

The Female Breeders

By Melanie Bokstad Horev

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In loving memory of Rina Horev and Larry Bokstad. I miss you both terribly.

Chapter 1

Neen

Neen Salvek was tired of waiting. It was insufferable.

It had been weeks since she'd finished her degree, and still the council hadn't notified her about her work assignment.

The sun outside was setting, its tired beams marking the end of another day. Neen looked out across the skyline of High City. The pinkish light from the sunset caught the reflection of the city's central district's gleaming white towers and glass windows. Off in the distance, the Arena Dome shimmered. Its exterior was all glass — a special kind that allowed only those from outside to look in.

Neen's residence was too far away for her to see inside the Dome now, but there were times when she'd walked about the city and wandered by it to see what the males were doing.

She never got too close, of course. Even though none of the males could see out of the one-way glass, she felt uncomfortable getting near. Neen knew her history well. The males were not to be trusted.

Since it was twilight now, the glass of the Dome would be shifting soon. It was almost time for the evening report. When that time came, the glass would switch to a giant LED screen, and all the screens across the city would broadcast the news.

Three times a day, High City officials would broadcast these reports: sunrise, midday, and sunset. They were never particularly interesting — what news could there be in a city with no real crime, no social ills, no suffering? — but the council insisted on the thrice-daily routine.

Sisterhood. Community. A reminder of how far the world of EVE had come since the dark days before the revolution.

The women of High City, it was believed, needed these reminders. Despite the security of the dome, women still needed males to breed with. Every month, there would still be intimate

contact between them. The citizens of EVE needed to remember the horrors of male dominance; there was no letting one's guard down, even during breeding sessions. As repetitive as these reports were, they were necessary. The survival of the sisterhood depended on it.

Neen didn't need to worry about becoming too attached to a male breeding partner. She was classified at fertility level D, the lowest. Even if she was interested in breeding, she would never be selected. The doctors who ran the breeding program only wanted the women with the most chance for successful insemination and full-term, healthy pregnancy.

Like Ems.

Neen's best friend would be arriving soon from her clan lands. After all, it was almost time for the breeding trials, and Ems would need to watch the males compete in order to make an informed selection.

Neen wasn't sure how she felt about Ems getting designated a breeder. As children, they'd both laughed when their teachers explained the breeding process. It was still quite comical to Neen even now, but she understood the necessity. The genetic processes necessary to develop the clans' specialized traits meant breeding the old-fashioned way.

Scientists had tried to replicate the process in the lab, but the experiments always delivered inferior results. If they wanted to keep the genetic enhancements of each clan intact, then for better or for worse, they needed to breed with the males.

Still, Neen thought the whole thing sounded awkward. She respected the women who had the courage to breed with the males, but she had decided a long time ago that she could never go through with it herself. It wasn't like she had a choice anyways, low breeding class and all.

Ems had been of a similar mind, but perhaps that had changed now. This was the first time Ems had been classified as fertility level A.

Neen missed her. They hadn't seen each other since Ems finished her training early and was assigned to the leadership circle in her clan lands. That was over a year ago. Ems had risen fast since getting her assignment. She had recently been selected clan leader and won the vote by a large majority.

Seeing her friend's success made Neen even more restless. Her classes at the university never really challenged her, her internship work had been monotonous, and now that she had graduated, all this waiting for an assignment was driving her crazy.

It insulted her too. Hadn't she been at the top of her class as a Triverser? Hadn't she finished her training faster than anyone except her Sixter friend Ems?

It was ridiculous that the high council hadn't chosen an assignment for her yet.

Wandering around the city, reading books alone in her residence, chatting with Ems every other day via their networked screens — it was just too much sameness, day after day, no change.

Neen needed a challenge. All her life she had felt this restlessness. Nothing seemed to be enough.

And yet she felt guilty at the same time. Was she ungrateful for the world her foremothers had created, a world free from want and needless suffering? A world in which women could finally — after centuries of oppression — flourish?

But her mind was never still. Everywhere Neen looked, she analyzed and contemplated and wondered how things could be made better. Their society was nearly flawless, but it wasn't perfect. There were still things that could be improved. Neen was hoping the high council would give her a position within city planning or even the breeding labs. Perhaps there was a way to revisit the old experiments of breeding without intercourse, of ensuring the genetic enhancements for each clan were successful without having to mate with the males.

Or perhaps there was a way to change the males. To make them less dangerous.

Neen knew she shouldn't be entertaining such thoughts, but they had crossed her mind more than once before. With all their scientific breakthroughs in genetic technology, wouldn't it be possible to breed males who were not like their ancestors, who weren't violent or deceitful or hardwired to desire the subjugation of women?

These were dangerous thoughts. The idea that males could be reformed, that they could be fundamentally changed, was not the kind of thing a woman said openly.

She heard a familiar shrill whistle from the kitchen, the antique kettle ringing loudly in the quiet apartment.

She got up to make her tea, choosing an herbal mix from her tidy cupboard and breathing in the bright smell of camomile and mint. She scooped the loose leaves into her brew basket, placed it over her teacup, and then lifted the ancient cast iron kettle from the stove. She admired the sturdy kettle as its hot contents poured over the tea leaves.

