Chapter 274 is now available to read on my Patreon.

Chapter 249

Freya

Freya shuddered. Even secondhand, with the searing agony dulled by the fog of memory, the torture that Calliphone had suffered had shaken her. The feeling of impossibly strong fascination abruptly turning to burning pain as her arm was flayed down to the bone from within had just been the beginning, and the rampage she'd gone on, all while having dungeonmetal snaking its way up her arms, causing such pain that she'd lost the ability to reason for almost an hour hadn't even been the worst part.

No, the worst had come afterwards, when the draconic titan of fleshmetal had fallen. One of Cal's poleyns had been torn off, leaving her knee covered only by her warskin. When her child had sagged, falling to one knee, that had been the opening that touched the mass of formerly-animated fleshmetal and gave it a way into her body. The agony of that had been what knocked the woman out completely, despite her incredibly toughness, durability and grit.

Now, because of that, Cal's body had been irreversibly changed, with side effects and consequences completely unknown. A tear slid its way down Freya's fair cheek, then along her jawline, and fell from her chin, down towards her lap, only to be intercepted by a blackened palm. Cal was smiling at her in silence, while Ais simply started at the transcribed status in her hands.

Quietly, Freya leaned herself into the taller woman's embrace, and, without a sound, reread the sheet that she'd burned Cal's transcribed status onto. Her mind wasn't on the koine writing, though, or even on the small piece of untranslated text, the implications of which she didn't care to consider. Instead, the goddess found herself wondering if this was what Zeus had felt like, when Maxim had come to him, missing an arm and an eye.

The circumstances were different, of course. Cal was whole of body, and had been, at least for now, strengthened by the change, whereas Maxim's wounds would have outright killed many, and most other survivors of such injuries would have given up adventuring for good.

Hm, perhaps the parallels were more present than she'd thought. Somehow, she could see Zeus, proudly smiling as his now one-armed and one-eyed child declared that his wounds wouldn't get in his way. Cal hadn't done anything of the sort, of course, but her tallest child was acting as she always had, and that was enough for Freya.

How pathetic she was; Calliphone had been the one to experience the hardship, self-inflicted or not, and here Freya was, crying about it as if she'd been the one to suffer. If anyone other than

her dear children had been present between Folkvangr's four walls, she'd have never lived it down.

The goddess blinked away her tears as she rose to her feet. Mastering herself, she brought her arms around the midsections of both of her golden-haired children.

"All of the others won't be back for a few hours yet," she said. "What do you think of having a quick jaunt out to Melen?"

Ais perked up at that, the girl extracting herself from where she'd buried herself in Cal's bosom. "Can we visit one of the fisheries? Aleya mentioned that she'd heard the recent hauls had been quite good, with some of the best-quality fish in years," the young girl asked.

Freya tittered, hiding her mouth behind the back of her hand as she did so. "Unless you'd care to dress and clean the fish yourself, we'd be visiting the fishmongers, dear," the goddess corrected her adopted child, though the silly girl seemed to actually be seriously contemplating doing so. The grey-eyed woman smiled fondly, and, with a look at the giantess whose lap Ais was sitting on, extended the question to Cal.

Put on the spot, the woman seemed to hesitate, before slowly answering. "I don't mind either way. Oh, but I could teach you how to properly prepare a fish. Kimyo was quite happy to show me," the taller of the two blondes responded, absently combing her newly-clawed fingers through Ais' long hair as she did so.

Of course, Cal was a complete pushover when it came to these things, Freya thought. If any of the children were enthusiastic at the prospect of something, and it wasn't *completely* idiotic, then there wasn't a chance that it would be denied to them if the giantess had any say in the matter.

"I suppose we'll be enjoying tuna steak for supper, then," the silver-haired goddess said, carefully removing herself from the tangled embrace the three of them had found themselves in. Smoothing out her rumpled clothing, Freya raised an eyebrow at Cal, who had decided to slip on that baggy abomination of a shirt again. There was a fine balance to be maintained between indecently exposing one's self, and fully concealing every shape and detail of one's body in clothing, and this was certainly too far in the latter direction.

