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Chapter List

CHAPTER 16

A Gentle Power

The air that day was crisp and clear, without even a single cloud to be seen. A distant bird's song sang out across the sky, grabbing the attention of a certain little girl.

Ellie had never been so far out from town before.

Granted, she hadn't even traveled that far to begin with. From where she was, you could still very much see the capital in its full glory if you simply turned around. But for someone like her, someone who never really got out much, a small walk like this was a considerably far one.

So today was definitely a first for her.

However, she wasn't alone. Accompanied by the Nessaroses, she traversed down a dirt road, cutting through a beautiful and sprawling grassy plain just outside the capital's domain.

Venturing out this far would typically cause Ellie to feel a bit nervous, or out of place, but having her new guardians at her side surely put her at ease— Even if she couldn't exactly explain why.

Perhaps it was simply due to them being adults. Though whether or not Belle in particular was a *responsible* adult, she couldn't exactly pinpoint. At least Liz looked to be pretty competent.

That wasn't to say that Belle was a complete and utter idiot, however. It was more that she was just seemingly entirely carefree, possibly to the point of detriment. Though how much of that was an act, or how much of it was genuine, nobody, except for maybe Liz, could really be sure of.

Speaking of Belle, the particular reason for their outing that day could be clearly heard by the loud rumble of her stomach.

"How much longer…?" She winced with a groan, clutching her belly. "I'm reaching my limit here…"

"A-Are you okay, Mrs. Belle…?" Ellie pried in a small voice.

"I'm not sure…" Belle groaned, the hunger pangs audible in her voice.

Her eyes couldn't help but be drawn towards the basket that Liz, who was walking just a few paces ahead of her wife and 'child', was carrying.

"I might just drop dead…" The severity of Belle's complaints was matched only by the continued growling of her stomach as she forced herself along.

"R-Really…?"

Ellie's spirit dropped as the idea of Belle unceremoniously dropping dead in the street from starvation brought on a feeling of worry. Unfortunately, such a thing happening to her didn't seem too out of the picture, considering her tendencies. Either hunger or an alcohol overdose.

"Belle, please, don't feed Ellie such ideas…" Liz huffed. "You're going to scare her."

"I'm scared myself…" Belle mumbled. "I might not make it…"

"Don't be dramatic."

"Promise me…"

"Promise you what?"

"Promise me not to marry someone more beautiful than me… While it may be a difficult task to undertake, I don't think my heart could handle it! If I ever found out you shared a bed with some random hussy, I'd find her, and cut that tramp clean in two!"

"But won't you be dead?"

"That doesn't mean you have to cheat on me!"

While Belle'a delusions wove a story Ellie couldn't even hope to follow, she wasn't exactly in disagreement with her hunger. She was feeling rather peckish herself, after all. Either way, she didn't really mind waiting all too much.

The goal the three had in mind was to hike up to a certain spot Liz and Belle knew, and have a picnic for lunch. Ellie would definitely prefer to eat immediately, as evident by a rumble in her own tummy, but she simultaneously believed that the food would be much more worth it upon reaching their goal.

"A good meal is only earned after good hard work."

Ellie had heard Faith spout such a saying once in passing, and figured there wasn't any reason not to take it as the truth. Though while that's what *she* believed, the same couldn't be said for Belle, who looked ready to pounce at any opportunity to go against it.

Her eyes were glued to the picnic basket, like a predator gazing at its prey. It was clear that she was incredibly determined to snag a bite.

'Mrs. Liz is gonna be mad… Mrs. Belle is gonna get in trouble…' Ellie thought to herself as she watched Belle move in to take what she believed to rightfully be hers.

And sure enough, the moment Belle made her move on the basket—

Smack!

With speed and precision, Liz had swatted Belle's grubby paws away from her prey, which, in fact, was *not* rightfully hers at all.

It was actually rather impressive that Liz could combat her so easily, Ellie thought. Though it was definitely a little disappointing that someone like Belle, a ninja, could be so easily beaten. Maybe ninjas weren't as cool as they initially seemed.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Wait until we get to the place." Liz glanced at Belle with a stern scowl. "You're more childish than the literal child among us…"

"That's mean…" Belle whined as she rubbed her stinging hand. "She's just not as desperate as I am…"

"How can that even be? Did you eat breakfast?"

"Of course I did…"

"And what did it consist of?"

"Um… Does booze count?"

"No."

"Then I guess I didn't…"

"That's on you, then."

"You're so mean…"

Belle hung her shoulders in defeat, earning just a small amount of sympathy from Ellie, who reached up to reassuringly pat her arm.

“Are you hungry too, Ellie?” She asked.

“Ah…” Ellie froze a little. “Um… A little…”

“See, honey?” Belle smirked, earning a skeptical side-eye from Liz. “Ellie wants some too! Right now~!”