Neen had found the kettle in an antique market years ago, and while Ems had found it annoying, Neen adored the ancient relic. A calmness came over her as she breathed in the scent of steeping tea. It was a calmness she had longed for all day. Neen yawned and rubbed her eyes. She hadn't slept well last night, tossing and turning with uncertainty.

Neen sighed, waiting for the evening report to begin. It was the last thing she wanted to see, but there was simply no choice. Even if she tried to block out the images and sounds, the evening report couldn't be turned off.

Just as the Dome glass outside and the networked screen on her lap both shimmered and went black, there was a knock at her door.

Both the knock and the voice announcer from the evening report startled Neen. She could hear the familiar, too-happy voice of councilwoman Sienax echoing from her tablet screen, but she blocked it out and went to the door.

Standing there was high council member Nekka, the representative of Clan Triverser.

Neen stepped back and looked at her with wide eyes. The council members didn't usually make personal visits to new graduates awaiting assignment, councilwoman Nekka least of all.

Nekka had sometimes observed Neen in her classes and even given the younger Triverser a few half-hearted kudos on occasion, but she wasn't exactly a warm or friendly presence to the students in the Institute, or even the clerks in government.

Nekka was distant and somewhat unapproachable. Perhaps it was her Triverser nature — many of Neen's clan were cerebral, more focused on solving an equation than on being bosom buddies — but Nekka was perhaps the most inscrutable of all the high council members. She was

certainly the least amiable. To have her standing in Neen's doorway right now, her gray hair tied back tightly in a neat bun, was a bit intimidating.

"Councilwoman Nekka," Neen said, stepping aside so the older woman could enter, "what an unexpected honor." She held out her hands so that Nekka could greet her in the formal manner.

"Hm?" Nekka looked at Neen's outstretched hands, palms facing up, waiting to be clasped. But Nekka waved them away. "Never mind all that," she said. "There's no one watching."

Without being asked, Nekka took a seat on Neen's sofa. The two women were dressed almost identically, each wearing a jumpsuit with the light brown Triverser colors on the top and the circular EVE insignia just under the collarbone on the left side.

Nekka looked Neen up and down. "You're much prettier than I remember," said the councilwoman. "Not very typical."

Neen squirmed under the gaze of the older woman. Her physical appearance had been a slight source of embarrassment when Neen was a child; Triversers were valued for their intelligence, not their looks. Only the males cared about such things; it was another way they had dehumanized women in ancient times.

"It can't be helped," Neen replied, ignoring her discomfort. "I don't let it get in the way, though."

"No, you don't."

They both had to speak loudly, ignoring the prattling of Sienax and the other voices coming from Neen's tablet. Despite the banality and repetitiveness of the evening broadcast, there was no way to turn it off.

"Congratulations, by the way," Nekka continued. "Graduating early. Youngest in your cohort. Impressive." The way she said it, though, didn't sound particularly complimentary. Something in Nekka's matter-of-fact manner was off-putting.

Still, Neen knew the councilwoman was incredibly intelligent and well-respected. A true matriarch of society. A compliment from Nekka — even a perfunctory one — was something to be proud of.

"Thank you, councilwoman," Neen replied. "I must admit I'm anxious to get my work assignment."

Nekka nodded and a thin smile spread across her lips. "I bet you are."

Neen waited for her to say more, but the droning of the report was all that passed between them. Not knowing what else to do, Neen glanced at her tablet.

The broadcast was showing its usual ode to the glories of EVE, a montage of the ways different women in High City had helped each other throughout the day. There were shots of Triverser doctors chatting with their patients, images of Evox actors performing for an amphitheater of patrons, scenes of smiling Trabador construction workers building a new public library. The voice-over reveled in the achievements of this woman-centered society, all while lovely, harmonious melodies flowed from the soundtrack.

Then the bucolic images faded and darkness covered the screen. The glass panels of the far-off arena dome turned dark as well. Every screen in the city was showing the same thing: darkness.

Sienax's voice grew lower, more ominous. "We cannot forget, my sisters. We can never let it happen again. The beauty of EVE must never be tarnished."

Then a flurry of images. Burning torches marching through ancient streets, women screaming, bodies being trampled by soldiers, gunshots and teargas everywhere. Then sporadic, grainy footage of men speaking to audiences from centuries ago, defending their draconian laws, fear-mongering about the breakdown of society, justifying the subjugation of women as the only way to restore law and order.

The images were disturbing, even after seeing them night after night for nearly her entire life. What men had done to women in those ancient times was awful.

Neen picked up the tablet and flipped it over so that the images couldn't be seen. Only the sound was still audible, just more muted.

"The males are too dangerous to be trusted," Sienax's voice continued. "Never forget the ringing of the bells and the birth of EVE. Together, as women, we are stronger than any male. Together, as women, we will flourish. Together, as women, we will see a new tomorrow. Together."

The music was now that beautiful and sentimental strain again, a final crescendo just before the end of the broadcast.

Nekka stared at Neen. "Don't like what you've seen?"

"No," said Neen. "It's an important message. Necessary, even. It's just— we're trying to talk. I'd appreciate having an off switch sometimes."

As soon as she said it, Neen wished she hadn't. It wasn't acceptable to question such things, especially in front of a high council member.

