

She knelt down and examined the mud, her fingers stroking the indentations made by the feet of the small animal. She sniffed at the air, catching a scent on the wind that blew past her nose, and she knew instantly what she was going to be having for dinner tonight. She gripped the wooden spear she carried and continued her hunt.

She hunted alone, as she always did. Other trackers, other hunters, would just get in her way. It was simpler this way, alone, with no one to distract her from her task. Why should she have to worry about others when all she wanted to do was get her next meal? Why share that meal with others when the animal she tracked would feed her longer by herself? Yes, alone was always the better way. And she never tracked any animal that was too large for her to take on by herself. She knew her limits. And she always survived.

She had washed herself in the river before starting, so that the animal would hopefully not smell her human odors as she tracked it. She was quiet as she hunted, a trait her father and mother had both taught her when she was younger. She was an expert tracker but a better killer. Nothing escaped her once she had its trail.

She looked over her shoulder when she heard an explosion, and she grimaced as the jungle came alive with the sounds of birds coming to life. The mountain of hot rocks was rumbling again. It had gotten worse lately, and she began to wonder if she was going to have to move her hunting grounds. It was only recently that the mountain of hot rocks had become this active. She did not have much, always being on the move, but finding a new hunting ground would not be easy, especially if someone was already there. They would demand something of her to move into their territory—something she might not want to give.

She moved faster to catch her quarry, hoping it had not fled too quickly. She followed its footsteps more rapidly, caution gone now that the mountain of hot rocks had woken up again. If she did not hurry, she might have to go hungry tonight, and she had already gone hungry for two days.

She slowed down when she heard the sound of an animal eating nearby. She peered around a bush and saw her quarry by the riverbank, having taken down a large animal with a lot of fat that she knew would be protecting good meat. It was dead, and if she killed the animal eating it, she would have two good meals. She looked quickly around to make sure there were no other animals nearby who might spoil her dinner plans, and seeing none, she threw her spear.

The long piece of wood with a sharp rock on the end flew straight and struck the cat-like animal in the back, felling it instantly with a sharp cry of pain. The long, black cat collapsed over the back of the larger animal and died. She ran forward and looked quickly around to see if she would have to defend herself against another animal that might want to stake her claim, but she saw none. Above her head, winged reptiles and other large birds continued to flee from the active mountain of hot rocks.

Now, the question was, how did she get this back to her cave where she could skin and prepare not only the meat from the cat but from the larger beast as well.

Sometimes being on my own isn't as great as I think it is, she realized.

A nearby tree rustled, and she grabbed her spear and spun, defending her kill. She saw two men with dark skin from a nearby tribe standing there in their loincloths, spears in their hands. They saw her and stuck the ends of their spears in the dirt before crossing their hands over their chests in a sign of respect for her. They spoke to her, but she did not understand their language. She did not speak at all—there was no need when she was alone.

She snarled at them, enough to show she meant business but not enough to threaten them. They smiled at her. One made a noise over his shoulder, and a young woman came

forward from behind the trees. She smiled at the woman kneeling next to the kills, and the woman smiled at her.

The girl spoke to the woman and then sighed.

“Life would be so much easier for her if she would just learn our language,” she told the two men behind her.

“She does not learn because she does not need anyone else,” the man on the right replied. “How she has survived this long is a testament to her skill, though. We just want to help her. We do not want to take her food.”

“She looks like she hasn’t eaten in a while, other than for some scraps she’s foraged. This will feed her for quite some time.” She looked at her friend, seeing how messy her orangish-red hair was, and the large thigh bone her friend wrapped her hair around for decoration was off-kilter. Her meager clothes, given to her by the tribe a long time ago, were growing frayed.

“We want to help you,” the girl told the cave woman. She raised her arms and flexed her muscles. “Strong men help you carry food back to your cave.”

She grunted and shook her head. At least she seemed to understand something of their language.

The girl from the tribe sighed. She stood up and indicated for the cave woman to take the food back to her cave. They were not going to try to help her.

She grunted again in satisfaction and stood up. Then she looked at the cat, the larger animal, and she let out a frustrated sigh. She grunted in frustration and stomped her foot on the ground. She indicated the animals and nodded her head.

“She’s willing for us to help,” the girl from the tribe told the two men. “Would you go back and get some others to help with our hunt so we can help her?”

“She needs a name,” one of the men said, coming over.

“She doesn’t want one,” the girl told him. “I’ve tried. She’s afraid we’ll take her as a pet.”

“A pet?”

“Well, she visited us once and saw me petting one of our beasts and feeding it and calling it a name. She’s afraid that we’ll do the same to her. Let’s just be good neighbors to her and don’t ruffle her feathers.”

“I still don’t understand why you wish to help this woman so much—she’s done nothing for us except take up our time.”

“She’s never asked us for anything—she’s willing to share when she has too much. More people should be like her. Now tell the village chieftain what is going on and that we need help with our own hunt so we can help her. Go!” she said, shooing the hunter away.

“We will help you,” she told the brown-haired cave woman, making rudimentary gestures that she hoped the young woman could understand. It was difficult when one party refused to find ways to communicate otherwise.

“Th-ank... you,” the cave woman said in the other woman’s tongue. Her voice was rough and cracked once from disuse.

“Y-You’re welcome,” the girl told her. “Do you remember my name? Can you say it?”

