

Natalia couldn't help but smile at the doctor's timidity.

Over a drink at the bar downstairs, Tretton had leaned into her ear and told her to meet her upstairs in ten minutes, then proceeded to leave and walk up to their shared room. Her tone had been quiet, curt - her usual cadence - but this time, a touch of nervousness in her voice. Considering how things had been going between them, Natalia half-guessed what she was asking for. The two of them had been closer recently, both physically and emotionally, though they hadn't done anything that had either of them without their clothes.

Now waiting, the rogue smiles to herself, a warm excitement bubbling inside of her at the thought of what Tretton was preparing upstairs. She takes a swig from her drink, frowning as she reaches the bottom of her mug.

Her eyes meet the time: two minutes to go.

Natalia had contemplated the thought of what the doctor may be like between sheets, even more curious - what that form underneath those robes held. Straightening up and seeming to readjust the thought in her mind, she quickly removes the amorous thought from her head. Natalia was still getting used to this feeling - the idea of a relationship more long-term, one that held something more than just a one-sided gain or brief indulges in more carnal desires. Sure, there had been times where Natalia had genuinely cared for those previous partners, but they're no longer here. Tretton was new for her, a person who's unexplored - in both meanings of the word. There was, of course, the chance that Tretton would just want to show Natalia something that she had found. Or perhaps it was just for a quiet talk, a private moment, or something else.

One minute to go.

Even stranger still, she usually got to know her partners *after* making love for the first time, and again, the doctor is a different case. There have been fleeting memories of some of those faces, some of those nights, some of the forms that she laid with. Surprisingly, it was Tretton's face that stood out to her the most - though she *did* have that elongated beak of a mask, so that most likely contributed.

It was time.

She slides herself out of the tavern booth, cloak around her shoulders, hair let down, eyes wandering two tables over where Olivia, Samuel and York are playing cards. Interrupting her journey; the watchful gaze of the soldier.

'You going up?' Olivia asks, instinctively shielding her cards from York, to which the wyvernfolk responds by turning his head away, guilty but smiling.

'I think so, it's been a long day. Goodnight.' Natalia responds, giving a brief goodbye-wave with one hand as she turns to leave.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Nat.'

'Night, golden eyes.' York's nickname for her closes their farewells.

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The wooden stairs of the tavern are well-made, as they don't creak as Natalia walks from the upstairs hallway to the room that her and Tretton would be sharing for the night. Her mischievousness and curiosity peaks as she leans and presses her ear up against the door, hearing the pacing of feet from behind it. She knocks, and at once, the pacing stops.

'Natalia?'

'That's right.'

'Come in.'

The rogue obliges, closing the door behind her as she then leans up against the wall, arms folded, facing Tretton. The doctor is still in her robes complete with her mask, the only item of clothing missing are her shoes. A previous iteration of Natalia would have frowned in disappointment, this one does not.

‘So...’ Natalia trails off, stepping away from the door and treading towards Tretton. She’s using that tone that she has in her voice, the soft, gentle kind that she knows Tretton adores - Natalia knows it makes her fidget and fluster. The doctor turns her head to avoid her gaze, though is quickly met with Natalia’s coaxing hand taking her chin and lifting it upwards towards her.

‘...what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?’

The question is laced with a combination of curiosity, gentleness and sultriness. Tretton cranes her neck, the beak of her mask brushing against Natalia’s midsection as her fingers slowly wrap around Natalia’s. The rogue notices that they are shaking, but only slightly - a detail that switches her expression to one less playful and more serious.

‘I-I want to show you something.’

Tretton’s tone is concerned, rickety. Her hands take Natalia’s and guide them until they are both sitting on the plush mattress. A miniscule ocular movement from Natalia as her eyes move to the bed then back to Tretton. The doctor stands, stepping a few paces away before the singular rise and fall of her shoulders signify a deep breath before she begins to move her gloved hands towards her waist. She begins to unbuckle her belt, an action that causes the sides of Natalia’s mouth to slowly shift into a wide smile. The belt comes off, Tretton letting it fall to the floor. *Clunk*, the metal buckle is heavy against the wooden floorboards. There is a moment of stillness from both parties. Natalia spots that the doctor is now *visibly* shaking. The rogue’s smile drops upon seeing it.