But Nekka didn't react. She simply observed Neen with that thin smile on her lips.

Neen decided to sit down across from her. She felt less on display if she was sitting down.

"The males are too dangerous to be trusted," Nekka repeated, almost to herself. "Isn't that right, Neen Salvek?"

At first, Neen thought Nekka was speaking rhetorically. Of course the males were dangerous. What could be more obvious? But when Nekka sat patiently waiting for an answer, Neen realized the councilwoman's question wasn't rhetorical.

"Yes, of course," Neen answered. "We all know what they did centuries ago. No male can ever be trusted."

"And yet, each month, for days at a time, we place ourselves in the same rooms as the males, allow them to mate with us, and surrender some part of our safety to their trust."

"The women who choose to breed are brave indeed," Neen repeated the slogan she'd heard a million times before. It wasn't that Neen didn't believe it, it was more that she was tired of having to repeat these trite bromides. As a Triverser, it was hard to shut one's brain off sometimes and just go with the flow. Neen especially bristled at the constraints.

"A bit of a mixed message wouldn't you agree?" said Nekka. "We can't trust the males, and yet every month..." Nekka's eyes peered intently at Neen.

As a matter of fact, Neen could agree. She had wondered the same thing herself. It was a bit of a shock to hear a councilwoman so openly questioning the policies and messaging of their world, but Neen had to admit, she'd contemplated the same.

Perhaps Nekka was hinting that Neen would be placed with a bio lab to study ways to make breeding obsolete. Perhaps she would get assigned to design a new security system in the breeding suites. Neen's mind whirled with possibilities.

Finally, she might get to do something. Neen had waited long enough.

"The competitions will be starting soon," Nekka continued in that off-hand, impersonal way of hers. "I believe the first shipment of males arrives tomorrow morning." Nekka wasn't looking at Neen anymore; her eyes had drifted to the large window overlooking the city.

"As you may know," she continued, "lately we've seen an increase of women rejecting their breeding partners once they were alone in the breeding suite. Most women cited incompatibility, but a few reported extreme discomfort and a sense that their male partners were not willing to abide by our consent rules. Of course, those males were quickly removed from the program—"

Neen noticed Nekka's eyelashes flicker ever-so-slightly. It had been a gift from Neen's earliest years — the ability to notice these slight shifts in body language — something unusual for a Triverser. Ems had always joked that Neen was part Sixter somewhere in her ancestry.

But when Neen noticed this slight eye movement from Nekka, it made her wonder. It wasn't that Nekka's tone of voice changed; she was as matter-of-fact as ever. But something else had changed in the councilwoman.

Did Nekka disapprove of removing males from the breeding pool? After all, if a male couldn't breed, then it was best for him to be put to useful work instead. Without the males' efforts in the mines, they wouldn't have enough raw material to power the communications network.

Perhaps Neen misunderstood.

"What I'm proposing is a new procedure for screening the males," Nekka continued as if nothing had changed. "Psychological profiling before they even begin their trials. If a male is deemed unstable or not fit for breeding because of some mental defect, then he can be removed from the program earlier. Women will feel more comfortable knowing their males have been thoroughly screened ahead of time."

It made perfect sense to Neen. She was surprised something like this hadn't been instituted before.

"I can see the question forming in your mind," said Nekka, without taking her eyes off the view of the city skyline. "Why haven't we done this before? Frankly, in earlier eras, we were content with lower birth rates. Our population was bigger then. Not as much urgency. But now, members of the high council are concerned. We can't sustain these rates. Something needs to be done."

"Let me guess. You're one of those concerned council members," Neen replied. She didn't see the need to beat around the bush. Neen hardly ever did.

"I am," Nekka replied, finally turning to look at Neen.

Neen could see that Nekka was pleased.

"I must admit the program is controversial. Talking with the males, treating them as more than pieces of flesh. Some within the government don't see the point. Even women classified to breed often don't see these males as anything more than objects meant to further the species and create gloriously enhanced female progeny. The idea that men would have real—" Nekka stopped suddenly.

Neen could see color rising to the old woman's cheeks. It was surprising to see Nekka lose any composure, even something as innocuous as this. But it was clear that the councilwoman had said more than she intended. Neen wondered what to make of it.

Nekka turned to the window again. "I'm proposing a beta version of a new program," she continued, her voice resuming its measured and dispassionate quality. "Psychological profiling for all males designated breeding class three or higher. To be done here in High City before the commencement of the breeding trials. Profilers have the authority to designate males as unfit for

breeding based on several mental and emotional factors. This will help us avoid so many rejections during actual breeding." She moved from the window back to the door of Neen's sterile, bleached apartment. "I've selected you to take the lead on this project. A complete dossier has been uploaded to your tablet with all the necessary data."

Neen was surprised. Her academic work wasn't focused on psychology. Planning, infrastructure, systems engineering, biochemistry: these were the things she had studied. She expected an assignment in government or science, something that would challenge her intellect. But talking to the males? Getting to know them and making judgments about them? Why her?

"Hesitant?" Nekka asked, that thin smile curling the corners of her lips again.

