

Poison - Reaper Arc

Injured and poisoned during a hunt, Ruby is rescued by a stranger and given a mysterious stone with the promise it will give her all the strength and power she needs...

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The Hunt

The rain fell steadily, wind threatening to blow the cold droplets onto the tiny campfire. Ruby coughed and groaned in pain, fumbling in her pack for a vial that kept escaping her clumsy fingers. Finally, she grasped it and pulled out the stopper, choking and spluttering on the bitter red liquid. Slowly, her vision cleared and the stiffness in her limbs dissipated. Sighing in some relief, she laid down beside her tiny fire.

The hunts had been getting harder. Maybe there were more vicious creatures in the world lately, maybe there were more newbie hunters to snap up the easy marks before the veterans could reach them. Not only that... she needed to prove herself, time and again. There was no overseer testing her or checking her skills and strength. No evidence other than the bounty she brought home. There was only the little voice of doubt in the back of her head. The only thing that silenced it was another kill, bigger than the last. Proof that she could face any threat, defeat any foe and, therefore, protect those she held dear. She had proved it a hundred times, but no matter what, the voice always came back.

She had been clumsy this time. So overconfident in dealing the killing blow that she hadn't avoided the morbol's last exhalations of vile fumes. Even as her axe sank into the beast for the final time, the poison had infected her, leaving her with barely the strength to crawl to the tumbledown wall and lean-to she had constructed earlier. Purged of the poison, she could now turn her attentions to her physical injuries. Broken ribs, clearly, given the pain that wracked her whenever she coughed. The left side of her face was throbbing, vision on that side blurring. She could taste blood, and see it on her arms and legs, though thankfully no deep wounds. The worst could be dealt with, with the basic healing spell she had learned as a child. Just as soon as she had rested for a few minutes...

You're not strong enough to protect her. Look at you. Battered and broken. So what if you killed one foe? There could be another right at your back and you're already too weak to deal with it. You're not strong enough to protect her and when you fail to protect her they will make you watch as they take her apart piece by piece.

Respite from the whispers in the Xaela's head rarely lasted long when she had been wounded, though it seemed especially vicious this time. A dark, mocking voice that burst into her mind with a shock of pain, like an invasion, flicking through her memories like a book and tugging on the strings of her insecurities.

Blearily, Ruby woke and rolled onto her side just in time to empty the contents of her stomach onto the ground beside her. Her head pounded, vision swimming as she tried to sit up and failed. A tiny thought broke into her mind as her chest tightened - the antidote wore off before the poison. Maybe it wasn't made for Au Ra, or the wrong dose... gasping for air as her muscles convulsed and seized, she plunged back into darkness.

You call yourself a Xaela warrior? You're pathetic. You left the Steppe and you lost it all. Even your name! 'Ruby', that's not a warrior's name. Your name was lost with all those who died without you

there. Your name died with... him.

"Hello, hello? Can you hear me? What's your name?"

Ruby let out no more than a small groan as she felt herself lifted by large arms. It felt like her eyes were open, but she could see nothing. The gentle swaying motion of being carried, and then nothing once more.

The Gift

Ruby's nose twitched, the sickly sweet stench of antiseptic the first thing to reach her senses as she slowly came to. Thin sheets against her skin; the realisation that she had been stripped of her clothing and put into bed. The odd realisation that whoever had undressed her had decided they needed to see to her modesty - she was wearing small clothes she hadn't been before, and her chest wrap remained in place. Sounds reached her ears, the chatter and fuss of a busy ward. Finally, she opened her eyes.

"Ah, you are awake little Xaela."

Ruby started and turned her head towards the voice. A white-furred Hrothgar sat beside her bed, cleaning her axe. He grinned widely at her, showing long fangs.

"Don't worry. I recovered proof of your kill to deliver back to the clan. You beat me to the beast, though it seems you were lucky I wasn't too far behind."

Ruby placed her hands at her side, slowly trying to push herself up to sitting. Her muscles felt like jelly, drained of all their strength, and her chest ached as she breathed in. Her brow furrowed into a scowl, frustrated at her body's weakness and her own stupidity for letting it happen.

"It... seems so." She coughed out, discovering a raw, painful throat. Looking around, she found her bed surrounded by off white curtains, and her clothing piled neatly on the table beside the bed, evidently washed and pressed. "How long was I out?"

"A day or so. I carried you back to Idyllshire and delivered you to the infirmary, then went to recover your things." The Hrothgar examined the detailing on the axe's blade; satisfied it had been cleansed totally of morbol crud, he placed it carefully against the wall. "By the time I was back they already had you tucked up in here to recover. Seems your antidotes were poorly made, nowhere near as effective as they needed to be."

Ruby coughed and cursed the trader who has sold the concoctions to her.

"Thank you, for your kindness. You've been to such lengths for a stranger, one who got in first on your hunt as well." She spoke quietly, knowing she needed to be polite to her rescuer even though her Xaela blood boiled at the situation.

"Ah, never mind that. It's all part of the clan hunts. I'm sure I will beat you on another one." He laughed a bellowing laugh and patted her shoulder. "I have seen you on the hunts before, particularly the ones that require a group effort. You are always in the vanguard, if not the very lead." Though Ruby wasn't familiar with many Hrothgar and their expressions, she could detect the note of concern in his voice and the frown on his face. "You are small, but strong."

"I'm not small. Not for a female." The Xaela protested.

"Not for a female of your race, no. But in a crowd of hunters, Hrothgar, Roegaydn, Hyur, even your

males, you are small." He sighed and shook his head. "You are trying to match up to those others. I admire your will. But I fear you need to admit your limits and know when to ask for help."

