

Voe sighed. “Of course you must put on a mask — to survive. But sometimes I thought I would die from feeling alone. I felt that it would take over and kill me if I let it, like the Rung does when it grows inside you. Bearable at first, but then it’s more and more...vicious. You are eaten alive, and slowly.”

Sig studied her. Inside him, a thing opened up and allied itself to her in the smallest, strongest way. “Did you?” It sounded skeptical, instead of inquiring. A defense. Instinctual. He could punch himself. “Want to die?”

She nodded, undaunted. “When I was with the Roachers.”

He grunted. Shifted in his spot by the fire. Popped his ankle. “So...you do anything?”

Voe stared at the pile of dead animals he caught them, held her knees close. “Stopped eating. They didn’t care at all. I was lighter to carry. Easier to restrain. They laughed at me and said they’d kill me, but never did. I was weak already, so it really didn’t matter.”

He skinned the next shrew at his feet, roughly. Muscle fibers ran ragged on it, from the rushed job. Would be stringier when they cooked it. He reminded himself to put that one in his rations, not hers. “It didn’t matter?”

“No, Sig.” She told him simply, incredulous and annoyed, as if it were common knowledge and he a simpleton. But there was a strange pain behind it, in the eyes. A wounded little dog, made to obey. “I was always meant to die.”

Sig paused, twisted the knife in his fingers.

*Meant to die.*

This was a mantra he’d heard before — from insane Roacher victims.

So they really did feed her Toxin.

It was still in her system, even now.

The drug was derived from Rungspore pods; only Roachers managed to create it effectively. Perhaps it was their superior equipment. Perhaps it was because they were hooked on the stuff. Toxin made you either feel invincible, or destined for what they called “divine death.”

Toxin made you crave pain.

Voe might have been Optimal, same as him — but she clearly didn’t possess any resistance against Rungspore if Toxin affected her. Full-blood Optimals were immune to it.

Sig didn't feel much; knowing this.

Disgust, maybe.

Disappointment.

The knife slipped in his hands; sliced his skin open instead of the shrew's.

A rage filled his throat; raw and molten. Born in seconds from somewhere deep and inexplicable — an animal trap with teeth inside. He breathed in, deep and quiet, to master himself. “You meant to?”

Nothing.

He turned to see her pick a blade of yellow grass and shred it with her dirty nails.

And then, softly spoken: “Yes.”

The rage suddenly pushed upwards into his throat. “Why?”

“Because...once it came to me, I couldn't get out of it. I lost everything and everyone. Nothing good came from what I did or what I said. Nothing *worked* anymore. Nothing made *sense*. And when nothing makes sense anymore and when it feels that no one cares about you and you are ripped apart one way and then the other for so long you don't remember what it feels like not to be ripped apart...that is what happens to you. You survive in a shadow world that is really no different than it had been before, but is somehow, suddenly, every day, too much to bear. So you need to die to escape it. Because you can't get out. Your mind doesn't let you get out. It becomes a bad circle.”

“Don't make sense to me. You tired of life? You really tired? Then just end it. Plenty of trenches to fall in. Knife to the neck. Or a skewer through the armpit to the heart; over in seconds. None of that slow starvation shit you're talking about.”

Voe glared at him. “I wanted someone to care. You drag it out when you want someone to care. That is their chance. And you look for it, and when it doesn't come, you continue until it's over. Idiot.”

“Then you didn't really want to die. You just wanted attention. Starved yourself to get it. When you could've gone to a Wiseheart. Idiot, yourself.”

Voe stared at him, something seemed to grow on her now; something dead and disappointed. Before he knew it, she had thrown a rock against his skull. “I wanted *attention*?” she raged, as she found and chucked another rock at him.

“This, from you? You, who’ve killed someone? You, who are so in pain from it you tell me everything? Vomit it all out on me the day we meet, like a desperate, pathetic madhead?”

Sig deflected the third she threw at him. “Never wanted to die, though.” A bald lie. Out of his mouth just for spite. Her and her fucking rocks. “Never said I didn’t want attention, either.”

Something like a breath and a sob escaped her. “What is *wrong* with you? Have you crushed all that is human inside you?”

He rubbed the side of his head. Shrugged a shoulder. “Hm.”

“That’s all you have to say?” she screeched, as if he were tearing her apart.

He wasn’t, though. He wasn’t trying to harm her. “Well...you’re throwing rocks at me,” he said softly. It just came out.

In an instant, she changed. The rage left her, dissipated like smoke. “Oh,” she said.

“That’s all you have to say?” he retaliated, annoyed. He doubted he’d ever understand her.

Silence for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” Voe said softly, those girl-eyes of hers on him. They were too big for her face.

They were pretty.

Sig shrugged again. “Happens.”

She looked upset again at that. Shuffled closer to him. Tapped a little finger to his arm. Gently. “I’m sorry I threw rocks at you. And called you ‘idiot.’ I shouldn’t have done that. I won’t do it again.”

He eyed her for a second. Couldn’t bear it any longer. “Guess I could...watch myself more. What I say. Around you. Won’t kill me.”

“Me too.” Voe smiled a little. “Thank you, Sig.”

He said nothing to that, just handed her the good shrew. “This one’s yours. Don’t burn it.”

She eyed the other carcass for a brief moment — the stringier one he had set aside — then to her own plump, perfect one. Her smile grew. “I won’t.”