

5 Kilometers from Truval City - Aerospace Hub - Converted and Repurposed Administrative Bunker.

Evina

We were surrounded.

The tell-tale glow of iridescent eyes refracting and reflecting what minimal light there was down here gave away the positions of the rest of the would-be raiders.

I counted two, three, four, no... at least *twenty* other members of their group lurking and walking amidst the shadows that the main lights of the room could not reach.

Some sat perched atop of old piles of equipment Eslan had been working on for months, some were rummaging through our food stores and battery bays, some were holding improvised rifles and arrow-slingers straight at us; as if they'd come here explicitly thinking I'd be trouble.

I'd since raised both my hands above my head, knowing well that even *flinching* the wrong way would have resulted in either my death, or worse - Eslan's.

"Good." The gang leader replied dryly, prompting me to start buying time by doing the first thing that came to mind.

Talking.

"How... how'd you-"

"Your little watchcat." He responded gruffly, cutting me off as he began ushering me and Eslan towards our bunks. "It did a good job in leading us straight to your little slice of paradise. It was hesitant to do so too, so don't blame it. I'm sure it just wanted to come home. Especially after you abandoned it and left it for dead near the forests."

My heart hitched up for a moment, as I looked around, trying desperately to find Lera.

"Don't worry. We're not *complete* monsters. We didn't do your watchdog in, I promise you. But we left it outside so it couldn't interfere. Besides I ain't got beef with your pet, *wormer*."

My heart skipped another beat as I heard that word. Finally placing the man's voice to a face that I thought had long since been dealt with. "Wait-"

"Yes. Little old Penninger and his gaggle of *Pinerose Motor Wasters* is back in town. Heh. Didn't think you'd see my handsome mug after the stunt you pulled now did ya?" The man chuckled darkly, hiding a not-too-well-hidden seething *rage* beneath that fake and forced suaveness. I turned around for a second, only to glimpse a face that was much *much* worse for wear than

what his voice initially hinted at. More than that though, all it took was for a brief glimpse for me to realize who this would-be second-rate comic book villain was, as I recognized the handiwork of my earlier escapades out in the wilds *very well*.

That big gash across his face was a dead giveaway.

The result of a heavy construction crane, a hook, and a chase that resulted in the collapse of a bridge and what I thought would be the end of the waster gang infamous for terrorizing above-ground expeditions by the local bunkers.

“You really thought you sealed our fate didn’t’cha?” The man continued, forcing both of my hands behind my back, and then tying them tight with what seemed to be an improvised series of high-strength cables. “You reaaaally thought you outsmarted old Penninger by isolating us on that peninsula.” He continued, referencing the geographical deadzone that they were effectively stuck in after that whole stunt.

“And you would’ve been right. Those mechanical monstrosities out in the woods had kept us all but penned in for the better part of the year.” He admitted with an insidious ire. “*But*, you were a fool to think you could rely on such natural monstrosities. For we slowly whittled them down until they were *nothing, wormer*. Yes, you’ve noticed haven’t you? How there are now scantily but a few stragglers left in the New Lorisa forests? Yes, that was of *our* doing.” He grinned wildly, pridefully, as I narrowed my eyes and let out an internal sigh of annoyance at that tall tale.

The aliens. It was the aliens’ doing. They whittled down the population of those beasts to thin out their ranks. This inevitably resulted in the natural wall that was the beasts to be weakened enough for these second-rate villains to escape. But of course, they didn’t know that. So they were boasting about their non-existent escape and exploits.

Typical.

“So, now that the year-long *ceasefire* has come to an end, how’s about we resume where we last left off hmm?” The man continued, baring his sharp fangs.

“What exactly do you want, Penninger?” I finally spoke up. “Supplies? Rations? Equipment? Weapons?”

“Oh, why of course, that’s already a given.” He spoke, before gesturing to the group currently ransacking the place; most of them clearly making a mess of things for no other reason than to spite me. “Besides, you’re not really in a position to negotiate what I can or can’t take, so, it’s time to rethink your strategy here, *wormer*.”

I sighed, trying my best to focus my attentions squarely on the man, and not Eslan. The less he knew about the weaknesses I had, the less he could focus his ire on the things I actually cared about. “You want the base too I guess?” I managed out, before attempting to divert his attention

to a fake piece of memorabilia. "Fine, just take everything, but don't take the medal on the counter-"

"Oh just shut it with your diversion tactics. *We know about your boyfriend here.*" He snickered darkly. "That's what really matters here right? You could lose your supplies, your equipment, heck, I'm thinking about taking your whole base. But losing all of that's just a setback for you isn't it?"

I let out a sharp, frustrated sigh, my eyes darting back and forth within the room. "Just tell me what you want Penninger and just take-"

"I want revenge." He spoke plainly, simply, as if he was offended by me not reciprocating his little teasings. "Is that so hard to grasp? I want to hit you where it hurts. I want to make you pay. I'm not going to lie and say this is for some grander reason. I'm not going to overcomplicate things by making it seem like there's any motive other than what's blatantly obvious. Because unlike you *worms*, us true survivors don't mince words in order to do what needs to be done. Kill a bunch of stragglers for a bottle of water so that we have something to drink at the end of the day? Yup, that's us. Kidnap a younger member of some community to have them lead us back to their hidden camp? Yeah, it's efficient and effective. We'd do that in a heartbeat if the opportunity presents itself to us. We don't try to hide behind bullshit. We do the things we do because we can, and it either lets us live another day, or it's because we just *want to*. And this time? Well, *wormer*-" He paused, coming closer and closer still, placing a sharpened claw underneath my chin. "-you're on my shitlist of people to fuck with because I *want to*."

