

Out of Order

I trusted him. I trusted the one I had to kill because I felt compassion and because I was convinced the Mistress would actually command someone to kill. I was wrong. I've been locked up in this tiny cell for what feels ages, shackles and ropes spreading my limbs apart and lifting me half a meter off the floor, and in addition to that: very little food and fifty whippings a day. I should have seen through his lie but I cannot merely blame him. It is my fault as well. I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. The Mistress never gave me that command. Aeon *wanted* me to kill him, for whatever reason. Perhaps he was really desperate to escape his fate? The Mistress wouldn't have killed him, I am sure. There must be another reason for his act. Ugh, I don't want to think about it anymore. I told Aeon the truth; I won't ever forget him. I remember him as the largest *fucker* I have ever known and I will not forgive him for what he done to me. Ironically, the one commanded to whip me is the fellow who saved the wolf. That doesn't make it any better, though. It was his best friend and I murdered him.

No.

I have to let go and accept my fate.

Five days earlier.

My feet hastily move up the stairs, my goal the Mistresses quarters. It's remarkably quiet so it must be evening already. As I raise my paw to knock on her door her voice interrupts me. "Come in, Riku." The vixen's distinctive voice sounds strangely grim. It sends a chill down my spine. Does she... Already know? No, that's impossible. That can't be.

I open the door carefully and step inside. The friendly face she had was not there anymore. A single candle, standing majestically in the middle of her empty table, illuminates the entire room. I am barely able to see the rest of her.

"Sit down." She says, with a lot of tense in her tone.

I quickly grab the wooden chair and move myself onto it. It is an utmost frightening scene. Her relaxed mood is no more.

"You already know why I have brought you here, don't you Riku?"

I gulp, my heart beating hard inside my chest. She ordered me to kill him, didn't she? It must be something else. She must have brought me here for something else. I am safe!

"N... No, Mistress."

"Think again."

Just as I am about to answer, the shackles hidden at the underside of the armrests and chair legs lock my wrists and ankles tightly. A metal ring with rusty spikes protrudes out of the back of the chair and closes in around my neck. There is no way I can remove it and moving causes a lot of pain. My heart beats harder, painfully hard. The veins scattered across my arms and legs swell up and I can feel the blood being squeezed through them.

"Riku, I know everything. But I want you to admit your sins. I give you three minutes. If you don't, you know what will happen."

My blood boils. What does she expect? The wrong words will cost me my life. Confusion hits me and I am unable to think clearly. My head is one tangle web of information that needs to be processed. A strong headache kicks in at that point, too. Adrenaline is pumped through my body as if it would help. A minute passes.

"Well?"

I have no idea what I had done wrong. Did she really mean the murder of Aeon? It felt so right since it was one of her commands.

Wait...

The Mistress would never command someone to execute another, especially not as a test. This cannot be true. Has Aeon tricked me? There isn't any reason why he would do that. Then why did he want me to kill him? There is no time to think about that now.

Shit.

"...Time's up."

"Wait! I... I killed Aeon! I did, I did it!"

The Mistress raises an eyebrow.

"You're lucky. One second later and your gullet would have gotten pierced by a rusty spike." Her words sound awfully calm and distant. The vixen stands up and walks at me with short, hasty steps. She stops behind me. An icy-cold paw draws circles on my chest. Her paw-pads feel like thousands of tiny little barbs softly freezing my fur.

"Well done Riku, very well done. I am proud of you, so very, very proud." She runs a paw through my hair, ruffling it. "But your deeds will not be forgiven soon. Before I will continue interrogation, you will..."

I can hear her heart skip a beat, as if she hurts herself saying this.

"...spend a year in the isolated cell." The Mistress sneers, her mood switching. "You'll rot there, Riku. You might start to regret your actions. You might try to commit suicide." Her paw grips tightly around my neck. "I'll see you soon." And with that, her grip tightens to a point where I am unable to breathe. Right before I fall unconscious, she opens the spiked collar.

