

Dooriss nodded. “Long trip, not sssurprised. Go, go.” She made a shooin motion with all her hands. “Get clean. Sssssoak. Feel better.”

Cambria levered herself up with the help of the table and chose fresh clothes off the shelf.

She picked up her woven towel, a soap vine and her knife. Might as well clean it properly while she was at it. Dooriss all but pushed her out the door.

“Dooriss, what’s the hurry?” She looked down at the ‘pillar, her hand on the door cloth.

Dooriss looked embarrassed and hung her head.

“Dooriss?”

The ‘pillar mumbled something and backed away.

“What was that?”

“Sssmell like death.” Dooriss raised pleading eyes to her. “Cambria ssssmell like rotting death, make a messss of hut.”

“You see a bad smell as making a mess?”

Dooriss nodded vigorously and Cambria chuckled. “Okay, I’m gone.”

Chapter Fourteen

The water pool felt like an oasis of peace and she quickly stripped off. She dived in and came up spurting water. It taste fresh and cool after the running she'd done today. She floated on her back for a while then turned over and swam for the shore.

She picked up the vine and squeezed some of the gel onto her palm. It had a different smell. More... citrusy and she decided to talk to Dooriss about it. Lathering up with sand, the bubbles felt softer, too. She dived back into the water, her skin felt more alive, tingling, *energized*, if that was possible.

Cambria surged out of the water, laughing. She felt *great*. She'd taken on three men and won; she'd taken on a komatsu single-handed, and won. She *should* feel terrific. Her laughter died away when she saw Excalibur Jones sitting on the bank near her clothes, cleaning his fingernails with her knife.

"Something you want, Jones?" She called and she saw his quick grin. He didn't look at her but kept cleaning his nails.

Cambria ignored him and swam around, her muscles loosening. Her shoulder twinged and she stopped. Jones watched her so she swam closer.

"What's up, Jones? You don't come down here when I am."

"How do you know?" He asked in a silky voice that had her nipples tightening and her abdomen humming. She was thankful the water covered her.

"So, you've watched me, too?"

He grinned at her. It was all the affirmation she needed. "Any one else?"

She knew better than to ask the question and his answer was the lifting of one shoulder.

Cambria sighed. "A peep show. Great. You're all perverts."

"Yep. Safer to look, but not touch. We get that."

She looked around at the surrounding forest, but couldn't see anyone.

"There's no one here but you and me," Jones said, drawing her attention back to him.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

“Because I threatened to tell *you* who watched, and where to find them and what you’d do to them.” He smiled at her outraged expression. “You make a real good threat, Cambria, you’ve made sure every man here knows it. And now this story Vangana is telling.”

“What about it?”

“I came to see if it’s true.”

It was her turn to shrug. “Ask Moreriss.” And his grin widened. “You already did. Jesus, Jones, you are one fucked up individual.” She huffed out a breath, the water cooled against her skin. “Okay, I’ll ask again, what do you want?”

“I want to discuss security arrangements with you.” His smile faded and his expression turned serious.

“What? You couldn’t wait until I was at the campfire?” She paddled backwards a way to keep the circulation moving in her muscles. Jones thrust her knife into the sand, stood up and her blood heated. He wore a white t-shirt that stretched sinfully across his chest and stomach, outlined every muscle. Her gaze drifted down. His jeans were tight and he wore no shoes. They sat next to her towel.

“I could.” He said and turned his back as if to leave.

She waited, but he didn’t go, only stared off into the forest. Cambria sighed and stood. He flinched at the sound of water falling from her body. If he wanted to torment himself, he was welcome to. She’d done as much for everyone else. She had nothing he hadn’t seen before.

Cambria shivered in the warm breeze, then walked slowly out of the water, watched Jones’s back. She didn’t know what she’d do if he turned around, but he didn’t.

She reached down for the towel and wrapped it around her. Now, he did turn.

Cambria lowered her head, squeezed the water out of her hair and he stepped into view. All she could see was his arousal pressed painfully against his tabs. Even as she watched, one tab began to part as he swelled.

She didn’t do anything but squeeze her hair and look at the tab. Her dreams came back to her.

Night time wanderings she had no control over, wrapped in his arms as tightly as the towel was.

Jones stepped past her and bent down for her comb. He stood behind her and tilted her head up.

Slowly, carefully, he tugged the comb through her wet hair.

“You smell different.” He murmured next to her the skin of her shoulder. She said nothing as he dragged the comb down.

“There is no fear in you, either.”

“I feel plenty of fear,” she said voice just above a whisper, “I just don’t show it as much as some people.”

His hand lifted her hair and let it fall with a cold slap against her naked back. Cambria couldn’t suppress the shiver.

Jones turned her around, his hands gentle on her upper arms and she swallowed against her dry throat. If she gave in this once, would the men condemn her? Would Excalibur tell them? If he did, was she going to have to kill more of them who expected her put out? After all, if she did it once, she would do it again. What price her virtue?

She lifted her eyes to his, her turmoil clear in her eyes.

“Cambria.” He whispered. “You have needs, too. And you’re strong enough to take them all on,” he said before his mouth lowered to hers.

For a first kiss, it was gentle. A touch of lips; a test of softness. Cambria didn’t move, just watched his eyes. He brushed her mouth again, this time with an added flick of his tongue and she clenched her hands into fists to stop herself from grabbing him. Sensations ricocheted through her body. Her skin tingled, heated and arousal flared. He was right; she *did* have needs.

He must have seen something in her eyes. His lit with heat and she responded. His mouth cruised over hers a third time, flicking his tongue out and this time she parted her lips on a sigh.

His arms came around and held her to him, his lips moved against hers, his tongue invaded her mouth.

Cambria reciprocated, grabbing his butt and held him firmly against her, her tongue duelling with his. Her hands dived beneath his shirt, fingers brushed the tense, hard muscles of his back, then his chest and stomach and lower. Jones stripped away her towel and broke the kiss to look at her.

He smiled, a sensuous parting of his lips, and pulled his shirt off. The tabs easily parted on his jeans and she shoved them down. His glorious body, all hers, she thought running her gaze and hands over him. His hands fisted as she kissed her way down his chest and rippled belly. His erection bobbed against her chin. “Down.” She said and they both sank onto the sun-warmed sand.

Cambria straddled his knees and took him into her mouth. But Jones quickly pulled her up.

“If you do that, I won’t last. It has been a long time for me, you know.”

She crawled up his body. “It’s been a while for me, too.” She murmured against his mouth and gave him a soul-searing kiss. He rolled her, parted her thighs with his knee. He kissed his way down her throat to her breasts. He drew one peak into his mouth and she arched against him. “*God!*”

She reached down and guided him to her. He gave one thrust and seated himself inside her.

Once there, he paused, the look of strain on his face nearly her undoing. She raised her knees and he pushed deeper. He shut his eyes and grimaced. “I can’t...”

Cambria held his face until his eyes opened. “Then don’t.” She said softly and brought his mouth down to hers. Jones thrust into her hard and fast. He did what he could, tweaked her nipples, licked at her mouth, moved his hand to where they were joined. He withdrew and entered her in one hard thrust, then he held himself still above her and she felt him come in a spurt of hot liquid.

He collapsed on top of her. Cambria stroked his back as he tried to level his breathing.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his head between her breasts.

“It’s okay, Jones. Get your strength back and we’ll try again.”

He lifted his head to look at her.

Her hands moved down to his butt and she squeezed him with her thighs, but he didn't react. No orgasm for her, then.

Cambria shared a long wet kiss before letting him slip out of her. She crawled to the water and sank beneath the surface. Jones followed her in and they surfaced together, faced each other a foot apart. Cambria didn't know what to say to him, and he seemed equally hesitant.

He leaned forward and kissed her. Her hands moved over his slick chest to rest behind his neck. She broke the kiss first and looked at him.

"What now?" He asked, holding her hips to him.

"Nothing." She said and he tilted his head.

"We can't pretend it didn't happen."

"No, we can't, but we are consenting adults."

He nodded, waited for her to continue. Her arms slipped from his shoulders and she strode out of the water. She bent for her towel. Jones came up behind her, gripped her hips and slammed into her. He forced her to her hands and knees and pumped inside her hard. One hand came under her body and massaged her breasts, tweaked her nipples, the other moved to where they were joined spread her wide. She threw back her head and moved with him, unable to stop herself, parted her knees wider, taking him all.

He gripped her thighs and changed angles, thrust deeply. The orgasm hit her hard and fast. It was huge; rolled over her and still he didn't stop, still surged into her, grunted harshly as he worked inside her.

In, out, in, out as if she was all and everything. Finally, he held himself still. She came in another rush. He surged into her one last time and he collapsed on top of her. She fell to the sand and tried to relearn how to breathe.

When she could, the anger blasted through her. She shifted and he slid out of her. "You son of a bitch! *I won't be your whore!*"

He met her anger with his own. "That wasn't casual sex between 'two consenting adults', Cambria. It was more and you *know it.*"

She got shakily to her feet and went back to the water. She dived in once and came out again. She grabbed her towel and roughly dried off. Without taking her eyes off him, without saying a word, she dressed and gathered her gear. She was about to stalk off when his words stopped her.

“So, now we see the fear.”

“What?” She turned back to him, he was lying on the sand like a centrefold, one leg bent at the knee, one arm behind his head and her body hummed with appreciation.

“You’re afraid of passion, Cambria, and where it might lead.”

“Fuck you.” She turned and walked away.

“You did, thank you very much.” His laugh followed her up the path.

xxx

Cambria sat in her chair, slowly rubbed the knife blade across the whetstone Dooriss provided.

The ‘pillar shifted nervously from foot-to-foot. “Did it work?”

“Did what work?” She asked, disinterested. Her interlude with Excalibur raised more problems than it had solved. She had to find a solution to it, otherwise, all the men on the planet would be knocking on her door expecting...

“The vine. The mating. Did you mate?”

Cambria paused her sliding of the blade against the stone and eyed the ‘pillar. “What did you do?”

Dooriss bared her teeth in a smile. “Give you mate vine.” She nodded.

Cambria pushed the stone aside and tested the edge of the blade. “And what, exactly does that mean?” She leaned forward, her eyes level with the ‘pillar. “Explain to me exactly what you did and why.”

“Cambria lonely,” Dooriss said, her eyes sad, “I want you to be happy. Happy iss mating. I give you mate vine. You clean with vine gel, male want, you want. You join, make happy. You now have a mate to make you happy.”

Cambria felt a slow burn of rage creeping up on her. “You deliberately gave me a vine that would lure a human man into mating with me.” Dooriss nodded eagerly.

“Whether I wanted to or not.” Again, the ‘pillar nodded, but this time, her expression was unsure.

Cambria leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. She couldn’t condemn the creature for wanting her happy. The ‘pillar obviously had no idea about human relations. They saw things in simple terms.

“You manipulated me, you manipulated him.” Dooriss looked puzzled and she held up a hand. Dooriss wouldn’t recognise the word for what it meant. “Dooriss you have put me into an awkward and dangerous position. I have a man back home, on Earth. I have no wish for a man here.”

“He didn’t make you happy?”

Cambria winced. “He is not a man I can be with. None of them are. They have... flaws.”

“Flawsss?”

“Yes, they are not kind to women, females. And now that I have... mated with one, the others may expect the same. I cannot and will not mate with all of them. Do you understand?”

“No.”

“Let me put it this way, Dooriss, no more mate vine, or I will be very unhappy.” She flicked the end of the blade with her thumb to emphasise her point.

Dooriss looked from the knife to her face and slowly nodded. Then she hung her head. “No more mate vine, only clean vine.”

“Thank you.”

Cambria wondered what Jones would say to the manipulation. She snorted. He wouldn’t care why she screwed him, only that she had. Should she tell him? After his last comment, she was disinclined to inform him, but she couldn’t let him think that she was available every time he was feeling horny. And she was very much afraid that after years without a woman, he would be knocking on her door more frequently.

Yeah, she would have to explain things to him after all.

She started as someone tapped on her doorframe. Here he comes, she thought, wanting more.

She resheathed the knife and went and opened the cloth door. Her eyebrows rose.

Chien bowed to her. "There are komatsus at the fence. We must get rid of them. Jones bids you come."

Cambria nodded. "I'll get my sword."

She ducked her head inside and unhooked the scabbard from the wall. She tied it to her belt and stepped outside. Chien bowed to her.

"Where is he?"

"At the northern gate," Chien said and walked beside her as they moved up the path past the campfires. The 'pillars watched them go, fearful expressions on their faces.

"Did he say how many there were?" She asked as they went from the clearing into the forest.

"No, he didn't."

"Idiot," she muttered. "Did he have a plan of action?"

"No, he didn't." Chien said with a small smile.

"*Blundering* idiot." Cambria said and took a deep breath. She could smell the night approach; a cool, fresh dampness. It would soon be too dark to see anything, let alone fight the komatsus. She assumed they could see at night; the 'pillars could, so why not their larger counterparts?

"This sucks." She said.

"Undoubtedly, but Mr Jones felt you would have an idea on how to defeat them."

Cambria glanced at him. "Oh? Why would he think that?"

"Because you have killed two single-handedly. Which is two more than the men in the camp put together."

Cambria blushed. He'd said it so matter-of-factly, as if he were commenting on the weather.

"I had luck, Mr Chien."

"Indeed, Ms Peterson, you did, but it still remains that you have killed two of them now. Perhaps you will have an idea on how to kill more?"

“Not at this particular juncture in time, no.” She said.

She saw Chien nod out of the corner of her eye. He understood perfectly. She wondered if Jones would be as understanding and as she thought that, she saw him come around the corner of the path.

He stepped slowly, quietly as if not wanting to attract anyone or anything’s attention.

Chien bowed to him, Cambria crossed her arms.

Jones’ eyes were pinched at the corners, his mouth was tight. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Think of one fast.”

Cambria frowned. “What’s going on? How can I formulate a plan when I haven’t seen the situation?”

“Half a dozen komatsus are pacing along the fence line.” His voice was low, terse and hurried. “They have yet to charge, but they will and when they do, they will take out the fence and anyone in the way. At the moment, there’re pigs poking their heads through the fence, provoking the men.”

“Have you lost anyone yet?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time.”

This was a new side of Excalibur. He was tense, unsure of himself, angry and frustrated. What was he thinking? She wondered, and why did he think that she had a magic cure for getting rid of the komatsu?

“Jones, what is it you want me to do? Surely, you have everything under control?”

His grey eyes narrowed, his brows lowered. “I want you to think of a plan to get rid of the komatsu, all of them, get them away from the fence.”

“You’ve got to be...”

Jones cut her off, “Chien, go on ahead and try and keep those idiots quiet.”

He watched Chien move silently up the path, then turned back to Cambria.

“What’s this about?” He asked. “Payback is it?”

“Payback?”

Jones rolled over her question. “Well, these are men’s lives. I don’t give a shit how angry you are with yourself, if those komatsu get inside the perimeter we are toast and so are the ‘pillars.’”

“Whoa, wait a minute. You think I have a plan but won’t give it to you because of the shitty way you treated me?”

He eyed suspiciously, then nodded.

Cambria smiled then gave way to snickering. She couldn’t laugh out loud; she didn’t want to attract any undue attention.

“Boy, have you got the wrong end of the stick.” Her smile faded and she pinned him with a glare. “Like I told you at the time, we are two consenting adults, it didn’t mean that much to me. As you said, I have needs too. It’s over and it’s done. Get *over* yourself. You accepted the invitation and...” she held up a finger to stop his outburst, “Dooriss confessed to giving me mate vine instead of my usual bath gel vine.”

“Mate vine?” Jones cleared his throat.

“She wanted me to be happy. According to the ‘pillars, to be happy, you mate... with *any* male. Are you *reading* me now?”

Excalibur glanced away so she wouldn’t see the look in his eyes.

“Okay, then. I don’t have a plan, because *I don’t have a plan*, not because I’m still pissed at you. I am, but that’s not important right now.” Again he opened his mouth, but Cambria ignored him. “I’m going up to see what’s happening.” She walked away and Excalibur shook his head.

Cambria tried to step as quietly as she could towards the gate. She couldn’t see the men yet, but she could hear the snuffling of the pigs. She slowed her pace, listened to where they were.

Her boots, however, weren’t made for stealth and she could hear the quiet crunch of dried leaves and foliage beneath her feet. She glanced over her shoulder.

Excalibur gave her a pained smile and she shrugged. She would have to learn, have to get either Jones or Chien to teach her how to walk through the forest silently.

She stood still, her head moved back and forth as she tried to see the fence and beyond.

Jones came up and placed a hand on her shoulder. He pointed slightly to her left and she narrowed gaze. She could just see movement. He squeezed gently and swung his arm further left. There was another. He moved his arm to the right, two more of the komatsu rubbed against the fence.

Jones pointed further right, inside the fence. One of his men stood next to a giant tree. She'd only seen him because Jones pointed him out. He urged her to follow him and he slid quietly through the trees. Cambria followed, not so quietly.

He stopped at intervals and pointed to men and animals. Two men guarded one komatsu. The pigs seemed disinterested in coming under the fence; they stayed outside, rooting around in the undergrowth for whatever they could find. The komatsu, too, seemed more inclined to feed off the foliage rather than charge the fence.

When they were a safe distance from the fence, Jones turned to her. "What do you think?"

"About what?" She asked. "The creatures are doing nothing more than feeding."

"Don't be obtuse, Cambria, it ill suits you."

"Oh, get a grip, Jones! What are those animals doing other than feeding?" She pointed skywards. "It's night, they obviously feed whenever they can. Those pigs could have charged at any time, but they didn't."

"They're dangerous; to us and the 'pillars. We need to either kill them, or scare them off somehow." He crossed his arms as if to dare her to argue.

"You're set on this course of action?"

"Yes. It is our job to protect the pillars and their village. We cannot allow one of those creatures inside the fence. It would cause devastation."

Cambria nodded and started to pace. He wanted kill or scare; she wanted to scare or leave them the hell alone. Could she do both?

"How did you know the komatsu were coming?"

Jones shrugged. "One of the scout pillars."

“Can your men climb?”

“Climb?” Jones turned his startled gaze to her. “Why?”

“Because I don’t believe the komatsu are going to attack. I think they’re just grazing and here happens to be the best fodder for them at the moment.”

Jones snorted his disbelief.

“Have they done anything other than rub up against the fence? Have they attacked anyone? Shown the slightest interest in charging?” Jones shook his head, once, twice, three times.

“Then I’m thinking their feeding, that’s all.” She looked up into the night sky.

Strange, alien constellations sparkled. She shook off a sudden case of vertigo. “Look, I think I’m right. But if I’m wrong, I’ll take precautions.”

Jones eyed her.

“You wanted me to come up with a plan, well this is it. Non-confrontation.”

His lip curled.

“Six men, Jones, up a tree each. If the komatsu show aggression, they can wave a flag, whistle or whatever towards the camp. Now that I think about it, get one of the scout ‘pillars to stay with the men. At the first sign of unrest, the ‘pillar or one of the men can run and raise the alarm. We will have enough time to form a defence in front of the village if necessary.” She shrugged. “I don’t honestly think it will be, but just in case...”

“Six men.” He said neutrally.

“Or even four. The point is, we don’t need everybody standing around waiting for something to happen. We need to be rested if we are to take these things on and a night of standing watch will only make us *all* tired. Better four tired men, than everyone being exhausted.”

Jones tilted his head. He paced back and forth, thinking. The night air cooled and Cambria felt the chill. She rubbed her arms.

“Alright, Cam, we’ll try it your way. But if you are wrong...” his voice held a warning and she was just tired enough to call him on it.

“Okay, I’ll bite: what?”

“What?” He asked startled and she sighed.

“If I’m wrong...” she repeated, “What happens?”

Jones shook his head and took a deep breath. “I’m sure I’ll be able to come up with some sort of a punishment.” His teeth were very white in the darkness.

She’d known better than to ask, but she was tired. “Was there anything else? Or can I go back to my hut for some sleep. It’s been a long day.”

Jones stepped closer and she jerked back.

“Still afraid.” He whispered, leaned into her.

“Do you really want me to kill you or the rest of your men?” She asked loudly.

“What?” Jones pulled back.

“You touch me, they will expect a reaction. If they don’t get the one they expect, each and every one of them will turn up at my door and I will have to kill them. Do I make myself clear?”

Jones held himself very straight and gave her a curt nod.

She walked past him and returned to her hut. She stripped, turned the lamp off and lay under a thickly woven blanket. At least she wouldn’t have to worry about midnight visitors.

The men knew what would happen and Jones seemed mortally offended by her attitude.

Fine. She could live without being in his arms. Could do without the fireworks and mind-blanking pleasure; wouldn’t miss the warmth, taste and smell of his body.

Oh, hell, she thought and rolled over. Who was she trying to kid? She wanted to make love to him again. Even the rough stuff was incredible. And that brought her thoughts to Louis. He was a gentle and considerate lover, to be sure, but she’d never felt with him what she had with Excalibur.

How was she going to face Louis when she returned to Earth? Jones had spoiled her for other men... the *bastard*.

Huntress

Cambria lay on her back and stared at the ceiling. She had changed. She could no longer settle for the ordinary life. She had killed; men and beasts.

Felt the hot blood run over her hands; had her own blood spilled.

This world had created a barbarian in her; an uncivilised and uncompromising attitude that wouldn't translate well back on sophisticated Earth. She couldn't go back to the way she was, the lifestyle she lived, the friends she knew. And given that, should she go back at all?

Here, she had a home, people who relied on her on a more fundamental level. She sighed and closed her eyes. The best she could do was to face the situation - if and when it arrived.

Chapter Fifteen

She was startled awake by a knock on her doorframe. Cambria automatically reached for her knife and she rolled out of bed. She quickly dressed in jeans and shirt. Underwear would have to wait. “Come in,” she called and sealed the last tab on her shirt.

“You didn’t have to dress on my account,” Jones smirked as he stepped inside.

Cambria sat on her chair and rolled the cuffs up on her jeans so they wouldn’t drag in the dirt. “Did you want something, Jones?”

“Yeah, a repeat of yesterday, but failing that, the night was quiet. The komatsu fed and left. So you were right,” he nodded and leaned on the doorframe. “They were feeding.”

“Uh, huh. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Come out to breakfast and I’ll explain.” He turned and left without waiting for her reply. Cambria sighed and put socks and boots on. Her socks were starting to look a bit threadbare. She’d have to ask Dooriss for a needle and thread so she could darn them.

Jones quietly sipped Ssoclar, stared into the blaze when she sat at the fire. Moreriss handed her mug with bared of his teeth. He was much happier now he was back.

“Okay, what now?”

“Grumpy in the mornings, aren’t we?” He said it as if he’d been thinking of other things and it was an automatic response. Cambria didn’t reply, but sipped her brew and waited for Moreriss to dish up her porridge.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of the komatsu travelling in a herd.” He said, studying the fire.

Moreriss handed her the bowl of porridge and she nodded her thanks. The sun was once again shining and she wondered if it ever rained. Maybe it was a seasonal thing?

“Something is making them do it.” Jones finally said and looked up.

“Making them? How on earth do you force a one tonne beast do anything it doesn’t want to?” She asked, amazed at what he was suggesting.

“I don’t know. What I do know is that this is a first. The ‘pillars have never heard of komatsu moving in groups, either. Something has to be controlling them.”

Cambria lifted her head and looked at him.

“I’ll tell you something else for nothing: It’s the pigs that are aggressive, not the komatsu. You’ve taken out two of *them*, not the pigs. What’s making them attack?”

Cambria lifted a shoulder. “You’ve been on planet much longer than I have Jones, what’s your thinking?”

Jones scratched his nose, sipped his drink, spooned up orridge before answering.

“I think it might have something to do with the fortress.”

“How do you figure *that*?”

“For generations, the ‘pillars lived quietly with only the pigs to watch for. Not that the pigs actively *hunt* the pillars, they’re more... targets of opportunity. Now we have pigs and the komatsu moving, without aggression. My men spent a peaceful night in the trees, by the way.” He put his empty bowl down and held his mug in both hands.

“Now, I have to ask myself, what’s different now? The only thing I can come up with is the fortress.”

“But why would Manor involve himself now? He’s left you alone. Except for sending out the next poor bastard and supplies, you have no contact with him.”

Jones nodded. “Agreed. But what else can it be?”

Cambria had an idea about that. “Jones?” She waited until he looked at her. “Be honest with me. Who, exactly, sent you here?”

Jones thinned his lips, but he didn’t look away. His grey eyes were as expressionless as usual. “You know the answer to that.” He said, but he didn’t look away.

“Then maybe our judge has something to do with our problems.”

His expression closed up and he turned away. “How could he?”

“He sent us here, Jones! If I know the judge, and I did quite a bit of research before getting fucked over by him, he does nothing without checking things out himself, personally.”

Excalibur’s lip curled. “So. He was here. So what?”

“Do you know how many worlds he controls?” Jones shook his head. “Neither do I. But he sent me here just because I found something he didn’t want found. I’ll bet if you ask some of the judge’s other... mistakes, you’ll find they were sentenced for trivialities or because they pissed the judge off.”

“What has all this got to do with the herds?” He asked.

“So maybe he wants to get rid of some of his mistakes. What better way than to have the local wildlife do it for him? If there is collateral damage, well, who cares? There are no witnesses left. The displayed aberrant behaviour. It’s the season, lack of rain, too much sun, ate the wrong plant, *pick* a reason. Who would think we’re specifically targeted? How would they find out if only the judge knows about this planet?”

Jones glared at her. “Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

Cambria nodded. “You’ve agreed that the only difference is the fortress. But Manor would have no motive for influencing the local wildlife unless told to.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Why would he? He seems perfectly happy with his lot in life. But I said to you that he didn’t have a communicator to order supplies; that someone must come through the gate. Why wouldn’t the judge send one of his lackeys to do his dirty work?”

Jones sucked on his lower lip and she could see he was thinking about it. Thinking about it hard. “I don’t know of any technology that could influence anything, let alone komatsu. Do you?”

Cambria’s shoulders slumped. “No. I don’t. That doesn’t mean there isn’t any, but...”

“Yeah, but who knows what kind of technology he picked up on those other worlds.” Jones said.

She sighed. “We really only have one choice.”

“Go and talk to Manor.”

“Yeah.”

“Any ideas on how to get inside the fortress?”

“A few. I...” There was a sudden disturbance further up the line. Chien and another man came running down.

“They’re getting aggressive.” Chien said.

“I thought you said they’d left.” Cambria said.

“They did,” Jones narrowed his eyes at the two men. “Obviously, they’ve come back. Is that right, Chien?”

“Yes” Chien said with a bow.

“Okay,” Jones and Cambria stood. “What exactly is happening?”

“Nothing much, yet.” Chien said. “They’re getting...” He lifted one shoulder, “fractious.”

“Fractious?” Cambria asked, her eyebrows near her hairline.

Chien nodded. “They’re no longer peacefully grazing but pacing up and down the fence as if searching for a weak spot. The pigs are equally aggressive, darting under the fence and back again.”

“That makes no sense,” she shook her head. “What’s setting them off?”

“I think,” Jones cut in, “the better question is how do we stop them?”

Cambria looked at him sharply. “Do we have spears?”

“Yes, but not enough. Oh,” he waved his hand, “we have enough to arm the men, but none of them know how to use them. What do you have in mind?”

“A forward defence. Come on, Mr Jones.” She turned to Chien. “Mr Chien, can you go and see Sam? Get every spear he has and meet us near the gate.”

“As you wish,” he bowed and grabbed the other man’s arm, pulled him along.

“Where are we going?” Jones asked and Cambria looked at him as she stepped into her hut to get her sword.

She tied it on and marched up the line. “How is it that all the men show deference to you when you have little or no idea how to defend the place?” She strode past the last fire, aware that what she said was an attack on his ability to lead. She didn’t really expect an answer, but he should at least defend his masculinity. After all, she’d been the one to do the killing around here, the one forced to take charge and come up with

a plan of action. That had to be emasculating. She was close to the gate before he replied.

“I’m meaner than everyone else.”

“Meaner?”

He gave her a strange smile and nodded slowly.

“Don’t make me prove it, Cambria, you wouldn’t like it.”

His eyes emptied of all emotion as he stared at her.

Again with the spook expression. She thought wryly.

His stance appeared relaxed, but she could tell by the set of his shoulders, the way he balanced on his toes, that he was ready for attack. She didn’t want a fight, so she nodded instead. “First things first, Excalibur.” She said softly.

He blinked and she realised her mistake. She’d never called him by his first name before and she mentally kicked herself. No matter what happened between them, she couldn’t allow a familiarity, couldn’t allow a repeat of yesterday no matter how much she wanted to feel that good again. It would lead to places neither of them could afford, least of all her.

Heat rose in his eyes and moved up her face. She knew what he was thinking, she was thinking it too, but this wasn’t the place or the time, if there ever would be the time and place.

Jones stepped forward and she broke eye contact with him. What the hell was she thinking? She raised a hand to rub her forehead. She’d already decided not to repeat yesterday.

Cambria dragged in a breath and turned back to him. Jones stared down the path.

Chien and the other man had bundles of spears over their shoulders.

“Where do you want them, Ms Peterson?” Chien asked and the other man looked at him, surprised.

Cambria looked around. “Which route from the fence or gate is the easiest to the village?”

The three men studied the surrounding forest, then each other.

“Okay,” Cambria said with a small smile, “Where are the komatsu massing?”

“At the gate itself,” Chien replied.

“Then the chances are they will head down this path.”

She looked around at the forest. “We need some cross bars.” She said and marched into the undergrowth. There were plenty of fallen branches. “Chien?” She called and the man appeared next to her. “Do you know where I can find an axe or hatchet and some string?”

“Of course, I’ll send Rodin. Then I shall go and keep an eye on our... friends.” He left as quietly as he’d arrived and Cambria shook her head. She had to get him to teach her how to do that.

“Cam?” Jones called and stepped into the forest. It was cooler here, under the broad leafed canopy.

Cambria rose from her crouch. She held two branches in one hand as she turned to him.

“What is it, Jones?”

He stepped closer to her, invading her personal space and her eyelids drooped. His arms came around her and he nuzzled her neck. “There’s no one around, at least, not here.” His hands moved down to her hips and held her against his firm and pulsing arousal.

Cambria dropped the branches.

She stood, unmoving. It took all of her will power not to tremble when he slid his warm, wet tongue up her throat. “No, but there will be.” She said, amazed that her voice could come out calm, level and almost... disinterested.

Jones jerked back and met her eyes. She returned his sharp look with a bland one of her own.

“You are a bona fide, genuine, stone cold, bitch. You know that?” He pushed her away and went back to the path. Every step expressed his anger; he made no effort to be quiet.

One hundred feet away, she could hear the roar of the komatsu.

“He doesn’t know you.” A voice said from behind her and she reached for her knife as she spun.

Vangana crouched near a bush.

“Are you spying on me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He slowly stood, his eyes on the blade. He made sure he kept outside her strike range. The look in his eyes told her he was scared of her; scared of what she might do to him. She acknowledged his caution silently. Here, at least, was a man who knew what she was capable of.

“Jones knows me as well as he thinks he needs to.”

Vangana shook his head. “He underestimates you. He does not know how deadly you are. He has never seen you... work.” His eyes lifted to hers.

“And you do?” She asked, her hand on the hilt of her knife.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why are you spying on me?” She rocked back on her heels, a picture of relaxation, but she was ready for any assault. With the cry of the komatsu, her attention was on every thing around her and she listened hard for any movement behind her.

“I want to learn. I can only do that by watching.”

“What is it you want to learn?”

“To kill,” he said with a feral smile.

“You have someone in mind?” She was confused. Jones had named Vangana a rapist, yet he had done nothing around her to warrant any suspicion. He was a small man, with small features. Brown hair fell across his pale blue eyes. Had Jones been misinformed or was Vangana on his ‘to be executed’ list?

“I do.” He said.

“But you’re not going to tell me.”

“No, ma’am; that might cause... problems if others were to find out. This is between you and me. I thought it only... well, it would be safer for me if I told you of my intent to learn, to watch you. If you discovered me, you would be... unhappy.” He moved from foot-to-foot, nervous, ready to run, as if she was someone of interest, yet lethal.

And, she supposed, she was an oddity. Men surrounded her at every turn. None of whom, as far as she could tell, had so much as tickled one of the komatsu. She'd been here a few weeks and had accounted for four men, two komatsu and a pig. Yeah, she thought, she *was* dangerous to be around.

“Go.” She said and he turned to duck under the foliage. “Vangana.” She called and he looked over his shoulder at her. “If I see you when I’m bathing, I will gut you. You and anyone else I see. Pass that message along will you, please?” She smiled pleasantly and saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. He nodded quickly and dived into the shrubs.

Cambria picked up the branches and moved them out onto the path. How long did she have? Chien hadn’t returned so she laid the branches next to the spears and headed back into the forest for more.

The man who’d accompanied Chien, she assumed his name was Rodin, walked casually up the path when she came out of the forest with an armful of wood. He saw her and she thought he gave her a brief smile before he smoothed his face into wariness.

She dumped the branches and waited for him. He held a hatchet in one hand and casually swung it. In the other he held... a ball of string.

“Your equipment.” He bowed, but it was a mockery of Chien’s more graceful move. She waited until he stood straight.

“Thank you,” she held her left hand out for the hatchet. He gave her a grin and held the weapon out by the handle.

“Is there anything you wish me to do?”

“Yes, go find Chien and stay with him until he sends you back to me.”

Rodin shrugged. “Okay.” He went further up the path without a backward glance.

Cambria trimmed the branches of detritus. Each branch was approximately the same length and thickness. When she had pile that rivalled the spears, she laid some of the spears across the length of the path, leaving a gap of a foot between each spear. Each point faced the gate. There was room for seven spears, but she picked up the spears on the outer edge.

She laid four branches across the spears, creating a grid. Studying the layout, she minutely adjusted the branches or the spears, then she crouched down with the string to tie the cross points.

An hour later, she had her first grid.

Chien and Rodin came down the path as she was tying off her third grid. She had another five spears, but she wanted to save them for something else.

Chien stepped around the two grids.

“How will you use these?” He asked and she squinted up at him.

Cambria slowly stood, pushing a fist into her lower back to ease the ache that had settled there. She rolled her shoulders and walked to the first grid.

“I will weave some of this string,” she held up the ball, “into thicker strands and attach them to each corner. I’ll cover the grid with dirt. As you can see, it’s centred. If one of those komatsus come barrelling down the path, the grid is lifted and the beast runs into it. With the holes in the grid, even raised a little late, it will still gut the animal. A creature that size could easily block the path,” she shrugged and walked down to the second one. “If another one manages to get past the first, there’ll be a second grid, and a third after that.”

Chien nodded, approval warming his voice. “It’s a good plan.”

“But who’s going to lift them?” Rodin asked glancing from Chien to Cambria and back again. “It would be suicide. If you didn’t time it right...” He left the rest off. Each could imagine what would happen.

Cambria stared at him, a small smile on her lips. “Then someone had better get it right the first time.”

Rodin paled and swallowed. Cambria returned her attention to Chien. “How many animals?” She asked.

Chien shook his head. “Maybe half a dozen, and this,” his hand swept over the grids, “doesn’t take the pigs into account. Have you a plan for them?”

“Do I need one? With sword and spear, we can kill them easily enough.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Rodin muttered and they looked at him. “Oh, hey, I mean, uh...” He backed up slowly down the path. “I’ll just, ah, leave you to it, okay?” He glanced over his shoulder, turned and ran down the path.

“Cannon fodder?” Chien asked, his arms crossed as he watched Rodin sprint down the path.

“Cannon fodder.” Cambria agreed. Rodin disappeared around a corner, puffs of dust marking his passage.

“You have three grids. What are you going to do next?” Chien asked and crouched down to help tie off the cross points.

“Do you think we’ll need more?” She asked and cut a length of string with her knife.

“I think we’ll need something.” He looked up at her, his dark eyes inscrutable. “These creatures act out of character. There is no telling what they will do, so yes, I think we will need more.”

Cambria tied the last knot and stood. Chien handed her the ball of string. “Hold this,” she said and gave him the end. She walked the length of one grid, then the second then the third.

She cut the end and it dropped to the ground. She repeated the process until she had three long pieces of string. The ball was almost finished.

“Can you get me more string?”

Chien nodded. “Do you need it now?”

Cambria looked up the path to the gate. “How close are they to breaching the fence?”

He gave her a small smile. “I’ll run.” He turned and bolted, leaving Cambria to smile after him.

She stepped into the cool forest and cleared an area of ground. She sat cross-legged and tied the three ends into a knot. Then she began to plait the string.

When she judged the length long enough, she tied it to a branch on one of the trees and tugged. The strands tightened and she backed onto the path, plaiting as she went. There was no one around. Chien had yet to return.

She quickly finished the length of rope, untied it and attached it to either side of the first grid, on the second row.

Holding the rope, she pulled backwards and the grid rose. It slipped a little towards her, and she realised that, slippage could be a problem for whomever was going to be in control.

There was no way they were going to be able to get out of the way quick enough. She lowered the grid.

Cambria sighed. Who was she kidding? She didn't think *anyone* would be brave enough judging by the way Rodin ran like a rabbit. Chien might do it and Jones might as well. Sam? Well, maybe.

Okay, she thought and looked at the ground near her feet. Time for more construction.

And where the hell was Chien with her string? She glanced down the path. Nothing and no one.

