

A couple of us were having breakfast downstairs around the living room when Ange came down to join. She hugged me, hugged Tamara, and then sat down next to her with a comb to begin brushing the woolen bed of hair. Our most recent resident, however, didn't take kindly to that.

While Remmy and Ivory gamed away on the console, sat on the floor to be as close to the television as possible, the one who couldn't play turned to face us. The purple tint of Remmy's body returned to a deep blue as the pink gathered to a small splotch on her back, forming the face of Saralash.

"Demon. Your presence offends me. Remove yourself from my sights," Saralash demanded.

"And what will you do about it? Insult me until I do?" Ange reveled in the fact that her would-be assassin was stuck and unable to harm her.

Both of them began to bicker. It went about as well as one would expect. Their words were vicious but had no bite. A part of me was disappointed since their exchange had the potential to become more spicy if Tamara wasn't in the room. This had become a regular occurrence whenever the two were in the same room together. Most of us had stopped asking them to get along.

Usually, the only way their mutual verbal spar came to an end was by—

"Saralash, what did I say about being more friendly?" Remmy asked her unwilling bodymate.

"Would you be so kind," Saralash began with a heavy sigh, "as to remove yourself from my sights?"

"Awww. The little pimple has learned to be more courteous. Very well. Come, Tamara. Let's pester Cresta to help with your tougher tangles," Ange said.

"Okay!" Tamara scarfed up her breakfast before following Ange upstairs.

The pink slime glared at Ange until she was gone.

"Alright, Saralash. I feel like you're going to pop like a zit at this rate. Do we need to sign you up to anger management classes?" I asked.

"All of you continue to liken me to a cosmetic imperfection that only matters to humans. I *feel* I should be offended. The only management class I need is how to regain control of my body to slay the demon once and for all," Saralash said of Ange.

"The Royal Black Guards are done. You're still on about that?"

She grimaced. "Did you think I had a change of heart back then? I sacrificed myself for Remmy. Not for any sort of empathy I might have for a demon."

Maybe it was too much to ask.

As I got up to start cleaning the table, my phone rang. I wasn't expecting any calls, so it came as a surprise when Reggie was on the other end.

"Yo, Akira! How do you like your surprises?" Reggie asked.

"Rare and easy on the pepper," I answered.

"Well, I brought something better than steak! Come on out and get it," he urged with a little mischievousness in his voice.

Better than a good steak?

When I opened the front door, Val and Isla were standing in before me. Immediately, the little sapling jumped to hug me, entangling me in growing vines and roots.

"Hi, Papa!" Isla exclaimed, burying her face into my chest.

"What? You guys are back already?" I stammered like a bumbling mess, elated by their early return.

"The operation was successful. Isla couldn't wait to go home, and Tarcosa assured us that it would be fine," Val explained with a smile.

Behind them, Reggie tossed a peace sign from the driver's seat. Grace, who sat in the passenger seat, nodded approvingly at me.

"Better than steak, right?" Reggie smirked.

"Steak is good, but I'd say this is pretty up there. Thanks for bringing them home. Now we can... finally go to the beach as a dorm," I asked cautiously.

"Without Angeline, I hope?" Grace corrected me, one brow raised like a teacher awaiting a student's silly answer.

However, there was only one answer a man of my age could possibly give.

"But I want to see Ange in a bikini!" I exclaimed.

"My man!" Reggie flashed a big, grinning bro nod until Grace's unamused demeanor wiped the smile from his face.

"She's under house arrest," Grace reminded me. "Don't. Bring. Her. Out."

They drove away and left me no room for negotiations.

Was Ange really going to be trapped in the dorm forever? They couldn't just keep her here. She was a living, breathing person. That placed a damper on more than just beach plans. I had to kiss my trip to Japan with her goodbye, too.

Sighing, I returned my attention to my adopted netherfolk daughter, the little happiness afforded to me this day. Though something about Isla seemed different.

"Is it just me or did you get taller?" I asked, noting that she was as tall as my waist now.

Height wasn't all that changed. Isla's skirt of leaves had grown thicker and more vibrant, a darker green in color. A bright flower with pink and yellow petals crowned her head, too.

"Isla *did* age considerably," Val said. "A consequence of living within Tarcosa's castle for a time which was heavy with magic. She likely absorbed the magic passively and grew in doing so. That won't happen anymore though with her receptors surgically removed in the operation."

"I'm a big girl now!" Isla exclaimed.

