



Preface:

This is a story told from two disparate perspectives. As such, there will be overlapping information witnessed and repeated from different points of view. It is our hope that you'll enjoy the process of seeing these two points of view clash, then come together both figuratively and literally, as indicated by the right and left idents noting the shift in perspectives.

In the near future, the world as we know it is no more. The wasteland covers what was once the continental U.S, and only small pockets of humanity have managed to survive and settle in the new world. In this world, however, new humans with dangerous gifts have risen to prominence, preying on the weaker humans with their ability to change their size and density at will. These 'Shifters' roam the wasteland, struggling to survive much like the remaining humans, even with their natural, predatory advantage.

Here we find the story of two people living in this world. So different from one another, soon to clash, and from then on to relearn what it means to be human after humanity has fallen....

She left, without binding him again; she left the van giving him free reign of the space. If there was a time to strike, it was now. He scrambled to collect the knife he'd smuggled and hopped down from the cargo hold, hurting his leg on the landing after forgetting his wound. Clenching his teeth through the pain, he bared the knife, moving purposefully to the door where he'd go outside and strike....

It only took a peek out the door as the early rays of morning light broke into the cave around a massive feminine silhouette for him to know she'd already grown. He hadn't considered how easily or quickly the process took her, even after seeing her do so the day before.

'Stupid!' he cursed internally, the weapon in his hand now meaningless, just a splinter to the immense creature between him and freedom. When she stepped out into the light, increasing her size even further with every step, the tremors she made shook his soul and the loose debris that comprised the cavern. Only the lower half of her thighs were visible below the overhang as she stretched onto her tiptoes, basking in the brisk morning air that Adam would dearly miss.

She turned around, her rugged yet moderately well-kept feet now aimed towards the cave, and her knee dropped to a kneel, bringing her waist and womanhood into view. Adam's own knees quaked as the ground shook, the shifter now dropping onto both knees and leaning over, the first hints of her blonde hair piling on the ground around her before even seeing her head.

It struck him at that moment that she was coming in, and remembering her not-so-cryptic warning from last night told him why. Hastily, he jumped back into the camper, the only refuge he could imagine where he'd at least be somewhat safe. But would she be able to just reach in? The interior looked beat up to a degree, with a number of her belongings strewn about in a nonsensical mess. How far would she go to pull him from his unfortunate sanctuary?

At that moment, he turned his head every which way around the cabin, looking for any form of escape or shelter to better his chances. Not five feet away from him was her haphazardly piled cache of guns. All unloaded with various munitions scattered amongst them. These might be his way out, but he knew that not all rounds went to all guns, and he couldn't bank on having time to find a proper match. Still, these weapons didn't harm her before. Why would now be different? All except possibly the unloaded

harpoon taser sitting atop the pile, a fresh bolt just underneath. His heart was pounding, a possible lifeline not far off, waiting for him to take up arms...

And yet, he couldn't move. The shaking vehicle denoted her approach, and for the life of him he couldn't summon the courage to leave his relative safety. There wasn't a reason behind his decision, or a conflict of indecisiveness holding him back. Just the overwhelming sense of dread that gripped his spirit with cold, sharp talons, weighing him down where he cowered as the giant approached.

The booming stomps from her crawling into the cave rocked the vehicle fiercely as she blotted out the sun outside. Adam by now had climbed up into his cot, keeping out of sight of the door. After another handful of grueling, agonizing tremors, they stopped, and the cart shook in the aftershock for some more time before coming to a rest, silence laying over the cabin.

"Alright! C'mere, snackie," wind rushed into the cabin from just her deceptively cheerful voice, the implication in her call in no way subtle.. "Think it's about that time, don't you?"

Adam paled; this was it. She was calling him out to be her breakfast. Likely she grew to her current size to manage him as easily as she had his clanmates. A tear streaked down to the dusty cot, the boy clutching his useless shiv like his last tether on Earth.

"Come on human. Let's not drag this out. I won't bite~"

The once innocent phrase that may have implied harmless flirtation now hammered in the terror of his fate should he leave the car, especially after seeing how she obviously did 'bite' just yesterday. He tried to suppress his panting, not wanting to alert her to his whereabouts. There was no best case scenario besides making this as difficult for her as he could.

After all, it now came to his attention that she was giving him a choice. She was asking him to step out, not outright dragging him into her jaws. If this was the case, there was no way he was leaving the vehicle! Perhaps she was too attached to damage her vehicle for just one human, he convinced himself. Instead of obeying, he pushed himself back into his sleeping place, making himself as scarce and quiet as possible.

Maya huffed, glaring at the van. She wasn't about to go drag him out and risk denting the interior. That'd just be more repairs to worry about later. As it stood, she'd continue trying to coax him out as is. If it came down to it, she could always just shrink back, pull him outside by force, and do things the hard way.

"Oh little Snack, come on. Come out! I know you'll want to see the sunshine. It's a beautiful morning! Crisp and clear. The wind isn't blowing for once," she said, attempting to paint an enticing picture for him. "Ooh. I see deer in the distance. They're adorable, prancing and bouncing like they do."

Her broad, lilting accent brought more color to the picture she was weaving for her captive. Hopefully, he'd understand the kindness of letting him see the sun one last time. It wasn't necessary, but on a few occasions she'd stumble on a poetic type that fell for such fanciful acts. They were funny, if a bit pathetic. She didn't take this fearful boy for that type, but any way to make breakfast easier on herself was appreciated.

