

Sunlight streamed in through the slats in the plastic blinds, tilted slightly open to breathe some life into the otherwise empty office vestibule. The entire place reeked of simplicity - plaster walls, floor tiles of some nondescript material, and long, rectangular ceiling lights that hummed and buzzed in unwilling compliance.

On one end of the hall, two glass doors marked the entrance, though the glass was entirely covered by blinds. It was the set of floor-to-ceiling windows to either side that they allowed some light to pass through. No one on the outside would be able to see through the tinted panes unless they walked right up to the building. They had people ready to deal with anyone who got too nosy.

On the other side, there wasn't much. A long table, oak or perhaps maple, they were difficult for him to tell apart, alongside a podium of similar construction. Various papers were set on the table in a way that surely made sense to Sarris, the gray wolf behind the podium, while an ornately carved, dark-stained wooden box sat atop the slanted surface.

Besides himself and the wolf, there were two other men, one on either side of Sarris, handing him papers or whispering something in his ear, and a single-file line of street rats and thugs leading from the podium to the door. The newest "applicants" to the New Barakaat Kings, he thought with no small amount of disgust.

I remember when wearing blue and black still meant something.

"Dracyn." Sarris looked at him with his one functioning eye. The other stayed hidden behind a blue headband pulled over the socket. "Something wrong?"

"Not at all." He lied, leaning up against the wall behind him and crossing his arms.

So what, they're just cannon fodder. None of them will last long enough to actually become a King. They'll die or quit long before then.

An entire month of Carnage Night survivors, one by one, were initiated into the gang. Sarris removed a broad, steel dagger from the wooden box,

took their outstretched hand, and cut a gash into the palm of each one. After that, the wolf cut two smaller strokes, forming a crimson 'K' in their flesh, then he pressed their bleeding hand onto a vellum scroll, next to all the others from this month's recruitment.

Once finished, Sarris handed the recruit the knife, and sent them off into the next room to grab their new gear. Dracyn had sat in on the process innumerable times, and yet he found himself more irritated than usual this time. Why Leon resorted to these tactics - lowering their standards to the point of taking in every punk with a death wish - infuriated him to no end. Seeing it in person only twisted the knife in his back.

It's cheaper to buy some worn-out knives and guns than to actually hire on real help. Especially since these poor saps rarely last long enough to collect their pay. And they think they're getting the better part of the deal...

Dracyn froze. A shark woman strolled confidently through the door, jet black hair flowing wild down to her wide hips, pink-streaked bangs darting between her eyes as she walked. Her blue - no green, or perhaps both - eyes met his for a brief moment before she reached the podium, zeroing in on Sarris with a stare so venomous he thought the wolf might drop dead.

So this is the woman who survived the blood trial?

"I've heard many things about you, shark." The wolf spoke through a toothy grin, unphased by the stare pointed at him. "Sounded like you made quite a mess. One of the best in recent memory, so I'm told."

"They had it coming." Her demeanor didn't waver, despite his compliment.

"Ah, but don't they all." Sarris pulled another dagger from the box. "Hand, please. And a name, seems it's not on my list."

Dracyn's eyes flicked to the papers on the table. He scanned towards

the bottom, where last night's would have been recorded. *Lance Calgore, Adri Black...* The next entry made him struggle to stifle a laugh, burying his mouth into his palm and forcing a cough. Whoever wrote down "Sharktits" must've been awfully confident that she wouldn't find out about it.

The shark frowned, but ultimately extended her palm out. "Vaira."

Sarris took it eagerly, as if initiating the first female into the Kings would bring him some great notoriety. There were other women in the gang, but that'd been before the blood trials were installed. Back when the only way to gain entry into the most exclusive, most powerful crew in the largest city in all of Almedra was to be so terrifyingly skilled that Leon couldn't afford *not* to recruit you.

Dracyn had a feeling that, even if those were still the circumstances, this "Vaira" would still have made it in.

You shouldn't be here. The other recruits will get you killed... This system isn't designed for someone like you.

