

By midday, sunlight had given way to ominous black clouds, heaving and churning with the heavy storm they longed to relieve themselves of. New Barakaat's skyline disappeared into the mass, the clouds themselves flying much lower than they might in other cities. Somewhere between the tons of polluted gas dumped into the atmosphere each day and the immeasurable volume of magic dumped into the ruined land at the city's birth, they'd broken something that couldn't be fixed. But that's what happens when there's no room left on the sustainable land - there's sacrifices that have to be made.

Vaira peered up at the storm and sighed. Ever since she'd came to this damn city, it was always raining. Even when the sun was out earlier, it was raining. There was no need for natural clouds, the *onxciira*, thin and patchy as it were, still loved to coat parts of the city in its acid bath. Thankfully, the acid wasn't quite strong enough to be harmful, so long as you didn't get caught out in it for long.

Ash had been kind enough to drop her off at the storehouse this morning, so she didn't have to worry about it. Though he wasn't technically NBK, he had low-level clearance - enough to get near the compound and not much else. Evening would be upon the city soon, and the bartender would be preparing the club to open soon, so she had little choice. Walk.

That'd been her plan all along. The shark had paid close attention to the route they'd driven, so she'd be able to return on her own. Until the NBK gave her a spot to crash, the strip club was a small step up from the street. Ash was kind enough, perhaps too kind to a stranger such as herself, considering the type of people who might come through that door. People like her.

*Don't trust anyone.* The words came to her again. They'd proven themselves true enough with Sarris, who'd made her into a fool at his first opportunity. Perhaps she should reevaluate her position with the horse, too. Though he seemed harmless, surely someone that the NBK were willing

to trust with their extremely-illegal recruitment process couldn't truly be so... benign.

*This is why criminals always seem so paranoid. One day in and I'm already beginning to think everyone's out to get me.* Vaira sighed again. She hadn't expected this to move so quickly. A week ago, she was bleeding out in the streets of Santrefal. Now, the shark was halfway across the world as a pawn in the single-largest underground organization in the hemisphere.

"It must be bad if they're willing to trust me again so soon." She said quietly, if only to break up the silence. No one moved around on the surface once the storm clouds rolled in. They either stuck to the aircars or the subway. Besides her, the only living things in sight were the feral creatures that cared little about the storm -they'd built up an immunity to the toxins over the centuries.

A scream filled the humid air, reverberating off the towering buildings on all sides. The sound was distorted, Vaira couldn't discern where it came from. The crisscrossed streets were like a labyrinth to anyone who hadn't spent their entire life navigating them...

The scream echoed out again, and this time Vaira caught it before it bounced around and distorted. To her left, the intersection continued for a block then shot left again, out of her sight. For how clear the sound was that time, it couldn't have been very far, but if the shark went off to play hero, she might not be able to find her way back to the bar.

*Everyone's inside, trying to avoid the storm. No one else will hear that scream.*

Vaira balled her fists, staring off in the direction of the scream. *It's not my job to save the world. If I go, it'll probably be some punk running away with a purse, and for all that I'll have to sleep outside cause I'll get lost. I can't exactly ask for directions to the NBK Storehouse in the morning, either.*

Another scream. Vaira ran after it.

The road shot left from the first intersection, then snaked it's way deeper into the heart of the city. Any time there was another intersection, Vaira had to wait for another scream. They were growing farther and farther apart each time, and the shark stopped waiting and started guessing.

The road she chose came to a dead end. There hadn't been a scream for several minutes now. She'd spent too long thinking about whether to help or not, and now it was too late.

*Dammit. What a waste of time.* The shark sucked in air. Though she hadn't ended up far from where she started, Vaira had backtracked and circled the area so much, she'd surely ran three times the actual distance traveled. All for nothing.

"Hey, careful! For fuck's sake, we ain't gonna get paid if you drop her and she breaks her neck!"

Vaira's eyes shot to her left, down a narrow gap between buildings.

"Quit your bitching or you can carry her yourself!"

The shark slipped through the gap, pausing at the edge of the building and peering into the alley to her right. There were three people, each wearing a hooded jacket, red with a dark violet hood. On the back, "BnB" was initialed in bold white font, with what appeared like blood dripping down the letters.

