

Chapter 41: Bleak History

He appeared a victim of dual amputation with his arms sunken within the gray shirt. Frankly, it was a little comical to see that massive bush of hair rising from atop the shirt collar. No doubt it was awfully filthy, though. There was a dire urge to give his hair a thorough washing, but of course it would be best not to awaken him. It would be a safer decision to have the rising sun handle that unstable mess should it startle him awake, but the temptation to wake him herself lingered about. Yazzalo wasn't too far from the beast either. In fact he positioned himself at a point where he split the two, and kept himself much nearer the unstable one. Of course, he'd dismantle the situation should any conflict arise. She smiled and rolled her eyes at the thought, but her master's overbearing protection still warmed her heart.

Still, worry and uncertainty crept through her thoughts as she laid eyes on the snoring Lorenzo, still curled up within the guts of the much-too-large shirt. Just the day prior, she wanted to see him having suffered a fiery death. By nightfall, she pitied him so much that a sense of obligation to recuperate the broken being dripped into her blood. Of course she was in no *true* obligation for such and would disavow it the moment he snarled at her – he was one with the Undergrowth, afterall. The weak smolder of hospice often strengthened its radiance within her steel soul.

The sky began to shift into its blue dawn; a joy for some, a nightmare for others. She stood from her sleeping matt on shore and took in the scene of a calm ocean beneath a sleepy light. As she fluffed and shook her long brown hair to rid it of sand, a thought crossed her. “I wonder if Yazzalo brought one of those soap bars with him,” she began to turn to where he rested, “I’ll ask when he wakes–”

The master was in the midst of performing single-armed, handstand pushups. Still, he made sure his eyes were lined towards Lorenzo. “Good morning, Pyrei,” he uttered.

She stared at the back of his hairless head. The logic behind Yazzalo's almost omniscient senses still eluded her. Sure, sensing magic energy should be a basic performance for the average magically-attuned person, but to be aware that a specific individual's attention was on you without having even glanced at them was strange, to say the least. "Good morning..." she returned.

"I noticed you were awake much before dawn. If there is any aid I can provide in supporting you, I of course am happy to be there."

"Support for what exactly?" She questioned, though it was rather obvious that her ignorance was performance given her tiresome tone.

"The revelation regarding your brother."

"I am no longer shaken by the death of my last kin. Pyreizin made choices of which I relentlessly warned him about, and he suffered the consequences for following them. I have no more tears to shed over him."

Even with his *'omniscient senses,'* even Yazzalo seemed taken aback by her words. He was sure she didn't mean them in their entirety, but then again he knew Pyrei was not one to be indirect. "Your last kin? Your parents haven't passed, have they?"

"By the very definition of death? No, at least not to my knowledge. Still, I see no difference."

He was silent, but not antithetical to her view. He reasoned it was better she be apathetic to her parents existence than vengeful and in pursuit of retribution. Still, he was quite sure her words didn't clearly mirror her feelings, but he opted to leave it be

and excavate no further. “I see,” his mind fell upon. “Well — what influenced you to abide by the boy’s wishes and rest on the island with him?”

“Who knows,” she spoke with a tongue lightly sprinkled with the dust of omission. “Perhaps I’m just trying to figure him out. It would be wise to get to the bottom of this mystery; he likely has secrets of the Undergrowth that can aid us.”

Yazzalo nodded. “Very wise, as expected of you. The main obstacle at hand is trying to open the lock to this chest with no key. I’ll wait for him to awaken on his own before I begin his lessons. I’m not sure how he reacts to being torn from his slumber just yet. I’ll test this another time.”

“What difference will waiting for another time make? We’d just be pushing back the same experiment that presents itself now. It is wiser to do so now while we’re in this relatively controlled environment, is it not?”

“Yes, however...”

“When will you stop this, Yazzalo?”

“Stop what exactly?”

She stared at him silently, knowing that he was fully aware.

Yazzalo unleashed a capitulating sigh, “Alright, I relent. I’ll wake him now... just don’t stand too near.”

Pyrei waited just beside the snoring Lorenzo, and Yazzalo’s heart raced at the speeds he expected Pyrei’s to be mirroring. Of course, she wasn’t bothered, and instead grew very impatient. “I’ll do it if you don’t want to.”

“Pyrei, please, take a few steps back.”

