

The light was fading within the treeline, ticking down the seconds that she had left in the forest. As much as the old woman wanted to head back to camp, there was no way she could make it there in time without sprinting. Not only were her boots in too poor a shape for that now, but there was no telling what that noise would attract.

The old one would have to find a new pair soon, they really didn't make soles like they used to. Already burning through the last set in less than a month, wishing she grabbed just one more pair while the woman was in the city. But it was just too dangerous, too many of them nearly patrolling the streets and stores. She only made it out alive last time due to some fool making noise.

There was no telling if that one even survived, and of course the guilt of not coming to their aid weighed once again in her heart. Even after all these years, it was still affecting her. Swearing that it was due to her training as a combat medic; forcing old one to suppress that instinct to venture out and help... It was highly responsible for keeping her alive today.

Far from the only thing, of course, as the woman continued to climb up the hill in the forest. Using the trees to aid her balance and trying to find something... Some place to spend the night. It was unlikely that the animals would disturb her, but she really didn't want to take any chances.

The last intense light of the sun fell over the large tower in the distance, giving its final warning to those who were still out and about. For those to get the hell inside or take your chances out in the darkness for the next several hours. Causing the elder to start moving a bit faster, no matter how much her soles ached, scanning the surroundings with what little precious light she had left-

A howl came from far behind the lone woman, causing her to freeze in place and hold her breath, only able to hear the thumping of that old heart. Returning her gaze, she actually spotted a cottage somewhat towards where the call came from, nearly hidden by foliage. The woman's biggest chance at survival, in hopes that there was nothing else inside it.

The elder approached cautiously, spotting the doorway fully open in the front. An abandoned set of

vehicles, one clearly older than the other, rested in the driveway. Something she would search later if forced to, it wouldn't make for a terrible shelter but she would need to get it opened. When it seemed clear enough, she made her way out of the bushes and-

Another howl caused something inside the cottage to reply with its own, making the woman stop completely in her crouching position. A scrawny figure dashing out the front door, barely looking around before bolting where the distant vocals came from. Breathing heavily into a rage as it ran off, just barely missing the medic's camo with the autumn colors. Such a close encounter nearly scolded her for being so reckless tonight, wondering if she should take it as a warning.

But the old one didn't have a choice, and by the sounds of it... It's possible that howl came from her camp. There wasn't any place specifically safe. Not anymore. Taking a deep but quiet breath, she moved closer to the doorway. Giving the opened barrier a few taps and listening if something moved.

...And something did. What sounded like a scratch against wood. Making the woman think twice about actually entering the house, but looking behind the light had begun fading from the trees. Quietly but quickly she made her way to the old truck and SUV, cursing silently when they were both locked. Maybe the keys were inside?

As much as the elder wanted to avoid any danger, sometimes you just didn't have a choice. Pulling out a dirty hunting knife, the retired medic made her way inside. Trying to see through the dark home that had been clearly trashed or looted. Signs of a struggle were everywhere, old stains on the floor that were just too familiar to her.

Another scratch nearby, coming from the next room. Stopping the woman in her tracks for a moment before moving towards it. Trying to narrow it down to a pair of doors, one a possible closet, another maybe to the basement? Hearing some tapping from one of them, she leaned up against the wall beside it, towards the hinges. Reaching over for the knob and readying herself. Twisting and opening-!

Only to spot a dog scamper out of the doorway and into the room she just came from, bolting outside to freedom. Looking different from most that the elder had seen... Almost like a small white wolf? Hard to tell in the darkness. Regardless, it was no threat to her, making the woman breathe a sigh of relief. Shame... She could've used a companion.

The place seemed safe enough. No other sounds other than a few distant howls. Making her way back to the opened exit and closing it off quietly, not seeing any sign of that dog anywhere. Taking a quiet look around with her dim flashlight, making sure all the other exits were secure, and even spotting some shoes nearby. Not new soles, but better than the ones the medic currently had. The soft cone of light from the object flickering badly, odds are they would need to be changed soon.

Until then, a small set of tealights would do. Along with many candles, matches, lighters with plenty of fluid... (Whoever lived here was at least prepared for living out in the woods for a while.) Her gaze moved towards the boarded up window, almost cueing another series of howls that sounded like they were getting closer. (No one could've prepared for... this.)

For now, the woman will be safe. But she could make herself safer, as the darkness settled in the forest. Taking the small candlelight in a holder and making her way upstairs quietly, trying not to grab the attention of anything outside. Hearing some of the wooden steps creak almost too loudly, pausing to make sure nothing else heard it.

But something scurried outside in the bushes, her ears barely catching it. But silence afterwards... To the point where the old one wondered if she was imagining it. Step by step, occasionally creaking regardless of where she placed her weight. Making it to the top and seeing the three doorways, all leading to different rooms. Warm, which was good for this time of year. Perhaps she could strip herself of some layers and give her skin some time to recover, dealing with the many straps and contracts of packs. Even for just a few hours.

Opening the master bedroom door sent a wave of repulsive air. The bed was coated in an orange stain, figures of what looked like bones were still laying in the covers, another body laying on the floor, causing her to gag from the smell alone-

Only to get a loud shout from the room! Slamming the door and hearing someone claw at it while screaming in a rage! Slamming against it as the woman scampered backwards, dropping the light and making the holder shatter! The candle flickering but keep the faint light illuminated. As if letting her bear witness to the white painted door splitting heavily with every frenzy induced hit from the thing on the other side!

Once again, the medic pulled out that knife while attempting to get back up. Trying to find something to put some distance between her and the creature as it punched through the wood with bloody and scrawny fists. Grabbing a hold of the hole it made and pulling on the door again and again, shouting what one could only consider profanities in a primitive language as slowly the wooden barrier split larger and larger!

The woman made her way to another door and attempted to shut it, only to find that the lock itself seemed to be damaged! As if purposely made so it couldn't remain shut, possibly broken down several years ago. Trying to find something to put in front of it when the wood across the hall was heard again! Ripped out from the doorknob! The malnourished humanoid leaping at the old woman and hitting the previously broken door with an immense ram, knocking her to the ground!

The feral thing pounced at the elder, screaming loudly in a rage as it clawed at her arms, trying to defend herself using the many layers of her clothing while pushing the thing off! So damn skinny it was hard to shift its weight enough! Feeling it grab her forearms and pull them down enough to go in for a bite, barely missing her ear as the woman shifted her head to avoid it!

Another attempt was enough to give her an advantage finally, pushing its solar plexus while once again dodging another bite! Causing the thing to lean forwards too much to roll off of her and onto the foot of a wooden bed frame, one made for a child. A bony snap was heard as she scampered up- the creature attempting to do the same but snared on the unlevel bed! Giving her time to take the knife and slam into its skull-!

(He beat me... Over and over again... For what reason? What did I do wrong...?)

The voice of a small child echoed through her head, instantly sinking that old racing heart as the body spazzed. Still filled with adrenaline, but the brain no longer functional. Causing the woman to shed a tear while breathing heavily, still bracing the body while attempting to calm herself down. Struggling to pull the blade out and cause the creature to fall face-down.

Staring at it was a mistake, she knew that. Hoping everything was just all in her head, like some nightmare they were all trapped in. But she still couldn't help herself... Slowly moving towards the corpse's ragged shirt and lifting up the back. Even in the dark, recognizing the signs of bruising from something blunt. Fists, a sock full of coins... She didn't want to know.

But it spread into her brain like a disease, making the woman question what the point of all of this was. Why survive? Especially in such a doomed world? What was she afraid of? Death? Becoming one of them? It was inevitable, deep down the woman knew that. Regardless how long they survived, they would meet that ultimate end.

The howls outside began to draw closer, but this time it barely phased her. The woman's heart was just too heavy and disillusioned to care anymore. Let them come, claw at the windows and break down the doors. She was tired of running, hiding, and scavenging. Tired of seeing the worst of humanity. As she climbed into the bed clearly too small for her, the least the elder could do is die in what little comfort the world had to offer. Resting her head on the pillows, swearing she could still smell the tears of that little one it was stained with. Letting their frenzied calls draw closer and closer...

And a large bestial roar outside the front door...

Chapter 1

A pair of hands jolted him awake, nearly making him scream as his body jumped in reflex and fell off the other side of the bed. Cursing under his breath as a childish giggle filled the room, trying to be quiet. "What the hell...!?" The young man panted, holding onto his chest from the jumpscare. "There are other ways to wake people up, Bre!" Another whisper, as if out of habit.

"It's Natalie." A much younger girl lightly laughed from the other side. "And yes, there are. This just happens to be my favorite way." She leaned over the bed. "And youuuu just happen to be my favorite person to do it on, because your reactions never fail to entertain." A groan from the male. "Poor Jumpy Josie, always getting punished."

"Punished for doing what?" He tended to his elbow, feeling funny from the landing and double taking at her implying stare. Raising an eyebrow when he met it with a questionable gaze... Only for it to finally click in. "Damnit! I overslept!"

"Again. And-"

"And they're waiting for me, I know! I know!" The young man scampered for his pack, socks, boots. Throwing them into whatever pockets he had on him. "Okay, I think that's everything-"

"Pocket knife."

"Pocket knife!" Josea repeated after her, grabbing it and throwing it into a random pocket.

"Fishing wire-"

"Fishing wire! Wait, didn't I pack that last night?" Another playfully scolding look from Natalie, as she

glanced over in a direction, instantly making his eyes dart over and spotting it. Grabbing the spool of wire, throwing it into the pack. "Fishing Wire!" He then stopped and looked at her for instructions, getting the girl to roll her eyes but chuckle at his incompetence.

"Hook?"

"Hook!"

"Matches?"

"Matches!"

"Extra matches in a different spot?"

"Extra matches somewhere!"

"Water filter?"

"I- ...I'll get some before I leave."

"Robbie probably has the charcoal. Bandages? Alcohol?"

"I... Should have those?"

"Sounds like you're all set. Don't die." She nearly chirped as he bolted out of the room.

"I'll try not to!"

The young man scampered through the corridors of the bunker, thankful that the halls were mostly empty as he rushed through one doorway and up to a table with several already made supplies. Grabbing a couple of homemade water filters and turning about, nearly running into an older woman with a tray of food. Yelping in surprise at her rather stoic expression. "H-hi Ms. Brooks-"

"Park it, Josea." She commanded.

"I can't, I'm already late enough as it is-"

"I know you are. And I know you haven't had breakfast yet."

"You're the one who sent Natalie after me." The younger one mumbled under his breath.

"Park your butt. Eat. They can wait another ten minutes." He moaned in defeat as he sat in a nearby chair. Getting the tray of a simple breakfast slid in front of him while the woman sat across. "You won't be much used to them hungry before you even leave." He sighed, taking a few bites, unable to hide his saddened expression. "What's wrong."

"I'm not much use to them, period." The young male admitted in a mumble. "Why does he want to take me all the time?"

"Because he's your grandfather, and somehow he thinks that you're as capable as he is."

"I'm as capable as my father was-"

"And he's betting all his cards that you won't turn out like his son, yes. Hoping the survivalist just skipped a generation."

"Well, it sadly skipped two." Jose grumbled, swallowing another bite out of his breakfast. "The herbs I can memorize, the medical stuff I can get downpacked when I'm not under pressure. But anything physical, I'm just..."

"Yet, you're offering to be the blacksmith's assistant." She bluntly stated, spotting a guilty look in his eyes.

"I didn't think it would be that hard... Would it?" A blank stare from the older woman. "...Would it?"

"You don't know a thing about smithing, do you."

"I know it's always hot in the forge, and that's the main reason why we're always wearing ear plugs while inside." He tapped at one of his ears, a makeshift 'filter' sticking out of it. "Though, I think Peters has better muffs."

"He needs them for some reason-

"Because the soundwaves from his hammering need to go somewhere. If they're constantly bouncing off the walls around him, it's only going to deafen him faster without any protection." Another rather stoic stare from the woman. "Grampy also wants me to always wear them inside, says it will make them more sensitive when we're out."

"And able to hear the Hollow ones coming. That alone can save your life." A few more bites and Jose sighed again, brushing his brown hair out of his face.

"What does he hope to even find out there?"

"Game, for one. For food and for trade." A disappointed whimper at her response. "We need to eat, Josea."

"I know we do, I'm just... Bad at it. I also feel bad for them."

"They're animals."

"They're innocent. And they already have enough things to deal with without us hunting them too. Like their natural predators, and not to mention those... Things."

"The 'Roiders'." The young man groaned at the term. "That's what the Runners have been calling them."

"Which is a very dumb name." He finished up the last of his food, and continued speaking while chewing. "One that I will die preventing it from ever catching on." Finally a little bit of a smirk from her. "Thank you for the breakfast, Brooks. I will try not to die out there." He grumbled sarcastically, trying to move past her but she caught the young man's attention with a single arm.

"...There's something that a lot of us realized, when the fall happened. Some sooner than later." He looked at her sadly, but those older eyes just stared into space. "This was not the world we meant to hand down to you, Josie. But it's currently one we, unintentionally, left you unprepared for." Those blue eyes locked onto his own. "He's just trying to correct that."

That... Actually made sense to him, nodding faintly as Ms. Brooks dismissed him. Granted not before a sudden hug from the young one that made her groan a bit. Feeling a little better about going out now,

he made his way to the front gate. Easily spotting the bearded older fellow along with the guard and another younger male. Blonde hair on this one, while Josea's grandfather was always gray. "Couldn't convince anyone else to come in your place?" The younger one teased.

"Stop talking and go find your brother. We're losing daylight." The elder ordered, getting a playful salute in response as the other male got up and headed down. Leaving the two family members alone in a bit of awkward silence as the older one commanded Josea to sit. Doing so a bit nervously while his grandfather looked over the younger one's bag, making a few adjustments. "Nervous again?"

"When aren't I?" The grandson mumbled. "I hate going out there." Josea couldn't hold back a yawn, making the nearby guard do the same but his grandfather resisted.

"But we need people who are willing to. And you have the body type for it."

"I think you just called me a stick." Josea joked, getting the guard to chuckle. Smiling at her as she looked out a one-way durable window to the outside. Making him sigh a bit quietly. "I know. And we younger ones need to find a way to earn our keep."

"Less about that and more about gaining experience. As long as we avoid the cities we'll be fine. Leave those to the athletic groups."

"I could never get the hang of parkour." The grandson grumbled. "Or anything else."

"You're a good shot."

"No, I'm a lucky shot." Josea nearly scolded along with the guard.

"No, he's a lucky shot, Murry." The guard nearly scolded, along with the young one. Causing the elder to look back and forth between the two for a moment.

"Same difference, Daphne."

"If he can't hit the same target twice, it's luck." The woman teased.

"Often enough, you only get one shot. Speaking of which." Murry shifted his gaze over to his grandson, who only double-taked. "Did you even look for it?"

"Look for what?" A disappointed exhale from the elder as he grabbed something on the other side of him; a PVC homemade bow. Instantly making the younger one whimper slightly in embarrassment. "Right."

"It'll be hard to hunt something without this." The gray bearded one half grumbled. "I tuned it up while waiting for you, and the last time I'll do it. If you're late again, you're doing it on the hike."

"Y-yes sir." Josea took a hold of his weapon, overlooking the recurve structure again.

"Your quiver." Another nervous nod from the younger one as he took and attached the homemade arrow-carrier onto his belt. Making sure the strap was around the bundle of ammo to help them stay inside. Just as the two brothers were seen returning. "You remember what's on the list?"

"Uh..."

"That means no." The guard stated, looking out to make sure the area was clear before unlocking the heavy door. "Be careful out there. There's been tales of the Ghost being around again. Were you planning for an overnight trip?"

"Yes."

"Alright, good luck Murry. Oh, add some WD-40 to the list, I already let the runners know about it but you guys have come across things as well. Door is getting slightly noisy. Planning to do any trades?"

"Not today. Just going out for some game and come back." Murry informed, nodding at the three boys and picking up his pack. Motioning to remove the plugs in their ears as he did so himself. "Let's move out."

The day could've been better. Painted in overcast with a bit of a wind within the fields. Moving down the rows of crops and small gardens, fenced to keep out the animals and pests, and possibly... Whatever else was out there. Signs painted on occasion, some of them marking for the bunker's use, others available for travelers providing they only took what they needed.

The idea of it all always made Josea uneasy, recalling the early months where everyone wanted to

hoard everything for themselves. A lot of people losing their lives- not from the actual threat, but from people's own greed. Rise and falls of bandit groups who didn't store properly, often making their own gangs, marking territory out on the surface. Their feuds and wars were very short lived when the noise started.

It made him wonder just how much those... Hollowed bodies could hear. What they identified as a threat, possibly food? Studies on them are rare and often end in failure from one experiment or another. It was just best to just avoid them altogether, that's what Josea found worked best. Let them go about their business... And hope that no one else was in their path.

"Hey." The blonde haired brother got the grandson's attention, making him double take at the group going a different path than usual. "Pay attention. No daydreaming today."

"R-right."

"We don't want you getting lost again." The black haired brother chuckled, instantly making Josea groan.

"Ugh, that only happened the one time."

"Three." Murry corrected him, but signaling them to be more quiet. "But Carlos and Kurt are right; pay more attention."

"Why are we not taking the hunting path?" The grandson moved up towards his relative, watching him pull out some bright orange tape and begin cutting it into long strips. Pocketing each one.

"Roiders were spotted yesterday-"

"Please don't call them that."

"Along the hunting path. So we're scouting out another." Kurt said, tying a cloth band to help keep out his black hair.

"And Roiders fit; they're scrawny fucks that look like they've been on steroids-"

"Josea is right, don't call them that." The grandfather stated rather thickly, almost scolding the

brothers.

"But 'Hollows' is better?"

"It is more respectful, considerate about what they lost." He caught the two near twins rolling their eyes, as well as Josea's uneasy look. "All of you are green, so you don't understand."

"We're only *green* because you refuse to go out and hunt them." Carlos grumbled, again all in a whisper as they made their way through the woods. Setting up the bright strips around thicker branches above head level. "If we started taking them out, we could clean up the land. What's the big deal-?"

"Silence." The elder actually growled, narrowing his gaze in disapproval at the two younger ones. But getting all three to lower their heads in guilt.

"All I'm saying is, runners get to do it, why not-?"

"As a last resort. For us, not only is it a waste of ammunition, it is also very very dangerous." Murry fully stopped, though older he was still towering over the younger lads. "Don't treat them like wildlife; they're not going to run away if you miss your shot- or even hit. They're going to come after you. And if you are not careful, it will be the end of you." The boys were quiet. "You want to know why Runners go through so many weapons? Is because the Hollows are contagious. If they have to kill them, they're leaving that weapon behind for the safety of others."

"Contagious?" Kurt questioned under his breath, looking at his own brother.

"If they scratch or bite you, yeah. But...?" No response as the older man continued forwards. "Why is it that nobody talks about them?" Silence, but Josea caught a hardened look on his face from afar, one that the others didn't seem to notice. "Whatever." Carlos grumbled.

It wasn't the first time his grandfather had been distant about them. At first, he just thought it was due to Murry once knowing many of the people he came across. Long before their change. But... Something always felt off about it all.

Chapter 2

A light breeze passed over the autumn forest, slaloming through the trees and brushing against their colored flags. Tearing a few of the more brittle ones off to dance with as they glided down onto the grounds. Creating a soft pile and a blanket that would hide the grass and other creatures burrowing underneath.

It worked for most, that is true. Especially those with brown or darker coats, but it couldn't fool the ravens surfing along the winds. The cool morning signaling another winter coming, but in the far distant. Despite the snow hidden underneath the leaves.

Well, to some it looked like snow, but the black birds knew better. Landing on a nearby branch and cawing at the white grounds from afar, taking turns until a grumble was heard and the warm colored debris started to move around. Revealing more of that white coat striped in black, only encouraging the vocals of the small murder above.

Granted, she definitely wasn't happy about it. Grumbling louder and louder, hoping they would just give up if the earthbound creature just rolled over and ignored them. But it wasn't until one landed nearby and began pecking the dirt out of her fur. Causing the ear to flick and eventually feel a beak begin to tug that. Omitting another growl that caused the black flier to hop back and once again caw as the carnivore rolled up and glared at it with blue eyes.

Of course such intimidation didn't work, making her only sigh and stretch as they cheered her rising. "You guys realize that I'm not a wolf, right?" The smaller white beast grumbled, about the size of a large dog, but this was no canine. Having a shorter and higher bridged snout, longer front legs than back, and a long puffy mane all the way down her back. One that danced along the wind when she shook it.

The ravens cawed at the hyena, making her stare and shift her gaze at them, as if understanding their vocals. "I get that, but you guys should be finding a pack of wolves to help you hunt instead of bothering me." Another grumble as the white one got up. Stretching her oddly shaped body but moving around

regardless, causing one of the ravens to actually land on her shoulders and softly call. "And my method is any better? It's basically the same except you guys just need to keep an eye on the target when it goes into the forest or tall grass. And yes, that is a much better volume. Much easier on my ears."

She began moving, trotting towards where a pair of black birds moved towards the distance, while one remained riding on her back. "But you're never going to learn how to communicate with the wolves by avoiding them." A caw in protest. "I don't care if my track record is better, and you know better than to attempt to butter me up about it." A noise in question. "It's an expression used to- nevermind. Flattering me isn't going to work, Gwual." Another vocal. "Vello, I was close. It's hard to tell you all apart."

A questionable chirp from the large bird. "A raven from a different flock." She grumbled, keeping the conversation with him. "In case you haven't noticed, my hunts tend to take me places. Namely, wherever the target runs off to. And you wonder why I never settled." The hyaena snorted. "Annd you're far from the only family or flock that requests my help. That's why I move around." A caw in question. "Searching? For what? There's nothing to find here." Another few calls, same uptalk. "Nope, all gone." A vocal, and the hyena just tilted her head in a shrug. "Can't do anything about it, why bother focusing on it?"

Some calls from the ones flying ahead got their attention as the white one gave a large nod in signal. "Let's continue this conversation never, shall we?" She grumbled, lowering herself to a crouch and approaching mostly silently to the edge of the woods. Her ear flicking to Vello's softer vocal. "We've done how many hunts before this and now you want to know it?" A near whimper in disappointment from the bird as she sighed quietly. "No, I'm sorry. I just... Never really had one." A vocal that was relatively close to what she just stated. "Yeah... But let's talk about this after you guys get your meal. Maybe think of one while you're scouting, but now you've gotten me curious: what did you guys even call me beforehand?"

A reply that made her groan silently and completely stop. Placing a paw over her eyes and getting a caw that nearly sounded like a chuckle from Vello before he took off to join the others. 'Far Spirit', how freaking original. Far basically meaning Foreign, and Spirit just because of her coat color. Shaking the thought of the terrible nickname off of her coat like an oily substance, making her mane puff out a bit before once again resuming her hunting stance.

Deep breaths. Slow heartbeat. Ears perked. Eyes opened. Soft steps towards the outlines of the trees. Looking over the grass carefully to scan for targets. Her own mane mimicking the dance of it in the wind. A couple of deer. One very small. Not worth the effort. A herd of bison as well nearby.

For some, that might be the worst possible choice to go after. Especially for something the hyena's

size, as she could barely see over the grass standing, and the dancing wild hay easily came past where their undersides hung. Quietly searching over top, the white one began narrowing a target down. One that was straying away from the group, and she entered the wild grass.

Millions of blades help hide the huntress as she moved in closer, using the field's mane as a camouflage. Allowing her to approach the back of the bison slowly; a large tank of muscle, meat, and pelt. Easily spooked and highly temperamental, recalling the first time she hunted one of these things and how hard it kicked her.

As she approached the stray, it began turning around. Making the hyena to stand completely still as it moved past her, unable to sense or see well and just snort heavily. Giving her a good look at those small, upcurved horns for a brief moment. As it moved past, she released a very quiet sigh in relief.

Turning about to follow it closer to the herd, not liking the direction it was heading but all the white one needed was one clear shot. Stalking through the grass, trying to match its own heavy hoofprints. Watching it suddenly stop and halting with it, spotting the large brown head and mane look wide left. Scanning the area as if detecting it was in danger from something, and she could feel the tension rising. Like the heat around it was becoming intense with a rage and ready to strike-!

The hyena lunged at its hamstring, biting into the thick pelt hard and tearing into the hide just as it attempted to kick! Causing the white one to nearly be launched backwards, aiding her attack by ripping off some of the muscle as it cried in pain. Alerting everything else to scatter and flee for their lives. The hyena landed in the grass a little hard, shaking the light impact from the blow over her body, spitting out the pelt that was covered in... Well, you just don't want to know.

The hard part was done, as she got up and spotted her target slowly moving through the fields compared to the rest. The ravens above cawing loudly at the act, cheering on the success as the bison cried at the pain of walking. Such a vital part of movement hindering it so that it could not escape quickly, left behind and ready to strike as soon as it could find where the huntress disappeared to.

But no signs of it, unable to hear through the persistent caws. Adrenaline demanding for it to fight back, but the injury was causing the leg to lock up. Sending warning after warning that something was wrong, ignoring commands sent down to move properly. The living tank bellowed and attempted to scare off the predator, striking out at random in hopes of hitting something. Yet, couldn't spot the huntress in the tall grass.

It was then that fear began to set in, fleeing out from the meadow and into the plains where the grass was shorter. The black birds overhead following and marking the creature for death as the hyena followed behind. Letting the target get more and more distance on purpose as it struggled to run away.

Burning through most of its energy as it attempted to gain and keep ground, while she just lightly trotted after it. Keeping up with the injured target as it grew more and more tired to keep up.

Heaving and groaning loudly, as if cursing the strange dog nearly a tenth of its size. Feeling that leg lock up hard as blood leaked from it. Wasting some of the tank's precious distance for some recovery, only to spot the white one get much closer than expected! Further causing the bison to call out in anger and attempt to run away, spending more of its energy getting back up and continuing to move until its injured leg forced it to collapse.

The ravens above circling around it, singing as the beast of an animal lashed out at the approaching hyena. Hoping to get a lucky hit while keeping it at bay, but she just waited patiently. Letting the thing tire itself out, and then the striped one would go in for the kill-

Only for an arrow to fly through the air and straight into the bison's brain, making the white one stare at it unimpressed. "...Or that can happen." She half grumbled, spading her ears as she moved towards the jerking body. Resting on top of it as the birds half scattered and moved onto a nearby tree, knowing quite well how dangerous the humans were. Nearly booing the group as they approached what was supposed to be their meal.