“V-era,” the cave woman told her, the cave woman’s voice cracking on the name.

The girl smiled. “Vo-era, but that’s close enough,” Voera told her. “Why did you suddenly decide to talk?”

The cave woman shook her head.

“Oh, you know just enough to be polite, but you don’t want to overdo it—I understand. I’ll take what I can get. So you understand what I’ve been saying this whole time?”

The cave woman nodded her head.

“And... what my companions have said?”

The cave woman pulled down her eye with a finger in a rude gesture.

“We’re sorry if we upset you,” Voera told her. “And we don’t want to give you a name to make a pet of you. We want to give you a name so we know what to call you when we see you.”

The cave woman pointed to herself. “Obro.”

Voera’s eyes went wide. “Your name is Obro?”

Obro nodded.

“It’s nice to know your name, Obro—it’s a beautiful name. Now, Obro, would you mind if we help you take your catches home? We’ll be glad to help you.”

“Th-ank... you,” Obro said.

“Obro, this is Verrar,” she said, introducing one muscular, dark-skinned man, “and this is Otoh,” she said, introducing the second, skinnier man. “They’ll carry the Medudea while you and I get the Enix. Does that sound good?”

The ground began to tremble as another explosion rocked the distant volcano.

“Looks like the Fuming Mountain is waking up,” Voera said, looking at the black smoke spewing from the mountain’s cratered top. “That’s far away from where you live, though, thankfully. Verrar, Otoh, get what you need to bind the Medudea so you can carry it.”

“That’s a big one,” Verrar said. “We’ll have to figure something out. Come on, Otoh.” The two went over to the beast to see how big it was and if they could carry it.

“Now, you and I can deal with the Enix,” Voera told her. Obro nodded with a smile. “And I’m going to get you to talk, no matter what.”

Obro frowned with an over-exaggeration and shook her head.

“All right, fine, you can remain silent. Why don’t you tie up the Enix’s front paws and I’ll do his back, and we’ll carry it back with your spear.”

Obro nodded.

They all got to work and in under an hour had both animals ready for transport. In the distance, the volcano began to rumble more and spew lava into the sky.

Voera shivered. “I’ve never seen the Fuming Mountain so angry. I hope it settles down soon. Thankfully it’s too far to do us any harm.”

“Look out!” Verrar shouted as a group of lizards walking on two legs and carrying spears approached the group. The lizard-men attacked the group, guttural grunts the only sounds they made. Verrar managed to take one down before another speared him through the stomach.

“Verrar, no! Obro, run!” Voera shouted to her friend, but Obro grabbed her spear and ran one and then another lizard-man through the chest, killing them. She pulled her weapon free easily and swung it around, trying to ward the creatures off, but they pressed in on her in a group. Obro moved Voera behind her to protect her unarmed friend.

“What are there?” Voera asked, looking at the naked lizard-men. “I’ve never seen them before!”

Obro shook her head, having never seen them, either. She poked at another lizard-man who tried to get close to her and Voera. They started to back away, but the lizard-men kept moving closer. Obro swung her spear in a small arc, forcing them back. She jerked her head to the side, and Voera instantly looked around to make sure more weren’t trying to come from behind them.

“We’re safe back here—they all seem to be in front,” she told Obro.

“Run,” Obro told her.

“I won’t leave you,” she said as she watched Otoh struggling with three lizard-men, only one of which had a weapon. He must have disarmed the other two somehow.

“Help,” Obro told her. “Run... help.”

“The village is so far away,” Voera said. “Can you hold them off that long?”

Obro nodded confidently as she speared another lizard-man that tried to attack her.

“Don’t die,” Voera told her before she ran off.

“Thissss one issss sssstrong—Masssssster will be pleassssed!” one of the lizard-men hissed. “Take her!”

“Shhhhe’sssss too ssstrong!” another lizard-man yelled as Obro’s spear struck his arm and drew blood. “Get the net!”

“I’ll be right there, Obro!” Otoh yelled to her. “Let me kill this last... whatever this thing is!”

Another lizard-man threw a net at Obro, but she dodged aside quickly, knocking one of them to the ground. There was a flash of metal and then she slit his throat with a small blade she carried on her inner thigh. Just as quickly, the blade disappeared back into its hiding spot. Obro leapt to her feet with the speed of a Caithyes and avoided the net, which managed to capture nothing but the dead lizard-man she had just killed. Obro threw her spear, killing the lizard-man that was attacking Otoh. Otoh took the spear and threw it back to her so she could defend herself.

“Retreat!” one of the lizard-men cried when he saw defeat was at hand. “Return to the masssster!”

The few remaining lizard-men broke from the battle, and they all ran away, tails swinging wildly behind them.

Obro and Otoh watched them run. Then Otoh went to his dying friend. He clasped Verrar’s hand.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Otoh told him. “Those were cowardly creatures to attack you like that.”

Verrar turned his head to look in the direction Voera had gone, then he took a deep breath and died. Otoh closed his eyes.

“Voera will have a hard time with his death. They were supposed to marry.”

Obro looked down sadly.

“Verrar!” Voera rushed forward and knelt next to the young hunter. “No!” she cried, throwing her arms around him. “No, you were supposed to be my mate! N—”

Verrar coughed, blood splattering across his mouth, some landing on Voera’s face. “I’m not dead,” he told her. “Though with this pain in my side, I wish I was. I’ll be okay.”

