

Hacksaw didn't have even a second to breathe before Idris was upon them, crawling down from the wall like a demon, **her fins flared and her electricity spewing in all directions.** Though she did not raise her voice, her magic was potent and Hacksaw lowered himself before her, ears down, tail wrapped around his legs. He was as close to the ground as he could be, though even that did not seem to be enough to quell Idris's aggression.

"Who is this?" She demanded. Both of her true eyes were narrowed, one a stuttering sliver of pure electrical fury, the other a sharp tool meant for judgment.

Neo wheezed, hefting Jolyne's weight as a couple of his siblings came to fetch her and bring her inside. His whole body shook. "That's Hacksaw. [Mom], what the hell is going on?"

The yard, which had previously been an overgrown forest of colorful trees and shrubs, had been stripped bare to make room for dozens of tents, which were being reorganized by a band of volunteers until Mithras's command. A garden had been started, and was nurtured by nature casters who stood in attentive lines. A wide ring of barren dirt had been cleared around the perimeter, and several unfamiliar faces roamed across the property, organizing boxes of tools and weapons and keeping human children from getting into trouble.

Emby sat on the wrap around porch, her face unreadable from such a distance, though her back was straight in her chair. She was wrapped in a blanket with just her cloud of red hair to identify her. The only movements she made were violent sneezes.

"[This is my territory]," Idris growled in the Banishment language. Hacksaw looked at her but did not move. "[I do not allow useless miscreants in. You're a useless miscreant. I've heard of you. Of what you've done to my youngling.]"

Neo deflated under the pressure. He stood before a stormfront, dwarfed by the stench of ozone, confusion drilling holes in his brain as he grasped for some kind of sense. He'd experienced her ire before, but this was something else, a different person wearing Idris's skin and parading around like a monster.

A predator.

Neo swallowed, feeling all of Idris's eyes follow the motion with a precision that did not line up with her normally patient demeanor. He could see the calculations running behind her savage eyes. Was she going to kill him?

Her shifting fins told him that she was thinking about it. Thinking hard.

"You have to let him in," Neo said. He couldn't hear his own words for how hard his heart drummed in his chest. It was just as fast as Idris's, which was louder in her mouth whenever she opened it.

"No," Idris said. A few people stood up outside of the wall's perimeter, and she hissed loud enough to draw Mithras's attention, though he did not approach. **The musty ozone smell grew stronger, as her defecated magic skittered across her flesh, burning her along the way.**

Neo puffed his chest out. This creature that bristled and huffed was not what he had expected, and she was laced with new scars across her body that knit together at a snail's pace. Diamond tooth marks, and long slices of mottled flesh barely held back from bleeding. She had a new tooth grown in, and some of her cluster eyes looked brighter as well.

Once, back when he'd been in and out of the home, Parti had mentioned that people responded to stress differently. Some people grew fearful and ashamed, choosing to hide themselves away to protect what core they had. Some made impulsive decisions and lived

wildly, never settling down lest they have to deal with the pain of uncertainty. Some got aggressive and picked fights just to keep everything within their control at the cost of inner peace.

Neo had been pissed off about it then. Idris had only had Parti talk to him because he was a colossal screw up and couldn't keep a job for the life of him. His temper kept getting him into trouble, and there had been more than one shouting match about before he'd shoved off to try again.

The urge to scream and fight arose. How could she sit there and see the state that he and Jolyne were in and decide that Hacksaw was useless? How it stung to feel that in another life, she might have said this about him. He had no real skills outside of kicking up dust and making a fool of himself, and he was allowed. It wasn't fair!

None of this was fair.

"He's the only reason me 'n Jo are even alive right now," Neo said, struggling to keep himself from shivering. Those damn eyes staring at him from the side of her neck, the bleary ones along her tail. Dissimilar and out of sync. "He can fight. And he can heal. And even if he couldn't do either one of those things, you should let him in anyway."

Hacksaw's fur stood on end, alarmed. Idris's skepticism drew him into her full attention, and she moved past Neo to inspect him, her corded arms dragging her body along the dirt, tail eager to slam into anything that came within reach. Neo kept step with her, though he was sluggish.

"[Mom]!" He pleaded. "[Mom], please."

The urge to shout was mounting, though his voice would surely evaporate if he tried. There was no stopping her, not really. Fear sank soiled claws into his body, and he grabbed Idris's arm, a foolish mistake.

She rounded on him with a quickness unusual for a thing as large and cumbersome as she was, and Neo froze as her meaty hand pressed into his shoulder, nearly smashing him like an insect. The roughness of her palms radiated heat, and he saw what many Crooks might have seen in their final moments before being swallowed whole. But there was no pain. Just heat and tension.

Whatever evil had been there melted away, and Neo felt that familiarity. [Mom] again. Idris again.

"If he can heal, he can be here," she said with measured restraint.

"Thank you," Neo whispered.

"But I must speak to him," she added.

Neo, satisfied that she wasn't going to kill Hacksaw, retreated into the house, where Taiga and Esther - one of his youngest siblings - received him. They had a lot of explaining to do, but what he needed now was food, water, and rest. Taiga was stiff, and her tendrils were withdrawn, but Neo didn't have the energy to argue or fight, or inquire.

When they were gone, Idris returned her attention to Hacksaw, and the opening in the wall blended shut with little effort on Mithras's part. He stood a few paces away from Idris and Hacksaw, with his shoulders squared in warning. Hacksaw eyed the two of them.

"[Did you want to wait before you slaughtered me?]" Hacksaw asked.