The taller woman wouldn't meet her gaze, head turned away and golden eyes stubbornly staring at the wall to mask her embarrassment. Even Ais didn't hide her disdain for the clothing that Cal had chosen to adorn herself with.

After a long moment of silence, Freya broke it with a quiet sigh. "Put something nicer on, at the very least. Something like that worker's uniform; it's got long enough sleeves that, with a pair of gloves, your hands won't be visible, and the pants are of a similar-enough color that it'll seem like you're simply wearing dark socks," she instructed, and Cal hurried to obey.

Soon enough, they were all at the door, watching with fingers crossed as Cal slipped her leather shoes on, hoping that the small claws on her feet didn't render her entire stock of footwear unusable. When the tall blonde's blackened heel fit slipped into the shoe, and the polished brown leather front didn't suddenly get punctured by black claws, Freya was more than a bit relieved, until her eldest –or second-eldest, she wasn't quite sure– daughter looked down at her feet with a frown.

Cal had to lean forward to do so, for fairly obvious reasons, which was quite amusing, but the words that came after were less so.

"I'll need to get some new shoes," the golden-eyed woman muttered. "Gotta bend my toes to avoid tearing through the front. No good at all."

Freya didn't doubt that Cal bending her now-clawed toes was also quite damaging for her shoe's insole. Oh well, they would simply have to stop by one of the many shoemaker-owned workshops within Orario, most likely one of the ones under Minerva's umbrella. They tended to make the best footwear, at least when it came to leatherwork.

"Have you considered using some of the Behemoth-hide you brought back for this?" the goddess suggested.

Cal hummed for a moment. "Now there's an idea. Might as well get some new shoes for everybody at the same time," the giantess commented, before vanishing for a moment, then reappearing with a rolled-up sheet of limestone-colored hide. "Do you remember where the measurement sheets are?" she asked.

Ais responded quickly, before Freya could say a thing. Clearly, the girl was eager to get to the part of the day where they got to enjoy some tuna steaks. "The latest ones should still be in the armory, in the filing cabinet by the door," the girl said, and, a moment later, Cal was back, with the sheet in hand.

With that, they left, for both errands and to enjoy the afternoon.

Maxim Tzavaras
A week later - Seven years, four months and three weeks since joining the Freya familia

Finally, Weyland's shields had finished going through testing. It wasn't likely that they'd see much use just yet, what with the Denatus coming up in around a week, but after the surge of managerial work that usually resulted from the quarterly gathering of deities was handled, the 'Razorgrass Barrier', as it had come to be known, would be pierced by someone other than Cal for the first time, and by the Zeus familia.

Hopefully, anyway. No point in counting one's chickens before they'd hatched.

"You're distracted," a pleasant voice reproached him, the person speaking having laid her head against his chest as they both enjoyed the sun from the creekside hill in the Duelist's Vale they were resting atop. Looking down, Maxim found Cal's gorgeous golden eyes staring up at him, her mild irritation showing in how they were adorably narrowed.

He smiled, causing her pretty eyes to narrow further, and leaned down, kissing her on her slightly pursed lips. She returned it, and let out a small noise of disappointment when they separated a few seconds later, blushing prettily when he gently swept a lock of fluffy blonde hair out of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was thinking about Weyland's shields. They've finally gone through every test, with glowing results. We're already planning an expedition after the Denatus, to explore the razorgrass steppes."

Cal hummed. "Congratulations. Mia won't be happy to hear that Laurent's going to be gone for a few weeks," she said, to which he shrugged.

"Can't do anything about that," he returned. "It's simply part and parcel of life as an adventurer," he continued, his bronze hand finding the taller woman's blackened one. Finding that out had come as something of a shock, which he'd immediately had to hide upon seeing the flash of hurt on Cal's face.

The story he'd gotten out of her afterwards was quite something, even by the outlandish standards he was accustomed to. Maxim had already known that the latest area Cal was exploring was well out of the ordinary, but finding what amounted to five floors of almost dwarven-like industrial yards was several steps beyond what even he'd thought possible, much less the city-sized forge.