The shark was staring at him. Only then did he realize he'd been staring at *her* the entire time... Dracyn noticed the guards were watching him now too, talking amongst themselves in hushed tones that his heightened senses still couldn't pick up.

All of that didn't bother him. Letting her go through with this initiation, that did. But what could he do? This was how it worked now... To interfere would be to publicly humiliate Sarris right in front of his two most-trusted subordinates.

The wolf brought the blade closer to her flesh.

"Stop." Dracyn called out, turning his eyes to Sarris for the first time since Vaira entered the room.

Vaira's eyes filled with the same venom she'd pointed at Sarris. Now it was pointed at him. "Something to say?"

"Don't mark her." Dracyn said, his gaze flickering to Vaira for only

a moment. She looked ready to grab the knife and plunge it through his heart. The wolf looked ready to do the same.

"Why the Hell not?" Sarris' voice reverberated with anger. "She passed the blood trial fair and square! My men saw her kill two people with her bare hands!"

"I said don't mark her." He remained calm, his tone unchanging. "I didn't say don't let her in."

The shark seemed perplexed, but stayed quiet. It seemed like she hadn't been too keen on the idea of being marked in the first place.

Sarris, however, was frothing at the mouth, working eye more white than iris. "And what am I supposed to tell the boss, then? This is my job, in case you weren't aware!"

Dammit Sarris... He couldn't let the wolf, even rightly angered as he was, get away with challenging him in public. In a single, lightning-charged step, Dracyn crossed the width of the room, stopping mere inches from the wolf's face. "Your *job*, Sarris, is to follow orders. *I* will tell Leon, personally, of what has occurred here. Because, as you say, that is *my* job. Are we clear, or have your ears failed you as well?"

For a moment, Dracyn thought the wolf might actually try to stab him with the knife. Instead, he slammed it into the podium, driving it down to the hilt in the wood. "Oh, *I understand...* Maybe once you stop thinking with your dick and start thinking with your head, you'll realize what you've done!" Sarris roared out in anger and stormed off, heading through the doors the earlier recruits had passed through. But not before he rammed his fist through the plaster wall. His two guards went with him, probably to stop him from destroying anything else.

I know precisely what I've done. That's why it had to be so. You'll forgive me in time, old friend.

"That went well." Vaira stared off in the direction Sarris went, then turned to Dracyn. "What now?"

"You sure this is what you want?" Dracyn took hold of the knife and tore it from the wood with barely a flick of the wrist. Vaira eyed it suspiciously, but didn't budge.

"No, I risked my life and killed two people cause I thought it would be a fun way to spend the evening." She stuck her hand out again, lips curled into a snarl. "What do you think?"

Dracyn sighed, flipped the knife over and placed the handle in her palm. "What I think... and what actually happens are two entirely separate worlds."

Vaira blinked. She took the knife and held it up before her eyes, inspecting the blade, before dropping it back onto the table. "Then let your actions provide the bridge between dreams and reality." A grin spread across her maw.

Disbelief ruined his stoic facade, eyes wide from the shock. "You're... familiar with the quote?" Just who the Hell was this girl?

The shark shook her head, though the grin never left her features. "Nah. It was just a lucky guess." Her eyes kept a strict vigil on him in every moment, as if she were scrutinizing his every move. Though she maintained her ignorance, this game had just become far more complicated.

This is no street rat. Whoever she is... she's already two moves ahead of me, and I didn't even realize we were playing.

The longer he stayed, the more she outmaneuvered him. He needed to get out and recollect himself, and hopefully figure her out before they met again. They *would* meet again, of that there was no doubt. She was clearly here for more than grunt-level work...

Dracyn hooked his thumb in the opposite direction Sarris had gone, pointing toward another door. "Through there, you'll find the real storeroom. Ask one of the grunts, show him your hand, and take whatever you need. Once Sarris calms down, he'll tell you where to go. If I wasn't already late to a meeting with Leon, I'd show you myself..."