Ruby's hands clenched the thin sheet covering her legs.

"You don't understand, I... there can be no limit." she whispered. "I can't fail."

The Hrothgar watched her silently for a minute.

"Then I have a gift for you." He reached into a pocket and drew out a pale stone, placing it atop the pile of her possessions. "I sense this could suit you well. You will still have to ask for help - but this stone should give it, as one like it has given it to me. You must be strong, in mind as well as body, and do not give in." He got to his feet and nodded to her. "Farewell, Xaela. I will see you on the hunt."

Ruby had barely opened her mouth to question, but he had lifted a long-bladed weapon and strapped it to his back, walking away with a swish of the curtains. She lowered her feet to the floor, stumbling and pulling a curtain from its railing with a crash as she tried to follow. A Hyur nurse bustled across the room and bullied her back into bed with more medicine and a cold cloth for her hot head despite her protests. Muttering Xaela curses under her breath, Ruby pulled the blanket over her head as she laid down to hide the tears of humiliation. How could she have been so weak and careless as to allow this to happen? She had seen the pity in the Hrothgar's eyes, and she despised it.

On the side table, the pale stone gleamed.

The Dream

Ruby tossed and turned in her sleep, cringing in pain as the medicine continued to flush the poisons from her body. The nurse came to her side regularly, gently patting away the sweat on her fevered forehead, while the Xaela's mind overflowed with dreaming.

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She took in a deep breath and let out a sigh with a smile. The scent of grass and canvas filled her nose, underpinned by the sour smells of goat and horse. The smells of the Steppe. Of home. The sun was swiftly setting, deep orange light cast across the green plains and dancing on the surface of the lake before her. In the waters she could see the reflection of the full moon rising, just as it had on the night of her coming of age. Turning, she expected to see a busy campsite, family and friends cooking over the central fire and brushing down the horses after the day's journey.

The wind whipped through a deserted scene. Tent flaps snapped back and forth, revealing dark and empty interiors. A thin column of smoke rose from an extinguished fire, ashes scattering. Ruby shivered in the sudden cold that followed the sunset. She was alone.

Is this what it had looked like? Her tribe's encampment on that fateful day when they had been wiped out. Her toes curled in the grass as she walked through the camp, the silence filling her and weighing her down. If only she had been here, she thought as she knelt by the burned out fire, the last of the embers dying. It wouldn't have made a difference. What would one more warrior have been against a force strong enough to massacre an entire tribe? Her blood would have been staining the grass along with the others. Tears dropped from her cheeks into the cold ashes. At least she wouldn't have been left in the world alone, to carry the guilt of living when all of her kin had died. She gasped in a breath of the cold air, tears coming thick and fast as she sobbed. The temperature was falling rapidly and the chill seared her lungs. She was one of her tribe's warriors! It had been her duty to protect them, fight for them and die with them, not go chasing her childish dreams halfway around the world. Another frosty breath bit deep into her, and she let out a scream that tore her throat and shook the ground around her.

Suddenly, she was warm. Hot even, her skin prickled as if she had stood too long in the sun. Her horns caught the sound of footsteps behind her and she turned swiftly, rising to her feet. A male Xaela approached her, towering over her as they all did. His face was framed by thick horns that swept down to his chin and scales that cascaded down the sides of his neck and over a broad, tanned chest. Bright blue hair was drawn back into a short ponytail and violet eyes gazed down at her.

"Enkhutuya, my love."

"Maral..." Ruby choked out, taking a step forward, legs shaky as she approached her lost mate. "Is it really you?" She reached out one hand, fingertips landing on his chest and feeling the searing heat within. "Did you live?"

The male Xaela enclosed her hand entirely with one of his own.

"No, Enkhutuya, I did not." The voice he spoke with carried no tone of anger. "I died defending them, and my last thoughts were of you."

"I'm sorry, Maral... I should have been there!" Ruby's mismatched eyes swam with tears again. "I should never have left!"

"Enkhutuya, none of us blame you. I am proud of you for following your heart, even though I missed you every day." He raised a hand and caressed her cheek, fingers stroking the length of her horn. Ruby melted under his touch.

"You don't know how good it is to hear that..." She smiled, closing her eyes.

"Now listen, my love." Maral pulled her into his chest, enclosing her in his embrace. "Nhaama has granted me a return from the great beyond, to join you once again." Ruby frowned and looked up at him.

"What do you mean?"

"The Dusk Mother in her wisdom has chosen to bless you as the last of our tribe. Accept the blessing, my love, and I will be with you once again. And more than that, I will bring you power from the beyond, so that you can protect those you love. You will never have to feel the pain of that loss again." Maral murmured against one of her horns. Ruby's breath caught in her throat.

"You're not angry at me, for having new loves?"

Maral threw his head back and laughed.

"Am I angry at you for living your life? Of course not. I only wish to be with you as well. I will help you protect them." Placing a hand under her chin, he tilted her face up, her white-and-blue gaze meeting his violet eyes. For the first time, she noticed flecks of glowing red in the purple orbs. Had they always been there?

"Accept me, my love. I will give you all the power you need, to protect them forever."

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Stars gleamed down from the sky above. Ruby laid back on her favourite rock just beyond the gates of Idyllshire, gazing up into the clear night sky. Two days on, her body had flushed the last of the poison - now it was just a matter of resting and regaining the aether to make the journey home. Her eyes scanned the heavens for the comforting sight of the moon, but the silver orb was invisible tonight.