“Verrar!” Voera cried happily, and she hugged him.

“Ow, watch it,” he told her. “I’m injured.”

“Hurry, make a bed to carry Verrar home to the medicine woman,” Voera told the men she had brought back with her. She looked at Obro. “Where did the lizard-men go?” she asked. “We need to know where they came from and if there are more of them!”

Obro pointed in a direction but shook her head. She grabbed Voera’s arm to stop her and shook her head firmly.

“Obro, we don’t know how many of them there are,” Voera told her. “You’ll be in danger if they discover your cave. We can stop them. I brought our strongest warriors.”

Obro shook her head. “No... can’t let you get hurt. I’ll... track for your warriors. You stay with Verrar.”

Voera's dark eyes flew wide. "That's the most you've ever said at one time. You must be serious."

"She's a fierce warrior and a fine tracker," Otoh told Voera. "We'd be honored to have her guide us."

"Don't attack them when you see them," Voera ordered him. "Look but don't engage. See how many there are and come back if you need more warriors. Don't be bold, Otoh—these monsters almost killed Verrar. They almost killed you and Obro, too."

"We'll be cautious," Otoh promised her. "I won't let anything happen to your friend."

Voera looked at Obro and then nodded her head. "All right, she does know the lands the lizard-men ran towards better than I do. Watch her closely and follow her commands as you would mine."

"We will."

Voera looked at Obro. "Promise me you'll bring them home safely," she said.

Obro nodded firmly, falling back into her silence. Voera smiled at her. "And you come home safely, too. Let's take Verrar home and get him fixed up," she told a small group of men. "We'll tend to your food, Obro. It will be in the village. Come there when you're done with your hunt."

Obro's stomach grumbled hungrily. She held it, hoping to quiet it.

"We'll see that she eats," Otoh promised Voera. "Now get Verrar back to the medicine woman."

Voera looked at Obro. "Bring my friend home safely," she whispered to him.

"We'll keep her and ourselves safe—no heroes today."

Voera nodded. "We'll be waiting for you in the village," she told Obro. "Be safe."

Some of the men who came with Voera loaded up the Enix and the Medudea and carried them off back toward their village. Meanwhile, Otoh and the warriors who were going with Obro to follow the trail of the lizard-men sat down and broke bread and shared some meat with their cave woman friend. After filling her empty stomach and drinking some river water, they set off.

The lizard-men's trail wasn't hard to follow. Only a pack of elephants would have left less of a trail than they did. And as Obro feared, they were heading straight to the volcano.

"Fuming...Mountain," Obro said. "Lizard-Men warm there."

"No one can live in that," Otoh said. "I explored its caves once. The fumes stung my eyes and nearly killed me!"

"Lizard-Men not like us," Obro told him.

She suddenly held up her hand, and the warriors behind her stopped. Obro moved into the brush to hide herself, and the warriors did the same. They watched from concealment as more Lizard-Men walked past them from the direction they were going, these red instead of green like the ones before. They also had small spikes running down their spines to their tail.

"Stupid Lizard-Men—Doctor Despair should have sent us Salamanders to do the job in the first place," one of the new Lizard-Men said. "Now we have to pick up the pieces and hope it's not too late. Fools!"

"Yes, we Salamanders are far stronger," another agreed. "And we don't have a lisp like the Lizard-Men do!"

"Lisp? More like a hiss," another Salamander joked. "Are they Lizard-Men or snakes?"

All the Salamanders laughed at that as they walked off.

“There are more of those creatures?” Otoh whispered to Obro quietly. “What are they and where did they come from?”

“Fuming Mountain,” Obro told him.

“We may not have enough men,” he said.

“We’re going there just to scout,” another tribesman reminded him. “We don’t want to fight unless we have to. We’ll come back if those Lizard-Men are up to no good.”

“Who... *Master*?” Obro asked, remembering a Lizard-Man using the word while she was fighting them.

“That’s a good question,” Otoh told her. “I guess we’d better find out.”

Doctor Mannheim Mengele sighed despondently and looked up when he heard the screaming Lizard-Men enter his volcanic lair. He swore silently beneath his breath and knew, beyond any doubt, that they had failed in their task. All he needed was *one* test subject—someone with a brain capacity above that of a beast. He guessed he was asking for too much from a primitive, backwater world like this one.

Even the lizards were less intelligent than he was used to.

“What has my life become that I’m forced to experiment here of all places?” he moaned gently. “Stupid Galactic Courts and their laws. Scientists should not be punished for wanting to make worlds better places than they are! What I’m doing can benefit all races of the universe! Why can’t they understand that?”

“Isss it this way?” he heard the voice of a Lizard-Man ask.

“No, I think it isssss thisssss way,” another said, and the doctor could see their shadows in the hallway just outside his lab until the shadows moved away.

Maybe not all races, he thought despondently. *Why did I bother making those morons? At least the Salamanders are smarter—and they can breathe fire. Too bad I made them on another world and transplanted them here. Maybe I was just forward thinking, too.*

“I told you it was thisssss way,” a Lizard-Man said as he led his two companions into the doctor’s lab. “Doctor Dessssspair, we have returned.”

