

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.

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