

Envy's Revenge

By Rachel Aukes

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He was the third scuffer this month. It could mean only one thing: Mech City could no longer support its aging population. Scuffers—homeless beggars and brigands—were pouring into the surrounding areas. Times were getting desperate.

I watched the poor excuse for a man tumble out of a rusty clunker and hobble into my swamp. His legs were obviously off-the-shelf models, his left at least an inch shorter than his right. No different from the other scuffers who scoured the land for anything that could be eaten or sold. And, like the others, this scuffer had no idea that something far more valuable than gold was right under his nose. *Me.*

I let out a sigh before pulling a lever hidden in the trunk of the old tree. He was barely worth the effort. Sure, I could've used the rifle to finish him off. It was faster, cleaner, and easier, but it was loud. I couldn't risk drawing attention from the ever-present scanners patrolling overhead, searching for new slaves to bring to Mech City. Besides, gunpowder was hard to come by these days. Everything I owned came off the bodies of those I'd killed, and the pickings had grown slim. The slicer, albeit messier, got the job done.

The poor scuffer didn't stand a chance.

Gears grinded to life and a whir floated through the air, the sound muffled by the swamp's dense foliage. Bullfrogs quieted as though in anticipation. The scuffer fidgeted with his goggles as he scanned the swamp. His eyes settled on the tree I peeked out from behind, and a sneer formed across his half-rotted mug. He thought it was his lucky day. He was wrong.

The scuffer stumbled toward me, the muddy water making his progress pitifully slow. With a bit of fumbling, he managed to pull out a gun with a short, wide barrel. A netter.

I drew my machete as he closed the distance, but there was no need. He wouldn't get close enough to fire. The near-silent whirring of the quickly speeding blades warned me it was nearly time.

Three. Two. One.

Giant blades slashed out from the trees, quartering the scuffer before he realized what was happening. Sharp metal cut through his mech limbs with a screech, spraying blood and oil as the scuffer collapsed in pieces.

I slid the machete back into my belt and nodded.

Killing was my talent.

Killing was why I existed.

I was born after the final Great War, after the Mistake. Some military scientist modified sarin gas to replicate itself like a virus. No one thought it could mutate. But it did. All it took was a girl with a head cold for the virus to evolve into a genocidal plague that wiped nearly ninety percent of all women off the planet and much of the remaining male population. The plague was particularly devastating to the female gender, putting humanity on the brink of extinction and making every surviving female a priceless commodity.

As countries fell into chaos, the Mistake brought on an even bloodier After War. The entire world was dragged into its massive yaw and left the planet and its survivors scarred. My mother fled with me during the After War, when I was not yet a teenager, from the desperation the world had become. Violent city states had sprung up where countries had fallen. Human rights collapsed, and anything that couldn't be automated required slaves: construction, maintenance, even sex.

It was during my mother's and my time together in the swamps I learned why I was named Envy. She'd said envy was a desire to deprive others of what was important to them. It wasn't until the day my mother was taken by a hunter that I understood.

I existed to deprive others of their lives.

A hoot owl made its first call in the distance, signaling the beginning of twilight. At night, the alligators owned the swamp. My place was indoors.

It didn't take long to grab everything I could use off the dead scuffer and from his piece-of-shit clunker. Besides the heat-goggles, he had little to offer: a few dull blades, a barely-charged blaster, and a bolt of cloth in need of a good wash. Until I pried opened the warped toolbox and found the faded red dress folded neatly inside. It was old and threadbare and precious.

I squealed in delight and spent a moment hugging my newfound treasure. I carefully wrapped the dress in the cloth before moving back to the task at hand. After dumping the scuffer's body parts in a deep part of the swamp and hiding his rusty skiff, I reset the slicer's blades and did one final sweep to make sure no other scuffer would suspect someone lived here.

Just like the swamps I'd see in picture books, the large trees and ferns hid me from the scanners. The thick mud and black water swallowed footprints and blood and bodies as if it were starved for such things. I took in a deep breath of the stale damp air that smelled of earth and rot, smiling. The swamp took care of me, and in return, I kept scuffers from thieving its plants and wildlife.

