

Zompiewolf 551

Chapter 551 An Unforeseen End

Ashton stood over the fallen Deacon, a victorious grin on his face. The Deacon, on the ground, pointed towards his humanoid creatures, commanding them to attack.

"My children, attack the one standing before you. Show him the true power of my creations!"

With a wave of his hand, the creatures lunged forward, snarling and snapping their jaws.

"Is that all you've got?" Ashton replied, looking at the creatures. "Pity..."

"You cannot defeat them all, Reaper. My army is too powerful for you to handle-"

"Watch me," Ashton replied, his smile never leaving his face.

He snapped his fingers, and his summoned soldiers immediately appeared, weapons ready. They charged towards the creatures with fierce determination, cutting through them like a hot knife through butter.

The Deacon's eyes widened in shock as he watched his creatures fall one by one to Reaper's undead army. He struggled to get up, but Ashton placed a foot on his chest, holding him down.

"You really should have picked a better army," Reaper taunted, a wicked glint in his eye. "My soldiers are undead, but they know how to fight, unlike your creatures. Those sickly things were mere playthings to them."

"So cool..." Alina said the words inside everyone's heads.

However, not everyone was pleased with Ashton's heroics. The Deacon glared up at him, his face twisted with anger and frustration.

"You'll never understand the power of the Great One," he spat. "You're just a mindless puppet, a slave to your own desires."

Ashton's eyes narrowed.

"I am no one's puppet," he growled. "And I'll never bow down to anyone, especially not to the likes of you. Now tell me whatever you know about your shitty Cult-"

"Hahahaha!"

The Deacon's laughter echoed throughout the abandoned facility as he stood up, his body undergoing a grotesque transformation. His skin stretched and twisted, becoming a sickly shade of green, his eyes turning black as they glowed with magical energy.

"You fools!" he cackled, his voice distorted and inhuman. "Did you really think I would let you capture me so easily?"

The crew backed away, their weapons trained on the Deacon as he continued to taunt them.

"I have been experimenting on myself for years, perfecting my abilities. And you, Reaper, are the perfect opponent for me to test them on."

Reaper remained stoic, his expression unreadable. He knew the danger that the Deacon posed, but he was also confident in his abilities.

Ashton stood before the transformed Deacon with his arms crossed over his chest. He could feel the energy radiating from the Deacon as his body mutated and shifted into unrecognisable shapes.

"Funny to think you'll transform in front of me." Ashton laughed.

Having had enough of Ashton's rebuttals, the Deacon let out a guttural growl and lunged at him. Ashton sidestepped the attack and spun around, delivering a roundhouse kick to the Deacon's head. The blow knocked the Deacon back, but he quickly recovered and charged again.

After sparing with Mazton on the regular, jokers like the Deacon were of no danger to him. However, the same could not be said for the rest of the Ghosts.

As the Deacon charged, Ashton waited until the last moment and leapt over the Deacon's head, landing behind him. The Deacon whirled around and swung a clawed hand at him, who ducked under the attack and punched the Deacon in the gut. The blow landed with a sickening thud, but the Deacon just laughed.

"You think that's going to stop me?" he sneered.

"Hm... I guess not." Ashton replied before signalling Laihud and the rest to back up a bit. "But then again, I'm just getting started."

If Ashton wanted, he could have ended Deacon with ease, but it was a rare opportunity to face someone from the Cult. Thus, he intended to have fun with the Deacon in his way.

"You're not the only one that can transform."

With that, Ashton's body began to shift and change. The transformation started deep inside him, a twisting, writhing sensation that felt like fire and ice all at once.

His vision began to blur and darken, the colours of the world around him becoming more intense, more vivid, even as they turned more alien and strange.

The first thing everyone noticed was his fangs - sharp and deadly, emerging from between his lips as his canines elongated and sharpened.

The second was the fur sprouting up from his skin in a rush of black, velvety hair that coated his arms, chest, and legs.

It felt like electricity was coursing through his veins, making him feel alive in a way that was impossible to describe.

Then came the claws, ripping through the tips of his fingers as they elongated and grew thicker, curving into lethal weapons he could use to slice and dice his enemies. His senses sharpened, allowing him to see in the dark and hear the slightest sounds around him.

Finally, his spine twisted and contorted, the bones cracking as they realigned into a new shape. His body grew and expanded, his muscles bulging and rippling as he grew stronger and more powerful.

With a howl of primal fury, Ashton completed his transformation, becoming a Zompiewolf. He felt like a god, an unstoppable force of nature that could crush anything in its path. And he knew he was ready to take on anything the Deacon could throw at him.

As Ashton transformed into his Zompiewolf form, the crew stood in awe at the sight before them. Alina and Jay's eyes widened, and they both stepped back, unsure of what to do. The Xylopians that had accompanied them stood with their weapons raised, ready to defend themselves if needed.

Laihud and Vimur stood their ground, having seen Ashton's transformation before. Ashton let out a low growl, and the Ghosts could see the change had not affected his mind. He remained in control, his focus unwavering.

"Is that really you, Reaper?" Alina asked, still in shock.

Vimur chuckled, "You're just seeing his true form. Reaper is much more than he appears to be."

The Xylopians looked at each other, unsure what to make of the situation. They had never seen anything like this before.

The Deacon's eyes widened in shock as the Zompiewolf charged at him. The Deacon tried to defend himself, but the Zompiewolf was too fast and powerful.

Reaper's claws tore through the Deacon's flesh, leaving deep gouges in his skin. The Deacon tried to strike back, but his attacks were weak and ineffective.

"Argh!"

Reaper continued to pummel the Deacon, his claws and teeth tearing into the Deacon's flesh. The Deacon's body convulsed with each blow, and his once proud form began to wither and shrink. Finally, with a last, pitiful groan, the Deacon collapsed to the ground, barely breathing.

"Laihud!" Ashton yelled as he transformed back to his human form.

"On it!" Laihud rushed to heal the Deacon, but something was off.

The seemingly lifeless Deacon sprang up to his knees. As the Deacon got to his knees, Ashton could see the fear in his eyes.

He looked like a man who knew he was about to die and was desperate for salvation. To everyone's surprise, the Deacon began to pray, his voice trembling with fear.

"Oh, Great One," he said, his voice barely audible. "I beg of you, show me mercy. Forgive me for my sins, and spare me from the fate that awaits me, Ack~!"

The Deacon then looked up at Ashton, his eyes wide with terror.

"It's inside me," he said his voice barely a whisper. "Something is inside me, and it's coming for me. Please, you have to help me-"

Before Ashton could even comprehend what was happening, the Deacon's head busted open, revealing a centipede-like creature who chopped the Deacon in half before turning into dust itself.