“I-I can wait, though…”

“Shh~!” Belle brought a finger to her lips. “Don’t ruin this for me…”

Liz let out a small sigh of irritation at Belle’s continuous insistence.

“We’re almost there, you two… You can wait just a little longer…”

“If you say so~.”

Belle seemingly gave up on pushing Liz’s tolerance any further. However, after a moment of silence, she slunk backwards, crouching down to Ellie’s level as they continued to walk.

“Want to see something cool?” She asked.

“Huh…?” Ellie perked her head up. “Cool…?”

“Mhm~. Mrs. Liz thinks she can prevent me from digging in, but she’s sorely mistaken. I’m a shinobi, after all~!”

“…”

“Just watch and learn~.”

“B-But, stealing isn’t allowed…”

“But it’s okay if who you’re stealing from is your partner. They forgive you quickly!”

“Oh…”

“Keep that in mind if you ever find a boy you like~.”

“O-Okay…”

Belle, laughing at her own joke, wasted not even a moment before quickly lunging for the basket once again.

But, as expected—

Smack!

"You're far too predictable…" Liz groaned in displeasure after defending the basket once again.

"Foiled again…" Belle gave a clumsy smile as she scratched her cheek.

"Also, please, don't teach Ellie such falsehoods…" Liz glared. "I wouldn't wish for her to grow up to reflect your poor habits."

"She's quite harsh, isn't she?" Belle giggled, turning to Ellie as she jabbed at her wife's attitude. "She still loves me, though~."

"Don't push it."

"Notice how you didn't deny it? I love you too!"

"Hmph…" Liz's lips protruded as her glare dwindled, turning into what could better be described as a pout.

Noticing this, Belle's mischievous grin only widened.

"You see, Ellie," She sang, "She's just embarrassed about giving away her true feelings! But if you *really* look, and *really* pay attention, you can see the truth."

"H-How can I see it…?" Ellie asked.

"Hmm…" Belle brought a hand to her chin. "I suppose I can just naturally tell due to the nature of my abilities…"

"…"

"But I think you can do it too, if you try hard enough…"

"R-Really? You think so…?"

"Probably…" Belle answered with an unsure voice. "Anything is possible, right? Wasn't that the moral of one of your books…?"

"Oh… Um… Yeah…"

"Yeah?"

"Y-Yeah…!"

"Exactly, then, yes!" Belle clapped her hands. "Okay, let's try perceiving it, then!"

"H-How do I do that, though…?"

“Umm… Well, typically, I just look at her, and can just tell…”

“…”

“Why not do that?”

That didn’t seem like it would work at all. Though, Ellie didn’t see why it wasn’t worth a shot. After a moment of hesitation, she turned to look at Liz, really trying to see if she could perceive something…

“…”

As expected, she couldn’t see anything special.

“Maybe you just need to look harder…” Belle recommended. “It should be easy for you, since your eyes are much younger and fresher than mine!”

“P-Probably…”

“Try looking like this!”

Belle brought her hands to her face, making circles, and bringing them together in a motion that mimicked a telescope.

Ellie nodded, following Belle’s instruction.

Once again, she looked at Liz.

Nothing.

“Maybe try getting closer?”

“Okay…” Ellie mumbled as she closed the distance between her and Liz. “W-What am I looking for…?”

“Something warm?”

“L-Like a color…?”

“Probably! Red, perhaps?”

“…”

As Ellie stumbled closer to her, looking through the telescope she had formed with her hands, she focused directly on Liz’s face, who returned the eye contact. And upon doing so, Liz couldn’t help but feel her face grow hotter. The sight was causing a sort of maternal instinct to well up within her—

“I-I see it…!”

An instinct that was evident from the red color of her cheeks.

“Good job, Ellie!” Belle applauded. “You’ve learned how to do what I do! Now that I’ve passed it on, you can be my successor! That means I can successfully retire from my work. Make me proud!”

“You’ve *been* retired…” Liz corrected, turning away as she attempted to recompose herself.

“Well… I can retire… from my retirement…?” Belle’s face contorted in confusion as she stumbled over the messy logic of it all. “But that means I’d have to start killing people again, huh…?”

“I’m aware that you’re only joking, but please refrain from talking about such concepts around Ellie… I wouldn’t want to fill her mind with those things…”

“I meant… killing people with love and kindness…!”

“…”

Her lousy attempt at self-filtering was only met with a groan drenched in disappointment.

“Yes… Of course, that’s what you meant.”

“Mhm!” Belle beamed, self-assured in her own lie. “And for my first victim out of retirement…”

She turned her head, drilling her gaze directly into Ellie.

“You!!!”

