

By the time Idris realized that Neo had left, it was too late to search for him. Mithras had delivered the news that evening, when the final patrol stowed their weapons and turned in for the night. All bodies had been accounted for except for one, and when Mithras questioned his patrol, only one volunteer had seen Neo wander off.

"Seemed intent on something," they had said.

There were not enough resources to go out and look. If he was alive, Mithras reasoned that he would eventually come home. If he was dead, then so be it. Idris shared the sentiment, though it took a long time for [Unseen] to submerge back into the depths where it wasn't needed.

"Why would he run?" Idris asked. "It is not safe out there."

She lay in the muck of her destroyed yard. According to the other earth casters, without a more talented water caster, they would have to wait for the yard to drain naturally. Even the nature casters that tended to the gardens agreed. They didn't have enough seeds to draw out the water through fruits and vegetables, and if they tried anyway, the seeds they had would drown in the soaked soil.

It would only take a few days.

"It will not do any good to speculate on the internal ramblings of the younglings," he replied. He sat next to her, leaning on her bulk and cherishing her warmth. "They have not lived in a world like this before. Unused to real hardships."

"If he dies, I will be sad," Idris said. "Or, I will try to be sad. I'm afraid that if it happens, I will not feel anything at all, and that is not ideal. It goes against my calling."

"Only time will tell."

"Is this a punishment? For my cruelty?" Idris's voice grew a hard edge. "I should have resisted the temptation. Eating dirt would have been a better alternative."

Mithras shifted. "You were not cruel, Idris. You did what had to be done, and a lesson was learned. It was bound to happen that the younglings would see you return to what you are."

Idris rolled onto her side and Mithras adjusted himself so that he was comfortable against her. **Her electricity had returned after consuming the CCCat, shedding a bright light as it crackled.** When it was done, all

that remained was half an arm and a scrap of flesh attached to the crowns. It had dusted almost immediately after.

"I am finding it difficult to be dirty when I have experienced cleanliness," she admitted after a heavy sigh. "Many things come to mind in the mirrors of our lives."

She reached for Mithras and ran her hands over his body, pulling on the beautiful red cape of fur that lined his shoulders, now a much brighter red than before. Her cluster eyes drank in the color, committing it to memory, for she was certain that she would never see this shade of red again. Never see the full luster of the brass scales, the deep chocolate browns and the striking whites. This was the Mithras from the Before Times, and she had been neglecting to observe it for too long.

Mithras let her groom him, though all she did was smear dirt all over him. Dirt and blood. She made a deep sound in her chest. A pleasant thrumming similar to a purr, and her fins twitched in the way he had always found adorable. Despite her circumstance, she could still experience joy and he wanted nothing more than for her to continue to do so. He'd move heaven and earth to make it so.

"We will be hungry again soon," she whispered, pulling Mithras's massive head into the hollow of her neck, taking great care not to zap him. "A few days is a long time for us."

"I will handle it," Mithras replied, wrapping his arms around her and twiddling with the fin along her back. Subtle shadows cast along the wall as the glowing markings pulsed and they tied their tendrils together. "Any requests?"

Idris stifled a throaty laugh. "I am sure they are out of the prawn crackers at S-Mart."

"You might be surprised." But he knew she wouldn't be. S-Mart had been picked clean months ago.

When the sun rose again, Mithras had already left for his patrols and Idris circled her territory, dragging herself along the muddy path with loud thumps as her tail slapped the wall. Nothing had tried to scale it, though some of the CCCat refugees mentioned more new faces along the edges of the tent city.

In the afternoon, Idris crossed Wrench's path. He tinkered with the prosthetic shrapnel on a makeshift workbench in the backyard, commandeering what little patio space was left. He looked stiff and stopped often to massage his leg. When he caught Idris's eye, he waved her over and she came, a trail of mud following her wake.

"Why are you trying to save those?" Idris asked, sounding hopeful despite her observations. The legs were shot.

Wrench raised an eyebrow and crinkled his nose. "It's my job."

"Your job is to fix what can be fixed." Idris snorted and motioned to the twisted junk. "These are damaged beyond repair."

"I have yet to determine that." He pointed a screwdriver at her. It had a film of dried dirt on it. "Mind your tongue, big red, you are not the expert here."

"Where is your husband?"

Wrench shrugged. "He said he was going to try to 'do his job', but I'm not sure how well that's going for him." He paused and scoured dirt out of the metal heap with a precision granted only through years of experience. He looked unfazed. "So what do you actually want?"

A deep shame flashed across Idris's face before she shook her head and clicked her teeth. "I am being responsible and checking on my guests."

"You're not checking on shit," Wrench said, though there was a hint of sarcasm lurking there. "This place runs like a well oiled machine. You've been moping all day, so out with it or go back to moping."

