

"You alright, miss?"

Vaira blinked, her attention drawn to the lip of the pit. The colt bartender was staring down at her. How long had he been there? With a muted sigh, the shark realized he'd probably seen everything. So much for the only interesting part of this dump.

"They'll start cleaning that out here pretty soon." He said, a hint of fatigue eroding his professional tone. Or was it fear? Maybe even anger?

"Oh." Was all the shark managed to spit out. Vaira didn't budge from the pit, his words didn't click to her adrenaline-addled mind.

"I, uh..." He hesitated a moment, peering off towards the bar for a moment, then back to Vaira. "I've got some Messharian Brandy stashed away in my personal collection, if you'd like to lick your wounds over the best that money can buy... My treat, of course, if you're interested that is."

Those words came in loud and clear. In fact, the shark couldn't think of a single thing she wanted *more* than a drink at the moment. Despite the fatigue settling in, as the adrenaline in her blood tapered off, Vaira bounded up the stairs, meeting the colt at the summit.

"It's rare for a pretty girl to come running *towards* me. I could get used to this." He chuckled softly and shook his head. His gaze flickered back to the bar again, before returning to her. "You need a hand? I promise I won't push you."

"You wouldn't survive the attempt."

His posture straightened reflexively, despite his effort to hide it. "Point taken."

Vaira let the barest hint of a smile slip and offered her arm to him. "I'm a bit more tired than I thought I was, perhaps."

To her surprise, the colt rested her arm around his shoulder without any further snark, letting her bear the brunt of her weight on him as they walked. Vaira almost didn't notice his feather-light touch as his hand slipped around her waist, bracing her as her knees wobbled threateningly.

She was a little disappointed when they reached the bar as quickly as they did. In one smooth, practiced motion, he removed her arm and slid her easily into a seat, then ducked behind the ghostly counter. With a sigh, Vaira dropped her elbows on the ceramic stone and braced her chin on a palm.

"Here." The colt reappeared from beneath the counter and extended a white rag towards her. He offered a reassuring nod as the shark regarded it with some curiosity. "For your, uh... face."

For a long moment, she found herself speechless. Of all the things she'd expected to encounter in a strip club deep in the slums, kindness was the last thing she thought she'd find. Hesitantly, Vaira accepted it, returning a small nod of her own. "Is this how you treat all the women who pass through here? I don't even know your name yet."

"Ash." He said, peering at her from across the ghostly-lit bar. "And no, this is just how I treat all the women who can kill me with their bare hands."

"What?" Her face scrunched up as a protest formed in her throat. But, even the dim light, the barest glimpse of a grin held her in check. Instead, she buried her face in the plush cloth, unexpectedly damp and cool against her skin. "Saw that, did you...? I hope you realize I had very little choice in the matter."

Ash grabbed a tumbler and another white cloth from underneath the bar, scrutinizing it as if to find some hidden defect. His gaze flickered up every now and then, checking to see if she was still staring at him. She was. "That's why you came, isn't it? People who can fight like you can don't just randomly show up on Carnage Night..." He sighed and shook his head. "Besides, I saw the flyer you were holding. Whether you'd been shoved in or not... that's where you would've ended up."

Vaira slammed the bloody cloth back onto the counter, spreading tiny globes of crimson across the stone. "What the Hell does it matter to you, then? You're just the damn bartender!"

The sound of glass shattering made Vaira jump. Ash stared at her, then glanced down. The tumbler had slipped from his grasp, now nothing more than a million shards of crystal strewn across the floor. He sighed deeply, and hopped off the stool he'd brought behind the bar. "Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. You're right, I had to right--"

"Forget about it." Vaira stared down at the glass, leaned well over the counter at this point. "Sorry about... that. Do they make you pay for that?"

Ash shrugged. "Probably. It's fine, not the first time, and won't be the last time."

"I'll give you some cash to--"

"Keep your money." The colt was smiling, though Vaira could see the strain on his features. "Lemme go fetch that Brandy I promised you while you catch your breath. It's just upstairs in my room, won't take me more than a few minutes. Just wait here a moment, I'll be back shortly."

Vaira's ears perked up. "Wait, you live here?"

