

PACKMASTERS #2

20-PAGE
READING
SAMPLE!



RAID ON SULLIN

BERYLL & OSIRIS
BRACKHAUS

Beryll & Osiris Brackhaus

PACKMASTERS #2
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SULLIN

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Editing and proof: Chantal Perez-Fournier

Layout & Book Design: Julia Schwenk

Coverart: Dávid László Tóth (Darbaras)

Cover Layout: Osiris Brackhaus | brackhaus.com

ISBN-13: 978-1533587541

www.brackhaus.com

CREDITS

A big Thank You to our beta readers – Uhu, Alana, Mayetra, Eija and Talomor – for keeping both our heads and the story straight.

PACKMASTERS

What happened so far:

Twenty years ago, the evil Packmasters used their genetically engineered bestiae in an attempt to seize control of the galaxy. The Core Worlders wiped them out, scorched their planets and kept the few surviving bestiae as trophies. As one of those pampered pets, Cat doesn't care about old stories. But as soon as he crosses paths with Ana, she suddenly becomes his heart, his soul, the centre of his life – just like a real Packmaster of old.

Together, they ran away and tried to learn more about their kind, about the bond between them and the strange powers it conferred. Hiding among the criminals and outcasts on the Fringe, they gathered up more members to their pack – Bear and Ferret. The last one, Wolf, they stole out of the arenas on the outlaw planet Darkside.

Finally having a proper fighter in their pack, they dared to steal a spaceship from a local Darkside crime lord, Viscount Tomori. On an abandoned Packmaster planet, they discovered a living, breathing Packmaster. But as happy as Ana was about finally having a proper teacher, Markus' lessons turned out to be bitterly poisoned. The bond allowed Packmasters to force their will onto their bestia, and that power was literally addictive to their minds.

Watching Ana more and more turn into an evil Packmaster of old threatened to destroy the oddball family they had built. In a last-ditch attempt to save their pack, Bear betrayed them to Tomori, hoping to get rid of Markus – but Tomori was a criminal to the core, and never had any intentions of honoring his deal. On Vandal, a space station hub for the less savoury elements of the galaxy, Tomori and Wolf's former owner managed to kill

Bear and capture most of the pack. When pressed to decide between her teacher and her pack, Ana did the right thing and shot Markus in the head. Under the leadership of Cat, they managed to rescue Wolf, kill his former owner and even Viscount Tomori.

Now such a trail of dead bodies would have sent them to jail almost everywhere else – but on Syndicate-run Vandal, the laws are different. And thanks to Tomori's arrogance, he thought it unnecessary to go through the proper channels – a mistake that might see Ana and her pack as the wrongfully attacked party with a chance to gain 'legal' ownership of their stolen vessel. It all depends on the tribunal's decision...

CHAPTER 1: BACK ON VANDAL

“We, the Tribunal of Vandal, after careful consideration of all evidence presented by the parties involved, have come to a verdict on Process M794-P7-13.”

The woman speaking held herself like a Core Military admiral straight out of a Core World soap opera. She even wore some sort of fantasy uniform. Not the dark blue and silver of Core Military, of course, but red and gold with lots of tassels and shiny buckles. Her buzz-cut gray hair and rimless reading glasses added to her aura of authority.

Personally, I thought she looked ridiculous, and I would have bet my furry tail that half of the people present in Vandal’s courtroom thought the same. But just like me, they kept their mouths shut and their faces straight. Even though it was called a tribunal and officially had five members, it was Judge Velasin who made the decisions. The other four were just decoration. Velasin originally had been a member of the ruling triumvirate of the Syndicate for several decades of her life. She had retired to Vandal and commandeered the tribunal as her pastime. Her stern face held no hint of being entertained, but everyone present knew without a doubt that she was enjoying herself tremendously.

Whether that meant she would rule in our favour or stomp us into the ground, I had no clue. Against all customs on a criminal hub like Vandal, we had been completely honest in our report on what had happened with the Viscount and Captain Falk. I had decided that we had to be, the odds that the truth would come out anyway were simply too great. Hopefully, she would find that amusing instead of inappropriate.