Chapter 552 Wrapping Up

Ashton and the crew stood there in disbelief as the Deacon's body slumped to the ground. They were all confused and unsure of what had just happened. They had been so close to capturing him alive and getting some answers about the cult and their activities on the planet.

'No, there's still a shot I can resurrect him using [Association]-'

As they stood there in silence, trying to process what had just occurred, Ashton noticed something strange happening to the Deacon's body. It was as if something inside him was struggling to break free.

"Everyone back up!" Ashton yelled and jumped as far away from the Deacon's corpse as possible.

Suddenly, a bright light erupted from the Deacon's body, blinding Ashton and the Ghosts. When their vision cleared, they saw that the Deacon's body had disintegrated into ash.

"FUCK!" He exclaimed.

Ashton could have done something about it as long as a part of Deacon's corpse was left intact. But with everything turned into dust, there wasn't anything he could do to resurrect the Deacon and get some information out of him.

'It seems they knew what I was about to do and thus used something to stop me from resurrecting him.'

[They know a lot more about you than you know about them. Capturing this guy was an opportunity for you to change that, but now... you're back to square one.]

'I was hoping we could have done this without breaking into the prison, but I guess not. What is that?'

Ashton walked over to the spot where the Deacon had been kneeling and found a small metal device lying on the ground. He picked it up and examined it closely. It was some advanced technology unlike anything he had ever seen before.

The small metal device was about the size of a thumbnail. It was made of a shiny, silvery metal that almost seemed to shimmer in the light.

The device was rectangular, with smooth, rounded edges and a small button in the centre. On one side of the device was a series of tiny, intricate symbols etched into the metal. The signs seemed almost alien in nature, with no apparent meaning to the untrained eye.

Despite having been buried in the ashes of the Deacon, the device was cold to the touch and seemed to hum with a low, almost imperceptible energy. Overall, the device gave off an aura of mystery and danger, leaving Ashton unsure of what it might be used for or its true purpose.

[That... is bad news. It's Xyran tech... There's a lot more we need to figure out now.]

Ashton turned to the rest of the crew and said, "We need to get out of here. Something's not right."

They all nodded in agreement and quickly made their way out of the abandoned facility.

As they were leaving, Ashton couldn't shake the feeling that they had just stumbled upon something much larger and more dangerous than they had initially thought. The Deacon's last words and the strange device he had left behind were proof of that.

Ashton knew they would need to investigate further and get to the bottom of what was happening on this planet. He was determined to get to the truth, no matter what it took.

The crew emerged from the lab, guns ready, expecting to be met with a horde of creatures. Instead, they found the forest eerily quiet. As they walked cautiously through the trees, they soon discovered that the animals had returned to normal behaviour.

The previously aggressive predators were now avoiding the crew altogether, and the once-scavenging animals were now foraging as they should have been. The Zoraxes and Ratacules were both enjoying each other's company.

But weirdly enough, the rocky forest was covered in luscious vegetation. It would seem the Deacon wasn't only experimenting on the creatures but also on the flora itself, and his death had some kind of ripple effect on the forest.

"This is incredible," Laihud breathed, looking around at the peaceful forest. "Whatever the Deacon was doing in there, it seems to have had a profound effect on the wildlife."

Ashton nodded thoughtfully.

"It's clear that whatever the Deacon was experimenting with had a ripple effect throughout the ecosystem. It's almost as if his actions were causing some kind of feedback loop, amplifying the aggression in the animals and causing them to act out of character."

He continued, looking at the Xylopiian leader, "Now, with him gone, nature got freed from the shackles he used to bind them. I hope this is the result you were hoping for?"

"I must admit, I was sceptical of you and your crew at first," the Xylopiian leader said. "But you have proven yourselves to be true allies of our planet."

"We couldn't have done it without your help," Ashton replied. "Your knowledge of the planet and your willingness to fight alongside us made all the difference."

The Xylopiian leader nodded. "We may have had our differences in the past, but it is clear that we share a common goal now - to protect this planet and its inhabitants."

Ashton smiled. "I couldn't agree more. And I hope this is just the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership between the Xylopiians and the Ghosts."

The Deacon was the primary reason why Ashton was there. However, he hadn't forgotten about Mazton's request to secure excavation rights from the Xylopiians.

"I won't beat around the bush and pretend you don't know what I'm about to ask for," Ashton asked the leader, back into his business mode.

"Ah yes, the Neoradium. That's what you're looking for, right?"

Ashton nodded.

"Fine. While we will not allow you to dig it yourself, we can share some of it with your people exclusively in exchange for security so that no other Deacon ever steps foot on Verdantia."

"You have my word. As long as I'm alive, protecting Verdantia is my responsibility."

The Xylopien leader held out a hand, and Ashton shook it. "We will always be grateful for what you have done for us. You have earned our respect and our trust."

Ashton nodded. "And we will always be here to help whenever you need us."

With that, the two leaders parted ways, each heading back to their own people, but with a newfound respect and appreciation for each other.

Chapter 553 Prison Break: Reconnaissance

Ashton and the rest of the crew entered the Tower, the central hub of their Ghosts. They made their way to the conference room, where they were greeted by the other members of the organisation.

Ashton sat at the head of the table, and the rest of the crew sat around him. They all looked at each other in silence for a few moments, each lost in their thoughts.

Ince everyone settled down, Ashton walked everyone through what had happened on Planet Verdantia and the Deacon. The only silver lining was Ashton befriending the Xylopians, as the mining right of Neoradium would ensure the Ghosts never ran out of funds.

Finally, Otiga said, "So, the Deacon is dead?"

Ashton nodded. "Yes. We were able to take him down, but it seems the Cult was one step ahead of us and had planted some sort of creature inside their followers, which gets triggered and kills the host once they get weakened enough."

The others nodded, but there was a palpable sense of disappointment in the room. They had been hoping to uncover more about the Cult terrorising the galaxy, and the Deacon had been their only lead apart from the prisoner they were about to break out.

"Did you find anything in the facility?" Anna asked.

Ashton pulled out the small metal device he had found in the Deacon's ashes and placed it on the table. "This. We don't know yet, but I'm hoping Thori can figure out what it is."

Thori, or Vulcan, was surprised once he heard Ashton call his name out. But once he saw the device in Ashton's hands, he immediately realised why his disciple wanted his help.

If there was anyone who understood more about Xyran technology than Astaroth, it had to be him.

However, the others did not understand why Ashton would choose Thori to review the device over Leon, who happened to be their tech expert. But since Leon did not object, the others could only watch on in silence.

"Also, some of the Xylopians wanted to join the faction. Leon, get them registered as mercenaries and geared up. Vimur, you'll be in charge of getting them trained."

"Got it." Leon nodded and left for the bay to execute Ashton's instructions along with Vimur.