Ash blinked, scratching at some unseen itch on his cheek. "Yeah, I guess. There's a suite upstairs that's something of a, well... let's call it a V.I.P. room. But they don't mind me sleeping there, so long as it's not "in use"." He frowned, letting his gaze fall to the floor. "One of the perks of the job, I suppose."

"And where do you sleep when it *is* in use?"

His eyes drifted back up to her for a moment, then over to the bar. Without a word, he nodded in that direction.

"On the floor?"

"There's a cot." He said. "Not really meant for, well, people of my height." He raised his hand, parallel to the floor, to his shoulder, trying to explain his dilemma. "So yeah, the floor. Thankfully, it's vacant more often than not."

Vaira's lips twisted into a smirk. "And what about tonight?"

Ash stared at her dumbly, as if she'd spoken in a foreign language.

Then his eyes widened, the words striking him all at once. "Oh, uh... far as I know, we're the only ones here. The pit cleans itself automatically, and no one really sticks around for that. Something about bad luck or some other nonsense."

On reflex, Vaira laughed. The entire concept of luck was ridiculous. Luck hadn't shoved her into the pit, nor had it been the one to fight off her two assailants. Luck was for people who didn't have the ability to ensure their future for themselves. Luck was for people who didn't have the confidence to go after what they want.

"In that case, maybe you could show me around."

Ash cocked an eyebrow, regarding her carefully. "Yeah, sure. Just, uh... throw that towel somewhere behind the bar. I'll take care of all that in the morning."

Vaira passed the towel over her face a few more times, then over her arms and anywhere else she could find gore, then tossed it behind the counter. Cautiously, she stood and tested her legs, which seemed to have recuperated nicely from their ordeal.

The colt started to turn towards the stairs, but stopped abruptly. "One second." Without warning, he stepped in and brushed his thumbs over her cheeks. As they withdrew, Vaira noticed a faint splash of red clinging to the ebony fur.

"Much better." He said with a smile, taking a step back. "Would be a shame to cover even a part of that pretty face."

Vaira stared at him, her mind caught somewhere between anger and excitement. Every time she started to get used to the meek bartender, he switched back to the confident colt. It's like he was trying to keep her off balance. That was supposed to be *her* strategy. Well, two could play that game.

"Careful now, you haven't even liquored me up yet." The shark shot him a toothy grin. "Talk like that might still get you killed."

"As if that was somehow my intention." He said and spun around

dramatically, coattail flapping in his wake. "And besides... something tells me you're much more interesting sober."

"As if *that* is a matter someone of your profession would have experience with."

Ash laughed. "I see the teeth are just as sharp as they look! Keep talking like that and I'll have to take a couple drinks just to recover!"

They reached a set of stairs tucked away in the corner, near the oversized speakers. Vaira found herself staring at him as he climbed. Whether it was the liquor she'd drowned herself in earlier, her near-death experience in the pit, or this colt's odd charm, she couldn't tell. But for the first time in a while, she was actually enjoying herself. Whatever the cause, one thing was certain. He'd pay for this.

"Coming?" Ash asked, canting his head over his shoulder. "Or should I sway my hips for your viewing pleasure?"

Vaira blinked, snarled, and dashed up the stairs behind him. They were barely wide enough for two people, their shoulders planted firmly against each other as they climbed.

"Do all of your female patrons fall for your act? Or do you save it for the really drunk ones?" Vaira cast him a sidelong glance, hoping for some reaction. Was he toying with her, or was his confidence genuinely that fragile?

Ash gave her a strange look. "Look, I'm just a horse with a very nice bottle of brandy. And I happen to want to share it with you. Why is it more complicated than that?"

"It's not!" She shot back. "You seem to believe you can offer me a little alcohol and my clothes are coming off." Forget the subtlety. Vaira wanted to know what's going through his head. The thought of this bartender getting *her* so wound up was beginning to drive her insane.

He merely shrugged. "You seemed to share the same taste as I have in a drink. And to be honest, I've had enough drinking alone for one lifetime. It's nothing more than that, you're just overly excitable it

seems."

Vaira stopped dead. "Me? You're the one--"

"We'll never make it if we keep stopping. I assure you, a Messharian is not something you delay without proper reason." Ash took the last steps two at a time and disappeared down the hallway.