“Ah…”

Belle raised her arms, wiggling her fingers deviously, and began chasing her, who in turn began running away as fast as she could. The two passed Liz and began circling her repeatedly, something that threatened to make her dizzy.

“Belle, stop that…” She frowned. “You’ll scare her…”

However, despite Liz’s unimpressed response to her antics, Belle did not stop. Not until—

“Gotcha!”

“Wahh…”

Belle successfully caught Ellie, who let out a small whine upon being taken captive. She wasted no time in ticking and patting her freshly caught victim's head, almost as if she were a cat.

To Liz, the sight was tiring to see, and yet a little heartwarming—

“Do you want this~?” Belle grinned, presenting Ellie with an appa.

“Huh?” Ellie’s eyes widened in surprise upon receiving the treat. “H-How…?”

Liz, knowing what had occurred, reached into the basket—

“What did I even expect from you…?” Her disappointment was surely immeasurable, feeling the lack of appa within it.

“Hehe~. What do I always say? Never underestimate my prowess~.”

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It wasn’t long until the three had finally reached the hill in which they were headed. (Though, if you asked Belle, she probably would have told you that the trek felt much longer than it actually was.)

“This hill is rather steep…” Belle wheezed as she fought her grueling battle uphill.

“Aren’t you a shinobi?” Liz asked with a hint of judgment seared in her voice. “How can you be so tired already?”

“Steep inclines can’t be beaten with shinobi technique…”

“I… suppose that’s true.” Liz admitted. “Except for the fact that Ellie seems to be doing just fine.”

Liz’s statement wasn’t untrue in the slightest. Ellie was actually trucking along pretty well, all things considered, even despite her growing appetite.

Though, even if she were tired, she wouldn’t want to show it. Tuckering out before training was done, or before she finished whatever else she would be up to, was considered weak, or bad, in her household, according to her mother. Wouldn’t the same go for Nessaroses?

“Ellie is just lucky that she has young, fresh legs that aren’t affected by years of wear like mine are…” Belle pouted. “I’m too old…”

“I think it’s more a matter of being lazy and not.” Liz sighed. “And please, don’t call yourself old. If you’re old, what does that make me?”

“Um…” Belle thought for a moment. “Also old?”

“I regret asking.”

The top of the hill was just barely visible, with only a couple more steps until they would reach the top.

'Just a bit further…' Ellie thought to herself.

She really was beginning to feel hungry. With how great those pangs had been hounding her earlier in the morning, she held tightly to the hope that the food would definitely be worth the trip. Though, now that she thought about it, there was also supposedly a really good view up ahead, a view she had heard about many times before.

"I used to meet Liz here quite often~." Belle had mentioned in passing. *"Though, I was trying to kill her at the time. Isn't that romantic?"*

Ellie never got much more information than that. The last sentence in particular baffled her, leaving her questioning why Belle would even want to kill her wife, especially considering it was never elaborated on any further.

Either way, the place was an important landmark for the two, apparently. So, with her small legs, Ellie pushed forward, following Liz up to the top—

And the sight she saw certainly was not disappointing.

"…!"

Lying ahead of her, sprawling out as far as the eye could see, was a lush and beautiful landscape covered in waving blades of grass, stretching out well beyond the horizon. She had seen depictions of such scenery in her picture books before, and the art always stood out to her in some peculiar fashion.

Both she and Elenor would talk about finding such a place someday. And to be standing here in the flesh—

"…"

She couldn't help the warm feeling that began to wash over her. She was actually seeing it. For real.

'If only Sissy were here too…'

Such thoughts threatened to diminish the feelings engulfing her when Liz placed a hand upon her head.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She asked with a warm smile.

Ellie stood in her usual silence, too insecure for an appropriate response. However, even for a girl who was so unsure of everything, and what opinions were good and bad, even she couldn't deny the beauty that lay in front of her.

And so, she simply nodded in agreement, earning an even bigger smile from Liz.

“Don’t you think the trip is worth the view?” Liz asked Belle, who had already plopped down onto the grass, chugging a bottle of booze which she had seemingly pulled out of nowhere.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.” She shrugged as she removed the tip of the bottle from her lips. “Although…”

She shot Ellie a small look, seemingly aware of something the average person wouldn’t be, like she was sensing her direct feelings.

Her lips curled into a small, satisfied grin.

“You win this one regardless~.”

Ellie still wished for Elenor to be here with her at this moment. Would she have agreed that the view was pretty? She wanted to ask— she wanted to make sure that the feeling inside her was the one she should be feeling.

But one look at either of her guardians seemed to confirm that she was thinking the right thing.

Maybe she was a bad kid for coming to a conclusion all on her own. Maybe she was betraying her sister by doing this without her. Despite their rocky parting only a few months earlier, it never diminished the love she felt for her.