Her courtroom wasn't as impressive as Judge Velasin herself, but considering it was located on a former mining station run by the Syndicate who ruled this sector of the Fringe, it was keeping up well. The large, angular room was decorated with flags mirroring the colours of Judge Velasin's uniform. It held a podium for the judges' bench, faced by a stand for witnesses to be heard and plenty of cheap plastic chairs for spectators. Naturally, there was no room for lawyers. Nobody would have been interested in their babble anyway.

The large metal cage that would normally hold the defendant remained empty, since Viscount Tomori was dead and Clan Tomori had failed to send any representatives. Why they hadn't bothered was a mystery to me. Maybe it had been too short notice. Maybe they didn't think it was important enough – though that sounded unlikely, considering we had killed their boss. Probably they had been thrown into chaos and infighting and simply missed the fact that they should have gotten involved, too.

In any normal place it would have been us in that cage, but since we had filed the complaint about Tomori attacking us, we counted as the injured party. More or less. It all depended on the whim of Judge Velasin.

"Before we declare our verdict we will add some personal comments to the matter at hand," she continued, her voice ringing with steely disdain.

I nervously rubbed my hands along the seams of my pants. After everything that had gone wrong, we simply deserved a break. Ferret shifted closer to me and I felt Wolf coil, ready for bloody murder at a moment's notice.

"We are deeply disappointed that an educated and respected member of society like Viscount Tomori would display such blatant disregard and wilful ignorance of our beautiful station's laws."

I breathed a soundless sigh of relief.

“He was fully aware of the correct course of action to reclaim his stolen property. Filing a complaint with Vandal’s security would have been a matter of a few minutes. Instead, he chose to go after the thieves personally, potentially endangering the peace and prosperity of this station. There is no excuse for his actions and therefore he and his family and organisation will be punished by this tribunal and the Syndicate we stand for without mercy until a time we believe they have redeemed themselves in our eyes.”

That was more than I had hoped for. A lot more. Apparently the Syndicate was using this incident to set an example for anyone who dared disrupt the careful balance they had achieved here on Vandal. Though I had no idea how exactly they planned to punish Tomori himself since he was still very dead. Thankfully.

“So, this is our verdict: From this day forward, the Syndicate considers all of Viscount Tomori’s possessions to have passed to Miss Ana -”

She glanced down at her notepad briefly, frowned, stabbed at it with her finger, clearly looking for something, then peered at Ana over her glasses with a even deeper frown. Ana stood next to me, outwardly looking stoically calm, while I sensed her trembling in her boots.

Judge Velasin glared at her for a long moment, then a smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Well, just Miss Ana, apparently.”

Maybe it was the fact that they were both wearing glasses, I thought, trying to come up with some reason how a hardened, brutal old hag like Judge Velasin would see something in Ana to make her smirk. Her expression would have been very different had she known Ana’s last name was Lancour. Though even then, she probably wouldn’t have made the connection between this unassuming smalltime criminal girl and her motley crew of bestiae and Lancour InterMedia, the Core World corporation controlling most of the galaxy’s entertainment industry.

I very much preferred nobody knowing her name at all.

“The tribunal confiscates the late Captain Falk’s possessions in their entirety as compensation for court proceedings. Explicitly excluded from these possessions is one wolf bestia which Miss Ana has successfully stolen and of which she is therefore considered to be the rightful owner.”

Her gaze swept through the courtroom, pinning down various people who apparently held some sort of significance. “Let this be a warning and an example to any and all who dare cross the Syndicate!” She finished in style by banging her gloved fist onto her table so hard the polished wood groaned under the impact. “Dismissed.”

There were some murmurs and sour looks in Ana’s direction, but none of them were loud enough to attract Judge Velasin’s attention. There were plenty who looked at Ana with curiosity or even respect.