Maral had visited her in her dreams every night, and once she had seen his shade on waking. It sounded so improbable and yet... The Dusk Mother often returned Xaela to the world of the living, with new lives, was Ruby going to doubt that she could return them in spirit form? As a guide and source of strength to one of her daughters who had suffered? The guilt burned deep inside her, the guilt of leaving them all, the guilt of burying Maral and the memory of his love deep within her heart, and the guilt for never having loved him back in the same way. She could relieve that guilt, and ensure she had the power to protect Kira and support Ashlyn always. She turned the pale stone over and over in her fingers.

After a moment's hesitation, she focused on the stone and the shade appeared once more. A grey cloaked figure, all features hidden, lit by glistening particles of purple and red. *Like his eyes*, Ruby thought. The shade didn't look like Maral, true, but then how much of a person's form could be

projected from the beyond? She wasn't sure, but this shadowy shape seemed a reasonable guess. The hooded head inclined towards her, a motion she read as affectionate.

Enkhutuya... A reassuring voice whispered to her.

"Maral." Ruby peered up, but she could make out no face beneath the hood. "I've decided."

As that Hrothgar had told her - she needed to ask for help.

"Please, help me to protect them."

As you wish. The contract is made. Maral's shade vanished and there was a second of nothingness. Ruby gasped as her heart suddenly pounded, veins of black, purple and red flashing over her pale skin momentarily. The weariness of the past few days left her and she clenched her fists, relishing the sensation of strength returned to her muscles. Elated, she got to her feet, clasping the stone and touching her wedding band.

"I'll keep you safe. Always."

The Price

A raised eyebrow from the hunt master as proof of the Xaela woman's latest kill thudded onto the desk before him.

"Did you slay this yourself?" he asked, recognising a behemoth horn.

"Of course!" Ruby said with a cocky smile.

Of course she did!

The hunt master nodded, impressed, and paid out the sizeable bounty. Ruby pocketed it swiftly, thinking how pleased Kira would be with the income as she headed out onto the busy Emerald Avenue. Finally, the nagging fear that she was unable to protect Kira had faded into the background.

Don't forget to check the hunt board, Enkhutuya.

Her smile faded. Stopping in her tracks, she turned and looked up at the board, perusing it for a few minutes. Selecting a few, she pulled down the bills and set off again.

Those marks are pathetic! Find something better.

"There wasn't much of a choice. Besides, with the gil from the last one, I don't need to go after much more this week." She replied under her breath, sensing the shade of Maral close over her shoulder. He had been pushing her to hunt more and more since a few days after he came to her, and she had done as he asked, testing and practicing her new powers and skills. After a month of it though, mental fatigue was setting in fast and Maral kept demanding more and more of her, even through what little disturbed sleep she had got.

Who cares about gil? Get me more aether.

"Haven't you had enough for a while? I need to rest, I've barely seen Kira in days..."

Are you trying to back out of your side of the bargain?

"That's not it!" Ruby burst out, then glanced around quickly. There was a couple of odd looks thrown her way, so she upped her pace towards the aetheryte. "I can't keep this up forever, even with the strength you give me."

It's your own fault, you keep choosing these aether-poor targets. Beasts are no good, Enkhutuya, you should find a person...

Ruby cringed, every fibre of her being recoiling from the thought.

"Out of the question."

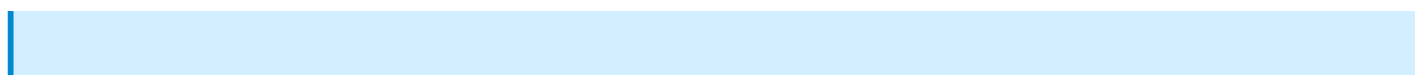
Just find some wastrel who deserves it.

"I said no!"

Then you had better get back to work instead of being lazy. You weren't like this back home, this place has made you so weak.

The hunt bills in her hand crumpled as she balled her fists, feeling tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

"I need to sleep at least." she mumbled, setting off for home.



Ruby unlocked the door of the apartment and slipped in quietly. It was late, and she wasn't sure if Kira would already be in bed. Emptying her pockets onto the nearby table, she removed her armoured overcoat and hung it up before discarding her boots and gauntlets. She glanced longingly at her chair in the corner, surrounded by her discarded books that had now not been touched in weeks.

Go to bed and get your sleep if you need it so much. Ruby cringed at the scolding, as if Maral had read her mind.

Across the apartment in the bedroom, Kira's ears twitched to the sound of clattering armour. She slowly sat up and looked to the entrance while rubbing her eyes

"Ruby?" Her eyes took a few seconds to adjust but upon seeing her wife the Miquo'te stood up, grabbed her gown and made her way over, wrapping her arms around the Xaela.

"I'm so glad you're back, I missed you!"

Ruby hesitated for a second then wrapped her arms tightly around Kira's shoulders, burying her nose in the Miquo's hair.

"I missed you too, princess." She spoke softly, trying to ignore the sense of Maral rolling his eyes and huffing.

"There's some leftovers from dinner if you want me to reheat them for you," Kira said, tightening her embrace.

Ugh, what's the point?

"I'd really like that. If you don't mind, of course." Ruby's stomach let out a timely growl.

The Miquo'te perked up, thinking this would probably be the first good meal Ruby had in a while. She walked over to the stove and motioned Ruby to take a seat. Lighting the stove, she placed an iron pot over the flame.

"So... You were gone a little longer than usual, is everything alright?" She looked sideways over at her wife, stirring the contents of the pot occasionally.