"No need." Vaira stalked off toward the door, stopping just before

grabbing the handle. "Anything else?"

"Don't get yourself killed." Dracyn's face had grown rigid once more, now accustomed to her aptitude. "And don't trust anyone."

Her hand paused mid-turn of the brass lever. "Not even you?"

"Especially not me."

Past the second set of double doors, a security checkpoint, a sliding metal fence, and some fairly confused gang members, Vaira entered into a wide, circular chamber. The walls were completely hidden behind shelves and racks, brimming with polished-steel rifles and handguns of every flavor, to the tiniest - and most easily hidden - pistol to the largest precision rifle she'd ever seen, complete with a scope the length and width of her forearm.

Brown crates of ammunition lay near their respective weapons, the cardboard flaps flung open to expose the neatly-marked boxes and brass shells within. For a non-military operation, Vaira was surprised to see how organized and well-kept the arsenal was. This type of maintenance wasn't the effort of a single person, it would've taken many skilled hands to keep up with it all. How many facilities did they have, just like this one, spread out across the city?

A long wooden table sat in the center of the room, much like the one out front. After a couple moments to look around, the shark returned with two items and set them down upon it.

The first, a standard-sized handgun. Nickel-plated steel, polished to a fine sheen until it shimmered in the light of a nearby florescent floor lamp, the pistol reflected the smile spread wide upon her face. She hefted it's weight into her hand and sighed softly.

Brings back memories.

There wasn't anything special about it; eight rounds of small caliber

ammo. But it was the same model she'd cut her teeth on years ago, and she knew it's engineering inside and out. It was... comforting among an ocean of rapid, drastic change.

Don't trust anyone. He was probably right about that. Vaira assumed most recruits were issued pistols similar to this one. Though she wanted to take something with a little more... stopping power, who knows how her fellow recruits might take to that. If she had to guess, by offering her a knife between the ribs. For now, the real fun would have to wait. For now.

The other item she laid out wasn't a weapon at all. A square of cloth, black with long stripes of dark blue. In the center, the letters NBK were stitched in gold brocade, stylized in a font that might've been normal four centuries ago. Back when people had nothing better to do than make their letters look as foolish as the clothes they wore. Not everyone would just believe her on face value when she told them she had been initiated, something like this might help sway them.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable."

Vaira spun around, sweeping up the pistol and pointing it at the source of the voice. Sarris had been right behind her, and caught her wrist before the gun ever reached his face. His good eye bore into her mind, like he was staring straight into her soul.

The wolf laughed and let her go, walking towards one of the racks on the wall. "Helluva trick you pulled on Dracyn earlier. I don't know what you did, but--"

"I didn't do anything." Vaira cursed under her breath and chucked the gun onto the table. It wasn't even loaded. Sarris probably knew that, or he could hide his true emotions just as well as she could. Maybe a bit of both.

"Sure you didn't." He picked up a pistol from a rack and looked it over. With practiced hands, he slid out the clip, checked the slide, and peered down the sight, before shrugging and setting it back. "But either

way, something about you riled him up. Never spoken to me like that before, that's for damn sure."

Her attention was locked on the guns he toyed with, rather than the wolf himself. Everything in her body screamed to run, get away from this wolf and disappear for a couple days. Somehow she'd thrown herself in the middle of something far larger than her recruitment, and was caught in the crossfire. But if she ran, everything to this point was for nothing.

"Is it true you killed someone with a headbutt last night?" He started again, casually inspecting a rifle now as he talked.

Vaira shrugged. "I didn't check his pulse."

Sarris burst into laughter. "Well said!" He replaced the weapon he was holding and turned to face her, unable to contain his smile. "You know that's how I lost my eye? Crazy story - some punk kinda like you tried to pull a knife on me in an alley. Figured he didn't have the guts, so as he comes in close, I just rammed him." The wolf punched his palm, signifying the impact. "Ha! Didn't even know what hit him!"

