

PACKMASTERS #1

THE RELICS OF THIALA

20-PAGE
READING
SAMPLE!



BERYLL & OSIRIS
BRACKHAUS

Beryll & Osiris Brackhaus

PACKMASTERS #1

THE RELICS OF

THIALA

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CHAPTER 1

The steelcrete walls of the fighting pit showed cracks, the steel grille floor was rusty and crusted over with dried gore. Of the four spotlights mounted under the ceiling, only two still worked. Even for an underground arena on Darkside, it was in a sorry state.

And yet the stands were packed already, despite the fact that tonight's main events were still to come.

We didn't care about those. We were here for the fight that was about to start down in the pit.

There was no denying that the wolf was a magnificent bestia. His chains forced him to stand hunched over, but he was still easily a head taller than I was - and a good deal wider as well - with heavily muscled shoulders and arms. His fur was a shaggy mass of grey and black. Hard to tell what the actual colour would turn out to be once he was cleaned. Completely unclothed, he looked like a savage animal. Then again, that was probably exactly what he was, even though he was just as much a bestia as I. Our race had been created to be bipedal, upright-walking, intelligent servants to our masters. His eyes were the angry yellow of flame and they burned just as intensely. The teeth in his snout were bared in an angry snarl I couldn't hear over the din of the fighting pit. Ears back, but not flat against his skull in fear, he was ready to attack.

As fine a wolf as ever I had seen.

Not that I had ever seen one in the flesh before – just recordings from before and during the war that Ana and I had discovered.

He would make a fine addition to our merry little band.

If we managed to pull off the stunt I had carefully planned.
If he accepted her.

Emotions coiled in the pit of my stomach and made me silently snarl as well, my ears twitching nervously in the deep hood of the cloak which hid what I was.

Excitement, fear, anger and jealousy – a volatile mix.

I shouldn't feel jealous, of course. It was the natural way of things that Ana would add to her pack, to our strength. But I couldn't help the fierce possessiveness that stirred in me each time she took in a new one. I had been her first, after all.

But that wasn't it, really. I agreed with Ana that we needed a strong fighter, but did it have to be a wolf? Just looking at him made the fur on my neck stand up, all my instincts warning me of danger. A cat recruiting a wolf? That could only end in disaster.

Alas, bestiae were rare on the Fringe. What few there were, were owned by people who were well prepared to protect their possessions. It had taken us long enough to track down this one. We didn't have a choice.

Maybe it would not take. Maybe he was too far gone to recognise what she could be for him. A selfish hope. Stupid.

I banned it to the black pits it had emerged from and instead focused on the wolf.

Two handlers were keeping a firm grip on his chains, and under his shaggy mane I noticed the dull glint of a heavy shock collar. His owner would have the controls to that collar, but we wouldn't have to obtain them. Having Ferret in our pack had proven invaluable. We had yet to come across a lock he couldn't pick.

The wolf was currently owned by a brutish man who called himself Captain Falk, who was engaged in a lively discussion with the ringmaster. Falk wore a threadbare military officer's overcoat with too many buckles and insignia to be taken seriously. Maybe he had been Core World military once, maybe not. Now he was just another Fringe spacer. He owned a small rust bucket of a ship, which he used to travel from port to port where he earned money by putting his cheap fighters into the pits and then betting against them. He always put up his wolf last, when no one really expected him to win anymore, raking in the cash when the bestia tore his opponents to bloody shreds.

Falk and the ringmaster were joined by the owner of the man his wolf would face in just a few moments. I studied the other fighter curiously.

Maybe a veteran of the wars, fallen on hard times, judging by the grey in his hair and the multitude of scars. The way he was shifting from foot to foot, his hands clenching into fists, the muscles under his skin rolling on his naked arms, told me he was juiced on combat drugs. The way his eyes nervously tried to shift in different directions told me those drugs were anything but high grade.

The wolf would shred him.