Between them, Vaira saw a young feline, though what species exactly she couldn't tell. One of the hooded men held her ankles while the other had his arms thrust up underneath her shoulders. The third seemed to be directing them as they stalked towards the opposite end of the alley.

Her blood roared in her veins, screaming and crying for justice. This was no petty theft, as she'd expected... Kidnapping, and Gods know what else after that! Zael didn't have to know about these, they simply *had* to die. No other punishment would suffice.

Heart racing, eyes wide and rimmed with red, Vaira pulled the pistol

from it's holster beneath her vest. The small box of ammo slipped easily from her pocket, the top cast aside in the alley before she shoved three brass rounds the clip. Only what she needed, else she might be tempted to waste them all here and now.

Vaira strode into the alley, and raised the pistol without a second thought.

"Who the fuck are you!" A voice yelled behind her.

The alley continued a bit to the left. In the corner, another hooded person stood watching the gap Vaira had entered from. When she turned around, he'd already started charging at her, a long, thin blade brandished threateningly at his side.

He must not have seen that she was armed as well. As he closed in, the shark leveled her pistol and fired in the blink of an eye. He never had a chance to realize what was happening, his stunned face as he fell made it painfully obvious.

The others stopped the instant they heard the shot. "Mark!"

Now she wished she'd filled the clip. She turned, and the one supervising the kidnapping had already grabbed his gun. Her breathing slowed to a crawl, her eyes watching his every motion with laser focus. Before he could even point his weapon at her, she'd discharged both her remaining rounds. Two down, two to go.

"Fuck this! Run!" The remaining kidnappers burst into motion, taking the feline along with them as they sped down the alley. Vaira sighed, holstered her weapon and charged after them. Even if they hadn't been dragged down by the girl, they couldn't have hoped to outrun her. Attacking them while they held their captive was too dangerous, though, and the alley couldn't accommodate two people walking side-by-side, so merely stopping them wouldn't work either.

So Vaira opted for another strategy. As she caught up to them, she leapt onto the wall of the alley and kept going. Her boots weren't ordinary combat boots, the soles were designed from a special - and highly

expensive - material that could provide traction on nearly any surface. After years of intense training, she'd developed a sense of balance so acute that, in combination with this material, she could walk horizontally on walls. Vertically too, for a while, though it was extremely tiring and offered little benefit beyond a few meters.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" The one in the back nearly dropped the girl from shock.

"Keep running!" His counterpart yelled. He'd switched to carrying the girl around the neck, holding her in a headlock so he could keep himself oriented forward. That's what made Vaira opt for caution.

Vaira leapt from the wall. In mid-air, she turned herself around, then skid to a stop ahead of the ykiddnapper in front. He cried out and slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. Vaira punched the man in the throat, and he instinctively released the girl to grab his neck. The moment he dropped her, Vaira planted her foot on the wall again, kicked off and slammed her fist into the side of his head. He flew, face-first, through a glass door leading into the back of a building, casting shattered glass through the air.

Realizing her mistake, Vaira stepped between the feline and the shrapnel. It bit through her flesh and clothes, but she'd live. Better her legs and chest than the girl's face and neck.

"What- what the fuck do you want! Just take her!" The last kidnapper had fallen to his knees, shivering and quaking like a flimsy tree caught in a thunderstorm. "Just leave me alone! I... I just joined today! I don't wanna die!"

Vaira glared at him, mercy banished from her frozen visage. "That's no longer an option. Everything that has happened you have brought upon yourselves." She picked him up by the collar of the shirt underneath his jacket. "Did you think there were no consequences for your actions?"

"Please! I didn't have a choice! You don't understand what it's like-"

"I don't *understand?!"* Vaira bellowed. "I know more than you could ever learn in a thousand lifetimes about what you've done today! You miserable, wretched rat!"

Tears rolled down his face. "Please, just don't kill me! I swear, by whatever Gods you want, I'll never so much as think about gangs or crime or anything bad ever again! Please have mercy this one time!"

"Would *she* have received mercy?!" Vaira raised him up so he could see the girl laying in the street. "Would *she* have had the choice you ask of me?"

"N-no..." He whimpered, the fight leaving his eyes as his posture wilted. "I guess not..."

*Don't trust anyone.* Vaira's eyes pierced him, scouring his soul for any shred of regret. *If I let him go, he'll do it again. And I won't be there to save the next girl.*

"May I say something?" He said, unable to look at Vaira. His eyes remained focused on the girl. "Before you... before you, you know..."