Others took the hint and left the room as well. Only Otiga and Anna were left behind, just the ones Ashton needed to talk with. Once alone, Anna tapped a few buttons on the control panel, bringing up a holographic projection of the prison facility they were targeting.

"How's the planning coming along?" Ashton asked, tapping the map.

"It's going well," Anna replied. "We've been reviewing the prison blueprints and think we have a solid plan. Thanks to Malekith, we've identified the weak points in their system."

"Walk me through it," Ashton replied.

"Sure thing," Otiga said, pulling out a stack of papers. "We've identified the weak points in the Prison's security system. The main entrance is guarded by four armed guards, and security cameras cover the entire perimeter. However, there's a blind spot in the northeast corner where we can slip in undetected."

As Otiga spoke, she pointed to different sections of the blueprints, showing Ashton the various routes they could take. Anna chimed in, explaining how they had acquired the necessary tools and equipment to pull off the escape.

Ashton listened intently, nodding along as they spoke. He was impressed with the level of detail they had put into the plan.

"This all sounds good, but what about the prisoner? How do we get him out?" he asked.

"That's the tricky part," Anna replied. "There are over a hundred prisoners in there. It's not like if we break one of them out, the rest will remain silent. And we can't just storm in and start a riot by releasing them all. We need to be strategic."

Otiga picked up where Anna left off. "We've been studying the patterns of the guards and the prisoners. There are certain times of the day when the guards are more relaxed and the prisoners are more active in... certain activities. We're going to use those moments to our advantage."

Ashton had the urge to know what kind of activities Otiga was mentioning just to embarrass her but decided not to go forth with it.

[You teasing me, you naughty, naughty~]

'Shut it.'

Ashton leaned back in his chair, his mind racing with possibilities. "Okay, I like what I'm hearing. But what about the guards? They're armed, right? Mazton said his men would distract them, but what if they fail?"

Anna nodded. "Yes, that's possible, but we have a few tricks up our sleeves. We've acquired some tranquiliser guns that should take them out without killing them. And if we have to, we can use force, but we'll try to avoid it as much as possible."

Ashton nodded. "Alright, I trust you guys. When do we do this?"

"We've set a date for two weeks from now," Otiga said. "That should give us enough time to ensure everything is in place."

"I almost forgot about it. What about the extraction route? Have we secured transportation?" Ashton glanced at Otiga. "We can't use our regular ship, or the Orion empire will know we were behind the prison break."

"Don't worry. I have arranged for a stealth frigate to pick us up at the designated location. We'll have a wide window of opportunity for extraction before the alarm is raised."

Ashton nodded, satisfied with the preparations. "Alright, let's finalise the plan and ensure everyone is briefed. We don't have much time."

The three worked together, fine-tuning the plan and addressing potential issues, while Mazton and Leon fulfilled their respective roles. They discussed backup options, contingencies, and communication protocols to ensure smooth coordination during the operation.

Once the plan was finalised, Ashton turned to Otiga and Anna. "Great work, team. I have full confidence in our abilities. Let's ensure our people are ready and prepared for the mission."

Chapter 554 Prison Break: Infiltration

Ashton and Anna sat in the cabin of the stealth ship as it descended towards the barren, desolate planet that housed the high-security prison. The ship's pilot, who surprisingly turned out to be Kass, sat at the controls.

Anna fidgeted nervously in her seat, her hands clenched in her lap. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked Ashton.

"Positive," he replied, reassuringly touching her thigh. "We've committed to shit way worse than this. Besides, Malekith has everything under control."

Kass turned to them, her red eyes glowing in the dim light of the cabin.

"We'll be landing in five minutes," she said. "I'll drop you off at the designated spot, and then I'll head back to orbit. I'll be back in six hours to pick you up."

Ashton nodded, double-checking his equipment. He wore a black tactical suit designed to be lightweight and flexible. A variety of weapons and gadgets were attached to his belt and strapped to his chest.

Anna, meanwhile, wore a similar suit, but hers was more form-fitting and had fewer attachments. Instead, she carried a small backpack filled with supplies and equipment. The ship touched down on the dusty ground, and Kass turned to them.

"Good luck," she said. "I'll see you in six hours."

Ashton and Anna nodded, and then they exited the ship, stepping out into the oppressive cold of the planet. The darkness of the night beat down on them, while the cold had no effect on Ashton. Anna had to wrap her hands around her body to find some semblance of heat.

They walked for several minutes, following the instructions Malekith had given them in their prior communication. Eventually, they came to a rocky outcropping, and Ashton tapped a few buttons on his wrist computer. A hidden door slid open, revealing a narrow passage.

"Who knew Malekith was such an expert in finding forgotten paths leading straight into the prison?" Anna commented before rushing inside.

Ashton and Anna slipped inside, the door sliding shut behind them. The passage was dimly lit, but they could see well enough to go down the tunnel.

Ashton and Anna made their way through the dark tunnel, their footsteps echoing loudly against the walls. The air was thick and musty, and they could barely see a few feet before them.

But thankfully, the place was warmer than the surface, which gave Anna some of her goofiness back.

"Hey, Ash, wanna do it?" Anna playfully winked at him before walking ahead.

Ashton shook his head but ultimately decided to play along and smacked Anna's back. "Business first; pleasure will come later."

After a few minutes, they emerged into a small room. Malekith's voice echoed through the room, coming from a speaker on the wall.

"Welcome to the prison, lads and lassies," he said. "I've thoroughly hacked into the security systems, and tonight I'll be your guide through the facility."

"Thanks, Malekith. Couldn't have done this without you." Ashton replied.

"No need to point the obvious." Malekith retorted. "Either way, it's good to see you again. You have no idea what kind of primitive place you left me in!"

"Don't worry, Kith, we'll be sure to extract you out of your misery before leaving the place," Anna commented, stripping out of her suit. "Stop watching me and get dressed already!"

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to do the deed!" Ashton retorted before quickly slipping into a prison guard's uniform.

As for Anna, she mimicked her appearance to suit one of the Warden's most prized girls. There wasn't any other disguise for her as the prison had no female guards among their ranks.

"Can we please kill the warden?" Anna signed as she donned the 'dress' liked by the Warden.

Ashton understood her anger. After all, the dress barely covered anything. One look at the dress, and it seemed wardrobe malfunction was included on the Warden's list of kinks.

"The Empire will handle him," Ashton reassured her. "For now, let's do what we are here for."

Ashton had dressed in a uniform similar to the prison guards on the planet. He had a guard's helmet on, which obscured his face, and he held Anna in his arms... through a pair of handcuffs. Anna played her role perfectly and clung to Ashton's arm like it was a stripping pole.