A hiss came from her left and she turned to see Dooriss.

The 'pillar had a water bottle on her back and held a package in her mid-arms.

"Dooriss. What brings you up here?"

The 'pillar glanced nervously up the path, blinked rapidly. "I bring you food and water."

She held out her arms. Cambria took the package and helped Dooriss with the water bottle.

She took a long drink first, then sat on the dusty ground and opened the package. It held the dried vegetables she'd taken on her journey with Moreriss. Speaking of which...

"Why have you brought this and not Moreriss?"

Dooriss shifted uncomfortably. "He tendsss the fire for Essscalibur."

"Oh. I thought he was supposed to be my... that is, I was under the impression that since I took him on his journey that he was..."

Dooriss nodded. “He iss telling Esscalibur about the trip. Esscalibur won’t let him leave to come to you. I sssneak thiss to you.”

Cambria sighed. Jones was holding a grudge, damn him. “Okay, that’s fine Dooriss, thank you for my meal.”

“Moreriss iss not worthy.” The ‘pillar muttered. *And you*, Cambria thought, *are worth more than your weight in gold*. She couldn’t say as much, didn’t know how. She’d probably offend the little creature and Dooriss would never show her triangular face in her hut again.

“Um...” Cambria began around a mouthful of the tough food. She sipped the water, hoping the liquid would soften the food. She waited, chewed and swallowed. It was definitely more palatable like that.

“Where is everyone, Dooriss?” She took another bite and sip of water.

Dooriss looked down the path and quickly up the path again. She shuffled her feet and looked again. She shrugged.

Cambria swallowed a lump of half chewed carrot. “Where is Chien?”

“With Essscalibur.”

“And my string?” Dooriss made a tossing motion, like someone juggling.

What were they thinking? That she would do all the work, accept all the danger, protect them all?

Dooriss interrupted her growing rage with a hiss and backed down the path.

“What is it Dooriss?”

“Danger ” Her words were punctuated by a roar from one of the komatsu.

Cambria turned to her. “Get the others, and hurry.” She tossed her food and water bottle into the undergrowth.

Dooriss nodded and dropped onto her upper arms, undulating down the path. Cambria didn’t think she’d be fast enough to get to the camp help. Only Cambria stood in the way.

She had no time to hide any of the grids; she’d have to rely on brute strength and pray for the men to get here... if they ever did.

Chapter Sixteen

“The troops are about to head out. Did you want to come along and watch?”

Maurice asked and perched his butt on the corner of Louis desk.

Louis leaned back in his chair and tossed his pen down in disgust. “You know, I thought this would easy.”

“And what’s that?”

“Finding who was guilty and who is innocent.” He waved at the stacks of paper. One was in his in tray, one, a smaller one was in his out tray and the other was in front him.

“And?”

“And just about every file that has Bolingbroke’s name on it is innocent. Makes me want to hunt the prick down and send him off to one of his own planets. Look at this one,” he picked up the page he was working on. “All this poor bastard was guilty of was not getting the judge his dinner soon enough. And this one.” He grabbed another page from his out tray, “this one was a window washer who had the misfortune to see the judge doing something he shouldn’t have. Doesn’t say what, he just sentenced the guy.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Maurice said after a moment.

“What was the question?” Louis rubbed his eyes. He’d spent too much reading, he thought, too much reading and way too much thinking. He still had no clue to Cambria’s whereabouts, but he’d found plenty of others.

“The troops are heading out to Vestria, do you want to watch them go?”

Louis glanced from one pile to the next. “Sure, why not. These lists and files aren’t going anywhere.”

He pushed back his chair and followed Maurice away from outrage.

Maurice led him deeper into the mountain. They went down a corridor to a lift and when it arrived, Maurice stood in front of the panel before punching a number.

“What? You think I’m going to try and find Cambria on my own?” Louis asked, amused at Maurice’s efforts to hide the floor number.

His friend glanced at him. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

Louis gaped at him, then shut his mouth. If he found Cambria, the planet, the coordinates, would he wait for the troops or would he dash out to save the damsel in possible distress, regardless of the consequences? Hadn't he done as much already, by continuing the search for her even when Maurice and Montague told him to stop?

The answer was an unequivocal yes, he would. He gave Maurice a smile. “Yeah, you're probably right to hide the number.”

The doors opened and Maurice indicated Louis to precede him. Louis stepped out into subdued lighting. There were two doors along the corridor on the right side.

Maurice walked to the first door and knocked. He waited until someone on the other side clicked the lock and opened the door.

Louis walked into a room that would have been better suited on the command deck of a starship. Every wall had units with switches, dials and levers. A man in a white coat with a grey comb-over sat at a console, studying data. On the left was a wall wide window.

He was interested in what the equipment did, but he was more interested in the men beyond the window and he stepped forward.

The window overlooked a lower room with two doors. The one on the left was blonde wood. The one on the right was black metal. Between the doors, six men and six women checked their weapons, each others equipment packs or their helmets. They chatted easily with one another.

“Two minutes to interception.” The scientist said into a microphone. Twelve faces looked up at him and one nodded.

They did final checks and then formed up into two lines.

“What's...?” Louis began.

“Shh.” The scientist cut him off.

Louis watched the clock on the wall inside the room click down. The counter clicked towards zero.

“Prepare for insertion,” the scientist said and the lead man opened the door. All the soldiers marched through the door and beyond. Louis couldn't see anything. It was as

if the men and women walked into darkness. The last soldier closed the door and there was a solid clunk.

Louis glanced from the door to Maurice and to the scientist, wondered what happened next. He didn't have long to wait.

"Insertion complete." The scientist said and leaned back in his chair, stretched his arms above his head. He turned to the two men with a smile.

"Gordon Miller, this is Louis Boudreaux."

Gordon stood and held out his hand to Louis. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last." He said and pumped Louis's hand.

Louis glanced at Maurice.

"Gordon's been trying to work out planets and their co-ordinates. You, or should I say Rene Dubois, saved him about two years work." Maurice explained.

"What I do now is send the troops out to new planets. They go out with one of your lists and bring back some very relieved people. Every one of them will put another nail in Bolingbroke's coffin." Gordon grinned and leaned back to the console to check the readings.

"Has anyone arrested the judge yet?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. "If these people are witnesses, then surely..."

"Yes," Maurice said, "they *are* witnesses. But until their stories can be verified, the judge stays where he is." His lips twisted into a grimace of disgust. "It's no easy thing to just slap the cuffs on a World Council Judicar. We need irrefutable proof of wrong doing, not just someone's word. Even a room full of witnesses isn't enough. Documented proof will be."

"But you *have* the proof! It's all in the files I've been going through." Louis said. "And if that isn't enough, it's all a matter of public record. I found half a dozen cases in the dungeon. So there has to be another explanation why that shit is still out there."

Maurice shifted away to stand by the console. He studied the data readings. "There is nothing in the dungeon, Louis. All the files, all the records, all the registers pertaining to those cases, are gone. All we have is what you have on your desk."

“So, we use them.” Louis said, and waited for Maurice to look at him, to confirm that one truth. Maurice kept his gaze on the console. “Maurice? We can use the files I have now, can’t we?”

“No. We can’t. They’re secret files gathered by numerous intelligence sources. They are speculation, heresay with some actual facts thrown in.” He finally turned and looked at Louis. “Yes, they’re true files, but we can’t prove the veracity of them without compromising a number of operatives.”

“Screw...”

“That, yes, I know your attitude and it is wrong. I cannot and will not compromise anybody for your vengeance. It will be done, make no mistake about that, but it will be done through proper channels with unimpeachable proof. Bolingbroke will never see the light of day again, I assure you. It’s only a matter of time.”

It was as much information Louis had every received from Maurice. He shook his head.

“Time. How much *time* do the innocent people out there have? How much *time* does Cambria have? How many others are going to be condemned to some God-forsaken planet on his whim?”

Maurice spared him a pained look. “Louie stop being so *bloody* self-righteous! What *you* want isn’t an issue here. And no amount of finger pointing or guilt laying is going to change the way things are done here. So, get off your high horse. There are more important issues.”

Louis crossed his arms. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

Maurice sighed. “Like the exploration of new worlds. Like the debriefing of people who have lived there. Like negotiating with indigenous species on those planets. Like a dozen other things.”

“The benefit of the many...” Louis murmured.

“Yes, Louis, sacrifices are made. But we, *as a race*, will be better off. Now you have supplied us with another thirty worlds to explore. Thirty *worlds* we know have environments where humans can survive. Thirty *worlds* where there are sentient beings. Thirty *worlds* that could be our allies should we be attacked by someone else out there. Who could provide us with specific technology or medicine.”

Put like that, Louis what he wanted felt petty and insignificant. He thought about those planets out there waiting for exploration, waiting for humans to light upon them and use them up. “We’re like a plague,” he murmured.

“What?” Maurice asked.

“I said we’re like a plague. Going out there,” he waved at the window, “seeking out new things, new worlds, new people. Negotiating with them for things *we* want. We’ve already transplanted humans to those worlds. What’s a few more, if some humans don’t want to stay on Earth? Shit, how many worlds are there out there that we know of that can support human life? How many have already had the benefit of human disease, human violence, human personalities?” Louis glared at him. “We are a *plague* on the galaxy. I don’t care what anyone says about a brave new future, or going out there to explore, what was it that old program said? The final frontier? Um... to boldly go...”

“Where no man has gone before.” Maurice finished for him. “Yes, we know, that is one of our mottos. But, if you remember, there is also the Prime Directive. We can’t do anything about that now the judge has sent people out there. We can only try and mitigate the damage. Get those people off restricted planets and get them home. There is nothing *else* we can do. But some of these worlds *want* our intervention, need our input and, by God, we are going to give it to them.”

Louis’s smile was bitter. “Spreading good will and largess are we?”

Maurice made a sound of frustration in his throat. “God, you are the most exasperating, infuriating, morally self-righteous, arrogant, prick....” he snorted a laugh, “and you never change, do you, Louis?” His expression was intense as he regarded Louis. “We can’t undo what has been already done, Louis, surely you must see that?”

Louis reluctantly nodded.

“Then the only thing we can do is our best to make the situation better for all concerned. It beats the hell out of making reparations to aliens. Agreed?”

“Yeah,” Louis sighed.

“Here we go,” the scientist said.

“What?” Louis asked.

“The troops are returning.”

“But they only just left. How can they be returning?” Louis watched as the door opened and the first two soldiers came through. They were blood and mud streaked. Behind them came others, men and women holding each other up. The line of people continued until the room was full and still he could see people waiting to come through the door.

“Actually,” the scientist turned to him, “it’s a little complicated, but they’ve been gone a while.” He grinned and returned to his console.

“Maurice?” Louis asked. Maurice turned to him, his expression grim.

“I don’t know the physics or the mechanics of it Louie, I only know that the soldiers go through that door and when they return, days or weeks, sometimes months have passed on their end, and minutes, hours or days have passed here.”

Louis felt the blood drain from his head. He leaned against the window. Cambria disappeared weeks ago. Was it months where she was? *Years?*

He felt ill, betrayed. All his work to find her quickly and she could have been gone for much longer. He felt the slow burn of rage against Bolingbroke.

He levelled an accusing glare at Maurice. “You knew she could have been gone for months.” He poked Maurice’s chest. “You knew and you said *nothing.*”

Maurice lifted his hands. “What could I have said that you would have believed? You’ve seen the truth now. You can have no argument.”

Louis wiped a hand down his face. “I’ll kill him,” he whispered. “I’ll kill that sick bastard!”

He turned to leave, but Maurice’s hand on his shoulder stopped him. “There will come a time where you might get an opportunity. But that time isn’t now.”

“*Time,*” Louis spat. “This is all about *time.* Well, I don’t give a flying fuck. I’m going to his office and I’m gonna *make* him tell me where she is.”

“Don’t make me cage you, Louis. We’ll find her. Just not yet.” He paused, squeezed Louis shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “She may be dead. May have been dead for some time, you know that.”

“No!” He slapped Maurice’s hand away. “I *don’t* know that! I will not *know* that until her lifeless body is in front of me... I will find her and find her now.”

He opened the door. Two armed guards turned to him, kept him from leaving.

“Don’t make me cage you, Louis,” Maurice repeated behind him. “You can be more useful hunting people down on paper. Eventually, you *will* find her.”

Louis glared at him and the guards. What choice did he have? Maurice was right. He would find Cambria: today, tomorrow, next week.

“Okay, Maurice. What do you want me to do?”

“Exactly what you have been: find planets, locate their co-ordinates, search for people.” Maurice said softly. “Don’t think that your lack of success at finding Ms Peterson means you’ve failed. Those people in that room? Every one of them have you to thank for their rescue. That’s important, don’t you think?”

Louis thought of the rescued. Their faces held joy, relief, satisfaction. The troops, too, wore determination like a shield. He’d saved them. Saved them from a world he had no knowledge of yet was dangerous given the blood. Yeah, it was important, but he couldn’t and wouldn’t forget his objective: save Cambria. He would find her, but if he found others along the way, that was okay with him.

He gave Maurice a nod. “Yeah. It’s important.” He held Maurice’s gaze. “I won’t give up on her, Maury. She’s my life and I want her back.”

xxx

Louis checked another name against the database he developed. A shadow fell across his desk and he looked up. She was simply... gorgeous. A long fall of blonde hair, framed a heart-shaped face. China blue eyes peeked out from under dark lashes. She was model thin, but stood nervously twisting her fingers together.

“Hello, can I help you?” Louis asked and smiled at her. She smiled back, briefly, politely.

“I’m Ranalda.” She lifted a hand. “I, er...”

“You were in the cell next to me when I arrived.” He didn’t have to put any effort into the genuine warmth in his eyes. She was stunning, but he kept his gaze to her

face, rather than exploring her body. He stood and dragged another chair over from a vacant desk.

“Please,” he said, “sit.” Louis held the chair for her and went back around his desk.

“Ah, yes. You’re Louis, aren’t you?” She folded her hands into her lap, her knees together.

“Yes, I am.” He leaned back in his chair. “What can I do for you?”

The finger twisting began again.

“Ranalda? What’s wrong?” The smile came and went like a light switch.

“I, er, understand you’re the one who’s tracking people.”

“Yes, that’s right, although it’s no easy task.” He leaned his elbows on the table and studied her. She was nervous, but it went beyond that, it was as if she knew a secret and was terrified someone would find out. He kept his voice low, leaned forward. “Do you want me to locate someone? Someone you know?”

She nodded and looked down at her lap. “My fiancé.” She murmured.

Louis felt a pang of regret. “Your *fiancé*, did you say?”

Ranalda lifted her head. Tears filled her blue eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. She was careful not to blink. “His name is Dane Robinson.” She said and cleared her throat. “He... ah, he worked for my father. He’s been missing for over a week. No one’s seen him and I think my father has done something to him, sent him somewhere. The judge is powerful, malicious, vindictive and quite possibly insane.” Her eyes cleared and they stared at him with dignity and determination. “You know who I’m talking about, don’t you?”

Louis burned with hate. “Yes, I think I do. If he is the same man I’m thinking of, he’s responsible for the loss of my...” he stopped himself. His voice had risen in time with his anger and people had turned towards them. It didn’t matter what the judge was responsible for. The man’s daughter was sitting in front of him, asking for his help. Could he?

He leaned back and frowned. His first instinct to ask himself ‘could’ not ‘would’.

“Why should I help you,” he asked, “when I can’t even help myself?” He finished bitterly and Ranalda winced.

She held his gaze with a determined one of her own. “Because you are an honourable man, and you would like nothing better than to poke my father in the eye. The sharper the stick, the better.” She tilted her head to one side, her hair sliding across her shoulder. “Or am I wrong?”

Louis raised an eyebrow.

“Dane,” she said with a small smile, “was daddy’s groundskeeper.”

Louis frowned. A *groundskeeper*? He could feel his own smile grow. A groundskeeper messing about with His Honour’s daughter? The judge wouldn’t like that, no, not at all. Still, Ms Bolingbroke would get over it, eventually. A groundskeeper and the judge’s daughter? No, she must be slumming it. The differences between the two would eventually tear them apart. A temporary amusement for them both. Robinson would have known the risk he took, but did it anyway. And Ranalda? Defying her father must be a daily past time.

But... she’d said ‘fiancé’. Was that just to get him to find the man or did it go deeper?

“Why should I find him? There’ll be more suitable men for you out there, surely.”

He watched in fascination as her face darkened; not with embarrassment, but with rage.

Sparks flew from her eyes as she stood.

“It must be reassuring to know you made the same assumption that he did. You are like him in that respect.”

It was an interesting reaction, he thought, but he wasn’t going to apologise for a shot at the family he loathed.

He watched her try to control her temper. She needed him if she was serious about Robinson.

Her colour returned to normal and she placed a hand over her lower stomach.

“I know it is not easy for you to deal with me, given that you have lost someone to... his... petty spitefulness.” Her gaze returned to his. “But. I’m in love with Dane Robinson, planned to marry him, am carrying his child.”

Louis felt the shock of her announcement spike through his soul.

“Did your father know?”

“Yes.” She glanced away, stared at something Louis would never see – a memory. “About the child, yes, I threw it in his face. He’s very protective of me, obsessively so. He parades all manner of ‘suitable’ men in front of me.” Her lip curled in a sneer. “I found someone to love on my own.” She slowly sank back into her seat and stared at her hands again. “No matter how many eligible men he brought home, I managed to find someone else.” She looked at him and he could see the grief in her eyes. “I’ve been a prisoner in my home for years. Only allowed out for education, shopping and cultural exchange. Opera, theatre and the like. And only with an appropriate escort. Dane took me away from all that. Taught me what life was about. What love, *real* love, could mean. You understand me, don’t you?”

Louis couldn’t look away from the truth in her eyes and he nodded.

“I can’t and won’t give that up. You can help me find him. Find him and bring him home to me.”

Louis blew out a breath and rubbed a hand over his face. Everything she said mixed with everything Maurice had said. He had to tread carefully here.

“How did you get here, Ranalda?”

She started, but answered him. “I confronted the judge in his office. He had some despicable things to say about Dane, some... things to say to me about his vision of my future. I disagreed. I told him about the baby as I left. By the time I got outside I realised that my temper caused me to make a mistake. I should have kept my pregnancy quiet. He wouldn’t allow the child of a groundskeeper muddy the family gene pool. No, he’d kill me and the child before he allowed me to dictate terms to him. I panicked, ran.” She gave him a wry smile. “Daddy always did underestimate me. All those nights at the opera or the theatre gave me my own network of friends. Friend’s my father wouldn’t approve of. I called one. He knew someone who knew someone and so on...” she rolled her hand. “I was met and brought here.” She shrugged. “End of story.”

He’d check it out, of course. The look in her eye suggested he do that and he nodded. “Okay.” He said and wondered how he would tell her the next part. Straight out judging by her expression.

Louis sighed. “I know I can help you, Ranalda, the problem is, I don’t know how long it’s going to take. I have no records of him or of... never mind. All I have is a list of planets and these files. I know he won’t be in them. All I can do, is give the people who can do something proactively, the name of a planet and its co-ordinates. They go in and rescue people. Whether they find Dane or... anyone else of... personal interest, is a crap shoot. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Ranalda nodded. “I do. But now you have another name to search for.” She stood up and Louis rose to his feet. “You’ll do the best you can. That’s all I ask of you.” She took a deep, cleansing breath. “I’d better get back.”

“Where can I reach you in case I find some information?”

“I’m... looking after the children that are found.” She gave him a sad smile and walked away.

Jesus. *Children*. How long had those people been out there? He lowered himself into his seat and held his head in his hands. The judge had better be rotting in hell soon or he’d hunt him down, regardless of what Maurice and Montague demanded.

Chapter Seventeen

From the trembling of the ground, Cambria knew more than one komatsu was on the way. What had set them off? She wondered as she grabbed the rope and braced her foot on the bottom of the centre spear. *Who the hell cared now?*

She glanced back. If she could, she would pull the next grid up by her hands, then the third grid. After that, she only had five spears, her sword and her knife. If that wasn't enough, she was a dead woman.

The first animal lumbered around the curve in the path. A smaller pig darted between its legs. Behind the komatsu stomped another. It roared with rage or pain, shook its head from side-to-side.

She had no more time to wonder at its antics, she was fighting for her life and the life of her village. Why didn't enter into it.

The lead komatsu saw her and adjusted its charge to come straight down the pathway. The smaller pig darted left into the undergrowth and disappeared, as if to get out of the way.

Her foot braced against the bottom of the middle spear, she raised the spikes to an angle. The animal either couldn't see it or didn't care. It ran straight for her and as its chest touched the spears, Cambria leapt backwards and ran to the next grid.

The komatsu bellowed, squealed as the spears buried themselves deeply into its chest. She heard the snap of the spear hafts and turned. The creature had fallen forward, slightly off the ground, three spears bent as they held it up.

She tugged on the next grid as the animal fell sideways. The second komatsu paused behind the first and sniffed at the body. Its hot red eyes shifted from the corpse to her and back to the body.

It stepped around the bulk and walked towards her. It had learned. The second grid would be useless. She couldn't move it any other way than up or down. The animal could bat it away with one sweep of its massive claws, taking her with it.

Carefully, she laid the grid down and backed up. The third grid was just behind her; behind that was the pile of spears.

She'd never done any spear fighting and didn't want to get close enough to try now.

Running wouldn't help her; it would come after her. What could she do? Slowly, she drew the sword and the knife. She could at least make life difficult for the creature before it swatted her.

The komatsu stepped on the grid, spears and cross bars snapped. It walked down the centre of the path. Cambria edged to the side, the creature watched and followed.

The path was clear behind her and she tried to think of where the pile of spears was.

Could she do anything with them or was she reduced to hand weapons? And where the hell were the men? If she got out of this alive, she was going to do some judicious skinning of her own.

To her left she heard snuffling. The pig, with its large tusks. Could this situation get any worse, she wondered. Yeah, she thought. Behind the komatsu walked two more. No way could she fight them all, but she couldn't let them near the village either. She bared her teeth. Maybe she should. That would get the men off their butts, but she couldn't allow these animals to hurt, kill or eat the 'pillars. It was her job to defend the village and that's what she was going to do.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the pile of spears. She didn't want to take her eyes off the beast in front of her and she couldn't use the spears. She was better with the sword and knife.

The snuffling on her left was closer, as if the pig searched her out, and let her know about it. She wouldn't look. If the beast was smart enough to know how the lead animal died, it was smart enough to wait until she looked away before charging.

She reached a widened area of the path, near the curve. She couldn't hear anything coming up behind her, but didn't look. This was where she'd make her stand and she stopped walking. The beast stopped, too, its red eyes glaring. The two behind it stopped side-by-side as if waiting. The snuffling stopped. All was silent, waited for either protagonist to make the first move.

The komatsu moved its head as if telling her 'no'. Cambria didn't move. It lifted its head and roared; loud enough to make her vibrate and flinch. The two following beasts joined the first.

The level of noise made her ears hurt, but she stayed motionless, sword and knife pointing at the beast's throat. Surely, they had heard the ruckus back at the village, so

where was her back up? Where were the men who were supposed to be defending the village with her?

Red eyes stared at her and it tilted its head as if puzzled. It shifted uneasily and shuffled forward, nudged from behind by the other beasts. It kept its eyes on her, but gave a hiss-growl out of the side of its mouth. She assumed the comment was directed at the beasts behind, like 'don't push, I'm getting there', or 'why won't it move?'

Cambria turned the blade and watched the beast come to her. She sheathed the knife without looking and gripped the sword with two hands. One foot shuffled backwards to give her more leverage.

The komatsu stopped three metres from her when she heard the foliage rustle to her left again. She glanced over and saw the pig run at her. She spun on her front foot and swung the sword down as the pig lowered its head to gore her legs.

The blade bit deep into flesh and it squealed, collapsed on its legs and slid as Cambria severed the spine. She completed the turn to see the komatsu bear down on her. She lifted the sword and jabbed it into the beast's throat. It reared back and swung out with two of its front limbs.

Cambria grunted as the clawed limbs hit her arm and chest, swept her up and over the foliage on the right of the path. She fell, rolled and slammed her back into a tree.

Spots speckled her vision and she tried to hold onto consciousness. Blackness closed in, agony flashed through her body. She couldn't seem to catch her breath, couldn't see properly, could only hear the rushing of blood in her ears and she weakly reached for her knife. It seemed too difficult and she closed her eyes for a moment to regroup.

It was dark when she managed to lift her eyelids. For a moment, she thought she'd gone blind, but through the canopy, she saw the faint spots of stars in the night sky.

She was shivering with cold, wondered how long she'd laid there. Where were the men? Hadn't they even *tried* to find her?

She rolled onto her stomach and groaned. A deep throb started in her chest, back and upper arm. Nothing felt broken, and that surprised her. She thought about what had happened.

The beast swatted her aside but hadn't followed through. Why?

Cambria eased to her knees and slowly dragged in a lungful of cold night air. Bruised ribs, not broken.

She got to her feet and looked around. The komatsu tossed her ten metres off the pathway. She rolled her shoulders and felt the ache of more bruises. The tree she'd hit stopped her fall into stubby brush, but it still hurt.

The forest was silent as she made her way through the undergrowth to the path. The dead pig was gone and she could see the shadowed outline of the komatsu still impaled on the spears, but there was no sign of men or other animals.

Cambria slowly made her way down the path towards the village.

Each step brought the aches alive, made her head pound; each muscle screamed at the abuse. She needed a long soak in a hot bath.

"No hot water." She mumbled. Maybe she could arrange it. Moreriss would do it, she decided.

Cambria blinked and looked up. She missed time, her thoughts moved in circles or off on tangents. She was normally more aware and alert than this.

"Concussion." She raised a hand to her head. She didn't feel any lumps, but her neck hurt. Whiplash from hitting the tree, she assumed and knew she was going to be one sore puppy tomorrow.

The walk was taking too long, she should have been at the village by now. Had she taken a wrong turn somewhere? All was darkness around her, there was no sound, no night creatures, no breeze rustling the leaves of the foliage and she felt a twinge of unease. Where was she?

This path should lead her straight to the village. Had she turned herself around?

She looked back over her shoulder and felt a chill down her spine. The curve of the path just before the dead komatsu was barely twenty metres away. How long had she stood here, gazing at nothing?

With a determined effort, she took a step, then another and focused on walking and nothing else. One foot in front of the other.

In the distance, she saw the ambient glow of campfires and sighed with relief. At least someone was home, but as she got closer, she saw gaps in the glows.

Rounding the corner, she saw why: Randomly demolished huts, campfires extinguished, and the ‘pillars gone. A few men wandered about, but they looked lost, shuffled from one campfire to the next and back again as if in shock. One by one, they looked up at her as she staggered by them. Their faces held a myriad of expressions: anger, calculation, blankness.

Her own hut was gone; the walls collapsed and stomped on, broken, with bits of furniture and bed clothing strewn about; the campfire extinguished. She shivered again, with cold and dread. Where were her ‘pillar friends?

No one approached her. She didn’t see Excalibur, Chien, or anyone she knew, but she was too tired to worry about them or anything. Tomorrow would be soon enough to demand answers; once she got rid of this *accursed* head ache!

She found her lamp, dented, but it still worked. She lifted broken wood, searched for anything of use. Clothes were dusty, some torn, but at least she had some. Her bedding lay ripped on the ground, useless. The crossbow survived and she scrounged for the quiver of bolts. Every undamaged or repairable item piled up next to her doused fire. She used the lamp to reignite it and soon had a cheerful blaze. Moreriss’s cooking pots were scattered, empty. Her belly grumbled, but unless she found some hard tack, there was nothing to eat.

She wouldn’t ask those along the campfire line, she knew what they would ask in return and she wasn’t willing to prostitute herself for food... yet.

Her priority was rest; *safe* rest. Her body ached, her head and neck throbbed as she righted a stool and sat. Thoughts drifted as she studied the fire but none settled for examination. She didn’t hear the man walk up to her, didn’t move when he laid a meaty hand on her shoulder. Only watched the fire.

“Cambria,” a deep and velvety voice called from above and behind her. “Cambria?” He squatted down beside her and she blinked at him. Sam’s midnight eyes stared into hers. She tried to focus on him, squinted at him, recognised him.

He lifted her into his strong arms and she laid her head on his shoulder. Sam was safe, she mused. Sam smelled safe. Sam wouldn’t hurt her; Sam asked her to protect someone for him.

Her eyes closed and his rolling movement rocked her to sleep.

A sharp jab in her shoulders jerked her awake. She reached for her knife and groaned.

“Don’t get up, Cambria.” Sam said and she lifted her eyes to him.

He sat near her, a spear in one hand. “Why did you stick me with that?” She asked, her voice hoarse.

“You were out of it when I brought you here. I think you gotta concussion. Gotta wake you every hour, but I don’t want to be gutted while doing so.”

He smiled at her. “Why don’t you go back to sleep?”

Cambria thought it was a good idea and drifted off.

The morning sun hurt her eyes and she rolled away from the intense light. She was warm and sleepy, but something was different. The sun never came into her hut; she usually left the window cloth closed to stop Peeping Toms.

Her eyes drifted open. She lay on the ground just inside the foundry walls covered by a blanket. She was naked again and she sighed. Who brought her here? What was that smell? She tucked her head under the blanket. It was coming from her. It smelled vaguely like peppermint. A mixture of peppermint and lavender. Slowly, she eased herself into a sitting position, keeping the blanket wrapped around her and leaned against the wall.

What happened to cause her to be here with Sam and why couldn’t she remember?

“Morning, Cam,” Sam said as he came into the foundry carrying two mugs. He held the first out to her and she gulped down the water gratefully.

She felt like shit. Like a large truck had rolled over her. Repeatedly.

Sam offered her the second mug. It was Ssoclar. She wrapped her hands around the mug and sipped. It tasted... wonderful.

“What happened, Sam?” She asked, looking up at him.

He went further back into the foundry and picked up a large stool. It was twice the size of the village stools. He sat down with his back to the sun, picked up a board and placed a whetstone on it. He reached up to a shelf and brought down a box of arrow tips.

Carefully, he removed one and sat it on the board. He dripped water from a bladder onto the stone and began sharpening the arrowhead.

Cambria waited for him to speak. He would tell his story in his own time, usually when he was doing something that comforted him. She sipped her drink.

“I don’t really know what happened, Cambria,” he began, “I was hoping you could fill in some of the blanks.” He glanced at her and she shrugged.

“It was something... important, but it’s all a little vague.” She rubbed her temples.

“It will come back to you, don’t force it. You’ll give yourself a headache.”

“I already have one.” She nodded and picked up her mug.

“As far as I know, it all went to hell in a hand basket and in a hurry.” He gave her a brief smile. “The first thing I knew about it was Juan came running down here, panicked. By the time I got to the village it was over. Huts destroyed, bodies, both men and pillars, scattered everywhere. One of the men came out of the forest and said three komatsus had rampaged through the village.”

“Where were Jones and Chien and the other defenders when this happened?” She asked and set aside her empty mug.

“No one knows. The attack was a total surprise.”

“No.” Cambria said softly. “It wasn’t.”

He looked in askance.

“I remember being up near the gate. I remember spears and a grid. I remember the roar of the komatsu; so loud it made my ears hurt.” She closed her eyes against the throb in her temple and leaned back against the cool wall. “I... remember... air. Flying through the air.” Her eyes opened. “Nothing else.”

“Judging from the bruises decorating your body, you’ve been in some kind of a fight.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “You *peeked*.”

He lifted one shoulder and continued sharpening arrowheads. “I had to see what kind of damage you had taken. The only way I could do that was take your clothes off. You were pretty out of it last night, didn’t fight me on it.”

“Where did you find me?”

He paused then continued. “Sitting by your fire. Your hut was destroyed but you’d collected some clothes, the lamp, some other stuff. I don’t think you recognised who I was, but at least you didn’t gut me. That’s how I knew you were hurt. I couldn’t leave you there, Cambria, the men were eyeing you as if you were their favourite piece of candy.”

“Thank you for that, Sam.”

He bobbed his head. “You should get some more sleep. You’ve taken quite a beating. I’ll keep watch in case someone turns up. You’ll have plenty of warning.”

Cambria nodded and slid down the wall to curl into a ball. She dozed for the rest of the day, though Sam kept nudging her to give her a drink. She didn’t feel much like eating, but by the time the sun hung low in the sky, she felt more alert.

The scent of cooking dragged her fully awake. She sat up and looked around. Sam was gone, but she could see a curl of smoke drifting from around the side of the foundry.

Cambria rubbed her face and rose.

She faced the back of the foundry and opened the blanket. Her whole front was a mass of mottled bruises. Not much skin was untouched and some of the purple had red mixed in, a sure sign of a deep bruise. No wonder she felt so beaten up. The komatsu really laid one on her.

She raised her head. She remembered.

With the blanket wrapped around her securely, she went in search of Sam. He was sitting by his fire stirring a pot. Juan sat next to him, his hands dangling between his thighs. Both men looked up when she came around the corner. Juan gave her a tentative smile and she returned his smile with a grin of her own.

“You look better,” Sam remarked.

“I feel better. Not a lot, mind you, I still feel like I’ve been run over. But, it’s better I think.”

Juan poured her a mug of Ssoclar and she drank it down.

“I went up to the gate,” Sam said, his voice neutral.

“And?”

“And I can see what happened.” He gave her a considering look.

“I remember what happened,” she nodded and looked away. “Did you bring my clothes down or will I have to go back to the village and...” she glanced down.

Sam snorted. “Juan?”

The younger man rose and beckoned to her. He led her to the other side of the foundry. There was another fire. Over it, was an enormous pot with a pipe coming out of the bottom. The water was held back by a spigot. The pipe itself hung over a... Cambria rubbed eyes... a deep, wide *bath tub!*

She grinned at Juan who grinned back. He pointed to the spigot. Behind the fire another large pot rested on a stand. This one filled with cold water. On the other side of the bath, a table stood. Her clothes sat in a neat pile on it. Her sheathed knife on top and next to the pile was the sealed vine she recognised as soap gel.

Juan turned the spigot on the hot water pipe then the cold and the bath slowly filled.

Cambria couldn't stop the grin on her face or the little hop of anticipation. He picked up another vine and poured a good half mug full into the water. The same fragrance rose as what was on her.

“What is it?” She asked and took a deep breath.

Juan mimed rubbing it on her body and she blushed. “You gave me a massage with that stuff?”

He nodded, his face solemn, almost fearful.

She gave him a smile. “I feel better because of that, don't I?” Juan gave a tentative nod. “Then I'll thank you for it.” She said and held out her hand.

His shoulders relaxed slightly and he clasped her hand. He dropped it quickly and turned the spigots off, then turned his back.

Cambria dropped the blanket and sank into blissfully hot water. She groaned and Juan glanced at her. Her smile broadened. “This is heaven,” she sighed and gave him the thumbs up.

Juan pointed to her knife, then to himself.

“Do you know how to use it?” She sank deeper into the tub as Juan shook his head.

“Thanks for the offer, Juan, but if you just keep an eye out and give me a warning if someone’s coming, I’ll take care of the rest.”

Juan nodded, relieved. He stood some feet from the tub, his arms folded as he stared at the pathway leading down from the village. His feet were planted slightly apart as if he meant business. And, she guessed, he probably did. Although, how he could give her a warning, she didn’t know. But it gave him a measure of comfort to do something and he took his job very seriously.

Cambria basked in the warm water under a late afternoon sun and relaxed. The heat sank into her bones and muscles, eased the aches. It was an impossibly beautiful day and she wondered why she’d never noticed the colours of the planet before. She ducked her head under the water.

Juan left some gel for her hair, so she lathered up and washed her hair until it was clean of sweat, dirt and blood - hers and the beasts.

When she felt clean enough, she stood. Juan twitched as if to turn, but he maintained his vigil.

She wrapped a towel around her and stepped out of the bath. “Do I empty the bath or will you or Sam want to use it?”

Juan turned around and pointed to her. He mimed donning clothes, then him taking his own off and bathing.

“Okay, I’ll be right back.” She picked up her clothes and ducked into the foundry, where she quickly dried off and dressed.

Juan was already in the tub when she returned so she turned her back and watched the forest. She had a moment of regret. Juan would have to be quick if he wanted to finish before the sun went down. She’d spent way too much time lounging in the warm water. But the flash of regret vanished. Her muscles felt loose, she was warm and alert. A long, hot bath was just what she needed.

She could hear Juan splashing about and grinned. He must love hot baths as much as she did. When the splashing stopped, she glanced over her shoulder. Juan had a towel wrapped around his waist and shook the water from his black hair.

Cambria's smile faded as she saw the white lines of scars marking his chest and shoulders.

He glanced at her, down at the scars and then back at her. She saw remembered pain in his eyes before he turned away. It was none of her business. All she had to do was protect him.

He dressed with his back to her; she continued to watch the forest. Nothing moved out there and she wondered what was happening up at the village.

Juan tapped her shoulder and they both went back to the fire.

Sam glanced up from his pot with a broad grin.

"You're an evil bastard," she said, "to keep that hidden from everyone."

Sam laughter echoed around the clearing. "It's not hidden, but no one wants to ask about it. Pride and all that. Me, I like the comforts of home, so I built it."

"It was... Well," she grinned, "you *know* how it was." She stared across the fire at him. "I keep saying 'thank you' to you, Sam." She shook her head.

"It's a fine thing to help someone, Cambria, without expecting anything in return." He filled a bowl and handed it to her, held her gaze.