But either way, for a reason she couldn’t quite explain, she didn’t mind being here with these two. The two women who had defined the past few months of her life. Her new guardians, who had been placed into her life against her will.

Even though she still didn’t know how to feel about them, the feeling she currently felt certainly wasn’t bad at all.

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Yet again, Ellie was face-to-face with Liz’s cooking— the very cooking she couldn't seem to get enough of. She nibbled away, and as she did, it seemed that Liz’s words rang true. The food really did taste better after the journey.

Belle, too, was scarfing down her food so quickly that Ellie actually felt a bit threatened that her portion wouldn’t last long if she didn’t scarf it down herself first.

“Belle, for the love… You’ll make yourself sick…”

“Aww…” Belle spoke through a mouth full of food. “But it’sh sho good…”

“So savor it, lest you want to choke on it.”

Before Ellie could even begin to dig in her heels to defend her portion, Liz had saved the day with a proper scolding.

By this point, Ellie had grown used to the pair's banter. While, from a certain point of view, one could call it bickering, it never seemed to actually feel hostile in nature. In fact, it could be pretty entertaining to hear at times.

She had only been living with the Nessaroses for a few months by this point, and while it was slowly becoming the norm, it never felt any less surreal. It was such a drastic change from her life before. Gone were the days of listening to her mother's every direction, gone were the days of playing with her sister, and in was something very, very…

"…"

'Different' was the only word that came to her mind. She wasn't sure if the change was necessarily good or bad, so any word that hinted towards either option she hesitated to use. Due to that, she settled on 'different,' as the only neutral term she could think of.

The Nessaroses were such a drastic departure from the only adult she had grown used to being around. While her mother was very demanding, and almost frightening to be around at times, these two were the exact opposite.

Belle was certainly interesting, to say the least. She was, as stated before, carefree to the point of near detriment. For example, while Liz made an effort to never smoke in front of her, Belle did not care one bit about such restraints. It felt as if she would drink both around and away from Ellie multiple times a day. She had told her that it was for her own health, but that made no sense. Wasn't alcohol bad for you?

Liz, on the other hand, was way more mellow and relaxed. She could be rather stiff at times, though mostly just when it came to Belle's antics. For the most part, Ellie found her to be incredibly kind.

Though she wasn't exactly sure whether to embrace that kindness or not. Liz wasn't her mother, after all. Only a temporary caretaker.

Although…

'Is it really temporary…?'

That was what Liz always said, but 'temporary' implied an end. What even were the conditions for that? When would she go home? *Could* she go home?

Probably not. Elenor likely wouldn't let her.

"…"

This was all incredibly confusing. Just what were the conditions of her stay? Would she be forced to live in the Nessarose household *forever?*

As expected, she had no idea how she felt about that idea.

She wanted to ask how long it would be, and how she should feel about it, but it was clear that neither of her two guardians knew themselves. Her stay was a bit of a haphazard decision, after all.

And so, Ellie just decided that she would continue to wait and see what would happen.

“How goes the healing process?”

“Huh?”

Ellie snapped out of her thoughts as soon as Liz spoke. Without thinking, she ran a hand over her knee, feeling the bruises she had accumulated over the past few weeks.

“The scrape on your knee?” Liz elaborated, pointing her chin towards a very specific bruise. “It looked rather painful, but you seem to be moving around just fine.”

“Ah…”

Due to being as small and frail as Ellie was, naturally, accumulating bumps and scrapes wasn’t exactly an uncommon occurrence for her. Typically, she would receive most from her mother, though simply tripping or stubbing her toe was also pretty regular.

A recent accidental fall had caused quite the nasty gash on her leg, one which Liz had properly treated without ever needing to be asked as soon as it happened. Receiving such care from her caused an intense guilt to haunt Ellie’s very soul. It was usually *her* job to treat her own wounds, not someone else's.

“Y-Yeah…” She murmured, pushing that feeling down, attempting to ignore it. “It feels fine…”

Liz’s face softened in satisfaction.

“That’s good. If it continues to hurt, just let me know, alright? I’m sure Belle knows a trick or two about healing magic.”

“Aww, you flatter me!” Belle blushed, bringing a hand to her own cheek. “I’m quite the magician, aren’t I~?”

Both Liz and Belle were very caring, and seemingly aware of Ellie’s inherent fragility. Of course, this was generally regarded as a good thing by Ellie—

—But what they didn’t know was that she was perfectly capable of healing her injuries herself. This was because Ellie absolutely refused to reveal her extraordinary healing prowess.