But the white hyaena remained there, worrying the ravens as they watched from afar. Resting on top of the kill's body as the group of natives approached a bit cautiously. The hunting leader; a rather young looking man, making eye contact with the animal with a supernatural level of understanding. Speaking to the others of his group. "The Ghost? Out here?"

"Not feline. Not wolf. The description fits."

"What should we do?" A couple of them asked their leader one after another, watching the lead scout stare at the strange creature a bit nervously; still sitting on the bison as if it claimed their kill. But before he could give an order, a hand was felt on his shoulder. Watching as an older hunter made his way forwards, a smile painting his face while looking at the 'Ghost'.

"Elder?" The younger one whispered, getting the attention of the soft brown eyes and nodding slowly. "Kikimuwasu, please-"

"It is alright. Let me speak to it." An uneasy look from the others as they watched their eldest of the group approach the strange creature with little fear and no threat. Resting on a knee to level his eyesight with the hyena as he just smiled, almost chuckling at her ears spading a bit further and behind, but flicking. "Esunikane?"

That one made her ears go back as far as they could, but no scrunching was seen over that black muzzle. Not knowing their languages completely, but enough to get an idea of what he wanted. 'To Trade Or Barter', something of the like. Means she would need to spend more time with them. Looking off to the side and releasing a half grumble, but nodding regardless, making the old man smile and get up. Gesturing an area off to the side for her to meet while he held up a hand to his own group.

"I will return shortly. Do not claim this hunt until I do."

"You cannot be serious, Elder." The hunting leader half grumbled, getting a near scolding look from the older one. "I understand your beliefs and respect towards the wildlife, but you can't actually-" Regardless, Kikimuwasu turned about to follow the hyena towards the designated spot, almost instantly silencing the head scout into slight grunts and worried whimpers.

"He can't actually talk to animals... Can he?" One of them asked in a low whisper, getting others to look around for any answer.

"It has been a long time since I got to speak with you again." The elder whispered, catching up to the white creature as they stopped. Sitting down beside it as she rested on her haunches, releasing an exhale through her muzzle. "I'm surprised you returned here."

"I can't say I had any plans on coming back, Kikimu." She finally replied in a whisper of her own, making him smile. "Did you fire the arrow?" A chuckle from the human. "It would be just like you to do so just to get my attention."

"I did not, no. But back in my younger years, I probably would have. Many hunters are eager to prove themselves, and to actually take down a bison with a single arrow-"

"After I chased it to exhaustion, they mean. Make sure that they kept that part of the story in tact." The hyena snorted, getting him to laugh a little loudly. Enough for the group to be concerned even further; either due to the noise or madness that their elder has gone through. "Speaking of chase, let's cut to it. What do you want?" Another smile.

"I know you were hunting for the ravens, not for yourself." A grumble from her, once again sending those ears back. "For someone so... Cynical, you have a good heart."

"One that gets me into a lot of trouble; your words, not mine."

"I'm glad you remembered that." Kikimuwasu gave the white one a pet on her messy mane, hearing another grumble but not doing anything about it. No movements towards or away from the hand, not shaking it off. "It is a big hunt, one that could feed a lot of people and ravens, as well as a Ghost." A near growl. "Don't like that name either?"

"I'm not *dead*." She half growled, instantly making him laugh at how blunt she responded. "All this spirit talk- why does everyone seem to think I'm some special entity that's there to aid them in their lives?" The hyena groaned, covering her eyes with a single paw as the man pet her.

"You appeared soon after the fall, a strange coincidence that was not a threat to us."

"Says the person who first found me covered in blood." Another chuckle. "*Human* blood, I might add." It eventually got her to smirk a little and sigh. "Alright, what do you have in mind. Spit it out."

"You know how... Easily we succumb to illnesses." A noise in confirmation from the white one. "And I don't mean any disrespect-"

"None taken. Out with it."

"Let us take first cuts of the meat, we'll leave plenty for the ravens to gather for their families." A nod as she motioned him to continue with a rotating paw, getting gently scratched by that hand along the back of her neck. "We will use the pelt, respect the kill."

"And?"

"And give you a nice home cooked meal-"

"That's what I like to hear." A chuckle at her sudden change in tone, even making the hyena fully smile at him. "However. One very important question:" Those brown eyes met with her blues. "Do you have any of the A1 left?" She watched the man's face twist in disappointment, making her sigh in defeat.

"Sorry, but it has been months-"

"I know, I know. I just hoped by some miracle the steak sauce would survive the apocalypse." That made him laugh. "Okay, agreed. You guys take first cuts, leave plenty for the ravens and other scavengers. You can keep the pelt."

"And you can enjoy a warm human-style meal."

"Deal."

Chapter 3

Orange light glazed over everything, brushing over the sky and its clouds. Forests and all its plants. Fields and all of its occupants. Touching all but the shadows, leaving them as a cold shade like a faint warning to seek shelter soon because the predators are coming out under its guise. Predators... And something possibly far worse.

For how beautiful it created a breathtaking nature's scene, dusk always made the young man uneasy. Trying to finish his jerky for the evening after struggling (once again) setting up his tent. He'll never get the hang of it like the others, at least something good came out of Josea's struggles; entertainment.

Watching them from afar, getting the fire going and enjoying its warmth. Teasing each other, as brothers do. And in that moment, he missed his own. Taking a deep breath to harden his feelings once again before finishing the last of his preserved meats just as his only family left came around. "Done?" The greybeard asked, gesturing towards the tent.

"B-basically, yes."

"A B+ job, overall." The elder stated rather bluntly, sitting down beside Josea. "Do you know where we are?"

"Kind of. Enough to find my way back, but nothing here looks familiar. You can't even see the city's towers from here." The older man was quiet. "I know... You don't like me relying on them to tell which

direction to go."

"Exactly. You need to learn how to read the stars as well, when you lose your compass."

"Don't you mean 'if I lose'...?" No response as Murry got out a small binder of sorts, opening it up to see a map on one side in the process of being drawn out, while the other had another small booklet. One leatherbound and nearly locked. "We're... Scouting?"

"I always like to make sure of our surroundings. Be it where the Indians are settling or if any new bandit camps come around. There's supposed to be a cave system around here somewhere, I could see them making camp nearby." A worried look from the younger man. "I'm not sending you out to find it, but I do want you to learn something new on this trip."

"That's never good news for me." Josea nearly whimpered, spotting the older brother began approaching him with several metal objects.

"Ready?" Kurt barely asked, his voice just hovering over the taps of the metal chains onto more solid.

"Yes he is." The elder spoke for him, closing the book up and putting it away. Making the grandson look at his relative a little worryingly.

"Murry told me he wants you to learn how to set up one of these." The slightly older male lifted up the three sets of objects: closed bear traps. Further making the younger one uneasy. "I've already been taught, same with Carlos. So he wants to watch camp while we get these set up. So you're with me." A whimper in disappointment but Josea didn't argue.

Gathering a single bag for emergencies that he always kept on him, the brown haired Josie followed the black haired brother. "How long will this take?"

"We'll be back before dark. These ones are a bit easier than normal, but if we're lucky we'll grab something else by the morning. If not today, then maybe in the coming days." A slight whine from Josea got his attention and made Kurt chuckle. "You really don't like spending time out here, do you?"

"I really don't. I'd rather just be back in the bunker instead." The younger one sighed. "It's safe, it's warm, and I don't have to worry about sneezing too loudly and have a hoard of evil librarians come after me." That one got a quiet laugh from Kurt. "I can't help but feel like I'm more use to people in there than out here, but he seems to think otherwise."

"Murry?" A noise in confirmation. "He's your Gramps, right?"

"Yeah. Father's side, and the only one I got left."

"My brother's the only one I have left too. When we were younger, he really liked the whole Ranger thing. Wilderness Survival, Bear Scouts, those kinds of things." A hand to stop walking and listen for a moment, then a head shake to confirm it was nothing. "I got dragged along for the ride back before the Fall happened, and I was okay at the stuff when I was younger."

"And now?"

"I'm... Hmm..." The black haired one pondered, while looking over the paths in the nearby forests. "You ever kinda just... scrape by at something your entire life, and then all at once- years later, it just... Clicks?"

"I understand, but..."

"Never experienced it?" Josea shook his head. "I've been doing a lot better lately. I've been able to understand the old man's teachings faster, judge the right distance when lining up a shot. Knowing where to set traps, forage for food, water, materials." Kurt sadly smiled, stopping in place and looking at the brown haired one. "I found my calling, honestly. And I think... Carlos sees it too. He's struggling a little bit, and considering this was his interest to begin with..."

"He's been frustrated."

"And he's been taking that frustration out on others. Including you."

"Me?" Josea double taked. "What do you mean?"

"The shots at you, about your performances and tardiness. He's just reassuring himself that he isn't the weakest link."

"And you-?"

"Think otherwise." A look from those blue eyes, twisting into disbelief at the slightly older one's statement. "Josea, you are capable. You're smart enough to remember this stuff, and you... Okay, you're

a little bit on the twink side." A whine from him. "But part of that is you second guess yourself midway through your actions. I did that for years!" He whispered loudly. "Be more confident that your intuitions are the proper answers, are the proper timings."

"...But what if they're wrong?"

"Then you learn. And hope it doesn't cost you something in the process." He gestured over towards the path and began to move, beckoning Josea to follow. "Over here will be good. Looks too big for humans to be going through, so odds are it's a buck or a moose." Kurt put down his pack and took one of the bear traps. "Okay, see these 'wing' things on the sides? They have loops around the main set of jaws in the center here. These 'wings' are actually your springs. It's what causes the trap to snap into action when the pedal in the center is pressed down on."

"Okay. They really don't look like springs."

"Yeah, I know they don't. But they function the same way. The main thing you need to do is get these things as closed as possible. Normally, you'd need a pair of clamps to get it set up properly, but you can get these done by stepping on them with one foot on each." The black haired one demonstrated, putting his weight on the wings to close them. "That brings these rings here down far enough for you to open the jaws. After you get them open, you just lift on the pressure pad in the center- but from underneath the jaws!" He whispered loudly. "You never put your hand inside them. All it takes is one little slip of your foot to:" As a demonstration, Kurt lifted one of his feet off a single spring, causing it to slide up and close the jaws quickly with a loud snap. "And you really don't want your arms in there."

A little bit of a nervous whimper as he watched the slightly older one step on the spring again, bending over to open the jaws down. "Now, reach in underneath and lift the pad until you hear it click. The trap can't hurt you if you move underneath it." Though clearly uncomfortable, Josea did so. Hearing a faint clink and getting a signal from the instructor to remove his hand. Very slowly watching the black haired one step off as the trap remained open. "Great. And that's all there is to it. If you're doing it solo though, you want some sort of branch or something to help you lift up the pad to lock in place."

He continued. "After that, we anchor it around something heavy, like this tree. You just take the chain, wrap it around, and we're done." Taking the loose chain and circling it around the nearby trunk. Attaching it to itself. "That way they're stuck in place. But that's all there is to it."

"I don't know if I'm heavy enough to do it alone."

"You should be, but you might have to throw your weight on it to get the springs down far enough."

He gestured the other two on the ground. "Grab one, we'll set it up and head back. It's already getting so dark I can't see." A nod from the brown haired one as he made sure to avoid the armed trap. Following the other scout into the fields as the sun retreated beyond the horizon. Now noticing the small cliffside in the distance.

And then a howl, somewhat nearby that got both of them a little nervous. Lowering her bodies to a crouch as they scanned the direction of where it came from, as well as its many replies. All coming from the same source; away from their camp. "Hollows?" Josea whispered, getting a nervous nod from Kurt as he began moving towards the cliff's edge. As much as he just wanted to retreat back to his grandfather, he stuck behind Kurt's lead.

The two commando-crawled up to the edge, making sure they were not easily spotted from the fields down below where many shadows were cast. But what seemed to be a large horde of humanoids moving through them at different speeds. Some stumbling and swaying, many others moving quickly with impatience. "Damn... That's a lot of them."

"Yeah..." Josie nearly whimpered under his breath.

"Let's get back, I think they're heading towards the camp." A nervous nod as they both began to move backwards slowly across the flat rocks, a thin blanket of plants over them. As the younger one got to his feet and took a few steps, his foot sank completely through the weak vines! Falling through the rocks and into a large space within them! Landing on his back and knocking the wind out of his body, thankfully preventing him from crying out in pain!

A few moments later, Josea came to. Hearing his name being called in a harsh desperate whisper from above. "Josie! Josie, are you okay!?"

"F-fine! I'm fine!" He finally coughed out, a little louder than he wanted to. Now noticing the echo of his new location. Rolling onto his side to sit up.

"Hang tight! I'm going to find something to get you back up!" Another howl in the distance got both of their attentions, getting the two to look at each other.

"No... No, go warn them!"

"What?"

"Go! They can't stay there with that horde around!" Another loud set of whispers, even within the low light, he could spot Kurt's face twist in disapproval. Looking back at the direction of the camp, trying to decide what to do. "Kurt! Go! I'll be fine here, so long as I keep quiet!"

"...I'll come back for you! Okay? Here, take my water, survive the night, you brave bastard!" An object fell onto the soft grass inside the cave, at least within arm's reach. "I'll get you in the morning! I promise!"

"Okay. I'll... Try not to get eaten by bears?"

"Try not to die."

Chapter 4

The sun was setting rapidly, as if freefalling towards the horizon. Covering the world in darkness before the hyena could find a proper shelter to rest in. She could detect the howls in the distance, slowly getting closer, but it didn't really phase her.

...Or did it, just indirectly? Half worried that maybe they were heading towards where the natives made camp, and that perhaps she should've stayed there with them. The thought actually slowing her white legs to a stop across the field to look back where she came, unable to see the glow of their fire any longer.

(...No.) She convinced her striped self, snorting at the idea before moving on. (He'll be fine. The rest will be fine. They're not my responsibility or problem. I got what I wanted out of them, they got what they wanted out of me. It's done, we're going our separate ways.) But the seed of doubt began to grow in her heart, unable to keep her mind from falling back and remembering the past as she moved on.

Heading towards the rocky cliffside where a cave was half hidden, there within is where she would take some shelter for the evening.

The white hyaena swear she could still smell the smoke that they used to cook with, both in present and the past as her previous self rested under a tree outside their camp. Feeling eyes resting over her form at almost all times, regardless of how much she did try to hide herself using the tree's trunk. But at the same time wanted whoever it was bringing her food to find her.

Those dark ears flicked at steps in the grass. As they turned out to be lighter than most adults, she growled a little bit. Stopping them in their tracks. Waiting a bit before another step forwards and getting another growl from the white furred creature. Eventually hearing something call the little one with a loud whisper, and the steps retreated back to the camp. Giving her a sigh of relief.

Short lived, however, as another set was detected several moments after. This time at least bigger and getting her to slightly groan, but the familiar chuckle put her at ease. Though, clearly not detecting the aroma of her meal. "Getting cranky?"

"Impatient, yes." She grumbled. "Remind me why you dragged me out here, Kikimu?"

"You will see soon enough." A strange coo got those ears to perk up as the hyena lifted her head. Double taking at the elder man now holding a child, giggling at her sudden whimper. "This is my granddaughter, Nihkaniw-" Nearly getting the older man to laugh at the animal's rather shocked expression.

"For the love of-!" She hissed, startling the little one as the grandparent chuckled. Though still making sure the little one was protected. "You know how I feel about others knowing I can talk, Kikimu!"

"I know, but I really wanted you to meet her. To know her scent, so that you remember her in the future-" A low growl from the white animal as her mane puffed up. Looking away from the two, attempting to not get the little one frightened and crying. Making that mistake before and dreading the damn noise. But it made the elder frown, set the child down, and tell her to go back to the camp. When they were out of earshot, he rested an old hand against her mane.

A low grumble in anger, but the hyena didn't stop him from stroking her neck. "I am sorry." He mumbled, at least making some progress as her ears flicked and began returning back to a more calm state. "I often forget that you see the world differently than us, including our values."

"It's not... That." She sighed, still frustrated but the grooming was helping calm her.

"You didn't remain in my tent." He mumbled with a smile after some silence.

"I don't like enclosed spaces."

"Especially surrounded by others?" A nod was felt from her. "It is not uncommon for animal kind to not enjoy such things. But whereas you can speak to us unlike them..."

"You keep mistaking me for being human." She let out a low growl. "Kikimuwasu, I'm not some mythical guardian that your beliefs think I am. I am not some protector from whatever disaster that happened to this world, I'm just..."

"I know, Acehlosu. I know." Another grumble from her. "You don't like that name either?"

"...It's better than the others, but."

"You've yet to be satisfied with anything we've come up with." A long pause as the man stroked her coat.

"It's not just you." She finally mumbled. "Maybe... I don't want a name."

"Why is that?"

"Because if I take a name from you or your kind, I become a pet. Your tribe will speak to me as if I *belong* to you." Another frown from the man as her head adjusted, resting on his lap. "I know that's not how you see it, but it is how I do. And I don't *want* that."

"What was your name before-?"

"I can't use that either." She almost growled, but he knew such anger was not directed at him. A heavy, quivering breath from the animal as those blue eyes closed. "I... I'm not that person. Not anymore."

"You've changed." A mumble from him. "You've transformed." Another heavy breath from her, indicating the elder was right on the spot. "Acehlosu: One who changes, adapts. Much like we all do to survive in this dark age."

"...I don't know." A scratch along her neck and up her jaw to the chin, getting the striped one to purr a bit before opening her eyes.

"This isn't an attempt to claim you for ourselves. It is a sign of respect. A sign that you are a friend to us." That irritating sound of footsteps in the grass came with the wonderful aroma of a prepared meal, brought over in an old large dinner plate that had seen better days. As Kikimu accepted it from the young woman, she looked at him strangely as he set it in front of the striped hyena. "Wolasuweltom [Thank you]."

Still, the creature did not move until the woman was heading back. Still recalling the lingering taste of smoked meat and gravy as her mind returned to the present. Entering the small mouth of the cave and moving through the darkness. But the elder's words still echoed through her head, distracting her. Making her wonder... If she really did want friends. Let alone a family anymore. The hyaena has been fine on her own for a couple of seasons, what good would it do to have one at this point-?

Her forepaws detected stepping on something metal, only for a pair of jaws to snap hard against her bicep! Causing her to cry out loudly in pain as it gripped her limb like a vice! Driving metal teeth through fur and flesh as agony echoed through her body! Trying to get it out, but the device seemed to be tethered to the ground somehow.

A howl from outside got her to be quiet, but only for a moment. Trying to muffle her whimpers and growls of pain while she attempted to somehow squeeze through the metal jaws. Then outmatch their strength, but couldn't with just one arm. Feeling her warmth drain from her, but not at an alarming rate. But she was stuck here... Until someone, or something found her...

Getting up was a bad idea, at least that's what the young man's body was telling him. However, he just couldn't stay put, knowing how close that horde was coming. Trying to stand on his foot sent a heavy pain through him, directly from his ankle, making Josea fear the worst-

That is until something within the cave cried bloody murder, clearly telling him that there were definitely worse things than a sprained ankle. Shifting around to what he hoped was a nearby wall, panting loudly at his own pain while something else released grunts, growls, and whimpers. The sounds of metal chains were faint as well, making him wonder... Was it stuck?

The scariest part was... The initial cry almost sounded human. Not bear, wolf, or anything else. Making him a bit curious, even if it meant the death of him. But if the others were going to search for a way to get Josea back out in the morning, they should at least know that there was something else in the cave.

With a deep breath... Then a second and third, he began to move with the wall. Feeling his way through the dark cave and towards the stressed noises. Attempting to be quiet, but that obviously wasn't the case when he heard a whisper. "God damnit. I was hoping this was empty."

"Hello?" The male whispered, almost instantly getting a groan in response.

"*God* damnit, why couldn't it have been a bear or something?" It definitely sounded more female as his vision adjusted in the dark. Discovering a white dog of sorts caught in a bear trap. The voice seeming to be coming from it. "Bears don't ask dumb questions."

"Y-you can talk?"

"Oh Gee Willikers, it can speak!" She mocked him, tossing her snout whispering harshly. "Can we *please* not do this now!? If you're here for my damn pelt, take it! If not, then get me the hell out of this thing!" As stunned as Josea was, he staggered over to the trap that caught her foreleg. Attempting to pry the jaws open, but his strength was not enough. "Try pulling just one side, and I'll do the other." She hissed, more at the pain than his failure.

"No." A growl from her. "It won't work. It's not the jaws themselves that are keeping it closed, it's the springs."

"What the hell are you talking about-?" A whimper in pain as he tried to press down on something, the 'wings' on the sides of the trap.

"I can't quite get it. Let me try-" He got up, trying to ignore her hiss of pain as he stepped on the spring. Needing to throw his weight on it to finally get the loop to slide down, giving the hyaena a little bit of relief. Only to witness her attempting to squirm out of it. "Whoa-whoa-whoa, stop. You'll only make it worse-!" She hissed at Josea in response, but followed his instructions. "Try to keep some weight on here or help me on the other side."

Despite his weakened ankle, the young man stepped on the other weight while she attempted to keep the other side down. Grunting in pain as he put more and more weight on that bad joint until the spring finally gave out and the hyena pulled herself to safety. Making Josea fall backwards onto the grass and the trap to snap loudly, at least this time not catching anything.

Panting as he searched through the darkness, watching the strange animal limp over to the side and lay down. Panting and dealing with the pain of the wound, as he moved himself against the rock wall. Howls getting both of their attentions from outside... Getting closer, but not specifically heading towards their direction. After a few minutes, he spoke up. "Are... You okay?"

"...Yeah..." She grumbled a bit. "It'll take some time to heal, but I'll live." That made him smile sadly. "Damn all your kind for making such contraptions..." And that statement made it fade, but he couldn't blame her. Shifting himself up and moving towards the creature slowly, hearing her grumbles of warning but half ignoring them. Getting out another device that called for a near growl until he clicked it, making it release a very faint light: a crank rechargeable flashlight.

"Let me see it." Another growl from her. "Please? If it fractured your bone, you might need a splint to keep it from getting worse." Those blue eyes narrowed at him for a few moments but then looked away, as if giving him permission. Allowing him to examine the red wound within the white fur, trying to be careful about where his fingers touched, but expecting the growls in response. "I think it's just a flesh wound. I still have my pack where I landed, I'd like to bandage it up for you-"

"Leave it. It'll heal on its own." She snorted, the adrenaline wearing through her body and getting her in a state of recovery. But of course feeling eyes over her body, making the hyena sigh loudly in frustration. "Fine, do it."

A double take from the young man. "D-do what?"

"Interrogate me. All other humans do it when they first see me, you might as well too."

"I... I wasn't..."

"I know you have questions. Just..." She sighed and rested her head on the grass, waiting for them to start pouring in.

"...Are you thirsty?" Josie eventually asked her, actually getting the attention of those strange blue eyes. Studying his own for a few moments. "I have some extra water if you'd like it."

"...Yes." She admitted, a little taken back. Seeing the brown hair in the darkness nod and watch him get up. Limping further into the cave and out of sight for a few moments. Hearing him struggle a bit before eventually making his way back; cone of light in front of him. Watching him switch it to more of a lantern mode where the two of them could see as he unscrewed the cap off Kurt's bottle. Leading the mouth of the bottle towards her, and noticing that black muzzle move towards it. As if doing this before.

Slowly, he tilted it, letting her get her fill of the water inside before starting to pull away. Doing his best to save the water the best he can and place the cap back on. Taking a drink out of his own bottle as she panted. "I'll never understand how you can drink warm water." A shrug was seen from him as another set of howls were heard. "Out of all the dumb things to ask..."

"What?"

"You ask if 'I'm thirsty'." She grumbled, getting him to chuckle.

"Well... It was either that or what color your toothbrush was, but I didn't think you used one." Josea smiled, watching that snout toss back into its laying down position.

"I don't even know what that is-" A howl, much closer than expected, making her whisper. "You might want to shut that off."

"Y-yeah... Is this place safe?"

"Probably. If something hasn't come after us yet, we're probably in the clear." The hyena mumbled. "If not, no use panicking." That didn't really assure him of much, but... Maybe she was right. Regardless, the man shut off the flashlight and attempted to get comfortable on the grass. Hoping that his other scouts made it out okay.

Chapter 5

"...Salajah...!" A loud whisper called her name, again and again through her drunken haze. Even feeling the presses against her head, awkward and misplaced. "Salajah! Wake up...! Please-!" A sudden cough from the near drunk hyena, making the voice gasp a sigh of relief. "You're alive! Thank the sun,

you're alive...!" The voice was almost sobbing as she opened her blue eyes, attempting to make any sense out of the blurry vision.

"...Wh... What?" Her muzzle attempted to make noises, but they came out sluggish. Spotting the thick wires of a cage, along with a heavy discomfort of metal.

"Maylasha stopped breathing...! I can't reach her! You need to wake her up!"

"I..." A heavy pant from Sala, as she attempted to lift her head, causing the room to spin. "I can't..."

"I know... I know, love. But you need to try. I've been trying to get these... Thing's attention but they won't come. You need to try to save your sister's life." Several huffs from the hyena as she tried again, forcing her body to ignore the dizziness and throw her weight into the wire wall. Hitting it face first with a sting, growling in response as she shifted again, attempting to look at the adjacent side where her mother was.

Only to spot her sister, wires through her paws and spread apart. Her insides scooped out and leaving her shocked and bloodied head open. Jaw slacked, several fangs missing, and the eye still shifting looking at Salajah. Instantly causing her heart to race heavily, then more so when something grabbed the back of her mane tightly! Lifting her up and dragging her through the wall where she swore her mother's cage was! "Next subject." The strange white humanoid stated, taking her under an intense light. Nearly blinding the hyena, unable to struggle as the piece of a needle was felt-!

And the white one woke up, heart racing heavily as she scanned the darkness. Hearing another set of breaths nearby, shaky but unconscious. Panting and leaning forwards, instantly detecting the pain in her forearm, reminding the hyena of what happened. Of who that was.

It was getting better at least, but it still hurt like hell whenever she attempted to shift her position. Go figure the moment she hurt that side, her body craved laying on it. As for the human, all she could really do is look over him. ("You know this one.") A nearby female voice made her ear twitch in the direction of the darkness, but not detecting anything there. ("Remember. One of the first rules to survival; shelter. Doesn't mean a roof over your head more than it does to-")

"Get off the cold ground." The hyena mumbled, sighing through her snout. "...He's cold. Too cold."

("He might have a spare blanket in his pack.")

