

“Credit for yer thoughts, luv? Not second guessin’ meetin’ ma folks are ya, eh?”

Kord's voice lassoed Zujenia's wandering golden eyes. She hadn't even fully realised her gaze had been darting about the whole walk through the Ryn encampment set below Estle City. She offered a small smile, noting the light hearted tone to his mid concern and hoping he didn't read too much into it. It was not his family she was on edge for. The half-Ryn reached out and squeezed his hand, “I am looking forward to this, promise.”

His mustache bunching grin replied before he continued leading the way. “Should be just ‘round the next two tents, yeah. Ma, Faun, has been lookin’ forward to meetin’ especially since they’ve met Shay’Ira already....”

Their hands remained conjoined as they walked on. His tail waved and bobbed above the ground with each stride, and Zujenia couldn't help but watch it. It was why when she looked up and met the yellow gaze of another fellow Ryn a few meters away she merely blushed and averted her gaze.

“Kordath, you're back!,” a high spirited voice called. Zujenia turning in time to see a young woman not much younger than herself start to latch onto her lover's free arm before withdrawing quickly as if suddenly remembering something. Instead, she clasped her hands in front of her and turned her uncannily similar to Kord's grey eyes onto his companion. “Oh and, erm, you must be his, uh, lady friend!”

“Zujenia,” she smiled, offering a hand that was received, “and you are K-Karo? No, Karina? Sorry, I'll just let you introduce yourself.”

This ‘meet his folks’ is going swell, the half-Ryn mused sarcastically. A brush of Kord's tail across the small of her back helped ease some of her nerves. She had thought she would have been elated, excited to meet his family, to join in the culture she had been away from for a time now. Sure she had Kord but such practices reminded him of what was. It took him only a few days ago to be able to tell her of his arrangement of this gathering. It had a bit blindsided her, but she was happy, happy they had shown.

“Karo was correct.” Kord's younger sister replied, pointing over her shoulder with a silvery blue hand. “Karina's inside helping with tea. We should join them.”

“Would nae say no to a cup, yeah,” Kordath grinned at the two before Karo guided the pair through the tent's entry. Three other grey-furred faces greeted them. The older woman raise up from the small fire at the center of the shelter and the kettle brewing at its coals in order to embrace her son once again with warmth. It took only a second before she had shifted her attention to the woman he had brought.

“And you must be his fiancée, Zujenia, yes?” Faun took the hybrid’s hands in hers, head tipping side to side in examination. “You’ve done well, Kordath. A fine protective and loyal soul— with spirit! Come, lass, have a mug. Boy, you too.”

The two of them followed her lead, accepting their mugs and settling on the spare matts they had set out. Zujenia caught Kord’s father, Krynn if she recalled, shooting a wink at him. It amused her, like father like son perhaps, so she fiddled with the tattered edge of the mat she sat on. The faded letters vaguely read ‘Kord-’ before becoming illegible. They talked for some time, making small talk, telling how they met, listening to family stories, etc.

“So, what do you do Zujenia? Do you work up in the big castle too? Are you a servant? A maid? A cook?...” her fiancé’s other sister, Karina unleashed a torrent of questions. They too Zuj off guard, yet also made her twitch ever so slightly at the theme of career options.

“I, uh, sort of. I work some of those in the castle, in close with the leaders like...Kord is.” She carefully chose her words, trying to recall how Kord said he described it. “However, I actually primarily work on the Port you likely passed through to get here.”

“That place didn’t seem like it would be the friendliest of places to live, easy to move around and stay out of attention, but not somewhere I would imagine someone would call it home.” Faun interjected with a bit of motherly concern and Zujenia could feel the back of her throat well up. The woman was nothing like her own, yet her appearance placed her around her mother’s. The years, however were kinder to hers than it had been to the harsh face of mum’s. Still, it didn’t stop the remorse and missing that flooded her. She flicked her sandy tail before answering.

“Yeah...but it’s home for the time being.”

“What band are you from? I feel like I would remember someone like you.” Karo inquired innocently.