Instead of properly treating her own wounds, she opted to hide her power and simply live with them for the time being. The Nessaroses were so gentle to her, so if they found out about what she could do and put her through the same training her mother did…

"…"

For a reason she couldn't explain, the idea of doing that felt incredibly unappealing. However, it did stir another guilty feeling within her.

She had her healing magic in order to assist her mother, didn't she? That's what she had always been told, so purposefully neglecting her training in her absence felt like she wasn't being a good child.

"…"

She instinctively clutched her arm, almost able to feel the way her mother would injure her, as if every vivid memory of her 'training' was etched directly into each cell of her body.

'If these two started doing that as well…"

Just the thought formed a lump within her stomach.

Although she naturally seemed to avoid doing her training, she would always be tempted to do it anyway for a good reason, right? Helping her mother was a good cause, wasn't it?

If that was the case, then why did she feel so defiant about it?

Maybe she just felt like she needed a break? Maybe she physically *needed* one? Or maybe being away from her mother meant that she should wait, since she wasn't there to guide her. Whatever the reason, she decided she would just continue to hide her power, only relying on the Nessaroses for her healing.

"But, my aptitude for healing in particular isn't the best…" Belle continued. "Why not ask Clyde to heal her?"

"Because you, me, and Eustass are the only ones who are allowed to know about Ellie." Liz reiterated.

"Oh, yeah… I forget…"

"Of course you have… You haven't mentioned her to anyone, have you?"

"I might've told a friend once or twice…"

"A friend?"

"You know, the Obsidian Man?"

"There you go again…"

"W-Who…?" Ellie tilted her head.

“Don’t worry about that.” Liz rested her hand on her head. “He doesn’t exist. Belle simply has a vivid imagination.”

“That’s not true at all… I really do talk to him…”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you do.” Liz huffed sarcastically, earning a small pout.

“…”

Ellie tried her best to continue nibbling away at her food, but the thoughts that had begun making themselves known naturally began to sour her mood.

“Are you alright?” Liz asked.

“Y-Yeah…!” Ellie responded without hesitation. “I… I’m just… T-Tired…”

“I suppose that’s natural after all that walking and eating.”

“…”

Ellie didn’t like lying to Liz directly; however, it was better than revealing how she really felt, wasn’t it? Though—

“…”

She was quickly made aware of a strange feeling enveloping her body, both within and outward. It was a feeling she had grown used to, especially when under the terrifyingly insightful gaze of Belle, who had given her a thoughtful side-eye. That was likely the cause of the feeling.

She didn’t say anything, but it felt almost like she was being read as if she were an open book. It felt—

—No. That wasn’t possible, was it? Could Belle really read her mind with just a glance? Or was she just extremely perceptive? If she did know, would she reveal her thoughts to Liz?

Would her secret get out?

However, as soon as these thoughts began to stress her—

“Whew, I’m stuffed!” Belle huffed, leaning against the nearby tree and patting her belly. “Honey, carry me home~.”

“I have to carry the basket. But I can drag you, if you’d like.”

“Um…” Belle frowned. “It hurts my butt when you do that…”

“Then act like an adult and walk…”

“Finee…”

As Belle continued to pout, Liz once again took note of Ellie's apparent exhaustion.

"In fact, you should probably carry Ellie once we're finished."

Belle simply slumped her shoulders.

"Yes, ma'am…"

Ellie let out a small sigh of relief. She was probably just worrying over nothing. There was no way Belle could sense her feelings. That would be ridiculous.

Her secret was completely safe, until the day she decided to reveal it herself.

△▼△▼△▼△

The sun still hung high in the sky as the three returned home, a warm afternoon light continuing to light up the world.

They had reached the outskirts of town and were gradually making their way towards their destination. An occasional carriage would pass by them on the road headed either into or out of the capital, signaling that they were close.

At first, Liz hesitated to even go on this trip, fearing that it would be too revealing. They were to keep Ellie a secret after all. If anything about her were to get out or become public, 'that thing' might be able to follow the trail.

However, as long as Belle was around to take them through her more secretive routes, ones that even occasionally utilized Rustellus's tunnels, they were able to enter and exit the slums without a hitch, not even a single worry about someone spotting Ellie on their minds.

Belle was certainly a useful asset to the 'family.' Although—

"I wanted to be the one to be carried…"

Once again, she complained about something as she carried Ellie upon her shoulders. For someone so useful, you wouldn't be able to tell from a glance.

"This is what caretaking looks like, Belle. I'd recommend getting used to it…" Liz scolded, though without bite.

"Ellie is lucky she's such a cutie… I don't lend my shoulders to just anyone, you know…"

"…"

Ellie was beginning to feel herself grow increasingly sleepy. A long walk and a good meal were definitely enough to do that to a child. That, and while one wouldn't expect it, the ride on Belle's shoulders was surprisingly smooth.