I knew it, the two owners in the pit knew it, the ringmaster knew it. And the audience betting on the fight knew it as well. No one out here was stupid enough to fall for Falk's usual game. Everyone was just hoping for a satisfyingly gory fight. Judging from the way the wolf flexed his claws, he was inclined to oblige.

Not like he had any other way of venting his aggression.

The stink of the pit was oppressive, fear and death, sweat and greasy food.

I was caught by surprise when the wolf's nostrils suddenly flared, his eyes drifting half shut as he inhaled deeply. I realised he had caught a whiff of Ana's scent even through the cloying decay of this place. So far, his attention had been glued to his opponent, but now I could see that he was distracted, scanning the crowd. So his senses were much more acute than any humans', not unusual for a bestia.

It made me wonder if he knew what had touched him. Probably not. Just like me, he was too young to ever have belonged, to understand the nature of that vital part missing from his life.

His distraction made me worry, though. We needed him to survive this fight if we wanted to claim him.

The two owners finally concluded their negotiations and left the ring, accompanied by the jeering of the crowd, eager for the show to start. The ringmaster followed close behind.

He didn't bother with any introductions. He knew his customers well enough - they wanted blood, pain and death, not pompous blather.

The handlers unclipped the wolf's chains and backed away cautiously. They needn't have bothered. Once again, the wolf's attention was focused on his opponent who was now grinning with a decidedly manic edge. The guy was so high he wouldn't even feel it when the wolf ripped into him.

Neither of the two fighters lost any time with cautious manoeuvering. I winced at the force of the impact when they slammed into each other. The human was stronger than he looked, though - augmented in some way, I guessed. At least that would explain why his owner had thought he would have any chance against the wolf.

Not that he really had. He only got a few punches in. Pure strength and madness were no match for claws and sharp teeth made to rend flesh and it didn't take long for the dull metal floor of the pit to be fed with fresh blood. The crowd howled with shared bloodlust, surged forward like a multi-bodied beast, intent on the kill. It didn't leave me unaffected. A peculiar mix of excitement and revulsion made me simultaneously lean forward and soundlessly hiss at the scent of slaughter.

I looked down at the slender, short figure next to me. Ana's reaction was much clearer. Wrapped in a cloak as concealing as my own, I couldn't make out her features, but she radiated disgust.

The wolf roared in triumph. I half expected the crunch of bones as he twisted his opponent's neck, but it was lost in the answering roar of the crowd. The body hung in the wolf's claws and any pretence of self-control was gone from him as he sank his teeth into dead meat, rending, ripping, devouring.

The crowd shrieked and screamed their approval and yet I sensed Ana's little sigh as the wolf fed.

She did not approve.

Ana turned and slipped through the crowd like a fish through water, and I followed in her wake.

After the racket of the crowd, the murky tunnels below the pit felt eerily quiet. The only sound was the buzzing and crackling of the failing glowballs, hanging precariously from the low ceiling, and the drip-drip-drip of water seeping through the cracked steelcrete walls.

We moved quickly and quietly. We had no business being down here, but the guards at the gate leading to the underbelly of the pits had been paid well to ignore our passing. Ferret nervously slipped ahead, scouting the way, while Bear brought up the rear. We had waited just long enough to make sure the wolf would be securely locked up in a cell down here, while his owner was still upstairs collecting his winnings. The window for an undetected escape was narrow, but it was doable if the wolf submitted.

Ferret stopped in front of one of the heavy steel doors lining the tunnel. Like the rest of us, he was wrapped in a voluminous cloak, concealing that he was a bestia, too. Still he had drawn some puzzled frowns, being mistaken for a human child due to his size. But nobody bothered to intervene – this was Darkside, after all. Nobody bothered, ever. Ferret fiddled with the lock only briefly before he stepped aside and allowed Bear to help him pull the door open.