Her gaze lingered on Yazzalo briefly. She suddenly crouched and gently rubbed her hand on the slumbering one’s back or stomach – it was difficult to tell considering he was still submerged within the shirt. She spoke lightly, though without intention “Get up. The day has come—”

Her light brushes ignited a sandy explosion. Lorenzo scuffled about the sands, liberating himself from the entrapment of the shirt through the brute force of his panic. It didn’t matter to him that he was one who turned the former shirt into an embracing blanket, just that it restrained him at a point of tumult and thus warranted death. He was postured up high upon a towering palm tree from one arm while his free one tightly held onto the severed skeletal hand. He vigilantly searched for the offender, but a light breath from behind earned the forceful assault of his leg. Twas right then when his shin was effortlessly caught in the grips of Yazzalo’s clutch. “Master —?” he dryly uttered.

Yazzalo’s opposing hand held onto the palm tree’s bark. “Descend your energy; there is no danger. ‘No more rain, I won’t sway. Darkness, darkness, ripple away.’”

With his sickly yellow eyes, he fixated on the old instructor for a deathly silent time. Soon he came back to himself and said, “No more rain, I—won’t—sway. Darkness, darkness, ripple away...”

Though his heart was exploding, Yazzalo smiled through the unappreciated excitement. “Very good. Did you find your rest adequate?”

Lorenzo’s eyes sank with loss. “When?”

“...Recently.”

“How recent is... that?”

“Can we get down from this tree, Lorenzo?” Yazzalo softly encouraged.

Slowly, his beastliness nodded, and threw himself onto the sand, in contrast to the instructor who descended onto his feet. “Can you tell me what you last remember seeing?” Yazzalo inquired.

“W-when?”

“In recent times, say a minute or two ago. What did your dreams look like?”

Lorenzo tensed, a sudden dread befalling him to the dilation of his pupils. “Th-the Dream? Why? What do you say that for? I-I remember the adage, Father...”

“Adage?” Yazzalo voiced.

“By the Nectar, of the Dream, with the Blood, for the Vision – yes, I remember it, Father...”

“Lorenzo,” Yazzalo kneeled before his watering eyes. “Look at me.”

He followed orders without conflict and Yazzalo continued, “There is no reason to stress yourself with memories of ‘Father’ here. Remember: the darkness has rippled away.”

“No, no, Father is a different darkness. He is the darkness. He is around at all times; he always knows; his eyes have eyes abroad. By the Nectar, of the Dream, with the Blood, for the Vision, by the Nectar, of the Dream, with the Blood, for the Vision, By the Nectar, of the Dream, with the Blood, for the Vi–”

Yazzalo clapped his hands a single time in a ginger maneuver and he kept his demeanor as soft as he could. It certainly helped that he was no longer swollen with muscle, but the face of a battle-ridden elder could only alleviate so much dread, and Lorenzo’s ramblings persisted. Pyrei stepped forward with her arms crossed, Yazzalo side eyeing her steps within the vicinity of which he deemed off limits. She stared at him apathetically, managing to not blink for the lengthy war of the gazes. “He said this before,” she spoke, “during our initial encounter.”

“And what of it?” Yazzalo replied.

“He only uttered it once with me; he is not stopping with you. Granted he sought to murder me following suit, but I’ve moved the scores a little closer to even, and what did you do? Beat him into submission, to put it extremely lightly. Not that I mean to imply a sense of remorse or even pity his punishment, but I’d say I’m closer to better ground with him than you. I suggest letting me talk with him directly.”

Much to her relief, Yazzalo seemed quite tired of battling her defiance. Regardless, the conclusion was her often prying herself into whatever situation he deemed unfit, thus he took himself aside. Pyrei lowered to Lorenzo and was quite grateful with how he quickly ended his verbal repetitions, but it appeared as if the same message went unending in his thoughts. She brought her hand to his left cheek and casted a weak, minor light which gently warmed his blood. His eyes softened as he pressed himself against her warming palm. “What are you thinking, Lorenzo?” she inquired.

“This comes from the same source which brought incineration to my body, now it makes me feel... hospitality.”

Yazzalo and Pyrei turned to one another in surprise at his use of clearer vocabulary. She continued, “And why might that be?”

“I rarely feel— warm anymore. The last time I did— was... in a desert. It was where I—” he choked. “I’m sorry. He harmed — *I’ve* harmed you in many ways. I’ve harmed many who did not deserve such a fate. It’s a sheet of death that I continue to lengthen... The innocent ones *they* ordered me to extinguish, I could not tell you where it began, only where it currently ends, and which hurt me the most in hindsight. With every fiber of his being, that man fought to defend his daughter, even when he knew it would be fruitless given his weak power. I tore through him and proceeded to maul his child like a wild beast... She survived. Then Father came to end her misery... I hope. I hear voices assuring me that— at least she and her parents did not have to suffer too long. I hear another which says I should renown those slays. One more tells me that none of it matters. I don’t know which voice is mine anymore.