“I actually don’t—”

“*Excuse me, sorry to interrupt,*” a deep voice whistled from outside with a slight tap on the fabric flap for a door. “*I am looking to speak with Zujen.*”

Zujen?...C-can it be? Zujenia’s heart seemed pound behind her ears. She moved to set her cup down, retracting it as her mind frizzed in where to place it before finally Kord gently took it. Golden eyes darted up to thank him, and his steel ones offer encouragement which mirrored his small concern. Brushing a hand against his arm in warmth, Zuj stood and dipped her head apologetically. “It was nice to meet you...uh, excuse me for a moment.”

“Go take all the time ya need, luv.”

"Aye, what Kodath here said. We aren't going anywhere, lass."

She nodded and slipped out of the tent. Her eyes darting up to meet the yellow gaze of a burly Ryn man in his late thirties — the same eyes she had met earlier. He ran a white mottled brown hand through his curly thick hair, the equally curly bush of a beard that hugged his face lifted in a wide smile. "Surprised to find you here, Zujen. How's the adventure going?"

"Manfri!" the woman darted forward and wrapped his arms around his waist before she could even think. She was elated to see this communal friend, mentor, role model she had grown up under the watchful eye of. 'Zujen' had been the man's nickname for the rebellious lass, something like 'a name fitting for one who could best most boys.' "I am glad to see you." She finally said, releasing him. "It's been...something."

"And this fella?" he quirked his snowy chin behind her, causing her to turn to see Kord stepping out of the tent.

"Oh, well, he's, uh, part of the adventure." Zuj smiled.

"The name's Kord, pleasure ta meet ya. Who are you who I've been given the chance to steal Zuj from?" Her partner flashed a cheeky grin, coming up to brush against the arm.

"This is Manfri, he's a family friend from my grandmother's band." Kord nodded, his gaze catching an odd drop in the older Ryn's face that Zuj had missed. She had instead returned to the taller man, her stomach filled with butterflies as she continued, "Manfri, Kord is my...we're engaged."

At this the muscular man extended an arm to Kord and shook his firmly, his face beaming proudly. "Congratulations. You've couldn't have found a better partner. Treat her well, you hear?" He pulled the wirey Ryn closer and gave him a hefty pat on the shoulder, one that probably gave him the sense he better heed those words. Manfri pivoted and hooked an arm around Zuj's shoulder, placing a kiss on top of her ashen hair. "And you. I'm so happy for you, Zujen. Orchili would be thrilled to hear of this. We must celebrate, a feast."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose...wait, how is Nana? Is she here or is it just you and Tsura and the kids?"

"The rest of the band is here, yes...Zuj," her heart sank, dread latching around her as he continued, "Orchili...she isn't doing well. Age is catching up to her and...and she would love to see you."

Zujenia nodded, her face pale and her knuckles paler as she squeezed Kord's forearm. His free hand covered hers, relaxing it, his tail hugging her waist.

"Do you want me to come with you?" her lover offered, voice heavy with remorseful support. She slowly shook her head and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry, Zujenia. We'll keep her in our thoughts. Now go see here, yeah? Donnae worry about this lot, I'll keep them entertained for the evenin'."

She nodded, turning to Manfri who offered a light sad smile as he led the way through the maze of tents. Each step brought a new wave of emotion, occupying her mind and blinding her to their surroundings. The older Ryn had to redirect her a number of times as she missed a turn or too. By the time they paused before a fairly patchworked tent, her blood was roaring like a damn space opera in her ears.

"You alright?"

"No, but I don't think I'll ever be for this."

Manfri nodded and laid a hand behind her shoulder, reaching out and pulling open the entry flap. A few faces, more than the size of Kord's family, all looked up in surprise. Young, old, male, female, many of which were familiar to Zujenia. She had either grown up under their eyes or witnessed their own childhood. But before she could catch sight of her kin, two sets of small arms wrapped around her. The children's momentum causing her to step back.

"Zujie!!! Dad, dad, where'd you find her?—"

"—Aunt Zuj, did you know you were lost? Mema Orchili said so."

"Floure, Saban, hey," she smiled down, choking back tears. She's missed them a lot, more than she realized. Just seeing them reminded her of a time where everything was normal. It almost caused her to drown in the tsunami of stress trying to release from her. *Lost*, Floure had said and from Nana as well, well perhaps it was true. "You've grown so big since I last seen you, what's it been, two years?"