The cell itself was unlit, but the flickering light from the corridor revealed the wolf, now securely chained to the opposite wall, his grimy fur slick with fresh blood. He bared his teeth at us, snarling, yellow eyes glowing with aggression.

Ana stepped past me. I nearly reached out to stop her from entering the cell, from getting so close to the wolf I would not be able to protect her. I caught myself just in time. It wasn't like I would have been a match for the wolf in a fight anyway. But more importantly, it wasn't my place to interfere. This was her call.

The wolf's eyes widened as he caught her scent, his pupils dilating. He drank in her scent and his snarl died away while his eyes searched the shadowed hood of her cloak.

She raised her hands and lowered her hood.

I saw it in his eyes – that flash of stabbing disappointment, the brief moment between hope and reality and truth. When her plain face, the thick lenses of her glasses, her frizzy orange hair – when none of it matched that heavenly scent, and she wasn't the glorious goddess he had dreamed of, just a not-very-pretty young woman. He breathed in her scent again, fully inhaled and I saw when his whole world snapped into place and everything that had ever been wrong suddenly righted itself. He sagged in his chains when all tension drained from his body.

Oh, how I understood. The memory of the very same thing happening to me was forever etched into my mind.

Ana stepped forward, her small hand reached out, her thumb ran along his snout and he leaned into her caress, eyes drifting shut. She leaned down to him, her scent all around him now. She gently kissed one of his scarred, furry ears and I could see her lips move, but her voice was too soft for me to catch the one word she spoke.

It wasn't for me to know. The true name she bestowed on him was a sacred thing, only between them.

All that mattered was that it was done. She had claimed him for her pack and from this day on, he would be our brother.

Whether I liked it or not.

She wrapped both arms around his thick neck, nuzzling her face into his fur. She had explained to me how this moment was as intense for her as it was for us. How it got more difficult to cope with each time it happened, as she had to rearrange her pack in her soul and it got harder the more parts there were to realign. How she was only guessing at how to do it properly, desperately hoping that she didn't damage us or our bond in the process, due to her lack of training.

Ferret shuffled restlessly, glancing down the corridor. His hood had slipped back, revealing his white snout, his twitching round ears and quick eyes. He was right. We were running out of time.

I took one step into the cell, but no more, not to threaten what Wolf had just gained. "Ana, we have to go," I said softly.

Wolf growled at me, deep and guttural, the sound carrying a threat of death, but I could not allow them to indulge. All of our freedom depended on us being quick now. His eyes burned with fury that someone would dare come between him and his new purpose in life. I felt a first, hot spark of him in the back of my mind, the place where I could constantly feel all the bonded members of our pack.

Behind me, Bear answered Wolf's challenge with a short bellow of her own. Deeper even than his, it startled him out of his dazed state. He jerked in his chains, immediately recognising a predator large enough to pose a real threat.

His movement served to wake Ana as well. She glanced back at me and gave me a tight smile to let me know that she would be alright. She took a firm grip on Wolf's mane. "Be good for me, love," she said gently, "my pack is your pack now."

For a moment it seemed he would balk, but then he lowered his snout with a soft whine of acquiescence.

Did he even know how to speak? He was the most feral bestia we had picked up so far. Not that it mattered. He would obey her, and everything else would come in time.

"Can you unlock his chains for me, Ferret?" Ana asked.

Of course he could, and she could have just ordered him. But that was Ana, kind and quiet, always asking politely.

Ferret took a step forward, but then glanced at me nervously. He was scared, he always was. He was the youngest of us, barely more than a cub, really. I nodded at him encouragingly and let him feed on my own calm, which he could feel just as easily as I could his fluttering nerves. Even in the low light, my eyes easily picked up how his ears and whiskers twitched, how he visibly had to force himself to get so close to the wolf who could have easily ripped him apart.