Ana herself somehow managed to not slump forward with relief. We had worked hard on her look for the tribunal, trying to present her as an authentic Fringe spacer, with cargo pants, a grungy shirt and an equally grungy looking jacket. Her thick glasses didn’t quite fit with the image, but they couldn’t be helped. Without them, the world turned into a fuzzy haze for her. She even wore a blaster belt for the occasion, though of course she had been forced to leave the blaster at the door, like everyone else.

Her bestiae were of course ignored. It was amazing how people forgot that we were a lot more dangerous than any blaster, and not just in combat. No one present would have considered it possible that everything Ana had said in her defence statement had been carefully drummed into her head by me. While she was smart as a whip, she still was working on understanding how the warped justice system of Vandal worked. It didn’t help that on top of things, she currently was a recovering addict.

Ana held herself straight and alert and graciously accepted the various data chips and code cards from a thug who apparently had drawn the short straw and been drafted as an assistant to the tribunal.

Ferret tugged on my sleeve. I leaned down to him so he could whisper in my ear.

“So we get to keep the Lollipop?”

I nodded with a smile. We didn’t just get to keep the Lollipop, it now officially belonged to us. As officially as anything ever belonged to anyone out here on the Fringe, anyway. I looked at the retreating back of Judge Velasin, wondering whether the fact that no one had been present to say anything in Tomori’s favour had aided our case, or if the Judge would have been even more vexed by someone from Tomori’s family arguing with her. Probably the latter. I put her on my list of people never to cross.

Even though Ana was presenting a credibly strong front, I sensed that she was rapidly losing both patience and her nerve. Her extended use of her control abilities over me had been a font of pleasure and invigorating energy for her, leaving me constantly tired and cranky. Now that she had vowed to never exercise those powers again, she was getting her own dose of misery. At first she had just been irritable, but now she was complaining about migraines and her very bones feeling sore. Typical symptoms of someone going through withdrawal from a potent drug. That the drug she craved was constantly around her didn’t make it any easier.

While some vengeful part of me thought she deserved to suffer a little, I mostly just felt the urge to cuddle and protect her. Offering comfort via our bond was a double-edged sword, though. It put the very thing she craved tantalisingly close.

Ana had been locking herself in her cabin alone during the week it had taken to prepare the trial, unless she was called upon by Vandal’s security. Like a wounded animal,

she holed up and snarled at her pack when we tried to offer companionship. At least, she readily accepted treats. If she had refused to eat too, I would have had to do something, though I had no idea what that would have been.

Before any of the spectators who had gathered to watch Judge Velasin dispense her own special brand of justice could start bugging Ana with unwelcome congratulations or propositions, Wolf moved in, becoming a massive bulwark of fur, muscle and claws between her and the world.

Most of the wounds he and I had sustained during the whole 'Tomori incident', as it was called in gossip across the station, had healed by now. Wolf had gained a new scar, crossing his snout, giving him an even more grizzled and fearsome look. I sported a little nick in my left ear that marred the perfect symmetry of them, but also gave me a rakish look I kind of liked.

The first two nights after the fight against Tomori, Wolf and I had spent in a big pile on the largest couch in the Lollipop's lounge. We both suffered from vivid dreams and waking up with the warmth and scent of the other helped calm us down. We had moved back to our own dens, once I got back to my natural sleep rhythm of only napping for a few hours at a time, but doing so several times a day. I still felt Wolf dream. Judging from the mixed rage and fear, they had to be blood-drenched dreams and each time I tried to use the pack bond to assure him that he wasn't alone anymore. Sometimes it worked and he settled into deeper sleep.

After picking up Ana's blaster from the front desk, we moved away from the courtroom and grabbed one of the little electric taxi carts right outside to ferry us back to the Lollipop. Whoever thought they had business with Ana would have to make the trek out there, only to hear from me that she wasn't receiving any visitors but that they could talk to me and I would take notes for her.