Doctor Mengele—also called Doctor Despair among the Galactic Community—glowered at the Lizard-Men, who backed quickly away from his furious gaze. “Without a human specimen, I gather,” he said, eyes dark with disappointment.

“We had four,” one of the Lizard-Men said. Another quickly whispered in his ear. “I mean seven! Wait, does seven come before six?” he asked, starting to count on his four fingered-hand.

Doctor Despair sighed and shook his head. *Queen Bee was right—I shouldn’t have gone with lizards. She’s going to lord this over my head at the next super-villain convention if I don’t pull this off. Though she hasn’t had any success changing people to bees, either, so I am at least one up on her, even if my experiments aren’t... successful.*

“Just... leave,” Doctor Despair groaned. “And don’t bother me again until I summon you. There is some food in the dining hall.”

“I want juicy spiders!” one of the Lizard-Men yelled excitedly as they went off.

Doctor Despair sighed and shook his head.

He turned and looked at his machine, powered by the heat of the volcano he had taken as his home. He had tapped the molten core early upon his arrival here, but only recently had the volcano begun to erupt. The eruptions were an unfortunate but foreseen possibility. Still, it should not affect life in the surrounding area. He may have been a scientist, but he wasn’t a monster. At least, in some circles.

His machine could increase the intelligence of anything with a brain. He had moderate success with some of the lizards on this primitive world, but he wanted a humanoid, someone with a higher brain function who just was just this side of cro magnon. He had sent his servants out to catch someone, but they had been less than successful. He hoped his Salamanders would have a better chance. Somehow, they ended up being smarter than the Lizard-Men—but newer experiments never suffered the way early experiments did.

Why couldn't the scientific community see that what he wanted to do helped people? Instead they scoffed at him, called him crazy and unethical! Well, how was it ethical to prevent people on less advanced worlds from knowing there was more to the universe? How many wars on distant worlds could have been prevented? How many countless lives could have been saved?

A tone from a nearby console beeped, alerting him that someone was approaching the volcano. He turned on his monitor and saw a primitive woman with a bone in her red hair, wearing haphazardly sewn together animal skins, approach, with two dark-skinned men on either side of her. They all carried spears as weapons.

"Savages," he said softly, saying the word almost as a curse. "Being stabbed to death has to be one of the worst, slowest ways to die—though, honestly, getting shot isn't all that fun, either." He pressed a button on his command console. "Lizard-Men, there are three intruders outside. Bring them to me immediately. There are two men and a woman, just so you don't bring me the wrong people... or something else you might find out there." He sighed. "Right, they don't know how to use my technology to respond. I told them how, but... they've got spiders on their brain and not much else."

He looked around and saw two Salamanders enter his lab on one of the patrols of his base. "You two," he said, drawing their attention. "We have visitors outside. Bring them to me alive. I need to test their brains to see if they are capable of handling my experiments."

"Yes, Doctor Despair," they said. They hurried off to do his bidding.

"Much better than the Lizard-Men," he said. "And maybe my human experiments will prove even more useful."

Obro and her two escorts stopped outside a large hole that looked like it had been cut into the volcano, for no natural formation could be so precise.

"That looks ominous," Otoh said.

Obro only nodded in agreement.

"But we're going in, aren't we?" he asked her.

Obro nodded again and silently made her way towards the entrance to the volcano.

She moved against the volcano's rock face and inched her way forward, her escorts following suit. She listened carefully and heard two voices talking to one another, and the sound of their voices grew louder. Obro held her hand up to keep the two men with her back, and they nodded when they heard the voices, too, a moment later. Obro looked down and saw two shadows displayed on the ground, and she jumped forward and speared one of the Salamanders in the gut before quickly retrieving her spear and killing the other one before he could recover from his stupor. Otoh and the other guard pulled the dead Salamanders out of the door and tossed them aside.

After the way was clear, Obro motioned her companions forward, and they entered the volcanic lair.

They took each corner cautiously, but they did not see much in the way of guards until they came to the mess hall, where they found half a dozen Lizard-Men talking and eating lunch. They decided to leave them alone for now.

“These... strange hallways account for the Lizard-Men being able to live here,” Otoh told Obro. “There’s no volcanic gas or fumes to make them sick. How could they have the ability to do this, though?”

“They not,” Obro whispered quietly. “Strange light in sky moons ago. Headed for mountain. Maybe light-beings built this.”

“How many moons?” Otoh asked.

Obro thought about it for a moment, then held up six fingers.

“The watchers of our village said they saw a strange shooting star about that time. Could be the same thing you saw.”

Obro nodded.

“We should go back and get more help,” Otoh suggested. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“We find out before help,” Obro said. “Know bring how many.”

He could not argue with her logic. They pressed on.

They killed a few more Lizard-Men they found in a nearby tunnel and hid the bodies in a room with a door. Then they entered a large room that seemed to be in the very heart of the volcano.

None of them had ever seen anything like this room before. All of the walls were smooth, with multi-colored lights blinking on the surfaces.

In the middle of the room was a small area sitting over the burning heart of the volcano. A railing protected anyone from falling in accidentally, including on a small ramp that led to some kind of chamber made of glass that hovered over the bubbling pit of lava only feet below.

“What that?” Obro asked curiously.