But then Ana reached out, her hand touching his just for a moment and Ferret's spine straightened. For her, he would be able to do anything. His hands didn't shake when he fiddled

with the simple padlocks that held the chains fast. The shock collar would have to wait until he had more time and light to work with. If everything went according to plan, we would be out of range of Wolf's former owner's remote control long before he could think of using it.

Ferret moved back when Wolf stretched up to his full height. Up close, he looked even more impressive than he had in the fighting pit. Not quite as tall and by far not as massive as Bear, but lean and powerful, scarred, but without fresh wounds, none of the blood in his fur was his own.

"Come," Ana told him and led him from the cell, one hand still firmly gripping the thick fur of his mane. Physically, she could never have held him, but I knew from experience that her grip was as unbreakable to him as the strongest chains.

Still he bared his teeth when he walked past me and caught my scent. I had been prepared for that and I still couldn't stop myself from responding in kind as his scent filled my nostrils. Wolf, dog, call it what you will, it made my fur stand on end. Somehow I managed not to hiss at him.

Then he spotted Bear, who had been guarding the corridor and his step faltered as he recognised her as the one who had bellowed back at him. She was bigger, much bigger. And in her concealing cloak, he had no way of seeing how old she was or guess that in a fight, he would surely have won, his youthful strength and speed easily a match for her greater age and lack of enthusiasm. As it was, her sheer bulk served to calm him down as he accepted that he was not the top predator around. We'd have to wait and see how things would shake out once he realised that in fact he was just that.

Ferret slipped past me and I left the dank cell last with one more mournful glance at the chains which had held Wolf. I still wasn't sure this was a good idea. Ana was right, we needed the muscle, it was what our pack was sorely missing. But I would very much have preferred someone less canine to fill the slot.

With Bear's help, I closed the cell door again and clicked the lock back into place. It would give us an additional minute or two at most, but that might be exactly the minute we needed. In the meantime, Ana had accepted an additional cloak from Bear, wrapped Wolf in it and pulled her own hood back up.

I led the way down the corridor. With a little luck, the guards would also ignore the fact that there was one more member to our group now, but I wasn't counting on it. Bear was right behind me, followed by Ana with Wolf and Ferret hanging back.

There were two of them and they were still arguing about some earlier match, just like they had been when we had passed them a few minutes ago. My head still hidden inside my hood, I nodded at them, every muscle tense and ready to spring into action should they make any threatening gesture. They looked at us with the same bored expression they had worn previously. I could see that they were counting our heads, and realised there were five of us now. They glanced at each other. One reached for his gun, then the other shrugged and the first relaxed again. He gestured for us to pass through the gate that led from the holding area to the hallway outside the large, circular room that held the fighting pit.

We slipped through quickly, past the long row of betting booths, with only a few late customers left. The main events were starting in the pit and most people had already placed their bets, so as not to miss the most spectacular fights.

The hallway was only dimly lit. Plenty of high profile patrons came here and they valued their privacy – they came to see, not to be seen. There were other, cleaner arenas on Darkside, but those had rules and rarely did a fight in the pits end in death.

The urge to hurry to the exit was nearly overwhelming, but I kept my pace calm and confident. Drawing attention was our biggest worry, as always. A few heads turned as we passed, but none of them showed much interest or even made a move to stop us.

Heavy, metal stormbreaker gates marked the exit. Bear pulled one wing open and one by one, we slipped outside. I went through last and breathed in deeply. After the stench of the fighting pit and the holding cells, the heat of the air outside felt like a punch in the chest. The smell of exhaust, burned oil and an acidic note that was unique to Darkside were thick enough to cut with a knife, but it felt fresh compared to the death, hunger and despair inside.

The alley was as dark as it had been when we had arrived, but the sky was lit with the tracking beams of the spaceport and a host of cheaply flickering holographic advertisements. The only sounds were from hovercars swishing by above the roofs of the buildings. All sound from the various bars, clubs and brothels that dominated this part of Darkside were locked behind stormbreaker gates just as thick as the ones we had just passed. Patrons hurried along without wasting time, eager to get inside again without being recognised.