Only once we had closed the Lollipop's main hatch behind us, did Ana finally slump forward to hug herself with a tremble running through her entire body.

"I can't believe we made it," she whispered, as if saying it out too loud would wake her from this happy dream.

"Told you we would," Ferret chirped cheerfully. "Cat had everything under control the whole time."

Even though we had shared our true names, it had quickly turned out that in casual conversation it was much more practical to use our old nicknames. Each time one of us mentioned a true name, it sent a bolt of pleasure through any of us in hearing range, and that pretty much brought a stop to that conversation with us scrambling to remember what we had been talking about.

True names were for special occasions only.

"You know how awesome his plans are," Ferret added, beaming up at me.

His trust in me was boundless and, I thought, rather unfounded. Most of our success in the courtroom today had been sheer luck. Yes, I had done some quick research in what Judge Velasin liked to hear and made Ana rehearse it several times. I had also paid some bribes to station security so their reports on the incident would be in our favour. But mostly I had winged it, hoping and praying for a favourable outcome.

Ana seemed to subscribe to Ferret's view of things. "Thank you, Cat," she said with a small smile. "I couldn't have done this without you coaching me."

That at least was true, so I smiled back and basked in her praise. Modesty wasn't my strongest trait. I would have liked it even better if she had accompanied her words with a scratch of my ears or cheek, but she was avoiding physical contact, too.

"We need to celebrate our victory!" Ferret announced, bobbing on his feet. "We should have a feast." He glanced

from me to Ana and back hopefully. "You could ... cook together...?"

His attempt at drawing Ana out from her hiding hole was both blunt and incredibly sweet and adorable. I drew breath to tell him that Ana probably was too tired after the court session, but she was faster.

"I guess we could do that," she agreed and looked at me, just as hopeful as Ferret.

She wasn't sure if her company would be welcome. Since she kept her bond closed down to but a trickle, not to tempt herself, it was hard to read her more complex emotions. She didn't forgive herself for what she had done to me, so she expected me to feel the same. It was true that I was sad and disappointed that she had so readily jumped into Markus' addictive trap. But I just couldn't stay angry with her, no matter how hard I tried. I loved her helplessly. I missed our closeness. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel that she had to stay away from me because I wanted it that way.

"A feast sounds perfect," I said and smiled at Ana. She looked a little unsure, so I stepped close to her and did what had been so natural to both of us before everything went wrong. I leaned over to her and gently rubbed my cheek against hers.

She held perfectly still. Like someone who didn't want to spook a shy animal. We'd fix this, eventually, I thought. We had survived so much already. As long as we worked on it together, we'd fix it. She pulled herself from her silent reverie with a little shiver.

"Meet you in the pantry in a few minutes?" she asked.

I nodded. Of course she would want to get out of her costume first.

I went ahead to the pantry. None of us had felt like doing any elaborate cooking in the last few days, so we had been living off the standard frozen pizzas and boxed meals.

That meant there were still lots of delicacies stacked in the pantry. But before we started the excavations, I wanted to do a quick check to make sure I had removed all the blood I had sprayed over the shelves when I had killed one of Tomori's thugs in there. It had been a mess. Cleaning canned and boxed food wasn't an easy task. And getting bone chips out of a frozen roast ham was a mess. I was still considering throwing away the whole thing and being done with it. But it was such a lovely piece of meat...

At least getting rid of the bodies had proven easier than expected. Vandal's security had kindly brokered a contract with a large fast food joint in the commercial hub that bought up all sorts of corpses to 're-purpose'. I had marked the place on my map of the station with a red skull to remind myself we should never eat there. But it had been a fitting end for those thugs. Handing over Markus' headless corpse and receiving a cash stick in return had been particularly satisfying.