I headed toward a home that, like me, no one knew existed. The small, oblong door to my underground bunker was nearly underwater and camouflaged by a particularly thick stand of ferns. Carrying an armful of tools and cloth, I opened the door and stepped into the darkness, ever careful to lock the door behind me.

I'd earned my bunker the old fashioned way.

I'd killed for it.

While on the lam, my mother and I had come across a scuffer living in this swamp. The man offered us safety in exchange for my mother's complete surrender. I would've run, but my mother had always been practical. She gave up what remained of her soul by surrendering her body to him in exchange for food and shelter.

But Gaian was a cruel, sadistic bastard, dumping his every torment on my mother. Rage, lust; it didn't matter. And she took it because she knew that he'd turn to me if she fought back.

The only good thing about Gaian was that he'd kept his word. He opened his bunker to us, and the swamp provided us enough food to keep from starving. Though that food came from our own hard work. My mother and I spent most of our waking hours foraging, while Gaian sat on his ass and ate over half of what we found.

My mother had disappeared while foraging only a couple years later. I'd been working on our new rice paddy. It wasn't until sunset that I'd begun to worry.

I'd scoured the swamp until the next morning. All I'd found was a handful of turnips scattered on the ground and my mother's lace handkerchief. It was the first time in my life I felt hopelessness.

When I made it back to the bunker, Gaian hadn't seemed bothered. He had a new shirt and a shiny machete, a gleaming contrast to his rotted-tooth sneer. I knew, just *knew*, that the rat bastard had sold my mother to a hunter.

He'd simply sat there, lounging in the shade. He hadn't even given me a day to grieve. He gave me the licentious look he'd given my mother and then made the same offer to me as he had to her two years earlier.

Gaian had always been stupid and overly-confident. He'd thought I approached him to accept his offer. His grin hadn't faded until I gutted him with his brand new machete. He'd been my first kill. There'd been so many more after that.

Down the dark steps I went, into the belly of the earth, into the old forgotten bunker that I called home.

Later that night, I jerked awake with the ominous feeling of no longer being alone. My brow furrowed, and I leaned back, telling myself that it was just a dream, that I was safely hidden from the world. No scuffer could find my bunker. And even if one did, there was no way he could get through the reinforced steel door. Shoving my doubts aside, I rolled over and tried to fall asleep. After an hour of restlessness, I couldn't ignore the tingling at the base of my neck, the feeling that I was no longer alone in my swamp.

With a silent mutter, I rolled out of bed, then pulled on a clean pair of well-worn cargoes and strapped Gaian's machete around my waist. Throwing the rifle over my shoulder, I grabbed the newly acquired heat-goggles and headed up the steps. With a crank of a wheel, the door opened with a tinny creak. Muggy air enveloped me, and goose bumps rose across my skin.

An unnatural silence blanketed the swamp. Frogs and crickets and owls alike were silent. It could've been a nearby alligator that spooked them. Or something far more dangerous. Adjusting the goggle's lenses, I scanned the landscape. The ground danced with the heat signatures of small creatures walking, crawling and slithering. Raising my gaze to the tree line, I did another sweep and froze on a large Cypress tree.

Without the heat goggles, he would've been impossible to see. I refocused on the heat signature, seeing a scuffer crouching on a large branch at least five meters above the ground. His heat outline was incomplete—missing an arm and a leg. Definitely mech-limbs. My muscles

tensed. The malnourished scuffer from earlier today couldn't have climbed a tree. Only a hunter had the strength and agility to pull that off.

I took my eyes off the man in the shadows to find the stones I'd placed across the swamp so I could walk without getting caught by the murky mud. I hopped deftly and silently towards the safety of the slicer. With a hand on the lever, I looked back up. No heat signature registered when my eyes jerked across tree limbs trying to locate the hunter. When I finally found him, he stood on the ground, no more than twenty meters from me.

I jerked back to hide behind the tree. Letting my breath out slowly, I stole a look around the trunk. He stood there, not coming any closer, holding out his open hands as though in parlay, a slight smile on his face.

I knew better.

With a scowl, I pulled the lever.

His brows furrowed as if he could hear the nearly silent blades winding up, but even as the slicer whirred quietly to life, he casually strolled toward me and straight into danger, the thick mud not slowing him in the least. It was as if the swamp refused to hold him back.