"One he's using as a pillow, just like you used to..." Her heart sank at that moment, as if realizing the person had already left. Taking a moment to harden her heart before getting her body up. Hobbling over the male human and laying down beside him; her fluffy back to his frontside. Hearing the man murmur in his sleep, barely noticing that he was even disturbed a little, but his arms shifted around the white furred body. Unable to keep her grumble in check as she was held close to the sleeping Josea. Regulating his breathing after a few minutes.

The morning light began to creep through the cave, slowly illuminating it enough for her to see in greater detail. Within the slightly long grass, she could still spot the metal arches of that trap sticking over the blades of green, the faint hint of blood still coming from it. Though, that could've also been coming from her own wound as well. ("Don't blame him for it.") That female voice returned, causing her ear to flick and go back. ("You always assumed the worst-")

"Can you blame me?" She grumbled in a whisper, hearing the sleeping human mumble something but return to his slumber. Making the hyena whisper more quietly. "The best thing I can do is assume the worst out of this species."

("I have the feeling you'll like this one. He'll lead you to good things.")

"Which is exactly what you said about Kikimuwasu, and look where that got me." A snort that was almost too loud. Swearing she could feel a smile glow upon her white furred form. "...Maybe I just want to assume the worst. Maybe I don't want a life where I'm pestered by others."

("I don't think that's what you want.")

"Of course you don't." She rolled her blue eyes, trying not to move her snout in the process but it was harder than it looked. "You seem to think-" A noise from the human made her stop, feeling him stretch awake and make the white one sigh as he came to. His hands shifting through her fur, trying to figure out what was in his embrace while she looked straight ahead. Ears back, a bit annoyed as he nearly whimpered. "You can stop that anytime now." A sharper whimper from the male as she started to get up, only to be stuck in his arms. "...And let me go."

"R-right." He released her, watching the black striped white beast get up and stretch. Needing to adjust himself and realize just how uncomfortable his own body got. Really wishing he was back in his bed within the bunker for the evening. Getting a drink from his own water bottle before unscrewing the cap to the other one, looking over her again. Sitting with her back towards him, testing her leg and grunting a little bit when some pressure was put on it. "There's..." Those ears flicked behind, but didn't do much else. "Some left if you want it."

"I'll find my own." She grumbled, though it did hurt a little, she was able to walk on her injured limb. "There. Aid for an aid, we're even and officially done here." She started to leave, still limping a little.

"W-what? Wait-"

"You helped me get out of a trap that *your* kind made, I helped you survive the night without freezing to death. We're on our own now. Good luck." She growled, not stopping.

"But-? ...Okay. Thank you, erm... Ghost?" That made the hyaena stop for a moment, actually looking back at him while the young man was facing his pack. Shaking her head and leaving the cave while she had the chance, greeted by the warm daylight. The cool air, the freshness of morning freedom of a quiet autumn day.

But it kept tugging at her mind, what he said. Nearly to the point of making her growl in anger before heading back in. Spotting him wrapping a blanket around himself. Not even trying to be silent, but she actually got right up to Josea without being noticed, making him nearly yelp before she pushed the man onto his back and stood over him. "W-wh-?"

"What the hell do you mean that!?" She whispered harshly, clearly confusing him. "'Okay'!? You just accepted my answer as final!? And 'Thank You'!?"

"I-I, uh...?" A loud swallow from the young man as the creature growled in his face.

"Your species **ALWAYS** begs for more! *Help me get some food, get supplies, escort me home! Hunt for me, and in turn I'll promise you ear scratches!*"

"Y-you don't like ear scratches-?"

"I *LOVE* Ear Scratches!" She hissed, confusing him even further. "But you didn't...! Why!? You're clearly injured, unable to probably walk without any help, and you don't even ask for it!? What game are

you playing, human!?"

"G-game?"

"Mind Game!"

"I-I'm not..." A growl interrupted him, making the brown haired man whimper a bit. "I'm... Josea."

"You're what?"

"My name, it's Josea." She curled her neck, taking a moment before a step back. Releasing her pin off his chest. "I'd like to know yours if you're willing to-"

"There it is again, what the hell?"

"I-I really don't know what you're talking about."

"You're...!" A half growl as she turned about and walked a few steps, shaking her head before returning to face him. "You're asking **Me** for permission instead of COMMANDING me, be it out of courtesy or as if you own me! Why!?"

"Because... I don't...?" A whine from the man as he sat back up. Puzzled by her frustrations, but at the same time... "Are you okay?" A heated breath from the white one as she sat down, about an arm's away from Josea. "Something is clearly bothering you, uh... Ghost."

"Please don't call me that."

"Okay." He softly spoke, once again getting her to grumble. Covering her eyes with the injured paw, regardless of the pain it caused. "What's wrong?"

"...Who are you?" She grumbled, barely asking a question but catching him off guard.

"Oh, uh... Josea." Another grumble in frustration. "I think it means something about Will-?"

"Not your name."

"Oh... I don't know what to tell you. I'm from the Bunker to the south?" No response. "You probably spotted the large fields of veggies in front of it."

"So, you're just some guy."

"Honestly? Yeah." Her gaze narrowed at him. "I-I really don't know what to tell you, or what you want to hear."

"I want to hear you talk like a normal human would! To make deals and persuade me to constantly stay by your side! I want you to be what I expected from your species, so it'll be that much easier to walk away and forget you-!" A breath and a head shake from her, as the hyena's gaze fell. "...That came out wrong."

"Nah, I don't think it did." He reached behind to get something, Kurt's water bottle again. Holding it up to her view and letting her gaze over it for a few moments before sighing.

"...Yes. I would like some of your warm water."

"No Please?"

"Don't push it, Josea." A chuckle from him.

"Can you walk?" The white furred creature asked him, still slightly frustrated.

"Not easily. I might have to find a walking stick or something." Her ears went back, expecting the request coming to the rather oblivious man. "Don't worry about it, but I'd like to ask you something."

"Here we go." She grumbled.

"Do you know how to get back up on top?" He pointed straight upwards, almost chuckling at her surprised doubletake.

"You mean...?"

"On the cliffside. If one can even call that a cliff. If anything, it's barely high enough-"

"Is that what you meant by 'fell'?" The creature grumbled.

"Y-yeah." Josea pointed in the room where he came from. "I was on top of it when my scoutmate and I spotted the horde in the distance. I just..." A strange stare from her blue eyes. "The grass was covering the hole, and I..."

"Fell." A bit of an awkward whimper from him, but the man nodded. "I see."

"If I can get back to camp, I'll be fine... I think. But knowing the best direction to get back up would help immensely."

"The fastest would be climbing, but I don't think you'll be doing that anytime soon." A chuckle from him.

"Yeah, that's pretty obvious. But do you happen to know...?" She took a breath, looking back and forth, as if scanning the area through the rock wall.

"There's a bit of a steep hill along that side, but it is covered in grass. Since it is your ankle, you should be able to crawl up it with enough ease and it'll get you on top."

"Thank you." He packed a few things and started getting up, leaving his sack behind as she watched the man hobble against the wall. Moving back to where he came from. "I'm just going to make a little sign for them, if they come looking for me."

"Sign?"

"An arrow." He gasped, leaning down and getting a few rocks. "Just showing the direction I went." A half grumble from her, as she looked back at the exit. Taking a breath and moving towards the room he was hobbling around in. Finding a rock and picking it up with her maw before moving to the center, where he was making a pile. The help did make the man smile, as he sat down. "You've done enough for me, erm... Stripes?"

"Terrible." She grumbled, sitting down across from him. "Your species is terrible at naming. And what do you mean 'Enough'."

"Oh, I'm not trying to be rude, I just... If you have someone to go back to, I'll be okay on my own." She curled her neck, once again out of his sight and focus as Josea began placing the rocks in the shape of an arrow; pointed towards the exit of the cave and making sure it was visible from the top of the hole. Only to double take at her puzzled expression. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm just..." She grumbled a bit. "Used to people trying to 'tame' me."

"And you don't want to be tamed." Her ears went back, but she didn't respond. "It's... I never really thought about it before, but it is a weird concept now that you bring it up." The brown haired one just smiled. "I guess people just find you special-"

"Because I can talk, and your species tends to have this obsession that all animals are their friends, regardless of the messes and mistakes they made in the past that disrupted their lives." She snorted, making his smile sadden a bit.

"...You're not wrong." Josea mumbled with guilt.

"About the obsession? No kidding."

"About the rest of it too." His gaze looked behind a bit, making her follow the gaze onto the bear trap he fell down with. Closed up and unarmed, but making her growl. "No, I didn't-"

"You are the one who's been setting those up!?" She growled loudly, her main puffing out as he raised in surrender.

"I know what it looks like, Stripes-"

"Don't call me that!"

"I didn't set up the one that caught you! I barely set up one in my life! I just-" She growled, ears back and looking away from him. "I was just following instructions, and..." There was a period of awkward silence, but she never left the room. "Is your arm better?" He gestured her injured leg, now being used to support her.

"...Getting there." The hyena grumbled, glaring at his gesture to see it better and sighing. But moving closer for the man to get a better view. Detecting her furs getting gently lifted to see the wound, sealed with a caked blood, but at least scabbed over.

"Does your kind get tetanus?"

"I don't know what that is."

"It's uh... Like an infection of sorts. Usually after getting cut by something rusty. It can cause your muscles to lock up, giving it the nickname Lockjaw." Her blue eyes gave him a bit of a worried look.

"I'm... Not sure."

"It's possible that we have a shot for it back at the Bunker if you want."

"A shot?" She questioned him.

"Like a needle-" A near snarl from her as she took a step back, once again raising his hands up. "Okay, okay. You don't like needles, that's okay."

"I won't be part of any more damn experiments!" She hissed, taking a moment to realize what she just said and started heading out the cave.

"Anymore...?" Josea repeated. "Wait, is that...?" It got her to stop in her tracks. "Is that why you can talk?"

"...I don't know." She hung her head down. "I remember some bastard with glasses... I remember many people. I remember needles and their stings. Eventually I could understand them. It was like the vision in my mind was expanded." A heavy breath from her as the man just stared. "I understood... Everything. The object around me and what they were for, the formulas written on the boards. The many cages, the bodies- not just of my kind but my-" She barely caught her sob, taking a few breaths to harden herself.

"I felt like I could understand everything but the reason why they abducted us..." She nearly growled, knowing that the anger wasn't directed at him specifically, Josea slid himself closer to the hyena. "But I have a pretty damn good theory."

"What is that?"

"To fix a mistake." A heated exhale from the white one. "Your kind's mistake."

Chapter 6

"So," The white one started, walking with Josea along the bottom of the cliff. Watching him hobble and use the natural structure for balance. "What's going to happen when you run out of wall?" She teased.

"I'll just have to either crawl or find a big enough branch. There's bound to be one in that forest somewheres, one that can hold my weight." Those blue eyes looked at him again, a bit of confusion with slight... Frustration? Making him double take a bit. "W-what?"

"You're just... Doing it again." The hyaena grumbled. "It's so weird to see it."

"Doing what?"

"Not asking me to do stuff. Not bartering, attempting to make deals." She looked off into the distance of where the native camp was. "Even if they're doing it kindly, they just... Look at me as if I'm a tool with feelings and needs. As if I'm there For them and to aid their existence- I just... Hate it."

"I... Personally, I don't really like asking people for help." That got her attention as she watched him hobble along. "I can't really explain why, but it is one of the reasons I don't like being outside of the Bunker. Too many dangers for someone to go alone, one gets stuck in situations like... Well, ours."

"Ours?"

"Well, me; sprained ankle. You; bear trap." A growl from her, but he just laughed it off. "Maybe that's why they're offering you to stay? Trying to 'Tame' you?"

"Because they think I can't make it out here on my own?"

"Well, I can't say I've seen too many... Wild dogs out here?"

"I'm not a wild dog." She grumbled. Getting the two to stare at each other's eyes as Josea ran through different animals in his head.

"Wolf-?"

"Not a wolf either."

"...Dingo."

"Not a canine."

".....Giant housecat?"

"...Not a lynx-A What!?" She said louder than she meant to. "No! I'm a Hyena!"

"...Isn't a Hyena a Canine?"

"No!" She hissed in a whisper. "Geez, you don't even know your animals, do you?" But the white one couldn't look at him without smiling.

"You can't blame me, we don't get hyenas here." The man chuckled, but his smile soon saddened. "Hey..." A look at his expression made her exhale with slight irritation. "For what it's worth; I'm sorry about your family."

"It's..." She sighed, almost exhaling some leftover anger while looking away. "I'm not going to say 'It's Okay', but... Thank you." That made him smile a little brighter, but soon came up to a small hill leading over the cliff.

"Uh oh. No more wall." He joked a little, taking a look around. Spotting a forest a little ways away, and it being the closest one. "I was hoping one would be closer." He sat down to take a little rest, and the striped one sat down close to him. Adding a bit of silence as they enjoyed the morning, though hearing a gurgle from his middle.

"How long has it been since you ate?"

"Before dusk yesterday." He mumbled. "I do have some emergency with me, but I'm going to wait a bit longer. Maybe to see what's... Left of the camp." She gazed off in the direction, based on his earlier suggestions.

"...Do you think they got out?"

"I hope so, yes." The young man sighed. "Kurt is reliable, but I'm just not sure how my grandfather would react." Though he didn't see it, the hyena stared at him for a moment. "I'm his only family he's got left."

"Just like her..." She whispered very faintly, not quite making it to his ears.

"Alright, let's see if I can find a crutch."

"Park your ass down." The white one grumbled, getting up and heading towards the woods.

"Park...? W-wait, Str-erm... Hyena?"

"I'll find you a stick, you work on your arrow made out of rocks." That made Josea smile.

"Y-you sure?"

"Don't make me regret doing this, I've yet to fully commit." She looked behind at the young man, smirking back. "Don't die while I'm gone."

"I'll... Try not to?"

The woods were at least peaceful, as if the very birds have either all flown south or learned that the main occupants on the ground are now attracted by sound. Causing the majority of the world to remain silent now, almost as if it were dead at this point. Leaving those who survived to scavenge over a colossal corpse for whatever they could find to keep alive. Be it food, shelter, or 'sticks'.

But the lack of wildlife here actually concerned the white one, walking carefully through the semi-dense woods. Making her more and more uneasy the further she got in. No wind, no sounds of things scurrying. Just this thick... Aura of something resembling a threat to her intuition, not quite lined up with the rest of her senses.

Cautiously scanning the area but spotting nothing that stuck out besides a single brown rabbit. Alive. Burrowed. Staring straight at the striped 'ghost', frightened. But not of her. Swearing it was warning her to run. But from-?

Those black ears caught the light squeak of something being pulled- a trigger? Pulling her head back as the loud snap of a pulley system echoed through the dead forest, launching a bolt through the air and just barely cutting against the bridge of her snout! Millimeters away from the hyena's eyes!

The too-close-for-comfort evade caused her to roll backwards onto the ground behind the cover of a thick tree. The rustles of the deceased leaves underneath her masking the hunter's slight curse under their breath. But not their device's reload. Hearing the slight cranks and pulls break the silence spell over the woods only for a moment... But now she had an idea where to look.

It still made Josea smile, which was honestly a little strange when he thought about it. Usually people doing things for him made the man uncomfortable and unworthy. But he felt like he was befriending the... Dog thing. Hyena! That was it.

How strange though, he thought to himself while taking a rock and scratching into the cliffside with it. A decently flat surface to display that he went up this way. To see the out-of-place animal all the way up here, however... She did mention some sort of lab and experiments. Likely shipped all the way up here for some reason or another.

Why work on Hyenas was beyond him. Lab rats were a common thing, maybe even apes. But why

those? Let alone give them... Intelligence? Taking a breath and looking back towards the woods the white one disappeared to, she didn't mention just how long she's been living up here. However, the stories and the bounty have been around for at least four months...

But who placed that bounty? Worry began to sink into his chest for his new friend as he started working on his sign again. The lab? Were they trying to get her back? He always just assumed it was some rich fella looking for her unique pelt for a rug or something... And now thinking it out loud felt beyond horrible for Josea. Not actually sure which one would be worse: to be killed for vanity or to be returned to finish whatever they were trying to do to her.

The damn rock was actually losing its edge. Making the man lightly grumble at the thing. Maybe his pocket knife would work? He'd hate to dull it, the young man thought as he pulled it out of the pocket and folded it out- nevermind. It was already dull. Scratching the arrow pointing upwards was more noisy but much more functional. He just needed a few more scratches, annnnd done. A nice white arrow pointing directly up, easy to see, and automatically lifts one's eyes up like it did his.

Only to hear a Hollow cry just over the edge...

Adrenaline surged through her body, still not used to being the one hunted. Attempting to calm herself enough so that her heartbeat wasn't hammering in her ears, allowing them to pinpoint where this person was. But all she got were pulses and silence. One of them was going to have to move at some point...

However, she was the one with a time limit. If the hyena didn't return, odds are that idiot would probably walk right into the hunter's line of sight. Possibly using the dumbass as bait, to lure her out and then she'd have to deal with yet another one of his injuries. Being very cautious and scanning the area using the forest as cover.

...Damnit. That boy was growing on her, wasn't he? Actually wanting to protect his foolish life, and for what? Why? Because Josea doesn't like asking the hyaena for silly requests and deals? Because he reminded her of that older woman?

A head shake from her as she started creeping from large tree to large tree. Now was not the time to start thinking about that, especially while in danger. (Focus, girl, focus! You've dealt with hunters before... They stay in one place, a vantage point where they had the best field of view. And right now,

you're the one sticking out like a sore paw.)

A nearby howl got her ear to flick while scanning, clenching her jaw knowing just where it was coming from! But spotting some movement in the distance! Darting around the back of the forest, jumping off of trees and sliding underneath a large log! Hearing the snap of the crossbow fire but was aimed above her; expecting the white one to be leaping over it instead of going underneath! Now was her chance! A pounce over his cover!

The scrawny humanoid leapt down on top of Josea, landing and pinning him to the ground with a heavy thud. Nearly knocking the wind out of him as long dark hair obscured his vision. The scent of rotting breath burning his eyes as poorly looked after teeth and decaying lips hissed at him, wrestling with his arms to find a good place to bite!

A lunge at his neck was misdirected as the young man attempted to knock the thing off with his knees. His pocket knife getting tangled in their hair and rags as he finally threw it overhead, but his small weapon went with it! Landing somewhere in the grass as Josea searched desperately for the thing, unable to find it by the time the Hollow rolled to its feet and roared at him! Taking another lunge as he grabbed his pack and put it between them!

Her jaws snatched onto the stock of the crossbow as the weight of the hyena's landing forced the camo'd hunter on his back. Bracing the white animal back as his visor met those angry blue eyes. Actually hearing the weapon begin to snap and crack underneath her growls as he attempted to twist it. Trying to throw her off balance and nearly doing so, but she swung her body in the same direction! Causing his grip to become awkward, forcing him to let go and she sent the weapon flying into the forest!

Returning to the hunter with a paw swipe across the head- one that hit with a much more surprising impact than it looked. Making him grunt against the blow and shield himself with his hands, only to get a hard bite on the wrist! A cry of pain as his attention moved to defend that, leaving his neck open for her next bite!

The humanoid's rotten teeth pierced into the old clothing, ripping into it but at least protecting Josea from being bitten. However, it had such strength that it slammed his back and head against the rock wall. Getting him to whimper as he attempted to hold the thing back without getting scratched too badly by those long nails. Even with his layered clothed arms he could feel them dig in!

Attempting to push it off him just burned through Josea's energy. Lacking the strength to really hold it back as he tried to shift it off balance, making the mistake of using his bad ankle. Making him cry out in a little bit of pain in which the Hollow screamed loudly at him.

"S-Stripes!!" The man cried out, hoping the hyena would hear. Tangled in the strap, the creature flung its arms out and tossed the bag off to the side. Leaving Josea to defend himself with just his tired arms! Managing to get one across the thing's chest as it clawed into his shoulders and neck! "Please!!" Through its ragged hair, two dark eyes could be seen in what was pretty much a skinned skull. What little light entered them left as an eerie green glow as its jaw grew closer and closer against his weakening hold...!

A heavy bite into the hunter's neck, but all she got was clothing! Pulling it and shredding the padding into rags as the man shoved her off. Causing the hyena to lunge at him again, barely seeing a knife get drawn out of his pocket and aim for her side! Not quite hitting his intended target, but getting the cold steel in the back of her leg! Making her snarl loudly as she swatted him with another heavy paw.

It was enough for his gloved hand to lose grip of the handle, and keep the blade in her body. It hurt, no doubt, but she kept focus on the real danger! Knocking the hunter on his front and slamming onto his spine; right inbetween the shoulder blades. Stunning him long enough to bite into one of his hamstrings and tear out some of the muscle! Making the hunter attempt to cry out, but with no real volume!

A few whimpers of desperation, that of near pleading, Josea attempted to find something- Anything to help him! Placing all his defense in one arm as the other searched around nearby, picking up the first solid object he could find and slamming it against the Hollow's skull! The rock he was carving with

beforehand!

The thing screamed at him, but the second hit was enough to throw it off! Getting up and diving for that knife- finally spotting it's red casing in the grass! Grunting through the pain of his sprained ankle, as he took hold of it and heard that screech again! Taking the open blade and swinging it sideways as he rolled-!

An attempt to roll over was stopped as the white animal stepped on his shoulder hard, hitting as if the impact was much much greater and nearly fracturing his bone. Biting into his clothing just behind his neck got the attention of his hands. Trying to protect it and grab a hold of that snout. Making her growl loudly, snatch his wrist again, and sink those teeth into it deep! A single paw pressing on his forearm as she pulled on the wrist! Ripping the entire hand off in a bloody mess as the hunter screamed with everything he had! Then a bite to the back of his bare neck! Feeling her jaws get tighter... Tighter...!

(I... I trusted him... With everything I had... And he still left me behind for another...?)

The voice echoed in his head just like the very blade entered the Hollow's skull, causing Josea to scamper back a bit before a massive weight in his chest was felt. Like something was stepping on his heart, a deep cut with no real physical pain. Still making it race hard as the adrenaline struggled against the weight, like battling against an anesthetic.

What even was that...? A voice he's never heard before, a pain that felt so foreign... Staring at the body while his own heaved loudly, trying to recover. Worried that the Hollow with a pocket knife sticking out of its head would jump back up at him. But after a bit, his body started nearly shutting down. Fatigue from his straining muscles, and this... Supernatural drug. Making him want to just... Give up.

It took him what felt like ages to begin moving again. The heavy pain in his ankle from stressing it during the conflict finally coming around and overpowering that strange weight. Getting himself to at least a sitting position to check out any wounds, never wanting to take a shower more, he started hearing something coming from the woods. That... 'friendly' white, with a very concerning red around her muzzle, limping a bit with her walk. Only to take one look at Josea, stop, and curse loudly. Heading

back inside the forest, and taking a few moments for the young man to put together that she forgot what she went in for.

Chapter 7

"Uss etter e guu enna." The hyena nearly snarled, pulling the large stick near Josea with it in her maw. Dropping it near him and turning around. "But first, get this damn thing out of me." A double take from the man as he spotted a black handle sticking out of her thigh. Making him whimper a bit as he carefully placed a hand on the black striped hip and taking a firm hold of the handle.

"Did... You want something to bite down on-?"

"Just do it!" She hissed, not trying to watch her volume. Feeling him pull on the blade, but weakly. Making it hurt that much more as she growled against the pain until it finally slid out and she staggered forwards. Watching him shift his eyes between the hyaena and the bloody weapon, tossing her snout at the younger man. "You should see the other guy." She grumbled.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." Another growl, though lower this time and not specifically at him. Looking over at the dead Hollow nearby. "Are you." She barely asked.

"I... Don't know." Her blue eyes studied his shakened ones for a little bit, mapping his gaze down to observing the bloody knife he pulled out. "Have... You ever killed one of them before?"

"Your kind, you mean?" That made him double take. "I do what I need to in order to survive, Josea. If it means culling either your loud berserk counterparts or silent hunters, it makes no difference to me."

"Berserk counterparts...?" He quoted, clearly confused to the point where it actually made the hyena a bit puzzled. Gesturing Hollow's body. "T-that isn't normal."

"It isn't?"

"No!" He nearly shouted, barely catching his voice. "T-these things only started appearing recently!"

"Don't act like I should know everything about your damn species!" She snapped back. "It's been a thing ever since I got out of that hellhole, how am I supposed to know any different!" A growl from the white one as she looked over the nearby corpse. "All I know is that they don't get back up if you crush their skulls in." The man took a breath and nodded in understanding.

"I just... I think I get why the adults never really talked about them." Those blue discs focused on him again. "I... Heard them... When I..."

"Delivered the deathblow." He nodded faintly, feeling his heart sink like before. "So what, you heard a voice. It happens."

A double take from him that time. "You... Hear them too?"

"All of the berserk ones say some phrase when you kill them. Consider it a confirmation." She lightly snorted, walking back towards him, but noticing something was off. "What? You feel bad for them?"

"I... Don't know." The man sighed heavily, brushing his brown hair out of his face. "I just feel so... Tired. Lost. Like there's just this weight on my chest and I'm having a hard time lifting it off." Took a few moments, not hearing any response from the hyena. Only to finally look at her and double take at her very puzzled expression; head tilted, ears perked, one eyebrow raised. "You've...?"

"Never experienced anything like that. You cull them, you hear their last breath before dying, and you move on." She grumbled, tilting her head in a shrug only to witness his gaze fall. Exhaling through her muzzle and looking the other direction. "...Maybe it's just that easy for someone like me. It's hard to feel bad for them considering what your species did."

The young man's head lowered heavily, a thick cloud of loneliness over his mind as he barely

mumbled. "...I'm sorry."

"You've already apologized, you don't need to-" The hyena's gaze spotted movement in the corner of it, the knife moving to his own wrist. Pressing into it hard just before getting shoved over by the white one. A strong paw holding down his armed limb while her other fore pinned his chest down. "What the hell!?" She hissed at him, only to witness his eyes almost snap out of the trance. A bit lost as if not recognizing where he was. "Why would you do that!?"

"D-don't yell!" He whispered, getting a growl in response. "And do what? Why are you on me-?"

"What good would offing yourself do-!?"

"What?" Josea then watched as her expression twisted from anger to shock, backpedaling off him like she just seen a ghost. Giving the man a second to realize the actions his body took, dropping the knife and checking out the state of his wound. Surprisingly and thankfully nothing more than a minor cut. "I... I don't know what happened. My-"

"No...!" She nearly whined, looking off into the distance and staring into space. "No-no-no-no-no! That's not what happened!" The white one took a few steps away shaking her head in disbelief. "She was killed! By some damn human after one of them attacked her! She didn't take her own life...!"

