

Tatnia and I spent a few minutes asking Vaz questions, which she answered as best she could. She was patient with us for a while but eventually had enough, climbing onto the bunk above Tatnia and almost instantly falling asleep.

During our talk, our first and probably most important questions revolved around how closely we were being watched. According to Vaz, while the guards were constantly on the lookout while we were "on the clock," the four cameras along the ceiling of the prison were the only places we were being monitored from while back at the "barracks."

"I have never heard of the guards knowing something not seen by their own eyes or by those recorders," She explained. "If they are listening to us as well, through hidden microphones, they have allowed several damaging incidents to occur to keep it a secret. If that were true, then what would be the point of listening in the first place?"

We talked a bit more about the cameras and what kind of incidents she was talking about before Tatnia brought up our collars, specifically if the smaller, individual control units could deactivate a collar and if she knew what else the collars contained.

"The units the guards carry with them?" She had asked before shaking her head. "I do not know. I know they can put one or many to sleep or induce pain to the same degree. I have once seen a collar execution."

"How did that work?"

"An explosive charge, just enough to decapitate them," She explained with a shrug. "I have only seen it once, nor have I heard many tales of it used otherwise. The threat is often enough."

I managed to keep myself from cursing, but only barely. Having explosives in the collar was one of the worst situations possible, as I couldn't risk a sparks spell, not when an overload might set them off. With my worst fears confirmed, Tatnia steered the conversation away from the collars, eventually talking about shifts. The lupine humanoid revealed she normally worked with our group, but the guard sometimes pulled her off to hunt for vermin.

"It would not be the first time my species has been reduced to vermin killers," She admitted with a shrug. "It is better than being stuck in the mines, even if I am only hunting small, weak prey."

Not long after, Vaz finally decided that she had explained enough, stopping Tatnia's next question with a raised hand and a shake of her head.

"I must sleep if I am to keep up with my quota tomorrow," She explained, turning to climb to the top bunk, stopping and turning back to us. "I am aware in which direction you ask your

questions. Be warned, you will be punished if your plans are discovered. You risk death if you enact your plans and they fail."

"We know. The guards don't exactly look forgiving," I responded, shrugging. "We will try not to get you involved. Unless you want to be, of course?"

She looked at me for a long moment, her green, gold-flecked eyes locking on to mine, studying me. Eventually, she rolled her shoulders, a dismissal of my offer, but I got the feeling it wasn't a complete one. She climbed into the top bunk without another word, laying down on the thin foam mattress, facing away from us and towards the wall. After a moment, it was clear she was asleep, or at least pretending well enough that I couldn't tell. After a few moments, I looked at Tatnia and gestured out the door with a nod, my crewmate following without a word.

"Better than I feared," I said as softly as possible once we were outside. "But not nearly as good as I had hoped."

"Not sure we could have gotten much better," Tatnia said, shaking her head and leaning on the railing across from the cell door. "Having a free run of the cell will make some things easier."

"Yes, but it's only the beginning," I said, shaking my head. "There are a lot of things we need to know before we can start planning."

"Seems like whether the guard's control units can deactivate a collar would be the most important one."

"My assumption is no," I guessed, idly looking down at the bottom floor of the prison, where a few people were sitting around. "It would be a huge risk for no real reason save a minor convenience."

"The unit that the foreman used seemed different," Tatnia said after a moment. "It was bigger. Had more buttons too."

"That feels slightly more likely," I admitted, though I was still frowning. "But it still seems like a big risk for them. Why have the device to free your prisoners somewhere a riot could access them?"

"Someone has to control them, so there has to be a way to turn them off *somewhere*," She pointed out before looking down. "How's your hand?"

"Pretty sure I cracked something," I responded, wincing as I opened and closed my fist. "Who knew punching someone in the forehead was such a dumb choice."

"Most people who throw punches do," She responded with a snort.

"Yeah... It will be fine, I'll heal it when I'm in bed."

We were silent for a while, looking around the large room before I stood back and yawned deeply.

"We need to get some sleep," I said, shaking my head. "We spend the next day trying to think of something while we work, and tomorrow we start brainstorming."

"Do...Do we trust Vaz?" She asked. "I know she stopped that creep, but..."

"I get a good vibe from her," I said with a shrug, ignoring Tatnia's eye roll. "Let's give her the benefit of the doubt for now but not give everything away just yet. Trust but verify."

Tatnia nodded, both of us heading back into the room, crawling right back into bed. I rolled to face the wall, lifting up the foam mattress and shoving my hand under it. I chain cast fast heal, the glow barely visible against the wall as the healing energy sank back into my hand, fixing whatever damage I managed to do to it.

When I was done, I rolled over and tried to get comfortable, closing my eyes. Sleep didn't come nearly as quickly as before, but eventually, I managed to fade into a dreamless rest.

The following morning, if it was morning since there was no way for us to tell, we were awoken by a harsh, almost painful buzzing from our collars. Vaz almost seemed to anticipate it, already jumping down from the top bunk and leaving through the door. She seemed to remember we were there as she while leaving. She paused to look back at us as Tatnia, and I climbed out of bed, wincing and visibly straining against the headache-inducing vibrations.

"It is our alarm," She explained. "It will not stop until we have prepared to leave the prison barracks."

We quickly followed behind the Shistavanen, struggling to focus through the "alarm." As we walked down the staircases, I could see that there was already a line forming by the entrance, other prisoners from the same group we had worked with before. Not long after we arrived, the intense vibration stopped, and we were handed our morning ration. Judging by how everyone immediately started opening them and eating their contents, we were on some sort of time limit. Sure enough, after a few minutes, the guards started to herd us out of the prison. They followed us, covering us from all sides, armed both with weapons and control units.