With the smoothness of his stride, it was clear his upgrades were custom jobs. My prey was no common hunter. He stood tall, solid with muscle that showed no signs of starvation. Dark glasses wrapped around his face, and I suspected he had enhanced mech-vision as well. The moonlight caught a shimmer on his shoulder, and I narrowed my eyes on the emblem with the goddess Kali's silver outline.

No.

He was *the* hunter. Known only as Hunter, he was the one I'd overheard about from others when they passed through my swamp, talking about him with fear and jealousy. It was said that

he was more machine than man, that he worked for the goddess herself. The only thing known to be a fact was that he never failed.

And he'd seen me.

He came to a stop a couple meters from me. Our eyes locked as if in a duel, and my stomach twisted in knots. I struggled to keep the countdown in my mind.

Three.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. Killing a man who'd showed no aggression against me struck a tiny chord of remorse, but I told myself that his actions were part of a ploy to get me to lower my defenses.

Two

The moment I made a mistake, he'd capture me and present me to whichever master he served. It didn't matter who his master was. They were all the same; merciless men with too few women and too much power.

One.

"Good bye, Hunter." The giant blades came slicing down. Hunter jumped, twisted, and then vaulted through the death weapon I'd spent years perfecting. When the blades finally stilled and the night regained its silence, he brought himself to full height in front of me.

No one had ever survived the slicer. Yet, this man stood unwavering before me, the only change in him being his previous smile had become a thin, hard line.

He took a step closer, a slight limp marring an otherwise perfect stride. His injury was a small victory to me, but not severe enough to give me an advantage. Blood hardened in my veins. I had gone from predator to prey in the blink of the eye. Swinging the rifle off my shoulder, I clicked off the safety and pointed it at him. He paused, tilted his head to the side. I aimed carefully, and then pulled the trigger.

He didn't flinch as the bullet whizzed past him, into the target I'd finished less than a month earlier. The sound of the bullet hitting metal reverberated through the night air, and he jerked before being brought down by a weighted net that sunk him into the peaty mud.

The net bought me the seconds I needed to make my escape. Knowing I'd never be able to take Hunter in a fair fight, not without more powerful weapons, I bolted to my bunker, twisted open the door, and jumped inside. I yanked the steel door closed, locked the latch and collapsed on the steps and shivered, sucking in breaths. All I could think was that I'd just pissed off the biggest, baddest killer out there.

I paced my bunker the rest of the night and through the following day until I couldn't take it anymore. Armed to the teeth and muscles shaking with unease, I went to finish what we'd started the night before. The humid air did nothing to tamp down the rush burning through my limbs. I've killed hunters before. I could do this.

A movement in the shadows caught my eye. I spun to see Hunter step out from behind a tree. Covered in dried mud and sporting a slash through the thigh of his leather pants, he looked more disheveled than the man who came into my swamp last night. I would have been pleased, except his look of determination chilled the blood within my heart. Not that I expected anything less from this particular mech-man.

I swallowed. *Stay strong, stay strong.*

I took a step forward, glancing around for any sign of a trap. Took another step. When I was within range, I stopped. I put my feet shoulder-width apart and stood firm. "This will get messy. Why don't you make this easy for both of us and bugger off?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and stood there resolute, his lips curling upward.

My lips tightened. "So be it." I pulled out a grenade. His eyes narrowed. Ignoring the knot in my stomach, I pulled the pin and threw it at him. He lunged into the mud. A boom rocked the swamp, the impact slamming me against a tree.

I cursed as pine needles rained down on me. Looking to the sky, I prayed a scanner hadn't picked up my indiscretion. Guilt prickled my conscience. It was different to kill a man who'd not yet shown any hostility toward me. But I knew better; I had no choice. If I hadn't taken him down, he'd have taken me.

And I refused to lose my soul.

I remembered the hollow look my mother had in her eyes. As a slave, she'd been nothing but a vessel to bear the children of the ruling class. I don't know how many sons she'd bore before me. She'd refused to talk about it. All I knew was that she'd reached her breaking point when I was born. Her only daughter, doomed to live the same life.

It took her years to plan our escape. She gave herself for my freedom, and I wouldn't let her sacrifice be in vain. I would live free—or not at all.