"So how'd he get your eye?" She felt inclined to ask, despite no real interest. Getting to know her boss, or at least his weaknesses, might come in handy.

A frown formed on his lips. "Bah. Damn kid just sorta swiped his shitty little switchblade on his way out the world and caught me. Never been so mad in my life as I was that night... that is, until about ten minutes ago." He leaned back against one of the racks. It shuddered but held. "Ain't much fun living with just one eye. Even less fun to have your balls ripped off in front of your boys."

"And you think I just telepathically told him to do that? I was just as surprised as you were."

"Nah you weren't." He shrugged. "But it ain't your fault either. I know that. Something about you got him all worked up, and I have a feeling it's not just your body." Sarris' eyes drifted from her face, tracing her from head to toe and back again, followed by a smirk. "Though it's not for

lack of effort, eh?"

His antics were simultaneously infuriating and yet exciting. Other than the missing eye, Sarris was in prime physical shape. Lush, lustrous gray fur, not dull and discolored like the tiger's stripes had been the night before. His tight shirt barely concealed the cut of his musculature, it wasn't bulky, just there didn't seem to be a ounce of fat on him. The wolf's face held several scars, but they weren't ugly, jagged rifts that prevented the fur from growing. They were clean cuts, as far as she could tell, mementos of hard-fought battles and worthy adversaries.

It's your boss, dammit. Control yourself. Vaira forced the thoughts from her mind. Sarris seemed suddenly more interested in her than he had been before, rising off the weapon rack and approaching the table once more. Perhaps he was aware of the effects his statement had on her.

That's good, actually... If I flirt with him a little, I'll have an easier time moving around, while he'll think he's got the perfect way to get back at Dracyn.

"If you're referring to my clothes, these are all I own." She took a half-step back, though her eyes never left his.

"I wasn't." Sarris stepped closer, and then he stopped, just at the table's edge, his head canted just slightly to one side.

Damn. Playing along was a good plan as long as she could keep it at that. He wasn't making it easy.

"Can't control how people react to my body, now can I?" Vaira hopped up onto the table, seating herself on the edge and curling her tail around her waist. She picked up the pistol she'd chosen earlier and looked over it idly, though her eyes often strayed from it to him, then quickly away.

"That you can't..." Sarris approached once again, but this time he didn't stop. The wolf stood so that she was pinned between the table and him. When she refused to look up at him, instead focusing solely on the pistol, he slipped it out of her hands so quickly the shark didn't even

realize what he'd done.

Fuck. Her eyes met his. He leaned in close, and she could do nothing but let him. The wolf's hands took her by the shoulders and pulled her in as he pressed his lips near hers, and Vaira clamped her eyes shut. So much for the plan.

Sarris' lips didn't touch her. Instead, they slipped past, towards her ear. She shivered as his breath rolled over the sensitive flesh, scalding hot, and she felt his grip tighten on her shoulders.

"Sucks, huh? Now you know how mad I was earlier." The wolf laughed and stepped back. Without so much as another look, Sarris turned around and walked towards the door. "Everything you need's on the table. Come back tomorrow and we'll discuss what you'll be doing 'round here." With that, he shoved the door open, and slammed it behind him.

Vaira fought hard to stifle her frustration. The damn wolf was probably still listening for her anguished cries - well to Hell with that! Her entire body was shaking, her blood boiling beneath her skin, his scent still fresh in her mind... And yet he'd done her a favor without even knowing it. As much as it sucked, and it *really* did, her plan had somehow worked out after all.

To her right, Vaira found what he'd mentioned on his way out. Beside the gun, there was a small black cell phone, a few hundred Astral, and a key on a thin loop of string. Just like that, Sarris - and the NBK - now owned her. Whatever they wanted, it was her job to make it happen. Her life depended on it.

She stuffed the items into the various pockets of her jeans, grabbed a holster and a small box of rounds from the room, and headed for the door. After all that, she *really* needed a drink. And maybe a certain bartender might oblige her other, more pressing needs as well.