“That, my dear, is my brain enhancer,” a voice said from nearby. Obro and her companions turned but not in time to stop three Salamanders from striking them and taking their weapons. The Salamanders knocked them in the back of their knees, sending the three intruders to their knees on the floor.

“Bind their hands,” the leader of the Salamanders instructed. “We don’t want them getting away. Bind their feet, too. Cut off circulation if you must.”

The Salamanders did as he asked, struggling against the captives, who refused to give in willingly. The Salamanders clocked them all on the head, stunning them into submission but making sure the captives remained conscious. The Salamanders made sure the bindings were super-tight.

“Now, I have three perfect subjects for my experiments,” Doctor Despair said, looking at them. “The question is, who do I start with? I want to enhance your intelligence, but my experiments work best on those who are less intelligent than others. So, I propose a test.”

“What kind of test?” Otoh asked angrily. “And how dare you hold us like this!”

“You invaded my home,” Doctor Despair told him. “Under normal Galactic Law, I could shoot you for that. The good thing for you is that I don’t follow the law—that’s also very unfortunate for you. But I think I’ll take you first, since you’re so eager to talk. Bring him forward,” he ordered the Salamanders.

The Salamanders grabbed Otoh's arms and pulled him to his feet before dragging him to a machine Doctor Despair was standing next to. They pushed Otoh into a chair, and the doctor put a helmet on Otoh's head and strapped it in place under his chin.

"I'll give you fair warning: Don't fight the machine—it can damage your brain," he said, patting Otoh on the shoulder. "Just let it happen." He flipped a switch.

Otoh screamed as lights pierced his eyes, and he tried closing them but he still saw the images on the screen as if in his mind. The images overwhelmed him until he finally groaned and slumped in the seat as if exhausted. Doctor Despair took the helmet off him.

"Take him to a cell," he instructed the Salamanders. "Let him recover. It will be awhile before I can see if he's ready for the enhancer."

"What do Otoh?" Obro demanded angrily.

"The same thing I'm going to do to you, young lady," Doctor Despair told her. "And since you're somewhat talkative, you're next. Put her in the chair!"

Obro struggled against her captors as they grabbed her arms and put her into the chair. Doctor Despair pulled the bone from her hair and tossed it carelessly aside before putting the helmet over her and covering her eyes. Obro did not struggle as the lights began flashing, however, remembering the man saying it would hurt more. A few minutes later, Doctor Despair pulled the helmet off. Obro glared at him with hate in her eyes, and he smiled.

"Oh, yes, it might have worked with you," he said confidently. "You may have been just unintelligent enough."

Obro spat on him.

"Oh, yes, you might be a success. Take her to a cell," he told the Salamanders. "And watch her... carefully."

The Salamanders took Obro to a cell near Otoh's and threw her carelessly inside before turning on the forcefield to keep her inside. Obro, not seeing anything in the doorway to block her, rushed to escape, hit the solid wall of nothing, and found herself flying backwards. She hit her head on the floor and passed out.

Obro awoke some time later and sat up. Her head felt fuzzy, and she put her hand to the back of her head but did not find any blood when she drew her hand away. She pushed herself to her feet and stood up before stumbling over to the doorway. She looked at the forcefield shimmering in the light of the hallway and sighed.

"He didn't make this easy," she said. She looked around the wall and found a small control panel, which she pried open with a small tooth-knife she wore high up on her inner thigh. She looked at the wires within, her dark eyes going over them each in turn. She took two wires, pulled them out, and used her knife to cut them. She twisted the wires together, forming a new circuit, and the control panel sparked before the force field shimmered and disappeared. "That was too easy," she told herself quietly. "He wanted me to escape. Too bad for him that I did. Now to find Otoh and Geb. We have to get out of here."

She found Otoh next door and Geb in the cell next to that. Both were sitting on the small cots in their cells, looking at the doors in frustration. Otoh's eyes widened in surprise when he saw Obro.

"How did you get out?" he asked, rushing for the door but stopping before touching the energy field.

"I don't know," Obro told him. "I just... seemed to know how to short-circuit the forcefield."

“I did not understand a word you just said,” Otoh told her. “And why are you speaking so well?”

“You weren’t affected by that mad doctor’s brain enhancer?” she asked him.

“I don’t think so,” he told her. “After all, I’m still here and you’re out.”

“Good point. Stand back. I think I know how to get you out of here.” She smudged her hand with some dry dirt that was clinging to her short skirt, and she blew it on the numbered control panel on the outside of Otoh’s cell. The dirt clung to four numbers. Obro punched in those four numbers but the cell did not open. She tried another combination with the same result. But on the third try, the forcefield fell and Otoh was free.

“How did you do that?” he asked as he stepped out.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “It just seemed... right. Let’s get Geb out.”

She went over to the last cell and did the same with the control panel there, and Geb was out in just a few moments. Obro looked him over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“No different,” he said. “How are you speaking our language so well all of a sudden?”

“Don’t ask me,” she told him. “It’s like that device unlocked some part of my brain. Stuff I knew but didn’t fully understand—like your language—are child’s play now. Come on, we need to get out of here without anyone seeing us. I don’t know what that Doctor Despair has planned for us, but it can’t be good. Come on!”

They left the area with the holding cells and ran right into Doctor Despair and a group of Salamanders and Lizard-Men, who were all waiting. Doctor Despair looked at his watch and whistled low and slow.