Once my ears quit ringing, I came to my feet, expecting to find minced mech-man. Instead, Hunter stood there, covered with cuts and scrapes but otherwise unharmed—and looking downright pissed.

My jaw dropped. *Oh, shit.*

I backed up. For each step I took, he took one forward in a lethal waltz. When my back collided with a tree, my breath froze in my lungs. No retreat.

I pulled out my machete and took a warrior stance, just like my mother had taught me. I clenched the handle, feeling nothing like a warrior and everything like the girl half his size. I'd fought scuffers before, but never a hunter, and never the best of the hunters.

He continued toward me. As soon he was within arms' distance, I swung, but he blocked my blow, knocking the blade effortlessly out of my hand.

Before I could pull away, he grabbed my wrist.

"No!" I kneed him in the groin. He crumpled, and I dove for the bunker door just like I had the night before, tumbling through and locking it from the inside before he could get to me. I sat against the door, feeling every bit the coward for running.

Hours later, when my stomach started to growl, I forced myself down the steep steps and into the darkness.

After dinner, I lay in bed, playing the scenes over and over in my mind. It didn't make any sense. He could've easily captured me before I'd even seen him last night. Yet, he'd remained out in the open, as though he *wanted* me to see him. Even today, I sensed that he went down too easily, that he wanted me to feel like I had the upper hand.

"Why?" I called out into the darkness.

Of course there was no answer.

At some point in the night, I passed out from exhaustion, shivering with the cold realization that I'd met my match.

With morning, came a new plan. As I opened the door, I found Hunter leaning against a tree, watching me. For a mech-man, he cleaned up nice.

His arms were crossed over a broad chest, putting his muscled biceps on display. His ankles were crossed as he casually leaned against a tree. He was compelling in the way he stood, confident that he would win this battle. If I fought him on his terms, I had no doubt, either. He would win.

So I initiated my new plan. I wouldn't try to kill him. Not today, anyway. Instead, I would play his game. Figure out his plan. I'd wait until he let down his guard. Then I'd finish the job.

I locked the door on the way out and kept a wide berth as I moved toward the slicer, stopping when I saw the blades had already been reset. Same with the net. I nodded toward my swamp's defenses. "You do this?"

A slight nod.

I sighed in exasperation, and my shoulders slumped. "What do you want?" Though I already knew the answer. A man could retire off the money he'd make from selling me.

Without a response, I eyed him warily as I hopped from stone to stone toward my hidden garden. I'd never gathered more food than I needed to get me through the day and was ill-prepared for a siege. No previous hunter had lasted more than a few hours in my swamp. The slicer had never failed me before. With this being the second day in, I needed food to keep my strength up. I took my eyes off my unwanted visitor just long enough to empty the eel-trap and grab several green stalks. With enough food for another day, I cautiously made my way back to my underground bunker.

It continued like that for eighteen days. Hunter didn't try to capture me, but, strangely, I never found the right time to kill him. Instead, I focused my energy on trying to figure him out. He kept the swamp clear of scuffers, and I found myself growing comfortable with his quiet presence, even looked forward to seeing him every day. Some days, I'd find a bundle of food waiting for me outside my bunker. When I looked at Hunter, he'd simply nod, his way of saying, "you're welcome."

Were his gifts a peace offering or a ploy? I'd yet to figure that out.

As the days went by, I'd sit on a Cyprus trunk and talk while he listened. Even with dark sunglasses, I knew he watched me as though he were entranced. Since my mother's disappearance, I'd had no one to talk to, and I found myself anticipating seeing him every morning. It was as though he filled a chasm in my spirit.

Each day, Hunter grew closer, to the point of being nearly within arm's reach. Yet he never made a sudden move, never reached out to touch me. The dangerous proximity should've terrified me, but I'd started to dream of being wrapped in his protective embrace. I'd almost touched him once, when I'd gotten carried away with a story, but I'd caught myself in time.

With every passing day, I betrayed my mother's rule. *Never trust men.* But I couldn't bring myself to hurt him. On the nineteenth day, Hunter was already lounging on the Cypress trunk, holding a bundle of colorful flowers, by the time I returned from my garden.

As I approached, I was so busy admiring the way his leather armor molded to his chiseled chest, I didn't notice that one of my stepping stones had sunk. I slipped and fell into a shallow pool of muck, sending my freshly-picked blueberries flying.