"Who?" The white one didn't respond, only panting while staring into space. Not even noticing that the young man moved back onto his knees and crawled towards her until a hand was placed on the furred shoulder. Causing her to step away as if spooked, but look at him a bit frightened. "Strip-erm..." Surprisingly, no growl or grumble from the 'name'. "I blacked out. What just happened?" No response, just a disillusioned stare from her blue eyes. "Did I...?" A look on his slightly cut wrist. "...Did she-?"

The makeshift walking stick did wonders for his speed. Even better than the wall's assistance when that was an option, but it did take some time to get used to. Now Josea didn't feel like he was slowing the striped hyena down, as they made their way to what he hoped was the right direction. Still trying to be quiet, especially if there was something still seeking out the yells from earlier.

However, there was a bit of an awkward silence between the two. Once in a while his eyes would look at the stripped one to see if she would look back on him again. And the same way as before, even. But instead, she was looking away. Off into the distance as if scouting the nearby woods and every little noise. Occasionally stopping if a noise was heard, but always turned out to be nothing.

Perhaps correcting the mistake of letting her emotions get the better of her. Within good reason, of course; both of them slightly injured and one more tired than the other. Having to walk back and forth a few times to collect a few things. The damaged crossbow still tapping Josea's backpack a bit awkwardly, but at least it was a weapon he could use. Providing it wouldn't just break apart after firing it for the first time, never realizing just how strong the hyena's jaws were.

But his mind drifted back as they walked in silence. Replaying the event over and over again. Remember pulling the knife out of her thigh and looking at it as the young man rested on the ground. His head was still delusional from the conflict and whatever that 'mind poison' was. The voice of the Hollow still haunting his chest, but it was getting easier.

And then his world went black, before he came to he could hear... Her voice. The hyaena's, loud and standing over him. With such anger that Josea thought maybe he attacked the white one with the blade, and she was just moments away from ripping his throat out. Needing a moment for his heart to thaw out... Then...

"I blacked out." His past voice echoed in his head. "What just happened?" A scrambled memory, as he attempted to make sense of her words. "Did she-?" Only for the white creature to dive into the man's chest, paws reaching around his back. Holding onto his middle tightly. "S-Stripes?"

"Don't ever do that!!" She shouted into his layered clothing, muffling her voice a little.

"S-sorry. I still haven't found a good name for you yet-"

"Josea!" She hissed, getting him to wince a little and now actually feel the animal's strength. "Don't ever leave me like that!"

"Leave you...?" A few shaky breaths were detected as he frowned, slowly hugging her back and almost waiting for some sort of retaliation. But all the white one did was hold the man a little tighter. "I'm... Sorry."

"Please... Just don't ever... I can't handle..." The hyena never did finish that sentence, but to Josea, she didn't really have to. Her story was still in pieces to him, but he could put some of the shards together.

"Let's... Just get you home."

And thus started the long walk in silence. Josea could tell that she was embarrassed about showing the affection, perhaps a little bit of her weaker self. Still, there were a couple of things he wanted to know. "Hey." He whispered to her, getting the attention of that black muzzle, still stained a dark red. "I... Think I'm starting to understand you a little better."

"Oh, this won't end well for me." The hyena grumbled, making the young man chuckle a little bit at her frustration.

"But I'd still like a name, one that you prefer."

"And you've spent the last several minutes making a dumb list of them. Let's hear it." She sighed.

"A-actually... I was wondering what *She* called you." The white one slowed to a stop, looking away to attempt to hide her gaze. "I... Thought it might be hard on you. I'm sorry-"

"It's... Fine, Josea. But it is not a name I want to be called anymore." He nodded slowly in understanding. "What else do you have?"

"About that..." A grumble from the white one. "What would *you* like to be called?" A motion to put a paw over her eyes was interrupted, making her double take and stare at the young man. Attempting to hold in his chuckle at her surprised expression.

"...Seriously, who **are** you...?" Her ears went back as she exhaled at Josea's chuckle. "I... Can't say I've never thought about it before, but I never... Came to one that I like."

"Really?" A mumble from the white one in response. Morphing into a bit of a growl as she continued walking again by his side. Mane rising up a bit.

"But I know what I don't like, that's easy enough."

"That being?"

"Something painfully obvious. 'Stripes' because I have stripes on my back. '*Spirit*' or '*Ghost*' or '*Snowflake*' because my coat is naturally white." She snorted, making him laugh. "*Nibbles*, because..."

Okay, that one I honestly don't know, but it was still dumb! Your species is terrible at naming things!"

"I can't disagree, but again: what would you like to be called?"

"Something without a damn hidden meaning." Another grumble. "Be it another language or symbolic. I'm just...! I'm tired of being forced into this box like people are attempting to define me. To give me some future purpose, hope, or destiny. I don't-"

"Zhiaxha?" A groan from her as she glared at him.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Her ears spaded. "I'm serious, I made it up on the spot. It literally has no meaning behind it." The hyena's blue eyes studied his for a moment, slowly curling her neck back. "We can think of another if you like, I just would... Like to call you something, as a sign of respect." The white one came to a stop and so did he, the two staring at each other for a few moments.

"...That's why this is so important to you?"

"I mean, yes. In a way. You're intelligent, able to see patterns and recognize your own reflection- I assume that's how you know you have stripes on your back." She attempted to look at them, not quite able to turn her head enough. "I... Kinda understand your want to remain nameless, and that's okay too. But I'd like to call you something more respectful than 'animal', 'hyena', or... 'You'?" She exhaled through her muzzle, looking off at the distant view. Making him do the same, taking a moment to admire the warm colored trees lightly blowing in the wind.

"And it means nothing?" She spoke up, getting Josea's attention again. "No meaning, no human word from a different culture?"

"I'm not going to lie, Stripes-" A grumble from her, lowering her head and spading out those ears again. "It is possible I heard it a very long time ago, it could mean something in some other language that I don't even know. But for this moment, for this intended purpose, it is a made up word. I promise." Another moment of silence.

"...What was it again?"

"I can hardly remember." That actually made the hyena chuckle. "Let me think... Zhiashee- no... Xha.

Zhiaxha [Zee(or Zae)-a-sha]."

"Zhiaxha..." She repeated it a few times, getting it wrong as the two agreed on some pronunciations. "...Alright. But if we find out it means something-"

"I'll give you a new one."

"I was going to say I'm going to bite you, *then* force you to give me a new one." She snorted, but Josea only chuckled at her. Once again looking off into the distance, but this time with a bit of a smile. "It... Grows on you."

"I think it's suiting, honestly." The man stated, beckoning Zhia to continue moving with him. "Kind of like a stranger in a strange land-"

"See, that's how meanings to words start." She growled, getting another chuckle in response.

Chapter 8

The distance revealed the tent Josea's group had left behind, half hidden within the bushes. The campfire was extinguished quickly using dirt nearby, keeping a decent amount of the wood inside the pit good for use, as well as still having a lot gathered nearby. Locations of the other tents were left vacant, a few things left behind as it looked like the group made their withdrawal. Giving the young man a sigh of relief. "Okay..." He mumbled, mostly to himself but getting the attention of the white furred one. "I think they made it out alright."

"You really weren't that far away from it." She stated, looking in the direction of where the horde was last night. Spotting the edge of the small cliffs in the distance, and getting Josea to look as well. Only to

frown a little bit before walking down the path. "You, uh... Might want to take a few of your things?"

"In a bit. I want to..." A noise in question from Zhiaxha as she started to follow him. "I want to correct something."

"Correct something?" It took a few moments as he examined the forest line. Every time there was an opening. "Look, if you're going to hunt something, leave it to me. I know you're probably eager to try that thing out," Her head motioned to the crossbow over his shoulder. "But-"

"I-it's not that." He chuckled, further puzzling the hyena as her ears kept shifting up and down, from being interested and irked at the fact he wasn't telling her. Everytime he stopped, the black pair of scanners would stop and lift up, looking around and he would move on. Causing her to growl a little louder each time. "Okay, this one, I'm sure of it."

"I swear if you don't tell me, I'm going to tear your other ankle off." Zhia snorted, only to lead her in view of an opened bear trap. Further giving the man a near-deathly stare, causing him to lift a hand up in slight surrender.

"It's not what you think, I'm just here to disarm it." A grumble in slight approval. "Now, if you'll please step inside it to do so-" She snarled at him heavily as Josea just laughed it off. "I'm joking, I'm joking! Let me just find another stick to be safe." He searched around for a smaller one and got down on the ground close to the trap. Sliding the small piece of wood underneath the jaws and pressing against the plate in the center, the metal half-rings snapped together loudly, causing both of them to jump a little at it but they were at least unharmed. "There."

"Now for the next one?"

"We... Only placed the one. Our plan was to place two more, but." Another grumble from the hyena. "I know, Zhia, but... You need to realize that this is how we hunt." The white one just snorted at him, ears back and looking away. But didn't respond. "I know it's cruel... But." A bit of silence. "How do you hunt?"

"What?"

"I'm not... Trying to specifically point out similarities or hypocrisies, I'm asking as to improve." Josea stated, moving the now disarmed trap out of the pathway and motioning her to head back to camp with him. "So how do you hunt?"

"Depends on what it is, I suppose. You use what power you have against them; if you're stronger, faster, more agile, silent or observant." She looked off into the distance, spotting some bison. "Take those, for example. I'm not going to outmatch its strength or its weight. I know I'm not going to be able to knock it down, and if it runs, I'll end up burning more energy attempting to even catch up to it for the hunt to be worth it."

"Have you hunted them before?"

"I have. By sneaking up behind them and tearing out the muscles in their hind legs. It snares their movement, allowing me to catch up. They burn through their energy attempting to escape, and by the time I do catch up to it with a reasonable pace..." The hyena tilted her head in a shrug. "All it takes is a bite in the back of the neck. I can't say it's painless, but it is better than crippling them in place for possibly several days. Where they would either die of thirst, hunger, or bleed out. A slow painful death is just..."

"I..." The man sighed. "...That's what I was afraid of. And why I was reluctant on setting those traps up. But..."

"Someone... Ordered you to?" Zhiaxha asked, getting him to nod sadly.

"My grandfather did. He's the best hunter I know, spent his life as a forest ranger for a few decades. He lived in the woods north of here as a child, and after his own kids grew up... His wife and him split up."

"The hell is a wife?" That made him chuckle.

"It's what we call a mate. Specifically the female one." Her slightly irked head tilt put a smile on his face. "I'm surprised you didn't know that, considering your speaking capabilities." A grumble as the hyena shook her head quickly.

"Some words I just... Know, somehow. I just don't always know what they mean." Zhia took a moment to stop and hold the top of her head with a single paw. "It makes my brain hurt when I start to think about it, and all that knowledge about how to use it scrambles."

"Really?" She nodded in response but continued to walk. "Do you know what they called the males side?"

"That Husbando thing?" That made Josea laugh and her playfully growl, as if she got it wrong. "Don't tease me about this, I've only had the ability to speak to your kind for a few seasons."

"I'm not laughing at you, but the Husbando is something slightly different. Kind of played as a joke."

"Then what's the real answer?"

"Husband." A grumble and snout toss in frustration. "You were really close!"

"Barely any difference!" She hissed in a whisper. "Why are your languages so dumb?"

"I don't have answers. All I know is that I'm hungry." The man panted, making his way back to the campfire and sitting on a nearby log. Taking out his pack and finding his bag of rations; mixed nuts, some dried berries stuck together with peanut butter and dried into a near 'bar'. A side of jerky in another bag torn into strips. Turning to face her while asking "Want some-?"

"-Yes please." Another laugh from Josea, that nearly made him drop it and fall over; seeing the hyena sitting down, facing him, and staring at it. Even though her ears were back at his reaction, trying her best not to grumble. "Your species may be dumb, but your cuisine is to die for." The young man tore off a piece and carefully offered it to the creature, expecting the white one to snap at it. But to Josea's surprise, the hyaena took it really gently. Purring loudly as she ate it very slowly, closing her eyes and wagging that tail, making the man smile as he took his own bite.

It was starting to get a little stale for his tastes, but it made him appreciate the flavors as he watched Zhiaxha take her time to enjoy it... Only to start licking the roof of her maw a lot. "Right. Peanut Butter. That might get stuck on the roof of your mouth-"

"Worth it." She grumbled a bit, once again making him chuckle. Getting offered another piece and taking it without considering the consequences.

"...Did she ever give you any food?" Her chewing slowed to a stop when he asked that. Taking a moment to think back, nod and motion for him to wait until the hyena was done. Requiring a little bit more effort with the peanut butter in her maw, causing Josea to smile sadly.

"She's the one who... Made me realize just how good it could be." Her blue eyes drifted off in the distance. "Back home, I don't really recall it ever being important or enjoyable. It just... Triggered a 'disgust' reflex when something wasn't safe to eat. The stuff that was? I wouldn't consider it good or

enjoyable, just... Silencing the hunger for another day. No one ever thought about prepping the meats or cooking them. And I honestly thought she was insane for doing it., let alone how it looked when it was done."

"It does often look burnt or unsafe."

"Like it's just been dropped in muddy water? Marked with charcoal?"

"Probably no pink to be found either?" An odd look from the white one, tilting her head a little bit. "Usually means the meat is cooked and safe for us to eat."

"N-no, that other word you used... Pink?" A chuckle from the man.

"Like the color, yes." Her blue eyes shifted in thought. "A lighter shade of red-?" He stopped himself when she grunted, like dealing with a bit of a headache. "...You probably didn't ever see in color before the..."

"I remember... What you call blue, I think?"

"Kind of like the sky?" He pointed up, making her examine it. "It's the same color as our eyes too."

"Our?"

"Both yours and mine are blue." She looked at them, needing to take a step forwards to really see.

"Yes, that... Fits, according to my mind anyway. And I remember... The grass here, that... Green color?" The younger man nodded, confirming she had the correct word. "But the... Color of the living, their insides."

"Blood?"

"Yes, that was completely new. To the point where I spent my first kill thinking it was... Toxic or unhealthy." A heavy sigh from her as the hyena laid down on the grass near his seat. Getting him to slide down and join her.

"That must've been really hard for you." Josea mumbled sadly, slowly moving his hand over to her

shoulder and giving her a few pets. Almost expecting her to growl or snap at him, but the hyena just exhaled through her muzzle. Lifting her snout to rest on his thigh.

"New place... New 'abilities', I guess. New view of the world... Yet, I still got locked into a closet." Zhia grumbled, taking a moment for him to put together that she couldn't open a doorknob and attempt to hold back his laughter. "Shut up." She shoved his leg, causing him to break a little and chuckle silently. "But that's the night I met her. She freed me, likely thinking I was one of those Hollow things... And I scampered the hell out of there."

"Then what happened?" A bit of silence. The physical rest causing him to yawn with no reaction from the hyena.

"She ended up finding one upstairs, fought it off by herself. They made enough noise to attract more... But I... I repaid her. I fought them off, but I was so hungry and weak afterwards. She took me in, and..."

"She became your companion?" A slow nod.

"She was so much like you, Josea. Never asked for anything major, no deals, no expectations. Fine on her own, and always stated that I didn't need to follow her around. That I was free to go anytime I would like to, but she would love my company." A heavy sigh nearly deflated the white one.

"Did she give you a name? I can't remember if you said..."

"I gave her my... Family's name. The one I was given after surviving my first year. But that... That was a mistake."

"Why?"

"Because I... I was no longer that person. She died in that tower, I'm just the monster that they made out of her corpse." Zhiaxha released a heated breath through her muzzle. "Enough about me. Josea, where did you come from?"

Chapter 9

"Me?" Josea double taked just as he was going to take a drink from his canteen, actually pouring some of the water on his neck and lightly cursing. "Y-you want to know about... me?"

"Yes." She tossed her snout. "Why are you so different from the rest of them?" She watched him take a drink as he worryingly thought. Taking a breath and looking at her a bit sadly.

"I'm... Not really sure what to tell you, Zhia. I'm not that interesting."

"You say that, but you're one of the two humans I've met that I can stand." A snort from her. "Try me."

"Well... I was born and raised in a small town outside the city. I was the middle brother in a family of three sons, both of which were better than me at everything. School, hobbies, crafts and arts... Everything. I was falling behind in a lot of subjects, and one summer... Our house caught on fire."

"And you lost them?"

"N-no, we all made it out okay, but we lost all our material possessions. Felix and Hunter were a lot more upset about it than I was, but I just... For some reason didn't feel as attached. Shortly after, my father ran into his own father while our house was being built. My brothers got to spend the summer with their own friends, those families taking care of them. But I... Didn't really have any friends. So my Grandfather took me in for the summer."

"This is when he lived out in the forests?" The young man nodded at her, making him sadly chuckle.

"I still wasn't very good. Grandpa always said I was a dim lightbulb, but animals seemed to like me for some reason. I still wasn't good at hunting them or taking care of them, but..." The hyena's blue eyes half glared at the man. "I-I mean it, I don't have any special power or anything, I just... Animals seem to be more friendly with me than most people."

"That explains some of it." A snort from the white one, making him smile. Petting the back of her neck

gently. "Continue."

"Not much else to really say. I kept going back every summer, I got a little better at things like archery, but... I didn't get the grades for a higher education. I took a year off from highschool, trying to find my own calling. Taking a part-time job to maybe do some traveling around the world..."

"And?"

"...Then the Fall happened."

"Well, yeah. Autumn comes around every year, doesn't it?"

"Autumn? No- well, yes. B-but not that kind of-" He interrupted himself, taking a breath to collect his thoughts before confusing the white one any further. "Remember when I told you that the... Hollows weren't normal?"

"The berserker ones?" He nodded in response. "Yeah."

"Well... The Fall is what we call when that started... Happening." Her puzzled look made him sigh heavily. "I don't know a lot of the answers, nobody really does here. Nearly a year ago, some... Thing fell from the sky. Some meteor or something, made of some black matter. People and scientists attempted to... Examine it, experiment on it? I don't know. But shortly after, our recently dead started coming back to life. Jacked up as if on steroids, wild and in a frenzy. Attacking at every little sound as if it were a threat."

"So, is it a sickness? Some...?"

"Virus? I don't think so. People don't specifically seem to be getting sick, though those who do often do come back to life. At first, people thought it was a mutation of rabies, but even those perfectly healthy seemed to change shortly after being clinically dead. For some, especially some gun-nuts out there, it was a chance to 'cut loose' and 'go on a killing spree to defend the country'. Perhaps even show off some military prowess... But they didn't account for..."

"The voices." A slow nod as his heart ached heavily, recalling his earlier encounter. Though her paw being placed on his leg did help him.

"Yeah... Until today, I didn't understand why their morale sank so quickly. Regardless if it were from

machines, ranged weapons, bare hands, or even bombs... Those responsible seemed to be shell shocked. Leaving them opened for the horde to take their lives or... Even taking their own. Unable to-" A heavy exhale from Josea as he attempted to harden his heart. Looking away from Zhiaxha as those curious blue eyes attempted to scan his face. Hearing her take a breath herself, get up, and try to hug the young man's chest the best she could. "...Thank you."

"Just don't expect me to do anything like this for anyone else, okay?" She grumbled. "But where were you during this?"

"I was... Back in my hometown. Everyone else either moved into the city or out in Oddin's kingdom to the far east." An odd look from the white one. "It's uh... A very cultural place. Some people like it, some people don't. But the king always seemed to be a good person from what the media told us."

"You were saying."

"R-right. I was working two meaningless part time jobs when they closed the city. Barely making enough to live off of. The 'Outbreak' as they called it, it got out of control really fast. Lines upon lines of people trying to get in or out, to save their loved ones or escape. I got a call from my mother, telling me they were going to head where I lived." A heavy breath from Josea. "That was before the power was cut off, and the cellular towers went down. My grandpa came down, dragged me from work and told me we were going to find them. But they completely sealed the city off. No one was getting in or out."

He continued. "When night came, we tried to head back to my apartment but got separated in a crowd. Too much noise attracted too many of those things, and I managed to hide in a dumpster." A sad smile from the man. "Wasn't one of my better nights."

"I imagine."

"By morning, I managed to sneak out unnoticed, but the town was no longer safe. I scavenged what I could, took off into the woods. Wandered around for a few nights and found the Bunker."

"And you never came across a single Hollow during that?"

"I did, but I never engaged. Most of them were far away and after learning the whole 'attacks whatever makes noise' thing... They were pretty easy to move around. However, they do travel in hordes now, I'm not sure why." A chuckle from Josea as he took a breath. "By some form of dumb luck, Grampy was there at the bunker too. And the first thing he did was hug me, then command that I took a shower."

"You do smell a little weird."

"Imagine what I smelled like then." They shared a small laugh. "...I've been with them ever since, but..."

"What."

"...Can I be honest with you, Zhiaxha?" A noise in half confirmation from her. "Maybe it's because I've been disillusioned by the apocalypse, but I don't really... Miss my family that much." He felt her questionable stare. "I loved them, sure, and maybe I'm still shocked by everything, but... I don't really miss them. I don't really miss my old life either. Don't specifically like this one, but I'm... I've been stuck in this constant loop of not being good at anything I do."

"And you have to be?"

"...Everybody has some sort of skill to bring to the world. Some sort of ability, talent, some unique trait that they bring to the table. They carry their own weight with it, whereas..." An exhale from him. "Some part of me was hoping that maybe I could kill the Hollows without being affected by their... But I'm no good at that either." There was a bit of silence as she let go of him, looking off into the distance.

"...You got me to somehow like you." That actually made him chuckle a little bit. "Shut up, some would consider that to be a damn superpower." The hyena snorted.

"That is something rather special, yes."

"It is! Do you have any idea how hard some have tried to get me to like them? Especially after I let out that I could talk- accidentally, by the way." Another snort at his chuckle. "So what if you're not the one who saves the damn world, consider it a blessing that you don't have to deal with that responsibility."

"...Maybe."

"No 'Maybe' about it." Zhia grumbled. "I honestly envy you; you can go about nearly unseen by people. Not having to worry about being hunted or captured constantly, to not lean on luck to find a decent shelter away from the weather- you can just *decide* to build your own at any location. Able to start fires for warmth or to cook your own food without relying on others."

"Not being trapped by closet doors."

"That's low, Josea." He laughed at her growl. "I... Hate the idea of being human, just because of what they did to me. But..." She trailed off, getting some ear scratches from him. Making her purr and putting a bright smile on his face.

"Thank you, Zhiaxha." Another bit of ear scratches leading down around her jaw and chin. "Alright, let's get a proper meal going while everything is here. There should be a stream of water nearby, I still have some filters with me. I'll have to hunt us something-"

"*I*ll do the hunting." She grumbled, getting him to chuckle. "You just try not to get lost or die." Josea just smiled at her, shaking his head but agreeing overall. Getting back up and testing his ankle. "Still bad?"

"Not that bad. I should start walking on it anyway, but I'll keep the stick with me. Meet back here soon?"

"Yeah. How much game do you want?" She started heading towards the forest, making him double take at the question and recalling her mentioning 'bison' earlier.

"N-nothing big. Even a simple rabbit would probably be enough for both of us." The man awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'll see what I can find."

The small stream was quiet but clear, and at least it was running water. A much safer option than its still counterparts; often inhabited with many unpleasant things. Setting his pack down and resting on the ground himself, something foreign was detected in one of his pockets. Needing to dig around it carefully to pull out the-

Black knife. Stained with red, and at first he thought maybe it wounded him while being stored, but recalling now that it was... Stuck in the white one's leg. Looking at it made him feel a little funny, like a lingering cloud of doubt and deliriousness, as if that strange brain fog was returning that made him black out.

...And those feelings of sorrow started to return. Making his chest heavy as he looked at the now red blade, catching this... Strange yearn to just end it ever since Josea killed that person... No. It wasn't a person, he was defending himself against someone that contracted an illness of sorts. And if he didn't... That Hollow would've killed him and wandered to possibly do in another.

It was a strange concept to him; to kill or be killed. A Survivor's Guilt washing over him rather heavily as he sat quietly staring at the knife. Almost feeling this kinetic pull from it to his wrist, letting his own blue gaze move towards the bandages he put on shortly after the cut. Wondering if it was too late, and he was already infected. Now it was just a matter of time before he would turn, and Zhiaxha would lose another person-

No, wait. This knife... This knife wasn't the one he killed the Hollow with. There was no telling anymore what it was used on besides that... Hunter that was after the hyena, so it was still possible that Josea was infected by something, but right now... Right now he was fine. Other than that strange lingering of a fading will, the young man was fine. Shaken, but okay.

But he should wash the other knife as well. Pulling out the pocket blade and spotting the same red marks, though... With something slightly different? The reflection from the light revealed an oddly green hue to its illumination. Making the man feel very uneasy as he shifted his gaze between the two blades. They... Were definitely different, that's for sure. The black blade that was used against Zhia had very faint traces of that strange green... Was she infected too?

It worried the man, but regardless he needed to keep these things cleaned. Using the running water and a little bit of his traveling soap, hoping that it was enough to cull whatever infection was resting on it. But even after the black handled knife was clean... Those heavy feelings still lingered.

Regardless, Josea put it away. Taking a heavy breath and beginning to work on his water bottles. Emptying out, giving them a quick rinse, setting up the filters and pouring some clean water through it. A small, upside-down bottle filled with layers of cotton, sand, cloth, and most importantly; charcoal.

The process was still weird to him, to pass water through the filter and into a large pot before returning it to the bottle. But Josea knew first hand what it was like to catch something from it, recalling being sick for a few days one summer. "If you can't boil it, filter it." He mumbled to himself, quoting the greybeard from back then.

The young man missed him dearly at that moment, wondering where his grandfather was. What he was thinking about. What he was planning. As well as if Josea was doing the right thing about heading back by himself- well, not exactly alone.

Done with the water collection, he packed things up and started to head back to camp. Wondering what those two would think of each other; Zhia and Murry. Would they get along? Likely the hyena would be skeptical, and the old man probably wouldn't believe his ears. Thinking it was some kind of trick or some fairy tale, someone not to be trusted. But Josea did trust her, and he believed that feeling was mutual.

Some ravens were heard somewhat nearby, lightly concerning him but no howls were heard. Maybe they began to ignore the sounds of wildlife? He could never be sure. Occasionally the Hollows would go after vocal birds or other animals, but not very often. Recalling stories going around of one group of hunters using the same mimicking calls as a form of communication... And it not ending well.

Returning to the camp, there was no sign of the white one's own return. Hoping she wouldn't take too long, but at least there was still equipment to cook with, allowing him to get a fire going and a pan heated. All he needed now was the meat, and perhaps the veggies in his backpack.