We were herded back down into the mine, walking down the spiral stairway. As we slowly made our way down, I couldn't help but remember how much climbing back up them would suck after our shift. I kept an eye open and on our guard, absorbing as much information about their tactics, temperaments, and reactions as possible.

Before long, we had returned to the still active portion of the mine. This time we followed Vaz, all three of us working on the same platform.

"What happened to not getting me involved?" She asked as she picked up the resonance grinder.

"Would you prefer we go elsewhere?" I asked seriously. "We could leave...."

"...No." She said after a moment of consideration. "The company is nice, I am usually alone on my platform."

I nodded and waited for her to finish using the sci-fi mining tool, taking it from her when she was done and quickly getting to work, not wanting to draw more attention. Almost as important as information gathering was staying under the radar, something that I hadn't been doing well so far but would hopefully get easier now that we had "settled in."

I passed the tool to Tatnia when I was done with it and got to work, hammering out stubborn chunks of stone, separating out the pieces of mediari, and storing them in my pouch. Work was constant and painful, the maroon material slowly burning my fingers, turning them red and causing small blisters to form. I could see Tatnia was suffering as well, and I had to fight the urge to reach out and heal her. Not only would the light of the spell be blatantly obvious to everyone around us, but we would also stand out like a sore thumb if we didn't have any sign of handling the caustic spice component. Healing my hand from punching that creepy fuck was the last bit of healing I could probably do for a while.

At first, Tatnia and I chatted to pass the time, making the early hours pass by quicker. By the time we emptied our pouches several times and got our first drink break, we were already too tired to talk. The temptation to cast respite was even greater than the urge to heal Tatnia or myself. Despite the encroaching exhaustion, we kept chipping away at the wall. Somehow Tatnia and I managed to just barely keep up with Vaz, the clearly physically stronger and fitter Shistavanen easily handling the hard work. All throughout the day, we did our bests to watch our guards, as well as the foreman, trying to spot anything that might be useful.

By the end of the day, after nearly twelve hours of difficult and painful work, Tatnia and I were leaning on each other heavily for support, our bodies not accustomed to the harsh conditions. Even our face shield and filtration masks made things more difficult, the old, worn-down equipment much more difficult to breathe through than it must have been when they were new. The fact that they weren't new and that countless people had used them before us was a fact I had to continually repress.

The after-work process was identical to the previous days, an escorted climb to the surface, a foam shower, and then a rinse. Vaz looked miserable walking out of the rinsing room, and I managed to keep from laughing. She looked like a dog coming out of a bath and reminded me of a family pet from when I was much younger.

When we made it back to our room, rations in hand, I stealthily cast respite on myself, then Tatnia, who looked like she was about to hug me when the stamina and energy-restoring spell settled into her body.

"That... I think that might be addicting," She said, sitting straighter and looking much more alert. "I feel like I don't need to sleep."

"That will fade, like drinking a cup of caf," I explained. "We still need to sleep, or we will crash."

When Vaz joined us, she sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall opposite the entrance, clearly not wanting to climb into bed soaking wet. She silently ate her ration, finishing it quickly. Tatnia and I talked for a while, quietly discussing what we had noticed throughout the day.

"They know what they are doing," Tatnia begrudgingly admitted when I brought up the guards. "They made the usual mistakes people make for these types of jobs, but they clearly learned to work around them."

"They are experienced," Vaz explained. "The mine is profitable, they can afford to pay them well and to hire guards who know what they are doing."

"Would be admirable if they weren't supervising slave labor," I said, shaking my head. "Did you get a closer look at the foreman's and control unit?"

As we were preparing to leave for the day, grabbing and starting to pull the mine carts full of mediari, I spotted Tatnia trying her best to get closer to the foreman's table without seeming suspicious. I tried to cause a bit of a distraction, but I was only partially successful, a nearby guard shutting me down with a threat almost immediately.

"Not close enough to really see much," She responded. "It's definitely different, but I have no idea if that includes an off switch."

"...I still can't see them having an off switch so close to us," I commented with a frown.

"It would be best to assume competency," Vaz responded.

"I agree," I responded. "Let's assume they aren't dumb enough to actually leave something like that around. Besides, starting an escape down in the mine... Seems like a good way to get shot climbing out."

"How are you planning to fight the guards, even if you manage to free yourselves?" Vaz asked, standing up from her spot on the floor. "Are you capable of fighting armed guards with your fists?"

"We... can handle them," I assured her.

She looked at me for another long moment before shaking her head.

"I do not know why I believe you, but I do," She responded, shaking her head. "I am more than a match in close combat, but not even sharp tooth and claw would help when they have the advantage of range."

"That sounds a bit like you're interested in helping us," I said with a smirk.

"Does it?" She responded, giving me a smirk of her own.

She wordlessly pulled down the mattress of the bunk above mine, using it to dry herself off as best she could. It worked surprisingly well, and I pushed the fact that she had probably used my mattress to do that to the same at some point. When she was done, she put the mattress back to dry before raking her clawed hands through her fur, attempting to comb it straight.

"I will join you," She finally said in her deep rumble. "I have been here, doing nothing for long enough. My father would be disappointed that I have wasted away for so long. Even if we fail, I may die knowing I was not a coward."

Tatnia and I shared a look, stuck between being happy to have another helping hand and concerned about her acceptance that she might die.

"No one's dying," I said, standing up from the side of my bed. "We take this slow, plan out every step, and we will get through this."

"Very well," She responded, though she didn't look like she completely believed me. "What is our first objective?"

"Our first objective is getting these collars off," I explained, Tatnia nodding in agreement. "Any progress we make is meaningless if we don't have a way to get them off."