

Courtesy

By Richard Paul

I was so tired when I stepped inside the tram carriage that, at first, I didn't notice the Valkilan hanging upside-down from one of the ceiling mounted perches. I woke up considerably when I saw her, but by then the tram had already started moving and since this trip took us from the Blyygkiih-Vrrriiii-Akra freeport to the surface, all the doors between carriages were locked. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was no one else here.

She was asleep; her body was encased in a makeshift cocoon formed by her wings and her long, orange hair was brushing against the floor of the carriage. I sat myself down against a wall-mounted solar lamp as far away from her as possible and closed my eyes, focusing on the nourishing UV light and hoping she'd stay asleep until we arrived back home.

No such luck. My eyes snapped open when I heard her leathery wings start to slowly unfurl. She'd smelled me, and the perpetually hungry Valkilan body, sensing a meal, prepared itself to arise and feast even whilst the woman, presumably, still dreamt.

I watched from the corner of my eye as she lowered her hands to the floor, freed her feet from the perch and pivoted upright in an artfully gymnastic motion, folding one of her long wings behind her back and poking about the carriage with the other to mark out her surroundings whilst her nocturnal predator's eyes slowly adjusted to the light-level. In this way she made her way over to where I was sat.

"Greetings." She said pleasantly at one point, her wing sweeping between the rows of seats used by human passengers.

"Greetings." I replied. It would have been churlish not to. Instantly her head snapped to face the source of the sound and I saw the red, blinking eyes squint at me, whilst the wing guided her path around the last of the chairs to where I was sitting.

I shuffled over against the wall, leaving enough room for her to sit down, which she did, grabbing my wrist tightly in one clawed hand as she did so.

"I trust your evening is a pleasant one?" She said, making a curious purring-roaring sound in her upper throat as she pressed her back against the warm lamp. "Meeting up with friends? Or heading to a mate's nest for a worthy evening?"

"No, nothing like that tonight I'm afraid." I replied, almost nonchalantly. Before I could say anything else she leaned a little towards me, sniffed once at my hair and said, possibly to herself: "You're returning from work, and you've been out of the light for longer than is healthy."

I took in a deep breath and tried to relax. There was nothing to worry about, this had happened before, it would happen again. It was a part of life for all Salthyl living within 50 light-years of the Valkilan border.

"I work in the roak-vine enclosures, they can't get too much light otherwise they wither away. It's draining, but I'm usually fine by the time we reach the surface."

"Good." She replied simply, and her grip on my wrist tightened a little.

"How about you? If I may ask, what form is your evening taking?"

"I'm heading home, to the cliff-city of Bvt'Karakli. Do you know it?"

"That's the one on the third Jarih island?"

"Yes. I've been stuck in the metal corridors of that cramped, unnatural human station for almost a month overseeing the loading and unloading of cargo crates. I need to fly for the sake of my sanity."

Here it comes.

"But I will need to feast before I do so."

Her free claw drew a careful line over my neck and the purring-roar in her throat suddenly sounded distinctly hungry.

"May I?"

Only a churl or a coward would refuse.

“Go ahead.”

The woman's long fangs unfurled from behind her first set of omnivore's teeth like pocket-blades and in a blurred motion she was suddenly looming over me. The claws on her right hand tore a bloody chunk from the left side of my neck and I could almost... almost... keep the scream merely one of pain as I saw my own gory flesh be chewed and swallowed by the grinning figure of the monster above me.

She wasn't done, her face swooped down to the wound as a hand forced my head back against the lamp. Two separate tongues were soon seeking out every last drop of the sweet, nectary blood that was dribbling down my chest and shoulder. I could feel strands of her hair stick to the side of my face and feel the freakish mingling of sickly-sweet sap and copper in my nostrils.

Finally she pulled back, making one contented sound after another. I turned my wounded neck towards the lamp, closed my eyes and tried to keep my breathing steady. In direct sunlight a Salthyl's flesh wounds heal almost instantly; in the glow of the lamps it took a few minutes, but soon enough my flesh had pulled itself back together and my blood vessels were splitting and multiplying to replenish their numbers.

When I opened my eyes again, she was sitting at my side, resting her head on my shoulder and seemed on the verge of falling back asleep.

With my neck healed and most of my blood flowing inside my body rather than over it, I found myself wondering, and not for the first time, what all the fuss had been about. Every time this happened to any of us, our instincts compelled us to flee, and yet no one was ever harmed by this simple courtesy; there is absolutely nothing violent or malicious about the Valkilan and yet our minds cannot overcome an irrational fear that they're going to murder us on sight.

Well, be that as it may, we need only keep being polite.

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