The pain in my right leg wakes me up. My head feels heavy and entangled in a web of intractable information. I blink, but no light will enter my eyes. My arms are suspended against the wall with massive metal shackles. From what I can feel, I'm sitting on a stone floor. The rustling noise it produces when I move my legs indicates it must be dead leaves. The air is cold and dry. My fur rises to preserve warmth as soon as I notice.

Brrrrr.

"Wh... Where am I...?"

I can reach the walls with my feet if I spread them as far as I can. It must be a tiny cell I've been put into. How long have I been unconscious?

"I want... I want to get out... Release... Release me...!"

No response.

"Let me go! I have to talk to the Mistress!"

Things stay quiet for a moment, but silence is broken by a shadow opening the door. Little light enters the room and I can't see who or what the visitor is.

"You don't have to talk to anyone." A cold, deep voice answers. "As the Mistress said; you'll rot here for a year. I will feed you once in a while to keep you alive and to keep you from getting blind. Don't try to talk to me again for I am not allowed. The Mistress asked me personally to give you a beating if you do." The stranger snickers. His voice reminds me of a badger.

"Now hush and eat up, I've got other slaves to feed." A wooden bowl is pressed against my lips. The content tastes horribly, as if straight from someone's tailhole! The smell isn't completely fresh either. I decide to eat either way and reluctantly roll out my tongue to welcome the 'food'. The unknown substance slides into my gullet.

Ugh. That tastes like excrement...

I estimate it to be around three hours after the 'chef' left. The bitter taste of the food he brought still lingers in my throat. My stomach turned upside down multiple times, but I've managed not to mess up my humble room with puke for now. My head slowly starts to feel lighter and less slow than before. Vivid images of the Mistress, my room and Aeon flash in front of my eyes. That *fucker* set me up. He is the reason I am here. I have lost everything due to him. Everything is clear in this silence, perhaps a little too clear. I don't want to remember why I am here; I have to forget. I have to forget myself and accept what I have done in order to stay sane.

For what feels to Riku an age passes. Hours, days, weeks and even months. Riku has devoted himself to day-long meditation and is thankful for every grub he gets. He has forgiven the Mistress, Aeon and most importantly: himself. The punishment is not that bad anymore. That's the whole point of a punishment; to understand that previous actions should not be repeated. Meditating, relaxing, exercises and eating. It has become a routine for Riku. His whole life has become a 2 x 1 meter dungeon cell. Enough to think, Riku told himself. A general slave would've rotten away within weeks, but the fox's perseverance beats anyone else's. The will to live, although he knows there is nothing to live for anymore, pulses vividly inside Riku's heart. The Mistress will likely give him the nastiest of chores and other servants will not treat him with respect any longer, but Riku is satisfied with only his life.

Five months.

Knock, knock, knock.

"...Yes?" I inquire.

"The Mistress wishes to speak you," A rough, unfamiliar voice speaking. "I will bring you to the headquarters immediately. You have a chance of early release... If your answers please the Mistress."

I tilt my head in confusion. She wants to talk to me after having me wait for five months? Well, whatever. I have forgiven her.

Two strong arms free my wrists from their permanent restraint. The fur has fallen out and a little longer in that cell would have rendered them bald. Not to talk about the deep cuts the metal has given me. The buff animal, a deer, wraps an arm around mine and pulls me out of the cell. My legs have become like pudding and I am barely able to stand. My lithe built has vanished, and has turned into something less athletic. Every ounce of fat has been burned due the lack of nutrition. My muscles have become weak. I want to work my body back to its former glory once I am released. Instead of spending time inside my room, I will exercise, become stronger.

The headquarters are getting near. I would be trembling if I hadn't accepted my fate. Am I going to get another beating or has she forgiven me for my despicable action? I only know that if my punishment is to spend *there*, in that tiny dungeon cell, my entire life she better freezes me to death as soon as possible. The cedar doors, which are richly decorated with totem-animals, swing open right before we enter. Two buff dragons walk past us, their expressions blank. Their tails twitch lightly as if they've just seen something terrible. The doors close before I have a chance to peer inside. The air feels heavy and oppressive. What could have happened inside that room?