

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."

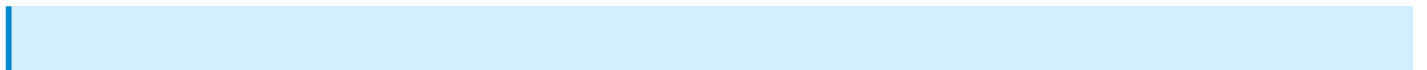
Just find some wastrel who deserves it.

"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 Miqo 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.

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