

Eeridi's cruelty knew no bounds. On the precipice of the incoming spring, the clouds grew grey and unrelenting winds brought snow, heaps of it, barreling down from the sky in a continuous reminder that none of the land was meant to be there. As if pelting the land with ice would force it back down to stopper the poisonous vats of acid below.

Jolyne was gone, fled into the darkness of the world with nothing to her name, her wounds now healed as she trundled along, **clutching her thick arm as it swelled with her unmoored emotions. The ice of her limb melted, froze, and melted again as she growled.**

She had fucked up big time. She should have just killed Worm Money without fooling around. She could have crushed his head like a grape and scoured his clusters out in one savage motion, but she just had to let her emotions get the better of her. She just had to let him realize his weakness to drive the point home.

Home to who? Her? She'd never thought of Worm Money as anything other than an annoying pain in the ass. Always snooping, always gossiping, always willing to run to tattle if he thought something wasn't right.

She considered going back to finish the job. If she got him from afar, she wouldn't have to worry about either guardians coming to the rescue. A powerful enough surge of magic would make his natural weave brittle, especially because his will was weak. He'd keel over immediately.

But, she didn't have her rifle. Another pain point, it was still in the apartment, buried deep in the closet, locked in an unassuming trunk. If the building had been ransacked, there was no way it was still there.

Still, the temptation to check proved too strong, and she lumbered onward, her glowing eyes freeing her from the uncertainty of the night. She would go to the apartment, get into the closet, and then take her rifle and be gone with it. Everything else didn't matter.

It took a few hours, and the frigid temperatures didn't bother, but she arrived at their old apartment building. At one point, it was a beautiful brownstone overrun with an enormous tree jutting out of the center of the building. The roots wound through the halls and had to be drilled into to allow the residents safe passage. No elevator could withstand the constant growth and Jolyne frowned at the state of it.

The whole building folded in on itself, a potbelly of bricks and glass hanging over a belt of twisted tree roots. The leaves of the crown had withered and blown away, and the front door led to a wall of debris. The cold ward off any would-be visitors, but most of what could be eaten on the outside had already been stripped away and signs of attempted entry dotted the first floor windows.

Jolyne couldn't tell if those attempts had been successful, but she couldn't see anyone and needed to try for herself.

They lived on the upper floors. Using her natural magic, she clung to the walls and hoisted herself up along the side of the building like a lanky salamander. The way the building had folded allowed for entry to the higher floors, and she listened for squatters.

There wasn't much shuffling, but she could hear at least a couple smaller residents, though they kept to themselves. She'd only fight them if they emerged.

She clambered into the building to find that the only reason the front half of the building hadn't fallen away was because a thick gnarl of roots kept it from doing so. Jolyne felt pangs of unease just looking at it, but went along the hallway anyway, which lay heavy with weeks of snowfall and ice build up.

Hopping over a few icy blocks and piles of debris, Jolyne approached their old apartment door to see that it had already been tampered with. Her hearts pounded as she squatted down to assess the damage.

Most of the doorway was blocked by a sagging wall. The door had been wrenched apart. The hole left over seemed big enough if she crawled on all fours, but as soon as she dipped inside, she pulled out. Too small.

She turned around and backed into the hole, dragging her massive arm along the floor. It scraped and chipped, sending sharp pain up her arm, and while she was able to get her body through the hole, her arm plugged the entryway.

"Shit," Jolyne growled.

She tugged a few times, but only managed to wedge the arm in place, chipping the ice more and snarling in pain. Her legs, which had a cluster of eyes along each thigh, were within the apartment enough to see.

Destroyed and ransacked, just as she thought, but mostly safe from the elements. From what she could see of the living room, the couches had been chewed down to the stumpy legs, and the walls were caked in filth. She did not see anybody, but that hardly mattered.

Jolyne surged forward, unsticking her arm from the hole and crawling back out into the hallway. She wouldn't be able to get in this way, and ran her hand along the wall in search of another potential entrance. Perhaps, she thought, the neighbor's unit would be useful.

She found their next door neighbor's apartment door to be more of the same; sagged door, too small opening, signs of previous entry. She didn't bother trying to wedge herself in this time. She did, however, kick the remnants of the door and shriek loud enough to elicit pained responses.

Jolyne pinched the space between her nostrils and dragged her hand over her snout and across her cheeks. Without her rifle, she wouldn't be able to finish what she started, which meant the payment wouldn't come, which meant she'd be stuck fending for herself until the CIB decided to focus on the regular folk.