Bear's body had been another matter entirely. We had seriously considered keeping it until we could give it a proper burial on a planet. Sadly the costs for a stasis coffin were rather prohibitive and we couldn't do a quick jump to some nearby planet to do it immediately. After we had filed our complaint about Tomori attacking us with Vandal's security, they had responded with hard locking the docking clamps holding the Lollipop in place, so we couldn't fly off until the investigation was completed. In the end, we had settled for paying the fees for a proper service in the station's crematory. Each of us had said a few words to appropriately see her off to whatever came after death and lit a small candle for her. It had felt rather lacking for everything she had been and her sacrifice, but it was the best we could manage with our options. And maybe she would even have appreciated the sparseness.

Her death had left a hole in our little team. Ferret would take over as our pilot. He had a real talent for it and the required reflexes. Getting a top grade VR training programme for him hadn't been hard here on Vandal. Considering how much time he spend with it, I had no doubt he would become a crack pilot in no time. Bear's expertise as a techie would be much harder to replace. It wasn't like we could just hire a human for the job, after all. I didn't even want to imagine how that would affect the delicate pack balance. Right now, we had to hope that nothing would break down and avoid situations where we would need such skill sets.

"Ugh, what is that smell?" Ana's voice asked behind me and I realised that I had been standing in the pantry, just thinking, for several minutes.

All I smelled was the sharp scent of disinfectant and I had a hard time believing that her nose would pick up something mine didn't.

"Did someone drop a bottle of cleaner in here?" she asked and I couldn't help but chuckle.

I turned around and did a double take at her. She hadn't changed back into her usual inconspicuous outfit of greenish gray pants and shirt. Instead, she was wearing that summer dress with the sunflower print she had bought the day before she had started practising on me. It only reached down to her knees, and combined with her heavy spacer boots and her carrot coloured hair, it was a bold fashion statement. But it looked good on her. Bold and daring beat shy and scared.

She noticed my scrutiny and cringed, ruining the picture. "I ... needed something different," she started defending herself. "It's too much, isn't it? I should go change..."

"I like it," I stopped her.

"Oh." She looked down at herself as if she didn't really believe I was talking about the dress.

"It suits you."

"You think?" She fanned out the skirt with her hands and caressed the fabric fondly. "It feels nice. Soft. Also rather weird around the legs. Airy."

"It looks like you don't give a fuck about what people think of you or who sees you. It's good," I said. "And I was a naughty kitty and killed my prey in the pantry. But I also was a good kitty and cleaned up afterwards."

Ana blinked at me repeatedly and wrinkled her nose. "Ewh. Bad, bad kitty."

It was a little awkward and stilted and we both knew it, but we were both trying very hard to get back to our familiar banter.

"So what do you want to make?" I opened the largest of the standing freezers to look for inspiration.

"I thought I'd do some steamed veggies in a cream sauce and maybe we could thaw one of those blueberry pies I made." She started picking up the necessary ingredients. "And yes, of course there will be whipped cream."

I dutifully purred at the mention of whipped cream. Maybe not entirely dutifully. "Do you know anything about preparing fish?" I asked. "I have a really pretty looking, huge fish fillet in here."

"Mmh..." She joined me at the freezer and peered at the huge slab of red fish I was pointing at. "Any idea what it is?"

"It says 'bluefin seafang' on the label," I read. "Any idea what that is?"

"Oh, yes!" Ana beamed at me. "My parents used to take me to this super expensive restaurant. Raw seafang was one of their specialties. They had live ones of different colours in a huge tank, and you were allowed to feed them with special treats. Then they'd catch one and slice it up for you. They taste like ... mmh, just lovely." She eyed the fillet with predatory interest.

"So how do you prepare it?"

“You actually eat it raw. In the restaurant, they made these tiny little bites from it. With rice and some sort of flaky flatbread and spices. They looked pretty, like little works of art. You dip the pieces into various sauces and just pop them in your mouth. But the actual fish is what tastes great. If we thaw it gently we can just slice it thinly and serve it with some different dips.”