She nodded and accepted the bowl. Sam filled another one for Juan who sat next to him. Sam used the pot for his bowl and they ate in silence.

"What happened to the 'pillars, Sam?"

"They left when the komatsus came charging through the village. They've not returned. At least, not that I've seen. You know how they abhor mess."

"Yeah." She held her hands up to the flames and warmed them. "Will they return if the village is re-built?"

"I don't know, Cam, it's never happened before." He shifted in his seat. "We were supposed to protect them and in the end, you were the only one to do something, or nearly die trying."

Cambria pursed her lips. "I don't think I came that close, Sam." And she told the big man what had happened and her theory.

“It’s possible, Cam. We just see them as large lumbering animals. It could be they’re as sentient as the ‘pillars. They’re a larger version after all. My problem with that is what set them off? Why now? What is so important to them that they would attack us, kill men and ‘pillars and keep on going?”

“Did they go away? I mean, did they go through the village and keep on going to the southern gate?” She asked.

“I don’t know, Cambria. Everyone at the village is shell-shocked. Jones and Chien have disappeared, as have the pillars. For the first time, they are truly on their own and they don’t know how to cope.” He shook his head in disgust. “I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them came down here tonight or tomorrow begging for food or whatever. Some of those men are totally useless.”

“What will you do?”

He lifted one massive shoulder. “Whatever becomes necessary.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll go up and see what I can do.” She stood, surprised her injuries didn’t give her any trouble.

“Are you sure that’s wise? Given what you are and all.” His expression was embarrassed.

“Yes, Sam, I’m sure and I am more than my gender.”

“Of course you are, I’m only concerned for your safety.”

“I’ll be fine and I’ll see you in the morning. Good night and thanks for dinner and the bath.”

“You’re welcome, Cam, you’re welcome.” He watched her walk back into the foundry, an expression of relief on his face. “Well, Juan, we might as well turn in, too. It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow.”

Juan nodded and leaned his head on Sam’s shoulder.

Chapter Eighteen

The village was still a wreck. Not one man had made an effort to clear the debris or rebuild the destroyed huts. Some of the men sat around the fires, eyeing her resentfully.

Cambria went to her own demolished home and stared down at the broken walls. She looked up at the men. No way was she going to help them with their own huts. The lazy slob could sleep in the cold air.

Time to get to work. Cambria spent most of the morning clearing rubbish away. When she'd uncovered the floor space, she eased her back and glanced up at the men. Still, they hadn't moved, just watched her. There were more of them, clustered in groups, quietly talked to each other; she knew them by look, but never learned their names.

Only one of her walls was unbroken, but she couldn't see how it fit with the other walls or the floor. It attached somehow and bent to study the ground.

She walked each wall line, noted where the posts sat. Some were broken off at ground level. It would take an effort to dig them out and replace them, but, she was going to try.

"Hey, girl," a voice called softly behind her and she turned to find a group of five men watching her.

"Hey, yourself," she said blandly.

"What are you doing?" The voice belonged to a middle-aged man with brown hair that was greying at his temples. He wore a grey-streaked shaggy beard and had cold blue eyes.

"I'm looking to see if I can rebuild my hut." She said indicating the postholes.

"There's no need for that. You'll share one of our huts." He lifted a hand to encompass the group. Some of the men nodded, their eyes roaming over her body and she snorted.

"Thank you, but no. I prefer my own."

"It wasn't a request." He said and stepped forward.

“And I didn’t take it as such.” She eased back on her heels, her hand resting on her knife.

More than one pair of eyes followed her hand.

“Neither Jones nor Chien are here to protect you now.” He edged closer.

“I don’t need their protection. I never did.” Her focus narrowed to the big pulse of his throat. She could slash it and be ready for the next one before he hit the ground.

The man hesitated and glanced over his shoulder. Two of the men nodded, the other two shrugged. He turned back to her. “You can’t take us all on,” he said and she sighed. Did these men think of nothing else? Why couldn’t they come up with something new to say?

“I don’t know how many I can take on, but I assure you, you will be the first.”

The man smiled, showing yellowed teeth. “I don’t think so, chickie. I don’t believe the stories about you. I don’t believe you killed three men at that other village and sure as shit don’t believe you killed one of those beasts. Not with just that knife.”

“Three,” she sighed. “I’ve killed three. The third is up the path near the northern gate. You’ll find it where you cowards should have been when the herd came through.”

He blinked. “Did you just call us cowards?”

She smelled him before she heard a noise behind her but didn’t turn from the threat before her. Cambria recognised the scent of death.

“Oh, hi, Cambria,” Vangana said, walking up to stand next to her, “I found your sword up near that corpse. Thought you might like it back.” He gave her a wolfish smile and handed the blade over.

She flicked him an empty glance and he stepped back. “Thanks.” She said and changed her stance. Left foot forward, right foot back. The sword in her left hand pointed to the ground, her right rested on the knife hilt.

The men shuffled their feet.

“You wouldn’t be so tough without those weapons, chickie.” The man sneered.

“That’s right, I wouldn’t be, which is why I have them in the first place.”

The man clenched and unclenched his hands into fists. "Put up the sword and let's see how tough you are." He challenged.

She regarded him steadily. "Why do you want to do this?"

His lip curled. "We have a bet going. Whoever can subdue you, keeps you."

"You men never learn do you," she sneered back. "I am not a commodity to be bartered."

She stabbed the sword tip first into the ground and drew her knife.

The man grinned at her as she stepped forward. "Jimmy." One of the other men tossed him a knife as long as hers. He caught it as if he'd done it many times before.

Here, she thought, was someone who knew how to use a knife. Someone who wouldn't back away from the rough stuff. Oh, wait, she thought, he already had.

She crouched into a fighting stance. "Why didn't you or the others come and help me with the komatsu?"

He gave her a half smile. "Didn't know about it."

"You big, fat liar," she said softly and his smile slipped away. "Those animals roared loud enough to be heard in Antarctica."

He slashed out at her and she backed up. "So, you're cowards after all."

"We figured," he slashed out again, "since you've proven to be soo," he slashed again, "tough, that you could handle them on your own." He slashed at her back handed. "You and your traps should have done a better job."

"Is that right?" They circled each other warily. Cambria saw out of the corner of her eye that more men turned up to watch. "So, next time, what happens? You gonna insult them?"

"We'll let you at them again. You have other uses apart from the obvious."

"You're not going to kill me."

"Nah, just cut you up some," his hand was viper quick as the tip of the blade cut through her sleeve above her wrist. Blood darkened the cloth and she ignored the sting.

"Well, I'm gonna kill you." She promised.

“You’re gonna try,” he replied and struck out again.

Cambria’s left hand hit his wrist and pushed his arm up. Her right hand jammed the blade of her knife beneath his sternum and up into his heart. He gasped once, stared at her with disbelieving eyes before falling away from her. The knife slid out of him as he fell.

Cambria stepped back and reached behind her for her sword. The men stared at her, then at the body at their feet.

“You *killed* him!” One said, horrified.

“I did.” She acknowledged.

“Why? You didn’t have to do that, he wasn’t going to hurt you much. Whydja kill him?”

She stared at the young man. She didn’t know him and wondered if he was a new arrival.

“Because a threat isn’t much good if you don’t back it up with action.”

“Too true, Ms Peterson.” Jones said from her right and she turned. Chien stood a little behind him a small smile on his face.

It was obvious he’d seen the fight while walking up the path but made no effort to stop it. Entertainment, she supposed, his own personal entertainment. Chien, she knew, would appreciate a good fight, would applaud particular moves, but wouldn’t intervene either. At least this time, she assured herself, he wasn’t responsible for this provocation.

Jones’ attention was on the village. “What happened here?” He asked and Cambria looked at him in surprise.

She had to tread carefully. “You weren’t here when I sent Dooriss for reinforcements?”

He glanced sharply at her. Chien watched her with something akin to apology.

“No. I had... business to attend to.”

“And you, Chien?” She asked and lifted her chin.

Chien bowed slightly. “Mr Jones’s business involved my help.”

He didn't openly apologise for not bringing the string. He could have sent it with someone else, but had chosen not to. From the look on his face, no more information would be forthcoming.

"Three komatsus came charging through the village," she said and sheathed her sword.

If she needed it now, there would be carnage, but Jones wasn't interested in violence.

"I thought you were taking care of securing the gate," he accused.

"I was. The remains of a fourth komatsu is still up there. However, I know you don't believe I could have taken on four of them and won. No one came to help." She levelled her own accusing glare at him. "I wonder why?"

Jones gave her a slight smile and lifted one shoulder before his face turned expressionless as he studied the wreckage of the village. "How many men did we lose?"

"I have no idea." Cambria said and his eyes turned deadly. "I wasn't here. You wanna see the bruises?" She offered and there was a interested growl from the crowd of men. "Um... maybe not." She demurred.

"Anyone know how many men were killed?" He asked the crowd.

No one spoke up. A few shuffled their feet, and others sidled away back to their fires.

"Shit." Jones muttered. "What about the 'pillars? I don't see any."

"As far as I know, some of them were killed. I don't know who. I also don't know where they went. Sam suggested..."

"Sam? What does he have to do with this?"

"He, ah, helped me when I got back to camp rather beat up. He suggested the 'pillars have gone and won't return until the village is set to rights again."

Jones nodded. "Christ, what a mess." The group of men had thinned. "All right, we'll get to that in a moment. You." He pointed to the young man. "What happened here?"

“Uh, the men, uh, wanted to have a little fun with...” he waved at Cambria as if he didn’t want to say her name. He cleared his throat. “Michaels reckoned she couldn’t do what some of the other men said she could. He, uh, decided to, um,” red crept up his face, but he took a deep breath and continued. “Michaels said who ever could subdue her, could keep her and well...” he looked down at the dead man and his face paled.

Jones laughed and shook his head. “Michaels was here for two days and look where his stupidity got him.” He looked at the young man. “Boy, if any of the other men tell you a story about Cambria, believe it. The truth is probably much worse.”

The young man nodded vigorously. Cambria frowned. She didn’t want to be the bogeyman of the village and Jones had no right to set her up as such.

“Jones,” she began, but he gave her a warning glance and she held her tongue.

“Now, what’s been done about rebuilding the village?” He asked.

They all looked down or away, shamefaced.

“Nothing? At all?”

One brave man stepped forward. “We buried our dead.” He said with vague defiance.

“You buried the dead. That’s it?” The man nodded and he turned to Cambria. “And you wonder why I get you to do things you’ve done.”

Cambria thinned her lips. This wasn’t the way she wanted his manipulation confirmed.

The men saw her as a killer. Jones’s killer. A punishment to for any perceived crime he deemed bad enough to warrant execution. She didn’t need to emasculate the men; Jones had already done that. And one day, one of the men was going to come after her while she slept. Or worse, a group of them. She could see it in the way they moved, the way their eyes shifted from her back to Jones. They would put up with his tactics for only so long before they got fed up with it and did something Jones couldn’t predict.

She sighed. He probably thought that was her job and she exchanged a glance with Chien.

He knew what she was thinking; he was thinking exactly the same thing. How had both of them become Jones's enforcers?

Jones had no idea what forces he was dealing with. His ego was rapidly making promises she and Chien wouldn't be able to keep.

And he was up to something. He'd managed to avoid the issue of his whereabouts during the rampage for the time being, but she, for one, would want an answer, and soon. But first, they had to get the village fixed and Jones knew what to do.

She stood next to Chien as Jones flung orders at the men. The change was remarkable. Where they'd once moved with resentment and lethargy, now they jogged off to do Jones's bidding. How did he do it? She wondered.

For the rest of the afternoon, everyone cleaned wreckage away from hut bases. The torn and broken walls were piled away from the village where another man sorted and tried to salvage what he could. The problem was that the walls and roofs were 'pillar woven and without the pillars, Jones couldn't be sure they would retain their integrity.

Until they returned, the humans could only do their best. When the sun began to set, Jones detailed six men to start cooking fires and make meals. They looked uncomfortable and confessed they didn't know where the stores were, or how to cook.

Jones delegated the job to another six. The first six earned hard glares and harder work.

He arranged for lanterns hung at intervals and they worked deep into the night. It was near midnight before he stopped the work. Every damaged hut was clear. Half of those huts had a wall or two. One, they had managed to rebuild completely with salvaged materials. Jones stood back from the hut and glanced at her. She shook her head. This hut would be for others.

He chose four men who would share the hut. Cambria walked tiredly down the campfire line to her own empty hut base. It was swept clean, but there were no walls and no roof. Someone had covered Michaels with a blanket.

Jones came up behind her. "I could stay with you," he offered.

She sat by the fire and rubbed her tired eyes. "To guard, or to..."

“Guard.” He cut in quickly. “We are both too tired to do anything else.” He handed her a salvaged blanket and she wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Where were you, Jones?” She asked and he looked away. “Why would you leave the village unguarded?”

“It wasn’t unguarded. They had you.”

She snorted. “Me. Against four komatsus. No one’s that good, Jones, especially me.” All thought blinked off as she realised something else.

“You expected me to die, didn’t you? That’s why you left me alone up there.”

He turned tired eyes to her. “I miscalculated. I didn’t think they would charge. They didn’t the day before, so why now?”

“Chien knew.” She said. “I sent him for more string.”

“Speaking of which. He said you’d built a grid of spears. How did it work?”

“Jones, you may be able to divert the men, but this is me you’re talking to. Where did you go?”

“The fortress,” he answered and stared into the fire. “I thought Chien and I might be able to get inside. You gave me the information, remember?”

Cambria felt a bitter and brittle emotion rise in her. “So, you were going to try and get back and leave everyone else here.”

“No, I was going to get help.”

“Bullshit, Jones.” Her tone held no heat, she was too disgusted for that. “That’s bullshit and you know it. Hell, *I* know it. You were going back and fuck the rest of us. End of story.”

In the firelight, she saw the skin on his face darken. She knew him well enough to know she’d pinned him down and he couldn’t defend himself.

“Yeah. You called it.” He didn’t look at her, just rose from the stool, lay down and rolled himself into the blanket.

Cambria did the same on the other side of the fire, curling into a foetal position and made sure she was covered. It would be cold tonight without the protection of a hut. Tomorrow would be soon enough for arguments he couldn’t win.

Something warm was snuggled up against her stomach; something that had crawled under the blanket with her during the night. Since it didn't seem to want to harm her, she let it burrow.

Now, though, in the pre-dawn light, her eyes snapped open and she parted the blankets slightly. A 'pillar curled into a ball against her. It rested against her belly and upper thighs, its head tucked against its own stomach.

Cambria stroked its back until it moved to uncurl. Dooriss blinked sleepily up at her.

"Hey, there, Dooriss." She whispered, still stroking the creature's back. Dooriss tilted her head like a cat into her hand and trilled in her throat.

The 'pillar curled back into a ball while Cambria brushed her warm, rough skin.

Cambria lay on her side and stared out at the forest as the darkness crept away. Mist hung between the trees, stagnant, like scum on a pond. The trees' dark foliage was unmoving, silent, waiting, like the camp behind her. The men had dropped into an exhausted sleep, and she could hear the occasional snore. This time of morning, they were unthreatening, the only time she could truly relax her guard.

The light increased and she could feel the heat from the fire increase. She turned her head.

Moreriss poked the fire, fed it more wood. His pots were once again in position.

There was no sign of Jones. So much for guarding her during the night.

Dooriss stirred and she looked down. The 'pillars eyes were clearer.

"Did you sleep well?" Cambria asked and the 'pillar nodded, uncurling and wriggling out from under the blanket. She spared Moreriss a glare before undulating into the forest.

Cambria stretched and sat up. She yawned and got up to sit on the stool. "When did you arrive, Moreriss?"

"Late." He said and continued to stir with his head bent.

"Was Jones here?"

Moreriss nodded. "He left when we arrived."

“Huh,” she said and wrapped the blanket tighter against the chill of the morning. No one else stirred, but up the campfire line, she could see other ‘pillars tend their fires.

“What made you come back?”

Moreriss glanced at her then his eyes slid right. Dooriss came up to the fire and hunched down next to it.

“Moreriss?”

“You need uss,” he said. “More than we need you.”

Cambria tilted her head at his spiteful tone.

“We failed you.”

Moreriss nodded and Dooriss looked up at her, her expression serious.

“We wanted protection,” she said, “and no one protected uss. Many were lossst.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I tried my best, but four komatsu were three too many.” She said softly.

“You are why we are here. Not them,” she pointed her chin up the line. “You try, they didn’t. They ran.”

“But those ‘pillars are preparing breakfast as usual.” She said watching the other creatures stir pots and poke fires.

Dooriss gave her an evil smile. “Not for long. Today only. Men will know what cossst, cowardisse.”

Cambria chuckled. “Oh, I think they’ll get the point.”

Moreriss held out a mug to her and she took it. She sighed with pleasure as she sipped.

There was something addictive about Ssoclar. Maybe that’s why Jones had compared it to coffee when it tasted nothing like it. “Thank you, Moreriss. This is great.”

The ‘pillar smiled at her and stirred his pot.

The village slowly came to life. This time she was outside to see it. Men stuck their heads out of doorways or rolled over in blankets as the scent of Sscolar and porridge filtered through the air.

As she watched, the men stumbled awake and held out hands for mugs and bowls. The pillars obliged.

Moreriss nudged her own hand and she accepted the bowl with thanks.

The men sat down, ate and drank, held out empties for refills. The 'pillars again obliged. When they were done with the second helpings, the 'pillars doused the fires, emptied the pots, stacked them near the cooling ashes and wriggled down to her fire.

The men watched with interest at first, then went back to their huts or off into the forest to do whatever it was they did in the forest. Jones had disappeared again and wasn't around to give them orders.

Cambria had long finished her breakfast by the time the 'pillars arrived. Moreriss stacked his own pots, but kept his fire going.

"Hello," she said to the gathering of pillars. "Would you like to sit?"

They shook their heads and one stepped forward. "Thank you for our breakfasst," it said and she frowned. She hadn't... uh, oh. She looked over to her hut. Michaels was gone, the blanket neatly folded in the centre of her hut square.

"You're welcome..."

"Booriss," he said with another bob of his head.

Boris. Of course, she thought with a smile.

"The men. They do not want uss to have breakfasst," Booriss said and the other pillars nodded.

"They don't?"

"No. They take breakfasst, lunch and dinner away."

Cambria frowned, confused, until she remembered what one of the men had said about burying the dead. No wonder Jones was pissed. How many men had he sacrificed to keep the pillars happy? She wasn't sure what she felt about that. It would be typical of Jones to do something like that.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said and Booriss nodded.

"We mussst go now."

"Where will you go, Booriss?" She asked politely. "Will you be okay?"

The group of pillars hissed as they laughed. Booriss hushed them. “Yesss, thank you for asssking. We go to weave wallsss for you.”

“For me?”

Booriss nodded. “You need a hut. We will give you one.” He turned to leave.

“Thank you, Booriss, but what about the others?” She tilted her head to indicate the empty spaces where huts once stood.

“They have not earned one.” Booriss said emphatically and undulated away. The rest of pillars, except for Moreriss and Dooriss followed.

Cambria watched them enter the forest and disappear.

She turned to the two remaining ‘pillars. “What about you two? What will you do now?”

The ‘pillars looked at each other, then at her. “I will cook for you, asss alwayssss,” Moreriss said.

“And I will clean for you, asss alwayssss.” Dooriss said.

Cambria smiled at them both. It was going to cause problems if she had two ‘pillars and the men had none. She could, of course, explain the situation to them.

Jones walked down the pathway, glanced at huts and empty fire pits.

His hair was damp and she knew where he’d been. Sam was generous with his hot water.

“Good morning, Cambria, Moreriss, Dooriss. Where did the other ‘pillars go?”

Cambria glanced at Dooriss. It was for her to explain.

“They have gone to weave.” She said.

“Oh,” Jones said and sat down. “We’ll need quite a few if we’re to get the village back to where it was.”

“Only four.” Dooriss replied.

“Four?” He looked up the line. “We’ll need more than that.”

“Only four. For Cambria.” Moreriss wriggled around the fire to stand next to Dooriss.

Moral support, Cambria thought.

“Why only you?” Jones asked her.

Cambria gave him an embarrassed grin. “Apparently, I’m the only one who defended the village, and I supplied them breakfast.” Jones glanced over his shoulder at the folded blanket and turned back to her with a grimace. “And,” Cambria continued, “the other men took away the ‘pillars breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“So, they’re what? On strike?” He asked and rubbed his chin.

“Cambria earn hut.” Dooriss said in an offended voice, “men have not.” She rose up on her hind limbs every inch the indignant ‘pillar.

Jones regarded her with narrowed eyes. “What can I do to make this right?” He asked.

“We are not ssslavesss,” she said fiercely. “We give you food, sselter, companionsssip. You give usss *nothing*.”

Jones nodded. “Understood. What can I do to make this right?” He repeated.

“It will not be easssy. You are good with wordsss, Jonesss, but otherssss do your actionssss.”

Jones sighed, acknowledging the truth of her words. His hut, however, was still standing and Cambria wondered whether he would still negotiate for his men or whether he had another plan to get into the fortress.

Dooriss stared at him, weighing the veracity of his words, his body language and his expression. Finally, she nodded.

“We need breakfassst. Cambria hasss given usss much breakfassst.”

Jones stared at the creature. “You want me to kill one of my men every time you want to eat?” His tone was as outraged as Cambria felt.

“No. There iss good hunting in the foresst.”

“I can hunt anything that is meat for you?” He asked, trying to be absolutely clear on what he had to do.

Dooriss nodded and narrowed her eyes at him. “*You* musst do thiss. We will be watching.”

Jones glanced at Cambria who shrugged her shoulders.

“Okay. I’ll go hunting for you and you will arrange for more walls to be built.”

Dooriss shook her head. “Not yet. Hunt first, then weave.”

Jones gave the ‘pillar a smile and leaned down. “You drive a hard bargain, Dooriss. I will hunt for you today and tomorrow you will give me four more walls. Agreed?”

Dooriss sat back on her haunches. “Agreed.” She said and they smiled at each other.

To Cambria, it was one of the stranger conversations she’d never had.

Dooriss undulated across the path and into the forest. Moreriss stayed by her side.

“So,” Jones began, giving her a look she was fast becoming familiar with, “it looks like we get the day off. Would you like to go swimming with me?”

“I don’t know, Jones. I still have to go up to the northern gate and tidy up.”

Jones gave her a feral grin. “Don’t worry about it. I think some of the boys need to be taught a lesson. I’ll get them to do it.”

“What kind of lesson, Jones?”

“One that involves them learning about defending the village more effectively and seeing just exactly what you are capable of. I think it will make believers of them.”

He stood with a smile. “Who knows? Once they see the komatsu’s corpse they’ll all, finally, leave you alone.”

Cambria stood as well. “Sounds like a plan. Why don’t you go and get a work party and I’ll head on down to the pool.”

Jones nodded and wandered off. Cambria went in search of Vangana. He wasn’t far, as she knew he wouldn’t be. He was always close. She didn’t always see him, but she always knew when he was close.

“Vangana,” she said softly, when she found him sitting on the other side of his hut. He was sharpening a stake. Why, she didn’t know, didn’t want to know. He looked up at her and then continued his work. “I’m going down to the pool.” He looked up at her and saw her expression.

“Okay.” He said and bent his head to his task.

It was enough. He understood.

Chapter Nineteen

Cambria left Vangana to his task and headed through the forest to the pool. She saw no sign of the ‘pillars, but then, if they didn’t want to be seen they wouldn’t be, or a human would have to look very hard indeed to see them.

The sun warmed her skin as she stripped off. She laid her knife on the pile of clothing and hesitated. She would have to learn unarmed combat, she decided. She wouldn’t always have a weapon at hand.

Today, however, she didn’t think she’d need one and she slipped into the cool water.

She floated on her back and stared up at the painfully blue sky. She’d been here for months and had yet to see a cloud marring the perfect blue.

It must rain at sometime; otherwise, nothing would grow.

It was peaceful, quiet and unnerving as she floated. She shook off the feeling and tried to enjoy herself. She eased her feet to the sandy bottom and looked around. Jones sat on the bank, watching as he had the last time they were alone together.

She watched him watching her, her hands making circles in the water.

“Come closer,” he called and she walked through the water and out onto the bank.

“Holy shit, Cam ” He sprang to his feet and gently grabbed her upper arms, his eyes glued to her rainbow of bruises.

He lifted his head and stared at her.

“The komatsus got a little frisky,” she said and stepped back. Jones made a twirling motion with his hand and she turned to show him her back.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. Cambria turned back to him.

“You left me to die, Excalibur, sorry doesn’t cut it.” She walked away from him and back into the water.

She ducked under the water, pushed off the bottom and swam to the other side of the pool. She heard a splash and knew Jones joined her in the water.

He caught up to her in the deeper part of the pool.

“You’re right,” he said. “I was wrong and I am genuinely, sincerely sorry this happened to you.”

Cambria gave him a wry smile. “Why the contrition, Jones, you very nearly got what you wanted.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, but I... I didn’t realise... It didn’t seem...”

“What? Real?” She swam past him towards the shore, turned on her back and did a backstroke. “This is as real as it gets, Jones. You getting me to kill people is as *real* as it gets. Me killing the komatsu is as *real* as it gets. The ‘pillars demanding their piece of flesh at your hand is as *real* as gets.”

Jones stayed where he was, his hands circling the water to keep afloat. He stared at her.

“You know,” she called, “I’m beginning to believe you were truly set up if you’re this squeamish about violence.”

Jones frowned at her and swam towards her.

Cambria reached the shallows and rolled onto her stomach in the warm water at the edge of the pool. She rested her chin on her crossed forearms and waited for Jones to come up next to her.

Eventually, he did and he copied her relaxed stance, with his chin on his forearms. Both stared off into the forest, and allowed the sun to warm their backs. He lay close to her, didn’t touch her.

“You know, this isn’t an easy world to live in.”

Cambria snorted. “The ‘pillars have made it easy for you, Jones. These men, most of them are trash. Granted, they are group trash. They won’t do anything unless they have each other to back them up. On their own, they will do nothing. They need a strong leader and you are it. You or Chien.”

“Yeah.” He said. They lay in silence, each consumed by their own thoughts.

Jones turned his head to look at her. She could feel the weight of his gaze and tried to ignore it. She found, for once, that she couldn’t and she turned her own head to stare at him.

“What are you thinking?” She asked.

“That you are the most amazing woman I have ever met.”

“Then you haven’t met many.”

His brows lowered slightly. “On the contrary, I have met many, yet none spring to mind who could or would have done what you have.”

“It’s a matter of survival, Jones, like you said. No one knows what they’re capable of until they are put in a life or death situation. Most people will choose to live, if given the choice.”

“True, but not many would take such drastic action to do so.”

“Most people wouldn’t find themselves in this situation. So the discussion is moot.”

Jones chuckled. “You don’t like that much, do you?”

“Like what?”

“Being reminded of what you’re willing to do to survive.”

“I don’t like killing, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, not really.” He snuggled closer, his warm, damp skin sliding against hers.

She rolled onto her side, facing him and propped her head in her hand. “What do you mean then?”

His eyes travelled the length of her bruised and battered body. “You have an uncanny knack of doing what is necessary. Whether it is getting the ‘pillars on your side, making allies with Chien, Sam, Juan and anyone else who is your friend, or killing komatsu and men when they turn ugly.” His eyes met hers. “You do whatever is necessary to survive.”

Cambria wanted to explain about Niall, her murderous brother, but he leaned in and brushed her lips with his, then retreated. “What’s more, you’re very, very good at it.”

This time, Cambria breached the distance between them. She used her tongue to lick his lips until he parted them. Then she sealed her mouth to his and plunged her tongue inside. His arms came around her and he rolled her onto to her back to lie between her thighs, firm and ready.

His hips flexed and she arched up to receive him. He nudged her opening, but didn’t complete their union. Instead, he kissed his way down her body. Cambria felt her breath jam in her chest as he kissed and licked her skin, lower and lower on her belly.

He rested his chin on her pubic bone, rubbing back and forth. He grinned up at her and she stared down at him as he lifted her thighs over his shoulders and feasted on her.

Cambria gripped the sand beneath the water as his tongue probed deeply. The first ripples of the orgasm had barely finished when he crawled back up her body. He planted his mouth on hers and sucked her tongue into his mouth. She scraped her nails down his back to his buttocks.

Jones squirmed as she held him firmly between her thighs.

She pulled his head away from hers. "Please," she murmured and he nudged inside her. Not far, just enough to have her gripping his butt. "More," she breathed and he thrust into her hard.

He filled her and she groaned.

God, it felt good to have him inside her again. To fill her, compl... No, she wouldn't think of that, of the future, only of now; only now mattered.

Jones surged into her and she raised her knees for him. He seemed to grow with each thrust, thickening, lengthening. Her breath came as hard and fast as his did, her heart crashed against her rib cage and she felt his equally thunderous heartbeat, as he moved faster and harder against her, his belly slick against hers.

He tweaked her hardened nipples and she cupped his buttocks. Jones leaned back above her and froze, pouring into her in a hot burst. The orgasm rolled over her and lowered to lie on her body. When he'd recovered enough, he slipped out of her to lie by her side. He threw his arm across his eyes, breathing hard.

"God," he murmured, "you are so good. Tight, warm and wet."

"We're lying in water," she reminded him as she regained her breath. He turned to her and grinned.

"So... we... are." He huffed.

They lay there in the water, each unwilling to make the first move out of the water.

Why couldn't she say 'no' to him anymore? It was insane to crave his body, his companionship, especially given the situation.

"I think I've had enough of swimming," she said.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of it.” Jones replied, his face to the sky.

Her head turned and she looked at him. He had such a... contented smile on his face.

She didn’t want a repeat of the last time they’d made love, so she said nothing. She watched the sky with him.

“Is that a cloud?” She asked and was startled when he abruptly sat up.

“Yeah, it is. Come on, we’ve got to go.” He stood and strode to his clothing and pulled on his jeans without drying off.

Cambria languidly got to her feet. “It’s a cloud, Jones, not a nuclear strike.”

“You haven’t been here for the storms.” He said and tugged on his shirt, “I have and they are nasty. That cloud,” he pointed skyward, “is the first harbinger of a storm.”

Cambria dressed slowly.

Jones glared at her. “Trust me when I say you don’t want to be caught in one, so get the lead out!”

She looked at him, with one leg in her jeans. He was serious, agitated.

“Are they that bad?” She asked and dressed quickly.

“Chunks of ice bad.”

“The huts won’t be much protection, then,” she murmured and picked up her gear.

More clouds drifted across the sky and sun, plunged the forest into gloom and sucked the colour away.

Jones jogged back to the village, Cambria close behind. She ducked into her hut; Jones followed.

“I want you to go to Sam’s and stay in the foundry.” He said. “Don’t move from there until he gives you the okay.”

Cambria nodded, unsure. Could the storm be worse than as those on Earth?

Jones grabbed her shoulders, shook her. “Promise me, you’ll stay there no matter what happens.”

“I promise, Jones, but...”

“Go and go *now*.” He pushed her out of the hut. Cambria walked quickly towards the foundry. Black clouds hovered low, churned in the sky and a rolling thunder echoed around the clearing as she jogged towards the stone foundry.

Sam and Juan were already inside and they both waved to her as she approached.

The first sharp spikes of frigid rain began to fall as she ran inside.

Rain and hail rattled against the foundry roof, drowned out any conversation.

Sam ushered her towards the back of the foundry where the furnace warmed the shed.

The stone furnace blocked Cambria’s view of the storm and she moved to the corner of the foundry. Here, she had a better view.

Sam and Juan stood just inside the open side, the roof overhang protecting them.

Cambria walked over to them. Both men glanced at her then out to the rain.

The storm was a stunning sight and she felt a shiver of fear for the men still outside. Huge chunks of ice, the size of her fist bounced off the roof and the ground. Just like Jones warned her.

Rain sheeted down like water over a dam and jagged spikes of lightning streaked the sky and slammed into the ground further away.

Something crashed behind them and all three turned to see that a hole punched through the roof. Sam stared at the hole grimly and other chunk of ice penetrated the wooden ceiling and shattered against the shelves of metal rods.

Cambria returned her gaze to the weather. She could barely see the forest, so heavy the downpour. Crash after deafening crash of thunder echoed around the foundry and through her bones. The hair on her arms lifted with the static electricity and she wondered how long the storm would last.

A long time, it turned out. Sam finally moved away from the spectacle and started to pump the bellows of the furnace. He took a pot down from one of the shelves and began to prepare the Ssoclar.

The clamour of the storm blocked conversation, so Cambria pulled out her knife and mimed sharpening it to Sam, pointed to the weaponry on the back wall. Sam nodded and she touched Juan’s shoulder.

Both of them spent the rest of the day sharpening and cleaning weapons, while Sam fixed broken ‘pillar pots, carved spear hafts and, on occasion, hot drinks and food. He joined them in the maintenance of the weaponry, too. Cambria cast the occasional glance at the storm and flinched with Juan whenever one of those fist-sized hail stones smashed through the roof.

By late afternoon, the storm eased off, or, more precisely, the hail ceased to fall and the rain eased to a thick and fine mist. The lightning and thunder moved on and Cambria could finally talk to her companions.

“Are the storms always like this?” She asked, loudly. Her ears rang from the ferocious onslaught of constant noise.

“Yeah, they are.” Sam said, shelving the sword he’d been working on. “Every single damn time. But I’ve seen worse.”

“Must have been tough when humans first arrived.” She, too, shelved the now gleaming sword she’d cleaned.

“It was. All the ‘pillars disappeared into the forest. The humans had no idea of what was coming. Once the storm hit, though, they got the idea and dived into the foliage.” He wiped his hands on a cloth. “We lost people, of course we did, but we learned.”

He poured mugs of Ssoclar from the pot by the fire. “This foundry was built to make weapons and to provide safety during the storms.” He snorted as he handed her a drink. “The ‘pillars were somewhat offended by it. Their woven roofs are strong enough, but, at the time we didn’t know that. It’s why there are only three of us in here now. The men will have dived into the forest or jammed into the remaining huts.”

He stuck his head out side into the fine mist. Steam rose from his mug and Cambria joined him. The temperature had plummeted. It was cold enough now that she could see her breath.

“I should get up there and see if I can help.” She flicked a glance at him.

“It should be safe enough. Once these storms pass, it gets cold and will slowly warm up until the next one. ‘Tis the season.” He toasted her with his Ssoclar.

“So they come when we’ve had warm weather for a while?”

“Sometimes.” He looked down at her. “Whenever you see a cloud in the sky, it means a storm is on its way. As you have seen,” he tipped his mug towards the mist, “they hit pretty quickly.”

“So they do.” She drained her mug, thanked Sam and slogged her way across the soggy ground to the path.

Water streamed down the centre, blocking it. Cambria took to the forest, but kept the path in sight as she made her way back to the village.

It took longer expected. The ground was soaked, spongy, and the undergrowth dripped with water.

By the time she got back to the village, her clothes were damp.

The men busily cleared away fallen branches, swept leaves away and captured rainwater in large bowls. The campfires were gone, washed away. She could see that a serious amount of water had gushed down the centre, furrowed the path.

Her hut area was flooded as were others. The ‘pillars had yet to return and she wondered how long they would stay in the forest.

Everyone ate hardened, dry rations with bitter comments. The storm arrived at the worst possible time; wreckage was everywhere. Half-finished huts lay in ruins and the men started again. There wasn’t a dry space outside of the shared huts. There were few injuries, some men knocked out and others simply bruised by the hail.

She spent the night and the following night rolled in a blanket in the foundry.

When she returned to the camp, Cambria had a new hut. It was larger than her previous hut and the walls were made of a thicker weave. Even the door cloth was heavier. She thanked the ‘pillars for their generosity. All she needed now was furniture. Cambria was sure at least one of the men would know carpentry.

The ‘pillars returned and grudgingly agreed to cook and clean for the men. She didn’t know what food Jones provided them, but an uneasy peace settled around the village. Some of the ‘pillars left, permanently, the men of their campfire seemingly unable or unwilling to accept that the ‘pillars weren’t there for their benefit. Those men tried to join other campfires and rejected by the ‘pillars under threat of them leaving all together. They had to fend for themselves or negotiate.

There were a lot of unhappy men.

The village was well on its way to returning to pre-stampede tidiness when Jones announced another patrol.

Cambria headed to her hut for her sword and crossbow. Vangana stepped from around the side of her hut.

“I would accompany you,” he said quietly.

“Okay.” She nodded and ducked into her hut. He had his back turned, stared into the forest, when she came out adjusting her sword on her hip. He had a repair kit with him, with axe, string and hatchet as well as his normal weapons.

Vangana walked beside her as they travelled the path to the northern gate. The remains of the komatsu were gone and she didn't see the debris of her grids, either.

Other men milled around the gate when they approached.

“What's *he* doing here?” One man sneered. Cambria thought his name was Devlin, but since no one introduced himself, it was a guess.

He was tall and broad, like a footballer still wearing protection. His black hair was long and shaggy, his beard ill-kempt and straggly. He bore a strange and vague resemblance to Michaels, if only in attitude.

“I'm going on patrol, Dev.” Vangana said and held himself taller. The rest of the men laughed and Cambria raised her eyebrows. Vangana might be young, but he was as able-bodied as any other man in the village.

“You? Heh, heh, and what are you going to do? Collect pretty flowers?” Devlin chuckled and the men surrounding him snickered.

