

~ Day 81 ~

After a good earful from a capricious drow, Me, Mia, Lily, Bob, and the rest of the tribe made our way down the mountain pass, through the outskirts of the jungle, and over to the ruined greenskin settlement.

All the way down, I could feel the ire of Mia's eyes boring holes in my back; literally, I could feel her use some kind of magic with her eyes but I had no clue what it was she was doing...

But for now, it probably was just for the best if I left her to vent, I kinda had screwed up after all.

Initially, her reprimand of me was very confusing. She seemingly was admonishing me for the fact that I had acted so recklessly, but simultaneously she was also praising me for having taken down such a strong foe.

But when it was all yelled, it wasn't surprising that I was conflicted about how to take it all. Honestly... I thought it was kind of cute, her small nose twitching with annoyance and her petite figure making the stance of where she put her hands on her hips quite appealing.

Though, I definitely didn't tell her that. For now, I was just going to think of ways to appease her wrath so I would be sleeping outside when it was time for rest.

As we arrived in the former settlement, it had already become dawn; however, many of the tribe needed to reset the cycles after such a long and arduous journey of inhospitable lands and ferocious enemies.

It wasn't long before the tribe had erected tents and appropriated the less damaged huts for temporary use. Sitting on top of one of the bigger structures that I believed to be once a

storage house of sorts facing the huge lake, I watched as the twin suns crested the colossal mountain range cradling the basin.

But as I was pulled out of my thoughts of Mia, I sighed. Joining me by my side on the roof's edge was Lily.

"Wow, I didn't know you loathed my company that much." She said, a hint of teasing in her voice.

"Hehe... no, nothing like that," I said, shaking my head tiredly. "It's just Mia, I think she's quite mad this time..."

"She's just worried about you." She snickered. "It happens when the one you love charges into danger constantly."

"Yeah... it really does seem that way..." I said a bit self-deprecatingly.

"Hey-" She said, scrutinizing me.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have some kind of a thing for being shirtless or is it a monster thing?" She said amusedly.

"Urgh... don't even begin." I groaned, covering my face with my palm.

"I truly feel like I've been cursed." I monologued. "Forever to be mistaken as an elf and never wear a shirt."

She didn't answer, just directed her gaze to stare out into the distance. As the silence stretched on, we just enjoyed the magical morning but breaking the stillness, Lily's voice suddenly took on a somber note.

"You once asked me about my family..." She said.

"Ah - yeah, I'm very sorry for prying," I said apologetically. "I never did get to apologize for that."

"Don't be so flustered... it's okay... after all, it was a perfectly normal question." She sighed. "It's just... I haven't really gotten over my past yet."

"You don't have to tell me, it's fine," I said. "I was just curious."

"No - I need to tell you..." She said with a surprising amount of determination. "I need someone to talk to, or I'll never get it off my chest."

Clearly, this was important for her, so I wasn't going to stop her. "Alright, I'm listening."

Taking in a deep breath, she began twirling the end of her ponytail nervously, a gesture that seemed wholly unconscious to her normally poised self.

"Back home..." She started. "Back in Mordria, we have the guild, the military, and the royals as I told you."

Not saying anything, I just nodded, letting her speak her peace.

"The royals have various different nobility, but the highest order, other than the king and his family, are the five Familias." She continued. "They reign mostly supreme in terms of

strength and are the main factions of the royals who clash against the military in the perpetual struggle for authority."

"I am from one of the Familias, the Zephyrous Familia; the strongest of them all in fact." She said, pausing. "(Sigh) - my family are all prestigious wind mages."

Hearing this, my eyes went wide with comprehension. Why she had been so sad when I asked about her family, it all made sense now.

"As you can guess, I'm no mage; nor will I ever be." She said, her mask of determination cracking a bit. "T-that's why I was ousted by the family as a disgrace."

"It was only because of my father I was allowed to keep the Zephyrous name." She continued "If not for him, when I was just a child, I would've probably been assassinated by one of my brothers or cousins just to rid them of having to share their prestigious name with trash like me. Honestly, anyone from the familia other than my father would've had seen me dead at some point or another."

"Is your father an influential figure in your family?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, he's the husband of the Zephyrous Familia matriarch, my mother." She explained. "Both extremely powerful wind mages and both in the top eight strongest of Modria."

"I see..." I mumbled, realizing that Lily's status had been a lot higher than I originally guessed. "Then how did you end up as a guild master for the city, Saphren, clearly a place all too unqualified for a figure like you?"