Thanks to Malekith, they had made it past the initial checkpoint at the entrance of the prison. Now they had to get into the Warden's office.

Under Malekith's guidance, they walked down a long hallway, the only sounds being the clanking of Ashton's boots on the metal floor and Anna's breathing.

As they approached the Warden's office, a guard stepped out in front of them, blocking their way. The guard was an alien creature, its long tentacles writhing menacingly.

"Halt!" the guard said in a deep, guttural voice. "What is your business here?"

"Malekith!" Ashton whispered under his breath.

"This is not supposed to be here," The AI replied. "He's a low-ranking grunt. Treat him like shit, and he'll be out of your way."

Ashton stepped forward, holding Anna tighter.

"I have orders to bring this atrociously dressed female to the Warden's office," he said, using his most commanding voice.

The guard hesitated for a moment, looking at Ashton and Anna suspiciously. He looked at Anna, then back at Ashton, and it seemed he was weighing his options.

"She doesn't look like a prisoner to me. What's she doing inside the prison-"

Ashton could sense the guard's indecision. He took a step forward, towering over the alien creature.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, his voice cold and threatening.

The guard backed up a step, its tentacles writhing nervously. "No, sir," he said.

"I am a high-ranking officer in this prison," he said, his voice low and menacing. "You will let us through, or you will spend the rest of your time licking the prisoner's butts clean. Is that clear?"

The guard looked terrified now. He stepped aside, allowing Ashton and Anna to pass. Ashton gave him a final menacing look and continued towards the Warden's office.

"Have you ever thought about roleplaying?" Anna smiled, licking her lips.

"Jeez, woman! Calm the fuck down! We are on a mission, not a vacation."

Chapter 555 Prison Break: Distraction

Ashton and Anna entered the Warden's office, with Ashton keeping up the facade of a prison guard. The Warden, a burly creature with a face covered in scars, looked up from his desk as they entered.

"Who are you?" the Warden demanded, his eyes narrowing as he took in the sight of Anna in her sultry dress.

Ashton stepped forward, trying to look confident despite knowing one mistake could cost them everything they had built up so far.

"I am Officer Dunbar," he said, using the alias he had adopted. "I've brought in this prisoner as per your orders."

The Warden's gaze shifted from Ashton to Anna, and a sinister smile spread across his face. He had no idea who the prisoner was, but he wasn't going to turn down the chance to get his hands on a beauty.

"Ah, I see," The Warden said, his voice dripping with lechery. "You've caught yourself quite the catch, Officer Dunbar."

Anna clenched her jaw, trying to hide her discomfort. She knew she had to play along with the Warden's advances to keep up the charade.

Ashton, on the other hand, was seething with anger. He hated seeing the Warden's predatory behaviour towards Anna, but he knew they needed to get the biometrics and master key to complete their mission.

The Warden stood up, his eyes never leaving Anna's form. He circled around her, making lewd comments and reaching out to touch her. Anna tried to keep her composure, but her disgust was evident.

Ashton, keeping his cool, watched closely for an opportunity to strike. He knew he had to act fast and get the Warden out of the way.

"Malekith... get the camera now!" Ashton whispered with a sense of urgency.

"Wait a couple more minutes!" Malekith responded.

As long as the cameras were online, Ashton couldn't make a move and risk leaving evidence behind.

The Warden looked them over again, but his eyes were focused on Anna, who had donned a revealing and provocative dress. His eyes widened, and a wicked grin spread across his face.

"Well, well, well," he said, standing up from his desk. "Looks like you've caught yourself a fine one there, Dunbar."

"She is a prisoner, so I'd suggest you maintain decorum, sir-"

"Relax, Dunbar. I won't hurt her...yet. Maybe I should take her off your hands and give her a proper punishment."

"Now!" Malekith's voice echoed in Ashton's earpiece.

Finally, the Warden moved closer to Anna, his hand reaching out to grab her. Ashton's heart raced as he saw his chance. He lunged forward, grabbing the Warden's wrist just as he touched Anna.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ashton growled, his voice filled with rage.

"What do you think you're doing grabbing a superior like this!" The Warden roared. "I'll have you rot in this very prison for going against- argh!"

"You are not going to do shit!" Ashton gritted his teeth before snapping the Warden's arm in half.

The Warden looked startled, caught off guard by Ashton's sudden aggression. He tried to pull away, but Ashton's grip was like a vice.

Anna took a step back, relieved to see Ashton taking control of the situation. However, as soon as she turned to face the Warden, she felt anger like never before.

Ashton used his strength to overpower the Warden, slamming him against the desk. The Warden struggled, but Ashton was relentless.

"Allow me to handle this bastard," Anna chimed in. "Meanwhile, look for what we're here for."

Ashton nodded and let go of the Warden, but not before breaking his jaw so he couldn't scream even if he wanted to. While Anna handled the Warden, Ashton needed to get the biometrics and master key from the Warden as quickly as possible.

With one swift move, Ashton used his free hand to swipe the Warden's fingerprints, retinal scan, and master key card. Once done, he nodded, and Anna delivered a decisive blow to the Warden's jaw, knocking him out cold.

The Warden slumped to the floor, unconscious. Ashton took a deep breath, his adrenaline still pumping. He turned to Anna, watching her with admiration and relief.

"I don't know whether I should be turned on or scared right now."

[The term is scaroused, my friend.]

"Why the heck are you looking at me like that?" Anna asked; however, Ashton could see in her eyes that she knew the answer very well.

"Nothing to be concerned with at the moment," Ashton gave her a reassuring smile. "We need to move quickly now. Malekith, do you have control of the security cameras?"

"Yes, I do," Malekith replied in their earpieces. "But we don't have much time. Other guards may be on their way."

Ashton nodded, knowing they had to act fast. He used the Warden's biometrics and master key to access the office computer and disable the remaining security systems while raising random alarms so the soldiers would be distracted.

"We're in," Malekith confirmed. "The security systems are down. Yank me out!"

"Got it!" Anna said before extracting Malekith out of the system.

Ashton and Anna quickly searched the Warden's office for any other valuable information they could use. They found plans and schedules for the prison, as well as a stash of Yenos that the Warden had gained from his illicit business.

Ashton looked at Anna before nodding. "Take it. Think of the money as compensation for sexual harassment."

"Card worth half a million Yenos... I'm not that cheap, but I'll take it." Anna swiped the card, inserting it between her breasts. "Well, I found some drives. Otiga wanna take a guess what's inside?"

"Sure, bring it over. We'll watch it together. If it turned out to be documentaries about the Warden's fetishes, then, well, I'll give the two of you some privacy." Otiga casually joked. "You better get going now before someone figures out what's wrong."

"Roger that," Ashton replied. "Let's get going."