A quick look in his tent and the backpack was still there. Untouched, along with his pipe bow and quiver. Likely his grandfather's decision to leave them behind for Josea, picking it up to gain access to one of the larger pockets. Pulling out an air-tight plastic bag with several mixed vegetables in it, already pre-chopped but spotting another small baggie hidden behind.

It was definitely Murry's, made of the old worn material that was used back decades ago. Yet still very durable. They really didn't make them like they used to, as he opened it to find several small things to help out. An extra compass, some extra jerky for the trip home, the map he was drawing with a little note on it stating 'You Can Do This.'

It warmed Josea's heart, staring at it and smiling for quite some time before catching the vocals of birds getting... Closer? Soon after the hyena as well. "We're going to wait here for him to get back." A caw in protest. "Because I can't use a knife and cut off the meat into slices like he can. I'm also not going to eat our share of it and leave the rest to you." Another with a bit of flapping heard. "Because I don't regurgitate my meals to feed others." Some silence before a single vocal from the bird, without even looking Josea could picture the look of disapproval from the white one's muzzle. "It's a little weird, Gwual."

That made the young man chuckle in turn startling the bird who flew up to the tree branch, observing him leaving the tent from a safe distance, along with a few more blackbirds. The striped hyaena looking towards them and tossing her snout. "Big chickens." She snorted at the ravens, getting a few caws in protest. "He's bigger than me too, but you don't see me running to the nearest burrow. And I already told you he was friendly."

"You can...?" The young man looked between the two sets of animals, as well as spotting the rabbit at Zhiaxha's paws. "Understand them?" A slightly questionable look from those blue eyes, but one that didn't last very long.

"I keep forgetting that your kind can't. Consider it another 'blessing' from that tower, I suppose." A few caws from the birds making her grumble a bit, spading those ears. "If one could even consider it that. Also, they would like you to hurry up and take what you want. They want the leftovers."

"O-oh, okay." He took the hunt from the white one and got a clean knife out. "This is a surprisingly clean kill."

"Please don't compliment me in front of them." Zhia laid down. "Once they learn that, it's all they'll do in order to get me to hunt for them." She glared at the birds from the ground. "What they *should* be doing is befriending other wildlife like wolves, instead of relying on me like every other flock in these lands." A slightly confused look from the young man, one she didn't notice for a bit of time before she doubletaked. "They're great at spotting prey, but terrible at the actual hunting part. Hence why that was a good kill; they spotted it before I did."

One of the black birds flew down and landed on the hyena's back, not phasing her in the slightest. Though still a bit cautious about the human being so close, how relaxed she seemed to be around him helped. Hearing the raven release a small vocal directed towards Josea, getting the two to make eye contact... Only for the avian to peck at the hyena's black ear, causing it to flick and Zhia to grumble. "Gwual, Josea. Josea, Gwual." That made the man smile, but the bird took a small hop back.

"Pay no mind to that, it's just how they show they're happy." Zhia half yawned, getting a caw in question. "They show their teeth, yes." The yawn spread to Josea and the other birds, unable to help themselves. "I know it's weird and it sends mixed signals, but that's every species as a whole; they're all weird." She snorted, feeling the bird look at the man a bit longer before picking through her black mane. Making her groan. "Oh, here we go." Feeling the raven pull out a bit of dirt and toss it off to the side, getting the rest of the flock to join in; landing on her and begin grooming. Releasing another grumble while Josea attempted to hold back his chuckle. "This is what that expression meant, guys. 'Buttering me up'. Doing little favors for me in order to get me to do stuff for you." A snort, but one that didn't seem to frighten the black ones any.

"Are they working on making you look all pretty?" Josea teased the hyaena, getting a playful growl. "Just act like you don't need her, that's what I did to get her attention."

"Don't give them ideas." A laugh from the man, as she shifted her mane a little bit. Feeling the birds attempt to get a lot of little bits out of the furred coat, that is until Josea showed her the carcass. Getting

the attention of all of them.

"Is that enough for them?"

"Plenty." He sat it down closer, and the birds waited until his hand moved back and he moved away. Specifically to get into a better position to cook them, but the flock surrounded the leftover bounty. Getting themselves a share before one of them paused to look at the white one, bringing over a slice to the hyena. "It's yours, Gwual. I'm going to have some of his."

"Only after I get to give you belly rubs." Josea teased, getting a playful glare from her and a questionable look from the black bird.

"Pests. All of you." She snorted, and the raven went back to eating. Resting on her body as she waited for the food to cook. Cawing a bit in warning, making the man a bit concerned. "He's got it under control, don't worry. It's been here the entire time and hasn't spread, hasn't it?"

"What?" Josea asked.

"They're worried about your fire. They're not used to it." Another vocal in question from a different bird. "Yes, to you guys it is basically magic. To them, it's a necessity. They get sick if they don't burn their meat." That made the man chuckle as the avians made a few soft noises. "It is weird, yes. But it does taste better, whatever they do to it." Another question. "...Taste. You know, that thing that makes you determine if something is safe to eat or not?" There was a bit of silence as the other birds shared a look. "To be fair, I didn't know what it was until only recently, so."

There was a bit of silence as the avians watched Josea watch over the meats. Adding some spices to the strips and letting them simmer for a while before one of the birds lightly called. "I know he's burning them, but that's kind of the purpose. Let him work." The group of ravens watched him intently, clearly looking confused at the methods and making Josea chuckle. A little more when the hyena couldn't keep her tongue still.

"Does it smell good-?"

"It's basically torture." She answered really quickly, making him laugh. "And having patience is a really hard skill to develop." The hyena snorted. "I know you don't have a choice, but how do you do it." Zhia barely asked.

"Our only other option is to prepare ahead of time."

"But that can often result in food getting stolen." His expression saddened as he nodded.

"Yeah... Some people resort to that. Always have." Josea mumbled. "Have you...?"

"Ever encountered them? Yes." She stated, near blankly.

"...Did you...?"

"Are you sure you want to know the answer to that, Josea? They are your species after all." The hyaena asked a little thickly, catching his slightly curious look that appeared only for a moment. "What an interesting reaction..." A few noises in question from the flock of birds. "For a moment there, he didn't consider them human, if I'm reading that right." The young man exhaled quietly.

"...My grandfather keeps telling me not to think of bandits as people, no."

"Have you ever encountered any?" His face morphed into worry. "That means no." The white one rested her head on her paws, staying silent for a few moments. "...She had a hard time with it too."

"Your... First...?"

"She tried the same mentality; think of them as either animals or even... Hollows? The berserker ones. But she had a very hard time to cull anything that 'talks'." No response from him. "So I'll make you a deal, the same I made with her. If we ever encounter any, I'll take care of them so long as you don't try to stop me." A sad look from the man's eyes, feeling the gaze over her white furred body and making her meet them with a pair of near cold blue ones. "But you need to let me know ahead of time that you don't know them. Like any hunt; if you hesitate, it may cost you." He nodded faintly. "Can I trust you to let me know?" Zhiaxha asked thickly.

The young man knew what she was really asking though; was he able to give her permission to take the lives of other people. Likely learning from past mistakes. Once again, he nodded, slower but more visible this time. But the truth was, Josea was unsure if he was capable of making that decision. Turning the meats over to study their progress, feeling her gaze over him linger for a bit longer before being released. Satisfied with their state, he placed a few on a lid acting as a plate and served it to the white one.

Who surprisingly didn't move but did cause her nose to twitch a little, making Josea smile a bit. Then the ravens got curious, hopping down towards it. "I wouldn't if I were you guys." She grumbled, causing them to look rapidly between her, the meats, and the young man who was serving himself. Getting a caw in question from a few of them. "Well, one: it's mine and you've already had yours. Two: it's hot and will remain so for at least another minute. And three: are you sure you want to ruin the rest of your future meals after tasting this?" That made Josea chuckle.

"I'm flattered by your confidence in my cooking."

"I'm basically tasting it with my snout, so yes. Consider it a compliment." Zhia snorted a bit, raising her head to lick one for a taste. "Still too hot." A few calls from the birds, as if begging the hyena to let them have some. Making her ears spade. "Did you not listen to me? Who am I kidding, you won't stop until you try it. Alright, go ahead. Blow your minds and see what you've been missing. Just don't go around harassing people for their cooked meals, understand?" Some squawks. "No begging, no squawking, no pestering of any kind. Not to me, not to them, and **definitely** don't go attempting this on your own! I don't want to see a forest on fire caused by some birds who don't understand the proper way to make a campfire."

To the man's surprise, the black birds actually looked like they were pondering the situation and her advice. But as soon as one of them hopped closer, the others soon followed. Each taking a few pecks out of the cooked meats, trying to get a decent piece then study it. "Don't aim for the black parts. Try to get the meat inside." A few more attempts as one attempted to squawk a bit and hop back. "Of course it's hot, that's what throwing it over a fire does." The furred creature sassed.

Josea chuckled, hearing her snort as if they were her pups. One of them actually cawing rather positively. "Yes, it is good. I told you. Now you all have to live with my torment that is going without until you can convince one of these weirdos to give you another fix." They all just looked at her while the hyena's ears spaded. "I'm eating now, move." They began calling in protest, almost playfully as she began taking a strip and keeping it in her maw. Slowly chewing it while enjoying the flavor, not caring that the birds are attempting to take whatever they can out of the remaining strips.

"Are you sure you're okay enough to be walking?" Zhiaxha half asked the man, carrying quite a bit of items now with the crossbow and some of the pots. "Do you really need all that with you?"

"I'll be fine, but thanks for your concern." He missed the hyena's double take, but her questionable look didn't last long. Only morphing into concern as the man pushed himself. "I was hoping to find someone around by now. Makes me worried that..."

"If they kept with this direction..." She mumbled taking a few sniffs on the ground. "I don't smell a lot of Hollows, so odds are they did not take the same path as your group."

"Can you smell them?" A nod from the white one, at least giving him some relief as they walked in silence. "Zhia?" A noise in question, one of slight annoyance. "What... Don't take this the wrong way-"

"Oh geez, here it comes." She lightly tossed her snout, making him smile sadly.

"What do you plan to do after I make it back to the bunker?" That time her black ears went back and she attempted to stare him down. Noticing just how immune or comfortable he was getting with that look as he met it with a smile. "That's taking it the wrong way." A low grumble from the creature. "I'm not asking you to live there. You're more than welcome if you ever want a safe place to be, but I-"

"I don't like humans, Josea."

"I know, I know." He softly said. "But what are your plans? What are your goals? Are you searching for something? Someone?" The look in her blue eyes saddened as she looked off into the distance. "Right..."

"Everyone I want to be with is dead, Josea. I'm not searching for them or some... I don't know. All I've been doing is wandering, surviving. Much like everybody else." The man nodded sadly, even though she didn't see it. "Though there is something I want."

"What's that?"

"After I got out of that damn place and learned more about this world... Finding out that I can survive rather easily in it, I was able to think about that question. Thanks to her..."

"Your first...?" A slow nod from the hyena as her eyes once again came into view; looking straight forwards and filled with anger. And he could piece it together right there.

"She gave me the same questions, and after I lost her, I thought about what I wanted, why I've been wandering around." He remained quiet. "You don't want any part in it, Josea. I'm a lot stronger than when I first escaped... As soon as I finally find that damn field of steel towers in the distance, I'm going for them."

"...You want Revenge."

"I want to make sure those bastards can't do this to anyone else. I want answers as to why he gave me... Sentience. And why he sacrificed my family to do it." A heavy breath from her. "Even if it terrifies me; the idea of going back into that nightmare... I want to destroy that place."

"Zhiaxha..."

"Even if it kills me." A heated exhale from her muzzle. "Right now, it's the only thing I'm really living for; to search for that place." The man slowed to a stop, and after a few steps so did the white one. "And no, you can't come." She snorted. "It'll be hard enough to take care of myself, I don't want to fall short attempting to keep you alive too." The hyena looked back at him coldly. "I'm taking you to your... Bunkbed or whatever, and then I'll wander around down there for a... What." She barely asked, noticing his rather guilty stare. Causing the black mane to begin rising along her back in anger. "Do not tell me that the place you're living in-"

"It isn't." Josea answered rather quickly. Feeling those blue discs study him for several moments before finally concluding he was telling the truth. "But..."

"But what." She watched him exhale heavily, almost in guilt. "Josea."

"You can see the city from there." Her expression morphed into one that was of disbelief.

"...That city from your story...?"

"Was likely the one you're... That you've..." The young man admitted. "It is possible that it isn't the right one, but..." Her gaze moved towards where they were going, studying it from afar and not moving when those ears heard him approach. Leaning down to place a hand on her shoulders, though in the process dropping his tent. Causing the two to look at it momentarily but ignore it. "Are... Are you sure

that's what you want?" A long stare, but eventually the white one broke eye contact and sighed.

"It has to be, hasn't it?" Zhia grumbled. "I was led to you for a reason, I stuck around you for a reason..."

"Led?" He questioned, getting her to release a quiet breath. "Zhia?"

"It's... Nothing, Josea. Nevermind." A few pets but he didn't pry. Only picking up the tent that fell and put it onto his shoulders once again as the hyena watched him. Continuing to lead the way, but stopped and met her gaze when the white one didn't move. "You're really going to let me do this." It was barely a question. "No tricks, no deception?"

"Zhiaxha..." He mumbled quietly. "It is your life. As much as I'd like to be more part of it more... I'm not going to keep you from what you want." He opened a hand, beckoning the white creature beside him. "Do you trust me?"

For a few moments, Zhia just stared at him, as if trying to sense his motive. Ears twitching on occasion, yet no vocals or sounds were heard. Though her blue gaze was still a bit stern, there was a bit of a fracture within them, a fissure of guilt. Taking a breath and walking up beside Josea before looking at him again. "...I trust you."

His groans got a little bit louder than he meant to, as Josea pulled with all his low-tier weight on the mechanism of his tent. Hoping it didn't once again collapse on him while he was inside, hearing the little crank within the center-ceiling of it almost tick off and finally click. Indicating it was locked in place and allowing him to let go and hit the ground with a bit of a thud. Releasing a sigh of relief. "You okay?"

"Y-yep! We got it." The young man quietly called, hearing her walk around the makeshift shelter from the back. "Thank you for your help. Was sooo much easier with you."

"That back peg sure was picky, that's for sure." She snorted a little, looking inside with a bit of caution. "And your plan is to... Sleep in this?"

"You never slept in a tent before?"

"She had one, but nothing like this." Zhiaxha mumbled, slightly impressed with the makeshift structure and its curved shape. "She only used it in emergencies, and I only got to sleep in it once. We often switched between caves and old shelters out in the woods instead. Cabins, vacation spots, that's what she called them."

"There's not too many of them left that are secure." Josea mumbled, seeing her nod in agreement in the low light of dusk. Taking a moment before entering the tent and almost flinching at every 'crunch' the thick fabric of its floor made, making him smile. "I spent a lot of time in this tent, until I got my own."

"This wasn't yours?" The hyena questioned, laying down beside him and resting her upper half on his belly. Almost as if asking for pets and instantly getting them.

"It was my grandfather's first, he's had it for nearly forty years."

"That's a long time."

"Yeah. But after he gave me one for my birthday and realized what a piece of garbage it was; no insulation, no support off the ground. He even broke it just trying to set it up, after seeing me struggle with it. First time he ever swore around me, he did well to keep it clean until I was 14." The man chuckled, shifting around his brown hair. "I spent that week inside this one with him, and my mother took it the wroooooong way. Thinking that he did something..." Those black ears perked at him.

"Did what?"

"She got it in her head somehow that my grandfather was.... Molesting me? I'm honestly not sure where such an idea came from, likely one of her gossiping neighbors. Regardless, she demanded I have a separate tent, and my grandpa went out and spent a lot of money on a really heavy duty one." A sigh from the young man. "And he still said this one was better overall, however... He gave this tent to me. Sadly when I had to start working for the summers, so I couldn't really get the time to use it."

"I can't say I'm following everything you're saying. Your society, especially before the... 'Fall' or whatever, is still completely new to me." The white one half mumbled, purring a bit at his pets. Making Josea chuckle a bit.

"That's okay. But I always knew where it was. And after that night in the dumpster, I went back for

what I could carry... I can't say this was on the top of my list, but."

"It means something to you." Another low mumble, one that was a bit sad. "Even if you can barely set it up by yourself." That made him chuckle. "I still think I'd rather sleep outside. I don't like being in closed spaces."

"That's okay. I got a sleeping bag with me this time, so I won't catch hypothermia tonight." The young man teased her perking ears, seeing them scan the opened exit to the tent. "Something wrong?"

"Do you hear that?" It took him a moment to listen before hearing howls, ones of the Hollows. "...There's a lot of them out there." A few taps as he started to get up, causing her to get off of Josea's body and lead the way outside the tent for a better listen. Getting the chain of howls as the sun was going down, ones that were... Much more aggressive than the night before. "Sounds like they found..." She went to share a look with him, but only discovered his face painted with fear.

"That's towards the Bunker..." He barely whispered, only to grab his bow, quiver and take off running.

"What the hell!?" She growled, chasing after him and catching up with relative ease. Especially since the effects of his ankle were soon hitting him to the point of nearly hobbling. "What exactly is your plan here? Going to outrun them so you get to your home first and-what? Warn them?"

"I've got to do something!" He wheezed out, getting a growl from her.

"You've got to be quiet, for one. If you get their attention you won't be much help to them." Zhia snorted, making him slow down and rest on the ground. Getting off his ankle and shaking his head in slight defeat. "Running headstrong won't do much, if anything at all. For you or for them."

"But I've...!" Josea whispered, interrupted by another howl in the distance that got both of their attentions. Making him exhale heavily, and soon get a nudge in his chest from the hyena's snout. Causing the man to look into her surprisingly calm and directed eyes.

"What am I missing here?" She barely asked. "You're calling this a Bunker, I assume it's heavily fortified."

"Yes, but..." She half looked at him in question, waiting for an answer. "It's almost dusk. The runners will be back soon and they might run straight into that-" Another near uproar in the distance, actually concerning the white one too. "And its possible the front door might not hold against that many." The

hyaena took another look in the distance and grumbled a bit.

"We'll take a look from afar, but it will be dark very soon." She half scolded. "If you get spotted by them, it'll be the end of you, Josea." He gave a bit of a sad look while she turned towards the howls and moved quietly towards them. "Stay low. I'm honestly not sure what you expect to do, unless you have some of those noisemaker things."

"Noise makers?" The young man asked, moving forwards and finally realizing just how much stress he put on his ankle just now.

"I don't remember what she called them. But they were this small mess of red tubes and fuses- whatever those are." Zhiaxha snorted. "I just remember she lit them on fire and then threw them, and they made-"

"Firecrackers?" She gave him an odd look.

"Maybe. All I know is that they made one hell of a noise, no wonder it made the Hollows furious." A snort, making Josea smile through his panicked mood.

"Sadly, we give most of the noisemakers to our runners. They encounter Hollows a lot more than we scouts do-" Josea whispered, getting interrupted by another howl that made his core worry. Moving quietly as they came up to a hilltop, barely seeing the gardens up ahead with many bodies moving around within. Some at the Bunker's gate, as if observing it. Like an animal being able to smell something inside. "No..."

"That is... Probably that horde from last night." She grumbled in a whisper, staying low to the ground and double taking when he pulled out the bow. "What the hell are you doing!?" She attempted to be as quiet as possible.

"I can't just sit around, I need to do something! I'm the only one who can here!" He got a growl in disapproval.

"Even if you did make perfect killshots with that thing, you don't have enough ammo to deal with them all." A snort, a bit louder than she meant. Immediately catching her muzzle and exhaling in frustration. "Between your dumbass bravery and my anger, we're going to get ourselves killed..."

"But I've-"

"*Got to do something*, I know!" Zhia sassed, squeezing her eyes shut and exhaling a wave of heat. "Fine... Fine, fine! I'll distract them." She started moving off to the side.

"W-what!? No-"

"Well, it's not like you can do it! Even if you weren't affected by their voices, you can't move fast enough to get away!" She hissed, spotting his hurt gaze and exhaling. "Just... Get yourself back in there when you see the opportunity, okay?"

"Zhia..."

"But do me a favor, Josea." He didn't answer and she didn't look at the young man. "Don't tell them about me. Don't tell them anything about me, understand?" He attempted to move closer, but the first sounds of the grass moving, the hyena took off. Going into the nearby woods and making her way around the other side, his vision lost track of her white color as it moved out to the landscape. The city walls, the many buildings in the distant view... And the skyscrapers. One of them likely being the tower that she mentioned, the one Zhiaxha was searching for.

A foreboding feeling overtook Josea as he stared at it, feeling empty as he'll never see the Ghost again. Stuck frozen until he heard a bestial roar in the distance, nearly splitting the sky in two and striking fear into his heart. Finding himself actually shaking as his heavy heart raced, unable to hear much over its beats while the rest of his sense kicked up a notch. His eyes scanning for any dangers, but all he seen were the Hollows slightly stunned... Only for a moment. Before taking off towards the behemoth that beckoned them, screaming in a battlecry as the roar was heard again.

Vibrations were felt in the ground from its vocals, but it got the attention of all the humanoids in front of the Bunker. Giving Josea the opportunity to move in, getting up and unable to keep himself into a stealthy mindset. Just sprinting and ignoring the pain in his ankle, it could break for all he cared. All he needed to do was get inside! He'll be safe inside!

On his way through the gardens Josea could hear the sounds of a slaughter from afar. Screams of rage interrupted by the violence of torn flesh and muscle. Bones snapping and intense growling- nothing that sounded familiar to him! Nearly making him sick as he struggled towards the large vault-like door. Banging his fist against it and shouting. "Hey!! It's Josea!! Let me in!!"

No response. He attempted again, still enthralled by the panic. "Hey!!" Only for that fear to finally begin to dwindle, able to think clearly. No matter how much he shouted, they wouldn't hear him. The damn thing was so thick it was basically soundproof. What did his grandfather do- what did the runners

do!? Looking around in a panic as the violence began to get closer! Spotting a panel off to the side and doing his best to pry it open with his bare hands, aching his fingertips and nails, but he got it opened!

A series of strings! The code-the code-the code-! 1... 55... 6872! Pulling each of the 9 available strings in a sequence, as if dialing a number. Hoping the bells inside were still working. Looking down at the one-way window attempting to see through it but there was no way. Instead... Seeing a figure behind him.

The humanoid screeched loudly, alerting the young man's presence to the others before jumping at Josea! Barely getting his PVC pipe bow inbetween himself and the Hollow as he was knocked onto the ground! Feeling claws and scrapes against his clothing and bare skin as the creature attempted to maul him! Struggling to get his knee in between them, attempting to shift the creature's balance off as his arm strength began to fade! Inching those rotting teeth closer and closer to his neck as another dark figure leapt at him-!

Only to hear the Hollow get impaled through the chest, a squirt of gore was felt spraying against his own clothed torso. Adding more weight to the creature before being pulled off of the young man and torn completely apart by a large red beast... One that was now staring the prone Josea down...

Chapter 11

"***What are you doing!?***" The monster before the young man roared, once again striking fear through his heart. "***GET INSIDE-!***" A few Hollows jumped on its back, instantly grabbing its attention as it once again began tearing through the horde. Stunning Josea for several moments as the sounds of violence mixed with growls and screeches layered the gardens.

Another loud roar vibrated through Josea. Feeling his heart race and finding himself still gripping on

that homemade bow, the man got up. Suddenly getting some courage and taking an arrow from his quiver! Lining up a shot as a Hollow leapt at the 'werewolf'!

And getting it in the body. It wasn't enough to cull the thing, but to knock it off course enough. Hearing the beast snarl, glance at him with a familiar blue glow in its eyes as it continued its rampage. Cleaving its claws through the scrawny bodies with ease, slamming into them with immense impacts that nearly caused shockwaves. All while Josea took shot after shot, trying not to aim for the Hollow's heads, but instead their limbs; if he killed one he would be useless. A liability. But at least like this he could set up culls for the monster. Even if he was missing every three shots or so.

The latches from the large door behind him were heard as the hinges began to squeak open. Causing him to sidestep in view of the open vault, but he continued to fire shot after shot. Never being more focused in his life- only for that flow to be broken when he ran out of ammunition. "Get in!" The voice of the guard got his attention, early pulling on his jacket as Josea grabbed the woman's wrist.

"Get me another quiver!"

"Are you fucking nuts!? Get in here-!!"

"Do it!!" The young man commanded, letting go of her limb and tossing his empty one off to the side. Quickly grabbing and clipping in the new one as he took three arrows, firing them off one after the other! Sniping Hollows in their legs and knees, piercing their palms as they were going in for a scratch! Delaying them just enough for the beast to crush their heads in.

All of a sudden, everything went quiet. Aside from the heavy huffing of the monster before them and the young man's own heaves. His courage subsiding and slipping back into fear as he stared at the beast a dozen yards away... Now seeing the familiar black stripes along its white back, taking a moment before looking back at him. Half revealing her side to her front; absolutely soaked with a deep red. No wonder Josea didn't recognize her... But now it made sense. 'The Monster Made From Her Corpse.'

The guard at the door began to slowly peer her head out of the shelter, nearly whimpering when she saw the nearly 9ft tall were-hyena. Receiving a growl from the extra pair of eyes, causing her black ears to spade backwards as she gestured with a paw. Flicking the tattered gore off of it while speaking to the young man in a surprisingly deeper voice. "Go." Only to find him staring at her for a few moments. "You're safe now. Go home." Only to watch him hand the bow to the guard, who double taked at it before actually holding onto it. Then watching in near horror as the once scrawny weak kid she new started walking up to the monster. Tossing its black snout up in the air in frustration. "Damnit, Josea!" It growled, making him chuckle.

"Are you... Okay?" He attempted to not step in the... Let's call it a 'mess'. And pretty much failing to do so getting closer. Hearing the 'white' one growl a bit at his concern. "I never knew-"

"There's a reason why I didn't want people to know." She grumbled, but there was a bit of sadness in her voice. "The irony is, people tend to feel more attracted to me like this. Instead of, y'know, *running away*." She glared at him. "...*Into their shelters*." She led on, the irritation in her vocals making him chuckle. Growling when he came close as the young man hugged her... Waist. Getting her to groan. "...I hate humans." A small laugh from Josea.

"Thank you, for everything Stripes-"

"Don't you dare call me that in front of a witness." Another growl, more irritated that he wasn't taking her threats more serious, giving the hyena's current state. Releasing a grumbling exhale, she grabbed the back of his coat and lifted him up. Casually walking up to the door of the vault and opening it slowly, creating caution in the female guard witnessing such a thing up close. "I believe this is yours." Zhiaxha set the young man back on the ground. "I have returned it to you. Put it on a leash or something-" Her grumble was cut short as those ears perked up and her nose sniffed a little bit.