She leaned forward, resting her head against hers as she began to doze off—

"Hm…?"

As soon as she began to settle, she perked back up again.

The reason she was taken out of her trance was that something that caught her eye streaked by, stopping on the path on which they were walking.

She followed its movements closely from upon Belle's shoulders, her eyes trained directly upon it. It was an old, scraggly cat that looked like it had seen many years of scraps and tussles in its life. Ellie couldn't help but feel her heart strain a little for it. Its life likely wasn't the easiest, after all.

"Aww, do you like kitties, Ellie?" Belle inquired, somehow sensing her sudden interest, despite not being able to see her directly.

"Ah, um…" Ellie stuttered, having been taken off guard by Belle's observation. "I don't know…"

"Is that so? Well, I like them~! Sometimes people tell me that my face markings look like whiskers. I suppose they can be considered my spirit animal~?"

"Perhaps a lazy housecat would be a fitting description for you." Liz jabbed.

"Those are everyone's favorite type, though, aren't they? They're cute and harmless~!"

"I suppose, if that's how you wish to take it…"

"B-But don't you wear a snake mask…?" Ellie asked.

"It's the only one I have…"

As they continued down the road, Ellie couldn't keep her eyes off the cat. It was like she found herself naturally drawn to it. Thinking about it, *did* she like cats? She always found herself looking at them more than she did dogs. Even thinking about the storybook she liked to read, despite thinking the dog was her favorite character, she found herself thinking about the cat more.

"Carriage."

Liz called out, stepping to the side and tugging on Belle's arm to prompt her to do so as well. Sure enough, there was a carriage pulled by a large land dragon heading into the slums, and rather fast at that.

The three stepped out of the way, allowing the carriage to pass—

Though only three of them did.

“Ah…!”

The old cat, due to its age, did not seem to notice the carriage at all, as it had sat down and begun licking its fur.

Ellie felt an urgent sense of dread well up from within her. It was likely deaf and unable to tell that the carriage was coming at all.

“M-Move, kitty…!” She yelped, straining her voice louder than it usually would go. “M-move-!!”

She desperately called out, yelling for the cat to get out of the way before it was trampled by the oncoming land dragon, wishing with her entire heart and soul that it would be—

But there was nothing that could be done to stop the inevitable.

Even someone like Belle, who probably could have moved to do something, was currently tied down with Ellie upon her shoulders.

“K-Kitty…!” Ellie cried out as the most horrific sight imaginable played out right before her eyes.

“—Ah…”

In a terrible turn of events, the cat had been trampled by the oncoming land dragon.

It didn’t even seem to notice the tiny life it had likely just taken. Without batting an eye, it simply continued heading down the road without a care in the world.

Both Belle and Liz were speechless, not knowing how to react in the moment. The only person who moved—

“No!!!”

—The only person who moved was Ellie.

She began thrashing and kicking, attempting to force herself off of Belle’s shoulders, to get free and help the flattened old cat, praying desperately that it still had at least a small flame of life within its injured body.

“W-Wait, Ellie—!!!” Belle protested as she was rocked around.

However, Ellie refused to listen.

She dropped to the ground, landing on her behind. It hurt just a little, but that didn't matter in the slightest. The only thing that did was the safety of that cat.

"E-Ellie, wait!" Liz called, but once again, Ellie ignored it.

She forced herself up and dashed to where the cat's body was, not even accounting for how gruesome the sight was.

Because the sight didn't matter. As quickly as it appeared, it disappeared. Ellie's power was just that strong.

"…"

"…"

Neither Nessarose knew what to say, or how to react to what was unfolding before her eyes.

From Ellie's small hands radiated a soft blue light which enveloped the cat, repairing its wounds in a fashion so quick that nobody would even believe it if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes.

"D-Don't die, kitty…! D-Don't!!!"

Ellie's healing magic flowed into the cat, repairing its body bit by bit until there wasn't even a single scratch left.

It had been saved in an instant. It had been saved, thanks to Ellie's extraordinary power.

Simply having healing magic was one thing, an incredibly valuable thing at that. But having it, along with an aptitude this powerful— powerful enough to bring an animal back from the brink of death in an instant— it was nothing short of—

"Incredible…" Liz muttered in awe.

"There…" Ellie whispered, gently patting the cat's head as it stood up.

The cat itself seemed to be in shock of its own miraculous recovery. Even it must have recognized the absurdity of Ellie's power.

But so were the Nessaroses.

Ellie's blood ran cold as this began to dawn on her. They saw that, didn't they? No— It wasn't even a question. Of course they did. Of course they had seen it. So of course, they now knew of Ellie's magic, the exact secret she was desperately attempting to hide.

"…"

For a moment, she didn't know what to say. She timidly turned around, looking directly at Liz, unsure of what to say.