‘Tretton, if you don’t want to do this, I want you to know that I’m not forcing you to-’

‘No - no. This is something I *want* to do’ she interrupts Natalia and continues to undress. She unclasps the buttons around the top of her robes before she takes either side of the neckline, widening it before pulling it down.

Natalia realises it is the first time that she has seen Tretton’s bare skin, to the point where she forgets to blink, focused intently on the sight before her. As the doctor pulls the dress down lower and reveals more, Natalia understands her nervousness, her hesitation, her fear. Tretton pulls the top of the dress down so that her torso was bare - save for a wrapping of cloth that covers her chest. Underneath lies skin that is pale - unnaturally so - as if someone had drained the blood from it, but permitted it to retain just a shred of its natural colour. In the area where her heart is, a discoloration of the skin, causing a visually chaotic pattern. The marking is ragged, bits of it scattered across her body, until Natalia realises that it isn’t the pattern of the flesh.

Those are stitches.

Three separate lines of stitches meet at her heart, one coming from her shoulder, one from her waist, another from her side. Looking closer, Natalia can see that not every section of Tretton matches the other. A miniscule difference in shade between all three; a light white, followed by two variations of skin that get slightly more grey each time. Some sections of her torso seem *newer* than the others, the part around her side looks drier than the other two’s smoother complexion. Around Tretton’s shoulders, a mismatch of scars, scratches and wounds that have sunken into her skin to remain where they are.

Natalia’s eyes track down to the stitches - they are done neatly, uniformed, most likely the work of the doctor. At the edges of the held together flesh, there is an ugly shade of dun - like dead wood - embedded into the doctor’s skin. On top of that, all manner of unwashed

smudges and muck that has stuck around on her body, most likely due to her being captive to the getup she had to conceal herself with everyday.

There is silence between the two as Tretton rolls down the dress further, moving past her waist, before she steps out of it, leaving it discarded on the floor beside her. Balled fists move up to pick at her spine before she finds the fastening of cloth there and removing it, alongside the underwear covering her lower body. Beneath the wrap that was around her chest is a particularly large scar, a horizontal slash - unsightly.

Now Natalia understands why Tretton wanted to do this. This is not a moment of timid and intimate first times, the doctor wants Natalia to look, but not for any copulative reason.

'My physical form is not...normal. It is a result of scientific barbarity that...' Tretton stumbles on her words.

'That -...' she swallows.

'This is what I am. This is *all* that I am'

Her voice and body is still taught with tension, visibly unstable. She is still shivering - even though the fireplace within the room is still alight and fuelled.

Natalia's expression is made of stone, showing little expression or emotion.

The doctor has her eyes trained intently on the floor, a modified shame beginning to sift through her brain, blood pounding in her ears. The silence was too much. A pit opens up within the doctor's stomach, a slow and tantalising anxiety starts to tear through her system as she is suddenly aware of her nakedness. She felt sick. This was the wrong thing to do, what a horrendous mistake this all was.

'I'm sorry, this was-'

'I want to see all of you.'

A great storm within the doctor's mind is quelled by Natalia's statement. Finally, Tretton looks to the rogue to see a woman who is not aghast and disgusted, but instead - one who is gazing past the eye sockets on her mask. There, compassion and remorse.

'This is all of-'

'Your mask.'

Natalia stands and paces her way to Tretton. Her hands reach out to cradle each side of the doctor's face, tenderly.

'I want to see your eyes.'

Her tone is gentle, understanding and brilliantly humane. Even through the darkened lenses of Tretton's mask, Natalia's glowing gaze pierces them and spots her eyes, wide and anxious. Gradually, Tretton's hands move to cover Natalia's, with the latter giving the former a reassuring squeeze. As the doctor works on removing her mask, Natalia spots the marks surrounding her hands. Stitches on her biceps, unhealed bruises along the forearms, skin around the fingernails picked away and reddened.

There is a metallic unclasp of buckles, a loosening of straps before the headscarf slips off to one side and the mask frees itself from around Tretton's head. Natalia's hands give their own form of mild encouragement as they both lift it off of her in unison.

