

"It's hot..."

I woke up with my whole body sticky and covered in sweat. Dirt and dust caked every inch of my exposed skin. My throat and mouth was so parched, I was willing to drink a gallon of anything put in front of me.

Shuffling at the entrance of the cave startled me.

Thankfully, it was Irapesha, returning with the mangled body of a red boar-like creature on her shoulder that looked to be a fresh kill. She was looking a lot better after resting. Although the canteen was now empty, it put me at ease that my tireless effort of slowly feeding her water worked.

"I've brought us food. We'll need to eat up to regain our strength." The corpse slipped from her grasp and dropped with a heavy thud. The left stub of her missing arm extended forward as if to pick the creature up, then she stopped short upon remembering it was gone. "This will... take time getting used to."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you lose your arm and wing?" I asked.

The question appeared to be a touchy subject. Her brows furrowed in apparent mental anguish trying to remember.

"Might have been when I wasn't myself... It's weird. I've come to my senses to find myself much less whole than I once was..." Irapesha regarded herself with disdain and disappointment, eyes growing wet like she was about to cry.

I walked up and put a hand on her right arm. "No, you aren't any less than who you used to be. You're still the same heroic and selfless Irapesha Bloodtalon from all of Cresta's stories, the statue in the Terrace of Heroes, and even the pumpkin carving. Hell, you even saved me when you were still out of it!"

The dragonewt chuckled, raising her right hand and clenching it into a fist. The entire arm bulged with chiseled muscles from just the act of tensing up.

"Cresta greatly exaggerates those stories." Confidence returned to Irapesha the more she ruminated on my words. "So they raised a statue of me in the Terrace of Heroes? We shall have to return and tear it down because I'm alive."

"Before that, we have to eat to regain our energy like you said. Are you going to cook it with your fire breath?" I asked, eager to see it again when not used to roast her own flesh.

She stared at me dumbfounded, like it was an outrageous thing for me to say in such a situation.

"First we drink its blood, otherwise we'll dehydrate. *Then* we cook the meat."

I stared back at her with the same dumbfounded look.

When I told myself I'd drink anything, I didn't exactly mean the blood of an unknown creature from another world.

Irapesha went out and returned with a large rock the size of my head, then pummeled a basin into it through brute strength. To my horror and disgust, she ripped a boar's leg off and squeezed the blood into the hole like wringing a wet towel.

"This shall be our drinking water," she said.

"Water is clear and not murky red!" I retorted.

The dragonewt lifted the rock, blood and all, up to me as naturally as if it were a cup. She wasn't joking. When it looked like I wouldn't budge, she dipped her face into it and chugged the blood down to the last drop.

"It's perfectly safe to drink," Irapesha insisted, breaking off another limb to drain blood out of. "In fact, bangloar blood is a good source of iron. Coupled with a diet of pakarian wyvern gives you—"

"All the protein you need. I know, I know. Cresta and everyone else made it very clear to me the first time." I sighed.

Hearing her friend's name, Irapesha settled down and smiled warmly to herself. She roasted both legs with her fiery breath, then handed one of them to me. It took both my hands to hold it steady and the meat was too piping hot to eat.

"Cresta and I often ate together like this. Though unlike you, she would never pass up a chance to drink bangloar blood... Tell me, at what front does she fight at now?" Irapesha asked.

"Front? The war's been over for years." As soon as I said that, she became despondent.

As we ate, I explained to Irapesha what happened in her absence. Until now, she had thought the war was ongoing. Even the caretaker system was a foreign concept to her.

From what I understood, Irapesha Bloodtalon was marked a casualty after diverting a demon horde to save Cresta after she was captured. That, however, turned out to be a decoy. The demons' true aim was the dragonewt herself, hoping to remove a strategic and powerful commander from the Granieda Empire's chain of command.

"I see. When I saw you, I had believed you belonged to a human special forces unit that came to rescue me. But to think... the war is over? Thank the gods. And it seems that you have been taking care of Cresta in my absence. For that, you have my sincerest gratitude." Irapesha let out a relieved sigh and bowed her head.

"Well... Cresta's done a lot for me. It's only right I do the same for her," I said.

After I got done explaining, the boar leg had cooled down enough for me to eat. The meat was so thick that a few bites were enough to fill me up. The dragonewt wasn't convinced that I had enough and ripped pieces of meat off the bangloar's body to roast for me.

When I tried to decline...