"U-Um…"

"—That's amazing…" Liz breathed, filled to the brim with astonishment.

She hesitantly began to approach her, Belle too, following. She crouched down at Ellie's side, inspecting the cat for herself. Sure enough, it was completely healed, without even a single scratch to be seen.

"Are you tired?" Liz asked. "After doing such a thing, I wouldn't be surprised if—"

She had reached out to rub Ellie's back, however—

"Hk-!! No-!!"

The moment Liz's hand touched her. She violently jerked away, a look of pure panic igniting within her eyes. Her entire body went cold, her hair stood on end, she instinctively yelped—

"…"

Liz could do nothing but blink in confusion. Belle, too, froze.

Ellie immediately felt a horrible sense of guilt wrack her entire system.

She didn't mean to do such a thing. It was just the unfortunate, instinctual reaction she had to being touched in the midst of a situation where she was using her magic.

Because every time her mother would touch her in a scenario like this—

"…"

No. That reaction was uncalled for. Liz wasn't her mother. She wasn't forcing her to hone her magic. She was…

"…"

"…"

"I'm… Sorry." Liz whispered, retracting her hand.

"A-Ah— Um…"

Ellie immediately regretted her reaction. However, she couldn't figure out what to do next. With a timid, apologetic look, she brought her hands to her chest as she began to curl within herself, shrinking away in shame.

Liz turned her gaze to Belle. Just one look at her expression told all that she needed to know. They were thinking the same thing.

She opened her lips, as if she wanted to speak, yet no words escaped her lips. Ellie, too, was lost in an awkward silence, until—

"Let's just head home, alright~?" Belle offered, cutting through the tension. "I'm sure we're all tired."

Liz was quiet for a moment, considering Belle's words.

"Y-Yes…" She finally agreed. "That's probably true. Cheers…"

She stood up, offering her hand to Ellie to also stand.

"…"

Ellie considered taking it, but hesitated, drawing out a sullen look from Liz. Though she didn't look like she didn't understand the reaction.

She took another look at Belle. It was as if they were having a conversation with just the looks in their eyes, exchanging feelings that words couldn't reach.

A serious talk between them was likely in order once they arrived back home.

△▼△▼△▼△

"So, the kids got some crazy healin' magic, huh?" Faith huffed as he sat himself down on the steps outside the Nessarose household.

"'Crazy' is putting it lightly." Liz corrected. "She brought a cat back from the brink of death in seconds. Much quicker than the average person could. Needless to say, her magic aptitude is likely very high, if not incredibly powerful."

"Interestin'…" Faith placed his chin in his hand as he began to think.

It was the afternoon by this point. After Liz, Belle, and Ellie returned home from their small outing, Liz wasted no time in telling Belle to go grab Faith for her. There was a serious discussion to be had.

"…"

Surprisingly, Belle had been staying quiet, something that didn't go unnoticed by her wife.

“Did you know?” Liz inquired, suspecting Belle.

She had the Divine Protection of Perception, after all. If anyone would be aware of it, of course it would be her.

“I had a feeling she was capable of much more than she let on.” Belle admitted. “Her gate is extraordinary…”

“Why didn’t ya say anythin’?” Faith narrowed his eyes.

“If she didn’t want to reveal it to us, she probably had her reasons. I wasn’t going to be the one to spill her secret~.”

“That’s surprisin’ly noble of ya.”

“Do you not take me as a noble person?”

“Well,” Liz cut into the banter before it steered the conversation off track, blowing a puff of smoke from her lips. “I don’t wish to come to any hasty conclusions, but we can piece some of this story together, can’t we?”

“Can we?” Belle brought her sleeve to her lips as she cocked her head.

“Yeah.” Faith nodded. “The evidence points towards a real nasty conclusion. A kid with real powerful magic, physical and mental signs of abuse, a sister who pushed her outta the house fer her own safety, and a ‘thing—’ most likely her mother, huntin’ her down?”

“…”

“…”

“Now I ain’t trying to jump to conclusions like ya said, Lizzie, but I ain’t sure what else that points to.”

The Nessarose’s expressions grew rather sullen, if they hadn’t already been so.

“What was happening in that house…?” Liz thought aloud.

“…”

Belle was silent. She only looked up towards the house in which Ellie lay, in the room they had allocated for her.

“I think she’s really anxious…” She murmured.

“What do you think we should do…?”

The doubt in Liz’s heart began to swell as she looked to her wife for some kind of support.

“This doesn’t change a thing, honey~.” Belle reassured her with a smile. “We should just talk to her about it, right?”

△▼△▼△▼△

Talking to her was exactly what they had decided to do. Ellie fidgeted as she stood on the porch, having been called outside by Liz.