"Sh-shut up," Nothing she said could be trusted, no matter how sweetly she spoke. Her melodic voice reverberated through the car, vibrating the surface he clung so dearly to. "I'm not falling for your lies, giant! I'm a coward, n-not an idiot!"

Maya had to laugh at that, a lovely, rhythmic chuckle that loosened more rubble from the cave walls. There was a boldness in him yet, something she hoped would reflect in his flavor. "Are you so sure about that? Come on. If I were you, I'd want to come see the pretty sunrise and cute deer."

She rolled over slightly, letting some sun inside as she got a proper view of the landscape beyond her declined figure. The sun was out, but no deer were present. No fauna dotted the barely greened wasteland she promised him. She'd have liked to see a deer, and have someone to share it with, for more than bait at least.

"Oh now this is interesting. There's a group of humans headed this way. They're coming from the same direction my meal did yesterday. I wonder if they're from the same village?" Her eyes lingered on the group of small figures in the distance, armed and alert to their surroundings. They didn't behave as if they knew a shifter was nearby, and hopefully wouldn't do anything stupid to rouse her ire like some others had foolishly attempted.

"I wonder if people from the same place taste the same? Now that would be interesting to find out. You think that'd be fun, Snack?" She was half expecting her little captive to come running out and beg for their lives. Whether he did or didn't, she didn't plan on messing with that other group. If they left her alone, she would leave them alone.

His head perked up. Had another scout team really been sent for him? Farley might have shared their projected coordinates before leaving, and there might be protocol for the investigation of absent teams at daily rounds. Maybe there were more of his people coming to rescue him!

Though how would they know? The monster had gathered the evidence and stowed it away with himself in her horrid living space. Even if there were others, would they have a chance taking her down? Did he even want them to try? More needless losses to just save one unimportant soul?

Then again, this was all based on the presumption that she was telling the truth. Believing any word from her mouth at this point was an idiot's gambit. Instead, he retreated to his huddle, refusing to give in to her tricks.

"I-I won't... I'm no idiot... and I'm not food! I'm... I'm..." Adam was losing his conviction with each frightened breath. There was no bargaining. No appealing to her humanity. No escape to look for. She wanted him for breakfast, and all that kept him outside her hellish belly was his will to stay out of her reach. There was no revelation that would save him. Just the tenacity of a mortified rodent cowering before the jaws of fate.

Maya sighed in irritation, resting her cheek on her crossed forearms facing the bus again, "Come ooon. Come see me. What kind of man doesn't obey a woman when she bares herself to him, hmm?" She paused, listening closely to his minute movements inside, hearing his little form tense up against her cot out of her sight. She smiled, finding her next strategy to lure the boy.

"Mmm~. Maybe I'll let you explore my breasts. Or perhaps my pussy is more to your liking." She raised her head to bring her chest into view, pushing them up with her arms as she cooed suggestively. "You know, I haven't had a good fucking in a long time. It's so lonely out here in the wastes. I'm happy to make this a memorable experience for you. Long as you just step... right... out~" Her head came down, bringing her plush, smiling lips directly into the doorway of the van, blowing gently inside the cabin with her warming, alluring sigh that ended in a moan.

"Wh-what the fuck is that supposed to mean!?" Was she trying to seduce him? Her ploy couldn't get more obvious.

"Y-you're sick! And out of you're mind if you think that's gonna work!" Even while denying her outrageous proposition, he couldn't fight the blood rushing to his cheeks. Adam had little experience in this aspect of life; an honor that was reserved for the highest standing members of the commune. Her nudity already exacerbated his subconscious insecurities, and now her carnal promises proved crueler teasing to the young man. For his most recent failures, he was unworthy to make love. Not in this lifetime, and especially never would he willingly lay with the man-eating beast trying to dangle it over his head.

"Come out," she crooned, "Come explore my body. Would it help if I was your size? Would I be more attractive then?" She sighed as she brought her head back up, her hands now raised to support her chin. "Come make love to me. I'd like a man's touch."

She moaned as she bit her lip, her hands dropping to knead her breasts as they rested against the ground. Truthfully, laying down and putting any pressure on her chest was an uncomfortable position. But for the sake of her performance, she bit the bullet, hoping the boy would get some kind of view of her from the windows.

Maya cupped and squeezed her right breast, running her fingers through her unbound hair and letting her natural pheromones wash through the cave. "Anything you want, little man. You can make a fist in my hair as you ride me. You can spank me. You can call me a skank or slut. You can do it all," she breathed. "All you have to do... is come out."

There was no sign of her stopping. These attempts to flirt and lure him outside were more offensive than effective. Yet, a stirring in his core spoke to some part of her rhetoric that broke through to his primal urges. Of course she was beautiful. Were they in any other position he would've pined for her touch more than anything.

"Y-y-you can't fool me. I'm not even worthy of... I--" he sighed. What honor was there in holding on to the last tether of life, hanging over the gaping pit of the void? Another few minutes of breath? There was no way she was serious about her promise... but if she were to swear. Yes, no one could break a swear. It was sacrilege in his home to turn back on a swear.

His logical mind protested the absurd notion, but he was tired, in pain, and maybe hopeful that he might enjoy one last privilege before the end. Adam stood up, trembling in all of his limbs. He climbed down timidly from the bed, moving no farther than the bench he'd been secured to the day before. Peeking outside, he saw her full breasts and looming face cheerfully meeting his emerging gaze. Trying to discipline himself not to get lost in her enhanced assets, he addressed the violet irises directly, "Do you... do you swear to do as you promise?"