Fine, if that's how you want to be, then that's what you'll get. She sighed loudly, finally reaching the top step. There, she found him standing before a door - solid black with white trim, much like everything else - fumbling around in his pocket, presumably for the key.

"A bit of color wouldn't kill them." Vaira frowned.

"Didn't kill you, I guess." As he dug out the key, a stray digit flicked a lock of her black and pink hair. "Maybe you're on to something."

Vaira bared her teeth, this time fully intending it as a threat.

"Keep your hands to yourself!"

He sighed and jammed the key in. It clicked, and Ash flung the door wide. "After you."

"A regular gentleman. I bet that woos all the ladies you bring up here." Vaira ventured into the dark room, stepping carefully to avoid... well, anything. He did mention it was a V.I.P. room. Not that she'd ever been in one before, but her imagination was enough to convince her of caution.

"I do try." Ash shook his head, posture drooped ever so slightly. But Vaira could tell, and she almost felt bad. Almost.

The snap of a switch, followed by a dull buzz heralded the light as all the bulbs illuminated at once. The shark found herself inside a large living room, suited up with expensive furnishings. Two rich leather couches formed an 'L' in the corner, facing a thin, but giant television that could be mistaken for the wall itself. In the middle, resting on a plush brown-fur rug, sat a table made entire of glass, save for a couple metal brackets. The top pane was oval and appeared fogged. It hummed with it's own light from within, but thanks to the glaze, the radiance stayed

within the table, brightening the glass in much the same way the bar had been.

The other side of the room appeared to be a micro-kitchen; granite counters and steel appliances, surrounded by rich chestnut cabinets and drawers. A small island rose out of the center of the space, with a double-basin sink and a small lamp overhead. A scattering of foods remained out on the surface - mostly bread and fruit, and a crumb-laced plate. Enough to assume that he probably used the place as a dining table as well.

"Help yourself." Ash noticed her lingering gaze. "Nothing fancy, but they give it to me for free, so I'm not complaining."

She shook her head. "Pretty nice place for them to offer you for free. I doubt you could afford the cost of a single night here."

Ash paused. "I generally try not to brag, but if you're gonna say it like *that* I feel a certain need to defend my honor. I'm the best barkeep in town - and the people who run this place know it." He ducked his head behind a cabinet door, the sound of shuffling bottles echoing out. "Hell, my regulars bring in enough per day to cover a pad like this for a month."

"If that's the case, when why do let them kick you out of your room? Seems like if they just paid you more you could afford your own place and avoid the problem entirely."

"The Kings are good people, at least the one's that sign my checks are... but they try to keep stuff "in house", if you know what I mean. Still, you do your job and do it well, they take care of you- Ah!" Ash surfaced again from the cabinet with a look of satisfaction painted on his face. In his hands, he cradled a gold-tinted bottle, capped in white foil. The tails of a ribbon fell gracefully from just below the cap, with tiny gold lettering embroidering the fabric. 'Messharian', each letter stacked on top of each other vertically.

"The perks of the best job in New Barakaat." The cold glanced up at her, grinning from ear to ear. "Shall we?"

Vaira started to speak, but something caught her eye. She looked over, down a hallway across from the door they came in, and saw another door. This one was made of glass, though it was too dark to tell much else. "Does that lead outside?"

"Oh, the balcony! Good idea!" Ash set the bottle down, before producing two small, cubical glasses out of another cabinet. Similar to the ones from the bar, but scaled down to half size. In a few, fluid motions, he slid over and pulled the door open to the freezer, then spun around and dug an ice pick out of a drawer in the island.

"You want ice, right? Of course you do." He answered himself, flipping back around and cracking two chunks off a full brick of ice laying on it's own shelf. "There you go." Precisely, he slid the glass across the island. It stopped just short of the edge, right beside her.

"Show off."

"Had we not established that already?" Collecting the bottle once again, he slipped past her and started down the hallway. If possible, his smile seemed to have stretched even wider. Vaira might've slapped him had he not been holding a bottle of liquor worth two-thousand Astrals.