Still on my knees, I turned to find he was chuckling at me, even though no sound passed through those lips. I threw a large blueberry at him, which he caught, wiped off, and popped into his mouth with a smirk. I couldn't help but smile. After pulling myself up as gracefully as I could, being covered in mud, I tossed a mud pie his way. He ducked, his grin widening as I prepared my next strike.

The sound of grinding gears decimated the silence and jerked my attention toward the belly of the swamp. A large plume of smoke signaled a skiff too large for a lone scuffer.

My eyes widened, and I glanced at Hunter. "Pirates!"

His lips pursed, then he disappeared behind a tree, leaving me alone to fend for myself.

I gritted my teeth and turned my attention back to the cloud of smoke clawing through my swamp. Desperate slaves and the vilest of scuffers fled cities to join pirate crews. Pirates would do anything or kill anyone to meet their needs.

I left my food and jumped toward the slicer. My machine couldn't stop their skiff, but they would have to leave the ship to get what they wanted. Rumors of my presence in these swamps must have been spreading. Things had been getting too crowded around here.

A horn sounded, and the skiff grinded to a halt where the trees stood as walls for my section of the swamp. At least a dozen mech-modified pirates with nets stood on its deck. A man stepped forward with a wide smile full of rotten teeth. "See, boys? I told you the rumors were true." He motioned me to the ship with a grimy hand. "Come here, sweets. Anything you want, it's yours. I swear you'll be treated like a queen. *My* queen."

My skin crawled. I knew better. Being shared among a dozen sex-starved pirates sounded as tempting as having my insides ripped out by a pack of ravenous dingoes. "Bugger off!" I yelled, before stepping behind the protection of a tree.

The pirate's face reddened and his hands curled around the railing. Evidently he'd imagined this playing out differently. "Come here. Now."

I reached for a grenade, stepped out, pulled the pin off the grenade, and lobbed it at the skiff. It landed on the deck with a clang and a second later, pirates jumped overboard, landing in the thick mud. A *kaboom* rocked the air, followed by a second louder explosion when the fire reached the engine.

I hated using the grenade. It had been my last one, taken off a hunter a year ago, and one of my most prized weapons. But I'd also never faced more than two trespassers at once before. Solo scuffers and hunters were one thing. Pirates, I hid from.

The surviving pirates emerged from the smog and came at me with unnatural speed. They were seriously meched up, as much as any hunter. I hit the lever on the slicer and began the countdown, already nervous that they'd be through the kill zone before the blades sprung.

A movement to the left caught my eye. Hunter stood at my side, now with a scabbard across his back and raising a blaster.

"You came back," I said breathlessly.

He gave me a confused look as though *I* were the crazy one.

I shrugged and pulled the rifle off my back. Together, we began shooting at the pirates as they weaved between the trees, all too quickly closing the distance.

When the countdown ran out, the slicer chopped four pirates. Their blood splattered the trees. The blades moved too fast. There were no screams from the instantly dead, only gore and limbs.

With a shout of fury, the captain aimed his blaster at Hunter who stood at my side, but then lowered it with a curse, no doubt because he couldn't risk hitting me by mistake. Even if he didn't decide to keep me for his own pleasure, I could bring a king's ransom, but only if I remained alive.

I'd already run out of bullets, and I was lousy at hand-to-hand combat. A moment later Hunter's blaster made a recharge hum. I pulled out my machete and he unsheathed a large, curved sword. "Nice," I whispered, before moving to stand back-to-back with him, his comforting heat infusing me with confidence.

I scowled at the remaining pirates—seven in all—who encircled us.

The captain lurched toward me. Hunter blocked him, but was held back when six swords leveled on him. He grimaced, and I laid a hand on his arm. *It's okay.*

Then, I spun around and swung the machete. The captain easily parried. I'd no training with swordplay and it showed. The sounds of a scuffle behind me meant that Hunter wasn't standing idly by.

The captain laughed before lunging under my next swing and grabbing my wrist. He squeezed. Agony shot through me, and the machete dropped from my grip. *No!*

He yanked me into his arms, his breath reeking of smoke and whiskey and rotted teeth. I punched him with my free hand. He wiped blood from his split lip and his eyes narrowed. I struggled harder, but he pulled me against him so that I couldn't get in another proper swing. His hot breath tickled my lips. "You're a feisty wench. I like that."

