

Karma had grown used to the odd looks she received as she traveled through Skire. Though frankenstein patterning was not uncommon among wormkin, the stitches that held her flesh together like bolts in a machine certainly seemed to put others on edge, not to mention the traces of mixed magic in her body usually reserved as a consequence for cannibal wormkin. It wasn't as distinct or sour as the cannibal marker, but it didn't take close observation to tell that her body contained a mixed makeup. Whispers and rumors of her origin become a hot topic of conversation among the circles she and Cherry pick up work in, though none have ever nailed the exact truth. Two-faced trickster, bodyguard cannibal, underground fighter, science experiment, cult survivor... just a handful of theories her borrowed ears have managed to pick up. It was almost enough to make the corner of her lip curl up into something that could be called a smile. Or a grimace. The ignorance of things tended to do that.

"Hey, Karm! We got the assignment, let's go!" Cherry called from across the street, snapping Karma from her head. Hm, right, they had a job to do. She glanced across the bustling road momentarily before quickly striding over to meet her companion. The smaller CCCat grinned and held up a manilla folder stuffed with a handful of documents. "Simple shipping order, but they're payin' fistfulls of crowns for it. S'Not even a dangerous job, this is practically theft." Her crowns twitched in amusement, matching the amusement on her face.

Karma hummed lightly in suspicion and took the folder from her hands. She flicked it open in her palm with one precise movement and took a brief glance at the contents. She was correct; The folder contained receipts for several large orders of a refined mineral that was mined from the bottom of Meteor Lake. It certainly didn't come cheap, but it wasn't anything they could get in trouble for transporting, nor was it really that hard to find.

"Dunno the client though, some guy named Cheron." They weaved their way slowly through the winding city streets. It wasn't their first time doing business in Luelor, in fact they came here quite often, but Karma never ceased to be mildly surprised at how busy this fishing town got. "It's hard to be elusive *and* rich. Maybe it's some middleman for someone in Choice." She paused and clicked her teeth, "Wouldn't that be somethin'? We haven't been up there in years." Cherry scratched her chin in contemplation as they walked.

Karma frowned. The name *was* unfamiliar, strikingly so. The business they do exists within a pretty tightly closed network of under-the-table dealings. For someone fresh to get their name out there enough to earn *their* work was unusual. Karma sighed and closed the folder, securing it tightly at her side before stepping in beside Cherry. The crowd parted much more readily for her than it did for Cherry, for reasons she knew well. She didn't mind using her size and appearance to her advantage, especially since there were few other social situations that it served her well in.

"Shit, you think the air docks up there are gonna be busy? This Cheron guy better have reserved a spot. No way in Eeridi am I waiting in a longass line with the way people pilot in Uto. My poor baby'll probably get steamrolled by a sky taxi." She was, of course, referring to her boat.

Karma's lip tilted upward slightly. She gently knocked her tail against Cherry's heels as they walked as a motion to stop worrying so much, though she may have used a little too much force, as her partner nearly tripped right into the gravent walking at a snail's pace in front of them. She looked back and stuck her tongue out, though her ears remained upright and angled

toward Karma. Karma gave an open-mouthed sigh and shrugged in response, feigning obliviousness even though they both knew what had happened.

Karma leaned over the railing of the *Arrow's Point*. It was a good ship, one that had served them faithfully for as long as she had been a part of Cherry's crew. She never really enjoyed the atmosphere of the city, even without the people present. Here, in the salt-soaked air, she felt just about as free as she possibly could.

Though CCCats generally had a natural fear of water, Karma found that the danger was somewhat grounding... or perhaps, familiar is a more correct word to use. She hated being wet, and found swimming suffocating at best, but here, high above the gentle tide, she felt control. It was as if she could reach a claw out and split the waters like a seam if she wanted to. She imagined the exposed skin of Eeridi, still salt-soaked, but filled with life and laid bare before her as if to be cut into and slaughtered. She rolled her glass eye around in her mouth once idly before returning it to its pouch in one nervous motion. Sometimes she was unsure if these thoughts were really hers or the residual consciousness of her lesser half.

...No, it was impossible. It had died moments after her awakening. She hadn't even gotten to know its name, let alone its origin or moral compass. Karma's face twisted into something of a scowl as she lifted her attention to a small flock of seabirds that flew in parallel to the boat. A distraction. They squawked incessantly, only closing their beaks to dip into the water below for food. She softened her expression as she watched the trails of magic they left in the air, as if weaving themselves into the very fabric of the sky.

"Karm" Karma's ears twitched harshly at the voice, but her body remained otherwise controlled, thankfully. Odd, her crowns hadn't sensed Cherry before she spoke. Perhaps she was a little *too* distracted. Cherry placed herself next to her on the railing and rested a hand on Karma's forearm, her touch gentle but present on her skin. The other CCCat gave a short, wry smile. "Somethin' bugging you?"

Karma was silent for approximately three seconds as she processed the words before leaning her neck down and pressing her forehead against her partner's lightly. "Nothing out of the usual, love," She murmured, her voice a little raspy and low.

The hand on her forearm came up to cup the thick fur on her cheeks and behind her lower ears. She leaned into the touch, letting the fingers trail all the way up to the stitches that held firm in the right side of her face. Cherry ran over the ridge with her thumb, the motion causing Karma's expression to harden ever so slightly.