Maya tilted her head to the side, letting her long hair fall to the same angle. Her violet eyes danced with amusement. Her words had some affect after all.

"Swear?" She chirped, her lips curling into a knowing, teasing smirk. "I swear to do exactly as I've promised." For her success, she was equal parts elated, relieved, and annoyed. If she had to fuck him before eating him, fine, but she'd still get her snack in the end. Likely he wouldn't be anything memorable, though she was honest in that it'd been a long time since her last bedfellow. "Come on out then, snack. Let's both enjoy the morning." she purred, beckoning him with curled, inviting fingers.

The ultimatum. Should he step forward and relinquish himself to her wishes? He had something to gain now, a privilege he never thought he'd achieve by fault of his unremarkable existence. Now, his cowardice might lead him to the pleasure he and his fellow clansmen wished for from the earliest days of pubescence. With painfully clenched fists, he approached the door outside, taking the first three steps down before stopping.

"Miss... I'd prefer you just finished it now." His eyes were resolute, quietly confident in his decision, "I regret the events that led me here. I never wanted to harm you, I never wanted to be a scout. If this is it... I'd rather end it quickly." His lip quivered, his terror palpable, yet there was a comfort in this last trace of honor he'd found. A good man found no profit in pain or pleasure, but the honest sacrifice when faced with the end of their time.

The horror that had suffocated him to remain inside had been melted away by an unknown defiance. Maybe it was the fact that he could deprive her of some satisfaction in any way that gave him this intrepid bravery, or maybe he'd just grown tired of clinging to a fool's hope. Resolved, he stepped fully down to the cracked concrete ground.

"Do what you have to do." Adam closed his eyes, waiting for the oncoming maw to swallow him into the void of the giant.

Maya would have picked him up and ate him right away, but his words made her pause.

She did pick him up after a moment, just holding him above the ground, putting only enough pressure on his midsection to keep him steady without pain. Something about his tone, his voice, jogged a memory from yesterday. He didn't want to harm her? She remembered one of the humans spoke against the plan to kill her, but didn't associate it with her snack until now.

The recognition rattled around her head, wearing a sober expression as she got a closer look at the quivering human in her hand. That mop of black hair stuck out to her. He was the first one to reveal himself; also the first one to run. He'd made no attempt to harm her.

Even so, he was a human. A primitive, violent race that brought her nothing but hardship and calories. She sighed, the exhaust blowing his short, shaggy hair about as she began to speak, "I- I'll make it quick. Thank you for your honesty, Snack."

She offered a genuine smile, debating whether she meant to not swallow him quickly or just chew him to save him the pain inside her gut. Her gentle smile parted slowly, lifting him closer to conclude their short lived obligation. He'd passed the threshold of her lips, just about to touch down on her waiting tongue...

When she was hit in her backside by a powerful explosion. She yelped, her head reeling up and knocking into the roof of the cave. It trembled momentarily as if threatening collapse, instinctively clutching her captive close to her chest. Angry for whatever hit her, she started crawling back outside, flinging her human back to the door of the camper as she reemerged into the light.

Beyond the open valley where her body stretched out into the wastes, at least a dozen humans were armed with their weapons at the ready, aimed at her. A trail of smoke blew upwards from the nozzle of a large artillery cannon welded to the back of a crude carriage.

She glared and bared her teeth at them. "You are going to fucking pay for that!"

"We're looking for our brothers, beast!" an indistinct voice called out from the carriage, amplified by a scratchy megaphone that distorted his presumably small, to her, voice, "Were you around these parts yesterday?"

Maya wasn't afraid of their weapons. She was irritated by the intrusion, more than anything. They were parsed out by many yards all around her, so dealing with them all wouldn't be as simple as rounding them up.

"Yeah? What if I was? Why should I tell you how I spend my time?" she growled through clenched teeth, glaring down with fiery aggression over her assailants. Then, from the corner of her eye, her attention was brought back to the cave. Rushing toward the exit was her snack, waving his arms out to the other humans.

She felt her chest jump, and hastily grabbed for the metal sheet she'd used as a makeshift seal the night before. With two hands, still seated on her side, she slid it over the entrance, cutting off the boy just before he'd made it out. There was a small relief in successfully detaining him. A relief quickly mitigated by another blast to her shoulder.

Maya cried out in anger rather than pain, turning back to the aggravating attackers who no doubt saw the boy try to escape.

"Give her hell!!!" the crackly voice called out, and every one of them began firing various barrages of bullets, bombs, and rockets at her. She raised her arms, condensing herself to weather the hailfire.

When the first round of shooters were forced to reload, she found the chance to make her move. Her arm lashed out, quickly grabbing one of the closest humans as her rear shifted her weight to her knees, beginning to rise up. The dust around her on the ground bellowed and swirled as she pushed against the ground, getting to her feet and starting to rise up to her full height, many, many, *many* times taller than the highest ruin nearby.

The human she grabbed was like a mouse in her hand, standing up fully and crossing her arms. "You know what? I know exactly where your friends went. Right here!" She emphasized her point by smacking her trim, tan belly, "and now I'm thinking of having a little reunion."