They passed a few compartment-like rooms - like the micro-kitchen, space-saving versions of other "essential" spaces a luxury apartment might need - before passing into a bedroom at the end of the hall. The bed itself took up the majority of the room, a four-post canopy raised several feet off the floor. Thin black veils curled around the crossbars, draped delicately over rich crimson silk sheets.

The footboard itself stood higher than her six foot two frame, swirling out and in like a wooden letter 'S'. The rest of the room was boring, in contrast. A nightstand, an armoire, and another dresser, all of a similar chestnut to the cabinets.

Ash drove his shoulder firmly into the sliding glass door across the room, and flicked it open with an adept swipe. Instantly, the room was flooded with a cool breeze, brushing gently over her knitting wounds and

sending a shiver up Vaira's spine so strong she nearly dropped her glass. By the time she'd regained control of herself, the colt had already stepped out onto the balcony. She quickly followed suit.

His balcony looked out over the river, over which the city had built on top of. Across from them was the cold edifice of a skyscraper, so tall it disappeared into the *onxciira* - a layer of "clouds", made of thick, black smoke pouring from the industrial plants dotting the city.

To either side, Vaira could see large bridges built over the churning water, wide enough for four lanes of road traffic. Tall streetlights spit out enough light to cast the asphalt in a thin, wispy blanket of translucent yellow.

"This was what they showed me when they first asked me to work here." Ash sighed, gazing wistfully into the river. "I liked my old place, had a lot of friends in that rickety, seedy, hole in the wall, but I couldn't turn this down... I grew up in a little fishing village you've never even heard of, spending every day staring out over the ocean and wondering what someone like me could actually become in this world." He chuckled, but it wasn't a cheerful laugh. "Certainly wasn't thinking this, way back when."

"Bartending?" She asked, glancing over at him. "Better life than most people get. You're at least a step up from the ants."

"The... killing, that's what I meant." His head sunk visibly. "When I saw you get shoved into the pit by that old man.... I never expected you to come out of it."

"Some bloodthirsty street rats aren't enough to kill me. But it's good to know you had faith in me." Her eyes narrowed, daring him to insult her again.

"I didn't mean it like that. You saw what happens first hand. Many people go in, not many come out. The odds were against..." He sighed again. "Sorry, nevermind I'm guess I'm just repeating myself. You didn't come here to listen to me. Let me get this bottle open already."

She frowned. *He was concerned about me? Why?*

Ash gave the cap an adroit twist and snapped the seal, and immediately the scent of liquor rushed past her nose. Fleetinglly, as if teasing her senses with it's fragrant bouquet.

"Care to hand me your glass, or would you rather just smell it?" Ash was staring at her.

And he's back to being an ass. Vaira shoved the glass at him with a low grunt.

He cocked an eyebrow. "It's like you're wired to a hair trigger. Never seen someone change emotions so much so fast."

"You're one to talk!" She shot him a venomous glare, then turned back to the river. Within moments, something cold pressed into her arm, and she wheeled on him once again.

"Enjoy." His expression had returned to his default, smug grin, as he offered her glass back to her.

She snatched it from him. "Yeah, thanks." The glass rested on the railing of the balcony, never once moving towards her mouth.

Ash, however, savored his quite loudly, as if it were the last drink of his life. "Wonderful. Messharian at it's absolute finest. I'll have to thank Mr. Trine personally for this." He took another long, drawn out sip.

Is he trying to infuriate me, or what? Does he think he can't end up like those corpses in the arena? The thought didn't bother her as much as it probably should have. What was one more to try and explain to Zael at this point, right? She already broke her oath.

"You know..." Ash started again. "If you had died in that pit, I was going to quit this job. Probably leave the whole damn city."

Vaira's attention snapped back to him. "That kind of talk might work on some women--"

"It's not talk. It's the truth." He met her gaze, but his eyes weren't the same. They were softer, and kept darting around, as if he were switching between looking at her and something off in the distance. He

wasn't grinning anymore.

"And why's that? You said it's the best job in town."

"Because..." He turned back to the river. To her surprise, he downed his glass in one gulp, rather than savor it further. "Because I don't think I could do it anymore." It was apparent he had stopped himself from saying something else, but he just shook his head and poured himself another glass.

Vaira stared down into her glass. His actions said one thing, and his words said another. "I'm not convinced you'd give all this up because you saw someone you didn't know get killed. I'm sure it's happened plenty of times before, and here you are still."