"Stripes?" Josea asked, a little worried before watching the were-hyena lean her head into the doorway, confirming what she was smelling was coming inside! Squeezing her way through the doorway as the young man attempted to hold her back. "Whoa-whoa-whoa-!"

A small shove to the guard as the large beast rushed down the hallway. Coming to an intersection and spending a few precious moments catching the scent while Josea chased after her! "Zhia!" Causing a commotion and startling the residents in the bunker who began taking up arms. Easily detecting the heavy footsteps as she ran down the halls, sliding to a stop when she lost the trail and moved back into a rather large room; the meal hall. "Oh no." Watching her attempt to squeeze through around the counter and into the kitchen as he vaulted over it- still behind her. "Zhiaxha-!?"

"Do you seriously have it here!?" She started smelling the grills, waste cans, and counter areas.

"What? What has gotten into you?"

"That scent! I know it... Some kind of sauce!"

"Sauce?"

"Your kind...! It puts it on thick meat-steak? Steak sauce!?" She nearly growled as her head hit the ceiling. Causing her to crouch and grumble at the tight space.

"Steak sauce...?" Josea pondered, looking through the cupboards and pulling out a bottle of 'A1 Steak Sauce'. Taking off the lid and letting her smell it from afar- instantly getting that tail to wag.

"YES!" She nearly pounced on him, pinning the man against the counter and once again banging her head, this time against the cabinets. Growling a bit in frustration. "You will give this to me!"

"E-easy, girl."

"No sweet talking! I've been searching for this stuff for months! I need it! I need-" Her thoughts were interrupted by the young man's whimper, clearly not from her threats but something off to the side? Following his gaze towards pretty much the entire bunker crowded outside the only exits to the kitchen, all attempting to look at the two. Causing her ears to fall down as she was towering over the young man half her size, covered in... 'red'.

"...So, I found a friend while I was out." Josea stated to the alerted citizens, getting the hyena to grumble at him a little bit.

"This is humiliating." The hyena grumbled, stuck in a large bathtub but now back to her feral dog size. Getting scrubbed down with a powerful soap, creating a lot of stings along her body from all the recent cuts.

"Well, it's required." Josea informed her. "Especially considering how... 'Painted' you became from that." A growl from her as she attempted to snap at a nearby bubble and instantly regretted it. "Besides you are getting rewarded-"

"I know, I know. And it takes time, but this is torture." She grumbled, trying not to show how good the brushing was feeling against her coat.

"It's not that bad." A growl from Zhiaxha as she glared at the man, her ears back while the little girl came into view, tending to the creature's other side. "That was your fault." Josea chuckled, making the girl do the same. "You spoke in front of everyone, you can't blame me for wanting to keep that a secret."

"I can try." Zhia snorted.

"I can't believe you found a dog outside, Josie." Natalie chimed in, doing her best to scrub down the thick black and white fur. "Let alone one that could talk! I thought they all went extinct."

"*Josie?*" The furred one quoted and questioned Josea, making him roll his eyes quickly.

"Please don't call me that."

"If you stop telling people my name is Stripes, then deal." She quickly looked back at the child. "And I'm not a dog." Then back to the man. "And you knew of dogs that could talk?"

"What? Oh, no no no. That's just a misunderstanding." Those blue eyes didn't let off him. "People used to use dogs to help warn against dangers of all kinds, while also keeping them as pets or guards due to their loud barks." Those ears spaded. "I know, I know. But to be fair, I think dogs usually came to us first, in terms of history." Another snort, causing bubbles to fly up.

"If you're not a dog, what are you?"

"Zhiaxha's a Hyena, Natalie."

"Isn't that just a dog from the south?" A grumble made the child giggle a bit. Causing that blue gaze to gaze at her.

"You have no idea how common that assumption is."

"He thought the same thing, didn't he-?"

"No I didn't." The two females looked at him, glaring a little unimpressed as he cleared his throat. "I think we're just about done here, Natalie. Can you go check on her meal? See if it's ready?"

"Okay." A few pets against the hyena's neck first before the girl went to wash her hands. Then headed out, Josea following her and shutting the door. Looking out the foggy window to make sure the bathing and shower room was unwatched before returning to the white one's side. Seeing her stare at the dirty water; heavily dyed red. Watching him pull the plug to drain it out.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. They sting, but I'm not entirely new to the concept of soap." She grumbled, sharing a gaze with his rather serious and saddened expression. Making Zhia sigh quietly and a bit heavily as her gaze fell. "I don't know, Josea... I'm trying to be."

"You're safe here-"

"From who or what?" The white one snapped coldly, though in a whisper. Taking a few breaths. "You say I'm safe but all I see here is danger and entrapment..." He frowned as her ears went back, but a bit low. "I'm not blaming you, it was my damn addictive hunger that threw me into this cage. Right now, all my mind can think about is a way out of it."

"You can leave anytime-"

"Even if it's through you?" Those blue eyes stared at him thickly, almost on the verge of crying. "I don't like small spaces, Josea, and I'm not sure-"

"Hey, hey... It's okay... One night, alright? Then you can head out. I'll personally escort you, because I gotta find them." That gaze fell again, closing to take a stressed breath. "You don't have to come with me, but we're both leaving this place together. I promise." The young man led her on where to step to get out of the large tub and onto a nearby towel on the ground. Beginning the process of scrubbing her down as she leaned against him, almost requesting a comforting hug and Josea wrapped her in the towel before embracing the white one.

"...I trust you." She whispered, making him smile.

"Trust me enough to-?"

"No." That made him chuckle. "No shots."

"Please?" A growl. "Zhiaxha, it can take days before tetanus symptoms can be detected, sometimes weeks. It's a single needle that could save your life."

"You don't know that I have it-"

"That's the point. And if you don't, fine. No harm done."

"So you think." She growled, getting a few gentle pets around her neck.

"It's almost never too late to get the shot, but I don't want you to suffer." Her ears went flat against her head, pointing backwards. "And there's no promising that if the pains set in you'll be even willing to come back here for the cure. Knowing you-"

"I'd rather just..." A heavy sigh from the furred one.

"I can give you the needle personally. I'll suck at it, I'm warning you now that it might sting. I might end up missing the correct place to even stab you with it a few dozen times." A growl from her. "But I worry that whoever left that bear trap... For how long its been there..." Another long growl that morphed into a grumble. "Please?"

"...On two conditions." The hyena growled, catching his nod to tell he was listening. "You warn everyone here that if I don't get to leave when I want to, I will break down these very walls that protect you. And tear anyone who gets in my way in half."

"S-sounds about right." He swallowed loudly. "And the second?"

"You don't leave my side."

Chapter 12

"The one place to bring me to wait, and its the torture room." The white one grumbled loudly, making Josea chuckle as she rested her head on the meal hall table.

"It's called a cafeteria, I think. Some people call it a dining room as well-"

"Well, its basically torture when you can smell your food cooking."

"Especially with that sauce-?"

"*Especiallly* with that special sauce...!" A quiet laugh as he pet Zhia's mane, watching her ears flick and hearing her grumble a lot. "And these damn things don't help."

"It'll save your hearing while inside here." He said, feeling his own makeshift earplugs. Only nullifying some of the sound instead of actually reducing a large portion of it. "You get used to them being in, but they really help when other people are awake. Though you'll need special ones for around the smithy area."

"You say that as if I'm going to stay here." A growl from her, morphing his smile into a more saddened one. Exhaling through her muzzle afterwards, but every breath nearly made her whimper... Only to get that pre-emptive feeling again, making her fur slightly raise. "Oh, here we go-"

"How... Did you do that?" Her blue gaze glared at Josea, seeing his eyes looking through the wall to what she assumed was the front of the bunker. Returning to meet the hyena's very unimpressed, almost irritated gaze, and chuckle at her. "It'll get your mind off of the food while it is being prepared." She flopped her head on the table again, closing her eyes, and he shrugged. Accepting that as an answer.

"...I barely know." A noise in question from him. "It's not uncontrollable, I can will it, but it hurts like hell."

"I imagine..."

"But, like with everything... After I escaped..."

"You had the ability to become a werehyena?" A half angry look from her, but one that held a little bit of pain as well. "...She called it that too?"

"Yeah... And she was a *looooot* more terrified than you were of it." Another deep inhale from the white one. "She called it something at first, a... Ly-something?"

"Lycanthrope?"

"I think so. But also said it didn't fit. Like you, she had a hard time with the whole 'Hyenas not being Canines' thing."

"And in our language- well one of them, Lycan basically means wolf." She nodded at Josea, agreeing with him. "So, did she call you something else?"

"...Ajaba. Another term I don't even know, and I specifically didn't want it to be a name. But she stated it was kind of like a reverse were-hyena; whereas usually it's a human turning into a 'monster', it's the hyena shifting into..."

"I imagine that's what a lot of people thought it was." Josea mumbled a bit sadly getting a cold look from the white one.

"Including you?" She barely asked.

"Only because I didn't recognize who it was, Zhiaxha. And that roar..." He whimpered a bit. "It terrified me at first, I'm not going to lie."

"Which resulted in you blowing your cover and me having to save your tail." The white one snorted, making him smile. "...I... Half understood though."

"Hmm?"

"Why you were afraid." Zhiaxha mumbled, half looking away. "Never got that close to her while I was in that... Warrior form, as the natives call it. I never really realized just how... Large it was. How easy it was to look down on you, whereas I'm so used to your kind looking down on me." She looked at Josea. "You may not be the tallest, but you're still... Tall. Larger than most of us, save for maybe a bear or a bison." Another breath as she closed her eyes again. "I seen my reflection once while I was in it... That's all I needed to realize just how..."

"Is that why you're being hunted?" The young man asked in a whisper, getting her to raise an eyebrow and look at him. "The crossbow you 'found'. That was from a hunter, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Why was he after you?"

"You humans need a reason?" She snorted. "From what I could tell it's anything; be it for food, wealth, trophy kills." The hyena grumbled coldly as he gave a sad look. "Yeah, I've stayed in enough cabins to realize just how sick your kind is. Having the heads of animals mounted on walls, using their pelts for decor." A heated exhale through her muzzle as she returned her head on the table, resting it. "Considering how rare my coat color seems to be, let alone my species in this place is, that seems to be enough of a reason to try to hunt me."

"...I could make an argument for why it would be better for you to stay here-"

"Josea-"

"But I won't." It opened her eyes slightly, but they were looking away. "Just know that you're safe here."

"...Maybe with you. But what happens when someone else decides otherwise?" Zhia grumbled quietly, spotting the cook come around and instantly perking her ears up. Seeing the two plates and raising her head in curiosity. Hearing Josea chuckle and lightly growling at his reaction as the cook came around. Surprisingly friendly to her, considering how much she dirtied the kitchen with her... Tracks earlier.

"Here ya go, lass." The cook slid the hot meal towards the hyena, adjusting herself and attempting to sit awkwardly on the chair. "Our last two steaks from the freezer, I made it the best I could for ya. And Josea for a return home." He slid another one towards the younger man.

"Thank you, Chris!" He nearly chirped in response, his own mouth watering at the second to last remaining steak they had in stock. The first being offered to the white creature, who only looked at her own meal in awe.

"You deserve it, Josie! For what you've done for us." Though still quite curious about the talking animal, the older cook returned back into the kitchen. Leaving the two alone in the large room for some privacy with their meals. Josea looked over Zhia and gave her a gentle pet.

"Does it look good?"

"Amazing." She nearly purred. "I have been waiting for this moment for as long as I can remember. I

convinced myself that there was nothing left, and I'd never taste it again." A chuckle from the young man made her ears go back. "I'm serious! This is the best thing I ever found in my life!"

"It's just steak sauce-"

"It's a gift from whatever this thing is you guys call a God!" That made him laugh, beginning to eat while she took a breath and gave the meal her very first lick. Making contact with that flavor and nearly whimpering in bliss at such a thing. Just taking a moment to close her eyes and nearly fall out of her chair as it danced along her tongue, eventually snapping the hyena out of its trance. Only to double take at the man's stare.

"...It's just steak sauce-"

"-It is **EXISTENCE!**" Zhia growled at his laugh. "How do you not build a religion around it!? How is it not used as a currency or worshiped as an art!?" Another gentle lick to repeat the entire process, barely noticing a woman come inside and near the table.

"Just remember to finish it before it gets cold." Josea teased, greeting the newcomer with a wave; the woman from the morning before. "Hey, Ms. Brooks."

"Glad you made it back, Josea. You really helped us tonight."

"It was Zhiaxha's idea. I'm just the one who messed it up." He chuckled, getting a rather surprised look from the human female. Looking over at the white hyaena who was still locked in her taste-trance. "...Usually she's more uh... J-just treat her like a person in a dog's body-"

"Not a canine-"

"Hyena's body." Josea corrected himself, making Brooks shake her head.

"I hope the meals are good."

"They are, and if she could talk right now she would probably praise it like the sun." A little bit of a grumble from the white one that made the man chuckle. Taking a bite out of his own meal. "It is delicious though. I'm not sure how Chris ever learned how to cook this well."

"Experience. That's what he did before the Fall." The woman replied, looking over the strange creature from afar. "Life will get better though."

"I'll get back to that, but first..." She met his sad gaze.

"Murry?" A faint nod from Josea.

"Vicky told me that they attempted to get in, but the horde just came too close."

"Yes. Before Daph could get the door opened, they were too close. She tried anyway and it got the Hollow's attention... Murry didn't want to be pinned down, so he stayed outside the Bunker and went off somewhere. We couldn't communicate, and just assumed that you were with him."

"I..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Ended up falling through the roof of a cave, spraining my ankle in the process." A blank stare from the other woman as the hyena swallowed her first bite.

"And that's just the start of his problems." Josea chuckled at Zhia's comment, giving her a pet on the shoulder and receiving a growl. "Not while I'm eating this."

"Fair enough." The man returned to Brooks. "But yeah, I got separated, the horde was making their way to where we set up camp. I told Kurt to go on without me and..."

"Murry would find a way back to you." Josea nodded. "Odds are, he expected you to stay put, but I'm guessing..." She glanced over at the hyena.

"Yeah... She walked into a bear trap shortly after my accident, one that happened to be in the same cave. Which reminds me, I'd like to get her a tetanus shot." A double take from the woman. "I couldn't tell how old the trap was, it wasn't one of ours. But I'd like to be safe-"

"Sure thing." Brooks answered quickly, surprising the young man.

"I... Was expecting more of a struggle, considering stock limitations."

"We can get more. There have been sellers around." Her gaze once again moved towards the hyena. "So that's where you met this white golden nugget?" A bit of a grumble that was buried under a purr as Zhia continued to eat.

"Yeah. Zhia's a bit of a strange one, but we've helped each other out ever since. Her more than me."

"As expected." Ms. Brooks lightly teased. "We'll send someone out to find Murry and the others, don't worry."

"I'm going in the morning." A look of disapproval from the older woman. "I need to find him-"

"You need to rest, Josea. And you need your ankle to heal up." The man sighed at her. "Murry knows what he's doing, he knows how to survive. He'll track you back here and be back within a day, don't worry." A disappointed gaze at his meal as she tapped the table. "Eat up. Head to the med bay when you're done." A bit of a sad look as the woman got up and left the room, leaving Josea to look back at his own meal and... Feel something was off. And it wasn't the gaze of the white one on him, meeting it with his own blue eyes.

"Do you want me to search for him out there?" The young man didn't answer, but she nodded. "I'll see what I can do, Josea. What did he look like?"

"I will never love like that again." The hyena half whimpered, making Josea chuckle. "But it was *sooooo* good..."

"You could always come back." A grumble at such an offer. "Even if it's just for a meal. You just have to make the kill for us."

"That's a lot easier on me. Considering for the most part one of you just need to carry around that bottle." The two passed several people, all getting ready for bed. Smiling at them and waving as they made their way to the medical bay. Spotting the white one slowing to a stop as her fur lightly puffed out.

"Is something wrong?"

"...Something feels off." She mumbled quietly, looking back and around as most of the lights in the hallway were shutting off. Leaving some for those still around. "I can't shake off the feeling that-" He leaned down and placed a hand on the back of her neck.

"Hey... Relax. You're safe here." He softly said, getting an uncomfortable grumble from the hyena.

"Come on. One shot, then I'll show you to our private room. From there, we just sleep until morning, have some breakfast." A deep inhale from the female, trying not to get too excited about breakfast, making him chuckle. "Then we'll go out. Even if I can't follow you too far." A deep inhale from the white one as she took a moment to nod. "You'll be fine, Zhiaxha. I promise. It'll maybe sting a little, but you've shrugged off worse."

"You don't know the half of it." The hyaena snorted, following him inside and once again getting those intense feelings. Spotting the woman from before setting some things up on the other side of the room, most of which seemed to be for Josea instead.

"Tell you what, I'll go first. That way you won't feel so bad about acting like a baby around needles." He teased, getting a bit of a growl from the animal as he directed her to jump on top of a bed.

"Trust me," Brooks added in. "You haven't seen baby until you've seen Josie here squirm from a cut."

"I'm not that bad!" She came over with a cotton ball, slightly wet with something.

"Take off that bandage on your wrist." A bit of an awkward look from the young man that kinda morphed into sorrow. But undoing the dressing and showing the cut across the flesh, and looking guilty about the wound.

"He killed his first Hollow." Zhiaxha stated rather bluntly, getting the attention of the woman before returning her gaze back to Josea.

"...So you now know why we don't talk about them."

"Yeah..." He mumbled sadly, not expecting the cotton ball to be pressed against the open wound and he hissed. "Ow! Ow-wow-wow-wow-wow-wow-ow!" Brooks made another look at the white one.

"See what I mean?"

"I can't help it if it stings! I'm sensitive, sue me." He grumbled, feeling the soft ball move from small cut to small cut. Each less painful than the previous. "I think that's all of them."

"How's your ankle?"

"Getting better. The swelling's gone down too." A nod as the woman got up.

"The little ones should be fine, but I want to get a new bandage for your cut there. In the meantime, give your companion there her shot. I've set it up for you." Josea nodded as he was gestured to the tray. Taking a hold of the filled needle and giving the very nervous looking hyena a few pets.

"Try to relax, okay? It's just a shot, in and out-"

"Just do it so we can get out of here, Josie." That made him smile sadly.

"It'll be over before you know it." He whispered as he jabbed it in her neck. Pressing in the plunger and pulling the thing out. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" All he heard was the white one exhale loudly and get off the bed. Turning around to place the needle back to be clean. "I'll show you to our room in a moment."

"Yeah, let me get this bandage on you first." Josea nodded, surrendering his arm to Ms. Brooks and feeling her tightly dress it. Making it rather difficult to move, but safe. "That took longer than I thought."

"What did?" He asked, soon hearing those claws slide against the floor awkwardly. Spotting the hyena begin to pant a little and swagger. "Zhia? Zhia!"

"Get away from me!" She growled, sliding up against the wall but still trying to exit the room. The sluggish movements didn't stop her from struggling as he attempted to help the white one stand up, only for Zhiaxha to bite his hand a bit hard. It hurt, but her jaw strength soon grew weak, allowing him to pull away and step back. "I... This is what I get..." She half hissed, slurring her speech while slipping on the smooth flooring. "For... Trusting you and your... Damn..." Only to completely collapse, leaving the man staring at her in a shock, neverminding his bleeding hand.

"What the hell happened!?" Josea nearly hissed, checking the white one's vitals and soon recalling Brooks' remark earlier. "What did you do!?"

"I just sedated her." A look in disbelief from the young man. "Well, technically you did. I just filled the shot."

"Why!?" His voice was getting louder.

"Calm down, Josea. This is a good thing." She stated, once again in her stoic ways. Gesturing his hand. "Let me tend to that too while you're here."

"But why did you...?" A half blank, half unimpressed look from the woman.

"You really haven't been listening to what's going on in the city, have you?" No response, but his slightly confused look said it all, making Brooks exhale. "Over the past month the lights have been seen on in the tower. People have been found alive there, and apparently they have an abundance of food and medicine. They even got the electricity running without any solar power like we have."

"What does that have to do with...?"

"Josea, they're own runners have been putting out signs and posters, wanting what they call the Ghost. Be it the creature's corpse or an immense outpay if someone can bring it in alive." His eyes drifted to the hyena's white coat. "If a talking white animal is not the Ghost that they're looking for, then I don't know what is. You just made us rich to the point where we might be able to actually make it through this apocalypse alive."

"But...?"

"I don't know what they want out of her, but it hardly matters-"

"-It *hardly* matters!?" The young man quotes her, nearly growling as her expression narrowed into a stern gaze. "You do this, she will never trust another person again!"

"She's an animal, Josea. Yes, she has more intelligence than most, but we're talking about the lives of everyone here; one sacrifice for the sake of a dozen others- minimum." She began putting some objects away and beginning the cleaning process on the needles. "For all we know, they could've been searching for a cure and can find it through her. Isn't one hyena worth all of humanity?"

He exhaled heavily, once again checking on the passed out white one. "...And what about her?"

"...You're too empathetic in a world that has no room left for empathy, Josie. This is the right decision, and if you play your cards right, you can probably never work a day in your life again. People here are looking at you as if you're a hero for bringing her to us." A double take from Josea while she wasn't looking, and it clicked in... Why they were so willing to bring out the last steaks, not worrying about using some of the soap and water. How they were all looking at the two... The entire bunker knew while Josea was completely oblivious to it.

Another heavy sigh as he started the rather awkward process of picking up the hyaena in his arms, getting a questionable look from the woman. "I'll... Keep her in the room assigned to us. But I want to stay there in case she wakes up." A stoic stare. "She's been resistant to a lot of sedation in the past, Ms. Brooks. I don't know how long this will last."

"Good boy." The woman stated. "I'll set up another shot then, just in case. We'll make sure to send a message to the tower in the morning." She half watched and listened to him struggle to carry the passed out creature in his arms.

Was it really the right answer? Josea wracked his brain while laying down in the room, listening to the steady slumbering breaths of the white one next to him. Occasionally hearing a soft whimper that ached his heart terribly. Likely having a nightmare that Zhia couldn't wake up from. Unable to sleep himself, no matter how hard he tried.

The question just kept popping up into his head, over and over again. Was it the right answer? The sacrifice of one for the lives of many? Attempting to weigh it through the many things he's picked out over their conversations together, what he's learned. The hyena was definitely unique and able to handle herself, even in that 'Warrior' form she was able to keep her intelligence. Making her a formidable ally...

If she even wanted to be anymore. The guilt really started to hit Josea's chest hard, swearing it was giving off a physical pressure. There was no telling if Zhiaxha wanted to even be part of his life anymore-

...Was he being selfish? The good of all the people who took him in, dealing with the fact that the young man was not helpful towards any task for them? The one thing he could bring to these people and he was considering taking it away somehow? It was just too heavy of a decision. One Josea felt like

he couldn't make... And he couldn't just leave it up to the hyena that hated humanity; her answer would be perfectly clear.

Another faint whimper in the darkness struck his heartstrings, causing him to shift towards her and hold the white furred one in his arms. "...I'm sorry about this, Zhia." Josea whispered, his own nose resting just below her ear. "I'm so sorry about all of this, it really wasn't my intention. And I don't know what to do..." Another whine in near response made him sigh heavily as he got up. Nature's warnings about a restroom calling as he made his way quietly outside-

Only to spot a figure in the low light. "I knew you were too attached." She said thickly, making the man freeze and look at her in question, stepping into the light while he did the same. Making Brooks nearly double take at the lack of an animal in his arms and creating a rather awkward moment.

"...Did... You think I was trying to sneak her out or something?" Josea asked, not getting an answer from the slightly embarrassed woman. "Nature was just calling..." Another few moments of awkward silence as she turned around and carried on down the hallway. Waiting until she was out of view before sneaking back into his room with the door half opened. Taking a hold of the readied needle and keeping to the shadows just inside the doorway.

As torturous as it was to just keep himself there, really needing that restroom break, he waited. Soon after, hearing a soft set of footsteps come down the hall, holding his breath as it walked passed a few steps... Then opened the door full way, shining a dim light on the bed with the hyena on it-

Only for him to jab her in the neck with the needle and push the plunger! Pulling it out of the skin and tossing it aside before starting a struggle, covering her mouth before the woman could call for help. While she grabbed his clothing, specifically the collar of his shirt, and judo tossed him into the ground with a bit of a yelp!

The man hit the hard floor with a thud, but still kept his hands around her mouth! Somehow keeping them there until the sedative kicked in, rolling the person off and shining the dim light to reveal Ms. Brooks, likely not trusting Josea. If anything, not anymore. "Sorry, ma'am..." He mumbled, only for the adrenaline to wear off and those warnings to return. "Damn, I need to pee...!" And scamper out the door.

The hallway was quiet, only echoing the footsteps down deep within the bunker's complex. Only ever really coming from one direction as the woman sat on the bench near the one way window. Barely being able to see anything outside in the pitch darkness, but considering the peek the previous guard had

outside. Whatever that... Thing did to the Hollows, considering how 'painted' it looked afterwards and the trail of bloody footprints it left. All cleaned up now, but the scent and the event would linger for a bit longer.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up when she heard footsteps approaching from inside, the dim lights revealing a rather scrawny figure coming into her view. "Hey, Daphne." He greeted her in a whisper.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Nah..." Josea flopped down on the bench beside her. "Too much excitement for me."

"I imagine." A bit of quiet between the two.

"You... Were on duty earlier? When my grandfather came back?" A nod from her as the guard took a breath.

"I thought this might come up." A sad smile from the young man. "I was trying to open the door for them, but they told me not to. That a large horde was coming and you were still out there... Murry refused to come back but was trying to get the other two in the bunker... Kurt felt responsible for what happened to you..."

"And wanted to go with him." Another nod confirmed Josea's answer. "And Carlos wouldn't let his brother go without him..."

"No Man Left Behind." Daph mumbled, yawning but no reaction from the male. "I guess neither of them expected you to make it back here in one piece."

"I don't think I could've done it without..."

"Your Ghost?" A little bit of a whimper from him. "I can't believe you even found it. That it even exists-"

"Her name is Zhiaxha. Or at least that's what she wants to be called." The young man stated slightly thickly, but exhaled quietly afterwards. "And honestly...? I didn't think she was 'valuable' to other people. I didn't convince her of anything, not to follow me, not to come inside... She honestly didn't want to do either of those." The woman listened to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"...You don't want to turn her in, do you?" A head shake from Josea. "I see..."