"Uh, yeah. Everything's fine." Ruby replied uneasily, taking a seat on the edge of the sofa. One of the braids in her hair had come loose, and she started to unweave it with her fingers. "Just had a few more marks than usual... I earned a lot though!" She gestured towards the purse of gil on the table.

"You're looking really tired hun, please take care of yourself... I know you want to pay your way but we're doing fine for gil, I'd rather have you safe." Kira turned off the stove and poured some stew into a bowl. She brought it round and placed it on the table in front of Ruby with two white rolls on the side and some seasoning over the stew in the shape of a smiley face. The Miquo looked into her eyes and brushed her face on the side opposite to her braids. . Sitting down next to her wife, she placed her head on Ruby's shoulder,

"It's nice that you're finally back though, I could do with your help around here".

Ruby picked up the bowl, smiling a little weakly as she saw the smiley face on top.

"I've got two mark bills left to finish up, in Thanalan. I've taken them off the board, so they're mine to do." she spoke quietly, lifting a spoon full of stew, the smell making her mouth water. "And then I'll be all yours, I promise."

Kira placed an affectionate hand on Ruby's leg.

"You promise? We should spend some time together after... maybe go travelling for a bit or see some old friends?"

Ruby nodded as she blew on the spoon.

"It would be good to see some friends. I've not even seen Ashlyn for a while." she said before putting the stew into her mouth, making a small 'mm' sound. "Have you been studying cooking as well as healing? This is so good."

Kira perked up at Ruby taking an interest in her recent work.

"Mhmm! Learning about conjury, life and the wood. Improving my knowledge about animals and botany all seems to go hand in hand." She began to play with her hair shyly. "In fact... I grew and foraged most of the ingredients. Do you like it?"

Ruby's eyes widened in surprise at how busy Kira had been, then saddened at the realisation she hadn't been around enough to notice.

"I-It's... I love it, it tastes amazing." she said, eating another spoonful. "This all seems like something you've got a real talent for. I'm so proud of you." Grabbing one of the bread rolls, she broke some off and dipped it into her bowl before eating it with a thoughtful look on her face.

"Oh! I know!" She put her bowl down and turned to Kira, holding her hands and smiling brightly. "Why don't we have a dinner party and show off your new skills?"

"Wh... what?! B.. b.. but... I've still got a long way to go, a dinner party? That, sounds like a lot of work." Kira's pale hand came up to her mouth. Her head tilted as she thought about the possibilities. "I mean, I might be able to if I prepare ahead of time and order one or two things in" she slowly mumbled to herself. Relaxing her posture, she turned back to Ruby and giggled, looking her in the eyes.

"Sure, why not. If it means we can spend more time together and I'm sure I can farm enough praise from this for a few weeks."

"It doesn't have to be anything complicated. And I'll help out as much as I can!" Ruby paused as she munched on her bread. "...though you probably wouldn't want me anywhere near the cooking part."

Kira snickered at Ruby's suggestion.

"Yeah, the best thing you can do to help me love is to stay out of the kitchen... or cook the meat."

The Xaela swiftly polished off the rest of her stew and placed the bowl down, leaning back on the sofa and pulling Kira to cuddle up to her.

What a waste of time... go to bed, get your damn sleep.

Ruby tightened her arms around Kira, burying her nose in her hair again and inhaling the scent of her shampoo. "This is what really matters." she whispered.

Kira tilted her head up to look at Ruby and gave the Xaela a kiss on her pale cheek. She had seen the expression on Ruby's face for a moment before she was pulled into her and heard Ruby's words.

"Is everything okay? You'd tell me if it's not, right? Please don't keep things from me..." she asked. Ruby slid her fingers into Kira's hair, scratching behind one of her ears.

"There's nothing for you to worry about." she said softly. "I'm just... still feeling the effects of that thing a month ago. I probably should have taken it easier."

You could take it easier, if you would only do what I tell you.

The Xaela closed her eyes tightly for a moment and kissed the top of Kira's head.

You're going to wish you didn't ignore me.

Kira nodded slightly, not fully believing her words but deciding to drop it.

"Oh, I was going to mention this later, but the time seems right now. This morning I put a down payment on a small house in the Lavender Beds."

"A house? Really? I'll definitely have to keep hunting to make the payments on that." Ruby laughed a little. "A whole house. It will be a nice step up from an apartment, that's for sure. And you can have a garden!"

"Hun, you know we don't need the Gil... we made more than enough in our previous jobs. Don't work yourself too hard" Kira said, wrapping her arms around her wife and hugging her tightly. "I've already started planning out some possibilities!" she added, pointing out a notepad on the table before returning to the hug, clutching Ruby's clothes tightly. "Why don't you climb into bed with me and we can snuggle there?"

"That sounds good." Ruby placed the notepad in Kira's lap and then scooped the Miquo up in her arms, carrying her towards the bed. She tossed her down on the soft mattress and then stretched before stripping off her clothes and unwinding her chest wrap as she always did for bed.

Just go to sleep, you don't have time to waste on her!

"We can snuggle and you can show me all your plans." Ruby slid beneath the covers and spread her arms open wide for Kira.

Ruby reread the hunt bill again - some kind of mutant drake, spotted in the vicinity of Little Ala Mhigo. This was the last one. One more, and then she would be going home. Nausea washed over her at the thought of the scolding Maral had given her for staying up talking all night with Kira. She had managed a couple of hours sleep in the end, before Maral had woken her and ordered her out of bed and back to work. She bit her lip to keep it from trembling, not knowing how she was going to deal with the shade in the coming days. But she could worry about that later, for now she had one more hunt to focus on. Climbing down from the rock she was perched upon, she headed towards the ruins where it was rumoured the beast was hiding.

