

A Water pours over my head. I lift my face, looking up at the dark ceiling. Dim sunlight casts faintly over the room from the stained window. I let the cold water awaken my senses as the sun slowly rises. I scratch and claw at my body, desperate to get all of the grave dirt off me. The water gently stings wherever my nails scrape.

Two curious, golden orbs peer around the curtain. Fluffy, brown fur borders her eyes. Lorlie rotates her head from side to side, as if she is considering attacking the falling water. She's adorable, but it feels like my face has forgotten what muscles make my mouth move to smile. I sigh as I drop my hands to my sides. I need to focus on today. Today we start the search for whoever murdered Mira and Javy. My brain slowly investigates my memories of yesterday. There must be something other than that damned note that will help us find this bastard. I wonder if it's August? No. Never in a million years would Mira lose to her. Oscar? He has no motive. I doubt he even knew she existed.

Lorlie meows as something clatters downstairs. I jolt and rush to grab a towel, quickly followed by my clothes. I carefully race down the stairs to find Raylin and Tezz standing at the front door. Raylin notices me first and turns to look with teary eyes, wide with worry.

"What's going on? Who's at the door?" I whisper. Tezz stands stock still.

"Ah, there he is," a familiar voice sings. "We were just talking about you, Eirian." My blood goes cold. This can't be real. His face peeks around the doorway. Be fucking serious.

"What the fuck is he doing at Mira's door?" I holler, my rage evident.

"So this is what you really look like now, Eirian? You look rough," Oscar smirks. Tezz shakily turns in my direction, his gaze not quite meeting my eyes. Oh gods, what is going on? Lorlie's tail curls around my calf as she stands in front of me.

"Eirian..." Tezz's voice dies, unable to form the words clearly racing through his mind. It is silent for a moment.

"Tezz, what's wrong?" I utter. He finally looks up at me, his eyes are tired, watery, confused, angry.

"He seems to be a bit tongue-tied. *Tell him,*" he commands.

"Oscar has offered to give me Mira's killer... in exchange for you," the words unwillingly pour out. "I'm so sorry, Eiri."

"Come here, Eirian," Oscar's words pull my feet forward. His hand grabs mine, and I flinch at the touch. My skin crawls and screams to be released. "It is really you. Finally, so Tezzeren, do we have a deal?"

"Tezz, he's family. You can't actually be considering this!" Raylin cries.

"Mira was my family! Mira was all I had left! I already failed her once! I can't do it again. I won't!" Tezz screams, his voice hoarse.

"You don't even know if Oscar is telling the truth. He's a dirty, shady man. You just lost your sister, I know, but we're your family too. Do you want to lose us too? Do you think I'll stick around to be sacrificed next if you go

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through with this?" Raylin demands. Tears once again cascade down her pale cheeks. I yank my hand away from Oscar, and he grabs it again.

"I won't fall for the same trick twice, Eirian. I'll be making sure it's you until Tezzeren and I have come to an arrangement," he states, his grip hardening.

"Tezz, this man is not your savior. He will fuck you over, you know that," I reason.

"C'mon, Eirian, you know I'm a man of my word. I've completed every mission I've been given with stunning accuracy, and I intend to complete this one in the same manner. While I'd prefer not to crush your vocal cords like I did with Mira, it is not out of the question. Perhaps it'd be best to go for the eyes in your case though," Oscar threatens, a sadistic smile spreading over his face. The memory of him taking Mira's voice away snaps something in Tezz.

"Deal."

My head feels fuzzy. This can't be real. I'm dreaming! It's just a nightmare! Raylin rushes to my side, desperately trying to rip me free. Tezz sobs as he holds her back.

"Where and who is it?" Tezz asks. His voice is muffled by Raylin's and my own screams.

"Clesinar Lambson. He should be on his way back through Vineal Valley," Oscar smiles. "Pleasure doing business, Tezzeren."

"Raylin! This can't happen! I can't go through that hellhole again!" I plead, struggling against Oscar's tight grip. Raylin shifts into a mouse, freeing herself from Tezz, then back to normal. She crouches down, her eyes dry, anger etched into every cell of her face as she places both her palms against the ground. The floor begins to snap as it contorts, the door twisting shut, walls turning sharp as they close in. She then sprints forward, morphing into a lynx. Yes! She won't let me be taken! Thank the gods!

"*Sleep*," Oscar sighs. Raylin's body slowly goes limp. She fights his power, but it is in vain. The walls and floors return to normal. A door forms again as Raylin drifts off, slowly becoming human again. "You know what? You too. You've always caused so much trouble. *Sleep*."

I blink. Water drips down my face. What? I'm in the shower again. Did I fall asleep? I couldn't have. Lorlie watches me, rotating her head side to side before meowing. I must be crazy.

"Did you show me that?" I mutter. Lorlie spins in a lazy circle before sitting down again. Whoa, our cat is a seer! I hurriedly hop out of the shower, yank on my baggy pants, and start down the stairs as I pull my black turtleneck over my head. Just as I make it down the last step, with Lorlie close behind, I hear a knock on the door. Tezz starts to follow Raylin towards the door.

"Don't! Don't open that!" I shout. They look at me confused and on edge.

"Why? Who is it?" Tezz yawns. I can't meet his eyes. I hesitate. I can't believe he would give me up.