"No, it's just—"

"You'll be alone in the room with them," Nekka continued, not waiting for Neen to finish. "It's the only way we can get a true read on their psychological state."

Nekka waited for Neen's objections, but the younger woman said nothing.

"Most Triversers wouldn't take on this assignment. Too dangerous." Nekka let the implications of her statement hang in the air.

Neen jutted her chin. "I'm not *most Triversers*."

Nekka let out a little bark of a laugh. "I didn't think so."

Neen didn't let Nekka see her hands start to quiver. Being alone in a room with a male was something only breeding women did.

But still, Neen had to admit her fascination. Her mind drifted back to her younger days as a child, when she would often steal glimpses of the pre-pubescent males in Young Dome. They didn't look particularly happy, but then, why should they? They were de facto prisoners, kept under constant surveillance, intended only for breeding purposes. Did they accept their lot in life? Did they have any feelings beyond their rudimentary biological needs?

Neen had wanted a challenge. Perhaps this was it.

"Well?" Nekka said, standing in the doorway.

Neen took a deep breath. "I accept."

"Good." Nekka nodded. Neen caught a glimmer of satisfaction in the councilwoman's eyes. "Very good. I look forward to your first report." This time, Nekka held out her palms for the customary salutation.

Neen clasped them.

"Together," both women said in unison.

The door slid closed, and Neen went to the couch to sit down. Her networked screen was still facedown on the table.

"I wanted a challenge," she said to herself, sighing. But she didn't pick up the screen. She probably should've started studying for this new assignment — after all, the males were arriving tomorrow from the clan lands — but something held her back. She kept replaying the conversation with Nekka in her mind.

The males were dangerous. Everyone knew that. But if the demographic data was confirmed, if they were struggling to get women to mate with the males, then something needed to be done. Neen liked the idea that she could help, that by doing this work she could make things better for the women who were able to breed. Women like Ems.

Neen was just about to pick up her screen when another knock came on the door. Perhaps Nekka forgot something. She glanced around the room, but all she could see was her cold herbal tea on the sofa table. Neen went to answer the door.

"Herria!" Neen blurted out. "I mean, councilwoman Herria, welcome." Neen stepped aside to let the Sixter high council member enter.

Two council women in one night? Looks like the tea would stay where it was.

Herria Skalon swept into the room, all energy and enthusiasm. She smiled warmly at Neen and offered her hands for the customary greeting.

"Congratulations!" Herria said, taking Neen into a friendly embrace after they finished clasping hands. "I just heard about your new assignment. I'm excited to see what comes of this. You're more than ready for the challenge, that much is assured."

Herria made herself at home in Neen's sitting room. She glanced at the facedown screen and almost reached for it, but then she looked back at Neen.

"Nekka tried to keep things under wraps, just for security's sake, but I managed to needle it out of one of her clerks. Tell me, tell me, what do you think of this whole program? Any possibility of success?" Herria's charm was contagious, like children's laughter on a warm summer day. Her broad, blinding smile and easy nature were designed to put people at ease. Despite her rather shocking head of ice-blond hair, closely cropped, she exuded both strength and compassion. She patted the sofa for Neen to sit down.

"Well," Neen began, unsure how to proceed. Even though Herria seemed enthusiastic, Neen thought she noticed a slight twitch in the other woman's lips. "I haven't gone over the dossier yet, but I do think it makes sense to screen the males more thoroughly before their competition and eventual breeding."

"Indeed it does!" added Herria, widening her smile more.

The slight twitch was still there. A crack in the facade.

"So," Neen continued, "I should probably get to work." She picked up her networked screen.

"But I wonder," Herria continued, her face looking overly thoughtful, like someone who had just entertained a disturbing idea. "If the beta program works out, then we'll most likely increase the program, assign more women to profile these males, invest more resources into it. More and more women sitting in rooms with males and talking to them. Not for breeding, just for... talking. Seems an awful effort, don't you think?"

"I suppose, but if it makes women feel safer with their breeding partners, then isn't that a good thing?"

"Only if you think we can continue forever with this breeding nonsense." Herria said it with a twinkle in her eye, as if she were sharing a private joke with Neen.

Neen could feel the pull of Herria's personality. There was something intriguing about the way the councilwoman made her feel as if she were part of an inner circle, part of something intimate.

"We'd all be better off without these troublesome males!" Herria added, shaking her head but ruefully smiling.

"Yes, breeding does present its challenges," Neen tried to agree. She wasn't sure what Herria was implying. "It would be a benefit if we could figure out how to keep developing our genetic enhancements without all the fuss of intercourse with the males."

"Not just intercourse, my dear," Herria replied. "It's the males themselves, don't you think? Storing them, guarding them, raising them in Young Dome. We need to feed them, clothe them, keep them alive, and for what? So they can breed with us and advance the female race. Hardly an efficient system."

Neen couldn't argue about the inefficiencies, but what was Herria suggesting? The competitions and breeding sessions were a hassle, it was true, but even if they could figure out how to keep their genetic enhancements without old-fashioned breeding, they would still need to do something with the males, they couldn't just.

Could they?

Neen felt her skin prickle. No, she thought, that's impossible. That's not what councilwoman Herria means. It couldn't be.