Beneath that mask, a woman with dark unkempt hair, unwashed and scraggly. Brown eyes, bushed and exhausted, look up to Natalia, fulfilling the covet that she asked for. There are no stitches or wounds aside from a cut across her cheek. But Gods, she looks *tired*. She looks so, so tired. Natalia takes Tretton's chin in a delicate fashion, as if it were made of glass, tilting it so that the two were looking into one another's eyes.

'*This* is all of me.'

Tretton's voice isn't shaking anymore, though it is impossible to tell if this stability is only temporary or not. Leaning down, Natalia leans her forehead against Tretton's, gently

pressing her form into hers. The touch lingers, the dying embers of the fire a spectator to their warm embrace.

'If you would permit me, I have one more request' Natalia says, leaning close to her ear, taking her face with both hands now, compelling Tretton to look at her. There, those golden orbs, honeyed-yellow, so sweet and nurturing. Then, a whisper of what was to come next.

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The water splashes down on Tretton's head, then trickles down to the basin that she was currently seated in.

The room is now relatively steamy, as evident by the condensation on the mirror, a detail that Tretton has been focusing on during her time sitting in the tub. Another douse of water. The doctor frowns.

'Was the stench *that bad*?' Tretton asks, prompting a chuckle from Natalia.

'No, there wasn't much smell, don't worry' she responds.

'Was it the grime then? Was there too much dirt?'

Another chuckle.

'No, love. You'll see.'

A flutter of the heart from Tretton at the use of the word 'love'. She hates how easily she reacts to it, crumbling at the slightest affection. Almost pathetic, really. A moment of silence before the sound of Natalia setting the bucket down. The water has reached a point where Tretton is almost neck deep in it.

'I think that's enough, don't you?' she asks, rhetorically. Tretton rolls her eyes.

'Nat, what is-'

'Trust me' Natalia says and then begins to gently press down on Tretton's shoulders, slowly beginning to submerge her. The doctor heeds her words, letting her take control of her form within the water. Tretton has her legs crossed, but her small height has her submerged up to her chin now. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Natalia discard her cloak, but looks away by the time her partner begins to take off her hose stockings. It still felt embarrassing, feeling this way for the first time. Before long, with her undergarments and shirt still on, Natalia steps into the basin on the other side of Tretton.

'Nat - your clothes-' Tretton points out, only getting an amused chuckle from the rogue.

'Hush - they're only clothes' she says, before reaching around the side to pick up a washcloth. Reaching towards Tretton, she takes her chin with one hand then begins to work on the left side of her face with the cloth. Even when scrubbing, Natalia can sense just how unbelievably *tense* her partner is. A warm, reassuring smile.

'Have you always washed by yourself?' Natalia asks, moving on to the other side of her face, being careful around the cut on her cheek.

'Always had to, so yes' she answers, rotating herself so that Natalia has better coverage of her face. There is a pang of pity from within the rogue, the idea of so many nights next to nobody at all.

'Would you like this?' Natalia asks. There is a brief silence where the doctor avoids her eyes.

'I don't know' she responds with a tone that does not communicate genuine uncertainty.

'You don't know?'

'I don't know how it feels?'

'To wash?'

A chuckle.

'To have someone *e/se* do it for me'

Natalia sinks her palms back into the water and finds Tretton's hands. She holds them, in which the doctor returns the gentle squeeze that is given.

'Do you want to try?'

The question is without judgement - a quality that Tretton picks up on and is deeply thankful for. The first feeling of tightness in her throat.

'That'd be kmh...that'd be nice actually' she says, looking back up to her partner. There, in those eyes, a deep auburn-coloured longing. Natalia meets her look, and smiles, silently thanking her for the trust.

Natalia starts with her back first, turning her around and scrubbing down her shoulders, down her spine, being mindful of any scars or new-looking wounds. The water is a good temperature for washing, hot enough for the cleaning to feel like it was doing the job - but not scalding enough to burn.

'You feeling okay so far?' Natalia checks, with the response of a nod from Tretton. Shifting closer, Natalia presses up against Tretton's back, so that she can reach the front of her, beginning to scrub away at her torso. The proximity of the rogue behind her causes Tretton's face to warm at the intimacy of it, even if Natalia still had her top on, the image of Natalia's chest pressing up against her was enough to cause her to become flustered. But no, if anything, it was how *careful* the woman was being with her, both verbally and physically. This transcends any form of lechery. That feeling of tightness increases, for a reason she cannot identify.