"[You will have the rules explained once,]" Idris said, nostrils flared, voice crackling. "[If you break any of them, I will kill you. And if you manage to kill me, then Mithras will finish what I could not.]"

Hacksaw's eyes narrowed. "[Fine.]"

"[This is a place where it is safe for younglings,]" she started. "[There are no other Banishment Crooks here besides me and Mithras. You are not to harm a single one of my younglings. No matter what they do or say, accident or on purpose. You will not harm any humans in my territory. You will not harm any CCCats in my territory. You will not harm any Wormlings in my territory. Have I made myself clear?]"

"[Crystal.]"

Hacksaw felt confident enough to stand up, and when he did, he could better see just how large Idris was in comparison to him. She was quite possibly the largest Crook he had ever seen in his life, and Mithras was just about as big and muscled. Wounded or not, he would not be able to best them if they fought together.

"[They are not food,]" Idris added.

Hacksaw snorted, veiled laughter caught in his throat. "[Is that a warning for me? Or a reminder for you?]"

Idris snapped her jaws shut and the force made an audible popping sound that made half of her face fizzle and crack. Mithras took a single step forward.

"[Mind your face,]" he growled.

Hacksaw slinked off to recover. He'd follow the rules and keep his nose out of this weird freaky business they had going on. He was beyond exhausted, and was functioning on raw instinct alone. Had he not just heard the rules, he might have even made a quick meal of one of the weak Skireans that huddled in their tents, unprotected from a full rampage. From him, or from anybody else.

He found a corner, curled into a ball and went to sleep.

Later that night, when the tents had been fully reorganized and the refugees were settled for sleep, Idris went to her sleeping spot by the wall, her body aching. She rolled onto her side, placed all four of her hands on her chest and stomach, and massaged the muscles, groaning.

She was starving, and her body struggled to keep up with the magical output it took to keep the wall electrified. Her throat worked around the desire to kill and eat, and she swallowed it back down, nestling it right next to the same place she had reserved for dealing with the Housing Authority, which seemed so distant and pointless now.

All of this felt pointless. She was wasting a prime opportunity.

No, she thought, her younglings were home now. This was good enough.

She was willing to drift into sleep when Embly cleared her throat about ten feet away, announcing her presence, which did nothing to prevent Idris from feeling ambushed. Idris righted herself and opened her mouth aggressively. When she saw that it was Embly, she flopped back down in the dirt. She hated how dirty she felt now.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Embly said, voice sticky with illness, but Idris heard a subdued chuckle somewhere in the mucus. Cute.

"You could never scare me," Idris muttered. "You are too small."

Embly smiled, though it didn't last long.

"You are bothered."

"I came to check on you."

"You do that a lot." Idris let Embly sit next to her, and she wriggled in place to make sure the softest dirt was available. "You should take care of yourself. Drink more water."

"I'm worried about you," Embly said. "I feel like you've been shouldering a lot of responsibility and not letting us help you get what you need."

Idris snorted, dismissive, and Embly's faded smile deepened, drawing lines in the corners of her mouth and across her brow. In the brilliance of Idris's neverending magic, it went unseen, but the cluster eyes along Idris's heavy tail could see the void of Embly's body condense.

"I am fine," Idris replied, stiff.

"You don't act like you're fine."

"I am managing."

"I saw what you did to Neo earlier."

A grunt. Idris shifted, raising herself up into a sitting position. Her electricity made the wall thrum with malicious intent. It made the whole thing warm and inviting. A trap laid out for the brave and the foolish. Embly pulled her blanket tighter around her shoulders.

"I think the way you've isolated yourself needs to be addressed," she added. "I'm afraid that you're going to hurt someone who doesn't deserve it."

"I am in my territory," Idris stated as if Embly were perhaps succumbing to a spike in fever again. There was gentleness, yes, but also a darkness to the statement. "I can do what I want. Intruders will not tell me what to do."

Embly stood up. "That's not right, Idris."

"Why should I be right?"

Embly didn't have an answer. Idris had been pent up since the walls rose from the ground, and it pained her to see Idris lash out like this. With her illness getting worse, Embly wasn't sure what to do when going to her apartment wasn't an option. She couldn't protect herself from the ichor beasts, and there was no way she would make it that way she'd been feeling lately.

Idris snarled at her and banged a giant fist at the wall, which boomed under her strength. Her magic snapped, and an arc of lightning crashed down along the wall, briefly casting a hazy yellow across the surface. A few of the refugees jolted awake with a frightened cry.

"Why should I be right?" Idris screamed. "The prey always thinks the predator should act right."

Embly jumped but composed herself, her blanket crumpling at her feet in a pile before she could catch it. Her lips pressed into a line. "Idris, don't yell at me."

Idris's claws had dug deep divots into the dirt. She found herself snorting and hissing, eyes bulging and rolling in their sockets, a horrible growling emanating from her stomach and grinding against her throat. Embly could see the two throats opening and closing, making sounds that she could not interpret, but understood to be the Banishment language.

Embly, though frightened, would not stand down. She stood her ground, waiting for whatever anger to dissipate before daring to speak again.

Idris's eyes returned from their manic spiraling, and calm settled over her once again. Her brows relaxed, she closed her mouth, let her hand slide down from the wall and fall back to the ground.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it."

"I know," Embly rested a hand on Idris's nose, being careful not to touch the magic. She didn't need to regulate the output anymore, and didn't want to take more than what she was already discharging into the wall.

"It won't happen again," Idris promised. "Ever."

"I believe you," Embly replied.