"Maybe that's selfish of me-"

"To want to help the life of another? To save them? No. I honestly felt like it was more selfish for us to trade what is basically a person for value. The... Council here, for lack of a better word, don't see it that way. I think they choose not to." Daphne whispered. "Makes it easier on them to make hard decisions."

"...What do you think I should do?" The young woman looked at him for a moment, taking a bit to think.

"Do you owe her anything?"

"Not too much. I'd say we're about even, but she did save my life out there. At the same time, I... I don't want to say that I saved hers, but I did keep her from a lot of pain." He exhaled. "Zhia also kept me warm during that night as well, so... Maybe yes. But so did that Council here, when I first arrived at the Bunker."

"Yeah... That does make things difficult." Daph whispered, meeting his sad gaze. "I'll leave the decision to you, Josie. But... If you want to leave with her, I suggest you do so before dawn."

"You mean?"

"I'm going to take a break in an hour. I might be a while. Hopefully that'll give you enough time to make a decision and prepare a few things." The man smiled at her, and she smiled sadly back. "Just close the door the best you can without alerting anything or anyone."

"I'll try." He mumbled, getting a hand on his shoulder.

"And if you do decide to go back out there with the Ghost... Good luck." The two shared sad smiles again as Josea got up, nodding and heading back down the hall to their room. Brooks' body just hidden out of view of the doorway, and the hyena still 'resting' in the bed. Laying down beside her again, hearing that faint whine over and over during the course of 30min... He couldn't do it. Maybe it was the wrong decision, but he just couldn't do it to Zhiaxha.

The man got up quietly, packing up a few things for emergency. Taking the white creature in his arms again, swearing she was lighter than before, and carrying her as quietly as he could to the front gate

when it was time. Relieved to see that Daphne was true to her word; leaving the front unguarded as he opened the door, snuck out, and closed it as silently as he could.

...Only to completely forget his bow inside. Grumbling to himself but he carried on. There was still that crossbow back at their camp and making the trek through the bloody gardens. The scent was nearly overpowering, even getting low growls from the creature in his arms. Even if she was lighter, he was still getting quite tired rather quickly. Making him wonder if this was the right choice or the right time. Maybe he could've convinced them otherwise-

Only to hear something nearby through the bushes, nearly cursing as Josea stood completely still, looking towards the noise. "Murry?" He whispered, hearing more movement but one much quicker! Instincts kicked in as his ears nearly perked, telling him to duck and barely feel something swing just over his brown hair! However, with the hyena in his arms, Josea wasn't exactly mobile. Getting that danger signal again, this time against his leg and unable to move; feeling it connect and forcing a cry of pain out of his core! Then a heavy strike to his head, knocking him to the ground!

Pain echoed through his skull as blood began to pump through; attempting to scan the area for damage as the rest of his body battled with the stun. Still unable to really see anything through the dark, but hearing multiple footsteps. One getting closer and closer... "This fucker knew your name."

"Coincidence. Put him out." A figure stood over Josea, winding up an overhead strike-

Chapter 14

The smell of outside and burning wood were familiar to her... Way too real to just be a dream. Hearing voices slowly drifted her to consciousness, specifically unfamiliar vocals that weren't even trying to be quiet. Contradicting her confidence that she was out of that hellhole. "I'm telling you, that's gotta be it."

"It's just a dog, Mike. One that just happens to be white-"

"There are no more dogs, there's barely any wolves left now. And that ain't like no dog I ever seen." She grumbled in her grogginess, attempting to move but responses in her body were minimal. "That's the thing the boss is looking for. And even if it isn't, who cares? It's white, it's not like he's going to know the difference."

"Murry's got a point. Nobody really knows what this Ghost thing really is."

"The Indians do."

"Yeah, they say that. But do you seriously believe them?"

"All I'm saying is that if the boss is looking for a white pelt, he might really like this one. Not like anyone else has been bringing him anything, and think of that reward...!" Another grumble from her, trying to get any part of her body to respond, to fight against the sedative. "We could live like kings beside him, maybe even get a turn with his ladies."

"I'm... Uh, actually-"

"Nobody cares, Terry."

"I was gonna say I'm pretty sure that's the thing those scientists in the tower were after. Remember those runners Clide's group caught a while ago? They mentioned something about the tower looking for some white hyena-thing."

"So what?"

"You weren't working in the city when it fell, Murry. I heard those scientists were working on a cure for this Roider outbreak, and the ones in Oddin's kingdom actually succeeded."

"No fuckin' way."

"That's what I heard. They tried many different animals, but hyenas were the main success. We could turn this 'ghost' into the tower instead, and maybe get the fuck off this dead island."

"And go where, Terry?"

"I'm thinking... Opportunity?"

"That fairy tale?" Eyes were felt on her. "But maybe you're right. Question is, what do we do with the other guy?" (Other guy...? Josea?)

"What significance is he? Who cares? Let's just kill that stick and be on our way."

"I donno... He took quite the beating and is still alive. I half want to keep him around to practice my swing."

"You're a sick man. Just kill him before he turns."

"Actually..."

"Fucking A, Terry... I know that look."

"He's probably from that bunker, yeah?" That was honestly a relief, meaning that the hyena was out. "I wonder what they would give to have him back..."

"That's not a terrible idea, but I'd rather have more guys with us..." Some silence. "Not sure if this stick is worth the trouble."

"A shelter like that is bound to have some good supplies. Hell, it'll be a better camp than we have if we could somehow get inside."

"Maybe the squeak knows a back way in?"

"That's a good enough reason to keep him alive for now. Murry, you head out and tell the guys back at Marrowood to deliver a message. We'll tell the boss what we have here and see what he thinks."

"Why do I have to go-?"

"Because your stupid ass ate the last of my cornchips!"

"That was a week ago-!"

"I don't care, I'm still pissed about it!" One of them nearly growled. "In the meantime, Terry and I

will find something else to eat around here."

"You sure we should leave them?"

"They're tied, they ain't going anywhere. Get moving." It took a few moments for the steps around to start leaving the area, giving the hyena time to concentrate and recover. Slowly getting back her ability to feel her muscles and slowly detecting her phantom body. What little movement she had felt restricted, bound. Scrunching her muzzle identified the all too familiar strap over her snout.

A few breaths as she attempted to get her eyes to focus. Early dawn. Sun hasn't begun to come up yet, only lightly painting the clouds and setting the sky on fire at a distance. A glow nearby and the scent of a campfire... A familiar fabric structure that tugged at her mind, and within the shade near her... A body. Beaten and bloodied. Bound like she was. Not moving, but still breathing. Unrecognizable to her aside from that... Undershirt?

Josea... She hated him at that moment, still unsure of what happened or how they got out here. But her trust in him was wounded heavily, nearly making her growl and actually giving the hyena a little more energy to fight off the paralysis. ("Don't blame him.") Her ear flickered to a familiar female voice, but one coming from no specific direction.

"Why shouldn't I?" Zhia hissed under her heavy breath, still trying to be quiet.

("Because he isn't responsible-")

"He's the one who gave me that damn needle! His kind is the one who-!"

("You keep doing this, Salajah; you keep blaming others for the sum of their species' mistakes. You did it to me as well.") An angry exhale from the white one as she flexed her muscles against the binds, getting more and more feeling within them. ("You cannot keep doing this-")

"I can damn well try until the day I finally die."

("If you keep holding this grudge, you'll become no better than their own evils-")

"Who the hell says I'm trying not to be!?" A growl that was louder than she meant to, actually spotting some movement from the young man across from her. "...I am just the result of what your kind made me, Meredith." The hyena mumbled much quieter this time. "I wasn't made for anything greater."

("That doesn't mean you couldn't become something greater, something better than what they made you.") The white one squeezed her eyes shut, exhaling her anger. ("All that hate will haunt you for the rest of your life, don't be blinded by it.") Feeling the gaze over her, but refusing to look at it.

"I'm sorry..." The young man's whisper caught her ear upmost, making it move against her head in protest. Attempting to faintly shake her head at him. "It wasn't-"

"Stop." She growled at Josea. "You've done enough damage." Still not looking at him, Zhiaxha took heavy and heated breaths. "I'll... I'll get us out when I can shake off your damn drug... Then..." Even when she wasn't looking at it, his sorrowful look could still be felt. Remaining quiet as she gathered energy, but not fast enough for the two bandits to return.

"You find anything?"

"Notta. Even looked over at the Bunker's fields... Something went-to-town on people there. Probably those roiders."

"So what?"

"Meaning, there's blood everywhere and on everything. All their crops, in the soil. That place is fucked, no way are they going to survive the next harvest without turning."

"Not even if they boil the stuff?"

"I heard that doesn't work. It got a few settlements for fuckers to learn that lesson." Some silence as the two felt looks over them. "Means this prick probably isn't worth it, especially if that Bunker is going to give us tainted food." That time, the hyena couldn't hold back her snarl. Growing angrier as the steps came up closer and she finally opened her eyes to see the legs of one of the men, standing over Josea.

Her heart raced heavily, filling up with anger and something else as the bandit pulled the young one up by his brown hair. Making him release a painful whine and grunt while Zhia nearly barked in anger. "I think you got on its nerves."

"Cute. He's probably its master." Yes, that actually got her more angry. Feeling the pressure rise in her core as she growled, tugging on the restraints while growling. Only to get a hard kick in the snout, releasing a whimper from the striped one as she was rolled over by the blow. "You might not want to see this then, doggy." A hit was heard as Josea cried in pain, making her fight against the tight ropes

harder! "Come'on, you were barely this wimpy before. What? Did that last beating-?" Another painful cry as his body was suddenly dropped, hearing the bandit step back. "What the fuck?"

"What?" The young one's groans were constant as the hyena shifted herself over, watching in near horror as Josea's body started to thicken up! Swelling his chest both in the front and back, shoulders broadening and flowing down the arms tied together behind his back! Ripping apart his clothing as his face began to push out! "What the actual Fuck-!?"

"Fucking Kill Him!!" The others panicked, grabbing weapons but hesitating when his limbs broke the ropes around Josea's wrists! Causing his hands and soon feet to become freed as he curled up. Attempting to fight the pain while a thick brown pelt grew over his body, a series of black stripes along his back and sides! All clothing became shreds while a long bushy tail was released from his pantleg! Vocals and cries of pain becoming deeper and more animalistic! Ending with a terrifying howl, much like... Hers.

A deep growl from Josea as he got up, absolutely furious at the two human beings that he towered over. Looking deep into the eyes of the one who beat him. The one who just kicked Zhiaxha. "W-what the fuck?" The bandit nearly whimpered, crying in fear as the brown beast leapt at him! Cleaving his body in half at the lower torso but then mauling the upper part as the man screamed in pain! Causing the other one to take off in fear!

For nearly a minute Josea tore into the bandit. Flaying every inch of skin he had before prying open that chest and feasting on the warm insides. Going until no part of the bandit was moving, allowing the brown one to calm down... And look in horror at his bloody hands; completely unrecognizable to what he was as he scampered backwards away from the gorey mess.

He panted, both in fear and the adrenaline still surging through his system as he looked around for the other bandit; now long gone. Only spotting the bound white hyena, and her surprised blue gaze staring at him. His own shifting between her and his own furred hands... Looking rather like Zhia's 'warrior form' from the night before. "W... What?" Josea managed to speak.

"S-since when could humans do that!?" She attempted to speak, making it a bit hard due to the strap over her snout. Watching the now larger one slowly approach her, long sharp claws that carried the scent of blood being extra careful to cut the strap and her binds. Allowing Zhiaxha to half get up and look over the now transformed human. "Josea...?"

"Y-yeah, it's me. B-b-but I... We... Can't...!" He looked over himself again, and felt her gaze do the very same. "H-how do I...?"

"Change back?" A nervous nod from the brown one, as she thought about it, making sure their surroundings were safe. "Y-you... Need to relax your heart." She took a quick breath. "Y-your energy will eventually slow down to the point where your muscles stop flexing so much, like that." She motioned with her head towards his claws; still lightly trying to 'grab' the air near them. "That's how I do it at least... How did this even-?"

"I don't know! I've never...!" Josea whimpered a bit, watching her try to walk and stumble. Cursing again as the larger one frowned. "Here... Let me..." He slowly approached the white hyaena despite her low growl and picked her up with ease. Getting used to his new height and strange... Digitigrade legs. Looking over the mess he made out of the bandit again and frowning.

"Stop it." She growled, getting his attention and accidentally bumping his snout against hers, making her grumble as Josea's brown and black ears lowered. "I'm still... Absolutely pissed off at you, but don't feel bad for these-" The bandit's corpse suddenly cried out loudly like a Hollow, instantly causing Josea to instinctively swipe at it hard and bash its head in.

(I never got your approval for anything... How do you fuckin' like me now, ma? You died too early to see what you made...)

The voice echoed in his head as he squeezed his eyes shut, scrunching his muzzle in the process as if waiting for the mental anguish from before... But nothing. No void in his chest, no sudden weight over his shoulders, no phantom pains. Making Josea slowly open up his eyes and get a concerned look from the white one in his arms. "...You okay?"

"...Nothing."

"Nothing? ...Not even a voice?"

"I heard the voice, but... Nothing else after." He studied his bloody brown hand from afar. "Like you... Said."

Zhia looked at him for a while, concerned about the young man's well-being but didn't sense anything was specifically off. Until their eyes met, spotting his usual guilty look as Josea gently hugged her. "Oh, here we go-"

"I'm sorry."

"Please stop saying that." Zhia snorted. "The last two times you did you almost left me, to the point where I'm starting to believe that phrase is cursed."

"I really am though." A loud grumble as he looked over the bandit's remains one last time, then the tent his grandfather handed down to him. Still set up and in decent condition, but raided on the inside. "My intention was just to give you a tetanus shot, but I didn't fill the needle-

"Stop, Josea-

"No." He nearly grumbled. "I need you to see my side of things-

"Why is that so important to you-?"

"Because **YOU** are important to me!" The 'warrior' growled loudly, actually creating an echo through the dawn. "And I don't... Maybe it's selfish, but I don't want you to be removed from my life." Her ears went back but she didn't respond. "And... Not because I'm afraid of... This." Another look on his hand and arm, gesturing the change. "I made a mistake of trusting them to see things the way I do; that you are a person not a currency. And I convinced you to do the very same." More silence. "...That's all I do is make mistakes."

"...Put me down, Josea." That ached the brown one's heart as he exhaled heavily, carrying her over to a nearby tree, leaning his back against it and sliding down. With another sigh, he released his grip on the white hyena in his lap. Feeling her get up... Adjust herself and lay back onto his large front. Feeling his saddened but puzzled gaze over her. "...You're not the only one who keeps making mistakes."

"Zhiaxha..."

"Even if it is stupidly trusting others in hopes to kill the pain of loneliness..." Some silence before the young one slowly embraced her once again. Not feeling any struggle against it.

It took some getting used to the strange legs, but he was able to walk pretty straight. Even with the altered center of mass being more in his chest area rather than his waist, regardless of the fact he was still carrying around the white one. Still grumbling a little bit as she blushed, but her tail wags were giving off a different signal. "This is so much harder than it looks."

"I'm not that heavy." Zhia snorted.

"N-no, but just... Walking on two legs when my legs are... Animal-like?" He felt a shift in her head, attempting to look at him. "-I don't know how to say that without sounding very-"

"Human?"

"Y-yeah. S-sorry." An exhale from her as the white one looked over the horizon. The sun just barely coming over it.

"I honestly had a hard time with it too. Sticking with going on all fours for my first few changes, but it made it so much harder to defend myself like that. What I am now, I'm nimble, able to evade easier. Warrior? I'm..."

"A bigger target." A noise in confirmation.

"I spent... Nights practicing, learning how to walk properly. Even then, I needed help."

"From... Her?" A slow nod. "...Who was she? If you don't mind me asking."

"You mean before the fall?" A noise in confirmation as Zhia exhaled sadly. "She talked about the past a lot more than you did. I could only understand so much of it, so forgive me if some of this is wrong."

"That's fine. I just... Want to listen for a while." A moment of silence as the white one gathered her thoughts.

"...She was a war medic or something, trained as one but rarely actually 'in the field' as she called it."

"Out on battlegrounds and such. After the Oddin monarch took over, much of the lands became at peace with one another, all under one kingdom. Though the west; where we are, always felt different about it, they still compiled for the sake of people. Occasionally you hear about some warlord or something attempting to uprise, feeling oppressed, but..." The brown one sighed, only catching her puzzled stare rather late and double taking. "W-what?"

"Battlegrounds...?"

"Y-yeah. Over territory. Resources. To own land-"

"The hell do you mean 'own land'?" She snorted. "To mark your territory, I can understand. You don't want another family overhunting your grounds, but." She stared down his smile.

"I... Often forget I'm not talking to another human being. It's just strange to see your perspective on things." That look saddened as her ears went back. "But it does kind of make me wonder if we-... If humans deserved this fate."

"You're still human, Josea." The white one attempted to comfort him. "You just... Haven't found a way to change back yet. It might take a while, as my first few did."

"If that's even how this works..." The brown one's statement worried her a bit, but nudged him with her black snout. Giving Zhia a sad smile. "We got off track. She was a field medic?"

"Yes... Her experience there came in handy several times, able to barter medical help with food and meals. She insisted that I was safe in their... Camps and such, but I never felt comfortable around other humans." The white one admitted. "You can understand why now."

"...Yes."

"She always respected that. Often letting me stay outside the camps and bringing the cooked meals out for me to eat in comfort. Away from interested eyes and hands. If the weather was bad, she would go out of her way to set up her tent and a fire for me to use as a shelter; keeping the front open so I could leave whenever I wanted. I listened to her for nights, talk about a world that I could... Never quite understand. Some fiction, some not... Not that I could ever tell the difference." Zhia sighed heavily. "...I swear I can still hear her voice and wisdom..."

A long silence as the white hyena collected herself. Clearing her throat and changing the subject. "What about this... Opportunity they were talking about. Know anything about that?"

"I, uh... Know a little. It was some project they were working on for years in the far east. They-" He stopped for a second, flicking his ears and scanning the area. But nothing. Then being lost in thought for a moment. "Do... You know what an ocean is?" Zhia curled her neck at the male, but grunted as her brain hurt a little.

"I... Know the definition; basically a massive body of water, right?"

"Yes."

"But I've never seen it-" Her ears suddenly perked as well, not picking up anything. "...Something's out there, watching us." Josea began to slow down. "-Don't stop moving. I'm going to see if I can pinpoint it, but keep talking."

"O-oh... Well, that's where a large amount of storms are created, making it really difficult to cross the ocean in a boat; which is a vehicle used to drive on water-"

"Your inventions are weird." She grumbled, making him chuckle nervously. Still feeling like he's being watched.

"They can be. But it is risky to go over it... So Oddin suggested going under. It was a really hard thing to suggest, but I heard they did it: making a tunnel underneath the ocean to reach the lands on the other side. Dubbing it Opportunity, which got mixed results from people in general..."

"But when this Fall happened..."

"It was a rumored safe haven. The lands on the other side were said to be unoccupied, and there was no way the Hollows were going to swim across... The west side attempted to build their own Opportunity when the Fall was happening, but... I doubt they had the time to finish it."

"Leaving you stuck here, in this hell..." She mumbled sadly. "Having to fend for yourselves against yourselves..." A trail off as the white hyena growled. "On the cliffside, hidden in the red bushes." Josea stopped suddenly to look. "Don't stop-!" Only to get an arrow to the side, making him growl loudly in pain and stagger for a moment! Flinching at the slight pain it caused before moving towards cover, getting shot again in the bicep! Hissing at the pain while another one barely missed his throat before finally getting to shelter behind some trees.

The white one climbed off of his sitting position overlooking the wounds, watching Josea take the supply bag off his shoulder and set it down before he did the same. Hissing at the pain while taking a firm hold of it, pulling one out and releasing a growl while Zhia scanned the low light. "He's moving... Damn Hunters and their crossbows."

"It's not a crossbow." The brown one attempted to hold his growl as he pulled out the other one. Feeling the bleeding soon stop. "It's firing too fast, unless it is a repeating, but these look like arrows not bolts." She looked at him for a few moments. "Just being specific."

"Stay here then, I can sneak through the bushes and field."

"You sure?" Her ears spaded. "...Walk in a straight line." A low growl and a snout toss, but she tried. Still finding herself stagger and sway from the drug. "You're not going to be able to run if you need to like that."

"I'll be fine-"

"I'm not risking that, Zhiaxha." A careful look out of cover. "I can make it... Let me do this-"

"And what happens if your body begins reverting inbetween that?" She barely asked, but didn't get an answer. "Josea-"

"I'll be back." A growl in disapproval as he moved out of cover, cursing him as she couldn't chase after! Only stay in cover as he ran across the field on all fours, swaying his directions and throwing off the hunter's aim until he got cover under the cliffside. Mostly straight vertical and made of layered rocks as he moved alongside it. Finding a good spot and taking a look at both the rocks and his own claws... Could they be used to climb up?

It was worth a shot, since no other way could be easily searched through the darkness. Attempting to use those natural weapons mostly just scratched the rock and vegetation growing along them, but the Warrior's sheer grip strength was enough to hold onto the many plates. Attempting to be quiet as he climbed up the near forty foot high rockside, hearing some bushes rustle nearby as those primal instincts began kicking in again!

The beast launched himself upwards to the lip of the cliff and pulled himself over it with ease, though receiving another arrow in his chest- just away from his shoulder. It wasn't enough to knock him down, but pinpoint where the projectile came from and pouncing! Hearing a loud curse through Josea's growl, a strip of light revealing some pantlegs that his claws went after!

They pierced the flesh and clothing, making the man scream in pain as he was dragged towards the brown beast! The chest now visible through that ray of light! Pulling the claws out the legs and impaling them into the human's torso; a few getting under the ribs! The vibrations of a wounded beating heart could be felt as the Warrior pulled the man's head into the light with a snarl- Spotting a familiar blonde.

Shock struck the Ajaba, as the young man still attempted to struggle. The immense surprise keeping the furred one still as those blue eyes morphed into sorrow. "Carlos...?" The blonde one nearly double taked as his body struggled to breathe. "No... No, no no no-"

"**NO!!!**" A cry of denial interrupted Josea's whimpers as he looked up, getting an arrow in the snout; nearly into one of his eyes! Causing him to finally pull his claws out of the blonde's chest as his brother knotted another arrow! Making the beast step back still in shock but protecting his brown head; an arrow landing in his chest. Another step back, another arrow in his body until Josea misstepped and slid off the cliff! Free falling for a bit before hitting the grass-covered rocky ground with a loud crack!

...He was out, only for a moment while his body forced a paralysis for triage. Only to hear a nearby arrow close to his head, shooting more adrenaline into his system to bypass any lockdowns. Recalling what happened in an instant and reaching a single paw up at Kurt; still on the cliff aiming down. "Kurt!! LOOK OUT!!!" Josea roared, just before a Hollow very close roared loudly in a rage! Making the black haired brother turn around and fire an arrow at the sudden appearance of another enemy!

Only to realize just too late who it was. The arrow left the string, curved around the bow, and pierced right through that blonde haired skull. The brown hyena down below could almost feel the loss from afar as Carlos' Hollow stumbled and fell to the ground, sliding off the cliffside. Leaving Kurt struck with the heavy remorse that came with killing, his very own...

Josea wanted to feel guilty, but something was just... Blocking it. Leaving him stonewalled towards the emotion as he looked at the now deceased brother's body from afar. The memories of him replaying in the brown one's mind but he still felt... So very little. Only breaking out of the trance when he saw some movement; the black haired brother stepping off the cliff on purpose. Another cry of denial from the beast filled the sky before that violent-

She heard the cries from afar. The howl. The roar. Still fighting with her body to obey her commands, only getting some feeling in her paws. Trying to see if Josea was even alright and breathing a sigh of relief when she spotted him walking back. New wounds, as expected... And a blank gaze. Shellshocked, to the point where Zhiaxha wondered if he killed the Hollow and felt... Whatever he had the first time. But there was something off about it as the brown male came closer. Picking up his bag and wearing it again, staring into space. "...You knew them."

A nod from Josea as he whispered. "They were my scoutmates." Silence. "And... They didn't recognize me."

"...Your grandfather?" A head shake, stating that the old man wasn't with them. "He should be nearby though."

"I don't know what I'm going to say to him..." The white one stared at the male for a little bit then took a breath.

"Tell him the truth? You thought he was a hunter and you defended yourself after being shot at three times." She snorted, not getting a reaction out of him. Exhaling and staring off into the fields, barely being illuminated by the slow light. "Josea... Let's go." It took a moment before he nodded again, getting the white hyena to attempt to lead the way, still having a bit of a swagger in her walk.

But after getting up, the taller male got a tad bit of vertigo. Every part of his body felt sore and strained. Nearly locking up as he lightly whimpered. Causing Josea to fall on his 'knees' and get her attention. "Josea?" He went on all fours, panting heavily as his body strained; form starting to shrink. "Damn it, not now...!" Zhia cursed, watching the man revert into his normal naked self and passing out. Only 'wearing' the bag with a shoulder strap onto it. "Josea...! Wake up!"

Chapter 15

Her growls of concentration only ended in frustrated pants as the white hyena studied her slightly numb body. ("Did you lose it...?")

"No." Zhia grumbled, looking over at the still unconscious man in the grass, knowing quite well that he needed warmth and soon. "I can feel the... Change start, but I can't shake off what that damn drug did to me." The white one moved and gently laid on his bare back. "Damnit... What the hell should I do?"

("You need to get him off the ground-")

"I can't!" She growled, placing a paw over her eyes in frustration. "I can't lift him up like this..."

("...Then you need to find someone who can. But you cannot abandon him.")

"What do you expect me to do? Drag him?" She snorted. Not getting a response from the voice. "...Damn everything to hell." Zhia growled again, getting off and taking hold of the strap around his torso with her teeth. Sliding Josea's body across the cold grass. "Your...! Forsaken Grandfather...! Better be...! Around here...! Somewheres!" The white one grunted between pulls, using a lot of her energy to do the motions as she moved him across the meadow. Bit by bit. Eventually needing to stop for a rest.

Panting herself, the white one leaned down to make sure the man was still breathing. SHollow, but she could detect his breaths, getting more rapid as his body shivered. Giving Zhiaxha a rather tight time limit. "Josea... Please wake up... I can't help you like this." She whimpered, not getting a response as she exhaled heavily and began pulling on that strap.