Dread doused my strength. I brought my gaze to Hunter. One of the pirates had stepped behind him, holding his blade to Hunter's throat so that he couldn't move without having his jugular sliced. His cheek was cut, and blood flowed from his nose. His sunglasses had been knocked off and I stared into his silver mech-eyes. I had never seen mech-vision before, and my breath caught at the tender gray gaze looking back at me. He watched me like there was no one else here. And he was absolutely furious.

His fury infused me. "Bastards!" I shoved away from the captain with all my strength, punching him again, then kicking his shin. He swung back. I was too slow. Bright pain exploded on the left side of my face, the force sending me to the ground. Vertigo kept me on the ground as I fought to regain my vision.

Noise and shouting erupted around me. When I could see straight, Hunter stood between the pirate and me. The pirate's bloody hands were wrapped around a sword impaled in his chest. Blood trickling from his mouth, he collapsed to the ground. A thin line of red marred Hunter's throat, and I held a hand out to him.

He reached down, but then spun around to block a sword from going through his back. As the remaining pirates attacked, my hunter fought them in a bloody ballet of swords and machetes. I grabbed my machete, stepped behind the first pirate I came to and skewered him through the kidneys. A large pirate lunged at me only to have Hunter slash his Achilles tendon, then decapitate another with the same swing.

I jumped back and swung at the pirate now down on one knee, but still he fended me off. Wild swings of my machete kept the pirate at bay, but then a hot, white pain shot through my head. I fell to the ground, trying to hold on to my blade, as my world sank into darkness.

It was twilight when consciousness found me. Gently touching the goose egg on my head, I looked around. Every pirate lay bloodied and motionless in the mud. Wincing, I came to my feet, and, lifting my machete, I decapitated each man, making sure their mech upgrades could never heal them.

Then I saw him. The blade fell from my hand, landing with a quiet *plop* in the mud. I dropped to my knees by Hunter who sat on thick root, propped against a tree. Blood from a gouge in his shoulder mixed with oil as it ran down his mech-arm, which made a small spasm with every spurt of oil.

I pulled out the delicate handkerchief that had belonged to my mother. Folding it, I pressed the soft cotton against his skin, and then pulled off my belt. He winced as I tied my belt around his shoulder to hold the makeshift bandage in place.

“It’ll be okay,” I murmured, raising my hand to cup his cheek.

Hunter’s hand covered mine. He gazed at me, as though trying to convey something through those two metallic orbs. For the first time, he looked mortal, and it rocked me to my core. Tentatively, I leaned forward and laid a gentle kiss on his forehead.

As I pulled away, he tugged me back. This time, my lips met his. They were warmer and softer than I would have guessed...and gentler. He didn't deepen the kiss, but he also didn't break the kiss while I took in the new sensation. Wanting to taste him, my tongue flicked over his lips; he opened his mouth slightly, and I slid my tongue inside for one delicious moment.

I pulled away. "Let's get you inside," I said abruptly.

He sighed. Wrapping his other arm around me, I helped him to his feet. Even using every ounce of strength, I could barely support his weight as we made our slow way toward the bunker door. Reaching for the lever, I paused with sudden trepidation. Biting my lip, I looked at the hunter bleeding in my arms. Then, with renewed purpose I opened the door, and brought a man into my home for the first time.

Three days later, I stood over my bed where Hunter slept, his breath a calming whisper. Like the mornings and nights that had passed before, I watched him, asking myself the same questions over and over. Why had I helped him instead of leaving him to die in the swamp? Why had I taken him in my home, my sanctuary? Why had I *kissed* him?

Still no rational answer came.

The next day, I filled a small cup with root soup. When I turned around, Hunter stood, watching me, a sheet tied around his waist, his mech-arm still in a sling. His other arm was braced against the wall, making the muscles on his bare chest stand out even more.

I swallowed, my breath coming faster, as if I'd just ran a mile. The heat he stirred in me sent goose bumps across my skin. Even asleep, he made me edgy, *changed*. Awake, it was a hundred times worse. My heart thrummed like a percussive symphony. Swallowing, I stood tall and carried the soup to him. "Drink this."