I stroked the flower petals on her head which drew a sweet giggle from her. "You speak in full sentences now, too! Don't grow up too fast, alright? For now, let's tell everyone the good news!"

As soon as we got inside, Tamara stampeded down the stairs to welcome Isla home.

"Isla, your big sister missed you!" Tamara tackled the smaller netherfolk, but was shocked when she pulled back to find them more similar in height now. "Whaaaat? How did you grow so much? I haven't grown an inch this whole year!"

"Good," Ange and I found ourselves instinctively saying, causing Tamara to pout.

"Isla's back? My pot buddy's back!" Ivory raced out of the living room to throw herself over Tamara and Isla.

The next to emerge next, however, gave Val an awkward pause.

Remmy poked her head in with Saralash staining the side of her cheek. They recognized each other immediately.

"Va'tish? Is that you?" Val gasped.

"Well, if it isn't Queen Vleanor. I would shake your hand, but that is not my choice anymore," Saralash said.

I explained everything to Val, from the Royal Black Guards all the way up to Remmy's fusion with Saralash, while surveying the destruction to our backyard. She was particularly aggrieved by her garden's destruction during the attacks, but found amusement in her old friend's unfortunate predicament.

"So, you guys actually knew each other well in Weyera?" I asked Val after all there was to say.

"Quite well." Val nodded. "Va'tish belonged to a subspecies of slow-corroding, sentient slime. It was my spies who found and rescued her, and we found that her mastery of shifting forms to do battle was very impressive. Truly the embodiment of a weapon arsenal. How ironic that she now cannot form even a single spine. A fitting enough punishment for what you did, all things considered."

"Hmph. As if I need to hear any more about what I deserve from the kingdomless." Saralash got the last word in before diluting herself throughout Remmy to hide.

"It's good to see you again as well, Va'tish!" she hollered to Remmy.

"Uhm... Is there anything we can do... to make her feel more... welcome?" Remmy asked.

"You really adore her, don't you?" I asked in return.

"Saralash isn't all that bad... just misunderstood," the purple-fied slime girl mumbled.

"Your only problem is her being at odds with Angeline. Fix that first before anyone else can get along with her," Val said.

Just then, Isla opened the sliding door and entered the backyard. She skipped over to hug my legs, glancing up at me with beady eyes.

"Papa, I'm hungry!" Isla exclaimed.

"We used to feed you by watering you, right? Has anything changed since the operation?" I asked.

"There has. Isla must be fed a diet of magic crystals— once per day.. Here." Val produced a small but hefty leather pouch.

I untied the string that held the mouth of the bag together, revealing numerous crystals the size of a pinky's fingernail inside in an array of different colors. Isla began to drool, her eyes fixed on the pouch.

"Alright, Isla. Say, ahhh!" I plucked a crystal to give her.

Instead of taking it, the alraune girl's head split open horizontally down the middle like a venus fly trap. Threads of viscous saliva connected one side of the mouth to the other.

"Ahhh!"

"WHAT THE FUCK!" I fell back, and Isla snapped her mouth shut apologetically.

Val guffawed so loudly that she snorted like a pig, tearing up from the corners of her eyes. Even Remmy couldn't contain her laughter and pressed a hand to her mouth. Isla was the only one worried enough to check on me, and now I felt terrible for freaking out *at* her.

"I'm sorry, Papa..." Isla whimpered.

"No, it's not your fault..." I glared at Val for not warning me beforehand, then picked up the crystal I dropped and raised it to her face again. "Just leave my fingers intact, okay?"

Isla hesitated at first, then her head split open again. Slowly this time. The gaping maw was lined with rows of sharpened teeth like the jaws of a shark with a bad dental plan. I cautiously leaned forward thinking to toss the crystal in when a long, fleshy tongue shot out to snatch it from my fingers.

The head mouth closed shut, and her other mouth curved into a content smile that hiccupped once.

"This is going to take some time getting used to," I said, clutching my heart in its death throes. "Why can't you eat with your regular mouth?"

"But I never ate with my regular mouth," Isla said.

Come to think of it...

We always watered her like a plant. She never needed to eat normally like the rest of us.

"Oh, Caretaker!" Val's condescending voice assailed my ears like a fire alarm from the ruins of the raised garden beds. "Will you be a dear and clean this mess, restore it to its original glory, and make sure it isn't destroyed again?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure thing, your royal pain in the butt."