Vangana flushed but held his ground. Cambria remembered the look on his face when she and Moreriss found him in the forest. Pale, sweating, scared to death. But who wouldn't be? A komatsu had already killed Tiquiri and probably would have killed Vangana if he hadn't run. Was that Devlin's problem? That Vangana escaped when he knew he couldn't win?

“Well, I guess if we run into anything nasty, we'll be sure to send you back for reinforcements, you're one *hell* of a sprinter.” Devlin sneered.

Cambria shook her head. These men were idiots, but for the moment, they were harmless idiots. Vangana flexed his hands, as if he wanted to pop Devlin in his smart mouth. That would serve no purpose other than to anger the big man. Vangana took a step forward and Cambria put a hand on his arm.

He glanced down at her, his eyes burned with hate and fury. She shook her head.

“Gotta hide behind a woman do you?” Devlin jeered and crossed his arms.

“I don’t have to hide behind anyone, Dev.” Vangana said softly and shook off Cambria’s hand. “You, on the other hand, have to have a pack of boyfriends with you before you’re brave enough to take anyone on.”

Cambria snickered. The boy had some wit after all. He was going to get seven shades of snot beaten out of him, but he talked a good game. Devlin’s face darkened and the other men shifted with growing anger.

“Boy, you have stepped over the line.”

“Which line would that be?” Vangana asked, clearly enjoying himself. “The one where I insult you or your toyboys?”

“Is there a problem here?” Jones asked and stepped out of the forest.

Cambria wondered how long he had stayed quiet. He usually enjoyed bloodshed, what was different now?

Devlin flushed darker, his eyes promised retribution as he stared at Vangana. “No, no problem.” He spat the words.

“Good, good. Then we can get on with it. Cambria, you, Simons and,” he glanced at Vangana. “What was your name again?”

Cambria held her breath. Jones knew *everyone*’s name. What was his game now?

“Vangana.”

“You go with Cambria and Simons. The rest of you, form up into groups of three. We have a lot of storm damage, so this is going to take some time. Don’t rush; we can always come out again tomorrow.” Jones nodded and opened the gate.

A small, wiry man with a rat-like face and lank black hair loitered after the other men had passed through the gate.

He must be Simons, Cambria thought.

“Okay,” she said, “let’s go.” And led the way through the gate to the left.

Jones presented her with another puzzle. He had listed Vangana as a rapist, but asked his name. She had no fear of Vangana or Simons; Jones always paired her with dangerous men, so what changed?

Was Vangana a genuine criminal or not and why would Jones go out of his way to make Cambria think so?

Vangana, so far, as demonstrated no interest in her as a woman. Devlin had intimated that he wasn’t much of a man at all.

Cambria and Vangana walked side by side along the fence line, Simons brought up the rear. Simons made a lot of noise. He stomped through the undergrowth as if to warn any nearby animals he was the bigger threat.

“What’s your first name, Vangana?” She asked.

“Joey.”

“May I call you Joey?”

“Yes,” His eyes moved over the foliage and undergrowth, searched for any danger. For all his bravado at the gate, he was still careful of the forest.

“Okay, call me Cambria, alright?” She followed the line of the fence. It was in remarkably good condition considering the violence of the storm.

“No, ma’am, it wouldn’t be right.”

Cambria glanced at him. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “I feel more comfortable calling you Ms Peterson.”

Simons snickered behind them and Vangana flushed. Cambria ignored the man.

“Alright, Joey, Ms Peterson it is.”

They walked an hour before they came across the first break. A thick branch had crashed onto the fence, snapping the two lengths and mashing them into the ground. They’d have to cut up the branch, and then make two more cross boards.

“Okay,” she said, studying the wreckage, “who wants to stand guard and who wants to do the heavy work.”

Simons pulled an axe from his belt and shoved past her. “You watch; this is *man’s* work.”

Cambria snickered and held up her hands. “Okay, you do the hard work. Joey?”

Vangana stared at Simons, murderous intent in his eyes. Cambria pulled him aside while Simons got to work clearing broken sticks from the branch.

“What’s wrong with you, Joey?”

“He insults you. As if you are nothing, have done nothing.”

“Joey, I don’t worry about it. If anything he says puts me in danger, then I’ll worry about it.” She gave him a shrug. “Besides,” she leaned in like a conspirator, “I can stand here and watch the forest. You know and I know it takes more skill than Simons has to fight. Let him be tough guy and tire himself out.”

“You’re not offended?”

“Not in the slightest. And don’t let him get to you either. You know you’re better than he is, but keep that knowledge to yourself, okay?”

Joey’s shoulders relaxed.

“Are you girls going to get anything done today?” Simons asked, his voice annoyed. Joey gave her a smile and a wink and went to help Simons.

Cambria stood watch. The forest was silent of animals, not even the insects stirred, but a light cool breeze rattled the canopy and leaves hissed as they rubbed against each other.

Simons and Vangana worked in silence - each man knew what he had to do. More than once Cambria looked over her shoulder at them. Simons used his axe to cut the branch into lengths. Vangana removed the damaged crossbars and cut them into spikes. When Simons made a length, Vangana sat the piece across his lap and began carving holes for the spikes.

Simons tossed the remains of the branch away and began carving the twigs he’d cut off into spikes to be jammed into the holes.

The whole process took three hours and both men were soaked with sweat by the time they’d finished. Cambria was bored. Staring and listening to the forest was easy but tedious.

“Okay, that’s done.” Simons said. “Let’s go.”

No one spoke as they walked the fence. Cambria listened to the forest, Vangana sank deep into his own thoughts and she didn’t care what Simons did.

They patched two more breaks in the fence before Cambria called it quits. She marked a tree so they knew where to start tomorrow and all three turned back.

The trip home was equally silent; the breeze dropped to nothing and neither men were inclined to talk.

The gate was open when they arrived. Cambria went through first and looked around.

There was no one around. Who would be foolish enough to leave the bloody gate open? Did someone want to *invite* feral animals inside the area?

She waited for the two men to enter and hefted the gate shut.

Both men looked at her.

“Never leave the gate open,” she warned them, “it’s an invitation to the komatsu.”

Simons shrugged and walked down the path ahead of them. Vangana stared after him.

Cambria shook her head with disgust and followed Simons.

The village was quiet when they returned. Cambria stowed her weapons, sat on her stool in front of the fire, and brooded. Vangana disappeared.

Moreriss held out a mug to her. “Drink. Feel better.” He said sharply as if it was beyond doubt.

“Thanks, Moreriss. I’m just a little grumpy. Some asshole left the northern gate open.”

Moreriss hissed. “Not good.”

“No.” She sipped the Ssoclar. It tasted different, sweeter. “Moreriss? You’ve changed the recipe.”

Moreriss nodded and clutched all of his hands together nervously. “Do you like it?”

Cambria sipped again. “Yeah, I do. Are you going to tell me what you did to it?”

The ‘pillar shook his head. “Sssecret.”

“Well, I like it, and you’re right, I do feel better.”

She left him to his pot and she tilted her head to listen. The ‘pillars further up the campfire line chatted to each other, but there were few men around.

“Where is everyone?” She asked.

Moreriss shrugged. “Bathing, fighting, fucking.”

Cambria gaped at him then snickered. “Where did you hear that expression?”

“The men. It iss what they do.”

“Oh.” She continued to sip her drink and wondered if the ‘pillars had their own alcoholic beverage. She knew the men probably had a still somewhere, but no one had mentioned one to her.

Damn, I could use a belt of bourbon.

A hiss rippled down the line of campfires and Moreriss turned from his stirring to the next campfire. He and the ‘pillar held a conversation in their own language. Then Moreriss returned to his stirring with a shrug.

“What was that about?” She asked.

“Breakfässt tomorrow.”

Cambria felt a chill spear down her spine and handed her mug to the ‘pillar. “What do you mean, Moreriss; *exactly*.”

Whenever the pillars mentioned ‘breakfast’ it usually meant someone was going to die or already had.

“Men fight, man will die. We get breakfässt.” He shrugged again and was dismayed when Cambria rose.

“Where?” She asked.

“Food iss almosst ready.” He complained.

“It will keep. Where is this fight?”

Moreriss hung his head. “In the clearing near the ssstone building.”

The foundry. Would Sam allow such a thing? Did he condone the violence? And who was about to die and feed the ‘pillars?

Chapter Twenty

Cambria heard the noise of the spectators before she saw them. They formed a circle around two combatants. Sam stood in the opening of his foundry, watching. He gave her a nod and she approached the circle.

The men moved aside as if she had a contagious disease. Vangana and Devlin circled each other warily. Devlin had a slice through the front of his shirt. A thin splotch of blood marred the material. Vangana had a slice through the forearm of his right sleeve. Each man had a bruised face.

They must have had a fistfight first, she thought.

Devlin lashed out in a similar style to Michaels. Vangana backed away from him and received cat calls and whistles from the onlookers for his lack of aggression.

Cambria knew what he was doing: waiting patiently for the right opportunity. He'd watched her and had learned. He even ignored the comments about his lack of masculinity, about his parentage and about having an unnatural relationship with his sister and dog.

She saw him smile at that one. Devlin dived in with crossing slashes, forced Vangana to back-pedal around the circle and dodge the blade.

"Fight me, you weasel." Devlin huffed.

"Dev, you fight like a girl." Vangana grinned.

Devlin's face went dark and he charged, his knife held high, forgetting everything he knew about knife fighting, including the fundamental rule never to let emotions be involved.

Vangana's blade flashed in the later afternoon sun as he stepped into his opponent and suddenly Devlin backed away holding a bloody wrist. His knife dropped to the ground and the crowd fell silent.

Whoa, I never taught him that! Cambria eyed the young man with more respect.

Vangana kept an eye on him. "Have you had enough?" He asked politely.

Devlin eyed him, his cut wrist and the knife.

“You’re welcome to have another go.” Vangana invited and backed away from the blade.

The crowd rumbled and murmured with anticipation. Cambria wondered which thought would hold sway with Devlin: the need to prove his superiority over a man supposedly an easy target and to save face in front of his colleagues, or the need to live to sneak up on Vangana another day.

The crowd settled into silence as Devlin continued think. Sweat popped out on his brow; he knew Vangana could and probably would kill him. He didn’t want to be ‘breakfast’; no one did.

He slowly backed up; blood seeping through the tightly clenched fingers gripping his wrist.

“No.” He gave Vangana an evil glare, that promised retribution and Cambria sighed. Never telegraph your intentions. Vangana nodded in acknowledgment at the unspoken challenge.

Sooner or later, one of them would be dead and the ‘pillars would rejoice.

Devlin pushed through the crowd towards Sam who led him into the foundry. The crowd drifted away, disappointed. Whether in the lack of a kill or Devlin, she didn’t know.

“Well done.” She said to Vangana when he was finally standing alone.

“Thank you.” He grimaced. “I wanted to kill him.” He confessed. “I really, *really* wanted to kill him.”

“Fight for many things, Joey, but not for pride and never in anger.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Yeah, I got that. He didn’t understand, did he?”

“Nope.” They both turned towards the path. “Join me for dinner?”

Vangana stared at her in surprise. “You never invite anyone to your campfire.”

Cambria shrugged. “I’ve never felt the inclination.”

“I’d be honoured.” He said and tried hard to suppress a beaming smile. “I did it, Ms Peterson. I actually *did it*.”

“What exactly was your intention and why?” She asked and sat on her stool. Moreriss glared resentfully at her.

Vangana lowered himself onto the other stool. “I wanted to avenge all the humiliation that dick has heaped on me. I wanted to show him, show them all, I’m not the weakling they think I am. That I’m not a coward.” His fists tapped his thighs, punctuating each word.

“Instead, you showed them you could fight and made yourself an enemy who will see you dead at the first opportunity.”

“Yeah.”

“And you fought in a circle.” She said and glanced at Moreriss. The ‘pillar turned his attention to spooning stew into a bowl for her and then another for Vangana.

“I don’t understand what you mean.” He said and took the bowl from the ‘pillar with an absent thanks.

“You fought in the circle, thus showing everyone that you knew how to fight all along, but when faced with danger outside the fence...”

“I demonstrated I was still a coward, willing to fight in a safe environment, not when it counted.”

Cambria nodded and tasted the stew. “This is great, Moreriss,” she gave the ‘pillar a warm smile and his brooding features cleared to grin back at her.

He lifted a hand. “It’sss a sssecret.” And hissed in humour. Cambria chuckled.

“Is there something I’m missing?” Vangana asked and Cambria shook her head.

“Just an in-joke between me and Moreriss.” Her smile faded. “Do you understand what you’ve done, Joey?”

“Yeah, I do now.” He looked up the line. Men stared down at them then commented to one another. “Their attitude won’t change unless I kill something significant.”

“Their attitude may not change even then. It’s up to you whether you want these people to leave you alone; they’ll never be your friends.” She murmured.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“There are always choices, Joey; it’s a matter of recognising them.”

He turned back to her. “Okay, I’ll bite: what other choices do I have?”

“Why is belonging so important to you?”

She thought he wouldn’t answer. His face closed down and he bent to his stew. Cambria waited, ate her own stew. She was finished before he spoke.

“I didn’t belong back on Earth, either. Is there something wrong with wanting to find like-minded people?”

“No, not at all. You just have to make sure that they *are* like-minded and that you want to be with these people for the right reasons.”

Vangana stared at her and she blinked. She was being uncharacteristically philosophical and she wondered why.

“That sounds reasonable, but...”

“What would I know about it?” She asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about it, Joey, I just know what is right for me. You have to decide what is right for you, that’s all.”

“Okay.”

Darkness had fallen, the glow from the campfires providing subdued lighting. As if realising, Joey shifted, uncomfortable with the intimate lighting. “I’d better go,” Joey said and stood.

“Be careful, Joey.”

He nodded and walked up the line. She watched him until he ducked into a hut a little further up from Jones’s.

Cambria stared into the fire.

“Why do you care about him so much?” Jones asked from behind her.

“How long have you been listening?” She asked without turning.

“A while.” He took Joey’s seat. “Answer the question.”

She glanced at him. His eyes burned with... was that jealousy? Cambria sighed and lifted a shoulder. It wasn’t her problem if he was jealous; it was something he’d have

to deal with himself. And she was getting tired of his disappearing and reappearing when it suited him.

Did they have a relationship or not?

“He just doesn’t seem to be the man you painted him. When I found him out in the forest, he seemed... lost. I think he’s still lost.”

Jones’s shoulders relaxed. “You feel sorry for him.” He said in a quiet voice.

“Yeah, I guess I do. I also don’t like to see people bullied, men or women.”

“Ever the crusader.”

“If you like. I seem to be pursuing one of your crusades, although what it is, I have no idea.”

“The only crusade I have is to get home.” His voice turned sharp and he glared at her.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you failed the first time.”

He was silent for a while and Cambria again stared into the fire. “We couldn’t get in.” He finally said.

Cambria grunted. She wasn’t going to give him a clue on how to escape. She didn’t trust him. He’d betrayed her already by taking Chien away when she needed him. Obviously, he didn’t trust her with what he considered the most important objective in his life. Well, he could work it out on his own.

“Any ideas?”

Cambria lifted her gaze to his. He wore his most charming smile. She wouldn’t fall for it. Why did he persist?

“Not at the moment,” she replied and lowered her eyes to the fire.

“Would you tell me if you had one?”

“Probably,” she lied and nodded.

Silence descended on the village. Moreriss wandered off as did the other pillars. Cambria yawned.

“I guess I’d better go. We still have half the fence line to patrol tomorrow. How did the other teams do?”

“Changing the subject?” He asked, his gaze hooded.

“I thought that subject was closed. Was there something else you wanted to ask me?”

He studied her for a moment and Cambria kept her expression curious. He finally shook his head. “No, I guess not.” He took a deep breath of the night air. “The other teams are doing fine. There isn’t as much damage as I expected.”

“Someone left the gate open, by the way, you might want to give us a warning about that tomorrow.”

His gaze sharpened. “Anything come through?”

Cambria shook her head. “I don’t know. There wasn’t anything around when we came in, but I mentioned it to Simons and Vangana to close the gate every time they come through.”

She rose and stretched.

“I’ll do that,” Jones said watching the dying embers. Cambria stepped away from him.

She half expected him to invite himself into her hut and she was curiously disappointed when he didn’t.

Cambria stripped off and rolled into her bed. She didn’t care for him; she refused to. He might make her feel special when she was in his arms; she might enjoy the best sex she’d had in ages, but she didn’t have to *care* for him. He was just a means to an end, a diversion from the daily dangers; that was all.

She drifted off to sleep wondering why she was trying so hard to convince herself he was nothing to her.

xxx

Jones delivered the warning about the gate at his briefing and disappeared by the time Simons decided to join them. The other teams, minus Devlin, left and Cambria and Vangana were about to go hunting Simons when he dragged himself up the path.

He opened the gate without a word and led them out. Cambria and Joey glanced at each other, at Simons’s painful walk. Cambria figured the man was so intent on

proving himself a tough guy yesterday that this morning his muscles were paying for it.

That was okay with her. She smirked.

The walk to the marked tree was quiet; even Simons kept his stomping to a minimum. The forest was silent, not even a breeze stirred.

Cambria listened for animals, Vangana was deep in thought again and Simons was disinclined to converse with either of them.

The marked tree appeared, and next to it, a broken fence.

“What the *fuck*?” Simons said and turned to them. “This wasn’t busted yesterday.” His gaze was accusing.

“No, it wasn’t.” Cambria walked up to the fence. Someone had lifted the bar out of the recesses and chopped in two. “Someone’s come back and done this.” Both she and Joey looked at Simons. He held up his hands.

“I didn’t bust a gut fixing fences yesterday to destroy them again. I ain’t that much of a masochist.”

“But I bet you know who is,” Vangana said quietly and stepped up to the man.

“That’s enough, Joey.”

He glared at her.

“Simons didn’t do this. Even if he knows who did, he’s pissed about it. That’s right isn’t it, Simons?”

“You bet your ass. I’m gonna tear someone a new one when we get back.”

Cambria tilted her head at Vangana.

He nodded. “Okay, Simons. How about you stand guard and Ms Peterson and I will fix this?”

Simons’s lip curled into a sneer. “Since when do you give orders, boy?”

“If you’d prefer to do the hard work, Simons, you’re welcome to,” Cambria said with a raised hand. He was in pain; he couldn’t hide the slight stoop to ease the tight muscles in his back.

Simons glanced from one to the other and relaxed his aggressive stance. “No, I enjoy all the fun, so I guess I’d better take my turn at guarding.” He said and turned his back.

XXX

Louis walked away from the Project Banish control room disappointed. Another planet, another rescue, another failure for him.

There was no sign of Cambria or Robinson and he felt... *despair*.

“Nothing?” Ranalda asked him as he left the elevator to return to his desk.

He looked at her and shook his head. “I’m sorry, but no.”

Louis slumped into his seat; Ranalda took the chair opposite.

“I don’t understand it.” He wished he could swivel the chair and stare out a window, but he was so far underground his view would be of earthworms and fossils. “I have checked and re-checked the planets and their co-ordinates. Granted, we’re finding people your father sent out there, and we’re finding legitimate criminals, but there is no sign of people he was the last to see.”

“Maybe there is another list?” She remarked and he sat straighter.

“*Another list*. Yeah, that would work. All the people we’ve found were exiled via the courts. He *must* have a private list for those people he doesn’t want found. The personal vendetta ones; the ones he saw personally, perhaps in his office.” His eyes began to glow as a plan formed. “You know Ranalda, the judge is looking for me, and you, of course. But...”

“If you’re thinking I’m going to march into his office and hand myself over, *you* are mistaken. I will not willingly put me or my baby anywhere *near* that psychopath.”

She stood. “Just keep searching. Those people are out there, all you have to do is find them.” She strolled away and left him staring after her.

Ranalda Bolingbroke was a stunning woman, he thought. It was a pity she belonged to someone else; and so did he.

Still, it was a good idea. He, or someone, needed to search Bolingbroke’s office. There had to be planets and co-ordinates out there that they didn’t have. But who could he talk to?

He hadn't seen Maurice for days. He was probably off on some nefarious mission. Did he dare talk to Montague? Could he even get in to see him? He reached for his communicator. One way to find out. And he dialled Montague's secretary.

He was surprised at the ease with which he could get an appointment with the man. He had until this afternoon to organise his presentation. Pushing aside numerous files, he bent his head and began to outline his strategy.

xxx

"And the High Priest gave you this to give to me?" Ranald asked his assistant. It was a cape, no. A cloak. It was made of soft, coffee-coloured leather. The drape was perfect, right to his ankles so he wouldn't trip. He'd never seen a more magnificent cape. Attached to the leather at the collar and studded down the placket were the whitest of diamonds he had ever seen. He wore millions of dollars worth of diamonds on his cloak and they were *buttons*.

Ranald tipped back his head and laughed. He swirled the cloak around him. "What do you think, Moeller?"

"I think, sir, that within a week, you will make the most terrible and magnificent monarch the world has every seen."

Fawning bastard, Ranald thought, but Moeller was right. He turned to look in the ceiling-to-floor mirror of his dressing room. Oh, yes, he *did* look magnificent; regal, dignified and elegant. His fingers fondled the leather, smoothed down the hide. It was so soft; the colours extraordinary. He would order boots to match and, he tilted his head, a hat, too.

He swirled out of his dressing room. "A week, you say?"

"Yes, sir, all is in preparation for your coronation. They are anxious for your arrival."

Moeller's mouth twitched in a half smile. The judge ignored it and as his hand stroked the leather, his gaze settled on the Alps. He would have mountains were he was going. Higher than these hills, more spectacular, all his to with what he wanted. The oceans, the land, the very air would be *his*. The people - men, women, children were all his to command.

Ranald sighed with pleasure. A week and he would be gone from this hellhole, no more to kowtow to antiquated laws of right and wrong, no longer to put up with people who didn't respect him, didn't defer to him, didn't know their place. And the God-damned World Council. *He* should have been in charge. Then he would have sorted those militant governments out, oh yes, indeed. A few tactical strikes, wipe out a country and others would beg, plead do anything to avoid the same fate. Yeah, he should be ruling the World Council.

But no amount of lobbying would get him there. Too young, not enough experience, blah, blah, fucking *blah*.

Well, he was king of his own world now and wouldn't the Council gasp in shock if they knew? With more power than those idiots could dream of. And speaking of which...

"Where are my daughter and Boudreaux?" He turned back to his assistant.

"Uh, sir, both have disappeared. There's been no sign of them. Neither of them have tried to access their accounts, to draw out money or use credit chips, their neighbours haven't seen them. It's as if they never existed, sir."

Ranald narrowed his gaze. Moeller was aware of how important it was to detain Ranalda and Boudreaux; he wouldn't dare fail if it was humanly possible. "You've checked your sources on the street?"

"Yes, sir. First thing I did. No one and I mean *not one person* on the street has seen either of them. You know how impossible that is. The only clue I have is that a man visited Boudreaux on the night we were to detain him. Both men got away. I have searched the international personal database and he is Maurice Joubert; he and Boudreaux ran together as children and young men until Boudreaux saw the error of his ways, got an education and began work with the World Council as an archivist. According to the records, Joubert was arrested for burglary and vanished into the system. Obviously, he's alive and well and hiding somewhere."

"The question, Moeller, is how he found out about Boudreaux now."

"Coincidence?" Moeller offered.

"Oh, Moeller, do you really think so?" Ranald gave him a humourless smile.

"No, sir. Someone tipped him off."

“That’s right. Ergo, Boudreaux told someone that he was in danger. That means he, too, was tipped off about the raid. He must have found your surveillance bugs on his system and made plans to disappear.” Ranald tapped his chin with a finger. “Did this Joubert help him? Did Boudreaux call his childhood friend for help? Joubert seems to be very good at hiding.”

“That seems a likely scenario, sir.” Moeller agreed.

“Of course it is. I thought of it, didn’t I?” He slammed his hands on the desk. “Find Joubert, you find Boudreaux.”

“Yes, sir, and your daughter?”

“To hell with her. She’s probably a prostitute and no one would have her. Or some john popped her. I don’t care. She’s gone; I’m happy.”

“I’ll get on the Boudreaux problem, right away.” Moeller bowed and left Bolingbroke to his thoughts. Was Boudreaux worth it? He wondered. In a week, he would be gone and all this would be a nasty memory.

He would give Moeller time. If he failed, who cared? If he succeeded, well, he’d make an example of Boudreaux. Give him a long and painful lesson in respect and staying out of important people’s business.

xxx

“And that’s about it, sir. If we can get Bolingbroke’s private list, we will find those who have definite information against him.” Louis leaned forward in his chair, anticipating Montague’s approval of his idea.

“What makes you think we haven’t been trying to get to the judge’s private office?”

Louis’s face warmed. “Well, er, you...”

“Mr Boudreaux, we run a highly effective organisation here. Otherwise, you’d be living out your days on some rock in a distant galaxy and no one would be the wiser.”

Montague leaned his forearms on the desktop. “It takes more than a good idea to succeed.” He allowed. “But if we were able to get into the judge’s office, this would all be a moot point and you wouldn’t be sitting here. Why do you think we have failed?”

“Er, he has good security?” Louis felt like an idiot.

“That’s right. We don’t know how long he’s been using his own corridor, but, given the amount of worlds out there, and the amount of superior technology...” he prompted.

“Bolingbroke would have a security system of the like’s we’ve never seen. If we haven’t seen it, we can’t compromise it.” Louis slumped back into his seat, embarrassed.

“Very good, Mr Boudreaux. Now. We are doing all we can to gain access. It’s a lengthy process and we have to use guile and stealth. All you can do is bring people home. What you do is an important job, Louis, one we couldn’t have done faster... *legally*. Every week, more and more people return home.” He shook his silver head and studied the paperwork in front of him. “I had no idea so many people were involved in sending their enemies out there. This corridor was supposed to be of extreme secrecy. Now, every tin pot country has one. And I want to know who gave it to them.” He lifted his head. “That’s not for you to do. Your job is to find planets. You will find your... girlfriend. Give it time.”

Louis felt suitably chastened, but he had one idea left. “Sir, we have an asset that we might be able to use, if you could convince...”

“She turned you down flat as well, huh?”

“Sir?” Louis gaped at him.

“Of course we asked Ranalda Bolingbroke if she would help, but she won’t risk her child. I don’t blame her. The judge, given what she told us and from our own observation, is one sick and twisted asshole. No, Louis, we won’t be risking her in this operation.”

“I... understand, sir.” He rose and turned towards the door. “It’s just so hard to know she’s out there somewhere on, as you said, some rock in a distant galaxy.”

“Have patience, son. From what you’ve told me, Cambria Peterson can look after herself. Her records show as much.”

Louis went back to his workstation, discouraged and disheartened. Montague was right, he thought, he needed patience, he needed to do his work and he would find her.

Chapter Twenty-One

The crossbow bolt took Simons in the centre of his chest. He grunted once then fell to his knees and dropped to the ground.

Cambria and Joey stared at him for a shocked moment then dived over the fence and into dense foliage.

She focused beyond the broad-leafed plant to Simons' body, searched for the assassin. Nothing moved out there.

"Devlin," Joey said and started to move. Cambria laid a hand on his arm and she heard a solid thunk as another bolt hit the fence. The sharp steel of the arrowhead came through the wood less than a foot from her face and she flinched.

"We don't know that," she whispered and sidled sideways, away from Joey. Another bolt came in under the top fence beam and struck the ground near her legs. Someone wanted her out of the way, not Joey, she deduced. Simons' death was to get their attention.

She slowly turned her head to Joey and flicked her wrist. He nodded and quietly moved further away from her. No crossbow bolt tracked him and he stopped.

Whoever it was moved so he was facing her. She hadn't heard them and she should have. They were good, she thought, but not that good. Their aim was awful, but a lucky shot would kill her just as a carefully aimed one. Unless... the shots were placed to separate her from Joey.

Cambria wriggled sideways to the post and another shot thunked into the upright. The wood was too thick for the arrow to pass through, but she'd felt the vibration close to her cheek. For her, it wasn't a matter of who wanted to kill her, but who didn't. If she was dead, the men could get back to their own male run community without interference. Jones would have an easier time of controlling them, too. But, as Dooriss had said, he was more interested in getting other people to do his dirty work than directly involve himself.

Which didn't say much for their relationship. Did he just see her as someone to fuck? He was good in the sack, but twice did not a commitment make. In fact, neither of them had declared undying love or even affection. And neither would, she realised.

The attraction would pass, she thought, it was only passion... and she'd better concentrate on the issue at hand rather than wondering about her sex life

Should she risk a peek? She glanced at Joey. He lifted his hands as a silent 'I don't know'. He was too far away for conversation; she would have to do something herself.

She looked to the right. There was more foliage and the next post was ten feet away.

Whoever was out there would probably assume she would head for it.

She glanced to the left. Joey was safely behind the next post. He clicked an arrow into his crossbow. Hers rested against her hip and she was running out of time.

The killer had to shift position for a better shot at her, but which way would he go? Left or right? Behind her was a tree, but open space between her and it. It was all a matter of trying to predict what the would-be assassin would assume she'd do.

Cambria slowly turned over and dragged her legs up to her chest. Nothing happened. She reached down and drew her cross bow, loaded a bolt into it and risked a quick look around the opposite side of the post.

The bolt whistled by the left side of her face and she flinched back. Maybe they weren't such a bad shot after all, she thought as warm blood slid down her cheek. She shuffled a little further to her right. Silence. How could they move so quietly? Joey, she saw, was gone. She hadn't heard him move, either.

He would have to teach her how to do that, once she escaped from whomever hunted her. She'd taught Joey to kill; he would teach her to walk quietly.

What now, she wondered. Escape and evade? The assassin would follow; hear her path. Wait for the son of a bitch? All he had to do was be patient and she'd eventually come out of hiding or he would find a better position. Confrontation was out of the question. This man wanted to kill at a distance.

Could Joey do something or was he just cannon fodder? He moved quietly, yes, but could she trust him to take care of the assassin? No, she answered her own question.

She braced a foot on the fence post and got into position. She needed a better idea of where he was. Then she could move around him. It was too open here.

Cambria pushed off and sprinted towards the tree, every step she expected a crossbow bolt in her back.

She heard it whistle as it came in and she threw herself to the side before scrambling behind the tree trunk.

The archer hadn't missed. The feathers of the bolt stuck out from the back of her right calf; the razor sharp arrow tip came out on a downward angle on the side of the muscle. Even as she registered the wound, it started to sting, then burn with increasing intensity. Blood leaked out of both sides of the wound. She tucked her legs up and tried to ignore the injury. If she didn't know better, she would have said the archer was aiming to wound, not kill.

What an unhappy thought.

She had nothing with which to bind the wound and if she tried to take the shaft out, it would bleed more, weaken her that much quicker.

Okay, she was hurt, but she still had her wits. If he knew he'd hit her, he would soon come to check his handiwork. If he thought he'd missed, he would wait until a better shot presented itself.

She would have to make sure that didn't eventuate.

Cambria looked around. The forest was darker here, with more trees and bushes. It occurred to her that who ever was taking potshots at her, might have been the same man to leave the gate open. But to what purpose? What connected her to the gate? Or were the two events connected at all? And where *the hell* was Joey?

It was tough waiting for the enemy to make a move, but she had to lure him out and the only way she could think of was staying motionless. He would have to check his handiwork, collect his bolts. Each man had a set, but Sam made sure every set had a different style of feathers. It was an identifying mark the assassin couldn't afford to have discovered.

Her leg was on fire. Blood soaked through her sock and into her boot. Insects hovered around the wound and lapped at the oozing edges. More of the buzzing creatures flitted around her face, but she couldn't afford to wave them off. Cambria tried to concentrate on her surroundings. She couldn't quite focus, but a plan pushed

to the front of her mind and she carefully and slowly took off her shirt. Cambria hoped she had enough time, energy and patience for it.

She dipped the front material of her shirt in the blood, soaked it. Then she removed one of her own crossbow bolts and smeared blood on it, too. With slow movements, she put the shirt back on, grimaced at the touch of cold, wet blood against her stomach.

The sun reached its zenith, slid towards the horizon and still she waited. A light breeze sprang up, cool enough to dry the sweat on her forehead, but not her body.

She clenched her jaw against the fire in her leg as she shifted and the agony slowly eased to a dull throb. Insects buzzed around her.

The assassin wasn't coming. He would have turned up if he thought she'd been neutralised. Unless, Joey got to him. No. If that were true, Joey would be noisily approaching. Even as she had that thought, she heard a rustle of leaves with a different cadence to the breeze. She snagged the bloody arrow through the opening of her shirt, held it there between two fingers, as if the assassin had, indeed, shot her.

She kept her head low in case she was wrong about the assassin.

Silence. Then another brush of leaves against cloth and she gripped the crossbow tighter in her fist. She'd better have the strength to use it or she was a dead woman. A smile crept across her lips; she'd said that before. Cambria drew her knife, laid it on the ground next to her thigh.

Cambria stared at the insects on her leg. Blood oozed and dripped onto the ground, formed a viscous pool. More insects turned up to the feast.

The rustling came closer. She felt as if someone stared at her, assessed her. Chin to her chest, holding her breath, fingers relaxed on the cross bow, Cambria did nothing.

A sword tip poked her shoulder and she resisted wincing as the point jabbed into her upper arm. As if she didn't have enough injuries or scars.

When she failed to react, a boot shoved her onto her side. Her leg burned ferociously at the sudden shift as she toppled sideways. Her teeth ached from holding in a scream, but she kept herself loose. The soil smelled of rotting foliage, moisture and the faint coppery tang of blood.

“And now you’re a dead bitch,” a low voice muttered. “Not so tough now.” She heard the man noisily clear his throat and spit. The gob landed her face, slid down her jaw to her chin.

He leaned down. One hand gripped her leg below the bolt, the other hand held the arrow shaft.

Cambria felt her heart-rate spike as she realised what he was about to do. She shifted her hand slightly, then raised the crossbow. He let out a gasp of surprise just before the bolt went through his body, chest level.

She dropped the crossbow and picked up the knife. Her arm slashed out and the blade caught him across the throat. The motion rolled her towards him and she landed on her elbow, bloody knife gripped in her hand. He stared at her in shock and horror. Then the life drained from his eyes and he toppled backwards, lay sprawled on the ground his gaze fixed on the canopy.

Cambria wiped the spittle away on her shoulder. Disgusting habit, she grimaced and pushed herself up to rest against the tree trunk.

Adrenalin coursed through her body. She heaved herself up and leaned against the trunk. The man was a stranger, but then weren’t most of them?

Someone was going to be mightily disappointed in this one, although, the ‘pillars were going to be happy.

Her leg was painful, but not life-threatening yet and she hopped away from the scene of her latest killing with no regret.

She looked around for a branch short enough to use as a crutch and heard a shocked gasp.

Joey leapt over the fence.

“Oh, my God. *Cambria!*” his arm came around her shoulders. “I think you’d better lie down,” he said softly.

“I need to get back to the village.” She said and leaned against him.

“Not with an arrow sticking out of your guts, you’re not.”

Cambria snorted. “This?” She tugged the arrow out of her shirt. “Mine.”

“You... shot yourself?”

“No, idiot,” she hopped forward. “I had to lure the assassin out and close enough to...” she flicked a glance at him, “sort him out. The only way I could think of was to play dead. Thus, a shirt dipped in blood from my leg and an arrow sticking out.” She gave him a tired grin, “worked, huh.”

“Oh, yeah. Jesus, woman.” He put an arm under hers and helped her to the fence. By the time she got there, she was drenched in sweat, breathing hard and slightly dizzy.

Joey solved her problem by picking her up in his arms and striding down the path.

“We’ll make better time this way,” he said.

“You won’t be able to keep it up for long.”

He glared at her. “Watch me.”

But after carrying her for less than half an hour, he was beginning to lag and struggle.

“Put me down, Joey, and rest. We still have a long way to go and the sun’s going down.”

He perched her on an old tree stump and sat on the ground, flexing his toes and leg muscles. “We need to do something about that,” he pointed to her calf.

“What do you suggest?”

“We could pull it out.” He reached out and she slapped his hand away.

“Do that and you’ll do more damage, it will bleed even more.”

He stared up at her, then nodded.

Cambria hopped off the stump and Joey rose. He made to pick her up again, but she shook her head. “Just be a crutch for me.”

He gave her a strange look, but she ducked under his arm and they began the laborious trip back to the gate.

They made better time. Joey was rested and took more of her weight as she hopped down the path.

It was night before they saw the gate. Joey was all but dragging her. He propped her against the fence and opened the gate.

Cambria focused enough to hop through the opening, then fell flat on her face.

Joey closed the gate and grunted as he picked her up in his arms.

“Sam. Take me to Sam. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars,” she murmured.

“O... kay.” Joey breathed and made his way down the path.

The foundry was aglow with light; from the furnace and the campfire. Sam was in the foundry, the furnace puffed out goutts of flame as he worked the bellows. Juan sat by the campfire, stared into the flames.

Neither man heard them approach. Joey stepped into the foundry and Sam looked up. His eyes widened and he stopped pumping the bellows.

“What in God’s name happened now?” He said and strode towards them.

“Assassin.” Joey said and turned slightly, looking for somewhere to put her down.

“Here,” Sam cleared off sword prototypes, blocks of metal, leather and tools. He looked around then grabbed a folded blanket to put under her head.