"Would you mind keeping me abreast of how your assignment goes?" Herria said, leaning in toward Neen in that conspiratorial, ingratiating way of hers. She put her hand on Neen's and squeezed it with affection. "I'm just concerned all that contact with the males might have a negative effect on your well-being," Herria continued. "I don't want to see anything happen to you."

Neen tried to smile, but Herria's words from earlier still rang in her head. *It's the males themselves, don't you think? We'd all be better off without them.*

"Yes, definitely," Neen said suddenly, trying to appear calm. "I'll let you know how it goes."

"Keep me informed," Herria said again.

"Yes. I will."

"Good."

Herria was gone almost as quickly as she came. That was typical of the Sixter high councilwoman, Neen thought. Everyone knew Herria was a ball of energy, a dynamic presence. Such a contrast to tight-lipped, buttoned-up, deliberative Nekka.

Neen slumped on her couch feeling exhausted. She looked at the darkness falling over High City like a blanket. She wasn't sure why she'd just lied to the councilwoman, but she had.

When it came to her new assignment with the males, Neen had no intention of telling Herria anything.

Chapter 2

Neen

"You're going to need this."

The guard handed Neen the pistol. It felt quite heavy in her hand. Thanks to her ballistics studies at the Institute, Neen could probably take it apart and reassemble it in only a few minutes, but still, she had never actually held a firearm before. Triversers were meant only to study these things, not use them. That was for Benglions.

The Benglion guard looked Neen up and down. "Still don't see the point," she said. The guard towered over Neen, looking down at her skeptically. She sighed. "But the high council makes these decisions, not me."

Neen didn't put the pistol into its holster right away. "Couldn't one of them just take this from me?" she asked the guard.

The Benglion laughed. "I thought you Triversers were supposed to know everything!"

"Well—"

"The security chip in their arms," the guard continued, cutting Neen off. "If they even brush their grubby fingers across that thing, the chip will release a toxin into their bloodstream." The guard smiled, seeming to relish the thought. "Instant death."

Neen was kicking herself for forgetting this. Of course, she had studied the chip implants—every male had them so they could be tracked and monitored—but she had forgotten the detail about contact with firearms and the toxin.

"Right, yes," Neen said, brushing off her forgetfulness with her best nonchalant face. "Let's go." She put the pistol in the holster around her waist and pushed a strand of her honey-brown hair behind her ear. She felt particularly small next to the Benglion guard, though she wasn't short by Triverser standards.

The guard led her out of the security room into a tunnel-like hallway. There was no obvious source of illumination, but the hallway glowed with a faint bluish light. The right wall was made of steel, but the left wall was all mirrored glass.

Neen stared at her reflection as she followed the guard. It was strange to see herself in the mirror when she knew that from the outside, women walking around the Dome could see through the glass and look right at her. Neen started to understand what it was like for the males. Their every movement could be seen by the eyes of the world, but all they ever saw was their own dim reflection.

Neen stopped looking at the mirror. She didn't want to see herself anymore.

"Use your tablet to communicate with us. We've got you hooked up to our network," the guard instructed. "If you need anything, just send us a message." The guard's voice sounded both bored and annoyed.

"Remember," she continued, "don't make any physical contact with the males. Better to use the pistol too early than too late, if you feel threatened. Males are not allowed to leave until you say so. No one will be monitoring your sessions—" the guard stopped and shook her head, "—damned if I know why. But I'd advise you to record the sessions on your end, just so we have a record in case of an incident."

"Do you think there will be an incident?" Neen asked. As they trudged down the endless hallway, she started to imagine several worst-case scenarios, each one more horrible than the next. The guard's annoyance didn't help.

The guard didn't turn around; she just kept leading Neen down the hall. "Who's to say."

The list of dos and don'ts continued until they reached a secured metal doorway on the right. Next to the door was a dark glass touch panel.

The guard reached out her hand and pressed her palm into the panel. The glass glowed red, illuminating the outline of the guard's hand, then Neen heard a soft ping and the glass glowed green.

"In you go," the guard said as the steel door slide open. "And remember, they've been off their meds for the competition training. Could see some aggression. Benglions especially." The guard cast a leering smile at Neen and then practically shoved her into the room. "Have fun!"

The door slid closed as soon as Neen was inside. The room was sparse, just two steel chairs and a perfunctory table. There was a pitcher of water and one glass on the table.

"Comfy," Neen said, wondering if her back was going to give out after sitting in that chair for eight hours a day. Maybe I can get them to bring in some couches, she wondered. Or some pillows at least.

Neen knew it was pointless. They would never approve any comforts for the males, and even if she requested them for herself, they'd make some excuses about budgeting. Neen could tell from Nekka's dossier and the memos she had gotten from the high council offices that this assignment was not exactly a popular one within the government.

She sat down in the cold chair and started reviewing her notes. She flicked her tablet screen with her forefinger, scrolling through the questions Nekka had prepared for her. They were all so straightforward. Neen worried these questions wouldn't elicit any answers worth hearing. If she was to get a sense of the males' states of mind, of their feelings and desires, she'd have to ask questions that went a lot deeper than these.