I’d never had raw fish, but everything I had ever read about my animal brethren agreed that they loved fish in any shape or form. And I was good with knives. “I think I can do that,” I decided and pulled the fillet from the freezer. It was rather large, but considering Wolf’s size it probably wouldn’t be enough for all of us. So I added a bag of frozen chicken chips to my load. Those I could just throw onto a sheet and put in the oven to heat up.

Ana and I took our haul back to the kitchen and started working. At first, we tried to carry on with our awkward banter, but more and more we relaxed into the kind of comfortable silence we had both missed. Even in such a confined space, working together with Ana was easy. With our bond, we always knew where the other would step next, and with our nervous tension slowly ebbing away, that sense of what the other would need came back as well. It gave us hope.

The fish turned out to be just as tasty as Ana had promised, and I allowed myself the luxury of snacking on all the bits I had to cut off to make the pieces for dinner look pretty. I found a whole set of small bottles marked ‘fish sauces’ in a little tray that probably had been part of some gift basket and put those on the table as well.

While I was setting the table, I caught a glimpse of Ferret lurking in the doorway to the cockpit, watching me. He ducked away the moment I noticed him, but I felt the flash of intense satisfaction from him and smiled. He was trying hard to fix things between me and Ana, like a kid trying to repair the

relationship between his parents. It was sweet and thoughtful, and all things considered he was doing pretty well.

I managed to catch myself before I set the table for five and forced myself not to look too long at the spot that had been Bear's. She was the first one our pack had ever lost and I felt like it would never stop hurting.

It reminded me of a thing Markus had said after one of Ana's training sessions, after I had started to deteriorate. He had tried to convince her to use one of the others and told her that it never was a good idea to get too attached to one bestia in particular. That the bond was there to bind the bestia to the Packmaster, not the other way around. Back then I hadn't really thought about it, but now I wondered if the Packmasters of old had actually used up their bestiae with drawing pleasure from their control over them. They had probably never allowed themselves to get as close to their bestiae as Ana was to us.

Her love for me was the only reason she had managed to stop herself. The reason she was fighting her cravings every second she was in my presence. She deserved some praise of her own for how well she was doing.

When I went back to the kitchen to check on the chicken chips, she was just pulling the blueberry pie from the other oven. I waited until she had set it down on a cooling rack and hugged her from behind. For a moment she stiffened, but she sensed what I felt and relaxed back against me.

"I'm proud of you," I told her softly. "I believe in you." I didn't have to say more. The bond told her all the feelings that were too complex to put into words.

"I will be worthy of your trust," she answered just as softly, "or die trying."

She didn't immediately try to put distance between us as quickly as possible again. Instead I felt her draw comfort from my closeness. That she felt secure enough in her control over her craving to do so was heartening. I didn't move either, instead relishing her scent around me.

We probably wouldn't have moved at all if the clock I had set for another five minutes for the chicken hadn't started beeping insistently.

"You better check on that," Ana murmured without any hint of trying to wiggle free. "Or we'll have chicken briquettes instead of chips."

"Yeah," I agreed, but didn't manage to bring myself to let go of her either.

Finally, she poked me in the ribs with her elbow and I released her. By then, Wolf was peering into the kitchen to see what the racket from the clock was about. He grinned at me, as happy about Ana's progress as myself. Together, we carried the completed dishes to the dining table while Ana was whipping cream, just as she had promised to.

Dinner itself was a quiet affair. We all loved good food and gave it our full attention. Most of the sauces turned out to be much too spicy for my taste and Wolf only sniffed them, but Ferret loved them so much he ate everything dunked in it. To Ana's horror, he even poured some of the hot red one over his blueberry pie. The fish was delicious on its own, however, and as soon as we had devoured it I started regretting that there wasn't more of it in the freezer. Getting more was probably way over our budget. Other raw fish might be more affordable, though, and would make a nice addition to our usual addiction to red meat.

Thinking about restocking the pantry reminded me of something. "Ana, do you want to go through the ownership documents the court gave you or should I?" Maybe it wasn't just the Lollipop we owned now. Having access to some of Tomori's funds would go a long way in filling our coffers for the bad times that would surely come again.