“Oh, *shit*.” He said as he got a better look at her. “Head, stomach and leg wounds. Girl,” he said solemnly. “I can’t help you, only make you more comfortable.”

Cambria began unsealing her shirt. Joey brushed her hands aside to complete the job and she let him.

Sam huffed out a breath as he saw the smooth, unmarred skin. “You kill someone again? This his blood?”

“No, Sam, it’s mine. I’ll tell you about it later, just take this fucking bolt outta my leg, wouldya?”

“Get that lamp would you please, Joey?” Sam asked waving behind him. He winced as he saw the cut on her cheekbone. “Close, girl, real close.”

“Not close enough, Sam, I’m still here. A miss is a miss.”

Sam frowned at her. “That is very cynical of you, Cambria, you’re too young to have that kind of an attitude.”

“Tudor has made me this way, Sam,” she sighed.

“No,” he disagreed, “not Tudor, the men who inhabit her.”

She nodded tiredly.

Joey brought the lamp over and Sam winced. “Oh. Well. Ow.”

“Yeah, that just about sums it up, Sam.” She reached out and held his wrist. “Do what you have to.”

“Huh, you’re being brave now, girl, but when I take that out, you’re gonna be squealing like a baby.”

“Figured.”

“Joey, go get Juan and some water. Make it real hot.”

Joey nodded and left. Sam retrieved one of his small cooking knives, gave her a look and went out, leaving Cambria alone.

This is going to hurt. She thought and shuddered.

There were no modern medicines here on Tudor, nothing to knock her out with, she hadn’t seen any alcohol either and she feared she would have to do this cold turkey. Just the thought made her tremble again.

Sam reappeared too soon. Her leg throbbed harder, in sympathy for what was about to happen. Joey and Juan also arrived, grim faced and filled with purpose.

“What are they doing here Sam? I thought *you* were going to do this.”

Sam eyed the edge and tip of his blade before staring down at her. He slit the leg of her jeans and exposed the arrowhead. Cambria gripped the sides of the bench and clenched her teeth.

“They’re going to hold you *down*.” Sam said, dipping his hand into the bucket and quickly pulling out a slim, pointed pair of tongs.

Joey went to her feet and carefully removed her socks and boots; Juan stood behind her head. He twitched his fingers and she lifted her arms to him. Juan grabbed rope and wrapped it around her wrists. He pulled another length through and around her wrists and tied it off below the edge of the bench. “Oh, fuck,” she whispered as Joey got a firm grip on her ankles and she closed her eyes. She so didn’t want to look. Sam held onto her leg, just above the arrow tip.

The initial probing of the knife didn't hurt much, but when he dug deeper, that's when she screamed and tried to thrash about. Juan threw himself across her upper body to stop her from struggling. Joey leaned harder on her ankles, her skin was slippery with sweat, but he refused to let go.

Sam continued to dig, Cambria howled, begged, pleaded and tried to toss the men off. It went on and on until Joey opened his mouth to stop Sam. He shook his head at the young man and gently cut the arrow shaft. He pulled the rest of the bolt out and Joey saw why it had taken so long. The bottom half of the shaft was dotted with spikes. Sam had done his best to remove the spikes first, but he had failed to get them all. Blood gushed out of the wound. Sam tossed the arrowhead and feathered tip onto the bench.

Juan raised himself off Cambria. She'd finally passed out and the men sighed with relief.

Joey abruptly turned and left.

Sam could hear him vomiting just outside the door.

Juan handed Sam a thick cloth and he tied it around the two holes. "Rope," he said and Juan handed him a small length that he tied around Cambria's thigh as a tourniquet.

Juan stroked Cambria's damp forehead and gently brushed the dampness away. Sam could see his man was a bit weepy. Juan untied Cambria's arms and laid them by her side. The wrists were chaffed raw and Juan glanced at Sam, his bottom lip sticking out.

"You did your best, Juan," he said softly, "She'll understand." He licked his fingers and threaded a needle.

xxx

Cambria felt as if dipped in molten fire. She couldn't catch her breath the air was so hot. Millions of tiny needles prickled her skin and waves of heat poured over her. She was thirsty, so thirsty her head ached with the need, her flesh cried out for moisture.

"Gotta go," she mumbled, "gotta get out."

Ice. S...s... so cold and she held her teeth together to stop them from chattering. Cold, snow, mountains, home. Then the heat returned, more ferocious, burning her nerves away. "Run, run, run." She whispered hoarsely.

Someone stalked her. No matter how she struggled, she couldn't move fast enough to get away from him. "Not so tough," someone kept repeating to her, "not so tough." It was the voice of a stranger, of a friend, of a lover, of no one and everyone.

"You're plenty tough enough," a deep velvety voice crooned in her ear. "Tough enough." It echoed through her and she held on to the words, relaxed into sleep.

A headache the size of a small country pounded. Cambria kept her eyes closed and tried to breath through each aching throb. Flickering light told her it was night and someone had lit lamps. She felt exhausted as if she'd run a couple of marathons. The tiredness was too familiar.

Memories flitted through her mind, but she couldn't grab on to any coherent thought. She had to remember something, something important.

She lay on something soft and her fingers flexed over the heavy weave of a blanket.

She heard a quiet noise and subtle movement. A hand gently cupped her cheek, was laid on her forehead and she lifted heavy eyelids to look at an equally exhausted looking Sam.

He smiled at her, the relief evident in his eyes. "Hey, white girl." He whispered.

"You look like shit, Sam," she croaked and he grinned.

"You don't look so hot yourself, girl." He turned away, then held a straw to her lips.

The water was warm, tainted with something, but she sipped it gratefully, until he took it away. "You need to rest now."

"Okay," she closed her eyes and slept.

It was morning when she woke, still tired, but unable to sleep. Opening her eyes, she could see outside to another sparkling day. She rolled her head on the pillow and looked around the foundry. The furnace smouldered resentfully, unused for days, as if abandoned. She wondered where Sam had gone, caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned in that direction.

Juan peeked around the corner of the wall and she smiled at him. He straightened and approached her carefully as if any movement on his behalf would be devastating to her.

“Hey, Juan, where’s Sam?”

Juan joined his hands as if praying and laid them on his cheek, closed his eyes.

“Sleeping?” She asked and Juan nodded. He stepped closer, then lifted fingers to his mouth and gagged. He pointed to her.

“I’ve been sick?”

He nodded and held up two fingers.

“For two days?” Again he nodded. He walked to the furnace. Lying on the edge was another bladder. He brought it to her and she sipped the warm fluid. This time, Juan allowed her finish before taking it away.

“Help me up, will you Juan?” she asked and raised onto her elbows and winced. She had finger marks on her upper arms, the bruises black with a faint green edge. The blanket started to slide down her naked chest; more black bruise. Juan caught her attention. He saw what she was trying to do and shook his head vigorously. “No? Why not?”

He carefully pulled the blanket back from her leg. Her... heavily bandaged leg.

Cambria looked at him. He mimed lifting something up and firing. The he pointed to the display of different kinds of arrows. Juan measured out a hand length then pointed to her leg.

“Someone shot me with a crossbow.”

He nodded and she laid back, tried to remember. It came in fits and starts. “Then what happened.”

Juan looked a little distress as he tried to think of a way to describe what happened next.

“Joey Vangana brought you here at your request.” Sam said and stepped inside. He felt her forehead and nodded. “Your temperature’s down, thank God. I dug the bolt out, but you developed a fever and I had to do more... remedial work.” He lifted the blanket away and began to unwrap the bandage.

“What... kind of remedial work?”

He pulled the last part of the bandage away and looked closer. “The kind you need to be unconscious for.”

Cambria rose on her elbows again. Instead of two holes in her leg, there was a straight line with two holes. “You cut my leg open.” She said.

“Yeah, it was the only way to get the remaining spikes out and clean up.”

“Spikes?”

Sam nodded to Juan. The younger man moved to another shelf and brought down the two halves of the arrow. He handed both sections to Cambria.

Sam pressed on the wound and she sucked in a breath as a deep throb started.

Juan carefully handed her the arrow. Small spikes extruded from the shaft. “You’re work, Sam?”

He nodded, his attention on the injury. “Custom made.”

“For?”

Now he looked at her. “Chien.”

Cambria eased back onto her pillow. “Chien didn’t do this.”

“No.” He gave her a brief smile. “The ‘pillars send their thanks, by the way.”

She sighed. “It was never my intention to be the chief supplier of their food, Sam.”

“I know that. It’s just way it is.” He stood and Juan handed him a clean bandage and a small piece of wood that had some dark green paste on it.

Sam smeared the paste on. It was cool and hot at the same time, and it itched.

“What’s that?” She asked.

“Something the ‘pillars gave me. It apparently assists in healing and it’s doing a fine job.” He wrapped her leg again.

“Can I get up?” She asked once he was done.

“Do you feel able to?”

Cambria shrugged. “Won’t know until I try.”

Sam put his arm around her shoulders and eased her into a sitting position, while she held onto the blanket.

“Any dizziness?”

“Not yet.”

“Feel up to some food, then?”

Cambria paused in thought. “I could eat, yes.” She moved to swing her legs off the bench, but Sam stopped her.

“No, you stay here. I don’t want a sudden rush of blood shooting down your leg. First, because it would hurt and second, it would hurt a lot.”

“Alright, but I think I may have to get up sooner or later.”

He raised a midnight eyebrow.

“Bathroom break, eventually.”

Sam gave her a bland look. “We’ll see. We have... alternatives.”

“I don’t think I want to know.” She said and he gave her a wide, white smile.

“You’re right. You don’t.” He turned to Juan who needed no words, just left to go to the cooking fire.

“You’re a good man, Sam. I would have died without you.”

“True. But you had enough sense to have Joey bring you here rather than back to your hut. Someone wants you dead, girl.”

“Yeah. So what else is new?” She looked down at her hands in her lap. “I’ve got to go. Leave Tudor if I can.”

“So you said.”

Cambria raised her head. “I did?”

“You were out of it, but you kept saying you had to go, to run.”

“I don’t remember that.” She shook her head.

“There’s a lot you don’t remember, I’m sure.” His smile flickered.

“I was hot, really hot, then cold, as if I was dropped into ice water.”

“Close enough,” he said. “We had to get your temperature down. Best way to do that was dump you into a cold bath. And, girl, you fought us all the way.”

“Hence, my nakedness and bruises.”

“Nothin’ I ain’t seen before and passed on; you are also one tough bitch to help.” He rubbed his jaw as if she’d actually hit him. The twinkle in his eye said ‘no’ but she wondered if she’d done Juan some damage and that’s why he was wary of her now.

Cambria chuckled. “You always know what to say to me, Sam.”

“All part of the service, ma’am.” He gave her a slight bow. Juan walked in with a steaming mug and handed it to her.

She thanked him and took a sip. It wasn’t Ssoclar, but something different; sweet without being overly so.

“Nutrient drink. I’ve been giving you warmed water with this in it, but the mugful is stronger. You can thank the ‘pillars for that, too. You’ll get better sooner, or so they promise.”

When she’d finished, Juan took the empty and Sam helped her lie down again. “Sleep for as long as you can. I’ll be back at sunset.”

“I’m keeping you from your work, aren’t I, Sam.” She glanced at the furnace then back at him.

“Not everything I do is with the furnace. The ‘pillars are most instructive on local medicine. And you’re giving me a lot of practice,” he said the last with a wry grin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cambria closed her eyes. She thought it was for only a moment, but when she opened them again, it was full dark and she had a full bladder that needed emptying.

She eased up onto her elbows and used a ridge between the stones of the wall to drag herself up. Carefully, she swung her injured leg off the bench. Pins and needles spiked up and down her leg, worse where the injury was. The feeling soon passed and she shifted to lower left leg off the table.

It, too, spiked with pins and needles, so she figured it was because she'd been lying flat on her back for a few days. Her feet dangled down a foot from the floor. She eased herself to the edge of the bench and tentatively touched down with her left foot. Her heel touched cold stone and she sighed. Her right calf throbbed, but it was manageable. She put her foot down lightly. No pain. More downward pressure and the throb increased.

It was difficult trying to hold the blanket and hop to the opening of the foundry. Full night greeted her and she had no idea of the time or where the men were.

There was a splash to the right and a deep rumbling voice. She turned in that direction.

Sam must be taking a bath, she thought. I'll ask him where I can... go.

Cambria came round the corner. Lanterns hung off the water barrels and sat on the table. Sam lay back in the tub, up to his chest in bubbles.

Bubbles? She thought and her jaw dropped when she saw Juan at the other end of the tub, also covered in bubbles.

“Jesus, Sam, my *eyes!*” She clapped a hand over her face, leaned against the wall and held the blanket with her other hand. Sam's laugh rumbled over her.

“Don't look, if you don't wanna see, girl.”

She heard another splash and peeked between her fingers. Sam had risen further in the bath, the bubbles up to his upper stomach. Water slid down the muscles of his chest and she suppressed a sigh of regret.

Juan peeked at her over the edge of the bath.

“I just wanted to know where I could... you know.” God, she was so *embarrassed*. She cleared her throat. “Hmm, bathroom break.”

His grin widened. She couldn't see what Juan was doing; he'd disappeared. “Ah, it's behind the foundry.” Cambria went to move but Sam stopped her with a... giggle. The giant of a man who looked like he could take on a dozen komatsus by himself, was *giggling*.

She *so* didn't want to know why.

He swallowed and pointed back to where she'd come. “If you reach around the opening of the foundry, you'll find the crutches Juan made for you.”

Cambria glanced back. “I'll, ah, thank him later. But it's going to be difficult to use crutches while dressed in a blanket.”

“I left you one of my shirts.” He suddenly looked startled and she cleared her throat.

“I'll, just... ah, go around the other side when I'm ready.” Sam ignored her. He had a dazed look on his face and she turned and hopped back to where the shirt hung and the crutches rested against the furnace.

She leaned against the wall and put two cool hands to her hot face. *Jesus*. That was a sight she could have done without.

The blanket dropped to the ground and she reached for the shirt. She had to fold the cuffs back numerous times before her hands were free. The tails drooped past her knees, but at least she was covered.

Her need grew in urgency so she turned to the crutches. They were made of wood, carefully carved with a protruding cylinder of wood for her hands. She tucked the padded supports under her arms and grinned. Juan was brilliant.

Cambria was awkward at first, but with a hop and a swing, she soon scoot around the back of the foundry.

Sam had built an outhouse. She struggled with the door until she realised it pulled out rather than pushed in. There was a metal box with a hole cut into it. Above the commode was another box with a chain attached and connected to the lower box by a pipe.

Cambria did her business and pulled the chain. Water rushed down into the toilet and away. *How about that?* She thought. *All the comforts of home.* Sam was a clever man.

Her hands began to ache and her leg throbbed in earnest by the time she returned to her makeshift bed. She couldn't hear anymore splashing, and assumed Sam and Juan had finished... their bath.

She was so tired as she levered herself up. Being horizontal again eased the ache in her leg and she snuggled under the blanket and dropped off to sleep.

Cambria's leg itched and something wriggled around her calf. She awoke lying on her side, stiff and uncomfortable. The blanket she lay on might be soft and comfortable when she lay flat, but on her side, she felt the hard wood of the bench.

She twitched as something dug into the healing wound and she rolled onto her back and sat up. There was an outraged hiss and a thunk.

Cambria peered over the edge of the bench. Dooriss uncurled herself from a protective ball.

"Why you do that?" She asked.

"Sorry, Dooriss, I didn't realise it was you. What were you doing?" Dooriss scrambled up the leg of the bench and Cambria shuffled closer to the wall to give the 'pillar more room. The creature flowed into her lap and stared into Cambria's eyes, her face solemn, her top hands resting on Cambria's shoulders, second hands holding her upper arms.

"Massage." She said. "Sssam ssayss good for mussscile before fisssio beginsss."

"Ah. Yes. Okay. It's just I didn't know what it was with the itching and the tickling."

"You make joke?"

"Kind of. But thank you, Dooriss, it does feel better." The 'pillar let her go and sat back.

"Bad." She said shaking her head. "You not come home. Moreriss fret, Dooriss fret, Jones puzzled, anxssious, worried. Joey come sssay you hurt bad and at Sssamsss. Jones go hunting." She grinned, "bring back breakfast you make."

“I’d say ‘you’re welcome’ but it creeps me out.” Cambria shuddered.

“Creepsss?”

“Never mind. So what did Jones do then?”

“He come down here. Cambria fighting with Ssam and Wan. He pick you up dump you in bath. Cambria sstop fighting.” Her expression was confused.

“You came with him?”

“Yesss,” she nodded, “might need my help.” When Cambria frowned, she continued. “I know medicine.” She stood straight. “Not jussst cleaner,” she chastised.

“No, of course not, I didn’t mean to imply that you were. After all, you laid the law down to Jones.” She lifted her head and looked around. “Where is everybody?”

Dooriss’s eyelids lowered. “Sssam and Wan go into foresst.”

“Uh, huh. And, er, how is everything up at the village?” She made shooing motions at Dooriss and the creature climbed off her lap. Cambria swung her legs around and carefully lowered herself to the ground.

“Village happy.” Dooriss said with a scowl.

“Why? Because I’m not there to cause trouble?” She reached for the crutches and began manoeuvring towards the outhouse. Dooriss followed.

“Yess. Jonesss, he tell Joey, Ssam and Wan not to tell otherssss you live. To ssay nothing. They agree.”

Cambria struggled with the door and Dooriss hissed and prodded her out of the way, opening the door herself.

Cambria did what was necessary and came out again. “Why would he do that?” She heaved herself around to the bath and washed her hands under the cold water spigot. She completed the circuit and went to the fire, sat down on a stool with a sigh.

“Jonesss knowss Chien did not do thiss.”

“I figured that much out myself. But they *were* his arrows.” She pulled the pot that sat near the fire closer. It had Ssoclar in it and she reached for a mug. Dooriss beat her to it and filled it for her. Cambria scowled. She wasn’t that much of an invalid that she couldn’t get her own drink. But she didn’t want to offend Dooriss again.

“Thank you, Dooriss.” She murmured.

“Jonesss bringsss back some arrowsss. Ssows them to Chien. Chien angry, sswears vengeance on thief. Jonesss angry, too. Not with Chien; trusstss Chien.”

“Yeah, I got that. He wouldn’t do this to me because he sees me as a warrior, Dooriss; as an equal, not a woman.” Dooriss tilted her head, puzzled. “Equals do not sneak up on each other; they face each other in combat. It might be a twisted way of doing things, but that’s the way Chien sees it.”

The Ssoclar was lukewarm but welcome. There was nothing to eat, though, and her belly growled in protest.

“You need food. Fatten you up.” Dooriss said, as if the lack of food was her fault.

“Yeah, I know, but I don’t know how.”

Dooriss gaped at her. “Not know how? Why isss thiss?”

“No one taught me, Dooriss, and I never went camping.”

“Camping?”

“I have never been to place that didn’t have other people to do my cooking for me. They’re called restaurants. And I love them.”

“You need to learn. Learn right now.” All of her arms crossed and she even tapped her foot.

Cambria figured that Dooriss would show her, but she continued to stare at her, waiting.

“What?” She asked.

Dooriss pointed to the fire. “Cook. I will watch and guide.”

“Dooriss, I said I didn’t know how, I meant it. I need a clue here.”

“A clue?”

Cambria sighed. “What do I do first?”

She was saved by the arrival of Sam and Juan. A flush threatened to climb up her face as she remembered the previous day, but she willed it away.

“Hey, girl, you look better. The massage work?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, I think so. I’m unwilling to apply any pressure though.”

“Good thing, too. We’ll start some physiotherapy on it after Juan gets dinner done. In the mean time, girl, you need to bathe.”

“I do?” She sniffed the shirt then stared at Dooriss. For a creature who objected to even the very air being tainted, she’d been mighty reticent in speaking up. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Dooriss shuffled her feet and looked away. “Cambria sspecial.” She said quietly.

“I don’t understand.” She glanced at Sam who shrugged.

“Cambria alwaysss bringsss breakfasst. Cambria resspectsss ‘pillarsss, we mustt respect her back. Pillarsss decide messyy Cambria air, price for breakfasst.” She finished with a mumble.

Sam made a choking noise and Cambria glared at him. “Help me up, damn it, and no snickering.”

He put a hand to his heart. “Me? Snicker? Why, perish the thought.” He helped her stand and picked up her crutches. “Messy Cambria air, huh? There a lot of that around?”

She adjusted her hold on the crutches. “Only when I kill something.” She said meaningfully and he laughed loud and long.

“Go... go take your bath,” Sam wiped his eyes, “Juan, go with her. I’ll get dinner started.”

Juan fashioned a sling for her leg so the bandage wouldn’t get wet. It was slightly uncomfortable, hooked under her ankle, but she was glad to sink into the hot water and scrub herself clean.

She lay back in the water. “Thank you for the crutches, Juan, they are beautifully made.”

He bobbed his head, red crept up his face.

“You’re a fine craftsman.” Again he bobbed his head and she wondered if he’d be interested in making some furniture for her hut.

She cut the thought off before she could ask the question. She couldn't stay; she had to find a way to leave Tudor, or she would die - whether by man or beast, this planet would kill her and soon.

The heat soothed and the sun warmed. She closed her eyes and sighed. There was nothing better, she decided, than soaking in a hot bath and catching some stray rays. She was woefully pale and a little colour would do her self-esteem the world of good.

"Looking good, babe."

Cambria's eyes popped open. Jones stood a few feet away from her, a slight smile on his lips and a suggestive expression in his eyes. Although one eye had swelled almost shut.

"What happened to you?" She asked.

"You did." He took a step closer and she resisted the urge to cover herself. She had no bubbles to hide under and she felt too vulnerable. He'd been gone for days and she'd missed him. "I went to pick you up and bam, right in eye. Good shot, though." He grinned and stared down the length of her body.

"No, Excalibur, I am in no shape, nor am I in the position, to ease your rampaging hormones." She held up a hand to stop him, but he just crouched down near her head a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Cam, your shape is just fine and as for the position," he tilted his head towards the sling her leg rested in, "another one of those and even that would be fine."

Heat travelled up her chest, throat and into her face. He turned back to her and laid his mouth on hers. Her hand moved up his chest and into his hair as her lips parted and she let him in.

His hand encircled her throat, felt her pulse accelerate and moved down into the water to cup her breast. He lifted his head, his eyes hooded. "I've missed you," he murmured, his face filled with need.

Cambria swallowed. "I... I've missed you too." She tugged his head down and met his mouth with her own. His hand moved from her breast and slid down her stomach.

"Jones!" Sam called and Excalibur jerked back, startled. "Leave that woman alone."

The big man strode up to them and Jones stood. "You ready to get out now?" Sam asked his expression annoyed.

"Yeah," she glanced at Jones, "I guess I am."

It was harder to get out than stepping in. With grunts, winces and groping hands, Sam managed to get her out. She finally stood naked on one foot and Sam wrapped a towel around her. Jones stepped back and watched, his expression once more blank.

"Why don't you get dressed," Sam said and rubbed her upper arms while staring at Jones, "and I'll dish up some dinner. Jones, why don't you come with me?"

"Why don't I?" He murmured his gaze fixed on Cambria.

Sam gripped his arm and led him away. Juan returned to help her and she raised an eyebrow at him.

He hunched in on himself and refused to look at her.

"What's wrong, Juan?"

He held out the shirt and she turned her back to allow him to put it on her. He kept his head bent as he sealed it for her, too, even though she was perfectly capable of doing it herself. He did things for her as if apologising to her.

"Juan, I'm not angry you left me alone with Jones; that was very... polite of you. Now tell me what's wrong."

He glanced at her then where Sam and Jones had disappeared.

"Jones. This has something to do with Jones. Sam wouldn't hurt you, I know that."

He nodded with his head bent..

"You're afraid of Jones, aren't you? So afraid, you go to Sam every time he appears."

Juan nodded. "Would you tell me why?" Juan shook his head and brushed his hands down her sleeves to her hands. He squeezed her fingers and laid a light kiss on her cheek before walking away.

What was that about?

Cambria shrugged. Juan might tell her if she pressed him, but it was such a gentle gesture, she didn't want to spoil it.

Juan made himself scarce. Jones and Sam had their heads close together and turned to her when she came up to the campfire.

“Here, girl, you need feeding up.” Sam handed her a bowl of stew when she’d made herself comfortable on a stool, her leg propped out in front of her.

“I bet you say that to all the boys,” she said and he smiled.

“Jones, I think you should tell her.” Sam said and earned a glare from the man.

“Tell me what?” Cambria asked and tasted a spoonful of the fragrant stew. She wouldn’t tell Moreriss, but Sam’s cooking was better than his.

Jones clicked his tongue in frustration and looked away. “Sam.”

“No, this involves her.” He poked a meaty finger at Jones. “You. Tell. Her. And tell her why.”

“Jones? What’s going on?”

“I thought that since you’re down here with Sam, he’d protect you while you heal.”

“I haven’t needed protecting, Jones.” Her comment met with silence from both men.

“Sam? You haven’t...” He wouldn’t look at her. “What did you do?”

Sam crossed his arms. “This isn’t about me and what I might or might not have done, missy, this is about *you*.”

“Ball’s in your court, Jones.” Cambria said.

“Your would-be assassin is one of a proposed many.” He said without preamble.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, Cambria, there’s been a sort of revolution at the village.” Jones sighed and told her the rest. “The majority of men don’t want you anywhere near the village. Dead or exiled would suit them fine. Some prefer dead, the more squeamish prefer exiled. They feel you’re too much of a distraction and a disruption to their peaceful existence. Your rising body count is also a threat. One, they feel, needs to be neutralised.”

Cambria snorted. “So rather than accept responsibility for their stupidity and lustful feelings, they will, as history has so ably demonstrated, blame the woman for their own faults.”

Sam nodded. "In a nutshell, yes."

She watched Jones. "And who will protect the 'pillars the next time the komatsus invade?"

He cleared his throat and looked away.

"No, let me think of the scenario for you." She rubbed her forehead. "They had no trouble before I arrived, ergo I must have had something to do with it. Um... I know! I lured the komatsus with my feminine wiles perhaps?"

"Sarcasm will not solve the problem, Cam," Sam said softly.

"Problem?" She said with disgust. "I'm *not* the problem. Oh, yes," she said when both men looked at her in surprise, "I understand what's going on here only to clearly. I have invaded the 'men only' club and done better at masculine pursuits than they have. And what men cannot understand, they destroy." Rage bubbled, boiled; outrage and offence turned the heat up. "I should go up there and knock some sense into those assholes, except to a certain extent they are right."

Jones and Sam looked at each. "They are?" Jones asked hesitantly.

"Well, sure. I've interrupted what used to be a fairly relaxed and peaceful place. I've upset that by killing men and what physically threatens them. I'm the first woman they've seen in years and they can't touch me. That's gotta be frustrating. I've inadvertently caused a 'pillar strike, forced them to accept their responsibilities in the alliance." She turned to Jones. "Pissed you off, didn't it, to have Dooriss make demands of you that you really didn't want to do."

"Yeah, it did. You're right. You have a better grasp of the situation than I would have given you credit for." He looked vaguely apologetic.

"That's all right, Jones," she smiled at him, "men have consistently and constantly underestimated women for thousands of years. *And* been just as patronizing."

Sam chuckled and shook his head. "You are so right, Cambria, so right."

"Okay, I get the joke," Jones said testily, "but it's what are we going to do about it before another assassin decides to have another go."

"Nothing, Jones. We will do nothing. I'm leaving." She said baldly and his gaze narrowed.

“How are you going to do that?”

Cambria’s smile widened. “Haven’t had much success, huh, Jones?”

Excalibur flushed under her knowing stare.

“Look, Jones, if I told you everything I knew about the fortress and Manor, you would have been out of here like a rat out of an aquaduct and you know it. You’ve already tried. So I kept some things to myself until it was unavoidable. Now it is, and now I’m leaving.”

Sam gaped at her. “You really know how to leave? How come you never told me?”

It was Cambria’s turn to flush. “The subject never came up Sam, you know that.”

He still looked hurt.

“If it works, the fortress will be opened and anyone will be able to go. I know how hard you’ve worked on the local medicine and your blacksmithing. I didn’t know whether you wanted to know or not. Now you do, and now you and Juan can make a decision whether you want to go back. There’s no telling what’s on the other side of the corridor, whether it’s safe or...”

“I get the picture, Cambria.”

“My problem, Sam, has been whom to trust.” Sam’s face cleared. “Now, I *know* I can trust you.” Cambria shrugged. “I don’t even know if it will work.”

“At a guess?” Sam asked.

“I’ll return to Earth or die trying Sam, there’s no room for middle ground.”

Sam nodded. “You’ll need more than a few days before you’re fit enough, Cam.”

She sighed and stared into the fire. “Yeah, I know.” She reached for her crutches and stood.

Jones and Sam looked at her but she had nothing more to say to them; nothing she *wanted* to say to them.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Louis collapsed onto his bed and gently knocked his fists against his head.

His Spartan room had the necessities: A comfortable double bed, a desk with a lamp and a data unit, a chest of drawers for his clothes and a small en-suite, but no pictures, no entertainment unit, nor bookcases.

He didn't mind the lack of amenities; the recreation room had separate entertainment units if he needed them. The food was good, the company okay; but it wasn't *his* food and the company weren't *his* friends.

He missed the outdoors. Missed the cafes, theatre, restaurants, the simple pleasures of fresh air or a spectacular sunset over the mountains.

It was late, he knew, and he *was* tired. Working fourteen or sixteen hours a day wore at him. But in sleep came dreams. Dreams he couldn't control and left him with an ache in his chest when he awoke.

A soft knock on his door lifted his head and he wondered if he had the energy to get up. The knock came again and he rolled off the bed with a sigh. It could be important.

Ranalda stood just beyond the doorway, head bowed, wringing her hands and Louis leaned against the door. "What can I do you for this late in the evening, Ranalda?"

"May I come in?" She asked softly. Louis's eyes roamed over her. She was dressed in a midnight blue shirt-waister that perfectly matched her eyes. He dropped his gaze. Why would she be barefoot?

Louis raised his eyebrows and opened the door wider. "Of course," he said and Ranalda stepped by him, "why don't you sit down and tell me what's bothering you?"

He pulled the chair out from the desk and she perched on the edge. Louis sat onto his bed, back against the headboard. "I'd offer you a drink, but I don't have anything."

"Ah, no, thank you. Drinking in private areas is not permitted." She said and looked around the room, her gaze landed on everything except him.

Louis sat up, crossed his legs. "What's up, Ranalda?" He asked. "What brings you here? I have no further information on your fiancé, you know."

"No... I know that. I just... needed to be with someone who understood."

“Understood? Understood what?” He asked softly. She didn’t meet his gaze.

“Understand that... Ah, you’re the only person who wouldn’t... I’m not making a lot of sense, am I?”

He saw a flickering smile and willed her to lift her head. “You’re doing fine. Just take it slow and easy.”

“Maybe it would be better if I showed you.” She murmured, almost to herself and slowly stood.

Louis was intrigued. What exactly was she going to show him at this time of night?

Then, an idea occurred to him. She *wouldn’t*... would she? He admitted to himself that he’d had a few fantasies about her. He couldn’t stay celibate for Cambria, but she’d understand.

Did Ranalda feeling the same way? Would Dane forgive her when he returned? All this was pure speculation, but when she climbed onto the bed and straddled him, he swallowed hard. Sometimes, it was tough to be right.

He looked up into her face as she settled on his upper thighs. Louis used his will power not rise to the occasion before she made her intentions clear. Her blue eyes lit with a fire and a determination he’d seen before, but the passion was new.

“Ranalda?”

She leaned down and brushed his lips with hers, a light butterfly kiss that had his lips humming for more and his groin tightening despite his best efforts. The expression in her eyes burned, her perfume filled his head, her warmth touched him and he leaned to touch his mouth to hers in reply. He deepened the kiss and she moaned, parted her lips for him. He delved in to taste her, to tangle his tongue with hers. His hands came up to hold her head still and to run his fingers through her silky soft hair. It came unbound and blonde glory flowed around her shoulders.

He held her moist and lush mouth away from him and stared at her. She’d unbuttoned the top half of her dress and he swallowed. Her breasts pushed up, full and ripe. Louis hands trembled as he touched a finger to the top of one, dragged it across to the other.

Ranalda shrugged out of the sleeves, the material sliding down her pale skin with a hiss.

Then she undid the front clasp of her bra and spilled into his hands.

Louis wanted to ask her why, but all thought suddenly switched off with the warm flesh peaking in his hands. She lowered herself to his lap and he could only think of one place where he wanted to be: deep inside her. Heat surged through his body and he leaned forward to take a distended nipple into his mouth.

Ranalda arched back and he undid the seals on his shirt. He rolled his shoulders, pushed the material down his arms without releasing her. He licked, he sucked, he gently bit and he soothed her when she gasped and held his head to her.

Her hands dropped to his belt buckle, then the seals of his pants before he came up for air and kissed her again. This time, he rolled her, dragged her dress off her. She tugged his pants down and it was then that he realized she wasn't wearing any panties.

The heat pooled and blood surged as he thrust at her, sliding against her, then entering. She arched her back, exposed her throat. He took advantage and licked her skin, gently bit, then soothed. One hand held her hip the other tweaked her breast and he moved deeper and harder into her warm, wet depths.

His breath huffed out and his heart pounded as he pumped into her, felt the tingles start. Her legs came around him and he slightly changed his angle. She tensed, cried out and his vision dimmed as her inner muscles clenched hotly around him. He felt himself shoot into her in a surge of heat and pleasure.

When he could breathe again, he found himself still embedded within her, his head in the crook of her shoulder. She drew circles on his sweaty back.

He rose onto his elbows and looked down at her. "Are you alright?"

"Uhh, hmm." Her hands slipped down to his waist and below, to his butt.

Louis brushed her hair back from her face and she gazed up at him. For once, he couldn't read her expression. To fill the sudden, awkward silence, he leaned down and kissed her. Her mouth was soft, ripe and he could feel himself harden again. Even as he did, her fingers tightened on his butt. He flexed against her and she groaned.

"Why? Ranalda," he asked and held himself still.

“Why, what?” Her hands came up to brush through his hair.

“This. Why this?”

Her eyes held his. “Because I was lonely, because I needed this, because...” one creamy shoulder lifted and she shifted her legs. Louis held his breath against the pleasure. “Because I’m afraid I will never see Dane again.”

“So, I’m a substitute?” He flexed his hips again and her breath caught.

“Just like I’m a substitute.” Her knees came up and he sank into her further.

“There *is no* substitute for you, sweetheart.” He ground against her and her breathing accelerated. “And it’s not polite to bring up other partners when you’re in bed with someone else, chere; try to remember that.”

He began to thrust in and out; she closed her eyes and lifted her face to his. Louis obliged her and kissed her lush mouth. She wrapped herself around him, rocked against him and he went blind as he emptied himself into her.

Ranalda curled into his arms, one arm across his waist, her head on his shoulder. His eyes drifted shut and this time, he let the dreams come.

xxx

Cambria didn’t know what woke her, only that she felt a chill of fear streak her spine. She rolled over, her eyes almost closed.

The furnace coals glowed a sullen red, but it provided enough light for her to see someone on the far side of the foundry reach up and pull something off the wall. The shadow turned and began to sneak around towards her, a large axe in his hands.

Cambria was unarmed and handicapped with her leg. The sight of a man with an axe immobilised her in panic.

The man crept closer, his head shifted as if searching. She heard another noise and the man froze, one foot in front of the other. Cambria watched him. She couldn’t afford to look away to the source of the other noise.

Sweat pop out over her body as she waited for the man to move, but he was patient. She could see the glimmer of his eyes as he looked around the foundry. He didn’t move his head, only his eyes. He held himself still and waited.

Cambria sighed and his eyes darted to her. Through her eyelashes, she saw him smile, teeth white in the gloom and he took another step towards her. The axe began to rise but he was too far away for her to do anything other than get out of the way.

She waited until the axe reached the apex of the arc and swung forward. Cambria braced herself and rolled off the bench, landed with a thump. The man grunted in surprise as the axe bit into the wood of the bench. He tried to pull the axe out and Cambria got to her knees. She pulled back her fist and hit him as hard as she could in the groin.

The man squeaked and dropped to his knees, gripped his privates. Cambria swung her fist again and struck him under his chin. He toppled backwards, hit his head on the stone furnace wall and slumped down, his chin pressed into his shoulder, his legs bent awkwardly at the knees.

Lamplight suddenly illuminated the foundry and Jones stood at the back of the foundry, holding a sword.

Cambria used the bench legs to rise on one foot, shook out her stinging knuckles. She tossed her blanket onto the bench and hopped up.

“Is he dead?” Jones asked.

“No, just unconscious.”

“For a change,” Jones grinned. She didn’t return it; she felt a sick suspicion rise.

“Do you want to question him, or are you going to kill him?” She asked and his grin slid away as he walked towards the fallen man.

“Me? I thought you would want to...”

“Night, Jones.” She rolled into her blanket and faced the wall alert for his approach.

She heard subdued muttering followed by feet being dragged across dirt. Let Jones sort him out. If she’d waited for Jones to do something, she’d minced meat.

She recalled him saying that he was a lot meaner than the others and that was why he was *de facto* leader. But he’d never proved it to her. He’d never risked his life, either. The expression in his eyes sometimes chilled her, but a particular gaze didn’t mean he had any follow through.

But... was he behind the assassins?