She'd tried to think of things to ask last night, but no matter how hard she'd tried, nothing really came to her. Neen seriously wondered why Nekka had selected her for this assignment. She wasn't a people person. She wasn't an Evox or a Sixter. What did she know about probing the minds of a bunch of males?

With a sigh of resignation, she pressed the button on her screen to signal for the first male to be brought in.

Within a few seconds, the secured door slid open and a different guard from before led in a Benglion male.

He was a hulking mass of muscles. Even taller than the female guard who led him in, the male looked like a colossus. His long blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail; his face was chiseled rock.

But what made Neen's eyes widen was the size of his biceps. They were huge. Like granite boulders the size of her head.

The guard sat the male down in the chair opposite Neen and the table. With a smirk, she patted the giant on his shoulder and then left without a word.

Neen gulped. "You should have no problem winning your cohort," she blurted out. It was all she could think to say. Neen silently cursed herself for being so blunt.

The male sat quietly in the chair. He looked straight at her, his eyes never leaving her face. His muscles looked like stone, and his face did too.

Neen was surprised. Males were required to respond whenever a woman spoke to them, but this one just sat there staring at her. Did she detect the hint of a smirk on his lips?

Neen made a note on her screen. She looked over the questions again. No, she thought, these won't do.

She decided to go off-script. "Listen," she started, "I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but nothing will happen. I promise. I'm just here to learn more about you."

The male's eyes smoldered with loathing. There was no mistaking it now. Even though he didn't move or react, Neen could feel this male's antipathy toward her.

Neen looked at her notes again. "Lekko, right? Okay, let's try this. I have the power to reject you right now from the trials, is that what you want? You won't even get a chance to compete, let alone breed."

The male, Lekko, made a harsh grunt in the back of his throat. But he was stone-faced.

"You don't want to breed?" The idea surprised Neen. She had been taught that almost all males, no matter the clan, had the overwhelming desire to copulate with women. Those that didn't were usually classified Type IV and rejected from the breeding pool. She made another note on her screen.

As she made note of things, Neen noticed Lekko's eyes watching her. She detected a slight relaxing of his facial muscles.

"My body is made for breeding," he said at last, his tone gently mocking her but compliant enough to avoid reprimand. "It serves the sisterhood of EVE." He put emphasis on that last word, and Neen thought he made it sound like a curse.

Neen nodded. He was no fool. "Clever," she said. "You know what you're doing."

At least he's not just a block of stone, she thought. She could tell this male had antagonism toward the society he was forced to participate in, but he also knew how to survive.

"You could probably snap my neck right now and take this pistol." Neen indicated the firearm at her side. "You wouldn't get far, perhaps, but you'd have the satisfaction of doing it. Is that what you want?"

Now Lekko reacted. He laughed. "I'm no fool, woman. I'd be dead the second my hand touched the grip."

Neen reviewed her notes. "You've bred before." It wasn't a question.

Lekko gave the slightest of nods.

"No problems?"

"You said it already. I know what I'm doing."

"Your body is made for breeding?" Neen tried to give back a mocking smile.

Lekko just shrugged a shoulder. He was done glowering at her. His expression went blank again.

Neen could tell that Lekko wasn't happy with his lot in life, but he wasn't about to risk it either. She tapped a few things on her screen, then slid her finger across the green approval button.

Was she doing the right thing? Was approving Lekko a good idea?

When they had finished, a guard came in to take Lekko away. As he stood up to leave, he bowed to Neen in mock formality.

"Thank you for letting me serve the sisterhood of EVE," he said, grinning. There was no mirth in it.

The guard pulled him up and shoved him out the door.

Neen sat alone with her thoughts. Maybe it wasn't wise to pass Lekko. Perhaps the fertile women would be put off by his arrogant demeanor. He was certainly physically impressive, though.

Neen wondered if she would allow him to mate with her. The question was one she had never seriously considered before. She thought about Lekko's arms wrapped around her in an embrace.

No, she thought, not him. But other women might find that attractive. There was something to be said for his stature, his strength, the way he seemed to command the room even without speaking. Some women might enjoy having his powerful frame at their disposal. He had bred before, after all.

Neen decided to stick with passing him. For now. She could always revisit her judgments later tonight, after some thought.

She pressed the signal on her screen to let another male in.

The male who walked in this time was different from Lekko. Leaner, but still muscular. His brown hair fell across his forehead, a bit sticky with sweat. He smelled musky, but Neen was surprised to find the scent was not unpleasant. Like oiled leather and sandalwood.

Neen could feel her face getting flushed. She wasn't sure why she was having this reaction. Embarrassed, she looked down quickly at her screen. *Tem MI-1338, age twenty-five, breeding class II.*

"Tem," she said not looking up. "This is your first trial, yes?"

"Yes."

I'm being ridiculous, she thought. He's just a male.

Taking a deep breath, Neen gathered her composure and looked up at him.

Tem hadn't been looking at her, but when she lifted her head, he glanced her way and gave the briefest of smiles. Neen felt her face redden again.

"I guess we've both just graduated," she said, trying to sound jocular, hoping to hide her flushed expression

"Graduated?" Tem looked confused.

Neen squirmed. Her attempt at humor had fallen flat. "I just meant— Anyway. How do you feel about the trials? Ready? Excited? Nervous?"