"Would you?" Ana glanced up from the piece of blueberry pie she was poking at unenthusiastically. I hadn't paid attention since I had been busy eating my own bowl of whipped cream, but judging from the fact that most of

the pie was still on her plate, it hadn't turned out the way she had planned. "I have about a million files to read from that research station. I'm kind of hoping that if I mix what Markus told me with the Core Military reports, I'll arrive at a more accurate version somewhere in the middle."

That sounded like a much smarter approach than just believing anything Markus had said. At least, I could be sure she would never freely trust another Packmaster again. If we ever even found another one. I had been studying those same reports as well, though my main interest wasn't history but raw data on bestia biology. I was curious what made us and our Packmasters tick. But I could continue that once I knew what Tomori had so ungraciously bequeathed to us.

"I'll have a look at the documents and let you know what I find," I told Ana, who nodded gratefully.

"So what do we do, now that we are free to go?" Ferret asked.

We hadn't discussed the question. What little time Ana and I had spent together, we had used to prepare her testimony and we hadn't had a meeting of the whole pack since our victory over Tomori. It hadn't seemed necessary as long as we hadn't won the case. We'd be staying at Vandal a little longer to pick up some more supplies, but I had no plan yet where to go next.

So far, Ana's need for information about the Packmasters and the war had driven us. With her will so focused, we had followed where she led without question. It would be a long time until I would be willing to trust her that blindly again. Considering she was studying those files from Thiala, she still was curious about the past, but she had plenty to work with now.

For the first time, I wondered where I would want to go and came up empty. My whole life had been focused on doing things for Ana. There simply wasn't anything I had ever wanted for myself. It was a little disconcerting.

“Well,” Ana said rather cautiously, “with the Lollipop we could go anywhere. We could go on a vacation even. Find some remote planet with pretty beaches, park our ship and just relax for a few weeks until we figure out what we really want to do. Give ourselves a break.”

That was an option I would never have come up with, but it certainly held merit. It would give all of us time to recover and think about what we would do with our lives in the future. We would also have time to study, learn and train. Ana could read her research texts, Ferret could practice his piloting in the VR and maybe I would get a chance for some combat lessons from Wolf. And of course, the thought of basking in the sun curled up in hot sand for a few hours every day was rather appealing.

Wolf leaned back in his chair, folded his hands over his belly and rumbled his approval. While he thoroughly enjoyed fighting and killing things, he loved not doing anything at all just as much. I could very well picture him lying sprawled in the sand right next to me.

One day, when his vocabulary had improved some more, I would ask him about his past. I wondered how long he had belonged to Captain Falk and where he had come from originally. He couldn't have been a pit fighter all his life.

As usual, Ferret took a much more practical approach to Ana's suggestion. “Oh, do you think we could catch some of those awesome fish, too?” he asked and greedily eyed the now empty platter of the seafang. “That would be great.”

Ana chuckled. “I'm not sure we'll find a beach with seafangs, but I'm sure there will be some fish to catch. As long as you do it, 'cause I don't think Cat would appreciate hunting in water.”

The mere thought made me shudder. Somehow, I had managed to conveniently forget that beaches usually didn't just come with hot sand but also with lots of water.

“Can you even swim?” Ana asked Ferret. She definitely was slowly falling back into her mothering ways. Another good sign.

Ferret shrugged. “How hard can it be?” he asked back, trying to look innocently confident.

Ana frowned at him. “You are not going into the open sea unless I am sure you can swim,” she told him, falling back into her command voice without even noticing it. Being protective suited her so much better, I thought and exchanged a smile with Wolf, who had noticed as well.

Ferret grinned at her. “Aye, aye, Miss Ana. Just Miss Ana,” he parroted the Judge from earlier.

Ana retaliated by throwing a blueberry at him which Ferret caught in his mouth in midair.

I leaned back in my chair as well and mirrored Wolf. Life was starting to look up again.

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