“I’m impressed,” he told Obro. “You got out a lot faster than I was expecting. It seems my brain enhancer worked on you just like I had hoped.”

“What do you want from us?” she asked him in frustration.

“You just asked that question in my language,” he told her. “You’re bilingual now. Congratulations.”

“I did—” she started to protest, but she realized he was right when she saw Otoh and Geb looking at her.

“I can make you more than you are,” he told her. “I can make you better. Stronger, faster—”

“But what if I don’t want that?” she asked.

“You want to live on this meaningless, backwater world, scavenging every day for food, never knowing when the next dinosaur is going to eat you?” he asked. “I can give you the means to escape this life. I’m not going to pretend to know what your dreams are, but you know you’re different, and I know you like it. You can talk to your companions on their level now—no, you’re smarter than they are now. You can teach them what they need to know to change this world, to turn it into something more than it is! But with my help, you can keep from making the mistakes other worlds have made. You can guide this world into a brighter future!”

“By terrorizing others like you have?” she asked. She nodded with her chin towards the lizard guards he had. “By changing helpless animals into my foot soldiers?”

“Only if you want to,” he told her. “But that’s not why I’m here. Stay with me. Let me help you become what you’re meant to become! You’ve tasted what I can give you—you can’t go back to your... cave, or wherever it is you might live, and forget what I’ve done, what you’ve seen. Let me finish my work. Be the example of what humanity can be that I want to show the universe!”

“What about my friends?” she asked him.

“Obro,” Otoh protested, but she held her hand up to silence him.

“What about them?” Doctor Despair asked her. “They can go for all I care. They’re worthless to me. I don’t need to hurt them, if that’s your concern. Stay with me and they can go home—as long as they promise not to come back here in a feeble rescue attempt.”

“You’ll let them go?” she asked for confirmation. “How can I trust you?”

“You can monitor them all the way back to their village, if you’d like,” Doctor Despair told her. “You can make sure they make it home safely before we begin.”

Obro nodded. “All right—I’ll do as you ask, as long as they and the other villages remain completely unharmed.”

“Done,” he said happily. “But you must not try to escape until I’m finished,” he countered. “Otherwise I’ll happily burn that village to the ground—men, women, and children.”

“I won’t escape,” Obro told him. “Just don’t harm the village. What about the Lizard-Men we saw pass us when we were coming here?” she asked.

“Commander Jharki, report on your progress,” Doctor Despair said into a small earpiece.

“We found the village, Doctor Despair,” Jharki reported. “We are awaiting your orders.”

“Return to base,” the doctor told him. “Do not attack the village—I repeat, do not attack the village.”

“Understood, Doctor—we’ll return to the base.”

“There. The village is safe.”

“What is going on?” Otoh asked, having not understood a single word of the conversation, which had taken place in Doctor Despair’s tongue.

“I’m staying,” Obro told him. “But you and Geb are returning to your village. Don’t come back here under any circumstances. I’ve negotiated the peace of the village. The Lizard-Men and Salamanders won’t attack while I’m here.”

“We can’t leave you,” Otoh told her.

“You have no choice,” she told him. “This is my decision. I don’t think he wants to harm me—he could have done so by now if he wanted to. Tell Voera that I’ll see her soon.”

“She won’t like that we left you here,” Otoh said.

“Tell her I am staying to protect her and the village,” Obro said. “That’s all she needs to know. Otoh, don’t do anything stupid.”

“We’re coming back for you,” he whispered.

“No, you’re not,” she told him. “Take Geb home and forget about me. As I said, I don’t think he wants to hurt me.”

“Never,” Doctor Despair said in their language.

“But what about Voera?” Otoh asked. “She told me to make sure you come home.”

“Where is the bone I wore in my hair?” Obro asked Doctor Despair. “She’s never seen me without it. If I have them take that home... she may think something happened to me.”

“Find the bone in my lab,” Doctor Despair told a Lizard-Man. “Bring it to me unharmed.”

“Yessss, Doctor,” the Lizard-Man hissed. He ran off to find it.

“You’d lie to Voera?” Otoh asked darkly.

“To save her life, yes,” Obro told him. “She is my best friend. I love her like family. I’ll explain things to her if I ever get a chance to leave here. I promise.”

“I don’t like this,” Otoh told her.

“We have no choice, it seems,” Obro told him.

“No, no you don’t,” Doctor Despair said. “Not if you want your friends to live. Take them away, Lizard-Men. Set them free outside... unharmed.”

After her companions were gone, Obro said, “Promise you won’t hurt them or put them through these... tests.”

“Oh, you’re all I’m going to need to prove to the scientific community on Esoria that my methods will help the underprivileged and those in need of better help.” He walked past Obro, and she followed him instinctually.

“You think I needed help?” Obro asked him with a snarl. “I was happy. Now I’m miserable.”

“But why?” he asked as he led her back to his lab. “You’re smarter than you were. You know things now that you probably never even dreamed of before!”

“Yes, and now I want more, and I hate that about myself. I never needed anything other than food and shelter. Now I want to know what traveling in space is like; I want to know what food other than Enix meat tastes like; I want to explore not only my world but the universe! But I know that it’s a dangerous business leaving my cave, and once I start, I’ll never know where I might end up.”

“Good paraphrase of *The Hobbit*,” he said. “One of my favorite books. You got a lot more knowledge than I was expecting. You’d give all of that up?”