Cambria tucked the blanket closer around her. She knew nothing about Jones, except he could make love like the best of them. He was an enigma.

She didn't trust him. He'd already betrayed her, on more than one occasion.

He could either let her would-be killer go, or he would take action himself. If she saw the man again, she would do something, until then, she needed her sleep.

XXX

"Heard you had a visitor last night," Sam commented as she approached the fire.

"Yep." She sat and he handed her a mug of hot Ssoclar.

"You kill him?" He eyed her over the rim of his own mug.

"No. I left him in the custody of Jones."

Sam frowned. "That probably wasn't a good idea."

"Sam, I was awoken by a noise. There's a guy with an axe. He raises the axe, I roll off the bench, and punch him in the crown jewels, then knock him out. It is then, after he is down, that I see Jones. He didn't do a thing, Sam, not one thing at all to protect me. He stood back and watched. I do not want Jones near me, Sam. I don't trust him." She paused. This was the second time he'd been in a position to help her and failed. Actively, deliberately *failed*. Set her up to die.

"You know, I think... no. He wouldn't..." She murmured.

"What are you thinking, girl?"

"I'm thinking this is the second time Jones has let me down when it has come to a life or death situation. I'm wondering if he has something to do with the assassins."

Sam chuckled. "No, he has nothing to do with those killers."

"Why not? He says he's mean enough."

Sam's expression sobered and he stared at her. "Because he loves you."

It was Cambria's turn to laugh. "Love? I don't think so."

"And I think you have feelings for him as well."

"Sam. Jones is seriously fucked up. I know nothing about him; he knows less about me. If his feelings were that deep, he would want to know, *I* would want to know. But

more importantly, he would try to protect me. He hasn't, not when the situations turned nasty." She shook her head. "No all we have is an attraction that will fade once we return."

"I think you're wrong, but I'll let it go for now."

"Sam, this isn't a topic I'm going to discuss with you. No matter how much I value your advice. He doesn't love me and I can't love him."

He looked at her sharply.

"What?"

"You said 'can't', not don't." He said solemnly.

Cambria waved a hand. "Semantics, Sam, you know what I mean."

Sam said nothing.

She levered herself up and went back into the foundry for fresh clothes. Juan had gone up to her hut and cleared it out for her. She had her own jeans, shirts and underwear again. She shoved them into the 'pillar-woven backpack Sam supplied and went to take a bath.

No one bothered her and she spent a good hour soaking. Tomorrow, Sam would take out the stitches in her leg. Then she could start exercising the muscle and she would be finally on her way to getting out of here.

Relaxed, dressed and armed with her knife and sword, Cambria slowly made her way toward the forest. Sam and Jones warned her to stay away from the village and that was fine. But she needed to do more than lie around waiting to heal. Using the crutches, however, was giving her upper body strength and that couldn't be a bad thing.

There were many well-worn paths through the woods. Sam did his own hunting and cut his own wood for bows, arrows, staffs, axe hafts, everything. She figured she would be safe on one of the paths.

As usual, there wasn't a lot of sound. She could hear insects buzzing, a light breeze rustled the broad leaves of the foliage and her own hop thump of her walk with the crutches.

She enjoyed her walk; the breeze was cool, but not cold, the colours were brilliant and for once, she didn't feel threatened by anything.

A large, flat rock provided a resting place for her and she laid her crutches down. She eased down onto her back and stared up at the blue sky through sun-dappled leaves.

A week, maybe less and she'd be on her way, with or without Jones. The problem was, she needed him or Sam; but Sam wouldn't leave Juan and Juan, regretfully, would be more of a hindrance than a help in her plan.

She could get into the fortress, but once inside, Manor would know what she was up to. He wouldn't believe she'd come for a visit. The very fact she compromised his security would be... unfortunate for the rest of the convicts; Manor would make adjustments. And if she could get in, she might very well know how to get back to Earth. She *did* know, but to his thinking, he couldn't let her go and try to stop her.

Cambria lifted her head to put her arms under her head and saw Jones strolling down the path towards her. She sat up. Now how did he know where to find her when she hadn't even known which path she'd take?

"Hello, Jones," she said and he nodded to her.

She shuffled aside to give him room to sit. "How did you find me?" She asked.

"I wasn't looking for you."

"Oh." She said, deflated. "Did you get any information out of our intruder?"

"Hmmm? Oh, well, he just figured he'd take care of the problem by himself." He lifted a shoulder. "Another one who felt you were fair game, that's all."

"So where is he now?"

"Breakfasst." He hissed and she sighed. She was tired of the violence and home beckoned. It was strange; until she understood the greater threat, home was something she'd get to sooner or later. Now, it was imperative that she get home, get away from the troubles and get away from Jones. She couldn't decide what threat was greater to her well-being: one was physical; the other was emotional.

The physical threat could only kill her once; the emotional could cut her into pieces and damage her beyond repair.

“Any thoughts on the fortress?” He asked and watched the forest.

“A few, but none I’m going to share with you.”

He glanced at her then back to the forest. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t trust you, Jones.”

Faster than she thought possible, he had her on her back and her arms above her head, his face close to hers.

One of his hands held her wrists and he drew a finger down her unscarred cheek. “But you want me.”

She had nothing to say to that, so she continued to gaze up into his burning pale eyes. “Just as I want you,” he murmured softly and brought his mouth down onto hers.

Heat sparked through her. His mouth was hot, urgent, persuasive and she relaxed against him. He released her hands and she brought them to his shoulders. Why, she thought vaguely, could he do this to her?

His hand dived under her shirt, pushed her bra up and smoothed his hands over her breasts. He seemed frantic as his other hand undid her pants then his own.

Her own hands worked his shirt open and she pushed it off his shoulders. Jones leaned to one side and dragged her jeans down her legs, then his own.

He was on her and inside her before she could take a breath. Jones froze, then adjusted his fit with a subtle shift. Cambria swallowed and then brought his head down to hers. “Now, Jones.”

He began to move. Slowly. She lifted her hips, moved with him, felt him slide deeper into her.

“Look at me,” he breathed and she opened her eyes.

“Look at me,” he raised up on to his hands and pushed into her. “I want to see you when you come for me.” Jones increased his tempo, harder and faster until the increasing pleasure spiralled out of control and she exploded.

He collapsed on top of her. She felt the burn on her butt from the rock’s surface. Having sex outside was wonderful, but having it on a rock wasn’t.

Jones breathed heavily against her throat. She felt him lick away the sweat. He slid a hand up from her hip to her breast.

Jones gave her a gentle squeeze, then he slipped out of her and tugged up his jeans. He picked up his shirt and tossed it over his shoulder.

Without another word or a look, he walked away. Cambria lay stunned. Her legs felt like jelly, her blood was hot and her muscles lax. That was a goodbye fuck, she was sure of it. But why?

Had he set her up again? She sat up and looked around. The forest was silent, but that meant nothing. Cambria tugged her bra down and did up her shirt. She had to hop off the rock for her underwear and jeans. It took some time to untangle her clothes and put them to rights.

She bent down for her crutches, heard a thwang and a sharp click as something ricocheted off the rock she'd been lying on.

Cambria dived behind the rock and shook her head in despair. She was out of options, out of time and out of patience. She was sick *to death* of these men.

“What the fuck do you want?” She shouted.

“What Jones just had!” Came the reply and she groaned. They had a witness. But this man couldn't be as stupid as to think she would let him that close? He didn't honestly think that after shooting at her she would simply give up and let him screw her? Worth a shot, though.

“Okay.” She shouted back.

“Toss the knife and the sword ”

She slowly took out the knife and flicked it over the rock. The sword soon followed.

Thinking hard, she unsealed her shirt to below her breasts and undid the top snap of her jeans.

“Stand up.”

Cambria used the crutches to lever herself up and stumble towards the pathway.

The man was in his early fifties with grey hair and a deeply tanned, road-mapped face filled with wrinkles. He had a protruding belly, an unshaven recessive chin and

hollow cheeks. His eyes burned with desperate lust. This man meant business; this man meant to kill her when he was done with her. It would, of course be her fault. He held the crossbow levelled at her chest.

He could, no doubt, explain it away if he needed to. She'd had sex with Jones, and she couldn't deny it.

They would assume she'd done Juan and Sam, Vangana, too. Then she'd come onto him, got a little rough and damn, she'd died. The arrow hole? Oh, well, that was an accident.

Better yet, he'd just call the 'pillars and it would be her turn to be breakfassisst. She saw it in his eyes. There wasn't a thing she wouldn't do to protect herself, to keep her options open. She had proved her willingness to do her worst and the men still dared her to take them on. And one by one, they were doing just that.

She would accept the challenge until the day she left. But each man would require a different strategy. She wouldn't hunt them down. They had to come to her. She wouldn't lure them either. It was their choice to live or die, just as it was her choice to kill or let live.

"What do you want with a cripple?" She asked scowling. He never looked at her face, his eyes were glued to her chest and below.

"You a screamer?" He asked and licked his lips.

"Not usually. Are you?"

His gaze flicked to her eyes then down to her breasts again. He took another step forward.

"Strip." He ordered.

"Nope." She replied and he really looked at her.

"I can shoot you now and have you later."

Her eyebrows rose at that. "Like dead things do you?" And she unsealed her shirt all the way and spread it wide.

"Warm will do fine, you don't have to actively participate." He took another step closer, his eyes riveted to her chest.

“Man, you are one sick puppy.” She reached behind, under her shirt and unhooked her bra. She had to keep his focus on her and since his eyes were about to bulge out of his head as she used a finger between the cups to pull her bra slowly down; she had his attention all right.

She pulled the bra down until the edges just covered her nipples, then she ran a finger along the edge, over the cream coloured mounds. “What are you going to do to me?” She asked in a low voice.

He swallowed and watched her fingers. “Oh, I’m going to stick it into you, you’d like that wouldn’t you?” He seemed hypnotised her by hand, stroking her breasts. The crossbow lowered and she could just see the spikes on the shaft.

She hesitated when she saw it, but covered the pause by drawing her fingers down towards her belly button.

The crossbow trembled and the bulge in his pants grew. She dipped a hand into her jeans and he just about went cross-eyed. He walked another two paces to her, his hand stretched out to her breasts.

Cambria moved her hand to her right crutch, dropped the left. She swung it up and around, knocked the cross bow away. Falling to her knees she punched him in the groin as she had the intruder last night.

His eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed around his injured anatomy, howled with pain.

Cambria adjusted her clothing, hopped over to her sword and picked it up. Her knife lay next to it. She picked it up, wiped of the dust and sheathed it. The crossbow wasn’t in sight, but she didn’t need to look at it to know Chien’s bolt was in it.

The man whimpered when she got back to him, crutches firmly back in place.

Leaning down, she cut the quiver from his shoulder, tied it to one of her crutches and moved back. She put the tip of the sword against the man’s throat and he looked up at her through watering eyes.

“You men just don’t get it, do you?” She nicked his Adam’s apple and he whimpered again and closed his eyes. “I will kill any of you should you try to touch me. Do you understand me? He nodded his head rapidly. “Live or die?”

“I just wanted...”

“I know what you wanted.” She gave him another nick; she was so angry, her hand shook. Blood trickled down his throat. “Live. Or die?”

“I know you did Jones, you’ll have to kill me or I’ll tell everyone else.” He pulled his arms from between his legs. “I know that.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“Live, then. I want to live so I can kill you later for what you did.”

“For what *I* did? What were you going to do to me, huh?” The tip touched beneath his chin, lifted his head. “You were going to rape me, then kill me and make up some lame excuse for the others.”

He glared at her.

“Come near me again and I will fillet you for the ‘pillars.’”

She sheathed the sword and hobbled down the path. When he could walk again, the man would either immediately come after her, or go on back to the village. He had two choices: tell the men of his failure and be laughed at or keep it to himself and try again later.

Cambria didn’t care what he chose.

She moved a lot faster going back to the foundry than when she’d left. Sam sat by the fire talking to Juan. He saw her coming and stood. His gaze went over her shoulder then back to her face. She knew she looked angry, and didn’t care.

He made no move to approach her and she finally dropped onto a stool, tossed her crutches down next to her.

“That is *it*, Sam. Tomorrow, you take out these stitches and I am going to go to the fortress.”

She accepted a steaming mug of Ssoclar from Juan with trembling hands.

“What happened?”

“Jones and then some asshole. I can’t even take a relaxing walk in *fucking* woods without someone coming after me.” So she wouldn’t throw the mug into the fire in a

fit of pique, she rested it against her forehead instead and took a calming breath.

“Bastard set me up, Sam.”

She said softly and tried to stop her bottom lip from trembling. She couldn't believe the hurt she felt now at his fierceness, then indifference when he'd finished with her. Excalibur Jones didn't love her, just what she represented: relief from sexual frustration. To him, she'd become what she'd sworn never to be: a whore.

Sam's arm came around her shoulders and she leaned into him with a choked sigh. “He uses me, Sam, like a whore and I can't seem to say no to him.”

“Maybe I should make him bleed for hurting you this way.” His voice rumbled in his chest.

“Maybe you could, but it should be me making him bleed.” Her voice felt tight, a lump formed in her throat. She should never have let him get so close to her, never been so vulnerable to him. She had to stay away from him, or he would crush her.

“Feel like telling me?”

“About Jones? No. About the other, well, let's just say there is another man hobbling back to the village with damaged wedding tackle.” She lifted her head and reached down for her crutch. She untied the quiver of arrows. “Here,” she offered the bag to him.

He pulled out more of Chien's arrows and frowned. “I only made twenty arrows for him. I figured it would be enough.” He counted feathered shafts. “There are ten here.”

“Let's see. One I knocked from the crossbow. One you dug from my leg. One in the fence post, one in the fence beam, one that went by me into the ground. That means there are still five out there somewhere.” She said and sipped her drink.

“Yeah. But I don't want to have to dig them out of anyone. These are too brutal. I won't make any more.” He promised and placed the bag next to him.

“Good idea. Why did you make them in the first place?” She asked.

“Chien asked me and I wondered at the mechanics of making them. I guess I couldn't resist a challenge.” He shrugged, regret in his tone. They sat in silence for a while then Sam dragged in a deep breath. “Come on girl, time to check your leg and see whether you've done any more damage.”

“Okay. It does ache.” She hauled herself up and hobbled into the foundry. She stripped off her jeans and jumped up onto the bench.

Sam pressed the scar and she flinched. The wound felt hot, inflamed beneath the stitches.

“I don’t know whether to slap you or weep for you,” he sighed and reached over her head for a salve.

“May as well slap me, Sam, it would hurt less.” She leaned back and closed her eyes, missing the sharp glance he sent her.

The gel burned and cooled against her skin until her calf went numb and she sighed with relief.

“I prescribe a hot bath and rest, Cambria.”

“I had a bath this morning, Sam.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, you smell of sex, sweat and fear. A bath would do you good.”

Heat climbed up her face until she felt she could glow in the dark. She kept her eyes closed and nodded.

“I’ll make sure no one comes near you. Juan will too. For today, try to relax. All this tension isn’t good for your leg, Cambria.”

He’d used her name, she thought, he was serious. And when Sam was serious, Cambria took note. “Maybe you can send for Dooriss. She gives a wicked massage.”

“I’ll do that. Take a bath, get some sleep.” He advised and left her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was another perfect morning and Cambria was sick of it. She'd seen a variation in the weather exactly once.

Constant blue sky and sunshine, she decided, could be just as wearing as weeks in London during winter.

But. Today was the day. The stitches would come out and she'd see how far she could get without the crutches. She was anxious to move on, to leave Tudor, to return to... what?

She sat up and swung her legs off the bench. To what was she returning? A homicide investigation; or had she been tried *in absentia*? She guessed she didn't have a job to go back to, or a home. Bolingbroke had made sure of that. So what was it she was going back to?

Louis? Her feelings for him had dimmed under the bright intense glow of Jones. She was sorry for that, but... but nothing. She was sorry for it just the same.

Civilisation, she decided. She was going back to civilisation. Where she could walk the streets and not worry about being armed. The cafes, the restaurants, the theatre and dvids. It sounded so... boring. She could always take up an extreme sport if life proved to dull.

Cambria hopped down from the bench and grabbed her crutches. She made her way to the outhouse, then to the fire where Juan stirred a pot. She wondered what Moreriss and Dooriss were doing, then shrugged the thought away as Juan handed her a mug.

"Where's Sam?" She asked and looked around.

Juan grinned and pointed to the forest.

"What's he doing in there?"

Juan pursed his lips and tilted his head. He was trying to think of a way to tell her and she wondered why he didn't just write things down. Come to think of it, she'd yet to see any writing paper or pens.

What was it about the men that they didn't want to create their own comforts? No paper, and it was easy to make. There was no outhouse for the village, either, they just used the surrounding forest. The 'pillars supplied their food, their soap, their

everything. The men just sat around or went out on patrol. They settled for the lowest common denominator to make themselves comfortable. Well, it wasn't her problem.

Juan shrugged, his face apologetic.

"Never mind, Juan, I'm sure whatever it is, it's important. Do you know when he'll be back?"

Again he shrugged.

"Damn. He promised to take out my stitches today." She sipped her drink, disappointed.

Juan tapped the side of his pot to get her attention. He mimed taking out the stitches himself.

"Okay," she grinned, "*you* can do it."

Juan set the pot aside and hung a flat piece of metal high above the fire between the four steel rods. The rods were usually leaning over the fire, joined at the centre from which a pot could hang. Juan had made himself a barbeque. "What are you cooking, Juan?"

He raised a finger and put a bowl in his lap. He picked up a bladder and shook out something like flour into the bowl. Next came a small brown root that he crumpled in his fingers over the flour. He ladled a spoonful from his pot into the bowl and began to beat the mixture together.

When he was satisfied with the viscosity, he dropped a spoonful onto the hot metal. He lined up more circles of batter.

"Pancakes? You're making pancakes?" She leaned forward and sniffed. They didn't smell like pancakes, and Juan held out a hand and wobbled it from side-to-side. "Not pancakes, but something similar." He nodded.

"Okay."

He flipped them with a deft hand and a thin, flat piece of metal, waited. When ready, he scooped three of the cakes into a pile and placed them on a plate. He handed it to her with a grin and scooped up three more onto another plate.

Cambria's nose inhaled spices and she unsheathed her knife to cut into the fragrant bread.

Juan forestalled her and handed her a smaller knife with a look of disapproval. Was she that much of a barbarian that she would use a knife she'd killed with as cutlery?

She gave him a sheepish smile and put her knife back.

The cakes were different from pancakes, the flavour spicier, texture richer and fuller. She finished the three and looked at him hopefully. He gave her a wide grin and she held out her plate for more.

Sam came striding up as she was finishing her second plateful. He sat down with a thump and took the mug offered by Juan. He drank it down, sighed and let his companion refill the mug and hand him a plate.

Cambria waited until he was done; and that was four plates of cakes and three mugs of Ssoclar. She didn't ask where he put it all, she could see where it went.

"You look tired, Sam." She said.

"Yeah, well," he gave her a sly grin, "keeping you safe is a long and laborious process, girl."

He stretched his arms above his head and back, making his joints pop, then he rotated his neck.

"I'm grateful to you, Sam." She hesitated to ask, but she needed to know. "What are you going to do? Go home with Juan or stay?"

"I don't know, Cambria. We've discussed it, but Juan doesn't think he'll feel comfortable back on Earth. Here, he can be free from the expectations of others. Here, he can be his own man."

"And you?"

He looked at her then and rose. "I'll be happy wherever he is. I'd like to go back," he lifted a massive shoulder, "have a look, check a few things out. But that's just a curiosity for past things. I have a home here now, but thank you for the offer." He held a hand out to her and she took it, squeezed his meaty hand gently and let him go.

Juan handed the crutches to her and she followed Sam back into the foundry.

xxx

“Hmm. Not too bad.” Sam murmured and pressed her flesh with a meaty finger. “A little red, but I think that’s passing. You haven’t had a temperature for a while, so I think it’s just residue.” He stood over her. “When and if you get back, Cam, you’d best see a doctor, make sure everything’s okay.”

“I trust you, Sam, I thought I mentioned that.”

“Fine,” he bobbed his head in acknowledgment of her comment, “then do as I advise and see a doctor. He can at least recommend someone to do some... corrective work.”

“Okay, Sam, now be a gentleman and help me down.”

He held her elbow and eased her off the bench.

Cambria grinned. It felt good to be on two feet again. She wouldn’t be up to running any time soon, but... she took a step, then another. The muscles pulled and twinged, then began to burn. She’d managed to walk from one end of the foundry to the other before she had to stop. It was better to go slowly and test her limits than push beyond those boundaries and tear something.

“If feels good, Sam,” she said and raised her calf backwards. “Hand me the crutches please.”

“Let me look first.” He studied the injury. “Okay. Juan will have a hot pack for you. Rest your calf on it and you can try again this afternoon.”

“How soon, Sam?”

He clicked his tongue. “You’re determined to get out of here as soon as possible aren’t you.”

“The sooner I go, the sooner your life will get back to some resemblance of normal, you know that.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Give a week, maybe a little less.”

“But, Sam...”

“No, Cambria. No. Give it a week. We can take care of you until then.” He looked away.

“I can’t wait that long, Sam.” She took the gel from him and leaned down to apply it to the scar tissue. “First, someone will kill me in that time, and second they could target you or Juan, and I will not risk either of you for someone else’s vendetta.”

“Joey’s coming down to help guard you.”

“You’d risk him and Juan?”

“Ah, Cambria...” he sighed. “Do you think so little of yourself that you think you are not worth the risk?” He crouched down in front of her. “Girl you have a fucked up view of yourself.”

“Not really, Sam. I’m the target here and...”

“And nothing. We men are good for more than doing your cooking and cleaning, you know.” Cambria gaped at him and he laughed.

“I... I’m sorry, Sam, you’re right. I’ve abused your hospitality badly.”

He was still laughing as he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the fire. Juan looked over to them with an intense expression.

Sam sat her down and got the hot pack himself. “Keep that on for a while, then more salve. Dooriss will be down later with Joey. She’ll give you a massage.” He held up a hand and she closed her mouth. “Listen, girl. We know you’re determined to leave. Why don’t you let us facilitate that for you, huh?”

Cambria snorted with amused affection. “Okay, Sam, I’ll be good and I’ll behave. See?”

She wrapped the hot pack on her leg and crossed her arms. “I’m being good.”

Sam shook his head. “I’m heading back into the forest. Juan? You keep an eye out, okay?”

Juan nodded and tapped an empty pot. It made a remarkably loud noise and she winced.

Juan grinned at her.

The day passed slowly and quietly. Dooriss massaged her leg, then her shoulders. Not because Cambria had asked, but because the ‘pillar didn’t want to leave her

unguarded. Cambria finally suggested the ‘pillar move down to the foundry, but only if she got Sam’s okay.

Dooriss expressed her disgust at having to ask a human for permission for anything, by digging her claws into Cambria’s flesh. “Hey, ow! Dooriss, Sam built this place. It’s his! It’s only polite to ask.”

The massage left Cambria with relaxed shoulders, but a sore calf. Dooriss had said that it was only natural, it would ease and she left to find Sam.

xxx

“Your Honour,” Moeller said, attracting the judge’s attention away from the window. “The people of your world bid you come. Your palace is finished.”

“Why so formal?” Ranald asked and turned in his seat. His assistant was reading from, what looked like, an old piece of old yellow parchment, the edges a dark amber.

Moeller shifted his feet. “Uh, the high priest gave this to me to read to you, sir. It’s been translated into English, but the paper is a genuine antique.”

“Okay, then. Finish it.” Ranald leaned back in his chair, a faint smile on his lips.

“Yes, sir.” Moeller cleared his throat and began to read. “The First People bid you welcome home. We honour this occasion by making sacrifice to you on the first day of the first month of the first year of your coming. We welcome your presence, we welcome your magnificence, we welcome your strength. Praise be to the King/God Ranald. Praise be to his glory all who look upon him.”

“That’s it?” Ranald asked, amused.

“Yes, sir.” He lowered the parchment and laid it on the judge’s desk. “I understand there’ll be a welcoming ceremony when you arrive. A week long party, games, music, etc.”

“When do I leave, Moeller?” Ranald was careful to keep his voice bland. He didn’t want to betray his excitement to a dead man.

“Tomorrow, sir. Every thing is ready for you.”

“Good, good. Well. Thank you for the...” he waved his hand at the pronouncement. “I, er, have things to do before I... we leave. Please make sure that security is in place.”

“As you wish... My Lord,” Moeller bowed and Ranald chuckled. It was something he would have to get used to. But, no. It was something he expected and one didn’t get used to something owed him by his... people.

xxx

Ranalda was once again in his arms and Louis sighed. Why didn’t he feel guilty? Why did the thought of losing Ranalda hurt more than his loss of Cambria? He was aware that Ranalda was awake when she slid a hand down his naked belly and continued south. He placed his own hand over hers.

“We’re doing two more planets today, Rani.” He murmured and kissed the top of her head.

“We have time yet, don’t we?” She looked up at him, her blue eyes smoky with desire.

“Trantis and Tudor.” He said and she sighed.

“I don’t care anymore, Louis.” She snuggled closer, her hand moved lower. “It no longer matters to me. All I care about is being with you.” She laid her lips on his in a gentle kiss and he sighed into her mouth.

He knew exactly what she meant, but he couldn’t abandon the people who were still out there. According to Maurice, the reappearance of people thought dead had caused a furore in the World Council. Countries were back-peddalling from their own duplicity in the matter; some denied it, some confessed. The World Council, however, had information he, himself had supplied, to accuse countries of serious crimes. How it would sort itself out, he didn’t know. All he knew was that the population at large bayed for blood and the shut down of technology they never knew existed, but could clearly see was dangerous in the wrong hands.

The World Council would be busy for a while. For now, though, he had a job to do.

Ranalda’s hand wrapped around him, warm and firm. He could do his job in a little while, he decided and bent to her.

xxx

Dooriss was curled up on her stomach when Cambria woke. The ‘pillar was almost purring under the blanket and she hesitated to disturb her, but, she had needs she couldn’t ignore.

Carefully, she moved the ‘pillar onto the blanketed bench and slid out. Dooriss didn’t move and Cambria dressed then crept out of the Foundry into the pre-dawn light. Stars still speckled the western horizon, but a glow rose in the east. There was no colour to it, just a lessening of darkness. As she watched, individual trees more defined, she could see the path leading up to the village and colours lost their black shade and brightened.

Cambria eased her way to the outhouse and made use of the facilities. Her leg was better today, she thought as she made her way to the fire. Barely a twinge, really.

She sat and poked at the ashes. It was a wonderful time of the morning, she thought. The air held a dawn crispness she would miss. The bite in the air, the warmth of a fire, the smell of brewing Ssoclar and Juan and Sam’s cooking.

There were things she wouldn’t miss, of course, but here, now, she would miss this world and its ‘pillars.

The coals sparked and glowed. Cambria added more fuel until she had nice fire going. The sun came over the horizon like a spiteful child and she knew the coolness would soon evaporate.

She started a pot of Ssoclar. Juan and Sam had showed her often enough that she felt confident she could make it. All it took was constant stirring until it was ready.

The first sip told her she’d forgotten something. It wasn’t too bad, but she doubted the others would agree.

The sun climbed higher and still there was no sign of the men. She slowly walked back to the foundry, to Juan’s stores and picked up a jar with pale green crystals. This was what the Ssoclar was missing. She also got a jar of the gel for her leg.

Dooriss was a lump under her blanket and she wondered why the creature didn’t stir. Maybe, she’d had a late night, Cambria thought and went back to the fire.

Her calf ached by the time she sat down and added a sprinkle of the crystals into the steaming brew. She stirred it until the crystals dissolved and had another taste.

Ahhh, that was it. She pushed her jeans down and applied the gel. Its numbing qualities brought instant relief and she pulled her pants up again.

Where were the boys? She looked around at the forest. All was silent. Maybe she should go and tell them she'd made Ssoclar. She could imagine the look on Sam's face and chuckled. She was doing a little 'facilitating' on her own.

With no sign of the men, she decided to go and look for them. She knew three of them guarded her, four if Jones decided to make an appearance without her knowing, but she disregarded him. It hurt too much to think of what he'd tried to do to her.

He wouldn't be out there, she thought and her shoulders slumped. Again, she returned to the foundry for her crutches. As Sam said, there was no point in overdoing it. Dorriss slept on and she quietly hobbled into the forest.

Juan sat on a rock facing the back of the foundry and outhouse as she came up behind him. His alarm, a metal pot with a metal spoon was on the ground next to him.

"Hey, Juan, didn't you see me making Ssoclar?" She swung her way in front of him and saw the crossbow bolt protruding from the centre of his chest.

Cambria fell to her knees before him, her chest tight with grief, a lump in her throat and tears threatening to spill over. "Oh, Juan." She whispered and brushed her hand over his head and cupped his cold, waxy cheek. Her vision blurred as she recalled his kindnesses, his embarrassment, his eagerness... She dropped her hand.

Insects buzzed around the wound. He'd been dead for some hours and she looked closer at the arrow.

She recognised the flights. She had found number sixteen of Chien's arrows. Cambria sat back and studied Juan. Someone had gone to great lengths to pose the body, using branches and sticks to prop him up. But why? To lure her or Sam into a position where they could shoot?

Her nerves tightened but she ignored them. Juan. Kind, protective, sweet and gentle Juan. He'd never harmed a soul as long as she'd known him. In the end, they had killed him anyway.

When Sam found out... Sam. She watched the forest. Nothing moved.

Using the crutches she levered herself up. She would bury Juan later, not for the 'pillars breakfast, he deserved more respect than that. For now, she had to find Joey and Sam. She hung her head for a moment, said a silent prayer for him.

Making an educated guess, she moved down the path to the right of the foundry. Either Sam or Joey would want to be able to watch this approach and any from the front. It would give them a good angle on whomever tried to approach from Juan's position, too.

Legs stuck out from behind a tree chilled her to the bone and she stared around at the forest again before checking the body.

Joey lay on his back, empty eyes stared up at the green canopy. He had a knife in one hand, an empty crossbow in the other and a bolt lodged in the base of his throat; number seventeen, she thought dispiritedly. Two of her protectors were dead. Was Sam dead, too?

She lifted her head and stared across the clearing to the other side. That's where he would be, dead or alive.

She made her way slowly through the forest, careful not to make any sound. She stopped every few paces to listen. The silence made her uneasy.

A body was sprawled across a rock. It wasn't big enough to be Sam and she sighed with relief until she got closer. *Chien?*

He, too, had a crossbow bolt through his throat, but higher. From the way his head lay, she suspected the bolt had severed his spine. The blood was dry and congealed on the ground where it dripped and pooled.

He'd been dead for hours, and while she didn't feel too sad at Chien's death, she felt chagrined that a warrior of his calibre met his end from a distance.

There were two more arrows out there, and Sam was still missing. Would she find him dead? Where would he be? Where would he station himself to be a better protector? There was only one other place she could think of and she made her way back to the foundry.

Doorriss was gone. She'd been wrong. She'd thought Sam would be in the foundry itself, but he wasn't here.

Cambria eased to the ground and rested her back against the cooling furnace wall.

Why kill three good men, then not come after her? She was vulnerable to attack, but nothing had woken her. All three men had been dead for hours, plenty of time for someone to enter the foundry and kill her. Unless they saw her as the greater threat? But no. Chien was the best fighter around she thought. Joey, too was an excellent fighter. Even Juan had an effective alarm system. Why hadn't he been able to use it?

"Because he knew the killer," she said into the silence. "Because he knew and trusted who ever it was."

Sam wouldn't hurt his lover, she knew that, had seen them together. Sam had confessed a curiosity about Earth, though. Only yesterday, he'd said he would be happy wherever Juan was. Had he changed his mind and decided to take care of the problem?

Cambria didn't think so. But Juan was dead and Sam was missing.

Joey didn't trust anyone but her. Chien? She didn't know who he trusted. What she *did* know, was that her protectors were dead, she wasn't fit enough to take on a 'pillar, let alone a man who could kill three men silently. There were also, two more spiked arrows out there. Who were they for? Her and who else?

She had one option now: to head for the fortress before the village men found out she was alone down here or the killer returned. She wouldn't have time to bury the men after all and that hurt. They deserved more from her, and she couldn't give it. The guilt would live with her always.

Cambria looked around the foundry, and then heaved herself up. Plenty of weapons hung on the walls, but she had only two hands and she was more comfortable with her sword, knife and crossbow.

First things first, though. She filled her quiver with bolts and slung it over her shoulder. She sheathed her sword then rolled the two blankets she'd used for bedding and tied them together.

She slung that over the opposite shoulder.

Sam had made some smaller hand-held crossbows and Cambria grabbed two of them, loaded them, flicked the safeties on and hung them from her belt.

Last, she needed trail food. Juan's shelves were full of containers and she spent some time examining and tasting what they contained. When she was satisfied with what she found, she put some into a pack, enough food and water for a few days.

When she felt ready, she set out up the path to the village. She knew of no other way to go except to skirt the village and head down to the southern gate, back the way Haariss guided her.

Regret filled her that she couldn't say goodbye to Moreriss and Dorriss, but if they were with the men, she couldn't take the risk. Cambria blinked back tears for that and for her inability to be able to bury three good men.

Time was against her. She couldn't have remained at the foundry by herself. Whatever rules Jones had set, she had no doubt that the men would come after her if they knew she was alone. The path was her only choice. To stay meant slaughter, of men and, or, herself.

And Sam. Sam would have to deal with the aftermath of his lover's death by himself. She hoped he was safe somewhere in the forest.

The tops of the village huts came into view and she veered off the well-worn path onto a lesser one.

None of the men saw her, and she didn't see them.

It was hard work struggling with the crutches and she tried to walk without them.

The length of her ability to move without the crutches grew less and less. By the time the sun eased beyond the horizon, her leg was on fire, her arms ached from the crutches and she was tired, hungry and fed up.

The path weaved through the towering forest trees and it grew dark quickly. Cambria forced her way through the low undergrowth and found a small area between two enormous trees. It wasn't a clearing, just a lack of shrubs.

She slumped down next to one tree and hung her head, the crutches rested next to her.

A week's worth of sleep would make her feel better, she decided, but she didn't have that luxury.

Huntress

The blankets warmed her against the chill evening and she carefully drew out some rations, chewed them mechanically. A couple of gulps of water and she rolled herself to the side and tried to sleep.

Her leg throbbed, the muscle twitched and cramped. She stretched her foot and that brought some relief. She dozed and her calf cramped again. Sleep was out of the question as long as her leg played up. One container of gel was all she had, she'd have to use it sparingly.

The gel numbed the muscle and hot, red scar enough that she eventually dropped off into a light doze.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Waking the next morning wasn't a happy event. Cambria felt tired, sore, grumpy and grief-stricken. The ground was rock hard and a root had dug into her side all night. The dawn light increased as she packed her gear. Today, she would get into the fortress and woe be to anyone who got in her way.

The path was slippery with the night's dew so she had to go carefully. More than once, the wooden bottoms of the crutches slipped and she fell. She bruised her arms, her pride and her temper deteriorated.

With no target to release her anger, she swore and cursed everyone she'd ever come in contact with. When she'd finished with that list, she started in on anyone she'd ever heard of.

Her progress was painfully slow and it was late in the afternoon before she arrived at the water pool where she'd first seen Haariss.

Tired, dusty and thirsty, she slumped down onto the sand and massaged her calf. It felt swollen and hot. She unloaded everything onto the sand, but kept her knife close. There was no one around, nor did she expect anyone, but it was better to be safe than dead.

Her clothes, she piled near the rest of her gear. With two blankets, she could use one as a towel and she slid into the water.

It was colder than she expected and, true to form, her calf cramped. She stretched out her toes to ease the pain and it settled into a dull, persistent throb.

Sitting on the edge of the water, Cambria used the sand to scrub her skin until it tingled.

She rinsed off and crawled out to the blankets. Finally, she was clean and she dried herself off, climbed into her clothes. They might be grubby but they were warm.

The night cooled and the forest settled into the night. Cambria stared up at the alien stars until her eyelids closed and she sank into an exhausted sleep.

Her eyes opened to the sky as if she hadn't moved all night. The constellations were different in the early morning, and as she watched, the stars to the east faded.

Cambria rolled onto her stomach. Her leg twitched and she threw off the blanket, sat up as the blanket fell to the side.

Rolling her foot, she eased the cramp before it took hold. Yesterday and the day before had taken its toll, but she couldn't afford to linger. The hill behind her would take all her strength and determination.

Recalling how she came down the slope fast made her shudder as she thought of the difficulty of the climb on crutches. Without injury it would be tough; with her leg and the crutches it would be slow, laborious and painful.

Once she got to the top, she would have to rest again, regain her strength before she got into the fortress. She had no idea how long it was going to take and, she thought as she stripped off her clothes, the day wasn't getting any younger.

The cold water woke her up. It was bracing and her leg cramped. She crawled out of the water and applied the gel. Just because she didn't feel the muscle any more, didn't mean she couldn't damage it further.

The redness surrounding the scar had widened and even with the numbing gel, and where the cool liquid didn't cover, the muscle throbbed.

The hill looked steeper than she remembered, but she took a deep breath, then another and began to climb.

True to her prediction, it was tough going and it wasn't long before she was sweating from exertion. She glanced back down the hill; at least she could no longer see the water pool. That meant she was approaching halfway up the hill. She eased to the side of the path and sat down, her rested back against a tree.