Everything on this planet had to be built to withstand the brutal sandstorms that could build up in a matter of minutes. None of the buildings had windows. All of them were a maximum of two storeys tall, with flat roofs, huddled close together to present a unified front. All of them also had deep underground levels. There were no ornaments to anything, nothing to make it a pretty or desirable place to be. That would probably have held true even without any storms. This part of Darkside was an ugly place, for ugly people, inside and out.

Not that the rest of it was significantly prettier.

Luckily, we were about to leave it behind. Hopefully for good.

Ferret was leading the way again, scouting ahead to make sure we wouldn't run into any trouble with Bear following him to remove any such if necessary. I brought up the rear, checking behind us for any pursuers and keeping an eye on Ana and the wolf. I knew that both of them would be dazed from the bonding. Ana would stay on her feet, she knew what was at stake. I wanted nothing more than to wrap her in a warm blanket and give her all the rest and care she deserved,

but that wasn't an option. Wolf was an unknown quantity and I wasn't getting anything from him over the pack bond. I hated that. There was no room for mistakes in tonight's tight schedule. So far, he was keeping up. But that wouldn't be enough. We needed him alert and able to fight.

He wasn't the most valuable thing we were going to steal tonight.

The deafening roar of a large, landing space freighter broke the relative silence. All of us winced in pain at the noise. All but Bear. Her hearing wasn't that good anymore.

As we made our way closer to the spaceport, clubs and bars gave way to warehouses and repair shops and the streets grew a little more crowded, though all business was still conducted in the secure shelter of thick steelcrete walls.

During the day, temperatures rose so high one could only hide inside, so all social life happened at night. That had probably been the original reason why the planet had been named Darkside. Now it was also a sign for the complete lack of law enforcement. This world was located as far on the fringe of civilised space as you could get without passing into so-called 'unexplored space'. Darkside was ruled by various crime lords and gangs, each claiming their own small territory and viciously defending every inch of it. They all were accountable to the Syndicate, the criminal organisation who considered this part of the Fringe their own, but apart from taking a cut of all earnings, the Syndicate didn't exert any control.

We tried to stay in the back alleys. The last thing we needed now was to be stopped by some overeager enforcer crew.

There was no formal border to the actual spaceport. No fence or guard posts keeping anyone from just wandering in. On the downside, all individual ships were well guarded. Bright beams illuminated the freighter that had just landed and the ground crew was scurrying around the huge landing struts. They looked like ants compared to the hulking belly of the freighter. It was an additional distraction from what we were about to do. One I had not anticipated and was accordingly grateful for.

We made our way across the landing field, crossing between the ships of various sizes without ever getting close enough to one to trigger the automated or human defences. At one of the storage sheds used by the spaceport's mechanics, we stopped briefly to pick up the gear we had stored there earlier. We didn't have much, a small pack each with some extra clothes and personal items.

Our target was parked at the outer edge of the field, well away from the general hubbub of day-to-day traffic. This part of the landing field was reserved for the luxury yachts of Darkside's resident crime bosses. They rested in individual cradles which could be locked down tightly against the sandstorms. At least, that was what they had originally been build to do. They were always locked to prevent theft, nowadays.

It had taken me and Ferret almost two weeks to get our hands on the unlock codes for the Lollipop's cradle. It's owner, the self-styled 'Viscount' Tomori, head of Clan Tomori, had earned his obscene fortune by trading in human flesh, both living, as slaves, and dead, for the exquisitely perverse high society of the Core Worlds who had a taste for their own kind. Its bright red lacquered exterior made it as inconspicuous as a sledgehammer to the face, but it was the only ship that met all our needs. Namely, good armour and shields combined with decent weapons, powerful new engines and most importantly – a state-of-the-art autopilot. Bear was a good pilot, but we couldn't rely on her to always be available to fly and it would take her some time to train up the rest of us since we were starting from zero. The autopilot would be invaluable during our learning period.