Her threat rang heavy on the men still opening fire as her feet started moving towards them. "**Come at me, fuckers!**"

The metal barricade slammed shut, severing Adam's view of the rescue outside. He'd caught the briefest glimpse of other humans approaching the cave before he was imprisoned again by the blonde giant. His view cut off, he relied on his ears to put together a picture of what was happening. Gun fire, and lots of it. Various shouts in response to the shifter's booming steps as she engaged them. Adam knew she didn't

take direct assaults lightly, but the larger size and scale of the onslaught he could sense sounded substantially superior to everything his team threw at her before. Maybe they stood a chance! There was hope yet, his tears ceasing as he attentively followed the audible action.

Had they come for him? There wasn't time to recognize their faces or check for his home's emblem. Left in the dark, he scurried along the steel wall that separated him from the outside. Any crack of light against the ground might let him squeeze through and escape, but what little openings there were proved too shallow for even his thin build.

Minutes went by, and the presence of weapon firing faded one gun at a time. The giant had demonstrated an immunity to bullets that trumped whatever firearms they were packing. Ultimately, the sound of fighting had ceased, and the smallest hint of a wet noise cut through into the chamber. She'd dealt with them swiftly, and would be back any second. He slumped down against the ground, defeated without the power to have affected the outcome of the massacre in any way. As a huge boom slammed against the metallic barricade, he cried out miserably through the dark hole...

Maya had sat down to rest against the entrance of the cave, stuffed to the brim. Her belly was rounded out with the contents of her meal, visibly wriggling and fighting inside.

She belched and patted her stomach, the sadistic satisfaction of dealing with more self-righteous pissants nearly as satisfying as her engorged mid-section.

She sighed loudly, a satisfied exhalation for a job well done. In any case, breakfast was taken care of. She chuckled to herself, amused that these humans had indirectly saved the one they were after. Though they likely didn't anticipate how the rescue was actually meant to play out.

Maya smiled, staring at the open plain of scattered weapons and clothes around her legs. She'd gather them herself, but wished to sit back and enjoy their struggles a bit longer. So, she sat forward briefly, reaching to her side for the edge of the metal door and pulled it slightly over, allowing a small exit out into the wild.

The satiated blonde leaned over toward the crack, speaking into the cavern where she knew her original meal was hiding, "Snack! I need you to go around and collect their things." Her order given, she sat back up and reclined again, closing her eyes and listening for the acute footsteps of her small prisoner.

The light blasted in from the far side of the cave door, and Adam rushed to the one chance of escape he had. Maybe the boom had been the giant falling dead, and his brothers had opened up this small crack to save him!

Unfortunately, on rushing outside, he only got as far as just beyond the wall when he was met by the Shifter's huge voice giving him ominous commands. Once in the light, he saw a familiar field of desolation. Abandoned clothes, gear, guns all over the ground, all juxtaposed to the tanned, womanly leg that stretched out and dominated the rest of the clearing.

To his left was the Shifter herself, sat heavily against the wall with a grotesquely stretched out gut. Another group brothers, dead. Or soon to be. Either way, the absence of any conscience regarding the life of his kind was on full display, rubbing her stomach lazily with a sick, content smile on her murderous lips.

Her orders were clear, leaving him with the dreadful task of collecting the remains of her meal. Stepping farther outside, he understood the sheer amount of people she'd consumed and shivered. However, her sloven aftermath told him a few things. One, she was too tired to get up from her recline. Two, she expected him to stay, even having released him from his cage. He looked to his right, finding an open plain that would lead him home. All he'd have to do was run.

Moments passed before he fully processed that the shocks running through his being were from his desperate footfalls building in speed. His feet picked up several paces before he fully knew he was running. A chance to get away he didn't think possible fell into his lap, and he hauled ass to make the most of it.

Maya was close to humming for herself when she heard a familiar pitter patter to her right. She brushed it off as the kid walking around like she told him too. Until she realized the rapidity of his pace. Looking over, she saw he'd gone into a full sprint away from the scene of her morning meal.

"Fuckdamnit!" Maya growled. "Get back here!!" she rolled over, reaching out for him before realizing he'd already gone too far, "Get back or I'll make room for one more!"

When he kept running, she swore and pulled herself to her feet. Her belly was heavy and made it uncomfortable to move fast, but she pushed forward. It was a short distance for her no matter what before she swiped the little human up again.

She straightened up and glared at him, looking a little green around the gills. "You little shit. I told you to do one thing and you fucking take off on me. Are you deaf? Stupid? What? Give me one damn good reason not to eat you right now!"

He was so close! Just getting around the next bend of garbage would've given him the cover to bury himself and hide. Barely ten yards away and he was pulled into the cruel, vertigo-inducing grip of his thundering pursuer. The strong fingers crushed his lungs and ribs while being raised far above the ground to meet her irate face.

She actually expected him to talk. Part of him imagined that would be it right there, but she wanted him to actually defend his actions? He swallowed thickly, finding the air to answer her through the vice of her powerful fingers.

"I--I, I just want to live... Is that so unbelievable!?! Tears welled up in his large brown eyes forced to face her, "Are you so removed from humanity that you don't know what it's like to fear!? You promised you'd kill me, just like you killed my brothers and sisters! You're cruel! Vile! And either you kill me now, or I'll do everything I can to get away from You!"

It all came flooding out, the emotional pressure that'd surmounted through his traumatic experience, shouting fervently at his unfeeling audience. "So here! You got me! I'm lost, just get it over with so I don't have to live in fear..."

