

Verena flung herself down into the ground, clamped a trembling hand over her mouth, pulled her knees tight to her chest, and squeezed her eyes so tightly shut that tears were forced from the corners. Terror made her stomach clench, bile rising in her throat. *Breathe* Verena told herself. *Relax. Don't think. Just breathe. In...out...* After the frenetic slapping of feet against stone, the silence made every small noise seem painfully obvious. Verena could hear Luca's quick, shuddering gasps beside her, and she willed him to be as quiet as possible. She could smell blood- he must have bitten through his lip again, trying to keep silent. It wasn't working. God, she hoped it wouldn't be able to smell the that.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty, as Luca finally got a hold of himself, breathing evening out. As her own heartbeat began to calm, Verena allowed herself to hunch down further, until she was sitting with her head tucked between her knees. The rough stone floor was digging into her, but she couldn't afford to shift over. Verena opened her watering eyes to the darkness, blinking to rid herself of the tears. She wished she could wipe them off, but it wasn't going to be much longer now. They were probably going to be okay. That is, as long as it didn't smell Luca's blood. That wasn't worth considering at the moment, though- there was nothing to be done about it. It would smell it, or it wouldn't.

After another ten minutes, a soft scuffling sound could be heard from the tunnel adjacent to theirs. *Relax* she willed herself again. *If it could hear you, it wouldn't be moving so slowly. You're doing great.* She closed her eyes again, not that it made any difference, and waited. Their carefully measured breaths still felt painfully obvious. The padding, scraping, fleshy noise of the untier drew closer. Verena could feel her pulse speeding up again, exactly what she was trying to prevent. It was level with the intersection of their tunnels. The sound of it was unlike anything Verena had ever heard before - it was as if it was pushing off of the floor, the walls, even the *ceiling*, a multitude of scraping, dragging sounds layering over each other. She thought she could hear its nails rasping against the tunnel sides. Then the untier was moving past them, the shuffling pull of skin on stone becoming fainter. Verena held tight to her self control for another 20 minutes- no use wasting all that effort, only to draw the untier back on top of them.

She removed her hand from where it had been pressed against her mouth, and reached to her left, squeezing Luca's lower shoulder. He jerked slightly, but then relaxed. Luca wordlessly lowered himself to the ground in front of her, and she stood carefully, making as little noise as possible. After laying her hand on his side, Verena swung one leg over Luca's back, and gingerly settled her weight on top of him, locking her legs around his lower arms. She wrapped her own arms around his neck, and crossed her ankles so that they rested on his lower back. She always felt a little guilty when Luca carried her, but her two human legs were much slower and clumsier than his six untier limbs. And anyway, the identified always looked out for each other- even if it was mostly Verena getting the help.

Luca took off down the tunnel on hands and feet, moving as quickly and noiselessly as he could, away from the other untier. Verena pressed her face against the sweaty back of his neck as the tension began to drain from her body. They didn't speak until they were back in the entrance

chamber, both too nervous to risk it, no matter how unlikely it was for the untier to be able to hear them anymore.

“How long do you think we have?” Luca whispered.

“Another hour?” Verena guessed. “I’m sure it isn’t more than an hour and a half, at least.” She had always had a good sense of time. Verena felt Luca nod against her hands, relieved.

“We should just wait here, then. The others won’t mind, once we tell them what we saw.”

“Probably not,” After Verena had climbed off of his back, she heard the quiet rustle of clothing as Luca stood up on his feet, and a soft crack as he stretched his back and arms, upper hands just brushing the grating above them. Clothing scuffed against stone as he settled down next to her to wait for the others, wrapping his right arms around her side.

Pia was the first to arrive, about half an hour later- the earliest time generally considered acceptable to be in the entrance chamber. It was always easier to recognize Pia than anyone else, as the clicking sound of her exoskeleton was, among the Tuesday night identified, unique. Pia shifted back, her steps becoming muted. She walked over to the lockboxes cut into the the wall, and rummaged through the one farthest from Verena and Luca. Pia quickly pulled out her clothes and redressed, before turning on the low central light and coming to sit on Verena's other side.

“Just get here?” She asked softly, setting her shoes down next to her. Varena just shook her head, and stared at her bare feet, unwilling to explain more than once. Pia’s eyebrows drew down into a frown, and her eyes flicked to Luca, questioning. He glanced up at her and away again, awkwardly hunching over to a more human height. None of the identified who had actually had their first change liked people seeing them in their untier forms, though Varena didn’t really understand why. Pia herself was quite capable of seeing in the dark, if only close up, and only in shades of red. And anyway, they touched each other often enough in the dark to have a very good idea of body shape; really, the only new information was color. Nevertheless, the untier seemed consistently embarrassed to be seen.

“Tell you once everyone’s here,” mumbled Luca, lower left hand fidgeting with the hem of his shorts. Pia looked worried, but she nodded anyway and leaned against the wall to wait.

Kamil, unofficial leader of the Tuesday night identified, arrived next, already human. He glanced around at them, blinking into the light. Taking in the tense postures and worried faces, he nodded, and, once redressed, sat down stiffly to wait. Aleksy arrived last, yawning widely as he slumped into the room mid-shift, body reordering itself.

“Anyone else ready to collapse?” He asked, squinting his newly reformed eyes open. Then, looking more alert, he asked “Someone have a rough night?”

Varena nodded. “Yeah” She said. “Luca and I got pretty close to something serious.”

“How close?” Kamil demanded immediately, ever efficient.

“1000 feet?” Luca guessed, looking to Varena. “But we had time get quiet, and weren’t on the same tunnel- we were around a corner.”

Kamil nodded tersely. “It chase you far?”

“Only for a little while. Once we got far enough ahead of it, it got bored. I think it must have forgotten pretty fast afterwards too, because it wasn’t even looking for us when it went by. Just passing through, I think.” Answered Varena.

“We had a good head start, though,” offered Luca. “It was pretty fast, so if we’d started off closer to each other, it could have been bad.” Varena bobbed her head in agreement.

“Shit,” said Aleksy, buttoning up his pants. “Where was it? Could you hear anything specific?”

“North and west, pretty far out- near the area with that sink,” said Luca. “Heading East. I don’t know about anything specific. No scales or exoskeleton, I think. Sounded like skin?” He glanced at Varena for confirmation.

“Feet.” She said simply. “Lots of feet”. The group mulled that over silently, Pia looking increasingly worried.

Kamil sighed. “Well, nothing we can really do other than avoid-” He was cut off by the grinding sound of the upper gate opening above them. Luca jerked to his feet, hurriedly shifting back, height sinking quickly down from seven and a half feet, to a human 5’9”, clutching his shorts to hold them in place. The others stood as well, looking relieved. “Nothing else important?” asked Kamil quietly. After a shake of Verena’s head, he nodded, and, tipping his head back, stepped forward into the beam of bright light filtering down from above.

“You all there?” called the custodian.

“All present” Kamil called, and then stepped back so that the rope ladder could be lowered down to them.