Hearing a noise ahead, she picked up her pace, drawing her axe from her back. As she cleared a rocky outcrop, she spied another hunter clashing, and struggling, with the creature pictured on the bill. The man was struggling to put an arrow to his bow as the giant drake charged at him - a purple glow formed in Ruby's wake as she charged forwards, deflecting the beast from the struggling archer. Despite everything, she couldn't help but relish the power that surged through her veins from the shade, her lips splitting into a wide grin.

Ruby stepped forward and swinging her axe in a wide circle. The drake reeled back then snapped forward only to be met again by the black-and-gold axe again as momentum carried it and its wielder in a full circle, the blade biting into its scaly shoulder. The beast roared and twisted, thrashing its head towards the Xaela and snapping. A biting pain dulled the thrill of battle momentarily as the drake's jaws crushed the armour around one shoulder.

Kill the archer, Enkhutuya.

"What? No!" Ruby brushed off the comment and refocused on her foe, deflecting another slashing claw as it swept towards her.

Kill him and take his aether. I can heal you and you can carry on fighting. Doesn't this strength feel good?

"Yes, but..." She gasped as a sudden surge of power flooded through her. The pain in her shoulder faded as she gripped her axe tighter. On the edge of ecstasy, she let out a laugh as her axe swung again, biting another wound into the beast before her.

Kill him and you can have more.

The archer had scrambled a few yalms back, a fresh arrow to his bow. Ruby glanced at him momentarily, dismissing the thought and yanking her axe back to prepare another attack.

Kill the stupid archer, Enkhutuya!

Ruby shook her head; in the moment of distraction, the drake drew back its claws and swiped at her. Blocking with her axe at the last second, the blow still sent her flying backward, landing beside the archer. She spat out a mouthful of blood and got back to her feet dizzily as the archer loosed an arrow. The drake roared as it struck it in the eye.

"You've got this, go on." She heard the archer shout through her daze. Taking a deep breath, she readied her axe, watching the beast flail in pain. Picking her moment, she dashed in and swung her axe in a high arc. Blackish purple and red flashed through her veins, the power Maral gave her filling her muscles to drive the blade down into the drake's neck, severing the head. Her heart pounded, the dark aether still filling her body as she turned back towards the archer.

"You did it! Thank you, I was sure I was a goner!"

Kill him.

Ruby's feet carried her towards the man. She was unsure if she was moving them herself or if Maral was puppeteering her. Her hands tightened on her axe again.

KILL HIM.

"No..." she whispered, feeling Maral's power beginning to drain from her body, leaving her empty and cold. Her axe felt heavy in her hands. The archer was looking concerned now.

"Are you alright? That was quite a blow you took." He leaned forward, trying to catch her gaze.

KILL HIM!

She needed that power back, needed to be filled again with it. The shade could be satisfied, his voice would stop ringing and demanding in her head for a time, and she could have that glorious power. But... she couldn't bring herself to do it. He had helped her!

KILL HIM NOW YOU STUPID BITCH!

All she had to do was this one thing and he would be quiet and she would be rewarded. People would assume the drake killed him when they found the body. Would it matter so much? Tears streamed from her closed eyes, her arms raising her axe above her head.

KILL HIM AND FEED ME HIS AETHER!!!

The axe fell.

The clang of metal against rock, and then a sharp, stabbing pain in her side. Opening her eyes slowly, she saw the arrow, punched through her leather armour and embedded in her abdomen. As she raised her head, she could see the archer running from her as best he could, blood pouring from a leg wound.

"Dusk Mother... what have I done...?" she whispered. "Let him reach a healer..."

GO AFTER HIM. FINISH IT!!

"No." Ruby shook her head, taking the last of the power Maral had given her she raised her axe and swung it down into the rock. "No. No. No! No! NO!" Building to a screech, the blood stained blade pounding against the stone with every word until it jammed, blunted and twisted.

Useless. You useless, pathetic little bitch. How are you ever going to protect your precious little wife when you can't even kill one weak little man? Maybe you should just kill her yourself and get it over with.

In a rush, the power left her, her head swimming as she staggered back from the rock, yanking out the remains of her axe. Clutching her side, she summoned up what little remained in her and willed herself somewhere, anywhere safe.

Rescue

Ruby winced as she cleaned the arrow wound in her side, relieved that even though it didn't seem to be healing well it at least wasn't infected yet. She covered it with a new bandage as best she could, winding her chestwrap back into place to cover it up.

If you went out to hunt, I could give you the aether to heal that.

She shivered as the shade's voice filled her head, telling her the same thing it had told her over and over the past few days. Every time she had passed someone in the hallway, she felt a tiny surge of aether, like the shade was trying to bait her into attacking someone.

If you had finished the job you wouldn't be here now. You could be back at home, if only you did it right. He probably died anyway, with a wound like the one you gave him, but because you ran away instead of feeding me his aether, you killed him for NOTHING.

Feeling nauseous, the Xaela grabbed her few things with shaky hands and left the shared bathroom, hurrying down the hallway barefoot back to her rented room.

Boots thudded hard against the ground. The Rava wearing them made her way to the place Kira mentioned that Ruby might have been after Ashlyn confirmed the Xaela was not at her manor. Her heart was racing as the Viera made her way through the darkened streets.

You know, if she is the one, we need to deal with her...

I told you then, I'm telling you again. We left that part of us in the past.

And look at what's happening. We have people harming others, roaming free. You just don't want to do it because of your stupid family.

No, I don't want to do it because you've seen everything we've been through since. We would only cause more...