Tem's face flinched a bit when she said "nervous."

"It's okay to be nervous," Neen continued. "The trials aren't easy."

"I'll be fine. My body is made for breeding."

"Sure, but I wasn't talking about the breeding." Neen tried to smile. Lighten the mood. It wasn't going to be easy getting into these males' heads if all they did was repeat the government's slogans. "The trials. The competition. I've seen that Lekko guy! Winning won't be easy."

"I just have to pass my trial." Tem wasn't looking at her. His head hung down.

Neen felt the sudden urge to reach out and brush the sweaty hair from his forehead.

Stop it, she told herself. Focus.

"Yes, that's true," she continued. "But don't you want to win your cohort? You'll get to breed if you do."

Tem didn't react. "Yeah. Sure."

Tem was holding something back. Neen could tell. She hadn't expected the males to be so moody, so sullen. She thought they all lived for these competitions, for a chance to prove themselves. Males were competitive by nature, after all.

"Were you working out? Before I called you down for this—" Neen wasn't sure what to call these sessions. Interviews? Interrogations sounded wrong. But — Neen realized with a pang of guilt — that's exactly what they were.

"I was working out. Yes," Tem answered.

"What do you like doing when you work out?"

Tem's eyes shifted toward Neen. She could tell he was trying to figure out the best way to answer.

"I'm a fast runner," he said at last.

"That's great. What about combat? I know they train you in different styles, do you have a favorite?"

Tem's eyes cast downward again. "No."

Neen waited for more, for some kind of additional comment, but Tem was silent. He shifted in his chair.

"Okay... well..." Neen was getting frustrated. At least Lekko was arrogant, somewhat mocking. She could tell what he was thinking. But this Tem was just too closed off. She didn't care if his hair flopped down over his forehead in an appealing way, she was going to fail her assignment if he kept blocking her out.

"So running, you're good. What about swimming? Climbing? There's a part of the trials where you have to scale a wall and rush into a burning building. I've seen bigger Benglions than you freak out when they see those flames. Think you can handle that?"

"I hope so." Tem was now staring at the wall to his right.

"Right. So no favorite fighting style. What's your record in training? How many fights have you won?"

Tem's eyes flashed. He scowled at her. "Doesn't your screen have all that information? Why ask me?"

Neen straightened. That was something, she thought. Some anger at least. "I was just making conversation," she said.

"Is that what you call it?" There was no mistaking the bite in his voice.

Neen glanced at her screen. "To be honest, there's no record of your training fights in my data."

Tem squirmed again, rubbing the back of his neck.

"It's almost like you haven't done any training fights," Neen continued, almost to herself. "That can't be right." She scrolled through Tem's data again.

"It's not wrong," he said at last. "I—" He stopped himself.

"You've never had a training fight?" Neen was incredulous. This couldn't be possible. He's Benglion. They're bred to be like warriors.

"I've— I've never fought," Tem replied.

Neen could see his body almost shrink down. Ashamed.

"All my bouts were forfeits."

Neen was shocked. This male was going to fail his trial if he couldn't fight. "But how?" she asked. "You're Benglion!"

"Yes, I suppose I am. Bred for superior strength. Bred to take risks. But when I have to fight—"

Tem's eyes started to get red-rimmed. He bit his lip and looked away.

"Tem," Neen said softly, "I'm here to listen. You can tell me what's bothering you."

As she sat watching him, Neen wondered if she should be taking notes on his emotional state. He was clearly upset. What if he wasn't stable enough for the trials? Or what if he made it through but couldn't handle breeding?

Tem's voice shook her out of her thoughts.

"I can see their faces," he said in a low voice. "Nothing behind the eyes."

Tem wasn't looking at Neen or anything in the room. He was lost in a memory.

"They enjoy pain," he continued. "Giving it. Watching it in others."

"The other males?" Neen wasn't sure what he was talking about.

Tem shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "The matrons. They let it happen. They watched. They didn't stop it." He covered his face with his hands.

"Stop what?" The words seemed to catch in Neen's throat.

Slowly, Tem slid his hands down his face and looked up at her. He stared right into her eyes. The anguish was still there on his face, but something else appeared too.

Neen tried to find the word to describe it, but her mind grasped at straws. That look... it was so...

Human.

"I know you've probably read all about Young Dome," Tem began, his voice shaking a bit. "You've probably studied its history — your history as a woman and mine as a male — you've done a lot of studying in your Triverser universities, and I'm sure you think you know what it's like, but I can promise you, you have no idea. The matrons, they didn't care about us. They wanted us to fight, to tear each other apart, to torment the weak ones and hurt the vulnerable ones. And they stood there and watched. And when they didn't watch, they whipped. They beat. There was nothing there of warmth or kindness. Only the rules we had to follow and a reminder that we were males, good for nothing but competition and breeding!"

Tem was breathing heavily now. Finally, his eyes flashed that anger again, but it wasn't the arrogance of Lekko or the aggression Neen had been taught to expect from the males. It was a kind of righteousness, a fury at the suffering he'd had to endure.

Neen knew the males in Young Dome were educated and raised by women in preparation for their integration into the adult domes in the clan lands. The Young Dome wasn't really a home for these young males, just a place to raise them until they were useful.