But there is one that still haunts, one of my earliest assigned murders. Friede... that was a life I could have assimilated into. I could have just been a good son for her, and I may have lived normally. She took me in, fed me, offered me a soft thing to sleep on instead of a dirt and stone floor in some cell.” His eyes opened from their shut relaxation, and his tone shifted down. “For you still be on about that wench... That hag did not care for you; you were a replacement, like a child’s pet dog after the last perished. Continue reminiscing about parasites seeing you as nothing more than a new pet, you embarrassing cur!

You say this while Father only sees us as just that; animals for war! You call me a fool relentlessly, yet you are still blinded by your own green stupidity that you cannot see we existed only to be on his leash?!

Silence! Father brought us prestige and experience! We were on the verge of earning our very own throne to call our own! Father said we were soon to earn it, and then you fucked it up! You fucked it up bad! As you always do! You f– hush! You stupid bush man, you are an embarrassment! Nothing more than a hideous serf to that hairless white branch of a man!”

Pyrei began, “Lorenzo —”

“Don’t call that fool by that stupid name! We are Viktor! We– no more rain, I won’t sway, darkness, darkness, ripple away, no more rain, I won’t sway, darkness, darkness, ripple away!” He took a heavy inhale, let it linger within, and finally released it. “I didn’t mean to do that... I didn’t mean to do that... I–”

“You’re fine,” she reassured with her cold tone. “This ‘Viktor’ you speak of – or embrace, I should say. What is it?”

“Father’s favorite, which sours me none. I used to see Viktor a lot more during my childhood, but as the years went he infiltrated my mind and now he resides there. The relationship is more parasitic than willful embrace.”

“It’s fascinating to hear you speak coherently now. What is the matter with that? Am I to believe the prior was simply an act?”

“I– don’t know. With you two I feel – warm and safe. With Father, he made sure I–could speak with a ‘sophisticated tongue’ as he put it. I could only do that... at times. There would be punishment if I spoke with poor– verbiage before him.”

Her eyes drifted off in uncertain wonder. “So he taught you to read and write?”

“No, he did not teach me to write or spell, only to say words and somewhat comprehend them in a manner he deemed fit. The closest I’ve been to him teaching me wording was him expressing his disdain for ‘C’s and ‘L’s... and apparently ‘Q’ is too flamboyant.”

“That is... strange. I imagine it would be a much greater challenge to teach one in only abstracts. I question the motive.”

“He wanted a warrior, not a scholar nor a thoughtless troll” Yazzalo inferred, “A warrior that can communicate is far more useful than a mindless brute.”

Lorenzo nodded weakly. “That sounds — accurate.”

Pyrei continued, “You mentioned him punishing you for speaking poorly. What sorts of punishments were enacted should you have disappointed him?”

“The Warded Vultures, Dunking... desertion. The latter was always a false hope.”

“May you go into details?” she inquired.

He appeared stuck; choked up. Nevertheless, he nodded. “The Warded Vultures are Father’s henchmen. I could not tell you if they have the flesh of man, are hollow steel husks, or some other creature. I’ve never seen one without their full armor. Even after having made the mistake of pushing their luck with me, their metal shelling held tightly. I’ve only heard them giggle. They were the ones who would often bring about Father’s punishments; beatings, cagings, Release and Pursuits, and Dunking. Release and Pursuit is when they take me out to the wilderness, always blindfolded.

They would then encourage my fleeing by the use of some sort of physical harm, then give me enough time to get lost. Twas only so they could begin to hunt me. If not

that, the other possibility were desertions, where I would be abandoned in the midst of nowhere to fulfill Father's assignment for having failed him in a prior time. Alas, Dunkings..." the fibers of his body tensed, "A terrible iron box with holes no larger than a finger's girth drilled into its metal. It was set before a deep pool of water. Earlier in my youth, it was often Father's chosen punishment for me. The Vultures would drag me to it and lock me within its metal maw, and finish by plunging it into the pool."

Pyrei's skin tensed and her lips nearly furled at the descriptions, but she took a breath to recuperate herself. She refused a sorrowfully sympathetic contort of the face, and kept her demeanor cold and stone. "How long did they leave you submerged at a time?"

"Long enough for me to awake back in my holding chambers."

"Deprivation of oxygen to the brain for even a short while can cause immense damage, much less continuous torture of such... how long did this go on?"