Pathetic. No you fucking psycho. The idiot rabbit is right this time.

Ashlyn grimaced as she turned the corner. Soon enough, she came to the wooden door. Taking a moment, the Viera took a deep breath and raised her hand up. She had no idea what she would do if Ruby was in fact here. She had no idea what she would honestly do if it was in fact Ruby who had done the near slaughter. Biting her lip, a white line forms from the pressure until the bunny finally rapped the door lightly. "Ruby? Dear? It's me..."

The Xaela's heart plummeted into the pit of her stomach at the sound of Ashlyn's voice. Idiot, she thought, of course one of them would find you. But for it to be Ashlyn... the shame fell on her like a lead weight. She couldn't lie to the Rava, she would have to admit everything, and then what?

Oh ho, so this is the other one? Lucky little Enkhutuya...

Biting her lip, she turned to the door. Maybe she could pretend she wasn't here... but that would only make things worse in the long run. Glancing around the room, there was only the futon on the floor and her discarded greaves, gauntlets and armoured coat piled in the opposite corner, hiding the remains of her axe. Taking a deep breath, she reached up to the latch with a shaky hand and opened it.

Ashlyn just waits with baited breath. Suddenly, the door opened. There she was, the mighty warrior with a soft spot for those the lizard held dear. There was no way that she was the one who

attacked the archer, right? She wouldn't just try to kill an innocent...

You're letting your feelings get in the way. You can smell it on her, she's guilty!

The Viera frowned slightly, there was no way. There couldn't be...

"Ruby, love. Kira called me worried sick about you. Is everything okay?" The Rava asks, trying her best to not bring the question that has been at the front of her mind to bear. The towering bunny leaned down and began to hug her lover.

Stop hugging her, kill her, you know we need to. You're delaying the inevitable.

Calm down you psycho. We know nothing. Even if Ruby is guilty it is up to the city-stat-

THE CITY-STATES ARE WEAK AND WILL DO NOTHING! WE ALL KNOW IT! THIS STAR NEEDS ASHLYN

I'm not killing Ruby period. Even if she's guilty...

Ruby opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She froze as Ashlyn's arms enveloped her, even her usually-expressive tail tense and unmoving. How could she even begin to answer?

Don't answer her then. You can kill her and take her aether. Heal yourself and feed me and you'll be stronger than ever.

Her breath caught at the shade's whispers inside her head, her heartbeat picking up as she felt the shade pouring its power into her veins.

"No! No no no no no..." She squirmed, pushing out of the Rava's arms and tumbling to the floor in her panic to get away.

Ashlyn furrowed her brow feeling Ruby push away. Her arms float there a moment before slowly lowering. Concern is upon her face. Why is Ruby acting like this? What is making her lover seem panicked? She couldn't figure it out.

It's because she's guilty! She knows what you've done! She knows what her fate is around you!

Ashlyn's fists clench up, there's no way she will kill Ruby. No matter what, even if Ruby admitted it, there was no way she would bring a hand to the Xaela.

"What is the matter Ruby? Please, I'm here for you." She tries to plead to the much smaller girl.

Stepping inside, Ashlyn begins to approach Ruby carefully. The warrior scrambled away from Ashlyn until her back was against the wall. Closing her eyes tightly, she tried to resist the glorious feeling of strength and power filling her body again, a sensation she had been deprived of for days, the shade had been depriving her of purposefully it dawned on her.

Do it and you can keep this power.

Taking a deep breath, the Xaela calmed her mind as she had been taught as a child, bringing her warrior's focus to bear. Raising her head finally, she fixed the tall Rava's eyes with her own.

"He wants me to kill you. Maral... wants me to kill you."

Ashlyn heard those words and paused. Her lagomorphic ears twitched. He? Who is this he?

Maral...that name began ringing a bell. Then after a moment it hits. That's the name of her missing ex. Her brow furrows deeply.

"You found him? Why does he want you to kill me love I...don't think I did anything to warrant it...from him at least." She replied. To be honest, Ashlyn had done a lot to deserve being slain.

Though, in the Steppes and Yanxia, Ashlyn only had slain Garleans. Why would that Xaela warrior want the Rava dead? Her mind was racing as the Viera took a couple steps forward.

I'm telling you, you'll need to kill her. When will you fucking listen to me?

Shut up shut up shut up!

Her teeth clench as the Viera takes another cautious step.

"Ruby, love, I...please. Talk to me. I...trust you..."

You are making an enormous mistake...

"Oh no, he's dead. He came back." Ruby let out a laugh, aware how crazy she sounded even as she tried to keep her hands stuck to the floor rather than use them as the shade kept whispering to her. "It's nothing personal... he gives me so much strength, as long as I kill and give him aether. Beasts were fine for a while, but now..." Her mismatched eyes overflowed with tears as she clamped her hands over her horns as if she could shut out his whispers. "... he's going to take it all away if I don't kill someone..."

Whispers of killing someone, wanting aether, this all sounds too familiar for the Rava. No more caution, she rushed to Ruby and took her lover within her large hands. Each one gripping an arm tightly, as though the lizard may float off. Her ears are twitching now as concern paints her face once more.

"Ruby, you have to promise me you haven't made a contract with him. I..don't think that's your ex. I think that's a voidsent!" She states, her voice firm. Justice is firing off within her own head, about how she was right and the righteous path Ashlyn must follow once more beginning with the Xaela within her hands.

The Xaela lowered her hands from her head slowly. Her fingertips were throbbing with the void energy the shade had been pushing on her, aching to use it.