...Only to get that prey's instinct again. This time a bit too late as she flicked an ear and moved back, feeling a heavy sting in her chest! Causing her to stagger back while the long arrow shaft stuck in her field of view; detecting her body swell up slightly around the area to tend to the intruder! The hyena whimpered as she moved away, not wanting to leave him but another arrow came between her and Josea. Acting like a warning shot of sorts, telling her not to get any closer.

It was only then did she start to feel extremely tired again. The adrenaline having a backfire effect while a pressure was put on her heart. Causing the white one to stagger and sway away from the unconscious man, while also trying to see where the arrow was coming from in the low light. Eventually spotting a figure moving surprisingly quickly towards them... Then a call from a different direction? "Damnit... More of them...?" Zhia heaved, feeling her body give into the fatigue again as she panted. Hazily looking over the horizon and spotting the light finally hitting something in the distance...

The over-warmth slowly brought him awake, feeling like he was almost cooking in the layers of blankets and clothing. Shifting around in the sleeping bag and nearly feeling bound into it, almost detecting a strange coldness in his chest. Like that of an illness starting...

Josea was getting sick, meaning he would be less useful to people for a while longer. Pulling off the layers to find himself bare, questioning why he was naked but at least in a tent. Another sleeping bag that's seen better days was on the other side, an old one that his grandfather used to use as a cushion

for the one Josea was currently in. Between them was the map book... With the small leatherbound one on display.

With no sign of his grandpa heard, the young man reached for it. Undoing the belted lock and opening it up to see a series of sentences. Small paragraphs made in statements and spaced out.

(All the money I've obtained for my family... To support them... I wasn't too colorblind to see how stained they were from the blood of others less fortunate... I just chose to ignore it.)

(It was one little prank... One little mistake that ruined the life of my best friend. The guilt would resurface everytime I spotted a wheelchair...)

(I'm the one who introduced her to that fucking drug... She had a future, and I took that away from her...)

Without finishing it, he turned the page. To find more and more and more of these statements. Barely making out the soft footsteps outside and looking up at the doorway, locking eyes with the old gray man. Not even trying to hide the book in his hands. "You...?" Josea started, getting a rather emotionless stare back. Hardened, but with just a hint of regret. "Wrote them down...?"

There was a pause but eventually the older man exhaled and nodded. "...Their Epitaphs."

"What?"

"That's... The word I gave for them." Murry admitted. "Every one I killed, I wrote them down." Some silence. "They deserve to be remembered, Josea-"

"I-I know, and I'm not..." He looked down at the book again, almost feeling like it was the diary of a serial killer. "I just..."

"You haven't taken the life of one yet, so you wouldn't understand." The older one spotted something

off in the young man's eyes. "...You have."

"...Twice." Josea admitted. "It was..."

"And you were strong enough to survive it." Even more remorse, making the grandfather exhale. Entering the portable shelter and sitting across on the old sleeping bag and gesturing for the book to be returned. Receiving it after a moment. "There's a reason why we do not travel alone, and not just for survival or combat purposes."

"...To keep our heads level. And to not..." A slow nod as the grandfather looked over some of the pages.

"...I've yet to hear Meredith's voice."

"Grandma's?"

"It's still possible that she's out there..." The old one mumbled sadly. "And it's also possible..." A heavy breath before he looked back at the entrance. "...Kurt and Carlos are gone too."

"I... Know." Josea exhaled heavily. "What about Zhiaxha?"

"Who?"

"Is she not outside?" Murry gave him a strange look. "She was with me when..."

"I found you alone, Josea." A sad look from him. "Some animal was dragging your body across the field, completely naked save for-"

"That was her!" An even stranger look. "Zhia! The... White hyena?"

"It looked like a wolf in the dark-"

"But that was-!" The young man began to get up out of the many blankets, now noticing the scars of arrow shots on his body. Healed over, but still leaving marks on his skin in the shape of small stars.

"Where was she-!"

"Stop, Josea! You're in no condition to search for her!"

"No! I **need** to find her! We were searching for you-!" The young one stopped, seeing some guilt in the grandfather's eyes. But only a hint, as if realizing... "You didn't..."

"I had no choice, it was an animal dragging your body-"

"You didn't!!" Josea nearly snarled. "Where was she!?"

"It's too late now, even if I told you, she isn't there anymore!" A growl from the young man as he left the tent- still naked, mind you. "What's gotten into you Josea-!?"

"**Where did you shoot her!?**" Those blue eyes stared down the old man's...

She recognized the feeling of being moved. Carried by something taller than her. The rocking of two legs moving forwards, making her grumble as her body stiffened and her mind came to. Making the hyena growl a bit as her sight became clearer. "Where am I?" She barely asked, actually getting the movement to stop and a few others around her to do the same. Dozens of eyes on her body were felt gawking, making her grumble louder. "Put me down."

"Acehlosu, do not worry. You are safe-"

"Kikimu...?" Zhiaxha attempted to look at him, feeling his hand move along her head in a gentle pet; but she wasn't being carried by the native she knew.

"Elder...? You...?" A sudden pause from the white one as she cursed under her breath. "You were right this entire time? The Ghost actually speaks-?"

"Put a damn sock in it." The white one snorted, actually getting a chuckle out of the much older male. "And put me down."

"Kikimuswasu?" The younger male carrying Zhia asked, actually getting the angry gaze of those blue eyes and nearly whimpering. Despite his much stronger 'warrior' look.

"I will not tell you again, human."

"Acehlosu, please." A growl in response. "You are injured, I honestly wasn't sure if you were going to make it. You were very close to death-"

"Where the hell is Josea?" A sad look at the near demand, finally getting her to struggle a little bit before the elder lifted up his hand in surrender.

"Please put her down." A nod from the younger man as he gently did so. Placing the hyaena back on her feet as she staggered a bit, now feeling the bandage and wrap across her chest. "I beg you to take it slow... You were nearly taken out by another hunter. You had an arrow in your chest-"

"The body I was pulling, where did he go." Another demand made the elder frown, making her exhale and rethink her question. "The hunter that shot me... Did you get a look at him?"

"Please, do not seek revenge, Ghost-"

"Was he gray? Beard, old?" A moment before Kikimu nodded. A bit puzzled at her sigh of relief. "...It was his Grandfather."

"The unconscious one you were with?"

"Yes. We were... Searching for him." Another gentle pet made her exhale. But there was still something off.

"He will be safe, I am sure of it. But we should get you back to our camp so you may rest-"

"I'm not going back, Kikimu." Zhia stated a bit coldly, looking off into the distance and seeing the city. Many spikes of metal over the horizon, knowing one of them had to be that tower. Taking a slow blink before facing the elder friend once again. "I'm sorry... But there is something I have to do, now that I found it."

("Wait, what? Why?")

"Acehlosu..."

"Thank you, old friend. For... A lot of things." For a moment she just took a breath, then leaned into his body. Feeling the older man gently hug her, nearly sobbing as he understood. She was saying goodbye.

"Please..." He nearly begged, feeling her head shake in rejection as the white creature pulled away. Feeling him hold on for just a bit longer before letting go. The two didn't say any more words as Zhiaxha left. Starting with a slow trot before moving into a sprint across the fields. Finally able to move on her own, even though her chest was still a little sore. A little bit of a sharp pain, as if warning her that if she did transform again...

("Why leave, Salajah?")

No response. She finally found that forsaken place, able to see it light up in the distance by the sun and invigorating the hyena to pursue it. Josea was safe... Kikimuwasu was safe. Neither needed her anymore, and the Ghost could finally do what she must to rest in peace.

"Why is this animal so important, Josea!?" Murry growled. "So much so that you insist on catching your death finding it!?"

"Because-!" The young man took a breath. "Because I know if she's still alive she'll see it!" He threw an arm towards the city. "She came from that tower, and if she sees it she'll go back to it-!"

"You're not making any sense-"

"She can speak!! She can talk, process information like we can!" Josea took a few breaths, feeling the disbelief on his relative's face. Getting actually frustrated, but feeling something in his own chest... A familiar power. "Fine." The grandson kneeled down to the ground and tapped into it, feeling the pressure begin to swell in his torso as he growled against the metamorphosis. A tremendous pain that leaked power.

"What are you doing-!?" Only to soon see it; the change in the naked man's body. Morphing out into something supernatural and soon covered in brown fur, the transformation was much easier than the

first time as the Ajaba stood back up. Towering over his grandfather, sensing the old man's fear.

"She... Is the key to our survival..." Josea spoke thickly, but a bit sadly. "Which direction was it." He barely asked, taking a few moments for the gray one to point. Only to suddenly see the beast move towards him and wrap arms around his body. Not quite knowing his strength, but soon realizing it was... A hug. "I'm still myself, Grandfather... I'm still Josea. Just..." He felt the embrace returned, making the younger one smile sadly. "But she's in danger, and we cannot lose her... I cannot lose her. So, I'm sorry, but I..." A nod from the older one was felt as the brown gently let go and headed towards the direction.

Through the thick forest was a bit harder to move through at this size, but Josea would need the Warrior's strength. Following a very small untraveled path as it ended and nearly making the brown hyena step off the cliffside. Sliding to a stop and taking a breath of relief as he looked over the view. The long grass of the meadow, the city on one side, and something white traveling towards it-

Zhiaxha!! A huge sigh of relief as he called to her- only for the rocks underneath Josea to crumble and make him yelp as he fell. Landing a little hard on the grass below, but nothing he couldn't shake off. Getting up off the ground and pursuing the white one's last known location again, still spotting her running a little bit into the distance as he called again. This time louder and actually getting some howls in the distance.

Josea chased her down, surprised that Zhia slowed to a stop. Giving the male time to catch up but double taking at her stinkeye look towards him. "Are you okay?"

"You chased me down to ask if I was okay?" She snorted.

"W-well... Yes and no-"

"Damnit Josea..." The white one growled at him. "That *was* your grandfather, wasn't it?"

"I woke up in his tent, yes. But-"

"Then why in the **Hell** didn't you stay there!?" A snarl from the white one, causing her fur to raise and even more howls in the far distance to be heard. Morphing her frustrations into a growl instead. "You got what you wanted! You got your family back! Why leave that-!?"

"Because I know what you're trying to do." He stated sadly.

"Josea-"

"And I'm telling you that it won't amount to anything-" Her sudden cold but angry stare actually silenced him.

"*It won't amount to anything...?*" She quoted him, actually walking towards the brown male easily six times her size and making the Ajaba take a step back and whimper a bit. "So, what. You think that I should just leave the place that took away my life running-?"

"You still have a life, Zhia! And-"

"My Past Life!!" She roared, not caring about the Hollows anymore. "My Family!! My Friends!! That Place took everything I had away from me, and now that I finally found it again, you're here telling me that destroying it would be **MEANINGLESS!**?" No response as they looked into each other's eyes, both quite shaken. "Say it, Josea... I know you want to. Just like every human that's ever met me. You don't want to lose something of *Yours*."

"Zhia..."

"You feel that way, don't you." She barely asked. "You feel like I belong to you, that somehow over the course of a day I became part of your life- therefore I'm yours. And you're afraid of losing that-"

"That's not what it is-"

"**Then What The HELL Is It!?**" Another roar, actually starting to see the changes in the white one as if her body was enlarging in form. Staring at the white hyaena with some tears in his eyes, but lifting his own hand and taking a look at it.

("Look at him...") Though still very angry, just puzzled at what the male was trying to communicate... Only for her expression to morph into shock and twist into denial.

"No."

"Zhia, please-"

"**NO!!**" A bestial roar, nearly shattering the sky as her chest swelled out. Breaking the strap that was

holding the bandage. Slamming the ground with both paws, sending the very intense and swift growth through the limbs. Another roar as her legs bulked out and her head grew; very quickly completing the Warrior form. "You Cannot *DO* This To Me, Josea!!"

("He didn't. You did-")

"You are the-!"

"**-SHUT UP!!**" She attempted to drown their words, ignoring the wets in her eyes. "Your species took everything away from me! You Destroyed My Life! Made me into a damn monster! You can't tell me I have to *Fix* it! Or that it even *Deserves* a second chance for all that it's done!!" Silence as the white one panted, her chest hurting a little as a light sob leaked out of her breaths. "...I can't let this go, Josea-"

"Please, listen to yourself... I know what you're planning to do, and I know for certain it won't be silent." The brown warrior took a step closer. "Within those walls... It is packed with Hollows. You can take on a lot of them, I know that, but... They are near endless. Eventually they're going to..." It hurt him to even think about it. "It's suicide, and for what? What good would it do to possibly kill yourself destroying that place-?"

"I Am A Phantom Of What I Used To Be, Josea!" Zhia attempted to get angry, but the sorrow spread through her rage like an infection. "...Maybe all I want is revenge and rest." The male's eyes just stared at her as she sighed. "Go back to your grandfather, Josea. Consider you to be my final gift to this Hollow world."

"...Maybe humans are selfish." The brown one mumbled, taking a few slow steps closer. Putting the white one a little bit on edge. "Maybe they do take advantage of things and people, abduct or manipulate them for their own gains. Constantly barter and pester to better their own lives." She watched as the male, now just a tad shorter than her, nearly came muzzle to muzzle. "...Or maybe they just know how to improve the lives of others with their company. That keeping alone in life isn't the best way to spend it." The white one closed her eyes, lightly turning her head away but not fighting when the male moved forward to embrace her. Taking a moment before Zhia embraced him back, fighting against her own sobs as she forced them down.

"...I'm sorry, Josea." His heart ached while an instinctual warning flared off in his chest. Her hold around him tightening, claws grasping his back fur. Taking in a breath to speak!

Before a sudden pain was felt in his crotch, making him whimper loudly as Zhia removed her 'knee' and let go of him. Letting his body's reflex to hold and defend the poor pair as it began to fall to the ground. Making Josea growl against the ache, but at least not detecting any more damage than a simple

ram against them.

However, it did stun the male long enough for the white 'warrior' to take off towards the city walls. The howls of Hollows coming from multiple directions, all getting closer as the brown one coughed. His body now obeying his desperate demands to get up and start moving. To chase after Zhiaxha and perhaps find some way to convince her...

Chapter 16

It was walking through an old nightmare from the distant past, scaling the large stone walls with ease to find fields upon fields of buildings. All aged and worn from lack of care, many of the roofs angled to deal with the snowfall of winter. Making it difficult to scale them and keeping many on the old grated catwalks and makeshift ramps to help clear gaps.

The white one recalled taking them in a terrified attempt to escape that night. Walking across like she was taking her own previous path and realizing just how much Zhia grew up since then. She was stronger now, still frightful of the tower that caught her eye. But she was also furious, nearly cursing it regardless of how much her chest hurt.

Though a call behind her caught the white one's ear, grumbling both at it and herself for wasting so much time and taking off before Josea could catch up. Likely getting the attention of many other Hollows in the process, as a loud uproar was heard within the city. Actually getting her a little afraid of the sheer numbers there were, but she stuck to the highgrounds. The many paths that the so-called 'runners' used to take as she made her way to that forsaken building.

The white Ajaba couldn't remember the exact path her past self took to escape, but with the daylight she could find a way to get close. Scanning the tall walls, she spotted a large opening that was patched up. The great window that she threw herself out of and landed on... Honestly it was a very large amount

of trash. Stopping her fall from being fatal, and by the look of it, they were still adding to it.

Tracing the way she escaped wasn't going to help at that point, but following the path that the Runners made possibly would. Especially if the people from the Bunker were going to 'trade' her for whatever. It would be risky; barging through the front door, but...

Following up the paths they made along the building sides and fire escapes, a much flatter rooftop which looked to be the remains of a de-walled building floor. One leading towards a makeshift drawbridge; raised but leading towards the tower's catwalks. A gap large enough to stop most Hollows from making it to the other side.

Another set of howls made the white one spade her ears, knowing Josea was probably not far behind. Taking some steps back for a running start, Zhia cleared the gap while aiming for one of the vertical Pivots (or columns) beside the drawn up bridge. Grabbing a hold of it with her momentum and swinging herself onto the otherside.

The catwalk shook more than she liked, already making her large body uneasy as the platform was suspended in the air. Causing her fur to puff up as the white one reached the point of no return, yet she could still hear his voice approaching the other side. "Zhia! Please!"

"I'd be quiet, if I were you." She snorted at him, taking off up the catwalk while hearing him whimper and curse. Only for those instincts to once again alert her senses again, not for her own life, but for-?

A yelp, a bit of a crash against some sturdy glass, and the metal catwalk shook heavily! Cursing at herself as she turned around and dove towards the edge where she seen a brown body slip off! Barely getting her own hand down to grab his wrist before he fell the at least 5 story height! Hearing the male panic in a whimper as he struggled to hold on, a series of Hollows screaming and diving for his dangling body! Some coming unbelievably close to grabbing him as Zhiaxha attempted to pull the male up with a single arm!

The metal platforms seemed to shift with the weight, worrying both of them while Josea fought against his hesitation! Swinging his free hand up to grab her arm, missing a few times before feeling her swing him to one of the supports. Allowing the brown one to shift his weight and give her a rest before they pulled him up to safety. Though that didn't stop her from pinning his body down on his back and angrily growl at Josea. "You...! Damn idiot!" She hissed, not caring about the screams of the rabid ones.

"T-thank you-?" A sudden clamp on his muzzle by a single hand of hers, but the male could tell he was getting through to the white one. Closing her eyes tightly and looking away, ears flicking as if hearing

voices.

"This... Is your last warning I will give you, Josea-" A pair of gentle hands resting on her white arm, the one keeping his snout shut. Making it that much harder to stay mad at him. "I need to do this."

"Nou yuu doont." He attempted to say. Watching her face twist emotionally as she let go and shook his very light grip off, standing up to stare him down for a moment then run up the way to the tower. Entering a small hallway before some barricaded doors, hardening herself but some part of her still felt fractured. Taking a breath before ramming the double doors open and going straight for one of the panicking guards, already armed with makeshift melee weapons but not expecting a beast.

Zhia took one and threw him out into the hallway, barely making it down halfway to the open air while the white one pinned the other guard against the wall. Coming inches away from tearing his throat out, but her ears flicked and she snarled. Taking a breath before looking at the terrified human in the eyes. "...Tell me where the whitecoat is... And I'll spare everyone else."

"W-whitecoat?" A growl from the beast.

"White coat, glasses-"

"T-the doctor!?" Her stern look didn't ease. "T-top floor!" A point to the direction inside the building, taking a moment before the hyena exhaled and let him go. Following his directions and slamming the door opened to find a hallway with a couple of yelps down below. Human, not animal. Making her stare at the guard who pointed again at the next door in her path, one that led to a large stairway.

She closed that door behind her and made her way up the stairs quickly in leaps. ("Salajah...") No response as the white one kept focused. ("Talk to me. Why are you here?") Another set of steps as her chest started to hurt. ("The answer is back with him. You have no reason to be here.") A series of yelps and a familiar voice from down below, making her curse Josea's name, but she continued up. Needing to jump over some makeshift barricades to progress higher and higher. ("Salajah-")

"If you need to question me, then you've never been listening." She growled through her pants. Trying to recover some energy. "I won't let this happen to anyone or anything else..." A few more flights and she made it to a door that read Laboratory, striking fear into her heart like a phantom from the past. Taking several breaths to prepare herself while someone down below was calling to her. Heaving just as much as she was.

With a snarl Zhiaxha bashed the door open, entering small room after small room- the many cages

and nightmarish office objects that plagued her slumbers, but she roared through it. Spotting the first human she found; dressed like a guard and giving it a heavy swat! Slamming them against the wall hard before going after the next one and the third. Spotting the white coat over the chair, taking a hold of it and recalling that foul scent!

...It was still around. Nearby, she could smell it. Following her nose to one of the small rooms nearby. Reaching in, grabbing a hold of a body by the chest; letting her claws scratch through his clothing before pulling the older male into the main room and slamming him up against the wall. Instantly recognizing his face, the now damaged glasses. Nearly making her frightened, but enraged! Roaring into his face before hearing him whimper...

He looked so small now. Helpless and weak. Prey to the Ajaba, but she tamed her instincts. It was to be her revenge after all. "Remember me." She growled at him, only getting a whimper in question. "Seasons ago. You hired humans to abduct my family...! You... Experimented on us-!"

"Z-zero-five-seven!?" The doctor said in surprise, actually still a bit frightful but... Almost delighted. "You've returned? You've survived-!" A loud snarl from the white beast.

"Zhia!!" Only for that to become a growl in frustration as Josea entered the room, instantly getting the attention of the doctor and the guards who whimpered.

"O-oh god, another one?"

"An... Actual other one-?" A snarl from the white hyena who interrupted the doctor.

"Do not take this from me, Josea!!"

"Zhiaxha, you can't do this!" A growl from her.

("Look to him, Salajah-") A louder growl from her.

"Zhia-?" A whimper in pain as her claws dug into the doctor's skin. "Y-you know 057?"

"The hell is 057?"

"Shut up, Josea!" Zhia snarled at him.

"G-Guinea Hyena 057. T-that was her s-subject name-" A near-deadly gaze from those blue eyes. "S-sorry, but he asked."

"Wait, wait... GH-057? 'GHOST'?" The white one's gaze moved back and forth between both Josea and the doctor, ears spaded and mane raised high in frustration.

"For the last time, I am not **Dead**!" Zhia hissed, looking back at Josea. "Which is more than what I can say for your entire species." A snort, one that confused all the people in the room, the brown one suddenly feeling multiple confused gazes over him.

"I, uh... Am actually human- and I know we're both naked." He motioned towards a guard. "It's weird, I know. Get over it." One of them shyly looked away.

"You're... Human?" The doctor almost whispered.

"She... Bit me."

"-I bit him." Zhia confirmed rather quickly. "He also tried to cut himself with a knife that had my blood on it- we're not really sure what caused it." She snorted, moving back to the man in her grasp. "Not like it matters to you-"

("Salajah...")

"Zhiaxha..." The white one squeezed her eyes shut and looked away from Josea's plea. "You... Have the ability to fight this. You are our cure-"

"**SHUT UP!!**" She suddenly roared, actually making Josea cower while dropping the doctor. Stepping towards her brown counterpart. "I am **NOT** your species' damn solution to their own screw ups! I am not your answer to their self-implemented Apocalypse!! I never was-!"

("You changed him, Salajah-")

"-Shut up, Meredith!!" The white one roared, fighting the heartache while another uproar was heard outside. "I am not responsible for your species...! I'm only a damn victim of its desperation to hold onto..." Zhia trailed off, her eyes staring into space before shifting back over to Josea. Overlooking his form; so much like hers. "It's desperation not to change..."

"Are you...?" The doctor whispered, not moving from the floor against the wall. "Not affected by the Hollows?" The brown one's slow head shake nearly filled the old man's heart with delight. "It... Worked then?" A low growl from Zhia as she half looked in the doctor's direction.

"Y-you've definitely made a monster, that's for sure doc." Several sharp gazes instantly silenced and lowered the head of the guard.

"Over in the east... They've been trying to find a cure for a long time, ever since the miners caught..." No response as both hyenas gazed at each other, but Josea could feel something off. Something... Growing colder. "They had the best luck with Hyenas, w-which is why-"

"Doctor, I would stop talking if I were you." The brown one stated passive aggressively, feeling something was off. "Zhia... Talk to me. What are you thinking."

"You were right."

"I am?"

"This entire time... I had it wrong." Her blue gaze moved out towards the windows along the walls. Spotting the forests and wildlife beyond the city walls. "You kept telling me, but I just assumed..."

"Assumed what?" Josea asked, slowly moving towards her and not getting any physical sign of threat. But something was still off. "Zhiaxha?"

"That you... Wanted me to save your species from the Hollows. That you wanted me to... Somehow undo what happened; The Fall." That worry in his chest intensified, even more so when her gaze moved towards the doctor. "You created me, not as a weapon against the Hollows... But as a means to save your species. From itself."

"What?" Josea whispered, getting her attention.

"Yes." A rather strong hand on the brown one's shoulder, nearly pinning him in place. "It worked on you, it made you... Better. Able to survive in this place. That's the path out of this hellscape. Your species needs to evolve past it, that's the only way."

"Zhia-"

"You cannot outrun this, Josea. It has reached every corner of this land, and has made it nearly unlivable." A slight madness was growing in her blue eyes. "The east, the kingdom of Odin-"

"O-Oddin-"

"Whatever. They had... That tunnel thing. Who knows if it even worked- but this does! Sure, you hear the damn voices, but it doesn't... Affect you anymore. Like it never affected me." Another stare into the distance. "I can make a new world. One with something better than humans and their terrible ability to name things."

"I-I understand your humor here, Zhiaxha..." A blank stare at Josea. "But let's not get too carried away-"

"Will you join my new world, Josea?" That caught him off-guard, making him stumble for words. "You stuck with me this far... Protected me when I needed you." A bit of a shocked look from his gaze. "I trust you, Josea. Do you trust me?"

For what felt like a year, the brown one felt like the entire world was looking at him. Waiting for his answer. In some ways, the white hyena's words seemed like madness to the young man, but was that because... He was still human? Or was he anymore? Sentient, yes. But there was living proof standing before him that humans were no longer the only sentient ones around... But if he rejected...?

No. He couldn't reject Zhiaxha. He stuck with her for this one, and she did as well by his side. Josea rescued her from the bunker for some unknown reason... Maybe this was it. His own personal greed or desire to have something better in this world, perhaps it was this. Without taking a breath, he nodded at her. Seeing her smile, but only for a moment. "I... I trust you, Stripes-"

"I will hurt you." She snorted, making him chuckle. But something still felt off, like the scent of blood in the air. "But there's still something else I need to do first." The white hyena turned towards the doctor, helping him up to his feet where he thanked the beast. Then thrust her claws deep into his chest, piercing through the ribs and organs as a pool of blood leaked over her arm. Making Josea almost call out in denial, but restricting himself to just reaching from afar.

Her other hand pulled on the doctor's head, where they were forced to look into each others eyes. Zhi's cold, blue discs holding back a pensive rage as she spoke. "I will make the best out of what you created, Whitecoat. But you still murdered Salajah. You still gutted her family in this place. And for that, you will have no seat in the next world. Rest assured that I will not carry out my wrath on your species for your own actions." A faint gasp in pain is all he could muster in a response, her natural weapons raking into his torso. "My anger is transferred here. From my own chest into yours."

She waited until his final breath before crushing his head, not caring about his epitaph. Releasing the mangled corpse and turning about. Letting Josea overlook the white one in his shocked state. Tall. Proud. Strong. But something far Colder. Lacking Empathy. The Ghost was the solution out of this

apocalypse.

Where the only way to survive this hell is to become a...

Psychopath.

Written by Bartan Tirix