"Yeah!" Saban exclaimed with his blue hands settling proudly on the young boy's hips. His older sister just rolling her eyes at him as if he's being so immature. "We have a new baby sister! She's sort of named after you, Ludrenia, because we thought you were dead."

"Saban!" a middle-aged woman hushed from inside. She approached, bouncing lightly a small bundle in her arms. Her hair was thrown in a bun and sleepiness lingered in her eyes, the culprit of her tired state cooing. Tsuru gave the young woman a small smile. "It is good to see you again, Zujenia. To be honest we were worried when no word had been sent from you. We're glad you are well."

"Better than well, she's engaged." Manfri added, a chorus of cheers raised from the band. Zuj smiled slightly, her ears slowly growing red as she nodded in thanks.

"Is that my Granddaughter we're talking about? Come here, darling, let me see your face closer and give you a proper congratulations." The raspy voice croaked from a corner of the tent, causing the room to fall silent for a moment before picking up in their own private conversation. A graying sandy colored Ryn laid upon a matt full of blankets. Her face was mapped with the timeline of her life, each wrinkle defining something special to her — or at least that's what she told Zujenia aging was some time ago. The elderly Ryn's face beamed as the hybrid crouched beside her and grasped her offered hand.

"N-Nana Orchili," she stuttered, "I...I've—"

"I'm so, so proud of you." The woman brushed back a stray strand of white hair of Zuj's. The effort straining her breathing. "You...you went and listened to the...the voice inside. Your mother had that same one. I-I had hoped your time with us would persuade you to be content with our culture and life—"

"B-but I am, it is my life —"

"No, your upbringing...but never be disheartened, *Zujestsi*. What fire drives you is what was meant to be...I feel the living energy flowing through you...you have the blessing of the stars in your veins, my dear, never doubt it." A cough racked her body, the handkerchief she pulled away from her mouth marked with scarlet. Zujenia squeezed the elder's hand lightly, concern radiating towards the woman.

"Rest your voice, Nana, please."

"I —*cough*— have rested it enough in my life. I'm seventy-three years old. I have brought —*cough*— five children into this galaxy and have fought hard to hold on to my one I have left. I'd said...goodbye to my love too early...but was granted *cough* two wonderful grandchildren. For that, it is enough."

A sob broke through Zujenia's lips as once again Orchili shook violently with a fit. She pulled on the Force selfishly, drinking in its energy until it numbed her own shuddering shoulders. Her forehead dropped to rest against their clasped hands.

"Orchili," Manfri's voice addressed quietly from behind her. He must have stayed within earshot in case help was needed. The man was always the watchful eye of the band. "You said two, two grandchildren. Are you..."

"C-confirming that you are...in fact Vai's son?"

Zujenia's head shot up and her eyes widened, "What? How? Why wasn't— I don't understand."

"I always...told your mother she should've been honest with...you, Manfri — *cough*." Orchili's green eyes met the half-Ryn's amber. "Manfri was born when we...were still enslaved. He — *cough* — was sold as an infant and your mother didn't find him again — *cough*— until he was seven. By then the work she was doing was dangerous...she...didn't want to—"

"She didn't want to give me a mother only to be killed later, so she gave me to my folks to raise." Manfri finished for her, his face contorted in pain at another intense hacking running through their grandmother. Their. It was slowly sinking in. It wasn't that she wouldn't welcome Manfri as her brother, it was just — she didn't know how to respond. How does one respond to this? She would probably understand later on but right now?

Orchili wheezed, the last bout leaving her immensely exhausted. She squeezed weakly Zujenia's hand before croaking, "Go, I would...like to sleep...now. Love you, my space hopper...both of you."

A tear slipped from Zujenia's cheek and landed on the wrinkled and lightly furred hand in hers, just in time with the old woman drifting asleep. The half-Ryn released her grip slowly and unsurely, her eyes hesitant to leave her elder's being—fearful she would pass on into the void if she did.

"Zujen," Manfri called, his voice light and heavy with the accent one could only hear when speaking Ryn. "come. Tsura will give O-Orchilla her herbs now. Let's...let's go outside. I think we need to talk— I mean, we could use some fresh air."

Zujenia nodded, and the two picked their way through the quiet room, exiting the tent to the golden rays of a new sunset. A new understanding of their lives heavy on their minds.