But they were males. They didn't need a home or affection or anything like that. Everyone knew that males only needed their basic physical needs met. They weren't as emotionally sophisticated as women.

Neen watched Tem's expression, the mix of resentment, pain, and sorrow that crossed his face. She was still trying to process what he'd told her of his childhood.

"So you're telling me that the Young Dome matrons let you and the other young males hurt each other?" Neen asked. "And they didn't stop it?"

Tem scoffed.

"Listen, I'm trying to understand you," Neen continued. "What exactly happened in Young Dome?"

"I was skinny. Weak. Smarter than the other Benglions. Little males don't like it when someone's different."

"So they picked on you?"

Tem shook his head. "They pulverized me. Day after day after day. And after a while, I just kept my head down. Let them beat me, didn't fight back. I had to survive. And your kind—" his eyes flashed — "Your kind just watched. Never helped."

Neen was appalled. How could the matrons have let this happen? Not tried to stop it? No child deserved to be beaten day after day, not even a male child.

"Whenever I'm in the fighting ring now..." Tem's voice trailed off. Neen saw his eyes start to glisten, filling with tears. His face turned red with shame.

"I'm sorry." It was all Neen could say. What else could she do? Feeling powerless, she reached out for the pitcher of water and poured a glass.

"Here," she said. Standing up, she walked to the other side of the table and handed the glass to Tem.

At first, he didn't react. He was trying so hard to hold everything in. Then, slowly, he reached up with his hand.

Neen was close to him, much closer than she had ever been to any male before. His smell was stronger here, the sweetness of his perspiration and the faint scent of sandalwood...

For a split second, their fingers touched. Tem took the glass and drank a long, deep sip. He didn't hand the glass back.

Neen stood there watching him, suddenly feeling foolish.

"So yeah," Tem said at last. He stood up without Neen's permission and put the glass back on the table. He faced her. "This is my first competition. And I'll probably fail. Thanks for asking."

* * *

When Neen left the Arena Dome, she was exhausted. Who knew sitting all day could make her muscles ache?

But it wasn't the sitting. It was the tension of having to wrestle something other than canned responses from the males. Of struggling to get them to open up. To speak the truth.

Most of the males were unremarkable. They were ready for the trials, ready to win and get on with breeding.

Some had to be dismissed right away. They immediately gave Neen a bad feeling. Some seemed too eager for breeding. Some were almost somnolent, like sleepwalkers amid a dream. These Neen rejected too; they hid too much behind a mask. No discernable personality. Not worth the risk.

But then there were others — like that Tem — who were not at all what Neen was expecting. Tem had been so... vulnerable. Even though he'd tried to hide it, Neen had seen the tears forming in his eyes. What he'd told her about Young Dome was disturbing, to say the least. She couldn't stop thinking about it.

She also couldn't stop thinking about that touch. It had been so brief — barely anything — and yet why did she still have butterflies in her stomach even now, hours later, when she thought of it? His fingers had been smoother, smoother than she expected. That touch was like a little jolt of electricity.

Neen quickened her pace through the plaza. This district of High City had a beautiful greenway where small groups of children ran and laughed together at their games. Tanned and flushed faces ran past Neen; she watched as the wind rushed through their pigtailed hair.

Neen realized she probably should have known that growing up in Young Dome wouldn't have been very comforting. She watched the young girls play tag.

Nearby, a couple of caregivers were watching the children at their games. The two women leaned in close to each other and shared an intimate conversation as they kept their eyes on the laughing girls.

These women — the caregivers — worked at raising the female children of EVE. Neen remembered her own caregivers, those warm and loving women who hugged her freely and without condition, who taught her how to be patient and kind and look at the sunset with awe every evening. She and Ems had loved their caregivers, had felt so safe and valued under their protection.

Even now, Neen could see those memories in her mind's eye, memories of running through the parks of Sunset City with Ems, looking for grasshoppers and trying to catch them, of listening to their caregivers teach them how to identify the difference between grasshoppers and crickets, between oak leaves and maple, between planets and stars.

The two caregivers stood up. Neen was shaken out of her revelry. She heard the caregivers shouting at the laughing girls and calling them in.

The children came scampering over, gathering around these older women, bobbing up and down with excitement to tell them how the game had transpired.

Neen couldn't help but smile. She remembered those feelings of unbridled merriment, warmth, laughter, and joy. She and Ems had been so happy then. Such simpler days.

With a jolt, Neen realized that none of the males had ever felt that feeling. None of them had ever known the affection of a caregiver.

Before this assignment, Neen wouldn't have cared. She had always figured the males had what they needed in Young Dome: food, clothing, shelter. Males were different. Affection was unnecessary for them.

But that wasn't true. Neen had seen for herself with Tem. He was hurt. Suffering. Scared.

Neen turned to look back at the Arena Dome. It wasn't too far away. She could see through the one-way glass, watching the Benglion males as they ran around the track, lifted weights, sparred in the combat circles.

She couldn't see Tem, but she wondered what he was doing. She wondered suddenly if he'd ever — even just once in his life — had someone care about him.

Neen sucked in her breath sharply. She realized she already knew the answer. Tem did have someone who cared about him.

Her.