"I think... I've known for some time it's not really him..." she whispered. "Contract? I don't know... I asked for help and he gave it. I thought he was my mate. Is that a contract?" The shade was still talking in her head, still urging her to use the power he gave her, to kill again. She focused on Ashlyn's hands holding her firmly, securely, grounding herself through the Rava's presence.

Ashlyn's mind was racing a malm a minute. She didn't know whether to offer her aether or to try to remove it. From everything she had researched regarding the void from what the Mhachi knew, the Viera was certain Ruby had indeed created a contract. Kira will be less than pleased to hear this.

"Ashlyn, I-I... I hurt someone... I don't know if they're dead..."

I FUCKING KNEW IT WAS HER!

Ashlyn's heart sank, Justice was right. Ruby was indeed the one to harm that archer. Yet the Rava knew there had to be another reason. Maybe the voidsent had taken control?

Stop looking for excuses. She hurt an innocent man and deserves death.

Ashlyn grit her teeth hard. There was no way she could. Never, in a hundred epochs...

Fine then you coward. I'll do it... No sooner had those words left Justice than a form that looked like Ashlyn's mirror coalesced beside the bunny. Long brown and white hair pulled back in to a ponytail while her side bangs flowed down her shoulders. Heavy black, spiked, plate adorned the otherwise rather lithe Viera. Within heartbeats, a fist began moving towards the Xaela. Ruby twisted out of Ashlyn's grasp as the armoured fist descended towards her, her well-honed instincts guiding her. Even the voidsent's voice had fallen silent in the confusion, though the Xaela remembered what Ashlyn had told her about Justice.

Just as suddenly, a smaller Rava materialized behind the second Viera. This one looking like a younger Ashlyn, not a sun older than sixteen or seventeen summers. Just as swiftly, she wraps her arms around the angry bunny, preventing the fist from connecting. As they took form, sweat began to fall down Ashlyn's face as they took a non insignificant amount of aether.

"No you fucking don't! I told you, we will let the city-states deal with her..." the younger Viera grunted out.

"Is this why you really came to find me?" Ruby asked in dismay, stepping back away from the wrestling bunnies. Reaching the pile of her discarded possessions, she knelt down and dragged out her axe. The blade, still smeared with blood both beast and Hyur, was twisted and blunted with a great crack running across the head - it was useful as a heavy piece of metal and little else, but all she could use to defend herself.

"No! Ruby you have to believe me. I didn't come to harm you!" Ashlyn cried out as the other two struggled behind her. The armoured girl seemingly foaming at the mouth, still trying to get to the Xaela.

"You stupid bunny! I keep telling you we need to end her. How many more innocents have to be harmed, have to die before you accept this?!" Ashlyn spun in place and with one swift strike, the back of her hand connects with Justice's face.

"I will **not** harm her and neither will you!" She bellows. Justice's sapphire eyes shimmered with a red glint for but a moment. The smaller Rava kept Justice at bay,

"She's right, we need to turn her in to the Brass Blades!" her voice rang out, albeit strained.

"No Regret, we aren't doing that eith-"

"OF COURSE WE AREN'T, THE BLADES ARE JUST TOOTHLESS COWARDS WHO WON'T DO WHAT THEY MUST TO KEEP THE PEOPLE SAFE!" Ashlyn lets loose a frustrated sigh before turning to Ruby. The warrior's hands tightened on the handle of her ruined axe as she listened to the three bunnies arguing. Her eyes roamed across them all warily before returning to Ashlyn, and, registering her sincerity, the Xaela nodded slowly.

"Ruby, you have to trust me. I came because I was worried. Kira and I both were..." her eyes revealed just how much concern the Rava truly had. "Please, don't listen to...them..."

To sustain those two as well... the amount of aether in her... how lucky you are, Enkhutuya... The grey-cloaked voidsent materialised with the sound of salivating in its voice. A clawed hand reached from beneath the cloak to grasp Ruby's shoulder. *If you killed her, you'd never have to kill for me again.*

"I'm not going to kill Ashlyn or anyone. You tricked me." She tried to pull away from the shade's grip, but it seemed stuck, like it was melting into her. Upon seeing the spectre causing one she loves pain, the Rava's hand clenched in to a fist.

"Let go of her." She states to the new being. For a moment the other Viera stopped struggling. *You were weak. I only gave you what you wanted and now you must do the same for me. If not willingly, I will just take your body and do it myself.*

"If you let her go, I'll let you feed on me..." Ashlyn's tone dropped low. Almost becoming a plea out of desperation to save the one she cherishes.

"To hells you wi- Justice's mouth is covered by Regret before she could get any more out. Could this be it for the young apparition, could she get the release she sorely desired?

The voidsent whirled to face Ashlyn, its grip still tight on the Xaela. Ruby winced at the tug on her shoulder, her heart aching that the Viera would make such an offer for her.

An interesting offer. What's in it for you, that you would bargain for her? A sneer entered the shade's voice. *And why is it better for me than just killing you and keeping her anyway?*

The remark from the shade incensed Justice. The plated Viera bit in to the smaller bunny's hand causing Regret to withdraw it from pain. "

You couldn't kill us if you tried shade! Even the weak one here could easily kill you and that gods-forsaken lizard!" she retorted.

"Ashlyn, I'm not going to let you do something like that, not to fix my stupid mistake..." Ruby spoke as she kept trying to pull away from the voidsent, the twisting motion tugging on the wound in her side, though she ignored it. "I put so many in danger, including you and Kira..." A heavy note of shame tinged her words and she closed her eyes against the tears. Ashlyn wracks her brain. There's got to be some way she can get the voidsent to leave Ruby alone. Her jaw clenched, even as Ruby remarked she didn't want for Ashlyn to save her, the Rava couldn't just stand by as this creature would eventually begin consuming the Xaela to satiate its need for aether.