It didn't help that sudden and agonizing surprises within the dungeon tended to kill the ones they were sprung on, rather than strengthen them, though considering Cal's own skewed metrics for what 'agonizing' meant, the overwhelming majority of even premier adventurers would likely have died from the pain of what she'd endured.

Rather than respond, the blonde giantess simply turned her head and buried her face in his shirt once more, likely because she agreed with his words; Cal had complained more than a few times about how moody and unreasonable her captain became when Laurent was away for any extended period of time.

After a long, comfortable silence, she spoke up once more.

“You know, I’ve brought up significant amounts of metal from the drakeforge over the past week,” Cal suddenly said, while Maxim gently rubbed the back of her hand with his prosthetic’s thumb. He didn’t say a thing, instead letting her elaborate on her own time. “I’ve been looking into the Airgetlam-derived sockets, too,” she continued.

“I… Think I could make you an arm that wouldn’t burn you when you go all out, without having to resort to using weaker materials like cryolite in the structural components,” Cal finished, and he resisted the urge to laugh. Only she would call cryolite a ‘weak’ material.

“Awfully generous of you,” he jested, and he felt her smile into his chest.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. It would be mostly made out of fleshmetal, port included. I expect you’d be cursing my name by the time the installation’s done, even while mainlining elixir,” she said, only a hint of laughter in her tone.

He hummed. “Yes, I imagine that feeling wires infiltrate my skin would make me quite a bit less appreciative,” Maxim jested, before pausing for a moment. “...It’s been deemed safe, then?” he asked, tone suddenly quite serious. He’d joked about it, but seeing his… Lover, he supposed, convey the events that had happened in the dungeon’s frontier had been… Distressing, to put it mildly. In a completely unrelated matter, the beautifully scenic rock well south of Melen that they’d been admiring the sunset from when she told him was now a pool of slag in a vaporized crater.

Cal shifted, rolling herself off of him. Gazing down at the smoothly-flowing creek a few yards below them, she answered him. “... For a given definition of safe, yes. The initial ‘injection’ is almost certain to kill anyone who doesn’t have incredible pain tolerance, a dwarf-like constitution and an incredibly well-developed falna. Otherwise, though, the metal seems quite beneficial in many ways.

Dian Cecht’s healers and alchemists looked me over, with magic, and Freya even had some other… ‘Mystics’ and more obscure healers to check me over. Even brought in one of those quacks from the far east. He said that my ‘qi’ had become aligned with both wood and metal, whatever that means, but that I was otherwise in perfect health.

All of them said there was nothing wrong with me. The magical examination was more interesting; apparently, the fleshmetal’s woven itself so well into me that it’s self-sustaining now.”

Self-sustaining… That could mean a few things.

“In what sense?” Maxim asked, curious.

“I completely skinned the back of my hand with magic a few days ago,” Cal easily admitted, as if that was a perfectly normal thing to have happen. Maxim ignored the hypocrisy of him being the man to think that. “It took less than a minute to heal up completely, and my skin was just as

proofed against blades. Brand also got into the supply, and his bite's now strong enough to shear through coralite without issue."

"Well, I can't exactly say no after all of that, now can I?" Maxim asked, sitting up slightly. "How would it work, if coming into contact with skin causes fleshmetal to enter it?"

"It only does that for unreinforced flesh," Cal corrected. "So, your current port would have to be removed, then your shoulder enhanced with fleshmetal, then the new port would be installed. It would be plated with cryolite, as would the prosthetic itself, for both cooling and safety purposes."

Maxim smiled. "Sounds to me like you're already working on it. I suppose I'll have to tell Weyland that he can fully set aside the upgraded port he's been tinkering away at for the last half-year," he jested, and Cal looked away.

The slight flush creeping up the back of her neck was telling, and the one-armed, one-eyed man smiled fondly. Always had to be working on something, did Cal.

Still, he wouldn't have her any other way.