

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..."

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