Leaning forward, Natalia rests her chin on the dip between Tretton's neck and left shoulder, so that she can see the doctor's body as she cleans. Fingers move a lot more delicately around the stitches, carefully wiping away at the skin that was there, doing her best to remove any sort of dirt or muck. Tretton's eyes move to Natalia's, seeing the woman focusing on the task at hand with the slightest ever upwards-curve to her lips. Natalia spots her looking and gives a warm smile, one that says '*I'm here*'. Tretton begins to breathe heavier at this look, those dominoes of composure behind her eyes start to topple. Turning back around to the front, Tretton's eyes dampen, then wetten, then she begins to cry, silently at first.

'You alright to keep going?' a whisper in her ear; Natalia.

'Yeah,' Tretton wipes her eyes, 'yeah, I'm fine this just...feels nice. Nobody's ever really done this before'. A gentle, singular tut from Natalia's lips.

'A crime, surely, punishable by the Gods' she says. Tretton chuckles, sadly.

'I doubt the Gods care for me that much' she says. A pause, the doctor worrying if her self-loathing has suddenly spoiled the mood.

'Then I defy those Gods, Tretton. How cruel they are to leave such a beauty with such a burden' Natalia says, now pulling her into a hug from behind, wrapping her arms around Tretton with an affectionate tenderness. Another chuckle from Tretton that dissolves into a choke, that crashes into sobbing.

The tears come quickly now; a great mental dam has burst within the doctor's form. It is brought on by the swelling love that Tretton feels, so excessive and so alien, so she cries. She buries her head in one hand, the other clutching Natalia's arm.

'You do not need to hold your tears from me, love' Natalia speaks into her ear once more. Tretton wants to respond, truly she does. She wants to verbally compare Natalia to the stars, to sunsets, to flowers, to butterflies, to supernovas. She loves her so incredibly and wants to say so, but she can only cry. Her other hand moves backwards to cradle one side of Natalia's head, shifting it to be touching hers, which Natalia quickly accommodates. They hold each other, one of them weeping, the other listening and waiting, patiently. Natalia

notices the grip around her arm is so very tight - not out of force, but out of some kind of starved desire.

'I'm not letting you go' Natalia says, softly.

The words cause Tretton to double over sobbing, though she is held upright by Natalia as she touches her cheek with hers; *I'm right here, don't worry*. The doctor has since stopped trying to wipe away her tears, as is now accepting the embrace with every bit that her body will allow. There is a mumbling of something incomprehensible through her crying, maybe a thank you, or request, but Natalia couldn't make it out.

'I'm not letting you go' Natalia repeats, continuing to hold her, as her partner cries freely and with her whole heart, perhaps for the first time ever. Listening, Natalia feels the rhythm of Tretton's heart beat. Steady, and slow - almost fatigued. Calm. Alive. Here.

*'I'm not letting you go'*

An hour later, Tretton had already fallen asleep.

From the other side of the bed, Natalia lays on her side and observes the sleeping form of the doctor. Eyes closed, face clean, hair still slightly wet and matted out across the pillow, like some small octopus.

They hadn't made love or kissed, but instead, they dried off, got changed and laid with each other in bed, before the doctor fell asleep in Natalia's arms.

Natalia feels the rise and fall of Tretton's chest, listens to her quiet, laboured breathing. She can't recall how long she's been listening. One finger goes to brush a piece of hair away from Tretton's face so that she can see it all, careful all the way, not to disturb her.

It was at this point that Natalia would usually leave the room, take her clothes and perhaps any other valuables she deems hers before she takes off. That's how it was previously. Though tonight is different. In fact, she was certain she would never do anything of the sort to Tretton. Not once, not ever.

Natalia settles, laying on her side as she turns down the lamp above them until it begins to gradually dim. As the light fades, Natalia watches the sight of Tretton slowly dissolve into darkness.

Even though she cannot see her physically, it is a new feeling of warmth - knowing that Tretton is just there beside her. Natalia only hopes that she is providing that same feeling for the doctor.