“Can I?” she asked.

“I would not make anything that I could not reverse,” he said. “The problem is that reversion... sometimes causes greater issues, like a small bit of knowledge remaining that could drive you mad if you can’t figure out what it means and you can’t get the knowledge you’re looking for. It’s one of the reasons I’m here and not on Esoria—the law thinks I hurt people intentionally, when I never intended to. I just—”

“Wanted to help them,” Obro finished.

“Quite right. Now, my dear, we have some more tests to run, and then I must put you into my machine.”

“Why?” Obro asked, brown eyes going wide. “Are you talking about that cylinder hanging over the lava pit?”

“Yes—I’m going to enhance your body as well as your mind. When I’m through with you, you won’t have to worry about any disease that might be infecting this world. Your heart will be stronger, your muscles will be capable of greater strength, and you’ll be able to survive in this prehistoric world far better than you can now—not that you haven’t already proven yourself capable. I just want to give you a chance against anything that might hunt you.” He reached over and gently touched a few scars on her arm from an Enix attack years ago. “And I’ll also erase your scars, making your body flawless.”

“You’re not going to turn me into a Lizard-Man, are you?” she asked cautiously.

“Oh, heavens no,” he said with a laugh. “But you will be far above the Lizard-Men, just like the Lizard-Men are far above the dinosaurs.”

“Will I be far above you?” she asked.

“If I’m careful, no,” he said. “But I understand the story of Frankenstein very well. My plans for you are to make you better than you are even now, but not a superwoman.”

“So not tackling dinosaurs with my bare hands?” she asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

He led her into the lab Obro had seen earlier. He threw her a dressing gown. “You can go behind that screen and change into this. It’s made from a material that the enhancing fluid won’t

react with. The clothes you're wearing might... change parts of you that you don't want changed."

"How?" Obro asked.

"Do you want to end up with teeth sticking out of your arms or legs? No? Then take off your clothes and put on the dressing gown. It just slides over your head—no fuss, no muss. Much better than the hospital gowns most hospitals use."

"I have to get in water?" she asked.

"An enhancement fluid, but I'll put a breathing mask on you—I won't let my prize drown."

Obro went behind the screen he mentioned and looked around quickly before she took her clothes off and donned the dressing gown. It covered her from neck to feet, leaving nothing showing.

"Underwear, too, if you have any," he reminded her. "Anything can be enhanced, and that enhancement will also enhance you."

"Right," she said unenthusiastically.

She came behind the screen a moment later. "I don't like being completely naked under this," she told him.

"Trust me, your virtue is sacred," he said. "Now, let me help you into the enhancer and we will get the next part of your new life started. You'll be in there awhile, so I hope you're not claustrophobic."

Obro looked at the small, cylindrical pod and gulped. "I hope I'm not, either."

"Let's get you in there so I can start phase two. I love this part." He took Obro's hand and helped her into the small chamber. He fitted the breathing mask over her face and then put a pair of waterproof goggles over her eyes so she could see. "Just breathe normally," he told her. "Do not take big breaths. If you start to panic, beat on the glass. I can drain the liquid quickly into the lava."

"Why is this hovering over a volcano?" she asked.

"I need heat to make the liquid work, and volcanoes are very hot. Now be quiet. I'll play a movie to keep you occupied while this works. I won't be able to talk to you or you to me once the enhancer has filled the tube, so—"

"Beat on the glass to get your attention," she said. "Is it too late to use the bathroom?" she asked.

"I can hook up a tube if you'd like," he told her. "Your urine might be interesting to study while the enhancements are working."

"Gross, no," she told him. "I'll hold it."

He sighed. "No one ever said science wasn't messy." He pulled the mask and goggles off her and helped her out. "The bathroom is over there," he told her, pointing to a small part of the lab. "I won't let you out of my sight."

"To protect my friends, I'll let you experiment on me," she reminded him. "I won't go anywhere."

She returned from the bathroom a few moments later and Doctor Despair helped her into the capsule once more. When she was ready, he filled it with the enhancing fluid. As the capsule filled up, Obro found herself floating gently in the semi-gelatinous fluid above the lava below. It would take so little effort for him to send her plunging to her death, but....

His face appeared on the capsule in front of her, and Obro was startled by his sudden appearance. "Can you hear me?" he asked, his voice resounding through the liquid to her ears. "Since you're trapped and can't do anything because I've numbed your body with

something I put into the fluid, I should tell you the real reason I've been kicked out of the scientific community on Esoria," he told her. "You see, I lied when I said I never intended to hurt anyone. I fully intended to hurt everyone I have experimented on. I get a certain amount of joy from seeing the terror on peoples' faces as I... do things to them. Don't worry—I have no intention of killing you. Beyond that, I cannot say what will happen to you. Oh, and there will be no movie—sorry!"

He flipped a switch, and the capsule began to vibrate as the liquid within began to move. Obro wanted to scream as she felt something unnatural happen to her body, but she was helpless within. She could only watch as Doctor Despair laughed maniacally as he pressed button after button, far out of her reach.

Hours passed—at least, what felt like hours—and Doctor Despair's laughter continued as he continued his work. But suddenly, he looked at a monitor on the far wall, and his face fell. Seconds later, Obro watched as the tribesmen burst into the lair, fighting off Lizard-Men and Salamanders and killing them effortlessly. Then she saw Otoh chase after Doctor Despair, who ran off, leaving his equipment running.