The area around the ship was unlit. I knew there were three guards on patrol, but even with my superior night vision I could only make out two. They were wearing bulky infrared goggles, but luckily they were not actively scanning for approaching problems. Instead, they were standing close together, two tiny red glows giving away the fact that they were

smoking on the job. A fact that could get them killed, if their boss caught them doing it. If everything went according to my plan, they would be dead by the time Tomori saw them again.

"Anyone see that third guard?" I whispered.

Ferret nodded and pointed up to the actual yacht. I took me a moment to make out the shape of the guard against the darker backdrop of the ship. He had climbed onto one the struts of the cradle close to the access hatch. It was a good place to keep watch from, which was bad for us.

"Shit," I muttered.

Ana glanced at me anxiously and adjusted her glasses, like she always did when she didn't know what to do with her hands. Her prime concern was our well-being, no matter how much she tried to be cool and professional. She loved us too much to put us at risk, so it was up to us to do it anyway so she could reach her goals. She tried to remain confident, but over our bond I sensed how nervous she really was.

"He's mine," I decided. I was best prepared to climb up there, so I had the best chances of taking him out unnoticed even though I wasn't a great fighter.

I half expected Ana to object, but instead she nodded jerkily. She didn't like it, but she accepted my word. That she trusted my judgement like that lifted me up. I would not disappoint her.

She turned to Wolf, whose mane she had been holding on to up to now. "Can you see the two men guarding that ship over there?" she asked in a low voice and pointed over to the guards.

For a moment Wolf swayed on his feet, but then visibly caught himself, shaking his head to focus on her words. Dazed but not out of action. It would have to be enough. He scanned the night and I could see his nostrils flare as he raised his snout. He nodded.

"I need you to work together with Bear here to take them out as quickly and quietly as possible," Ana explained. "You can't let them raise an alarm or call for backup. Can you do that for me?"

Once more his eyes roamed over the ship and surrounding area, now much more alert, clearly scanning for approach vectors, calculating odds. He was a fighter, after all. I had no idea whether his training went beyond slaughtering opponents in the tightly controlled environment of the pit, but for Ana, he would grow beyond whatever his training was as quickly as he needed to. Just as I had.

His head dipped down to breathe in Ana's scent again. Then he growled his assent.

"We'll circle around them," I said, almost expecting him to contradict me just to challenge me, but he listened calmly. "Give me a few minutes to climb up behind that guy. Then get behind those two. We need to kill them at the same time. Ferret will remain here with Ana. Watch for him giving the sign."

Ferret twitched nervously. He knew that there was an additional reason why he stayed back with Ana. If things went wrong, it would be his job to get her to safety. At least I hoped that she would be sensible enough to allow Ferret to do so. I had instructed him to get her back to our safehouse. If we managed to escape, we would meet back there. If not, well, it wouldn't be my problem anymore.

Ana laid her hand on Ferret's arm comfortingly and he quieted down.

We left our travelling gear in a small heap and circled around the ship in a wide arc, keeping well out of the guards' range. Only when we were out of view, the guards themselves hidden behind the cradle's struts, we closed in on the ship. I was pleasantly surprised at how silently Wolf moved. Even tired and dazed, he moved with the precision of a true predator. Not like me, who had learned the trade too late in life. I wanted to hate him for that ease, but he was pack now. All I could manage was an intense dislike of his prowess.

Bear nodded to me before she focused her attention forward to where we could hear the low murmur of the two guards on the ground talking. I scanned the struts of the cradle for a way up and was pleased to find convenient handrails.

Of course ground crew had to be able to get up there for service work. I dropped the hood of my cloak and secured the rest of the billowing garment to my back.