"I am not moping!"

Wrench shot her a flat look, not buying it for a second. "Then what are you doing?"

Idris rested on the patio. It had seen better days even before the world decided to end, and now it was caked in debris and loaded with so many crates of supplies that the foundation was beginning to crumble around the edges. She kept her tail off the patio to reduce additional load, though there was still chipping and cracking under her weight.

"I am moping," she said, deflated.

"About that CCCat?"

Now it was Idris's turn to be sarcastic, though it came out more aggressively than she had intended, [Unseen] peeking out. "I don't care

about that fucking thing. It served its function. I am only upset that I was not the one to snuff it out.” A long pause. “I was robbed of that catharsis. And my most troubled youngling is gone as a result.”

Wrench listened patiently, sometimes reaching for another tool to pry damaged panels apart. He’d heard all the speculation, and had forced Cheese Melt to stay away from the windows once he had realized that their intruder would not be leaving the same way they had come in.

”Not your fault,” Wrench said, one of the panels breaking off and flying out of reach. It landed in front of Idris like a pathetic broken toy. “No point in mincing words. Most people are not used to seeing something like that happen. A lowlife came in to steal from you and hurt your kin for fun, and they were killed. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes. Or so they say,”

”The younglings think differently of me.”

”They do not understand what happened,” Wrench said. “Would you have preferred to do nothing? To ask them nicely to leave?”

”Of course not.”

More grinding gears and screws loosening filled the air. Wrench and Idris sat in silence as she thought about it, her tail swishing back and forth, clearing grass and mud in a wide cone behind her. Wrench grit his teeth and kept cleaning out the prosthetics. He would have done just about anything for a handful of painkillers and a cold bath, but he had to focus on doing something with his hands or they’d be wringing someone’s neck by evening.

When he’d traveled with his tribe, they had plenty of space to spread out despite the dangers of the wilds, but there was no such luxury here. Every inch of the property was being utilized for something, and with so many people crammed together, spikes of restlessness were bound to happen, even if there was always something he could be working on when the major calamities had been dealt with.

He’d even picked up a few new skills while finding work to do.

The worst of the refugees were the CCCats, who had to keep their prejudices to themselves and got temperamental when food was scarce despite not needing it as much as the human refugees. On more than one occasion, he’d catch them whispering about the more animalistic behaviors

of the younglings, or how Idris conducted herself on tough days. How Mithras seemed more suited to do Idris's job.

And the pain was getting worse. The medic Crook wasn't able to do much to help him outside of rubbing the area and taking a little of the edge off. Not enough to make Wrench more pleasant to be around, but enough to keep him from actively biting anybody. Enough to keep his growling reasonable.

"I will leave you to your job," Idris said when her melancholy abated. "Please do not try to make miracles happen, human."

"I just make things," Wrench replied. "Keep your wits about you, big red, and give credit to your younglings. Only one of them is as dumb as he looks and he doesn't think you're a monster."

Idris laughed. "Be nice to him."

"I give what I get," Wrench replied.

Idris loosed her unmistakable throaty laugh and turned away to continue her territorial pacing with a little less drudgery slathered all over her face. Wrench, content with his socialization with whom he considered a close friend, barked and growled at anyone who came along afterwards, no longer in the mood to be disturbed. Of course, there was always one exception, but that exception was busy trying to teach the curious children how to read, with the odd crook squatting along the edges of the reading circles.

A crisp breeze blew through the yard, a reminder that the autumnal season would soon be over in favor of winter. With it came the muttering of fear. Fear of the vacuous cold that stripped the body of its constitution; fear of the unending dark when the electricity finally stopped flickering back on; fear of the monsters lurking along the edge of the wall.

For a brief moment, Wrench considered what he would be willing to do if the general attitude of the leadership took a sour turn. He didn't need to say it anymore than Idris did; they both knew who was truly expendable.

"You should take a break, my love," Cheese Melt whispered.

Wrench tensed, his hand curling around the screwdriver. "I need to stay busy."

"You haven't eaten anything in a bit."

"Not hungry."

Cheese Melt frowned into the plate of food he'd procured. "Are you worried?"

"About?"

"Her."

"Should I be?"

"No!" Cheese Melt said, shaking his head. Were it not for the plate in his hands, he might have thrown them up in panic. He, of course, meant no harm. "I mean, I heard about what happened, and I think a lot of people are having...complicated feelings about it."

"Does that include you?" Though Wrench's voice came out strained, Cheese Met did not shy away.

"Yes," Cheese Melt admitted, his tone lowering. "But not in the same way. I think it's best if we talk about it later. Maybe when this is over."

Wrench grunted and Cheese Melt placed the plate on his workbench.

"In the meantime," Cheese Melt said. "Please eat. It'll make you feel better."