Maya listened to him in silence, the only sound following his speech carried on the high winds natural to their elevation. She waited, then thought to speak in response until a pressure mounted in her chest. Her cheeks blowing up for the oncoming passage released as she let out a large hiccup followed by a wet belch. Maya hadn't intended these, but the wriggling in her gut and the exertion of running with said gut definitely wasn't agreeing with her.

She knew her gas wouldn't help her prey's emotional state at all, seeing a few globs of spit had hit his head. So she dashed the thought of responding with empathy. "Fuck this. I'll decide what to do with you later. For now, just pick up the weaponry in the clearing. Try running again and I'll flatten you," she warned.

He had frozen at her threat, making her content he'd finally obey. Walking the short distance back, she crouched and set him on the ground in the clearing, amid all the discarded weaponry. "Get it cleaned up. Now." She stood straight and crossed her arms, staring down at him.

The glutton wouldn't even suffer him the punishment she promised. He trembled until being left on the ground with her stern warning. He brought his arm up to brush the spittle away from his face while considering his options. Running and getting crushed didn't sound appealing, but it was one way to end his torment. A moment passed where he considered bolting again and accepting said fate. Still, the agency it gave her lessened the satisfaction of the hypothetical defiance.

Then an idea occurred. Doing as she wished, he paced over to the nearest rifle. Out of curiosity, he inspected the weapon, finding the crescent shield of Barstow emblazoned on the hilt. Now he knew these people had gone to find him, or at least the whole of Charlie-6. They'd died for nothing.

No one else would die because of him. He turned the barrel up to his face and shoved it in his mouth.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Maya hit her knees beside him and yanked away the gun. “Fuck damn, are you that eager to die?!” She picked him up and glared at him. “All this damn movement is making me sick. I swear on creation’s breath, I’m not going to get to enjoy myself because of you, am I?”

He shivered in her grip, though stared back, timid defiance in his brown eyes, “They’re still squirming, ya know. Your friend’s yesterday got fried because of that stupid electric pin prick! And today I can’t even sit back and relax because you won’t do as you’re told!”

Her violet eyes burned as she stared him down. “Fine. Then you can listen.” She swung him down and held him to her stomach as she slowly reduced her height. Those who were still alive inside her screamed in renewed terror as the space around them shrunk.

Maya’s face contorted in discomfort. Her body was working hard to compact her meal but it could only go so fast. And when she did it this soon after eating, it took longer and was more difficult because her meal was still firm and intact. She stopped reducing her height when she was in the mid-to-low twenties, still holding the boy firmly against her gut with her enhanced strength rather than her inherent size.

Now her gut was huge as it hung down over her waist, but the screams and crying had stopped. The organic sounds of her gut working had picked up intensely, working harder than ever to reduce her meal to manageable proportions. “You wanna be a coward? Fine. Stay in there until I’ve collected all the weapons.” She turned and threw him back into the cave, growing slightly more to close the metal door behind him.

Tossed again into the dark, he pushed himself back to his feet to scramble out until the dense metal sheet slammed back into the ground. He crashed into it pitifully, banging on the cold unforgiving steel. "LET ME OUT!!! JUST END IT!! LET ME DIE! Let me die!! Let me die..." he slid to his knees, his forehead scraping against the wall as he sobbed through his pleas. He wound up curled into a ball hunched over the ground, crossing his arms over his knees and sobbing uncontrollably, the screams of the now crushed people inside her ringing in this throbbing subconscious.

Maya ignored him as she gathered all of the gear. She couldn't reduce her size any further yet. Not until the food had softened more. Once she had all the weapons, she set them next to the barricade, stretched out across the ground and napped. They'd do well for trading while on the road, or at least as some good defense if she wasn't in the mood to grow and fight.

The faint sounds of her captive were a mild disturbance, one she brushed off by turning away from the cave and soaking in the sunlight for a nice nap. She slept for a few hours, as she usually did following a big meal, before stirring under a cloudy overcast.

She sat up and sighed begrudgingly, her gut now reduced enough for her to return to normal height. Before doing so, she moved the sheet metal aside with enough space for her to drive out. Inside, she found the human right away, curled up just barely inside the entryway.

Maya looked down at him with one brow arched, "Get up. You're going to help me look for my part," she said. "Or a space heater. Either one would work. But you're going to earn your life."

He looked up to her, tear stains ran down his cheeks. He'd been curled on the ground, coming down from a psychotic break in the handful of hours he'd been trapped. Seeing the light again, he met his captor, now with a shrunken belly and a firm demand. Adam stood glumly, the life and energy drained from his expression and posture, though he stood at attention, weakly responding, "Okay..."

Maya waited to see him blurt out any kind of protest, but was surprised by his passivity. "...Right. First, I'm getting dressed, so get back inside the van while I move it outside. It needs to be in the sun to recharge," she said, leading him back into the cavern to her vehicle.

She pushed him back inside the van, making sure to lock the doors before driving out to the pile she'd made. Only spending a minute collecting the gear inside while still completely nude, only when it was all in the mess of weapons in her living space did she head to the back and dress.

Maya pulled on a pair of torn jeans with a long-sleeved shirt and heavy jacket. It was just a few minutes for her to pull on thick socks and heavy boots. Stepping back into the main cabin, she slung a satchel over her shoulder and tossed another to her captive.