"You must keep eating. Your muscles will never grow as big as mine eating so little," Irapesha said.

"No amount of eating is going to get me to your muscle mass!" I fired back.

While Irapesha didn't exactly have bowling ball-sized muscles like bodybuilders, she was incredibly defined. Much of her limbs were covered in small scale plates like the one Cassius had shown me. Her body, particularly her abdomen, belly, and head were all skin like mine, though they were likely more durable than normal human skin. She also had a tail, so thick it could probably crush bone with just a whack. The horns reminded me of Ange and Tamara, but the dragonewt's was smooth and curved behind her head instead of forward.

"What's our plan of action going to be? Wait until we're found, or find them ourselves?" I asked the war-seasoned soldier.

"I'm eager to see my companions again. We'll search for them *after* you have finished eating at least half of this bangloar." Irapesha began to cook more of the beast.

"What?" I blinked..

Irapesha stuffed a large helping of shredded meat into my mouth and was cooking more before I had the chance to chew.

"I refuse to let you go hungry under my watch," she said while stuffing my mouth like a turkey's ass on Thanksgiving.

This woman was going to feed me to death at this rate.

I managed to rear my head far enough to avoid the next onslaught of meat to protest. "Why are you... so insistent on me eating so—"

"Sh." Irapesha put another handful into my mouth to silence me. She turned to face the entrance of the cave. After a few seconds of silence, a stampede of footsteps shook the earth around us. "I messed up... The demons must have sighted me when I was out hunting. We can't afford to be trapped here."

Without giving me an opportunity to swallow the food in my mouth, Irapesha picked me off the ground like a newspaper under her armpit and sprinted for the exit. We came out to a horde of demons pinning us in from both sides of the canyon. She instinctively spread her one wing thinking to fly, but we wouldn't be going anywhere with the other half missing.

There had to be something I could do, too.

Brushing my hand against the dagger gifted to me, I wondered if it had been long enough that it's recharged.

As we realized the futility of our situation, Irapesha put me down and placed her large, clawed and scaly hand on my head.

"I would have liked to visit your world and see Cresta again," she said. "Thank you for the warmth you've shown me. For a dragonewt, we don't say that often because we are boiling-blooded creatures."

"What are you saying? We're getting out of here together, aren't we?" I asked, fearing that she might do something rash.

Irapesha shook her head. "I will break their ranks and create an opening, then hold them back for you to escape. When you return to Cresta, please tell her... I never once, not even when I lost my mind, blamed her for what happened to me. It was my greatest pleasure to have saved her."

The dragonewt fought back tears as she took a fighting stance. Large, blood-stained claws emerged from underneath the scales in her right hand.

The horde of demons closed in, but they stopped and turned their gazes to the sky to the sound of helicopter blades beating in the distance. Half a dozen heavily armed choppers in formation mowed down flying demons that tried to get too close. Their guns turned to the ones at the ground and rained bullets all around.

One helicopter broke formation to fly right over us. Someone from inside had jumped off without a parachute.

Irapesha gasped. "Is that...?"

It couldn't be anyone else. Even as she was but a silhouette in free fall, the eager tail whipping back and forth was a dead giveaway.

"The catvalry has arrived!"

Cresta torpedoed into the ground and unleashed hell on the demon forces. They quickly fell into disarray, and with dust being kicked up from the ensuing battle, none of them could neither see nor fight back against the one-assassin ambush. Those whose self-preservation kicked in fled in terror.

By my side, Irapesha had dropped to her knees. The dust began to settle and the commotion quieted down, only to be replaced by armored military vehicles fast approaching. They created a barrier around us and soldiers poured out to form a defensive perimeter. Commander Qarth and his party waved from the open roof of one vehicle.

From the wall of dust and debris, Cresta raced in to find us. Tears streamed down her face the moment she laid eyes on Irapesha.

"Akira! Pesh!" Cresta choked out our name, but hesitated as if afraid we were an illusion.

"What are you waiting for? Don't you have something you wanted to say?" I shouted, snapping her into action.

Cresta tackled the dragonewt into the dirt. The two friends embraced on the ground, and unable to hold back their emotions any longer, they began to cry their hearts' out.

"I'm... I'm so glad... you're safe! I thought you were dead all this time! I missed you so much!" she wailed between quivering breaths.

"I know, Cresta..." Irapesha let the stoic demeanor fall as her eyes welled with tears. "I'm sorry for worrying you."