Anna nodded, and the two rushed out of the office, but not before Anna kicked the Warden in his nether regions. The moron was unconscious now, but he would undoubtedly be in a world of pain once he woke up.

Chapter 556 Prison Break: Extraction

The couple quickly made their way through the winding corridors of the high-security prison, avoiding any patrols along the way. Anna had changed into a more practical outfit, ready to move fast and fight if necessary.

However, they didn't need to avoid the guards for long as a series of explosions followed shortly after, distracting the guards. Mazton's men had arrived at the scene!

"About damn time!" Ashton smirked as the two rushed towards the cell their prisoner was in.

As they approached the cell, Ashton inserted the Warden's keycard into the lock. At the same time, Anna used the Warden's retinal scan and fingerprints to unlock the door. The cell door slid open with a beep, and they stepped inside.

Ashton and Anna cautiously approached the cell, their hearts pounding in anticipation. They had come a long way and risked a lot to get here, and they couldn't afford to mess up now.

Inside the cell was a thin, frail-looking man with dishevelled black hair and a thick beard. He was huddled in the corner of the cell, his arms wrapped around his knees, and he looked up at them with a mixture of confusion and fear.

"Dr Tarek?" Ashton asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The man nodded slowly, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"It's okay, Dr Tarek," Anna said softly, her voice low and soothing. "We're here to get you out of here. Can you stand?"

Dr Tarek slowly got up, his body stiff and weak from years of imprisonment. He was a tall, thin man with sharp features and deep-set eyes that seemed to have lost all hope.

Ashton offered him a hand, and Dr Tarek grasped it tightly, his fingers trembling.

"Thank you, I've been waiting for someone to come for years," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "But how did you get in here?"

Ashton held up the Warden's biometrics. "We have a little help from a friend," he said, smiling slightly.

Tarek nodded in understanding and quickly gathered his things. He was dressed in a ragged prisoner's uniform, and his hair and beard were unkempt. He looked like he hadn't seen the light of day in a long time.

"We need to hurry," Ashton said. "The longer we stay here, the greater the risk of getting caught."

Anna nodded and took Tarek's other arm, supporting him as they made their way out of the cell. As they made their way back towards the prison entrance, Tarek filled them in on what he knew.

He was a scientist who had been working on a new weapon for the Xyrans, but when he discovered what they planned to use it for, he tried to speak out. That was when they arrested him and threw him in prison.

"They're planning to use my weapon on innocent people," he said, his voice filled with anger. "I couldn't let that happen."

Ashton nodded sympathetically, finding yet another reason to hate the Xyrans, but what Tarek said next turned all attention away from the Xyrans.

Tarek looked up at them with a pained expression before he muttered weakly. "Then I made the worst decision I could and started working for the cult, thinking they'll help me in my fight against the Xyrans."

Ashton and Anna froze. Their expressions turned to shock and confusion. Ashton confirmed Tarek's words through [Heartbeat Sense] and determined he wasn't lying.

"The Cult?" Ashton acted clueless, trying to drag more information out of Tarek.

Tarek nodded weakly. "After I realised what the Xyrans wanted to do with my research, I turned to the Cult. I thought they were the lesser of two evils, but they're far worse than the Xyrans could ever be."

Ashton and Anna exchanged a look. They knew they got the right person. However, it also made him a target. If the information about Tarek's escape leaked, the Cult would stop at nothing to hunt him down.

It was essential to get all the secrets out of Tarek before the Cult made its move. Just in case they failed to protect Tarek in the long run.

[If it came to worse, you could always use Raphael to store him somewhere no one will ever find him.]

'That's a brilliant idea!'

Before Ashton could put the plan into action, they could hear the sound of alarms ringing and guards shouting. Ashton and Anna exchanged a worried look, and Tarek's face paled.

"They must have realised I'm gone," he said. "We have to hurry."

As if things couldn't get worse, a group of wandering guards found them.

"Stop right there!" one of the guards shouted, his weapon pointed at them.

Ashton reacted quickly, stepping in front of Anna and Tarek and holding up his hands. "We don't want any trouble."

He had no intention of surrendering, but acting as if they were scared should buy them enough time to analyse the situation.

"Then you shouldn't have broken into a high-security prison," The guard snorted.

Ashton scanned the area, taking note of the guards' positions and weapons. He knew that he could take them down. He then looked at Anna, who nodded, knowing what Ashton was about to do.

Ashton didn't hesitate and charged forward, his movements fluid and precise. He dodged a shot from one guard's blaster and knocked the weapon out of his hand with a swift punch.

He ducked under another guard's swing and delivered a powerful kick to his stomach, sending him stumbling backwards.

Anna had also jumped into action, her hand-to-hand combat skills just as impressive as Ashton's. She threw a series of punches and kicks, taking down the guards with ease.

Tarek watched in awe as the two of them fought off their attackers. He had never seen anyone move like that before, and he knew he was in good hands with these two.

Within seconds, the guards were all lying on the ground, unconscious. Ashton and Anna quickly checked to ensure they were all still breathing before turning to Tarek.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked, concern etched on her face.

Tarek nodded, a slight tremble in his voice. "Yes, thank you."

"No point wandering about," Ashton said with urgency. "Let's go!"

Chapter 557 Prison Break: Escape

Ashton, Anna, and Tarek rushed through the dark halls of the prison, trying to find their way out. They could hear the sound of alarms blaring in the distance, the chaotic noise echoing through the corridors. The guards had been alerted, and they knew they had to move fast.

Ashton led the way, his senses heightened as he scanned the area for any signs of danger. He had his weapons ready, prepared to take down anyone in their way.

Anna followed closely behind, her heart racing with adrenaline. She knew they were in a dangerous situation, but she also knew they had to escape. She kept a firm grip on Tarek's arm, making sure he didn't stumble or fall.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of footsteps approaching from behind. Ashton quickly turned around, aiming his weapon at the source of the noise. A group of guards were rushing towards them, their guns raised and ready to fire.

"Get down!" Ashton yelled and brought out his own gun as he couldn't use his abilities as there was the risk of being identified by the Empire.

Ashton didn't hesitate. He opened fire, his bullets striking each of the guards with deadly accuracy. Anna flinched at the sound of the gunfire, but she knew they had no other choice. They had to keep moving.

As they continued to run, they came across more guards, but Ashton quickly took them down. They finally reached a large open area filled with chaos and confusion. Guards were rushing in from all sides, and there was no clear path to safety.

"Malekith, help!" Ashton looked around frantically, trying to find a way out.

"Topside! There's a ventilation shaft there!" The AI replied.

Ashton stared above and found the shaft Malekith had mentioned.

"We have to climb up there," he shouted over the noise.