"A few years, at least since I was *Child*... since I was little. I cannot give an accurate time since it all is in a pool of mush and mixed together now. Father's frequent assignments of having me to assassinate or battle against good people and foes alike ended up working against them, however. My strength soon became too powerful for the Warded Vultures to restrain me. I can't help but believe that this was planned by Father, though. This led to my first major opponent of many: The Vire."

"Who or what is Father exactly?" Yazzalo said, "It seems that he holds immense authority over the Undergrowth."

"A Paramount, one of a number I cannot recall. I think..." Lorenzo counted on his fingers, "Seven, I believe. Many within it see him as above all in Penumbra due to his accomplishments and immeasurable influence, so he is often dubbed as the 'Paragon.'"

Yazzalo's chin rose in wonder. "Would he be the one who must be struck down?"

"It would bring me great bliss if so, only if I'm the one to do it. Still, killing him would shake the Undergrowth for a short time, ultimately changing very little. There are several *territories* controlled by different Paramounts. Once Father is dead, he will be replaced, and that would only be his territory mostly affected. The only thing that would happen is his successor carrying the burden of monumentally high expectations. The man is old and physically powerless... he's looked the same for many years. He has no true strength of his own; only authority, clout, and position, giving him armies and powerful rogues. That is all which keeps him safe... as much as I wanted to – *want to* tear him into a cascade of bloody chunks, that is all which worried me, even through my... thoughts. Fate has it so that I somehow ended up away from there, saving myself from the retaliation of his forces. Tragically that means he is safe from me, too."

"That is fine enough," Pyrei spoke with a loud utterance, at least what was considered loud for her. "Do you have one of those cleansing bars on you, Yazzalo?"

The master's left brow rose in suspicion. He dug into his pocket and once his hand revealed itself, a spherical shape wrapped within some fibrous and plant materials. The aroma of fragrance flowers already took to the air, polluting it with its wondrous scent. "Never without," he said, somewhat boldly, "but why interrupt? It is unlike you to change focus so swiftly, especially one so dire."

She took the wrapped orb of blissful scent, and just barely peeled back the protective materials to reveal a pale bit of yellow. It was soft and mostly smoothed. "The focus remains," she assured, "I simply pursue a change in location now."

She fixed herself to Lorenzo and simply uttered, “Come,” as she walked inland alongside the downflowing stream. “I’m not sure how Yazzalo hasn’t lost his head yet, but your stench is very bothersome. Follow along,” she ordered.

“That will not work,” Yazzalo said, “he reacts violently to water. Given his past, I understand why. The terror being inflicted upon my nostrils can be put on hold for the time being...”

“Nonsense. Lorenzo, I said to follow. You will be cleaned today, and I will not let up on this position.”

She cut a glare to Yazzalo. “And you will allow us space. The boy is afraid of you, and I want to hear him when he’s less on edge.”

“What? He becomes a nightmare merely at the sight of water, yet you wish to be left alone with him plunged within it? Absolutely not! I give you a seed, then you want the whole tree!”

“It seems that you’ve forgotten how I lived by my lonesome for several years. I do not require your oppressive infantilizing, Yazzalo. I am an adult with experience beneath my belt. Even if I were without such, the fact remains that I am an adult and am to deal with the consequences of my choices, no matter how they’re realized.”

“Simply throwing yourself in the way of harm is foolish and ignorant, Pyrei! You think more coherently than this!”

“I won’t hurt her,” Lorenzo’s soft tone nudged through. “I won’t let myself do that again. You two have been very kind to me. All assaults inflicted upon me by you twos’ hands were warranted; I am not scorned by them. But I’m not frightened by Master Yaz—”

“I said come along, Lorenzo,” she beckoned with stern eyes. “I can hear more of your story in due time.” The beastly one trudged behind, almost forgetting to walk on his legs alone as a man. Frankly, the optics of him moving quadrupedal rather than bipedal seemed a lot more natural, but he attempted to keep himself on nothing more than his feet. Though as the distance grew, he returned to his ‘four-legged’ movement. Alas, he disappeared into the forest after Pyrei.

Bewildering to Yazzalo, as he watched Lorenzo vanish into the forest, he felt something about his energy change. When he first encountered the boy, he immediately knew his spirit embraced chaos; thoughtless pursuit for murder. Now, while the uncontrolled soul still held onto the instincts of beasts, Yazzalo could sense a change; a light growing within him. The chaos was no longer the sole presence. Though tiny, there was a small glimmer in the sludge of darkness. It was — clarity. Yazzalo’s head tilted up, and he nodded. “His voices are beginning to quiet... Her soul becomes loud.”