"That goes back to me being allowed to keep my name." She sighed. "My father had pleaded my mother too allow me to keep the surname and to stay in the familia territory, so both he and I was already on thin ice when she reluctantly accepted."

"But the stubborn fool I was, I wanted to prove myself to my father, who's never once looked down on me or robbed me of his parental love. The only one in this world who matter to me. So I ran away and abused my familia name to get into the Green Gardens Academy, the place where all the country's most promising individuals are made. But this of course meant a betrayal to the agreement of me never going out into the spotlight or using the name for anything else than my own protection."

"But why? Couldn't they just make the academy expel you and take back your name?" I asked wonderingly.

"No, they actually couldn't." She said. "That's because, while the Zephyrous Familia is one of the country's ruling powers, the Green Gardens Academy is actually run by the Guild; an entity way beyond the country itself. With having already been enrolled, my family could do nothing to stop nor get me out, however, they did indeed take my name once again. But more so, to make an example, they pressured my mother to expel her only husband from the Familia, my father."

She stopped, looking into my eyes, her azure blue eyes reflecting both sadness and fierce defiance.

"But the story doesn't end there," I said.

"It doesn't." She assented. "It appeared that, like some sick and twisted joke, I wasn't the trash I had always been made to be. In actuality, I was a gifted prodigy that gained the rare and elusive Bladedancer class as the wind itself was my friend although I could not harness it magically. It didn't take long before I rose through the rankings of the academy, leaving all the other supposed geniuses in the dust. Even my brothers', father's, and mother's potentials weren't the equal of mine in the heights of their primes, which caused great unrest in the whole country. Especially for the Zephyrous Familia."

"Having rejected me and my father, they fought desperately to gain my favor back. However, I couldn't let myself return. Not to those wicked sycophants who outcasted me and my father. But as my father couldn't simply cut ties with his own flesh and blood, the woman he loved, and a family he had dedicated his whole life to, he was let back into the family to try and appease my anger."

"It is only because of him I still bear the name Zephyrous. Not for my mother, not for my brother, and not for my Familia. The only one who mattered in my life; my father. The name we share is the proof of our relation, something I can't simply discard no matter how much I hate the other who bears it."

It had been like I had expected, the cruelty of nobility was synonymous across even dimensions as earth back in the days weren't better even in the slightest.

"Then did you take the position of guild master in a small frontier city just to escape? And, was it really just because of a gut feeling that you decided to let me go that one time?" I asked, still very confused about these points.

"It wasn't a voluntary position, however, it did play in me wanting to escape from my family. Having used the Guild's name as safety from my family hadn't come cheap. As repayment, I had to serve the guild for a little more than a decade. Luckily, I got to choose the position and place within Mordria, a little loophole I took advantage of."

"As for sparing you..." She paused, her expression conflicted. "I've only served for a year of that sentence, and my future within Mordria is practically set in stone. I barely have to strain myself to become a person of power and authority within that small land; but for what cause?"

"I have nothing to strive for, nothing to fight for, what use is becoming the strongest in a small country when there's nothing for me to do?" She said, a tear running down her cheek, surprising me. "I have wealth, I have strength, more than I can use for a place like Mordria; but I'm wholly inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. The world outside is boundless, and I want something to make motivate me, something to fight for."

She turned her teary-eyed gaze to me.

"I believe that you are that 'something'." She said suddenly, standing up. "No... I'll me ask you."

"Are *you* the one who can give me a purpose?"

Knowing how the situation had taken a serious turn, my gaze hardened. I knew what she meant... I knew it all too well.

Whatever it was I was going to say next would shape the future of this young and strong woman. Standing up to meet her azure-blue eyes, my own crimson gaze searched her's for any hesitation or fear, but found none.

"I am," I said, feeling that the words were an undeniable truth before I had even spoken them. But true to my thoughts, it was as if words had tangible power as the world around is acknowledged them.

Like it was the most natural thing to do, my body almost moved on its own. I bit into the flesh of my wrist, stopping the innate mending of my body to let the wound flow with crimson liquid.

Extending my arm out towards the lithe woman, she stared at the blood flowing down my arm, the indication of what I was offering clear as any, but before she could react, I met her blue eyes and with bloodied teeth said. "There's no turning back from this."

But as her eyes promised, there was not a single sliver of hesitance as took my arm, beginning to greedily lather up every single drop of blood spilling from her crimson-tinged lips.