Anna nodded, grabbing Tarek's arm and pulling him towards the shaft. Ashton boosted Tarek up, then helped Anna climb up after him. He followed quickly, then pulled the ventilation cover closed behind them.

In the darkness of the shaft, they could hear the guards rushing past them. Ashton breathed a sigh of relief. If they had been a moment late, things wouldn't have ended well for them.

"We should be safe for now," he said.

Anna nodded, her heart still racing. She looked over at Tarek, who was pale and trembling.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Tarek nodded, but his voice was barely above a whisper. "I just want to get out of here."

"Where to now, Malekith?"

"Just follow the path, and you should end up in one of the storage rooms near the prison's entrance."

"Got it."

Ashton knew they had to keep moving. He led the way through the narrow, cramped shaft, his muscles straining as he pulled himself along. Anna and Tarek followed closely behind, their breath coming in short gasps.

Finally, they reached the end of the shaft, and Ashton pushed open the cover. They emerged into a small room filled with crates and supplies. Ashton quickly scanned the area, checking for any signs of danger.

When he was satisfied that the coast was clear, he motioned for the others to follow him. They crept through the room, then out a door on the other side.

They found themselves in a long hallway lined with doors on either side. Ashton quickly led them down the hallway, trying to find a way out. They came across a door that led outside, and Ashton pushed it open.

As Malekith said, they emerged near the massive entrance, which was already open for some reason.

"Shouldn't this place be in lockdown?" Anna quizzed.

"Who cares? Let's go!" Ashton yelled over the noise of blaring sirens.

Ashton, Anna, and Tarek emerged from the prison gates, and the chaos outside was overwhelming. Prisoners had taken over the central courtyard and were breaking out their fellow criminals of their cells while security forces were trying to contain them with stun batons and plasma rifles.

The three of them had to navigate through the throngs of prisoners and guards to get to the designated extraction point, where Kass and the stealth ship would be waiting for them.

Ashton took point, using his enhanced strength and agility to punch and kick his way through the crowds. Anna followed close behind, her own skills in combat coming in handy as she swung a baton she had picked up from one of the guards. Tarek was stumbling behind them, barely able to keep up with their frantic pace.

"Stay close to us, Tarek," Ashton called over his shoulder. "We'll get you out of here."

"I don't know how to thank you both," Tarek replied, panting for breath. "I never thought I'd make it out of there alive."

"You don't have to thank us yet," Anna turned to him. "Besides, we are not in the clear yet, nor are we breaking you out of here for charity."

As they continued through the throngs of prisoners and guards, Ashton noticed something strange happening. The prisoners were no longer fighting against the guards; instead, they were working together to fend off a common enemy.

"Something's not right," Ashton muttered to Anna, his senses on high alert. "I can sense a strong presence nearby... the person or thing has to be Grade A or above level."

"We need to get out of here fast," Anna nodded, her instincts telling her the same thing. "Kass and the ship are waiting for us."

They pushed their way through the final group of prisoners, and as they emerged from the chaos, they saw Kass and the ship hovering overhead, its engines whirring as it prepared for takeoff.

"Get in!" Kass yelled down at them, her voice muffled by the ship's engines. "Hurry, before that motherfucker notices us!"

Ashton, Anna, and Tarek sprinted towards the ship, dodging blasts of plasma fire from the security forces as they ran. Ashton took down two guards with a swift roundhouse kick while Anna used her weapon to knock out another who tried to block their way.

"Upsy daisy!"

As they reached the ship, Ashton grabbed Tarek and threw him onto the loading ramp while Anna covered their retreat with a few well-aimed shots from her weapon. Finally, they were all on board, and Kass hit the accelerator, blasting off into the sky and away from the prison planet.

"What the hell is going on?" Anna asked Kass as she seemed to know something they did not.

"Not now, Anna!" Kass yelled over the radio. "I'll tell you everything once we are off this goddamned place!"

Chapter 558 Prison Break: Final Leap

Anna's eyes widened as Kass spoke. "What do you mean, a monstrous guardian?"

Kass turned to face her, her expression grave. "It's a creature that the Empire has kept on this planet for centuries. It's one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy, and apparently, they've trained it to be loyal to them."

[Ashton-]

'I know.'

The Empire's way of protecting the prison was eerily similar to that of the Xyrans, or one could say the Precursors, as Xyrans had copied most of their things from the Precursors.

The only difference was that the Precursors had named their pet Hydra, and the Empire called it a Behemoth.

Kass continued, "It's been dormant for a long time, but if there's any kind of disturbance around the prison, it will awaken and begin to eliminate any threats to the Empire's security."

"No wonder the Empire didn't care about the prison's security upgrade. They already know no one could escape once the Behemoth awakened."

Anna looked out of the window, her mind racing. The carnage below was nothing she had ever seen. Even the undead outbreak on Earth was nothing compared to the blood and gore she saw down.

"What kind of creature is it?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Kass hesitated for a moment before replying. "It's called a Shadow Beast. It's a massive, black, tentacled creature that can move incredibly fast and can cloak itself from view. It's been trained to hunt down and eliminate threats to the Empire, no matter how powerful they are."

Ashton's eyes widened. "That thing sounds almost unbeatable."

"It's massive, Reaper. Easily fifty times your size. And its skin is impenetrable, even with the most advanced weapons. That's why defeating it is impossible." Kass replied. "You can learn the rest of it from Otiga."

Just then, Otiga's call got patched through to them.

"I know how you are, Reaper," Otiga sighed. "But the Behemoth is not something to be taken lightly. That's why the Empire has kept it hidden for so long, and they only bring it out in the most dire of circumstances. At least that's what I heard while tapping into their radio signals."

"I would've tried taking it on if I had Aegis with me."

Ashton joked, but in his mind, he missed an excellent opportunity to complete another few tasks from his evolution quest.

A-grade beasts were rarely ever seen, and by consuming its flesh and blood, he would strengthen himself and get a couple of steps closer to evolving again and entering the domain of A-grade beings.

However, at the moment, getting Tarek to safety was much more crucial. Just then, surprisingly, Tarek spoke up.

"Back when I worked for the Cult, I heard rumours of the Behemoth. The Cult was working on something similar, but they could never quite get it right. But to think the Empire beat them to it..."

Ashton knew that wasn't the case, and the Empire likely didn't create the Behemoth. Judging by how Tarek got put in prison because the Xyrans wanted it to happen, suggests that the Empire and the Xyrans share a close relationship.

[Which means-]

'-Xyrans gifted them Behemoth.'

As they sped away from the prison, the ground beneath them shook violently, and Kass struggled to keep the ship steady. Anna was holding on to Tarek, looking pale and sick, as they watched in horror as a massive creature emerged from the ground.