Ash set his glass down on a small glass table, next to where he'd left the bottle. It rattled as he did, and when Vaira turned to look, she noticed his hands shaking. Not much, but enough to expose his true feelings. "You're right about that. But, it's never happened to someone... like you." He sank into a metal chair and stared over the railing, at the gray skyscraper across the gap.

With that, Vaira downed her glass and set it on the table. "I should go. But thanks for the drink. And the towel." She stepped through the portal leading inside and into the bedroom, leaving him sitting there in the cool night air without another look.

If he really thinks that kind of crap is going to work on me, he's lost his mind.

Vaira crossed the bedroom in as few strides as possible and passed into the hallway, then into the front room. Her hand caught the handle and nearly tore it from its socket in her haste to throw open the door.

Strong hands caught her by the shoulders and spun her around, pushing her back up against the door. Ash wasted no time in pinning her against the black-painted metal as he pulled himself in close, his lips pressed tightly to hers before any protest could even leave her tongue. A hand drifted up the back of her neck, wandering through her hair as he gently

guided her head towards him.

Vaira's hands flew onto his back, but she didn't tear him to shreds as she had originally intended. She latched onto him, pulling his body into her. Her foot slid up against the door, shoving it closed and using it for leverage.

They both drew back at once, staring at each other with differing expressions. His face held a look of pure disbelief, as if he'd gone into the situation *expecting* to die. Her eyes regarded him hungrily, like a starved predator gazing upon cornered prey.

"Was that so hard?" Vaira was panting, but not from fatigue this time.

"Timing is everything." He ducked in to kiss her again, but this time her hands held him back.

With little effort, she shoved him back. Ash looked puzzled, until she shed her tank top and the paper-thin jacket she wore over it.

His dumb grin returned. "You don't mess around."

"No, I don't." She stalked over to him, exaggerating the roll of her hips. His eyes never left her chest though, she noticed with a twinge of disappointment. She'd just have to give him a reason to notice.

"Perhaps you shouldn't either." Without breaking stride, Vaira slid right past him and continued on down the hall. Towards the bedroom. With each sultry step, her long tail swung like a pendulum in her wake, both inviting and mesmerizing.

Footfalls pounded behind her, and as she turned around, Ash swept her off the ground and into his arms. Her limbs crossed around his neck and waist as their lips met once more, any caution he may have had for her teeth had evidently been thrown to the wind as his tongue forced its way inside.

The colt carried her to the massive bed, throwing the veil aside before laying her down on the silk sheets. Vaira's legs remained locked around his waist while he practically tore the black coat off his back,

followed by the formal white shirt underneath, leaving his rippling, onyx-furred chest bare.

"Don't keep me waiting." One foot had migrated from his back to the front, tugging at his belt with a few curled toes. She took the chance to pop the clasp on her jeans and slide them just over her hips, leaving them tantalizingly in the way of what he was after.

Ash snorted and pushed her foot aside, slipping free of the belt with one hand and freeing himself of the garment with the other. As they fell, a pair of boxers were all that stood between him and freedom, tented and stretched to their absolute limit, and the colt couldn't help but let out a long, deep sigh of relief.

Vaira stopped him as the colt started to remove those, too. Ash started to voice a protest, but it devolved into an guttural moan as her lips kissed his tip through the cloth. The garment stretched tighter as the flesh underneath tensed and pushed, and the shark could tell his knees were threatening to cave underneath him.

"You're this worked up already?" She teased, glancing up at him while planting another kiss.

Ash groaned and placed his hand on a bedpost. "It's... been a long time. I try not to get involved with- ah!" She wrapped her lips around the flesh and cloth, and he had to grab hold of the crossbar to hold himself up.

"With drunk women? You're right, it's *far* more interesting when I'm sober..."

Reluctantly, Vaira drew back and gestured to the bed with a nod of her head. At this rate he'd tear the whole canopy down trying to stay on his feet. Ash gladly accepted, clambering in beside her. The colt braced his back up against the headboard, gazing down at her with soft eyes and the same dumb grin.

Something about his inexperienced, pent-up yearning for her was driving her wild with lust. The way he handed her the reins without so

much as a peep of snark or complaint...