However, just as the raider was about to enter his endgame, a familiar voice suddenly made itself known; one that I wasn't expecting to hear, especially all the way down here...

"Don't react. Whatever you do, do not react. First, I need to know if you can hear me. Blink once if you can, I can detect it on your AR glasses."

It was the alien's voice. I blinked as instructed, holding it for longer than a typical blink, prompting the alien to let out a sigh of relief.

"Alright, thank the ancestors the signal still works down there. I've monitored the situation, and I've begun mobilizing my defense assets down there."

My heart hitched up for a moment, my mind racing through the possibilities of a potential firefight down here. The trigger happy nature of this gang out for revenge meant that *any* interruption to their plans could lead to them outright offing both me and Eslan in a moment's notice.

I wanted to interject, to tell the alien this...

But thankfully, his next words would indicate he already understood the complexity of the situation. This development came alongside his face popping up in the far right corner of the glasses, as he attempted to give me the best reassuring face he could muster.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be deploying the larger combat platforms down there. There are too many variables that could otherwise lead to you and your friend getting hurt. I’m going to be deploying smaller, less obvious drones. What we call hunter-killers. They’re small, the size of a large insect, packed with enough explosives in them to deal sufficient damage. Now judging by the fact that nobody here’s in a hermetically sealed suit, they should be more than effective enough to take everyone out in a single swoop. But I need you to help me. I need you to highlight the targets for me before we commit to this to make this a single surgical strike. Do you understand?”

I blinked hard once again.

“Good, now instead of staring and pointing at the targets like I taught you, all you need to do is stare and then blink. Can you do that for me?”

I blinked affirmatively, and began getting to work, all the while trying my best not to seem too inconspicuous throughout Penninger’s speech.

“-And not without reason too.” He quickly added, slowly, and painfully, running his claw against the underside of my chin. *“Look at me when I’m talking to you.* You fucked with my operations, with *me* personally. You didn’t think there wouldn’t be repercussions did you? I wouldn’t mind if you actually committed to it either. If you were strong enough, you would’ve just finished us then and there yourself. But you’re not strong. You’re *weak, pathetic*, you’d rather half-ass your job and leave things up to chance than finishing what you started. Destroying that bridge was ballsy, I admit. Doing *this-*” He pointed to his scars, which ran across both his face and the length of his chest. “-to *me*, was also a big move. But to leave it at that? You instantly moved down from an opposing player to a spineless *coward*. You left everything up to chance. You *hoped* that trapping us on that peninsula would ensure our death, leaving the job to nature instead. He paused, before gesturing to the whole group behind him. “But did it work?”

He awaited for an answer, something to satisfy him.

But I refused to budge, still trying my best to look at *everything else* but him, blinking rapidly at each and every one of the gang members present.

“Well? *Did* it?” He reiterated *loudly*, using his *whole* hand this time to clench my windpipe, prompting Eslan to move forward defensively.

“Please, stop it! Stop-” His pleas were interrupted by a hard *punch* to the gut, taking the wind out of both his, and my own lungs.

“I guess it didn’t.” I responded coldly, through a croaked and raspy breath.

The man glared at me gleefully, thinking I would begin the slow dive into acquiescence, followed by groveling and pleading.

Something he more than likely was accustomed to from his victims.

“But I know *this will*.” I spoke menacingly through a strained exhale. “I’m Evina by the way, nice to meet you.” I spoke, my eyes meeting his own, but only out of coincidence. As I focused both my line of sight, and that awkward introduction on the small picture-in-picture feed of the alien directing me to what would hopefully be a single decisive move.

[PROCEED Y/N?]

“I don’t give a shit who you think you are. What the fuck do you mean by this will-”

BANG!

I felt the pressure from the man’s hands suddenly loosening. This was followed by a dull *THUD* as his large body fell to the ground.

In fact, almost every soul in the room seemed to have fallen at about the same time, the loud gunshot-like sounds coinciding into a single echoey mess of noise.

No other sounds were heard after that.

Nothing remained but the reverberating echoes of twenty tiny explosions going off at the same time.

There were no screams, no yells, no call to action or even a confused response.

Everyone was alive and seemingly in control one moment.

And the next, they were dead.

I quickly got up, turning around first to make sure Eslan was fine, before I began inspecting the room. Every single one of the bodies were untouched, save for a small hole between their eyes or at the back of their scalps.

As if twenty unseen snipers had lined up their shots all at once.

“Well, I guess now’s as good of a time as any to admit I haven’t yet properly introduced myself to you.” The alien’s voice once more piped through the small earbud. *“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance Evina, I’m Lysara.”*

“It’s alright, I realized during our flight down that we hadn’t yet been introduced. They say the best introductions are ones made in the line of fire, so I guess this counts. Anyways, the important thing is I finally have a name to thank.” I acknowledged “So thank you, Lysara.”