The creature was easily ten times the size of their ship, with thick, scaly skin and razor-sharp claws attached to its tentacles.

It roared and bellowed, sending shockwaves through the air. The ground continued to shake as the creature rampaged through the area, easily tearing apart buildings and vehicles.

Countless ruptures formed on the ground with each of the creature's steps, shaking the very foundations of the prison. Guards and prisoners alike fled in terror as the guardian rampaged through the area, destroying everything in its path.

It didn't differentiate between prisoners and guards and killed everything that got in its sights. Anna looked out the window, her eyes widening in terror.

"What the hell has the Empire unleashed upon them!?"

"Fucking hell, we're in its reach!" Ashton cursed under his breath. "Kass, is there any way to outrun that thing?"

"I'm not sure," Kass replied. "It's incredibly fast and agile. But I'll do my best."

The ship jolted as the creature slammed its massive tentacles into the ground, sending shockwaves through the air. Kass struggled to keep control of the boat, dodging debris and rubble as they sped away.

Tarek was groaning in pain, his previous wounds worsening as the ship shook violently. Anna held on to him tightly, trying to keep him still.

"We need to get him to a med-bay," she yelled. "He's not going to make it much longer like this."

"Like hell he won't," Ashton replied, pulling out a bunch of HP potions from his inventory. "It might not be enough to heal him completely. But it'll keep him alive till we reach the Tower."

Kass immediately activated the ship's cloaking device and sped away before the Behemoth could do more damage to the vessel.

They watched in awe as the guardian destroyed everything in its path as they continued to fly away from the prison planet. Its massive claws ripped through buildings, and its powerful jaws snapped shut on anything that crossed its path.

The creature seemed invincible, and Ashton couldn't help but wonder what kind of technology or magic had been used to create such a monstrous thing.

[I told you, there was nothing impossible for the Precursors to do. If the Xyrans had copied their research, then... well, it might be too late to stop them now.]

Anna shook her head in disbelief. "This is madness. How can they create something so destructive and think they can control it?"

As they flew away from the prison planet, the monstrous guardian continued to rampage, leaving destruction and chaos in its wake. The ship's crew couldn't help but wonder what other horrors the Empire had hidden away in the depths of space.

Chapter 559 Love Amidst Turmoil

Ashton sat in his quarters aboard the ship, his thoughts consumed by the recent events. Anna was busy checking the readings and the ship's systems, helping Kass. While Tarek was lying in his own room, recovering from the injuries he had sustained during and before their escape.

He couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled in his gut every time he thought about the Orion Empire and the Xyrans. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He couldn't worry about things out of his control, and he needed to focus on what he could change.

"Even so... if those two are in cahoots, it could spell disaster for us."

As he sat there, lost in thought, the door to his quarters slid open, and Anna stepped inside. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face as she made her way over to him.

"Hey," she said softly, taking a seat next to him on the couch.

"Hey," he replied, turning to face her. "How are you holding up?"

Anna shrugged. "I'm fine, just a little shaken up. That creature was something else."

Ashton nodded in agreement. "Yeah, who would have thought we'd see something like that in our lifetime."

They sat in silence for a few moments, the only sound in the room the hum of the ship's engines. Ashton lost himself in Anna's gaze, her eyes sparkling in the dim light.

"Are you okay?" she asked, breaking the silence.

Ashton smiled, but it soon faded away. "I'm fine, just a little worried about what's going to happen next. The Empire is always looking to expand its power and influence. And with the Xyrans being one of the most advanced species in the galaxy, they could be a valuable ally."

He continued, "And once the Xyrans get to know about me... you know, all hell would break loose. I don't want you all to get caught in the crossfire."

"We can't control everything, Ashton. We did what we had to do to save Tarek, and we'll deal with the consequences as they come." Anna's lips thinned into a line. "That said, we can't jump to conclusions, Ashton, and we don't have any proof that the Xyrans are working with the Empire."

"But all theories point in that direction..." Ashton said, sighing. "Even if I ignore the obvious link between the two, we can't afford to take any chances. We need to somehow keep an eye on them."

Anna reached out and took his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "We'll figure it out, Ashton. We always do."

Ashton nodded, taking comfort in her words. He knew she was right, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of responsibility for what had happened. As the Xyran's self-proclaimed enemy and the next Tower Master, he knew he would have to deal with the fallout of the situation.

Just then, the ship's comms system beeped, indicating an incoming message. Ashton tapped the screen to accept the call, and Mazton's image appeared there, and he did not look pleased.

"Ashton," Mazton said, his voice cold. "I've been monitoring your actions on the prison planet. While I commend you for your successful extraction of Dr Tarek, I cannot overlook the loss of some of my best soldiers."

Ashton sighed, bracing himself for what was to come. "I know things went a bit- no, let me rephrase myself. Tarek's life was in danger, and we couldn't just stand by and watch him die."

"I know Ashton... it's just that the Empire has already begun asking questions." Mazton's expression softened slightly.

He continued, "So far, we have been able to remain innocent, but unless we produce some result, I don't know how long the situation will remain so. Just keep me in the loop with whatever happens, alright?"

Ashton nodded, acknowledging Mazton's words before he disconnected the call. He had expected the Empire to doubt the Tower or at least some mercenaries' involvement in what happened on the prison planet. But he hadn't expected them to be so quick.

Now that he knew that the Empire was keeping a close eye on him and his team, he would have to be careful in the future.

After the transmission ended, Anna approached Ashton and put her arms around him. "We'll get through this together," she whispered.

Ashton leaned in and captured her lips in a kiss, deepening it as he wrapped his arms around her. Anna melted into his embrace, her hands running through his hair as she kissed him back. They had been through so much together, and their relationship had only grown stronger.

As they pulled away, Ashton rested his forehead against hers, their breaths coming out in short pants.

"I love you, Anna," he whispered.

Anna smiled, her eyes shining with love. "I love you too, Ashton. Always have, and always will."

Ashton took her hand and led her to the bed, sitting down and pulling her into his lap. Anna snuggled into him, feeling safe and loved. They talked for a while about their plans for the future, but eventually, the conversation turned back to their love for each other.

Ashton leaned in for another kiss, but this time it was more gentle, a sweet exchange of affection. His hand caressed her cheek, and Anna leaned into his touch.

"Anna," Ashton whispered, his voice low and husky. "Do you wanna-"

Anna pressed her finger onto his lips, and she looked up at him, seeing the love and desire in his eyes. She nodded, unable to speak, as she leaned in for another kiss.

Ashton's hands roamed over her body, his touch sending shivers down her spine. Anna moaned softly as she felt his lips on her neck, her fingers running through his hair.

He leaned back, pulling her with him until they were both lying on the bed. He pressed another kiss to her lips before trailing a line of kisses down her neck.