"Alright, Snack, here's the deal. Scavenge whatever the hell you want. I really don't care. But keep your eyes out for this part." She handed him a picture of what she was addressing, a conditioner unit as indicated by the wrinkled, outdated blueprint.

"Find that for me, and I'll consider your freedom." She smirked and patted his cheek before starting up the van. She drove it around the embankment where it was most likely to get direct sunshine if the clouds parted. She parked and looked back to her guest. "No smart remarks? No witty retorts about your name?"

Adam stood right where she'd shoved him, not even looking her way while milled about and finally she dressed herself, staring at the floor through her busywork, even now facing the carpeted floor with vacant eyes. He glanced at the image she showed, taking it in fully to observe its detail then weakly stuffing it in his vest pocket.

He had to sit while the car was moving, but they didn't go far, just outside where the sun dimly glowed through the thin smog cover. She was teasing him again with freedom, this time in return for his labor. Should he try leaving again, she'd get angry. His energy was gone, not even the will to take his own life remained.

Maya paused while looking him over, then groaned and rolled her eyes. "Ugh. You think you've got problems? Get over yourself. From where I'm standing, I just saved your ass.

Three times. And spared it a few times. Get a grip, okay." She glanced at the clock on the dash and pursed her lips. It was well after noon. She sighed in frustration and pulled his face up to look at her.

"When was the last time you ate?" She was making a conscious effort to soften her voice and her tone. So far all he had done was be an idiot. He didn't deserve too much harsh treatment. "You didn't eat last night or this morning. Did you even eat yesterday?" She pushed him back to the bench before digging around in her supplies. She came up

with some bread, peanut butter and jam. She sensed his cautious observation while making him a quick sandwich. When it was complete, she presented to him on a porcelain plate from one of the above cupboards along with a can of beer.

“Eat. I don’t want you passing out. ” she spoke with a kind assertiveness, crossing her arms to literally watch him as he indulged.

"Uh--I--um," her words meant as encouragement were anything but. He tried responding to the mismatched motivation when she questioned him about his nutrition. He didn't have his meal of the day, so he was on time to have some food as he normally would.

He was shocked when she actually provided it. The odd sandwich was sloppily arranged, getting the sticky brown stuff inside on his hands when he held it. The taste was sweet, nearly too sweet. And the brown spread was difficult to completely swallow without extra effort. Adam wouldn't complain, favoring the slightly hardy yet sugary breakfast over refusing her odd hospitality. Soon it was done, and he wiped the mush from his fingers on the inside of his vest. "...thank you..."

“Drink the beer,” Maya instructed. “It will help wash down the peanut butter.” She pushed the bottle towards him. “It’s not poisoned or anything. It’s just beer. So drink. Water is too precious to waste on a simple meal,” she said.

He took the can, weakly pulling the tab until it popped open like he’d seen back home. He’d never had beer himself, used to the dirty communal water supply from home.

Drinking the stuff was bitter and uncomfortable, but he forced himself through it. By the end, he had an uncomfortable but full stomach, a small hiccup bubbling up from his hasty consumption of the beverage.

“Good. Let’s go.” She pulled him back to his feet and escorted him out of the van. “I searched the bottom two floors yesterday. We have the afternoon light but it’s only a few hours. There are two floors left. We’re searching them, then hitting the road.” Maya stopped in front of the building and looked to her captive.

“If you find the part, call out and let me know. Otherwise, scavenge whatever you want. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find something neat.” She guided him up the stairs and stopped when she hit the third floor. “You keep going to the fourth. Meet me at the van when the light fades. Don’t make me chase you or have to come find you.”

Adam nodded, moving on to the next set of stairs like a zombie. The fourth floor was the least devastated by time. No signs of vegetation or early decay, leaving most of the space intact. He wondered what this place used to be. The book on the ruined sign gave the impression of a library, but the most he found was dust and empty shelves. Whatever they were looking for, it wouldn't be in the open. It'd be installed in the walls, or at least that's where he'd find the cabling he'd come out here for.

Tearing through a panel of plaster and exposing the interior wall, he was lucky to find a cluster of cords. There it was, the bounty he'd been after. That his friends died trying to find. He stared blankly at the mess, making no move to act on his discovery. Instead he moved on, a solemn glaze in his eyes. He continued taking parts off the walling, standing up on a bare desk to reach up to the ceiling. There, he found a ventilation grate which fell off at the smallest nudge from him. Inside was a bulky box. Pulling out the image she'd given, it was similar, but not precisely the same. Still worth reporting, or at least taking it for himself. Adam didn't know what the machine did beyond messing with air, but the gratitude exhibited by his people when they recovered the last one let him know it's significance. Following a half hour of hardy rummaging, the box fell to the ground with a thud. A noise loud enough to be heard from the floor below.

Maya looked up when she heard the sound. What had he found? There wasn't much on her floor worth keeping so far, so she decided to go and see what he'd found above.

Making it up the rickety stairs, she quickly found him in the dusty, dimly lit room.

"Whatcha got, Snack?" She saw the box of parts he was rummaging through, clearly a complete unit of some kind like the one she was searching for. Moving him aside, she scraped through the myriad of components and cabling until her eyes landed on a cylindrical part buried just beneath the top of the heap. She grinned and picked it up, noting the comparable similarities between it and what she was after.

"Oy ya! It's not perfect but it will work. We'll at least be warm tonight. Good job, Snack." She ruffled his hair and turned for the door. "Come on then! Gotta plug this little boy in, then we're off!"