Further up the path, it took a right turn. Beyond that, there was another twisting climb of a hundred feet. From there, she would be able to see where the fortress stood; if Manor looked, he would see her, too and, no doubt, take preventative action.

Her supplies were dwindling. She had enough for another night, but that was all. Another night, she sighed. She was taking too long to get up the damn hill. The disappointment struck deep and she sighed.

Nothing worthwhile was ever easy, she consoled herself. And the prize was the greatest she'd ever known. Dragging herself to her feet, she slowly made her way up. She'd camp at near the top of the hill.

Cambria struggled for the rest of the day and into the night. Finally, she reached the spot she thought she remembered from her trip down. It was more a rocky outcrop than part of a cliff and she wrapped a blanket around her, settling against the rock wall and dozed.

Throughout the night, she jerked awake. Her leg twitched, ached or throbbed and more than once, her toes tingled. Cambria tiredly wondered what damage she'd done to make her lose feeling in her toes every now and then. There were also noises out in the forest; noises she didn't recognise. It was more an increase in leaves rustling or branches falling, as if something large was charging through the undergrowth.

It could have been one of the komatsus; she didn't think they could climb the hill, but the doubt kept her from sleep.

Once more, it was before dawn when she awoke, although she could see the glow of sunrise was bright enough for her to see the surrounding forest. Cambria peeled the blanket away from her body and rolled it on a yawn. She tied it and slung it over her shoulder and reached for her crutches.

She went hot then cold with fear. One crutch lay on top of the other. Her hand hovered over them and her eyes swept the area for an intruder. She *never* put her crutches like that. She put them on either side of her so she could get to them quickly. Someone was out here.

Someone watched, waited.

Nothing moved. She checked the trail, studied the ground around her but there was no sign. He wanted her to know he'd been here. She could only think of one man who was desperate to get into the fortress:

Excalibur Jones.

Only Jones would want her off guard; only Jones would do this to her, make sure she knew who she was dealing with. Only Jones would let her struggle without offering assistance to see if she was tough enough, strong enough, *clever* enough.

The bastard!

Her hand dropped onto the crutches and she checked them over. She wouldn't past the prick to fool with them; sabotage them somehow, but they appeared to be okay.

Maybe Jones was just messing with her mind, she thought and struggled to her feet.

He was out there now, she knew, watching and waiting for the right time. And, damn it, she was going to oblige him.

Cambria went towards the fortress cautiously. She studied the ground and stopped five feet from it. She could see scuff marks in the dirt, broken grass and the occasional divot from someone kicking the ground in frustration.

Moving towards the cliff face, she held out a hand and touched cool stone. She couldn't see it, but stealth didn't make an object vanish completely, only hid it from sight.

Easing her way along the wall, she felt for the brick she knew hid the operating system.

She'd seen a glimpse of it before Manor engaged the gate. He couldn't have known she would recognise it for what it was and she thanked her previous training in spotting it.

The hair rose on the back of her neck. Jones was out there. She ignored the feeling and continued along the wall. It was near the gate itself. Closing her eyes, she tried to picture where she was standing when she saw it.

Yeah, she was almost there, a little higher. Her fingers found the stone and she lifted the front of it. It wasn't a brick *per se* but a box with a false front. If Manor or some other guardian was stuck outside, and she could think of no scenario where *that* would happen, they'd be able to return. Maybe it was just another fail-safe device. Whatever, she lifted the cover and stuck her hand in. There were two buttons she could feel and she pressed the left one.

Everything around her shimmered and the fortress wall suddenly pressed against her cheek.

"I don't believe it." Jones said from behind her.

She congratulated herself for not flinching at his voice.

"What's not to believe?" She asked and pressed the second button. There was a groan and the giant gate slowly raised.

"Chien and I checked everything on this wall, yet you went straight to it."

“Observant creature that I am, I saw it before it vanished. Part of my training you know.”

“What training would that be, Cambria?” He asked as they both watched the door slowly lift.

“A simple thank you would suffice,” she evaded his question and ducked under the edge of the gate.

Manor’s huge bulk came through the door to his quarters. He started when he saw them both, then he walked closer and greeted Cambria with a smile. He ignored Jones.

“Ah, Cambria, I knew it! Moeller was so wrong about you.”

“Who’s Moeller?” Jones asked and Cambria all but felt her heart stop. “Shit,” he murmured.

Cambria was too slow in turning. The butt of his sword slammed against her head, behind her ear, and she fell toward into an expanding dark tunnel.

xxx

Louis dragged his disappointed ass back to his quarters. Trantis was a bust. Less than twenty people rescued and none of them were in any condition to talk. All suffered from frostbite or injuries consistent with being bashed by bats, or rocks or something. The fear in their shocked eyes was something to behold.

He hoped Tudor was better. He was tired of going through the alphabet this way, but knew it was the best and most organised way to do it.

Ranalda was sitting at his front door. Her back leaned against the wood, her legs drawn up to her chest, her head rested on her knees.

She didn’t hear him approach and started when he touched her shoulder.

Her eyes were red as was her nose. Tears streaked her face.

“What’s wrong, honey?” He asked softly and she threw herself into his arms, wept uncontrollably.

Louis fumbled for his card and slipped it into the lock slot. His door opened and he helped her inside. He tried to ease away from her, but she clung tighter, more desperately, so he sat down with her on his bed and waited for the storm to ease.

He stroked her back and whispered meaningless, but comforting phrases. Finally, she started to hiccup and her crying jag eased.

“He’s dead,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Dane?” He asked and held her tighter as she nodded.

He didn’t ask how she knew, whether she was sure. If this crying meant anything, it meant what she’d said was true. He didn’t know how he felt about that. Relief that his rival was gone, hurt because she hurt, strong because she’d come to him for comfort.

“I’m sorry, Rani, so sorry.”

He glanced at the watch. The troops would be leaving for Tudor in an hour, but did he really need to be there to see more bedraggled and soul hurt people when he had a bedraggled and grieving woman in his arms? He couldn’t help the others, but he could help her.

“Come on, honey, lie down with me.” He eased her back and she cuddled against him.

“He’ll never know his child, Louie, never know the joy of parenthood.”

“No, but I’m sure he’s up there, watching over you.”

She lifted her head. “Do you think so?”

“Yeah. He wouldn’t abandon his child if he could have helped it.”

Her hope turned to anger. “He didn’t *abandon* his child, you asshole, he was taken away from her!”

“He was. But could he have prevented it?”

Ranalda’s bottom lip trembled again. “Yes. He could have stayed away from me, then he’d be alive. If I hadn’t...”

“Hey,” he brushed her hair away from her eyes. “This isn’t your fault. It’s your father’s, you know that.”

She sat up. “That son of a bitch is going to *pay* for what he’s done to me and mine!”

“Probably,” he nodded and sat up next to her. “But you have your baby to think of.” He reached out a tentative hand and placed it on her slightly rounded belly. “You can’t go off seeking revenge until she’s born. Until she’s safe.”

Her hands clenched into fists. “I know you’re right, it’s just... Oh!” She threw herself backwards and looked up at him. “I’d like to kill him, or send him to one of his own miserable punishment planets. I’d like to bash his head in...”

“Please,” he lay next to her his hand once more going to her belly, “you don’t have to explain it to me. I would feel the same way if...” he stopped. He was going to say if anything happened to her. But what of Cambria? What if she’s dead, what then? He tried to put himself in Ranalda’s situation and failed.

Cambria was a part of his past; he understood that now. He would grieve, had grieved, but Ranalda was his future. He knew that now.

Ranalda tilted her head. “If, what?”

“If something happened to you,” he finished and leaned down to kiss her.

She put a hand on his chest and pushed him away. “What about what’s her name?” Her eyes were so serious, so filled with potential hurt.

“Cambria?” He traced her lips with his index finger. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t know if she’s alive or dead. But I promise you this: I won’t leave you. She may have been taken from me, but it’s you I dream of, you I want in my bed and my arms.”

She put her arms around his neck and brushed the hair at the base of his skull. “And if she returns?”

“I have no doubt the experience has changed her. I know it’s changed me. I don’t think we’ll be able to pick up where we left off.” He let the regret show in his eyes so she wouldn’t doubt his sincerity. “I’ll always think of her with affection, she’s not a nasty person; she’s just...” he traced her chin and drew his finger down her throat, “not the most important thing in my life anymore.”

“I’m glad, Louis, I would hate to have to fight her for you.” She drew his head down to hers and he sank into her with relief. All thoughts of his former lover disappeared under Ranalda’s sensual onslaught.

xxx

Cambria’s head throbbed like a metronome and this time, she knew damn well someone had thumped her. Worse, there was a prickling between her breasts that grew increasingly painful. *Jones*. Again.

She rolled onto her back and threw an arm across her eyes to block out the intense light of the sun.

Her hand lifted to touch the knot behind her ear and she winced. At least there wasn't blood this time.

Why was she so *stupid* when it came to Jones? He'd never said he wasn't a *real* convict, but he'd inferred it, made her come to her own conclusions. As always, she thought with disgust.

She opened her eyes and sat up. The throb increased and she wondered how long she'd been out. Jones had taken her sword, and crossbows, but left her with her knife. She took the pack off her shoulders and looked around. She saw Manor, slumped against the wall not ten feet from her. In his throat was a spiked arrow.

Near her hand was package. She picked it up and carefully opened it. It was the final arrow wrapped up in a note addressed to her. She spread the note out and read:

Yeah, it was me. I guess you know that now. Stupid really, I should have asked you more about the judge and his associates, but hell, I never knew him. You were so blinded by what men could do to you, you never realised what men could do for you. A mistake, Cambria. One you should look really carefully at. To what you really want to ask me. Chien wanted to come with me. I couldn't let him, I have other plans. Juan? Well, I've never approved of that kind of lifestyle. I would have killed Sam, had I found him, but I suspect he was cheating on the boy. By the way, did you ever ask him his surname? It's Vangana. It wasn't Joey I mentioned on my list, but Sam. For some reason, Sam took a liking to you rather than dealing with you the way he did other women. And Joey. Why did I kill him? Did you know that he was learning from you so he could kill me? I'm not sure why, but I got to him before he got the opportunity to get me. You might call it forward thinking. As you've probably guessed, the assassins were under my orders. I gave them Chien's arrows. I wanted to see what you could really do. I'm impressed. There. I've said it. You impressed me. But, regardless, I win this game and look forward to the next round. Finally, you're wondering why I haven't killed you. I hate you enough to do it, but I love you too much to live with the pain your death would cause me. What a wicked place you've put me in. Hanging between the heaven of your passion for me and the hell of knowing you'll never feel for me as much as I feel for you. That's why, as you lie there

in the dirt, I cannot bring myself to load the crossbow with this one last arrow. Instead, I leave it as a gift. I know you'll be coming after me. You can't possibly let me go knowing you're responsible for my release. That's gotta burn. Just so you know, I've got the remote to the corridor.

Love you always, I'll miss you

Excalibur Jones

She cursed him long and loud, punctuated by screams of frustration. He'd worked it out. But then, at the back of her mind, she always thought he might. Her only back up was how to get into the fortress. Now he was gone and so was her hope of leaving.

Unless there was a back up system, she was stuck. The remote, she'd figured, was for when Manor needed to return for whatever reason. She'd already worked out he'd lied to her about a number of things. And she had plenty of time to put it all together. If the other men had thought about it, they would have been able to work it out, too. But Manor had them convinced there was no hope.

She folded the note and jammed it into a pocket. The arrow bolt sat in her opened hand and she wondered what to do with it. A gift, Jones had said, but this was a poisoned gift that represented the murder of four people, nearly five except for Jones skewed feelings. She had no doubt he *thought* he loved her; she had other ideas. Obsessed, yes, intrigued, absolutely. But love? He didn't know the meaning of the word. She slipped the arrow into her pack anyway; it was a talisman, she told herself, a talisman not to underestimate psychopaths.

Cambria slowly got to her feet and checked Manor. Purely for form. He was dead and had been for a while. There was a gash on his shoulder, where an implant would normally be and she sighed.

She left him and went inside. It was still the same; clean, utilitarian. The back room she hadn't seen was a little less well cared for. Here was where Manor lived, had worked. The front room was for show; new convicts would get a better idea of where they were if there was no technology lying about to mourn over.

But in this room, here was Earth's outpost. A portable entertainment unit and data centre, personal aircon and heat units. She opened a small door, almost hidden by the end of his unmade bed. Inside was a virtual pharmacy of medications and equipment.

What on Earth would he need all of this for? She found the painblocker and choked down two dry tablets.

She closed the door and went to his desk. Pens, paper, an electronic journal. She flicked through the pages, but it just seemed a commentary on who arrived. The pages scrolled by and she caught a glimpse of the name 'Moeller'.

Going back to the page, she read some of what Manor had written.

Moeller's an idiot who will do anything for the judge. He arrived today, all smiles and congratulations, with supplies for me. Tasty and useful supplies. All he wanted to do was for me to raise the gate. I asked him why and he held up some sort of sonic device. Putz gave me a smile and said, and I quote, "Don't worry, Manor, you'll soon have no more convicts coming in and you can retire. The judge has no more need for your services. This will ensure there will be no problems from the natives." I asked him what it was for. He said it was to call the komatsus. It would make them temporary nuts and they'd rampage. I said that wasn't possible, and he said there were other units in all the villages that the komatsus would head for. They'd try and destroy the remote units...

Cambria put the journal down, then reconsidered. She'd put it into her pack. If she ever got out of here, the journal would be proof of Bolingbroke's and Moeller's conspiracy to commit mass murder.

She put a hand to the back of her neck and rubbed, tried to ease the ache lodged there. Maybe she should take another couple of pills.

She became aware of a low grade humming. That's what was causing her tension and she studied each wall, turned to pinpoint the source of the irritation. Not in this room, she decided and went to the front room.

The noise was louder here. It was coming from... and then it stopped. What *was* that? Then she heard something she didn't expect: voices. Voices barking orders.

Her hand trembled as it reached for the door handle. Friend or foe? Her right hand rested on her knife hilt. They would find her sooner or later and she'd preferred sooner. Friend, that was good. Foe, she'd go out fighting.

She slowly pulled the door open and stepped out into the sunshine. A dozen guns cocked in her direction and she froze.

“Hands away from your body!” One of the soldiers shouted. “Now! Do it! Or we’ll open fire!”

Cambria slowly raised her arms until they were level with her shoulders.

One of the soldiers approached and turned her around to the wall. He expertly frisked her, taking her knife, and the note. Cambria held her position and eased her weight of her injured leg.

“Turn around.”

She obliged the soldier. His troops had spread out around the fortress and were checking everything. They left the body of Manor alone.

“What happened here and where are your people?”

Cambria snorted and shook her head. “Why are you here?” She asked instead and his dark eyebrows rose.

“We’re here to rescue any survivors.”

“Rescue?” Cambria stared at him then the troops. “Rescue.” Her heart pounded and sweat broke out on her forehead. “You can’t rescue me, I don’t have an implant.”

She turned and walked towards Manor.

“Ma’am,” the soldier said, following her, “you never needed one. That was one way Bolingbroke kept everyone where they were supposed to be. Being told you’d come to a messy end if you tried to go back, implant or not, stopped many from trying.”

Cambria didn’t want to hear it, she’d reached her tolerance level and she didn’t want to think that she could have simply turned around and gone back the first day.

No. What she had now was *experience*, and she understood the changes this planet, no, the *men* of this planet had wrought in her. She couldn’t have come back that first day. Today. Today was the better option because now she knew how to defend herself and how to defeat Bolingbroke and his minions.

“Ma’am? Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes.” She crouched down in front of Manor and looked into his face. This man she’d thought was all but invincible, who’d played the game that gave her answers she

didn't think he knew about, who had shared his drink, his food and his time, lay dead because one man couldn't bare to leave any witnesses alive.

Jones was right. She would hunt him down. Not because she'd let him go, no, that would have happened sooner or later, but because of the people he'd killed just to get her attention. Because he played lethal mind games, set her up for death and had no conscience. He needed to be found and he needed to be killed.

Cambria blew out a tight and painful breath at that thought; her heart ached and grief bent her head. Painful or not, someone had to find him before he slaughtered more people. He was a deeply flawed human and she cared for him. Cared enough to go after him.

The soldier's hand touched her shoulder and she automatically went for her knife. She spun but he'd stepped away from her, regarded her as if she was a dangerous person.

Her knife, of course, was in this man's custody and she slowly stood. She *was* dangerous and that felt... good. Fire swept up her leg and she stood on her left foot, her right hovering just above the ground.

"Sorry, er... Captain..."

"Major, actually," he said warily, "Major Caparossi of the Italia Guardia."

"Hmm. Why don't we step inside and talk?"

"Of course, after you." He waved her to lead the way. She went into the front room and sat down, rested her leg on another chair and massaged it.

"Are you injured?" The major asked as she rubbed her lower leg.

"Always, Major," she said cynically, "but that will be put to rights later."

He took a seat across from her and pulled out Jones's note. "Can you explain this?"

"Yeah, but it will take some time. You wanted to know where, quote my people unquote were. They are down in the village a day and a half's march from here. I don't know where all the men are, but there is another village a couple of days to the east of the first village."

He tapped the folded note with a finger, then paused and tilted his head. "Men? You said the men, where are the women? And the children? What happened to them?"

“There was only ever one woman here, and I had no children.” She said and watched the colour drain from his swarthy face and as he realised the implications, darkened with fury.

“Signorina, I... don’t know what to say... Don’t know...” He let rip with a string of Italian curses; got up from the table with more curses and went to the door. He shouted orders in his native language and she heard the distinct click of weapons cocking and loads being jacked into barrels.

“Do not kill the aliens,” she said loudly to him and he paused.

“How will we recognise them?” He asked and flushed as one of her eyebrows lifted. He shouted more orders and most of the troops left. Only two remained to guard them; both had medic patches on their sleeves. They patrolled around the fortress, even though the troops had lowered the door on departing.

The major prowled around the room, lifted items, replaced them, muttered under his breath.

“Major, please sit down. Nothing happened I didn’t want to happen,” she said, knowing he’d read the note.

He glared at her, but complied. “The scars on your face...” he began.

“Yes.”

He took that as confirmation of an attempted attack on her and nodded. She didn’t want to get into the nitty gritty with the Major. Someone more senior would hear her story.

“Are they the only ones?”

“No.”

“Do you want to see a medic?” He glanced to the door.

“Eventually.”

He grimaced with frustration at her answers, but he was asking questions she didn’t want to answer.

He tapped the note again.

“To explain,” she said and he frowned at her. “The note?”

Caparossi tossed the paper onto the table where it lay between them. “Please, Signorina. Who is this man and what has he done?”

Cambria leaned back in her chair. “I thought everybody had heard of the notorious serial killer, Excalibur Jones.”

“He’s...” he gaped at her, “and he’s...” his eyes widened, “and you...” he looked like he’d sucked hard on a particularly bitter lemon.

“Yes, yes and sadly, yes.” She shrugged.

He muttered in Italian again and she rubbed her eyes.

“I’ll have to report back to headquarters. A serial killer loose.” He shook his head. “You will have to accompany me for debriefing.”

“What about your troops?”

“They can come back any time.” He pulled up his sleeve to reveal something that looked like a miniature, old style calculator wrapped around his wrist. “We all have these remote devices. As long as you know the co-ordinates for home, you can access any corridor.” He stood and came round the table to her. “Come, we must go, this is urgent news.”

Cambria picked up the note and followed him outside to get her pack. Caparossi watched her, curious, but she made no comment as she followed him through the metal door and into the corridor.

Chapter Twenty-Six

She expected the slight dizziness, but she didn't expect the full-blown nausea or head exploding pain. Cambria clutched her head and fell to her knees, cried out in agony as if her brain felt too small for her skull. She couldn't see, couldn't hear anything but the pulse of her blood through her ears.

Then it stopped and she was face down on the floor. Caparossi was next to her, on one knee, shaking her shoulder. "What's wrong? Hey," he leaned down and she turned to look at him. She couldn't quite focus and she blinked, rubbed her eyes, and glared up at him.

"You should have said something." He chastised, "It is dangerous to travel with a head injury."

"I didn't..." She looked around. There was light here.

"You're symptoms are precisely what results from a head injury, Signorina." He said icily and helped her stand. She swayed and his grip tightened. "This way." He said with military formality.

There was a door handle and she glanced at the Major as he walked towards it. Where was she now? The door she'd come through had no door handle, no light either.

He pulled the door open and strode through it without releasing her. She felt like an errant child as she followed in his wake.

She glimpsed a square white room with a raised window for observation before she was whisked through another door and down a completely white corridor. He pushed her into an elevator and pressed a button. The ride was short.

Once again, he took her upper arm and dragged her down the corridor.

"Look, Major, I appreciate all you've done for me, but do you have to drag me around as if I'm going to make a bid for freedom?"

His reply was a glare. He shoved open another door and white coated people looked up. "Dr Saville, the Signorina came through the corridor without informing me of a head injury."

Three different white coats stopped what they were doing and grabbed her. “Hey, what the... Let go... I don’t... Oh, ow! What the fuck did... you... stick...” Her vision wavered, went grey then black.

Cambria couldn’t get comfortable; there was something wrong with her bed. It was too soft, too... not like her own hard bench. She could hear things, too. Things that were alien to Tudor, but familiar.

She turned her head, opened her eyes and tensed. The walls were a pale yellow, cheery if you worried about such things. There were no windows, only an open door. Through the door, she saw a woman dressed in white looking at her. The woman spoke into a headset and came around the counter.

She came in with a smile and opened her mouth. Cambria held up her hand. “Wait.” She said and the woman snapped her mouth shut.

Cambria looked at the catheter in her wrist. It was bound to a board. The tube lead past her head to a bag of fluid.

Her right leg hung in some sort of contraption, bandaged from knee to toe. Another line came out of the white bandages down the side of the bed.

She was in some sort of a hospital and took a deep breath. Yeah, there was that insidious hospital smell.

“Okay,” she said on sigh. “What do you want?”

“And welcome home.” She grinned and came closer to check whatever it was nurse or doctors checked. She wouldn’t be sexist about it. “How do you feel?”

Cambria pursed her lips. She had a low-grade headache, felt bruised and battered all over and her leg throbbed. She gave the woman a rueful glance. “Like shit.”

“Good. If you were feeling fine, we’d worry.” She left the room, then returned with a clip board. “You had no identification on you and you never told Major Caparossi your name, so we’ll start with that.”

Her pen poised over the clipboard and she waited expectantly.

“Cambria Jaxentia Peterson.” She replied and wondered why the nurse/doctor hesitated before writing her name down.

The woman was about to ask the next question when a grey-haired man strolled through the door holding Manor's journal and the note Jones had left for her.

He didn't look at her, only held out his hand for the clipboard. The woman handed it to him and left, closing the door behind her. The man dragged a chair over to the bed and sat. He stared at the clipboard and she wondered what he was thinking. Only her name was on that board, she was sure.

"Something I can do for you?" She asked and he raised startled eyes to hers.

He cleared his throat. "Ah, Ms Peterson. I hope you are recovering from your... ordeal?"

"Yeah. What's this about?"

He tapped the note against the journal. "Tell me about Mr Jones."

"Why?"

His brows lowered as if unaccustomed to being challenged. "I am Lord Montague, head of this section. It is my job, at the moment, to find the... exiles. Those without proper procedure. I've checked up on Jones. I'm sure you know who he is. What I want to know is why you let him escape."

Cambria dragged herself higher in the bed. It was difficult given her leg was dangling from a sling. "I didn't *let* him do anything." She said and settled back against the pillows.

"This note suggests otherwise, Ms Peterson."

"It's complicated, Lord Montague."

"So explain it to me."

"What do you know about Tudor?" She asked and folded her hands in her lap.

"Only what Major Caparossi has told me." His expression darkened, but he held her gaze.

"Okay. So. The short story: Jones befriended me when I arrived. He gave me advice, helped me, we became lovers, he betrayed me, tried to have me killed on a number of occasions, murder four people, followed me back to the fortress, bashed me on the head, killed Manor, stole the remote and escaped."

Montague watched her impassively. “And the long story?”

“Wouldn’t really give you much more information.”

“This is a confession, you realise that?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“How do you feel about that?” He asked, his voice quiet.

“I’m... not sure what you mean.”

Montague glanced away, then back. “He makes his feelings for you quite clear.”

“Yes, he does.” She watched him grow increasingly uncomfortable and relented.

“Look, sir, Lord or whatever. We... gave into... urges. Whatever he feels for me isn’t love. What I feel for him doesn’t bear repeating in polite society. So, if you’re asking me if I have a problem with condemning the man to death, no, I don’t. I’ll even push the button.”

Montague’s shoulders slumped a little and he leaned back in his seat. “Good,” he said, studying her face with an intensity that chilled her, “I can see you mean that.”

“You bet I do.”

“Okay.” He held up the journal. “You read any of this?”

“Only the part where Moeller returned to turn the animals on us. A confession of guilt by him, and by implication, of Bolingbroke.”

Montague gave her a brief smile. “Very good, Ms Peterson and correct.”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming up. What does the journal and Jones’s letter have to do with one another.”

Montague frowned. “You’re a smart woman, probably a little too smart.”

“I had training, Lord Montague, don’t underestimate me.”

A grey eyebrow lifted. “I won’t I assure you.” He let the pause expand and she could all but see the wheels turning in his head. “On the basis of this journal, we went to Bolingbroke’s office. To arrest him and Moeller, his assistant.”

“I take it he wasn’t there.” She said with disgust. Another man she’d have to hunt down.

“Again, Ms Peterson, correct. However, it isn’t as cut and dried as you think. His office was a mess. There was a lot of blood which forensics have confirmed as the judge’s. There was no body, though, so whether he is dead or alive remains in doubt. We found some... *objet d’art* of an alien nature. We think Bolingbroke was ready to go to one of his own planets to live but we can’t prove that... yet. Of Moeller, there is no sign. No blood, nothing.”

“And you think what? That Jones found him first?” It would appeal to Jones’ twisted sense of justice to punish the man who was responsible for his mixed feelings for her. Then again, he would just kill the judge because he could and knew where to find him.

“Yes. But what was he looking for, Ms Peterson?”

That was the thing, wasn’t it? What was Jones looking for? The original corridor led back to Bolingbroke, she was sure. There was no other way he could get to the judge so quickly; no way he could get into the judge’s office without raising an alarm. It was Bolingbroke’s bad fortune that Jones found him first rather than her. What was in Bolingbroke’s office that Jones would torture for?

He’d know that if caught, he’d be sent to a harsher planet, or executed. He wouldn’t like that, no, he wouldn’t like that at all. So, what...?

“A list,” she murmured.

“Excuse me, Ms Peterson?” He leaned forward and she returned her gaze to him.

“Jones was looking for Bolingbroke’s personal planet list. He wants freedom. He would go somewhere, anywhere, that no one knew of. The only way he could do that, would be to have Bolingbroke’s list. That’s how you found me, wasn’t it, from his list?”

Montague looked embarrassed. “Ah, no, actually. We obtained a number of lists from countries who... ah... Have been less than circumspect in who they exiled. We also procured a list from another, private source. We have an operative who found the co-ordinates and then we sent the troops in to recover whomever.”

Cambria grimaced. Her rescue was an accident, random chance caused by a number of lists cross-referenced. One important fact remained. “So you don’t have Bolingbroke’s list.”

“Not yet. We are scouring his databases, his files, everything and anything we can get our hands on. When we find it, we will be able to hunt Jones down. We might even get lucky and find Bolingbroke.”

Cambria nodded. They had resources. Maybe revenge wasn't the answer. She should let it go, let Jones go. He meant nothing to her other than a mistake in judgement; a moment of temporary insanity, that was all. And she knew that was her head talking, not her heart. She ignored the thought; she had enough problems and chewed at her bottom lip.

“I doubt you'll find the judge anytime soon,” she murmured. “Jones has learned. If he doesn't want the body found, it won't be.” She believed Jones had killed and buried Sam, just to mess with her mind. She would worry about him, wonder if he was alive or still out in the forest.

“What makes you say that?”

Cambria looked over at him. “Because that is what he's like. That's what he'd do and has done. If he doesn't want to be found, you won't find him, list or not.”

“You seem to know him well.” Montague tilted his head.

“We were lovers, Montague, not friends. I don't profess to know him inside out, but I understand his motives and I know how his mind works. It's as if...” she trailed off as a new thought struck her. No, it *couldn't* be...

“As if what, Ms Peterson?”

“As if he was training me to understand him. As if he knew he would escape and needed someone to...” She grimaced, trying to latch onto the errant thought. “As if he knew he would need a challenge, an adversary worthy of himself and there is no better adversary than someone you've loved, been intimate with and betrayed almost to death.” She pursed her lips. “He made sure of that.” She said softly. Montague didn't interrupt; he wore an expression of intrigue.

“He knew Tudor would be a challenge, physically, emotionally and he deliberately put obstacles in my path. *Him*, in particular. He made sure he had my attention whenever it wavered.” She snorted with admiration. “The son of a bitch trained me; without my knowing it.”

“You're sure of this?” Montague asked, his voice bland.

“Oh, yeah. Re-read the note. It’s taunting, it confesses to killing my friends. It’s sympathetic, he spared me when he could have killed me at the end. It’s challenging me, he appeals to my sense of justice and revenge to go after him. It dares me to punish him for what he’s done to me, for what he thinks I’m responsible for.”

“An interesting idea, Ms Peterson, however...” Montague stood and tucked his hands behind his back, still holding the book and note.

“Oh, don’t go all stuffy on me.” She waved a hand at him. “I don’t have the resources or the inclination to do what he wants. Let the prick wait. Your people can have him. For once, I will not be manipulated by him.”

Montague chuckled. “I’m pleased to hear that, Ms Peterson. For a moment there, I thought you’d go charging off and... well, never mind.” His smile fell away as he stepped to the end of her bed, placed the book on the blankets and gripped the rail. “We, er, brought back some of the men from Tudor.”

“And?”

“And, they describe you as some sort of...” he lifted a hand.

“I killed, Lord Montague, in self-defence, nothing more.”

“Yes, and they told us as much. I think they were just relieved to be off the planet. There seems to be a discrepancy between...” He stared at her as if trying to work her out. “Never mind. Heal quickly, Ms Peterson, you have work to do.”

She opened her mouth to ask him what work, but he left fast, scooped up the book and swept out.

Cambria dozed for most of the day. The woman attendant, Gerie, explained it was common for people who came through the corridor with head injuries often had cataclysmic brain aneurysms, which was why she’d been leapt upon by medical staff. She’d been given the all clear and the doctors had worked on her leg.

She still had a spike in her leg that Sam had missed. The spike had created an infection they’d finally been able to remove. A surgeon would be discussing remedial treatment for the scarring at a later date.

All Cambria was concerned about, was being able to walk and run again without pain. Gerie kept her pumped up with nutrients and microbiots.

There was a hesitant knock on her door and she opened her eyes. A tall, blonde-haired and blue eyed woman stood there wringing her hands.

“Hello,” Cambria said, “are you looking for me?”

“Ah, yes, Ms Peterson, I am.” She took a deep breath and strode into the room to stand at the end of Cambria’s bed.

“What can I do for you?” Cambria had never seen this woman before, and yet she was familiar somehow. She would have remembered those classic features, if they’d met.

“I’m, ah, er.” She took another deep breath. “I’m Ranalda Bolingbroke.”

Cambria felt her jaw drop and the blood leave her face. That’s why she was familiar, she shared similar features with her father. The long straight nose, the uptilted eyes. She closed her mouth and narrowed her eyes. She let silence do her talking and Ranalda grew increasingly uncomfortable, but not for the reasons Cambria wanted her to be uncomfortable for.

“I’m sorry you fell foul of my father, may his black soul rot and roast in hell, but I’m here because of...” She lifted a shoulder and looked away.

Cambria waited, her face devoid of expression. This woman would say her piece and leave, but Cambria didn’t intend to make it easy for her. Why was she here at all?

Ranalda swallowed and faced Cambria, her head held high. “I’m here because Louis and I are involved. Deeply, irrevocably involved.”

“Louis.” Cambria said and Ranalda nodded. “*My* Louis.” Again the nod. “Louis Boudreaux.”

“Yes.” Ranalda’s shoulders drooped a little. “I’m sorry for that, too, but,” she shrugged, “these things happen.” She finished as if it explained everything.

It didn’t. Cambria was fine with Louis’ choice to break it off with her, she wasn’t fine with him not telling her, for being a big enough coward to let his new girlfriend explain things to her.

“Why are you here?” She asked and Ranalda’s face turned from pleased to puzzled.

“I don’t understand. I thought you’d want to know about me and Louis as soon as you were well enough.”

“And you’d be right about that, Ms Bolingbroke. What I want to know is why *you’re* here, instead of Louis.”

Ranalda’s face reddened and she glanced away.

“He doesn’t know you’re here, does he?” Cambria couldn’t *believe* this woman. Was she so insecure that she thought to explain things to her before she and Louis had The Conversation? “Please leave.” Cambria turned away from her.

“You don’t understand! He loves me, and I love him! I won’t let you come between us.”

Cambria snorted in disgust. “You’ve got that wrong, lady. You have come between us. You’ve no right to come to me with this and undermine Louis this way. So fuck off.”

“I’m not leaving until...”

“Gerie ” Cambria shouted and the woman came running.

“What? Are you all right?”

“Sure. Could you escort Ms Bolingbroke out and make sure she doesn’t have the authority to return?”

Gerie gave the blonde woman the evil eye and held onto her upper arm to guide her out.

“This isn’t finished yet, Cambria!” Ranalda called over her shoulder as she was dragged away.

“Yeah, it is, but not by you, not by you.”

xxx

Louis finally showed his face two days later while Cambria was with the physiotherapist exercising her leg.

He cleared his throat, drew her attention. She had a smile for him, knowing that since her return, he sweated on what to say to her; how to broach the topic of his betrayal of her. She wondered who had betrayed whom first, given the time disparity. But... she wasn’t ready to let him off the hook just yet.

He looked alternatively determined and nervous and she was sorry for it. Once upon a time, they could talk to each other about anything; they could hardly keep their hands off each other. Now he stood in the doorway, alone, resisting her as easily as she resisted him. What a sorry pair they were.

“Come in, Louis, grab a seat. I’ll be finished soon.”

The physiotherapist massaged her leg. She felt no more pain, just the usual ache of doing too much. Any other muscle would complain, too. The man slapped her leg. “See you tomorrow, Cam,” he grinned and strolled out.

Cam sat up on the padded bench and watched Louis. He wouldn’t meet her eyes and she bit her lip to stop from chuckling.

“I thought you’d be by sooner, Louis.” She said gravely and he hung his head. Cambria couldn’t resist another prod. “Am I so unattractive now that I don’t even rate a kiss?”

Louis looked up at her startled. His eyes flicked from the deep, thick scar along her jaw to the fine red line along her cheekbone. Dull red crept up his face. He stood, leaned down and tried to kiss her cheek. Cambria turned her head so his lips touched hers. He drew back, uncomfortable and Cambria had her answer. There was no tingling, no fire in her blood, nothing except the soft touch of lips.

He wasn’t hers anymore. She wasn’t his and she wondered sadly what would have become of them if she hadn’t been exiled.

“Ah, I understand Rani came to see you.” He said, embarrassed.

“Yes, she did.”

“I’m sorry for that. I wanted to wait until you were better.” He explained and resumed his seat.

“Now, Louis, you know that’s a lie. You didn’t know what to say to me. Admit it. I dropped off the planet and you didn’t know whether I was alive or dead. You find someone new and become comfortable in a new relationship then *voila*, I’m back. That’s gotta put a crimp in your plans and make you feel like a shit for sleeping with someone else. Worse, you think you gave up on me by actively caring, maybe even loving another woman.”

Louis gave her a weak smile. “That about covers it.”

“Louis, stop punishing yourself. *She*’s punishment enough!” He looked so outraged at her comment that she raised a hand. “Sorry, sorry,” she chuckled. “Look, Louis, I understand your position, really I do. Answer me this, honestly, okay?”

He nodded.

“When you kissed me just now, did you feel anything?” She asked.

“No, Cambria,” he lowered his eyes then raised them again. “I didn’t. It’s gone, isn’t it? Whatever we had is gone.” He stood.

“Yes, Louis. But don’t feel too bad about that. I’m not going to say we’ll always be friends, because we won’t. We were more than that.” She held out her hand. “Good luck, Louis.” *You’ll need it*, she thought.

“Thank you, Cam,” he leaned down and kissed her cheek instead of taking her hand. “I really am sorry. If I’d...” he shook his head. “No time for regrets, huh?”

“Nothing to regret, Louis, we had fun, let’s leave with good memories.”

“Sure.” He went to the door. “She really is wonderful you know.”

Cambria gave him a genuine smile and a wave as he left. *From what perspective was Ranalda Bolingbroke wonderful?*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cambria strode down the corridor towards Montague's office. The limp was gone, only a vicious white scar remained. If she learned anything on Tudor, it was there were more important things than vanity.

She stopped outside the Lord's door, suddenly nervous. Why did he want to see her? Was it about Jones or something else?

In disgust, she knocked. Montague called for her to enter.

His office was large, nice, but he wasn't alone and she halted, shocked.

The Secretary of the World Council turned to face her, his face went from polite interest to fury in an instant. "Heinrich was my friend," he stood quickly and walked across the carpet to her, hands raised. "And you killed him, you..."