He mouthed the words “thank you” before taking the cup and downing the soup faster than I thought possible for a man who had been on his death bed a day earlier. I collected the empty cup from him, took a couple steps to the sink and rinsed it. I turned to find him close behind me, still watching with those sensual silvery eyes.

Suddenly my tiny underground bunker felt even smaller and warmer than usual. I backed myself against the sink. “What do you want?” I asked, my voice breathless.

He gave a small smile, brushed a hair from my face, then turned and sat down at my work bench. I stood cautiously at his back, heat dulling into fascination as I watched his expert use of my tools as he repaired his arm and leg.

Finished, he quickly rose to his feet, startling me. He simply smiled, then turned, heading to the curtainless shower in the corner.

My eyes widened when I realized his intent. “Hold on,” I said in a rush, before hastening to the ancient steamer trunk and pulling out a towel. At the sound of water, I looked up to see the sheet fall to the floor. Heat flooded my cheeks.

Minutes felt like hours as I held the towel and fidgeted, biting my lower lip. My betraying eyes snuck glimpses to where the naked hunter stood under the spray. Even with all the mech-work, he was a glorious specimen. No man had ever caused these new sensations zipping through my blood, and I had to prevent myself from stepping closer to take in every inch of him.

Instead, I stood frozen, staring, until he lifted his hand and turned off the spray.

Suddenly nervous, I refused to make eye contact as I stepped toward him, holding the towel out as far as I could. When the fabric was tugged from my hand, I turned away, and stood without knowing what to do. Every muscle in my body was tense, screaming at my brain to face him.

A soft touch on my shoulder made me shudder and turn. Hunter stood before me, a towel wrapped around his waist, beads of water still running down his chest. I nervously licked my dry lips as I eyed the contrast of the cold metal against warm muscle, my body beginning to escalate beyond my control.

He stepped closer and I brought a palm up against his chest, where a strong heart beat under hot, damp skin. I tried to keep him at a distance, but instead, my hand moved with a mind of its own. I've never touched a man this way before, and though his muscles tensed, he didn't stop me as my fingers traced the planes of his stomach. A large hand cupped my chin, tugging my face upward. He bent down, backing me up until my legs hit something soft. I collapsed onto the mattress.

He came down next to me. Warm lips pressed against mine, softly, hesitantly. My eyes widened then closed, as his kiss took possession of my senses. Infused with heat, I pressed closer. Not knowing what to do, I let him guide me. His tongue brushed my lips and I opened to accept him, soon needing and demanding more. My nails dug into his back as his kiss became fierce, possessive.

A moan escaped me when a rough hand rubbed over my nipple. Nothing had ever felt this good. Nothing. The many times I'd given myself pleasure didn't measure up to a tenth of the passion he called forth from me.

His heat permeated me; his hardness ground against me, and my thighs moved around him in response. He ran his fingers over my breast, down to my stomach, then lower still, where his calloused hand brushed against my thigh before pushing my homemade skirt up over my hips. His fingers traced up my inner thigh until they came to my clitoris, and I gasped as he gently flicked it. "Gods, yes," I cried out, clutching his hair.

My hips began to move against him. I stared at him, the wild need on his face making me desire him all the more. Suddenly impatient, I pulled his head to meet mine and kissed him. It was hard and wet and demanding.

It was perfect.

He responded by thrusting a finger inside me, and I whimpered. Then two fingers. I gasped, coming almost instantly. He breathed heavily as his fingers began to move in and nearly all the way out before pushing back in again.

Just when I could feel the waves of climax building, his hand stopped and he pulled away. I frantically pulled at his towel. I wanted to feel him—all of him. I craved him inside me. “I need you,” I whispered.

He rose up above me, and I knew it was so he could watch me, to gauge my reaction as he slid the large tip in, and I sucked in a breath and then cried out in pleasure. For one long second, he didn’t move.

“Please,” I whimpered and brought my hips up, pulling him in deeper. He pulled back slowly, and I clutched at him, raking my nails over his back. He drove himself deep inside, filling all of me, harder and faster, the intense pleasure far beyond anything I’d ever experienced. A climax grew inside me until I screamed, and he responded with an explosive burst of release.