He was about to blindly follow when he stopped just above the stairs. His head was looking to the right, where something interesting had him start walking over to it. In the rubble against the wall, a thin, two foot long black cloth case lay across the ground between two bricks with a velcro seal at the top.

Adam picked it up, wondering if it was indeed what he recognized. Flipping open the seal, he caught sight of a bright wooden finish. Peeking further inside confirmed his hopes. Despite his string of apathy, a small smile worked itself onto his thin lips. Stowing under his arm, weighing almost nothing, he carried with him to follow his captor down the stairs.

Maya waited for him at the bottom of the stairs, her vigilant eyes noticing the case under his arm. "What did you find?" She stepped forward and deftly swiped it from his hold. If it was a weapon, best to confiscate it immediately. She opened the small, thin bag and examined its contents, finding a funny little stringed toy. No! An instrument. Certainly nothing he could try anything stupid with besides potentially make annoying sounds. Still, the concern in his eyes as she took it and his lingering worry made her consider the harmlessness of it all. Shrugging, she tossed it back to him, stepping outside toward the camper.

She popped the hood of the van and grabbed her toolset from under the bench in the dining area. Then she set to work replacing the heating element and modifying the connectors to make it all work. "Gonna tell me what you found? Looked neat" She asked in a chirpier accent..

Adam didn't answer, just returning inside, glad to have his find safe from the elements and any would be abusers. Sitting on the bench, he opened the case and pulled out the mostly intact, small wooden instrument. Three strings were wound along its length, and plucking them gave a buzzy, percussive pitch. The strings were severely out of tune with each other, which Adam began trying to amend, strumming the individual strings and adjusting the loosened knobs they were wound by.

Maya heard the strumming and shrugged, not needing an answer from him. She liked music, but wasn't particularly talented when it came to playing anything. Her singing voice was nice, that was about it. Within a half hour, Maya had the piece fitted and working. To double check, she started the van and turned the heat on. A minute later, delicious hot air came pouring out of the vents.

"Yes! It's a warm bed tonight," she cheered. She closed the hood and stepped into the van. With the door closed and the heat going, the cabin temperature slowly began to climb. "Time to get goin', aye Snack," she huffed, glad to be done with this territory where she'd been twice assaulted. She buckled her captive back in before sitting in the driver's seat and buckling as well, starting the engine fully and heading out.

They drove for several hours, until the moon was at its peak. At which point, Maya pulled off and found a secluded spot to park near a high ridge overlooking the valley they'd emerged out of. She stretched and sighed, feeling happy and content. During the drive, her stomach had nearly completely flattened, which showed after she'd shed the heavy coat and long sleeved shirt in favor of the tank top underneath.

"I suppose I should feed you," she said to her captive, swinging out of the driver's seat and into the cabin. "I don't want to hear whimpering in the night about being hungry. And, since you proved yourself useful, I guess I can make more than a PBJ." She dug around in the pantry once more, producing a plastic-wrapped block of dehydrated noodles. She poured the minimum amount of water over them and set it on to boil over an electric stove.

He'd spent the drive in silent anxiety, staving off the worry of where she was taking him. Wouldn't be home; she didn't know where he was from. He occupied himself by tuning the instrument, a difficult task when the tuning knobs were so loose. His butter knife substituted a screwdriver trying to tighten them, which helped, but then came the slow process of finding the right pitches. A series of trial and error that took countless attempts to get anywhere close by ear.

When they'd stopped, he didn't know where they were, and frankly, it no longer mattered. He was a dead man wherever he went. Since he was still waiting on being food, her second offer of food perplexed him, holding his instrument like a security blanket. "Eat... again? But I already..."

Maya turned and arched a brow at him. "What about this morning? You had a sandwich. That's hardly enough to hold you all afternoon, night, and to tomorrow." The noodle block slowly absorbed the water, hydrating and beginning to look more like food. She opened a shiny silver packet and dumped the contents, what amounted to some seasonings, into the pot of noodles. "I eat three times a day, usually, when I don't have a large meal early on in the day. I've got food a plenty, and know how to get more, so I don't bother worrying about starving myself to save it." she said while stirring the contents of the pot.

"But, what about-" he stopped himself. She was on her own, so conservation and consumption operated at a one to one ratio. The offer was tempting, and might settle the internal discomfort he'd been staving off while working on his find. But Adam had been trained to forget hunger, to eat only as necessity, "No thanks, it's wasted on me,"

he turned to the instrument and continued tuning it, closing in on a consonant pitch between the first two strings.

“It’s not wasted if I say it’s not,” Maya shot back. She poured the steaming noodles into two bowls, one for herself and one for him. She set one bowl in front of him, along with a beer, and sat opposite him at the table. “These things last forever and I have a fuck ton of them. So eat.” She poured a red sauce into hers and stirred it around before slurping up her first bite.

Wafts of seasoned steam rose up from the bowl she practically slammed in front of him. The smells were so pleasant that it almost offended him. Was he expected to eat something with salt? He didn’t earn it. Few did. He remembered being permitted with his team to sit down for a large meal after their inaugural mission. The main difference between his regular meals and that was the preparation, and all of the salt. With a slow reach, he picked up the fork, pulling the bowl closer to himself and leaning his head down to close the distance when he started on the soup. “....thank you.”