Vaira bared her teeth, rumbling out a growl that *dared* him to misstep.

"I just... I just wanted to fit in, you know?" His voice shook ominously, wavering but holding on for now. "Maybe... maybe someone like you could..." He swallowed and took a deep breath. It came out in bursts, he was shaking so terribly. "... Maybe you could teach me how to live a life where I don't have to do shit like this just to eat?"

The shark's fists balled up, her mouth gaped so wide she might tear out his throat... then she dropped him. He landed on his feet, but his knees immediately buckled and he dropped hard on his ass, wincing but nothing more.

"Go." Vaira said, then turned around.

"What?"

Fury filled her once more. She spun around again. "Go! Now!"

He climbed onto his feet, steadying himself with the nearby wall. As

Vaira started to turn away, he shook his head. "No."

"What did you say?" Disbelief outweighed her anger for the first time since she'd heard the girl's screams. "I'm giving you your life. You *don't* fucking question it, you *run*."

"I don't want it!" He said, his quivering voice betraying his confidence. "If I go back like this, they'll just kill me anyway! And I don't want to slowly starve in the subways like the other homeless kids!"

Vaira's breath caught in her throat. His words hit far too close to home. "Don't they have shelters, or food kitchens? You don't have to starve—"

"They're all full!" He yelled, growing bolder with each passing moment. "You think I haven't tried everything else? I didn't *want* this!" He stripped off the jacket and threw it onto the ground. Underneath, Vaira found a fox boy younger than the girl he'd tried to abduct. The shirt he wore was far oversized for him, full of holes and patches sewn shoddily into the linen. Beneath that, he was skin and bones, his red and black fur faded like an old photograph and falling out in places.

The fox stomped on the jacket, covering the bright red material in mud and dust and the tears that fell freely from his cheeks. "I didn't want this life! I didn't choose to be born, dammit!"

"Enough." Vaira said softly. When he didn't stop, she caught his chin and forced him to look at her. "*Enough*."

He stopped.

"What's your name?"

The fox tore his head from her hold on it, averting his gaze to ground.

*Don't trust anyone.*

The shark sighed. "My name's Avira. Avira Kaiser, from a land so far away from here, you could stack all the skyscrapers of this city end to end and still not be able to see it."

He sniffed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "... Faust."

"Faust what?"

"I... don't remember."

Vaira frowned. "I see." She caught his chin again, but he swiped her hand away, and the shark thought better than to push it. "Alright, Faust... you understand that even attempting a kidnapping is a capital offense, right?"

"... I know." His posture wilted again.

"Good. Then you understand that your life is already forfeit, right?"

Faust's knees buckled. But not before he nodded.

With a sigh, Vaira dug into her pockets. From them, she produced two fifty Astral notes, opened his fist and pressed them into his hand. "Then you understand what the consequence will be if I find you fucking up again."

His eyes widened to their absolute limit. Faust fell over backwards, sitting in the dirty alley once again. "You, you can't just hand me this much money! I didn't earn it!"

"Not yet." She couldn't help but smile softly at his reaction. "But you will."

The fox gazed up at her, and for the first time... it wasn't terror looking back at her. It was admiration. "Anything. Anything! Just tell me!"

"First. We have to take this girl home. She won't recognize you without your hoodie on, will she? I'd rather not traumatize her again."

Faust shook his head. "No, she never saw me until... until they..."

"Good. Then, you'll help me find my way back out of this maze of a city. You know where 34th street is?"

"Yeah, of course. Some of the alley kids and I would get handouts from a bakery over on 39th once a week. It's just a bit past that, but... that's not a good part of town. What do you want from over there?"

"I pulled a gun on you." Vaira canted her head just a bit to the



side. "What makes you think I belong in the "good" part of town?"

Faust blinked, then nodded slowly. "That's... a fair point, I guess. Here I thought I might have a shot at redemption, but instead it seems I'm just changing sides."

Vaira laughed. "Take my advice, Faust. Redemption is a meaningless word." She turned back to the feline, who'd finally begun to stir. "Don't make decisions based on what you want others to feel about you. The only person you need to make peace with is yourself."

"And if I can't accept myself? What then?"

She shrugged. "Then you lower your standards. Whatever Gods are watching know mine can't sink much lower than they already have."

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