He stayed inside me until the last tremor of my orgasm subsided. Then, with the gentlest of kisses, he rolled onto his side, panting and sweaty, and pulled me in a tender embrace. I should’ve been afraid. I should’ve scolded myself for betraying my mother’s commands. But I couldn’t bring myself to do either. It was the first time I’d ever felt...happiness.

We lay there entangled until my world slipped away into beautiful dreams.

Some hours later I awoke, still wrapped in the hunter's arms, and already yearning for him again. I rubbed against him, and he nipped my shoulder. I playfully slapped him, but he pulled away. The weight gone from the bed, I turned to see him rummaging through his pockets. He returned to me, looking down with concern, and handed me a letter. The thick parchment weighed heavily in my hand. I brought myself up on an elbow and turned it over. I ran my fingers over the wax seal, touching and seeing the unmistakable form of Kali. A chill ran through me.

Breaking the seal, I opened the parchment. The words were art, written in calligraphy by a delicate hand. I read it three times before the impact of the words sunk in.

On behalf of my people, I cordially invite you to join us in the safety of a free city founded for the preservation of humankind. Our city is located on an island in the center of the ocean, protected by the myth of the kraken. We cannot share the location lest this letter fall into the wrong hands. This hunter will provide you safe passage if you choose to make Kali your home.

Dearest regards, Lady Alexandra of Kali

The letter dropped to the mattress. I sat up and faced the man in my bed. "You came to invite me to Kali?"

He gave me a nod.

"And if I don't want to go, you won't force me?"

He shook his head.

I jumped from the bed and paced, oblivious to my nakedness. *A free city!* What that letter suggested was...impossible. After several laps in the cramped quarters, I stopped and watched him helplessly. When I spoke, the words came difficult.

"So this," I waved a hand between us. "Was to get me to go with you to Kali?"

His eyes widened and he shook his head fervently from side to side. He grabbed my hand and pulled it to his heart. It beat strong and warm under my palm. Holding it there with one hand, he reached for a piece of chalk lying on the work bench, and wrote on the wall:

Yours.

I stared at that single word, all the while feeling his heart beat under my palm. Feeling traitorous tears burn my eyes, I yanked out of his grasp.

“But once we’re there...” I thought for a moment. “You’ll leave again. Your job—”
He shook his head again.

“But that’s your job, right? Leaving Kali, hunting women?”

He pointed to the word on the wall.

I turned back toward the bed and collapsed on the mattress, holding myself still when I felt the weight behind me. Nor did I move when he wrapped an arm around me in a protective embrace—exactly as I’d imagined in my dreams.

I don’t know how long he held me. I fell asleep sometime in the night, still wrapped in Hunter’s safe arms. When I awoke, I was alone, a quilt pulled over me. I scanned the empty bunker, and my eyes fell on the wall and the single word written there.

If I went with him, everything would change.

In the weeks he’d stood guard outside my bunker, I’d felt safe. I had no clue how tomorrow would turn out. But the truth was I had been kidding myself all along. I wasn’t living in this swamp. I was hiding from life. Just as I was now hiding from this man and what he offered.

Throwing on a pair of cargoes and a tank, I stepped outside to find him in the garden. When he saw me, he stood quickly and watched me come to him. I searched his face, sighed, and then rested my cheek against his beating heart. “When do we leave?”

He grabbed my shoulders and looked at me. His lips curved up as he pulled me to him and kissed me with an intensity even bolder than our first kiss.

And we made love.

Later that day, we walked through the swamp to his modern skiff, perfectly camouflaged under the trees. Everything I wanted to bring to my new life fit in two bags. A dark shadow passed by overhead. “Ah, hell. We’ve got trouble,” I said, looking up to the sky.

Hunter set down the bag he’d been carrying, nonchalantly opened a side panel, and pulled out a hand cannon. My eyes widened, as he loaded it and held it out to me. With a grin, I dropped my bag, grabbed the arm cannon, then aimed it. I pulled the trigger and watched the grenade-like bomb shoot toward the scanner. An instant later, the scanner became a fireball hurtling toward the ground.

I handed the smoking cannon back to my hunter. Taking my hand into his, he helped me climb onto the skiff, where we danced to the music of the swamp.

And for the first time in my life—I laughed.

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