Vaira slid slowly between his legs, her eyes locked with his the entire time. As her face drew closer to his groin, she took great care to take only the cloth into her maw, then shredded it between her teeth. Ash nearly leapt from the bed, but the rest of him seemed more than content to stay. His shaft throbbed and twitched to full stiffness, finally freed, and stared her dead in the face.

Whatever she'd been thinking about disappeared entirely once his scent hit her. Between the pre dribbling from the tip and the musk hitting her in waves, Vaira's mind went completely blank, replaced by his pheromones and the heat building beneath her skin. She couldn't hold herself back any longer.

"Oh fuck!" Ash cried out as his head disappeared into her mouth. His hips jerked free from the bed and bucked once, but her hands were ready to hold him down, planted firmly on each thigh. A jet of pre splashed over her tongue, the heat and the taste enough to make her moan around him. Her eyes flashed back to him for a moment, waiting for him to relax again before she moved. Ash managed a meager nod, and Vaira didn't need much convincing.

Gingerly, she slid her tongue along the underside of his flesh, caressing him from the tip back, then around in a long, leisurely loop. When she felt his hand lay gently atop her head, she went down further, working her way along until the crown pressed into her throat, not even half of it in her mouth. The colt pressed lightly on her head as she started to back off, so she kept going. The shark drew herself up straighter, grabbed tight onto his legs, and buried him in her throat, her lips flush with the fur of his groin.

"Oh Gods..." Ash's head tilted back and his hand fell from its perch. He peered down at her through half-lidded eyes, unable to maintain his grin with his jaw slacked open.

She held it as long as she could, then shot up for air. Panting, with

some combination of pre and drool dripping from her lips, she smirked.

"That good, huh?"

"No one's ever... done that to me before." He sighed. "You're incredible."

Vaira blinked. *Incredible...?* She wasn't sure how to respond to that. *It's just something people say sometimes, it doesn't actually mean anything. Get a grip.*

Ash was staring at her, a mixture of confusion and worry on his face. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No." She said, then slid her head back between his legs. Her lips swallowed him until he reached her throat, then backed off until it was only the tip, bobbing up and down on his flesh while her tongue slithered and swirled over every inch of him it could reach. His moans grew louder, more charged with lust, and she increased her pace, working into a wet, squelching rhythm.

"I... I can't..." Ash barely managed a whisper, both his hands resting on her head. One rubbed one of her large ears while the other brushed absently through her hair. The rest of him fought desperately to hold himself back, thin outlines of veins protruding from the sheer effort.

Vaira felt him reach his tipping point, and she withdrew until only the tip was in her mouth. She wrapped her hands around him, one sliding over his shaft and the other massaged his hefty, overfilled sac, as her lips worked his glans and her tongue worked his crown. The shark brought him to the very peak, then braced herself for the finish.

The colt cried out so loud they might've been able to hear him from the distant streets. The results were even more explosive than Vaira had anticipated, his hands shoving her down into his lap as a torrent of white erupted from him and poured into her mouth. Ash bucked his hips and managed to force himself into her throat, pumping his seed directly into her throat. The shark swallowed an entire mouthful, only to fill up again and swallow, again and again until the flow finally tapered off.

Ash collapsed against the headboard, panting and sighing and sucking in air like he'd been the one held down. Vaira drew back, his last burst still filling her mouth to capacity. She smirked at the sight of him, completely spent, as she swirled his seed around with her tongue, finally able to savor it to the fullest. Did it make her a nympho to enjoy the taste of it so much? Probably, but then she'd never heard anyone complain about her sex drive before. Tonight might be the first.

The colt opened one of his eyes and looked at her, head still tilted and rolled back against the headboard. It sent static up her spine when she got that look, that look of ultimate satisfaction and gratitude. For a fleeting moment, it filled a hole in her that could not otherwise be filled.

Vaira tilted her head back and swallowed, closing her eyes to focus on it traveling down her throat. With that, she leaned in close, until their faces were but a few inches away. His eyes opened fully when he realized how close she was, though they clearly were opposed to the idea. The shark caught his gaze and held it, pressed her hands onto his shoulders, and grinned.

"My turn."