Maya watched him eat and nodded, pleased that he wouldn’t bother her during the night about food. Satisfied, she returned to her own meal. They proceeded in silence, and when they finished, she washed both bowls and the silverware to put them away. The disconcerting silence had lingered too long for her taste, so she turned to him and looked over his figure, “I suppose at the next trading post we stop at, I’ll have to get you more clothes. Can’t have my little snack running around in dirty, tattered rags.”

New clothes? His brows rose, perpetually confused by the kind gestures she was showing him. His resignation to being a future 'snack' was all he expected out of her. Not traveling for miles on end or being fed and clothed. "...How long are you saving me?"

Maya shrugged. “As long as I want,” she said simply, leaning against the counter as she looked at him. “While I was napping earlier, I had an idea. It’s not always easy for a lone woman to travel the country by herself,” she said. “I can eat just about anyone, yes, but then I would risk getting fat.” She sipped on her beer as she thought. “Actually, I don’t know if I *can* get fat.” She chuckled to herself, teasing the notion of herself putting on more weight before getting over her joke.

“All the same, it isn’t practical to eat everyone in sight. Then I wouldn’t have anyone to trade with. Most of the time, I appear just like this. I tell them I’m a scavenger and a

trader.” she sipped down the last of her beer, then Maya belched while crushing it in her hand.

“Lots of men see me and think ‘Oh look! A beautiful, strange woman! I could fuck her!’ and they try.” Maya threw a whimsical look to the side while biting her lip, “Oh boy do they try... but if I had a man with me, even one as short and scrawny as you, I would be bothered less.” She smirked, hopping over and surprising the kid by plopping herself in his lap, further adding to his physical confusion by wrapping her arms around his neck.

“So, Snack, how’d you like to be my arm candy? It’s a simple job, but I’ll pay you handsomely.”

“H-huh, what? I-I-I-I...” even on his lap, she sat more than a head taller than him, forced to look up at her or stare right into her bountiful chest. “S-so you’re not gonna... kill me...”

The news didn’t sit well. He knew close to nothing outside his limited homeland except what was necessary to learn in order to be a scout. This talk of trading and traveling was as alien as her. How could he trust her after all she’d put him through?

The cabin had warmed up considerably following her repair, and while she embraced him, the heat from her body transferred into his. Her smell was rank yet welcoming, so much so that he didn’t know whether to be offended by it or embrace it like the back of his mind was telling him to. So close, her eyes fixed on him with a look that told him that, somehow, he’d become more than a ration. He didn’t speak in response, simply nodding.

Maya grinned broadly and tweaked his nose. “Good boy! As I drive tomorrow, you can mend the cargo net. We should reach the next trading post probably a day after tomorrow. I can get rid of some of the weapons and gear in exchange for clothes and food and bedding and anything else I want.”

Patting his chest, she stood up from his lap and gestured to the loft bed. “That will be yours. You will care for your own sheets and bedding. When we find a lake or laundry service, it will be on you to clean them. Same with your own clothes.”

“Right.” He complied. Thinking back to his plan on seeing the damaged net. Even if he could kill her, where would he go? He didn’t know how to navigate to Barstow from wherever they’d wound up. Maintaining the vehicle also seemed complicated, a skill Adam lacked and would leave him stranded in the wastes. She was his guide, and his

warden. And he was a tool for her; slightly better position to be in than his nickname implied.

“You said we’d discuss my freedom if I helped you.” He said it plainly, looking up at her with large, pleading brown eyes.

Maya paused, thought about it, then shrugged. “I did, didn’t I? Smart little snack. Alright. If you want, you can go free.” She waved her hand broadly, as if lifting a curse off of him.

“At any moment you could walk out that door. But not with anything other than the measly gun you came in with.” She began undressing with the intention of changing into her sleeping clothes. “You would become prey quickly. I’m not the only shifter wandering the wastes, you know. Plus there are all sorts of nasty animals out there.” As she spoke, she changed into a pair of tight shorts and fitted tank top. Since she had heat now, she wanted as little clothing as possible.

“I mean, there are cougars out there, panthers, coyote. This time of year, they have pups and kits in the den. They’ll attack anything and eat anything. Including scrawny humans. Hell, you might even run into some others like me, faaar more desperate and less kind than I’ve been, Snack.” She turned the light off in the room and walked back to the boy, tilting his head up with her crooked forefinger,. “So yes. You may go free. But do you want to?”

She had a point. A devilish one, but valid all the same. His status as a prisoner was overtly illustrated and left him no will to talk anymore while faced with her overwhelming stare. If she had no use for him, he’d go to bed. He glumly climbed the narrow ladder to his minute quarters, curling himself up and facing away from her.

If he could help it, he’d spend most of his time here where he could be alone. He wondered if she’d said her name. He might’ve missed it during the hours of stress induced paranoia. Without turning out to face her, he quietly asked, “I’m Adam... Adam Ruth. What do I call you?” If anything, he wanted to do away with her cruel pet name.

“I am Maya Fjall. You can call me Maya.” She watched him for a moment before shrugging and going to her own bed. She left the door open just in case Adam tried anything stupid again, though she felt deep down that wouldn’t be the case anymore. She slipped under her blankets and snuggled her pillows, tucking her stuffed animal in tight against her chest, and drifted off in no time without the bitter cold nipping at her

secretly sensitive skin. She might even take off the covers later on with the heat back. Glad that the last days had turned out successfully, she let herself surrender to her well earned comforts.