Then a moment later, she saw Voera appear, a worried look on her friend's face. Voera ran over to the equipment and pressed a button that was flashing red and the capsule Obro found herself in stopped moving and the water drained away into the lava below. Voera ran to her friend as the capsule opened, and she caught Obro as the cave woman fell, the breathing mask slipping away from her.

"Vo...era," Obro said exhaustedly.

"We came for you," Voera told her, holding her friend close. "I didn't care what happened to us or the village—you are just as important to me as anyone else. How are you feeling?"

"Can't... walk... numb..." Obro said weakly.

"We'll care for you," Voera told her. "However long it might take."

Otoh returned a few moments later, a perturbed expression on his face. "He got away—I don't know how, but he's gone. I heard some kind of explosion. He's probably returned to wherever he came from. How is Obro?" he asked Voera.

"Tired, weak, but I hope she'll be okay," Voera told him.

Obro shook her head. "I have to fix what he did to me," she said. "If I don't, I'll revert to the mind of a child by tomorrow—I'll never be able to take care of myself again. Take me over to that control panel. I have to fix this."

"Fix it?" Voera asked worriedly. "How?"

"I have the knowledge for now," Obro told her. "Please, take me over to the panel."

They helped Obro over to the panel, and she quickly punched in some keys. A moment later, a person wearing a dark helmet, whose face they could not see, appeared on the monitor.

"This is Special Agent Shadow with the Galactic Agency of Crime—what do you wish to report?"

"Doctor... Mannheim Mengele is escaping from our world," Obro told him. "He created some Lizard-Men, and he experimented on me. I don't know how long I will survive, but he must be stopped."

"We wondered where Doctor Despair slipped away to," Shadow said. "I have your coordinates. We'll get him, and I'll send a medical team down to see if they can help you."

"They can't," Obro told him. "No one can. What he did to me—"

"He's done to others that we've helped," Shadow told her. "Don't worry. You're on the far side of the galaxy, but we have patrols in your area. They'll get to Despair."

“Please help my friend,” Voera said. “She means the world to me.”

“I’ll make sure our best doctors look at her,” Shadow said. “They should be there in a few hours.”

“Does she have that long?” Voera asked, looking at Obro.

“I have that long,” Obro assured her.

A few hours later, a discreet medical ship landed near the volcano and doctors took Obro away.

“We’ll have to take her with us to examine her, but we’ll do everything we can to save her. Once she’s back, though, you and your people will have to have your memories of this time erased,” a doctor told Voera. “You’ve learned far more in a few days than you should have learned in hundreds of years. We’re sorry, but something like this can advance your civilization far quicker than it’s supposed to advance. I can promise you that what we do will not hurt.”

“Just heal my friend,” Voera said.

“That will be our top priority—don’t worry,” the doctor said, laying a reassuring hand on Voera’s shoulder. “We’ll return her safe and sound. For now, you should return to your village and try not to worry too much.”

“She’s my friend—of course I’ll worry,” Voera said. “But thank you.”

The doctor left and the medical ship returned to orbit.

Voera and her people left and returned to their village, the threat of the Lizard-Men and Salamanders gone.

A few days later, Obro entered the village. Everyone looked up when she entered, and Voera rushed to her and took Obro into a bear hug.

“You’re all right!” she said happily.

“She’ll be fine,” the doctor who had spoken to Voera said, entering the village with a few others. “But now comes the time that I told you about.”

“You have to... take our memories,” Voera said. “How is that possible?”

“We’ve learned how to,” the doctor said. “We don’t like doing it, but you never know what an encounter like this might do if people start a written history and don’t explain things properly. As I said, it won’t hurt. Gather the villagers together,” he told those with him. “I need to talk to Obro for a moment. Excuse us.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked Obro quietly.

She nodded. “If I act differently, Voera will wonder what happened to me,” Obro told him. “She’s not stupid.”

“No, she’s definitely not,” the doctor agreed. “All right, I had Research make a bone just like the one you wore in your hair. It will make you act just like you did before Doctor Despair messed with your brain and DNA. Take it off and the changes will come back.”

“I can’t believe you were actually able to do that,” Obro said, taking the bone from him. “Your worlds are so different.”

“And maybe not for the better,” he said. “Remember, you’re smarter, stronger, and faster now. Hiding that won’t be easy.”

“I know. But the bone will at least help,” she said. She took the bone and wrapped her hair around it as Voera approached. As soon as Obro did, she felt the strength in her body lessen, and the knowledge she had gained was suppressed.

“We’re ready, Doctor,” Voera said. “The entire village is here.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Everyone, look this way,” he said. There was a flash of red light, and the Doctor said, “You’ve had a celebration party for the past few days over the meat you and your friend, Obro, managed to get. Voera has asked Obro to stay the night, but Obro says she has to get home.” Instantly, everyone fell asleep

He turned and looked at the other doctors. “Let’s go. We don’t need to be here when they wake up. Wish our Noakes Realigners worked like the Neuralizers from *Men in Black*—so much easier.”

They left the village and returned to their ships. Only Obro was awake to watch them go because she had closed her eyes before the flash. She thanked them quietly.