As she left the destroyed apartment building, she didn't bother shedding a tear for everything that had once lain within. All the memories and struggles, the nights of sharing secrets and giggling with her loved ones, were gone. Replaced by a ransacked shell with nothing left to offer.

Even when rebuilding was done, she hadn't been the owner of the building. She'd be left with nothing. In fact, as she reassessed her position, the only thing she had left was whatever funding she still had in her bank account minus a few months rent. The irony made her bitter, and the falling snow surged around her.

She'd left her phone like an idiot, and wouldn't be able to check how much she had left, though she knew she'd have enough to at least get to Stonewing. All she'd needed to do was get to a bank, a long walk from her to the center of Key.

Jolyne considered staying the night in the hallway and starting her trek to the central bank in the morning, but she feared that Idris would send Mithras after her. She could imagine the way it would go.

Idris would demand that Mithras bring her back to answer for her crimes, and Mithras wouldn't hesitate because he did everything she said

without question. And Mithras had looked different when he stood over the two of them that evening. A vacant shell of a crook.

Jolyne wondered if he would have eaten her too once Idris cracked her open like an egg; wondered what he'd said to make Idris let her go. Wondered if that was what he'd even been trying to do.

There was no way to know, and she didn't care. If it came to a real altercation, she wasn't strong enough to ward either of them off. And that needed to change as soon as possible.

As she lumbered through the streets that still sat in uneven slats of crumbling asphalt, Jolyne understood that she needed to go to Stonewing, to speak with her employer face to face. To beg for another opportunity so she could gain the ability to defeat two monsters in a fight; so she could ensure that she would never get caught in anyone's jaws again.

Embarrassment and fear churned through her. Had she not fled, what would Idris have done to her? Make her grovel for forgiveness? Parade her around before execution? Demand an audience?

Based on how Idris acted, Jolyne could believe it, and it terrified her. She needed to avoid that fate by any means necessary. Besides, she had already burned the bridge, and apologizing now would only make things worse. She'd been gone for a few days, and she wasn't the oldest "daughter". She wasn't the oldest anything so she didn't have the luxury of any kind of favoritism.

There was no telling how long it would take to get to the center of Key. The roads were only repaired in a few places, and Jolyne didn't know the city's layout. The closest she got was being able to walk from her old apartment to New Paths. And when things were normal, that only took a few hours.

Now it took a few days.

It would probably take a few more to get to where the tallest skyscrapers still stood, and then the bank had to actually be open. She recalled hearing that the banks were operational, but that could have been online only, or for certain types of clientele. She didn't have a plan for if she couldn't get access to funds. Maybe she'd just run through whatever portal was open and the main terminal.

Maybe she'd just go down into Fever and leave that way. Maybe she'd figure something else out.

For now, the most sensible course of action was putting as much distance between her and her old apartment as possible, hunker down in a hole to take a quick nap, and then make her way to the city center. If anyone tried to stop her, she would fight them off.

And when she made it to Stonewing, she knew where her employer lived. He'd most certainly invite her up like he had before, forgive her for her single failure, and then let her try again. He seemed like the reasonable sort. Always so sure that everything would work out so long as she did what he said and did it well.

She didn't have any other choice.

There was no telling what time it was when Jolyne finally laid down to rest. Her options limited, she found an opening large enough to squeeze into near a bus stop. The schedule sign was twisted almost beyond recognition, but it had a readable map still affixed to it and Jolyne figured this would be her best bet at navigation until she came across an actual person.

Before she closed her eyes, she morphed the snow around her into a sizable snowbank to shield her from prying eyes. It looked realistic enough to the rest of the blanketed neighborhood blocks that she doubted anyone would think twice of it. And if they did, then hopefully they would have enough sense to know not to bother it.

She settled between piles of bricks and stones, resting on her arm uneasily. Sleep did not come easy, for all Jolyne could imagine was the darkness of a drooling, gaping void framed by electricity. The mutterings of language she could not understand. The fear of being eaten alive.

Her mind swirled around the possibilities of what her voice would have sounded like if she cried for help and no one left the house. If her last moments would have been witnessing dozens and dozens of eyes watching in sorrow, fear, or apathy.

She wished that her magic would poison any who tried to devour her. That was the last treacherous thought she had as she drifted off to uneasy sleep, where Vetra chastised her and her feet constantly sank into the murk of a giant lake.