"Because I am an aetheric feast. You would be able to transcend forms many times over, maybe even becoming a prince. If I don't let you take it, you could never hope to take it by force..." her sapphire eyes lock with Ruby's mismatched ones, Ashlyn only wanted to help and save the one she cares about. Even if it cost her her life, the bunny was determined to get Ruby safely back to Kira. Ruby grit her teeth as she held Ashlyn's gaze, her fingers drained of the little colour they had as she tightened her grip on her axe. Her lover's eyes locked on hers focused her mind, reinforcing the mental strength that the shade had gone to great efforts to erode. She was not going to let anyone she loved sacrifice themselves for her, nor open up another wound in her heart that could be used to manipulate her like Maral had been. Raising one hand, she grabbed the voidsent's wrist.

What do you think you're trying to do? The spectre cackled, amused.

"I won't let you touch Ashlyn." The Xaela warrior growled, slowly prising the claw from her shoulder. "You will not take one single mote of aether from anyone I love." The voidsent hissed as Ruby tried to exert her will over it, the same way the voidsent had been doing to her for over a month. Ashlyn's hand jumped momentarily. She had been ready to give herself to free Ruby. Yet the little Auri warrior was not going to let Ashlyn do that, seemingly by force. She stayed silent, unsure what to do at this point. Should she try to forcefully separate the two? How linked is their bond? The Rava didn't know. It seemed that the voidsent hadn't taken over yet. Ruby still retained control at least a bit. Justice smirked wickedly.

"You know, I gotta admit. For criminal scum, you are quite strong. I'm willing to look past your near murder of that innocent if you convinced this cowardly rabbit to pick back up her path. Maybe even join in." It seemed even now, despite everything, Justice still sought to have Ashlyn resume the macabre duty. **"If you can handle this pathetic voidsent, you should be able to handle a typical criminal."**

Near murder. Near murder. Ruby had been mostly tuning out Justice's ranting, but those words cut through. As for the rest... that would have to wait until the voidsent was dealt with.

"So they're alive, at least. Thank the Mother." She had resisted just enough to keep the voidsent from making her kill before, she could resist it now. The spectre's claw was well free of her shoulder now, whatever its arm was made of was cracking and splitting as the Xaela twisted it. Swooning for a moment, she felt her muscles weakening as the voidsent tried to draw its power back from her body.

Give up, Enkhutuya... I can still drain you of your own aether as well... Still threatening, though it sounded worried now.

"Don't... call me that..."

Ashlyn took a step forward quickly before realizing that Ruby likely wished her to keep distance, lest the voidsent jump bodies. Concern and worry painted the Rava's face as she stared on, practically helpless to save one she loves. The Viera swallows hard, Justice merely smirks and the much smaller bunny finally releases her.

"You're trapped you stupid voidsent. If you kill that lizard, your connection here will be severed and you'll go back to the void starving." she simply remarks. Ashlyn silently mouths words of encouragement to the Xaela. She needed to do something, *anything* to help Ruby in this moment.

Ruby looked up at Ashlyn and smiled slightly. What would have happened if the Rava hadn't come to find her? Either sucked dry of aether or taken over completely, still telling herself it was the shade of her lost mate. She couldn't wait for this to be over, to hug Ashlyn and tell her how thankful she was just for her presence.

"As Justice says, *Maral*. Even if you did manage to claim my body for yourself, do you think they would let you stay in this realm?" She spoke, gesturing towards the collection of bunnies in the

room with her head. The voidsent finally stopped threatening and taunting. "You can go back to the void and break the connection *willingly*... or you can keep the connection, be silent, and be satisfied with whatever aether I care to give you." The grey-cloaked spectre writhed for a moment, howling in frustration then vanished. Ruby stumbled forward as the voidmatter she had been holding dissipated beneath her fingers, and dropped to her knees.

Ashlyn didn't even wait a moment. The second Ruby stumbled forward, the Rava moved quickly to catch her lover. Her heart jumped for a moment until she felt the Lizard hit her chest. The Viera's ears were flexed backwards for a moment as she tightly grasped the Xaela.

"Gods above, are you okay Ruby? Can I do anything to help?" She asks quickly. Justice scoffed and rolled her eyes. This very scene sickened her deeply.

"So are we going to resume bringing what this star needs or...?" The plated Rava begins rolling her wrist. Regret just shook her head.

"Do you not think of anything else you fucking psycho? Clearly Ashlyn is more worried about the other girl. Gods, you are dense..." Justice snarled momentarily.

"Fuck that sentimental stuff, it just weakens us. You know we were stronger alone."

Regret sighed heavily before giving in and her body rapidly breaking down in to aether to return to the Viera.

Ruby's arms wrapped tightly around Ashlyn's waist, clinging on as she buried her face in the Rava's chest. Taking deep breaths of her scent, her tense form relaxed and her heart began to slow.

"I'm... I'm okay." she spoke quietly, her voice finally revealing the exhaustion of the last few days.

In the back of her mind, as if malms away, she could still sense a connection to the void, a trickle of void energies flowing between her and it, but absolute silence. Lifting her head, she smiled lovingly at the towering Viera, her fingers clutching the back of her clothing. "I'm just... I'm so glad you're here. And this is all I need. For you to hold me." The wound in her side twinged and began to ache as her adrenaline dropped. "...and maybe for where that archer shot me to be looked at..."