"Were people bein' mean to you? Lookin' at you funny? You can tell me, I'll kick all their asses," Cherry whispered, the edges of her lip slowly curling upward as she spoke.

Karma exhaled and stood up straight. Cherry's hand did not linger where it was, but she did not retreat it entirely either, holding it out in the air between them. Karma gently laced her fingers between the other's. "It's nothing I cannot handle. Besides... you know I don't care for anyone else's gaze," She spoke softly, angling her head slightly to the side as she did.

Cherry scoffed and broke into a wide grin, "Oh, c'mon, don't hit me with the romantics when I'm not prepared!" She squealed, "I'm tryin' to be, like, a caring supportive partner, or whatever!"

"My sincerest apologies, Captain," She soaked her voice with something sweet but sarcastic; A trick that worked well to divert them from talking about the big questions... like Karma.

Cherry cheesed and tore her hand dramatically from Karma's, lifting it up to her forehead in drama, "Fine, fine, I'll leave my mistress shrouded in mystery." She paused and pursed her lips before adding, "And don't call me Captain, it's weird coming from you."

Karma let out a light exhale of amusement.

"Captain! We're here!" A familiar voice called from the helm. Both CCCats turned toward the noise to see the silhouette of a scrawny little nautipod waving at them in signal.

Cherry clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "Aha! Money time!"

Apparently, "we're here!" was code for "we're going to have to wait in line for another hour and a half because that dickwad did *not*, in fact, reserve us a spot at the dock.", as Cherry had exclaimed word-for-word upon switching *Arrow's Point* into aerial mode and receiving the wait-time prediction from the radio. Several loose mementos were rocketed out of the helm as a result of Cherry's impatient fury, though that was soon replaced by equally furious pacing in circles.

By the time they were actually able to pull into the dock, the sunset had turned the sky a beautiful ombre of purple and orange. Though it was a little hard to admire with the frantic running around as the crew attempted to unload the several hundred tons of rock they had on board.

"Where the hell is this Cheron guy?! They were 'sposed to meet us at the dock when I messaged 'em," Cherry hissed, "Those Choice pricks..."

Karma kept her eye on the dock, watching as the number of crates grew. It was certainly strange they hadn't been greeted yet considering they'd already been docked for half an hour. She tracked one of their crew members as they deposited yet another unclaimed crate onto the dock. They crouched down to mark something on the front before seemingly being startled by something just out of Karma's sight. She furrowed her would-be brow and stood more alert.

"Cherry."

"Wha-huh?" Cherry paused her pacing, as though snapped out of a trance.

Karma pointed a clawed finger toward the crew member on the dock, then both their gazes trailed to several large figures approaching the crates.

"Damn pirates!" Cherry hissed, quite literally throwing herself over the railing of the helm just gracefully enough to not land face-first on the deck.

Karma followed a little less boldly, choosing to humbly take the stairs down instead. She slunk behind Cherry as they made their way across the ramp that connected the vessel to the dock. Cherry slid herself in front of the crew member, despite being smaller than them. One of the large figures, a muscular CCCat, moved ahead of the rest of their group to meet her. Karma shifted to stand behind her Captain, arms crossed and crowns upright. She glanced down at the crew member next to her, who returned her gaze with a confused look.

"Cap'n Cherry, I take it? You got quite the reputation 'round here. I'm quite surprised, for someone of your history," The stranger spoke through its teeth as it walked, stopping just a few feet from the three of them.

Cherry jabbed a finger toward it, "*You bastards*. I know pirates when I see 'em." She

sneered, “This is *our* catch, keep you and your little *posse*’s fingers off.”

The CCCat’s face scrunched, as though a little confused. “*Pirates?*” It let out a barking laugh, “I think you have us confused. We’re just here to pick up Acheron’s package.”

“Acheron?” Cherry’s ears pricked up, and she was quiet for a few seconds as she processed what the stranger had said. She snorted and turned around to face the sweating crew member behind her, holding out a clawed hand. They perked up and searched their many pockets for a crumpled up piece of paper, which they promptly handed over. Cherry unfolded the document and held it up directly in front of her face, scanning it carefully.

Karma glanced from the document to Cherry, then to the strange CCCat, who was standing with an irritatingly smug grin on its face. It angled its head toward her in acknowledgement for only a moment before once again focusing its gaze on Cherry. *Some Confidence.*

Cherry murmured something under her breath before crumpling the paper again and tossing it absent-mindedly behind her, leaving the poor crew member to chase after it like a dog.

“Yeah, yeah, *Acheron.*” She rubbed her forehead with her index finger and thumb. “Whatever, I can’t just hand it over without payment—er, proof... of like, identity or whatever.”

“We’re on a very tight schedule here—”

“You know what else is tight? My bank account. Keep your mitts off of my goods.”

Karma could feel her stomach starting to coil with impatience. The two continued bickering back and forth, with neither side being able to push the other with much success. She flicked her attention to the rest of the strange CCCat’s group, just in time to witness their confident demeanor shift into something more nervous. Their backs straightened and their mouths shut into neat lines as something pushed its way through them—a nautipod.

“Do you even know who you’re talking to? Some confidence you have—” The CCCat froze as a jointed hand came to rest on its forearm and a dark-hued nautipod stepped out from behind it.

“Unnecessary.” It growled, then reached out a hand toward Cherry. “Apologies. It seems nothing can get done without my presence.”

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