“…”

Looking at the expressions both her guardians and Faith wore upon their faces, Ellie found herself feeling increasingly nervous. Were they upset with her? Was it because of what happened with the cat?

Naturally, Ellie couldn’t hold eye contact or open her posture much.

“A-Am I in trouble…?”

“Of course you aren’t.” Liz reassured, attempting to put on the most soothing smile she could. “But there is something we want to talk to you about.”

“…”

“Your magic~.” Belle put it plainly as she crouched down to Ellie’s level.

That was exactly what Ellie had been both expecting and fearing.

“D-Do we have to practice…?” She asked timidly, shifting her weight back and forth.

The idea of continuing her magic practice clenched her heart in a way words couldn’t describe. The training hurt. She knew it was for a good cause, but—

“Of course not~. You don’t like to, right? So you don’t have to do that.”

“Huh?”

Ellie blinked a couple of times. That wasn’t the response she was expecting.

They wouldn’t make her? But wasn’t honing her skills at healing the most important thing in the world? Didn’t it take priority over all else? Why would they just forgo that?

“We won’t make you do anything you don’t want to. Unless it's to take a bath, which I don’t really like to do either…”

“…”

“Did your mother make you practice your magic?”

Ellie nodded.

“Did it hurt?”

“…”

Ellie nodded again.

“Did she tell you why she wanted you to practice so often?”

“I-If I practice, and my magic gets big and strong, she said it would be… Helpful…”

“Helpful to her?”

She nodded once more.

“You know, Ellie…” Belle began. “Healing magic is a wonderful thing. It’s not something you should hide, or be afraid of.”

“…”

“I don’t know what your mother wanted from your skills, and I’m not really in a position to speak on it, since I don’t exactly know her. But I don’t believe that such a beautiful magic exists to serve just one person. It’s the most gentle and caring power ever, after all~.”

“…”

“It’s a power that saves the lives of millions… Like that cat from earlier.”

Ellie lowered her gaze.

Belle’s reasoning made perfect sense to her— Yet it caused a feeling of guilt to rise up within her. She suddenly felt bad for hiding it and not saying something sooner.

Upon seeing so, Belle gently extended her arm and grasped Ellie’s small hand within her own.

“You don’t have to practice it, or even continue using it. You don’t have to ever again, if you really don’t want to. I understand, if that’s what you wish to do. But what we want you to understand is that what you have is a very, very beautiful gift.”

“…”

“And one day, I hope you can use it for a beautiful cause. But until that day comes, nobody will make you do anything, okay?”

“……”

She didn't know why, but in that moment, Ellie remembered something Elenor had told her years ago.

"Who cares what that thing wants us to use these powers for? I don't care! I'm gonna use it however I want!"

For Elenor, that was offensive magic. Crystals of mana flying through the sky to nail and knock out people who dared step in her way. Ellie always thought that to be just another one of Elenor's defiance towards their mother, but thinking about it again—

"…"

Perhaps, just maybe, she could find her own goal. Her own application of magic.

Her own ambition.

Whatever that could be, she wasn't sure right away. She probably wouldn't be sure for a long time, actually. But it was something to think about, wasn't it?

"If you want to learn any tricks, though, feel free to let me know~." Belle grinned. "I'm a magical genius, after all~."

"A-Ah, okay…" Ellie nodded.

"But only if you want to. And if we decide we want to look at magic sometime, we'll figure out a method that doesn't involve you getting hurt. "

"…"

"Your happiness is what matters most to us, after all."

"…!"

Ellie couldn't explain it, but Belle's words were incredibly comforting. She was feeling anxious before, but now…

Belle seemed to recognize the shift inside Ellie. Another grin found its way onto her face as she stood back up.

"I've got such a way with words, don't I ~?"

She softly reached her hand out to Ellie, making sure such a gesture was okay, before patting her head.

"You're such a sweetheart, huh?"

"…"

She couldn't see it herself, but Ellie was sure she smiled just a little.

Off to the side, Liz and Faith seemed to have nothing to add to the conversation.

“Guess the bum has this handled.” Faith huffed in amusement.

“Cheers. I’m surprised how well that went over. I didn’t even need to say anything.”

The sight of Belle rubbing Ellie’s head, much like she was a cat, sent a warm feeling through Liz’s heart.

Faith was nothing like Belle, but he was observant enough to recognize that. Same with both Belle and Ellie. Though they weren’t a traditional family, and even if some of them would deny that they were, that was certainly what it felt like.

‘Who woulda guessed reality could be so goddamn sweet?’ Faith thought to himself.

The Nessarose’s future alongside Ellie was looking to be incredibly bright, if that wasn’t already apparent by the even brighter feelings encompassing the yard.

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