"Peace, Mr Secretary," Montague said, standing behind his desk and he sent a warning glance to Cambria who had raised her fists to defend herself. "Ms Peterson didn't kill the Senator."

The Secretary turned back to him as if Cambria was no longer a threat. Montague kept his eyes on her and she slowly lowered her hands.

"What did you say?" The Secretary asked, stunned.

"I said Ms Peterson didn't kill the Senator. Now, why don't you resume your seat, Mr Secretary. Ms Peterson?" He waved to a second chair.

Cambria kept her eyes on the Secretary as she sat. The Secretary kept his hate-filled eyes on her as he did the same.

"Now, then. To business. What we..."

"Explain to me why Ms Peterson," The Secretary spat her name as if it was an offensive, noisome thing, "didn't kill Heinrich, when I have *proof* of the crime?"

"Where did you get your evidence, Mr Secretary?"

"From my very good friend, Judge Ranald Bolingbroke who investigated the crime." The Secretary lifted an arrogant eyebrow and eased back into his seat.

Cambria opened her mouth, but once again, Montague sent her a warning look.

Okay, she thought, let him deal with it. I'll just watch.

“Yes, quite so. And I’m quite sure you feel justified in bring this case to the International Criminal Court.”

“I can assure you, Lord Montague, that I will make sure Ms Peterson is given the death penalty for what she has done.” A smug smile appeared and Cambria turned to him fully, watched his face.

“And you will lose, Mr Secretary.”

Cambria watched as the Secretary face darkened.

“His Honour, Judge Ranald Bolingbroke is under investigation for corruption, abuse of power and conspiracy to commit mass murder. Proof of which, Ms Peterson brought back with her. Proof of which is in his own office, Mr Secretary, proof of which is in the hundreds of people who have returned from exiled with eye witness accounts of their expulsion. I can assure you, Mr Secretary, that if or when we find the judge, he will be spending a very short time in prison before the very same sentence you offered Ms Peterson is carried out on him.”

There was a deadly silence in the office.

The Secretary’s eyes had gone wide and blank with shock.

“No,” he whispered then clear his throat. “No,” he said more firmly. “I will not believe an esteemed and highly respected judge of Bolingbroke’s stature is guilty of anything other than zealously pursuing justice on behalf of the people.” He stood and sneered at Cambria. “You’re going to die.”

“Mr Secretary,” Montague stood and tossed a thick file to him. “Read this before you say or do *anything* you will undoubtedly regret. It’s a copy.” Montague said as if thinking the Secretary might destroy the original to protect his friend.

The Secretary picked up the file, gazing at Montague. Finally, he left, holding the file as if it was the harbinger of doom. The door closed quietly behind him.

Cambria waited. Montague slumped back into his seat and rubbed a hand down his face. “Well, that went as expected,” he murmured, then he turned in his chair to face her. “That will only delay him for a while. The Secretary is a very, very good friend of the judge and the evidence against you is compelling.”

Cambria chewed her lip. Her time with Senator Dortmund felt like a long time ago, a distant event she'd all but forgotten. "Um... you could talk to Missy Lane, she's the office manager for the Senator. She's also a mole for the judge."

"We would, but she's disappeared, along with some rather sensitive documents and files."

"Our problem, Ms Peterson," he said and leaned his forearms on the desktop, "is that your DNA was found on the murder weapon and on the body. I know it was planted, God knows how many times that's been done, but you had probably only just left the office at the time of the murder. It's the timing, the DNA, what you were working on, even your background has been brought up against you."

"I don't have a motive, Lord Montague."

"An affair has been raised." He said and she rolled her eyes.

"He was too moral, too focused on his job, too busy to have the time for an affair."

Montague lifted an eyebrow. "That's remarkably naive of you. How many times did you and he have a closed door conference? How many times were you and he alone in the office?"

Cambria clenched the arms of her seat. "Having an affair with a Senator is hardly motive. Everybody does it, hell, it's almost expected."

"So you *did* have an affair?"

"No, sir, I didn't. I'm just saying it's not much of a motive even if I did, which I didn't."

Montague nodded, understanding what her point was.

"It would be a motive if he wanted to end it and you didn't. It would be a motive given your time with the Bureau of Political Security." At her frown, he continued. "The BPS are well known for investigating more than just politicians. They are, indeed, a kind of secret police, able to go everywhere and anywhere. We, here, get a lot of our information from them. If you had information, say, of a sensitive nature about the Senator, or the Senator's wife, or child, Dortmund would feel compelled to protect them and himself."

"I still don't follow. Wouldn't he try to neutralise me?"

“Yes, he would. He was known for his... ferocious temper.”

“It was more bark than bite, sir.” She said.

“Indeed, but that was in matters of state, political things, not personal. So, you get into a fight; he doesn’t realise that you could easily take him. He’s out of control with fury, knows Missy, who has been with him for years, will help him dispose of your body if necessary. But it doesn’t go his way. You’re former BPS and you accidentally kill him while defending yourself. That last bit gives you a bit of sympathy, by the way, and makes it a crime of passion. Regardless, there you are, you’ve killed a Senator, you run but are captured by the intrepid investigative team of the judge soon after the crime. A tip off? Yes, of course, Missy Lane returns moments after you’ve gone, finds the body, calls her good friend the judge and bam. You’re guilty, and sentenced by the judge. How is that for a scenario?”

Cambria nodded, felt vaguely ill. It was the perfect set up. Now she understood the wealth of evidence against her. Lord Montague was right: she was naive.

“It’s perfect, sir,” she murmured in a subdued voice.

“Indeed. And that is what the press have been speculating about. The judge made very sure you were condemned before the police could even access the crime scene. He pre-empted every move to make sure the world knew you were guilty of murder, no, *assassination*. Worse, he guaranteed you will never get a fair trial, no matter where it convened. His office even released pictures of the crime scene, detailed all sorts of false stories about your time with BPS. They, of course, cannot deny or confirm anything about their operatives.”

His eyes held hers. “Ever. This was a political assassination. That has other politicians looking over their shoulders and sideways at their own staff. They are furious at the suspicion Bolingbroke has created, but can’t dismiss it.

“The best I can do,” he went on over her pained silence, “is lessen the impact, give information to those who are important enough to do something. I doubt it will work, Judge Bolingbroke has too many allies, too many people owe him. The manhunt for you is ongoing and will not stop until you are confirmed dead or captured.”

Cambria slouched back in her chair, the implications of what he said washed over her, through her, chilled her soul, burned her heart. “And you just showed me to the

Secretary.” Thus confirming she was alive and under the protection of some shadow organisation.

“I did, yes, but not for the reasons you are thinking.”

“You have no idea what I’m thinking, sir.”

“First, you’re a little overwhelmed by what’s been happening, second you are stunned that you could be accused of such a crime, third you are totally pissed at being put in this situation, fourth, the only way out you see is to return to Tudor. Am I close?” He lifted his eyebrow and gave her a small smile of genuine humour.

“Yeah,” she muttered, “you’re close.” His grin widened.

“Luckily, we have an alternative to offer you.” And his smile dropped away into seriousness. “You understand that if you leave the bunker, you will be hunted by every crackpot bounty hunter out there?”

“Bounty hunters? I’m not worth that much, for Gods sake, even if I *were* guilty!” She sat straight in her chair.

“Oh, but you are. Given the outrage, the ability to get so close to a senior member of the Council, well, serious warnings have to be given to anybody else who thinks they might be able to infiltrate the Council with a sleeper agent. You are, therefore, worth just under 100 million Euros.”

Cambria gaped at him. “A hundred. Million? That’s insane!”

“Agreed, but hysteria being what it is, some people went overboard, outbidding each other. Dortmund was extremely popular. So, the World Council made the final offer. Yes, bounty hunters are out looking for you and so is everyone else. Your picture is everywhere, you are more famous now than...” He waved a hand. “A lot of famous people.” He finished with a sheepish quirk to his lips.

“I’m glad you’re so amused by my predicament, sir.” She stood, feeling a weighty stone around her soul. “Now, I think I’ll pack my gear and return to Tudor.”

“Not so fast, Ms Peterson, you have work to do yet.” He pushed another file towards her. It wasn’t as thick as the one he handed to the Secretary, but it was substantial. “I want you to read this.” He said solemnly. “And then come back to me with your answer.”

“What is it?” She asked and reached out for it.

“Read it, Ms Peterson.” He sat back and watched her.

She looked down at the folder and wondered if she dared touch it. Tudor provided the safer option. And as if he read her mind, he said: “Tudor will eventually be discovered by countries and people other than Bolingbroke. What do you think they’ll do if they find you there?”

Her look was sharp. “Kill me and exploit the planet anyway.”

“Read the file, Ms Peterson.” He said tiredly and ran a hand through his thick hair.

She nodded and picked up the file.

The file seemed to weigh more than it should, Cambria thought as she reached out for the door handle.

“One more thing. We found Moeller.”

She turned back to him and saw him smile.

“He seemed to be in a rather precarious position on some obscure planet. Apparently, he didn’t know that their King/God, could only hold that position if he was dead. He was very grateful when we rescued him from being roasted alive over a barbeque pit. Moeller is being very helpful in reconstructing Bolingbroke’s list of planets.”

Cambria shrugged. “Why tell me?”

“I thought you might like to know, given what’s in the file.”

She shook her head and left.

Her new quarters were three floors below Montague’s office, near the medical facility.

They were comfortable with a large double bed, an ensuite, her own coffee unit, data and communications units, a dresser full of new clothes. All the comforts she had done without for too long. The only thing that she didn’t have was access to the sky and fresh air. She didn’t even know what country she was in. It wasn’t important, as long as she was safe.

Montague had arranged for an extra lock for her door.

When she saw it, she sighed. Did every one think she'd been so badly abused by the men on the planet? What on Earth had Caparossi told them? Or the medical staff, for that matter.

If she went with that thought, it would explain Louis's hesitancy in touching her, for men here steering clear of her. Even her physio, while male, had gone to extreme lengths to assure her he was only there to exercise her leg. All the doctors and attendants she'd had were female.

She lay on her bed, the file resting on her chest. She wasn't fragile, wasn't about to have hysterics, and wasn't about to go on a murderous rampage and kill as many men as possible; and only Montague recognised that.

She had changed; now she was tougher than the staff could imagine.

Only Montague saw in her the ability to move on after a traumatic event, only he believed what she'd said, took everything she said at face value. So what was he offering here? What work could she possibly do for him? She was a researcher and from what she'd seen so far, he had plenty of them; what did he need her for? Well, she'd read the damned file. Maybe the answer lay with in the pages.

She rolled onto her stomach and opened the file. The front page read: Cambria Jaxentia Peterson/Tudor: Witness accounts, depositions, medical, psychological, recommendations.

Rather than be too comfortable when reading, she closed the file and tossed it onto her desk and made some coffee first.

When it brewed, she poured herself a large mug and sat down in her chair. She'd missed the stuff, and she missed Ssoclar, too.

She stared at the cover.

Read the damn file, Cambria, how bad can it be?

Bad, as it turned out, very, *very* bad. The surviving men had either painted her as some kind of an action hero or a psychopathic killer willing to murder them in their sleep. It was more the latter than the former and she got up to refill her mug.

The medical report was better. She was fit for duty and she snorted. She had no *duty* to go back to, so what were they talking about?

The psychological report was choked with terms and names she'd need a dictionary to understand, but the upshot of it was the same as the medical report. She was fit for duty.

What was going on? Who *were* these people?

She turned the page and blinked. This second part was all about Excalibur Jones. Police reports, court reports, psychiatric reports and more than a dozen witness statements from Tudor. Why was he in her file?

Cambria was even more confused by the time she got to the last part of the file. Jones was what she'd expected. Devious, calculating, self-motivated, self-involved, obsessive/compulsive, sociopathic, highly intelligent, charming... the list went on. It didn't tell her anything she didn't already know and had experienced.

Finally, she arrived at the third section. It was only a few pages and as she read, she felt a cascade of emotions rush through her: anger, denial, disbelief, curiosity and intrigue.

She turned on her data unit and inputted information. The less than stellar results from her search only served to increase her interest.

Cambria shut down the data unit, closed the file and went back to Montague's office.

The Lord leaned back in his chair, his expression assessing.

Cambria carefully placed the file on his desk and sat in a chair, facing him. There were no clues in his expression.

"This was what you meant by my still having work to do. You want me to be one of these 'Hunters'."

Montague nodded and leaned forward. "Yes. It is."

"Why? I mean, why *me*?"

"Because you have proven eminently suitable. You arrived on an alien planet where you were the only woman. You not only survived, but put the fear of God into the men there. You took action regardless of the consequences. We need people like you to hunt down others who are... less willing to comply with law and order."

Cambria snorted. Here was another man who thought to manipulate her. In her head, Jones' words came back to her: *you are blinded by what men can do to you, not what they can do for you...*

Was he right? Was she so churned up by what the men of Tudor wanted that she'd ignored other aspects? That men could help her and she could help them?

"It has come to the attention of the World Council that there are a number of corridors out there being used for purposes they weren't designed for. Criminal purposes for the most part, but some countries are using their corridors for the exploitation of planets. We cannot allow that. I'm sure you understand. As a consequence, the Council has formed an organisation, under the auspices of this office to hunt perpetrators down. I don't presume to tell you you'd be attached to the Office of Alien Protection, that's for the xenobiologists and cultural theorists. But you *will* be with the elite group of Hunters. They're charged with the hunting of individuals and your first task will be..."

"Jones." She said bitterly.

"You know him better than anyone else, you said so yourself. You're more than equipped to bring him in, or failing that, enforcing the upgraded exile, to termination order."

"Do you have any idea what you're asking me? You expect me to kill him?" She stared at him.

"With extreme prejudice."

"I'm not a woman scorned here, Montague. I'm not interested in revenge; I don't have that capability. It's true I will kill to protect myself and if I have no other choice, but to deliberately hunt someone down and kill them? No, I *don't* think so."

"Isn't that what you were going to do with Bolingbroke?"

Cambria shrugged. "For a while. But I didn't and I don't have the resources to do it. And what would revenge get me? Not a lot. Brief satisfaction and that's about it."

"And that's exactly what we need from you. Burning revenge is not what we're looking for. Brief satisfaction of a job well done will suit us fine."

“Jesus, Montague,” she rubbed her eyes. “That’s not what I meant and you know it. I’m not a killer.”

“Yes, Cambria. You *are*.”

She lowered her hand and looked at him.

“Do you feel any regret for those you killed on Tudor?”

“Some. They had choices and they chose wrong. All I was doing was defending myself.”

“How many did Jones send after you to kill you?”

Cambria thought back. The man on her first night; she was sure of him. The assassin on patrol. The other man who’d approached her, but she hadn’t killed him. “Two I killed, one I let go. I don’t know of any others. No, wait. Sam Vangana. Jones expected him to…” She stopped and thought. Sam made no threatening moves towards and he had expressed no interest in her. Should she disregard him? No.

“Jones’s mind is too complex for me to work out all of his intentions and his plans.”

“Yet, you thwarted him at every turn.”

“No, not every one,” she murmured and Montague blinked.

“Yes, well,” he cleared his throat. “That does, in fact, only reinforce my argument that you are the right person for the job. No one else has come up against him and survived, not when he meant to kill them. You got inside him.”

She squirmed at his expression. “Into his psyche.” He said. “You know him, know what he will do, where he will go.”

Cambria sighed. Was she capable of hunting him down? She’d been at his mercy more than once and only his skewed sense of affection for her had kept her alive. Did she want to be at his mercy again? No. She did not. But that twisted love he felt for her could prove to be an advantage. That’s what Montague was counting on. That she felt nothing for him and use his feelings to get close to him. Was she that cold-blooded? An image of the men he’d killed scrolled through her mind. Remembered the family she’d come from and slowly nodded.

“Yeah, I do.” She said quietly and looked up at him. “What kind of authority will I have and who will recognise it?”

Montague's expression turned pained as if she'd asked the one question he didn't want to answer. That put her guard up.

"Um..."

"Lord Montague?"

"You will have the authority of the World Council, of course, but I doubt any ruling body of the planets out there will recognise it. We're only now negotiating embassy space on some of them. You'll have to be, er, more *assertive*, I suppose..."

"You mean bluff. I'll be out there bluffing my way to finding Jones."

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. "Yes, basically."

"Anything else you want to hamstring me with?" She asked wryly.

"Well, actually, the problem with your status came up for discussion. The World Council is willing to use you, but fail and they will have you executed."

"Only if they can find me, Montague. I could disappear like Jones."

"The difference," he said with a tilt of his head and a knowing smile, "is that only *you* are looking for Jones." He finished.

"Ah," she nodded. "Now we come down to it. I do this for the Council, prove my worth, and they won't have me killed for a crime they know and you know I didn't commit. That about sum it up?"

"A blunt and unpretty way to put it, but yes." He folded his hands. "I didn't want to give you ultimatums, Cambria, you're much too sharp to respond to them. The World Council didn't give me a choice here."

"You could have refused."

"Yes, I could have. However, they made it clear that if I did, your current protected status would be revoked and you'd be taken into custody."

"A rock and a hard place."

"Indeed. But. And this is a big one. If you do this for us, you will have unlimited freedom; you can go anywhere in the galaxy to find Jones. Bring him in if you want, kill him if you have to. It's up to you. All we expect is periodic updates from you."

“That’s... generous of you.” She sat back. She’d be some sort of intergalactic cop or bounty hunter without the bounty. Her finger found the scar on her jaw. Jones had helped her, saved her life. Did she have the right to repay that with death or imprisonment?

There would come a time, she thought, when that would no longer matter. But for now, she had to decide. Was her life worth more than the people he’d already killed? Was she *that* thankful to be alive?

“All right, Lord Montague, I’ll hunt him down for you.”

The tension in Montague’s shoulders eased and he sat back.

“What would you have done if I hadn’t agreed?”

He gave her a strange smile. “I would have found another way to convince you.”

Her eyebrows rose at that, but she didn’t ask what... *other* methods he would have employed.

Montague chuckled and pressed a button on his console. The door opened behind her, but she didn’t turn, she kept her eyes on the Lord as he spoke to the newcomer.

“She’s ready for you.” He said and lowered his gaze. “I doubt we’ll meet again before you leave. So I’ll say good luck and good hunting.” He stood and held out his hand. Cambria rose and shook it then turned.

Major Caparossi stood at attention, watched her with narrowed eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Major Caparossi.” Cambria grinned.

“Ms Peterson, if you will come this way,” he indicated she should precede him. She strolled past him into the outer office and waited. She had no idea where she was to go now, the major knew and he opened the door to the corridor beyond.

Cambria walked beside him and waited.

He said nothing until they were in the elevator. “Are you sure you wish to do this, Signorina?”

“I can’t do anything else, Major.”

“Yes, well. I thought, given your recent... adventures, you might wish to take time to relax, to...” he waved a hand, unsure of his words.

“Major, as Lord Montague pointed out, I know Jones well. Ergo, I’m the one to hunt him down. I can’t do that lounging around doing bugger all.”

Caparossi cleared his throat. “I am only interested in your well being, Ms Peterson.”

“For which I thank you, but the longer I remain here, the more people Jones is plotting to kill or worse.”

“Worse?” He glanced down at her and she shrugged.

“Jones is an opportunist. He likes games, mind games. It’s important to him and the mental damage he could do could be incalculable.” She doubted *she’d* ever recover from his machinations, but she’d use the changes he’d brutally wrought in her to stop him from doing it to someone else. *Know your enemy*, well, she did know him, she knew how to think like him, too. He’d taught her that and it would be his downfall.

“I am sorry it has come to this, Signorina.” He sighed and the door of the elevator slid open. “This way, please.” He said and led the way down the corridor. It was the same level as the corridor room, but he went past the door to one further down. He opened the door and waited for her to enter.

She hadn’t seen this area before. It was a ready room for troops. There were, in fact, troops cleaning their gear. A few of them glanced up, then went back to what they were doing.

“This is the room from where you will be able to access the corridor at a moment’s notice.” He said and guided her through the men and women to another room.

It was long and wide with shelves in rows. Some of those shelves held armaments, others had devices she couldn’t begin to guess at their use. Another row held files. Caparossi went to one row and counted down. He lifted a folder off the shelf, made a notation on the dangling slate, applied his thumbprint and brought the file to her.

“This is a list of worlds Bolingbroke had access to. Moeller was most helpful.” He smiled.

Cambria flicked through it. A list was a list, with very few notes on what the worlds were or what kind of a population was on it. “I’ll need to talk to Moeller,” she began.

“Of course, this way.”

“After I have looked over the list, Major.”

He hesitated and looked down the row to another door. He gave a noncommittal shrug and returned through the ready room and out into the corridor.

Caparossi showed her to an office. It had a carpeted floor with a woven yellow fleur d’lis, a large desk; a data unit sat to one side. A file cabinet sat against the wall behind the desk and there was a bookcase holding blue folders. To the right of the desk was another door.

“This is yours.” He said and she turned to him in shock.

“What?” She asked in surprise.

“This office. It is yours. Your quarters are behind that door.” He pointed to the pale cream door.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, Signorina. The Hunters are... specialized.” He gave her a meaningful look. “They require information to narrow the hunt, quiet to plan strategies and to meditate. They are solitary, like most animal hunters.”

“Was that an insult?” She asked putting her hands on her hips.

“No, Signorina, merely comparing what you are about to do to other types of hunters.”

“Hmmm.” Cambria sat in the chair behind the desk. It was leather and comfortable, but best of all, swivelled. “Are there many?”

“Many?”

“Hunters, Major, are there many Hunters?”

Caparossi pursed his lips, then shook his head. “No, Signorina, there are less than twenty.”

“For how many people and worlds?”

Caparossi sighed, and pointed to the chair in front of the desk. “May I?”

“Please.”

He sat and crossed his legs. “You must understand that the information on rogue corridors in rogue nations is recent. We have no idea how many are out there or who has built them. All we know is that someone has betrayed the Council and made themselves extremely wealthy. They are being Hunted as we speak. There is also the difficulty of corridors in private hands. That, too, is under investigation.

“We are only in the early stages of finding everything and everyone involved.” He lifted his hands. “I’m sure you can see the difficulty. The World Council has virtually moved heaven and earth to create the Department of Galactic Law Enforcement. Men and women from all over the world are seconded, almost kidnapped to fill the thousands of positions we need filled. What we have done so far, for example, your rescue, is but the tip of a very large iceberg. Think needle on Mount Everest and you get an idea of what we are up against. No one knows how long this has been going on...”

“I suggest, Major,” she cut in, “that it has been going on since the first corridor was built. Start from there.”

“Er, yes. As I was saying. We are only realising the enormity of the situation and what has to be done to correct it. We are cobbling together what we can but it will take time to sort out who is appropriate and who is not. That is where the Hunter groups come in.”

“Hunter... groups? I thought there were only twenty altogether.”

“No, Ms Peterson. Checks and balances, checks and balances. This organisation has been put together so fast, we cannot make sure everyone is who they say they are. There is an internal hunter group to make sure of that. There is a hunter group for each world region, then there are the external groups of which you are a part.”

“Jesus. This world is leaking like a sieve.”

Caparossi nodded. “It is and it is your job to plug some of those holes or at the very least, make sure some of the... stuff... that gets through the sieve is returned or destroyed.”

“And what does that have to do with less than twenty external hunters?” She asked.

“We are more concerned with our internal security at the moment, sealing or destroying those unauthorised corridors. What can go through to another world, can surely bring things back. And I’m sure you know what that could mean.”

Cambria nodded, feeling slightly ill at the extra-terrestrial diseases, contraband, technology, an *army*; a whole litany of goods.

“So. We have more people working on internal security than external.”

“I understand.” And she did. The World Council had not only been caught with its pants down, it had been caught completely *naked*.

It was too late to protect the Earth from a myriad of things that could go wrong, all they could do now was play catch up and hope it was enough. And she was going to be part of it.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine and increased her heartbeat. She was excited, she realised. Excited to be a part of the cure.

Here was the opportunity that denied her while working for the Bureau of Political Security. She could punish those who deserved it, protect those who were innocent and not worry about criminals worming their way out of prosecution. And speaking of which...

“What exactly are my powers here?” She asked.

Caparossi swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Lord Montague was right: you do ask the hard questions.” He sighed. “In a nutshell, you will be judge, jury and executioner.”

Cambria frowned. “What’s to stop me from going out and killing everyone I hunt? Or bystanders, for that matter, who get in the way?”

His eyes met hers. “Your own sense of justice.”

She grinned. “Good answer.” She tilted her head. “What do you have to do with this?”

“I am your adviser.”

“I need one?”

“Every hunter has one.” He shrugged. “I am your checks and balances, I am your conscience, your supervisor and runner, your link to the World Council and I’m your sounding board when you need one.”

“You sound like a priest.”

“If the analogy suits you, then yes, I am your confessor as well.”

Cambria swivelled for a while and Caparossi waited.

“Did you volunteer for this?” She finally asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

It was his turn to stay silent as he gathered his thoughts. When he’d done that, his gaze settled on hers again. “When I met you, you were filled with fear, anger and deep down hurt, as if something important had broken. At the time, I was puzzled that you should feel that way on a planet of such beauty. It wasn’t until later I realized what kind of situation you landed in. I admired you for your resilience and willingness to survive.” He held up his hand to stop her from interrupting. “I will finish, since you asked.” Cambria nodded, uncomfortable with his words. “I saw in you something to be proud of, to be admired, and to be afraid of. My rescue of people on worlds in atrocious conditions, dragged at me. There was such despair and grief. I didn’t want to see that look on the faces of others again. But you, you were something else. You gave me hope that not all survivors were going to be... victims. That you certainly are not. You represent the unbreakable human spirit, the determination to succeed no matter the obstacles or the personal cost. I want to be a part of that, a part of helping

you rid the galaxy of the scum who put you into that situation in the first place. And that, madam, is all I will say on the subject; now or ever.”

Cambria sat slack jawed at his words. He painted her as some kind of valkyrie!

“Uh...” She was stunned speechless.

Caparossi rose. “I will see to the removal of your gear to your new quarters.” He gave her a courtly bow and left her still struggling to find words.

Cambria spent the next two hours going over the list Moeller provided. The most information was about the world he’d been found on. Pages and pages of information on Moray.. But she disregarded that world as Jones’ destination. Oh, he might drop in to have a look at what Bolingbroke lusted after, but it would be mere idle interest.

No, he was somewhere close, or familiar. Not to him, but to her. He *wanted* her to find him; the problem was, which planet. Moeller had surrendered a list of nearly a hundred names and co-ordinates. She knew Jones had a similar list, but nothing leapt out at her. She needed more information. It was time to talk to Moeller.

Caparossi escorted her to the interrogation room, oblivious of her discomfort. It was as if she hadn’t asked the question of his volunteering and he hadn’t answered. She would have to get over it, she decided or this partnership was doomed before it began.

Moeller sat with his head on his arms. Caparossi gave her a small smile and she knew Moeller had sat in this room since the Major had shown her the supply room. She grinned back at him.

“Hello, Mr Moeller,” she said, feeling a surge of pleasure and satisfaction that it was now Moeller in a subservient position. His head lifted and his eyes widened.

“Surprised to see me?” She grinned at his startled face. “Oh, yes, Mr Moeller, Tudor was an experience.” His eyes moved to the scar on her jaw and she lifted a finger to stroke its length. “Definitely an experience.” She sat in the chair opposite him.

Caparossi stood at the door, like a guard.

“But we’re not here about me, we’re here about you.”

She watched his throat as he swallowed convulsively.

“I want a lawyer.” He croaked.

“No lawyers here, Moeller, you haven’t been arrested nor have you been charged with anything, has he, Major?” She looked over as Caparossi shook his head. “So we don’t need no stinking lawyers. In fact,” she opened the file that held the list. “It was my understanding you’re here to co-operate. To give *us* information.” She gave him a pleasant smile and he drew back, fear flickered in his eyes. “I’m here to extract that information. What do you say, Moeller, shall we begin?”

Moeller’s eyes darted around the room, sweat bloomed on his face.

“Major?” She queried. “Why is Mr Moeller so upset?”

The Major cleared his throat and coughed into his hand. “I, er, well, some of the witness reports from Tudor leaked, Signorina.”

Cambria stared at him. So much for a secure organisation. “And?”

“I have not seen the report,” he lied, “but the witnesses were most... graphic, in their descriptions of you, er... defending yourself.”

He stood straight again, back to formality, but she saw his lips twitch, and his eyes gleamed with suppressed laughter. Fine, she thought with disgust, she would use Moeller’s fear against him.

She stared at him with blank eyes.. “So.” She said and he jumped, like a mouse caught in the glare of a cat. “Would you like some water, Mr Moeller?” She leaned back in her chair. “No need for us to be uncomfortable, now is there?”

“Yes,” he said hoarsely, “I would like some water, please.”

“Major?”

Caparossi opened the door and Moeller paled even further.

“*No!*” He said and Caparossi looked over his shoulder at the heavily sweating man. “Er, could I speak to the Major alone please, Ms Peterson?”

Cambria leaned forward and grinned at him. “Of course.” She even wrinkled her nose at him. “*I’ll* get the water.” She stood quickly and he inhaled a sharp breath.

The man was truly terrified of her. It felt good, she thought, as she left the two men alone.

Moeller had composed himself by the time she returned, his hands folded on top of the table, his eyes quiet. Caparossi was to one side of the door. He gave her a wink as she stepped through.

“Now, Mr Moeller,” she set a plastic jug filled with water and two plastic glasses on the table. “Tell me about this list you’ve compiled. Have you left any planets out?”

Cambria made notes while Moeller filled her in on the planets he’d neglected to mention. One in particular caught her attention, Nomad, and she grinned. It would appeal to Jones to be on that particular planet when she came for him. He had a sick sense of humour, but it would help her.

Caparossi saw her grin and cleared his throat. Humour as far as he was concerned, wasn’t appropriate in an interrogation room.

Moeller continued to recite facts and figures as if he were reading it out of a book. Cambria understood he just had that good a memory, so it was a relief to know that the interview was recorded and a transcript would be available to her by the time she got back to her office.

The prisoner poured himself another glass of water, sipped slowly and continued in a monotone.

Cambria listened for form, but she already had a place to start. If Nomad didn’t pan out, she would search down the list for other names, but Jones was there, she *knew* it. Two hours later, she thanked Moeller politely and he flinched away from her. He walked ahead of the guard that would take him back to his cell.

“What on Earth did you tell him?” She asked Caparossi.

“Oh, ah, I simply mentioned that if he didn’t co-operate, you now had the power to send him back to that planet we found him on or somewhere worse. Of course, you had the option of just executing him whenever you felt like it.” He smiled after the scurrying man.

“But I don’t have that power, Major, and you...”

“You do.” He turned to her. “You are a Hunter and I explained what that meant to Mr Moeller. Like I told you, you are judge, jury *and* executioner.”

“I thought you meant when I was on other planets.” She said.

“True, but it’s also true here. If the criminal is here on Earth, you need the same powers as you would have out there.”

Cambria shook her head. “I have a bad feeling about this.” She said and started to walk back to her office. “Talk about the opportunity to abuse power.”

“There is that temptation, Ms Peterson, but you have to have a warrant or prove without reasonable doubt before you can off someone. There is also the personality factor.” He said, taking a post up beside her to open doors for her.

She didn’t need him to, she was perfectly capable of opening her own doors, but it wasn’t about that. It was about Caparossi being genetically incapable of leaving the doors to her. It just wasn’t worth arguing about.

“Nobody can be sure of all the Hunters, Major, you should know that. People are going to die needlessly.”

“Probably, but that’s not your responsibility. Eventually, we’ll sort out the problems and have an effective unit. All it takes is time, training and tenacity.” He shrugged.

“Okay.” Caparossi opened the door to her office. “Get me the transcript will you, please? I want to revisit the part about Nomad. He’s there, Major, I know it.”

“I will get it for you now.” He gave that unnerving courtly bow and left her alone.

xxx

“I think you’re right, Ms Peterson,” Caparossi murmured and placed his cup on her desk. He lounged in the chair opposite, his feet on the corner of the desk reading the notes from Moeller and Cambria laid out her reasoning.

He swung his feet of the table and got to his feet. “I think it is time for your first mission.” He gave her a crooked grin.

“What do I take with me?” She asked and stood as well.

“Come with me to the supply room, we will kit you out.

He led the way back to the ready room. When they entered, the room was empty and she glanced at him.

“They’re off on another rescue mission.” He said and opened the door to the supply room, picked items off the shelves and shove them into a backpack. He then went to

the back of the room and chose weapons. When he was done, he led the way back to the ready room.

He approached a wall lined with lockers. "This is yours." He pointed to one with a nametag attached to the lock. He brought out a key card and handed it to her.

"This is coded to your genetic matrix. No one else can use it."

"And if I'm killed on a mission?" She asked taking the card.

He pulled out an infuser and placed it against her throat, just under her jaw. He pressed the button and she winced.

"A molecule-sized chip. It will be almost invisible to scans. The bone of your jaw will hide it. That will let us know and the matrix will be deleted from the database, thus allowing us to clean out your locker. It will also take note of any medical problems, your body's status at all times and record any conversations you have. It is also a back up remote for the corridor, coded back to Earth. It will only activate if you are incapacitated, unconscious or loses contact with this remote. " He pulled out a wrist unit from the back pack. "This has the information you'll need to track Jones and on the planet you are going to. Try not to lose it, they're expensive."

Caparossi led her to a bench and sat down. He pulled out various items she might need: a small pill box, "cyanide are the blue, knock out pills the pink. Don't mix them up." Another box, larger with a red cross painted on the top. "Your medical kit. It has pain reliever in pill, gel and infuser; microbandages, scalpel, tweezers, string, needles. Anything else you need and you are truly in trouble." A silver square, the size of her hand and as thin as the key card. "Micro blanket. Thermal and waterproof. Alien technology and very useful." Next was a leather, oblong envelope with a silver circular disc on the front. "Standard lock picking kit and an electronic lock pick." He put every thing back into the pack and started on the weapons.

The knife, she knew and loved. It had a new sheathe and a new handle. He unscrewed the top. "Mini kit. Thread, needle, tracking device, compass."

"Pistol." He handed her the silvered weapon. It warmed in her hand, then there was a sharp pain in her palm and she switched the gun to her left hand and stared at the small injury. "Which is now coded to your genetic matrix. No one else can use it."

“Terrific.” She said sarcastically and pressed her thumb against the small, bleeding hole.

“Pistol.” He said again and grinned. She sighed. The first gun went back to her right hand and he gave her the second pistol. The pinprick in her left palm hurt more because expected it, she thought. “This is cross draw holster. The guns will fit either side of your spine.”

“More alien technology?” She asked and Caparossi nodded happily and gave her a thin blade. She didn’t need to ask what it was.

“There are other smaller knives in your locker, should you wish to take them. They’re designed to be hidden on various parts of the body. In fact, why don’t you open your locker. You have a new set of clothes.”

Cambria eyed him suspiciously. “Why do I need new clothes?”

“Because the one’s you’re wearing aren’t projectile proofed of course.”

“Of course,” she murmured and opened her locker. The clothes were ordinary. She expected military, camouflage or something. Here were jeans, slacks, long and short sleeved shirts and blouses. Looking down, she saw loafers, sandals and boots. She glanced back at Caparossi. “What, no formal wear?”

He grinned at her. “Only if you need it.”

“Right.”

The Major stood. “I’ll leave you to change. I would advise...”

Cambria glared at him and he fell silent. “I don’t need advice on how to dress. At least, not yet.”

“I checked the weather conditions. It’s a wet and warm world with constant rain and tropical climate. Take the coat.”

She put her hands on her hips. “If it is a tropical planet, why would I need a coat?”

“Alien technology. It will keep you dry and cool.”

She shook her head. “Of course.” She murmured. “Are you coming with me on this mission?”

“Not unless you need me there. That’s what back ups are for. You should do this on your own, but I’ll be there if you need me.” He turned and walked out, strode really, as if it was he who was off on an adventure.

Cambria changed, strapped on various knife sheathes and the cross draw holster for the pistols. She practiced drawing them; single handed, left then right, and both. She felt like an old time cowboy. The coat hindered her draw. Until she was comfortable with the guns, she would take it slow. She wasn’t expecting any problems and she figured she’d have plenty of time to practice. She wouldn’t always wear the coat.

She tied her boots; at least they were military, and bloused her slacks around the top. Then she loaded extra clothes and weapons into her pack. She was as ready.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her locker and walked out of the ready room, backpack slung over her shoulder.

There was no one in the corridor room. Caparossi grinned at her from the observation room. A white-coated, balding man studied a control panel.

“Ready to Hunt?” Caparossi’s tinny voice came through the speaker.

Cambria glanced at him, then door. She took a deep breath and pulled her coat down in nervousness.

“Yeah, okay, Caparossi.” She said, then turned to him. “What’s your first name, by the way?”

“I’ll tell you when you get back.” She saw him reach out and toggle off the speaker and she smirked.

It must be bad for him to take such drastic action.

She heard a faint whine, then the floor vibrated slightly. “Ready to engage,” the scientist said and Caparossi gave her a thumbs up.

Cambria approached the metal door with primeval dread. The last time she’d gone through, she’d been forced. Now she was actively volunteering for the job.

She reached out and put her hand on the door handle. It moved downward and the door opened easily on well-oiled hinges.

“Ready or not, Excalibur Jones, here I come.” She stepped through and closed the door.