Wolf was watching me, his ears flicking and nostrils twitching now that for the first time, he got a clear view of what I was. Not some impressive predator like a lion or a tiger. Just a bestia engineered from an ordinary domestic cat. At least the calico markings on my fur weren't visible in the dark, and my nose probably didn't look as candy pink as it actually was. Still I half expected a condescending snort. He remained silent and turned away from me, towards the two guards on the ground. So, ridicule would come later.

I climbed the strut quickly. Suddenly, I had plenty of aggression to ease the kill I needed to perform. It wouldn't be my first and certainly not my last, even now we had Wolf to do the fighting. He clearly enjoyed killing. I doubted I'd ever get to that point.

The horizontal part of the cradle's frame was much narrower, but I still walked across the beam as securely as if it was open ground. A cat's balance did have advantages. Even with my bestia feet stuck in human boots. I looked forward to shedding them and walking around bare-pawed for a while. Having a ship of our own would allow us to let our guard down, to be ourselves without constant fear of discovery. If we managed to steal it, that was.

In front of me, I spotted the figure of the third guard. He was sitting on the beam, his legs hanging down on both sides, with a sniper blaster rifle resting in front of him. In contrast to his comrades, his attention was fully on his job, diligently scanning the landing field with his infrared goggles. From his position, Ana and Ferret were in his field of view, but they were standing too far away to seem interested in the ship he was guarding and managed to look like they were deep in conversation. It made me wonder whether this guard had also noticed that there had been five of us when we arrived and that three were missing now. He seemed unworried, though, and wasn't paying any attention to what was behind him. What happened to other ships wasn't his concern.

From up here, the ship's hull was blocking my view of the spot where the other two guards were standing. So he wouldn't be able to see Wolf and Bear creep up on them. Neither would I. Not knowing what was going on made my whiskers and ears twitch. It also made me smile ruefully. I hated not being in full control of the situation. I needed to keep Ana safe.

Soundlessly, I drew my dagger from its sheath at my belt. It was slightly curved, and blackened so as not to reflect any light. Perfect for cutting someone's throat. It was one of many knives I carried. I loved and hated it at the same time. Wolf and Bear killed with their claws. Even Ferret had claws, though I couldn't imagine him killing anyone. I didn't have that option. I didn't remember my claws being removed. It had been done when I was still a kitten. I didn't remember anything of that time, actually. Not who my mother had been or whether I had any litter mates. It probably was better that way. That time and place were so far behind me now, they seemed unreal.

I was close enough behind the guard that I could smell him. The lingering scent of the greasy food he had eaten before he came on shift, a biting whiff of what had to be some drug he had taken recently, mixed in with his sweat. I crouched behind him, ready to take his life, my eyes trained on Ferret for his signal.

When Ferret raised his hand, I closed the distance. One arm wrapped around the guard's torso, the other carried the knife in a swift motion. Maybe it wasn't part of myself like claws would have been, but it was so much sharper. Hot blood poured from his throat over my arm, the sharp scent filling my nose, blocking out everything else. Judging from every text I had studied about my animal brethren, the smell should have pleasantly excited me, but instead it made my slightly nauseous. I kept the guard close against me as he gurgled and shuddered, his life flowing out of him.

I didn't feel pity or remorse. He worked for a monster, and considering the trust placed in him, there was little chance that he wasn't a monster himself. But even if he had been a kind and caring man with a wife and adorable children, I wouldn't have felt anything. He was in the way of what Ana needed.

From below, I heard a muffled shout, reminding me that my kill didn't mean that we had succeeded, yet. My guard stopped twitching, so I lowered him forward until he was resting on the beam face down. Carefully, I pulled out the sniper rifle from beneath him and hopped back to my feet. Climbing over him took only a heartbeat and then I was hurrying along the beam to find a position where I could see what was happening below.

What I did see made my heart stop. Bear was just stumbling backwards, while the guard she was supposed to kill was reaching for his head com. I would have no time to raise the rifle, aim and fire before he—

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