They moved together, their bodies becoming one in a passionate embrace. Anna had never felt more alive, more loved. Ashton was her soulmate, her partner, and her lover.

Anna arched her back, a soft moan escaping her lips as she tangled her fingers in his hair. Ashton's hand moved to her waist, pulling her closer as he continued to kiss and nibble at her skin.

Their hands roamed over each other's bodies, exploring and memorizing every inch of skin. Ashton kissed his way back up to her lips, capturing them in a deep and passionate kiss.

They made love that night, their bodies moving together in perfect harmony. They were lost in each other, their love the only thing that mattered at that moment.

Ashton held Anna close after they were finished, their breathing still heavy as they basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he said, his voice low and husky.

"You don't have to worry about that," Anna replied, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest. "I'm not going anywhere."

Ashton smiled, pulling her closer. They lay there for a few more minutes, basking in the warmth and love surrounding them. Eventually, they both drifted off to sleep, their bodies entwined as they dreamt of a future full of love and adventure.

Chapter 560 Hardships Are Normal

Ashton, Anna, and Kass landed the ship at the designated area in the Tower's hangar bay. They stepped out of the ship, and Tarek was carried out on a stretcher by two medical staff. The team then followed the stretcher into the Tower's infirmary.

Ashton walked alongside Anna, who clung tightly to his arm. He was grateful that they had completed their mission and returned safely to the Tower.

However, the conversation they had earlier about the Orion Empire and the Xyrans still lingered in his mind, and he knew he would have to do something about it sooner or later.

Anna noticed Ashton's unease and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "Hey, we're back, and we did it. Don't worry about anything else now. Alright?"

"Yeah." Ashton smiled at her, grateful for her presence.

He knew that she was right. He needed to focus on the present and not worry about the future.

The group entered the infirmary, and Tarek was immediately taken to a medical bay. Ashton and Anna sat down in the waiting area while Kass went to gather the Ghosts or those who were informed about the operation prison break.

While they sat there, Ashton couldn't help but wonder what kind of manipulative tactics the Cult might have used to fool someone like Tarek. He couldn't comprehend any other way or reason why someone as brilliant as Tarek could have joined the Cult.

After all, no sane person would ever work for a group that wanted to destroy everything just for the sake of it.

Also, if what Tarek said was true, that the Cult was conducting experiments to create a Behemoth of their own, then they could have had some success by now. If that happened... Ashton didn't know how he'll handle the situation.

Anna noticed Ashton's change in mood and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Ashton shook his head. "I'm just trying to wrap my head around Tarek's past. It's difficult to understand how someone like him could have ended up working for the Cult."

Anna nodded in agreement. "Sometimes, people make the wrong choices because they think it's their only option. Tarek must have felt that way."

"I just hope that he can turn his life around now that he's away from the Cult's influence." Ashton sighed.

"Stop doing something that isn't your forte." Anna laughed, caressing his hand. "We'll get our answers once Tarek is able to. Till then, don't think about anything and relax!"

The couple sat in silence for a few minutes, lost in their thoughts. Ashton couldn't help but feel grateful for Anna's presence. He knew he could always count on her to understand his worries and be there for him.

After some time, Tarek's medical team came out of the medical bay. One of the doctors approached Ashton and Anna.

"Dr Tarek is stable, but he needs to rest. He's been through a lot, and we want to monitor his condition for the next few days. You can see him tomorrow."

Ashton and Anna nodded, relieved that Tarek was in good hands. As they left the infirmary, Kass approached them along with Leon and Otiga.

"Did you get him?" Leon asked.

Ashton nodded. "Yeah, we got him. He's being treated now."

"Good work. You two are something else." Leon let out a sigh of relief. He had been worried sick since he got to know about the Behemoth.

Anna smiled at him. "Just doing our jobs."

Ashton turned to Leon. "What's the update on the Orion Empire and the Xyrans?"

"Nothing concrete yet, but we're working on it." Leon shook his head. "We've got a few leads we're following up on."

"And what about Shian?"

"Still unconscious," Otiga replied. "Did you two get checked yourselves?"

Ashton nodded. "As you can see, we're in one piece. Thanks to our expert pilot here!"

"I don't you about you lot," Kass raised her hands over her head. "But I, for one, could use a lot of booze!"

"Sure, you more than deserve it." Ashton nodded, and the group left the medical bay.

Ashton, Anna, Kass, Leon, and Otiga walked towards the Tower's bar, eager to celebrate their successful mission. The atmosphere was lively as people chatted, laughed, and danced to the music. The group sat at a large round table and ordered their drinks.

Being a dark elf, Kass ordered a barrel of her favourite ale while Otiga ordered a fruity cocktail. Anna opted for a glass of red wine while Ashton ordered neat whisky. Leon, as always, settled for water.

As they sipped their drinks, they reminisced about the prison break, with Kass recounting their experience in the pilot's cockpit while Ashton and Anna shared their experience on the ground.

Suddenly, a loud voice broke their conversation. "Finally back, are we?"

They turned to see Vulcan approaching their table. Aegis waddled behind him, wagging his three tails. Without warning, Aegis jumped straight into Ashton's hands, vigorously licking his face.

"Alright, alright, little guy. I missed you too!" Ashton said, laughing and smiling.

However, Vulcan's expression remained serious as he stared at Ashton. "Would you accompany me on my walk for a moment or two?"

"Sure thing." Ashton placed the tiny creature into Anna's arms, and Aegis immediately began licking her face, tail wagging furiously.

eaglesnov?1,coM As the group played with Aegis, Vulcan and Ashton left the bar. Ashton didn't dare speak as he knew his master had something to say first.

"You're too weak," Vulcan said bluntly. "and unprepared for what's coming."

Ashton's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"The Cult, Xyrans and now the Empire. Are you ready to face them if they attack tomorrow?" Vulcan asked, his voice low. He continued when Ashton didn't reply. "That's what I thought. They're preparing for war, and we need to be ready. You... more than anyone else."

Ashton felt a wave of panic wash over him. But at the same time, he felt relieved that his concerns weren't unfounded.

"What can I do to help?" Ashton asked, eager to prove his worth.

"You can start by training," Vulcan said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Flintmace and I will be your trainers starting tomorrow."

Ashton nodded, understanding the seriousness of the situation. He knew that he needed to be stronger, faster, and more skilled if he was going to help protect the Empire.

Vulcan's expression softened slightly. "But for now, enjoy your time with your friends. This may be the last chance you get for a while."

Ashton breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the chance to enjoy the moment before everything changed. As Vulcan left the bar, Ashton felt a mixture of fear and excitement. He knew that the training would be intense, but he was ready to do whatever it took to protect the ones he cared for.