

An Expected Visitor

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When she opened the door to permit his entrance, Selene kept her eyes down. It was expected of her. He was higher in rank than she, and she ushered him in with all due deference. It was unfortunately easy. Years of servitude had engrained servility into her, and now she behaved almost on instinct... almost. She knew why he was here. He was here to find out why her shipments had been coming more and more irregularly, with decreasing quality and quantity. The eversteel she provided was needed by the others.

He was there to find out the reason for her failures, and then he was likely to punish her. She knew he was going to punish her, whether or not that was his directive. She had tasted his... punishments before. Her skin crawled as his beady, slitted eyes raked her body. His snaggletoothed, crocodilian visage stretched into a hungry grin, and as he sat in the chair in one of her smaller workrooms, he crossed his thickly muscled arms over his barrel chest. Murky green scales covered his body, lightening to pale yellow on his front and giving way to hard, bony plates on his back and down the length of his thick tail.

That lewd look she recognized. She had gotten them nearly her entire life. While she wasn't necessarily the most voluptuous woman in the world, the curves she did possess were long and elegant, an elegance accentuated by waist-length hair that shimmered like sable waves as it cascaded down her back. His stare made her want to cut it off, and she kept her soft blue eyes averted lest the bulky lizard see the hatred in them.

Luckily for her, he was just as blind as she had once been, and only leaned back in his chair hard enough to make it creak as he grumbled, "You know why I have come, yes?"

The crocodile's voice was low and rough, like his throat was full of gravel. She acknowledged it with a curt nod, making sure not to lift her eyes from the ground. When there was a long pause, she swallowed noisily, whispering, "Yes, Master."

With another long period of silence, he sipped slowly at the cup of steaming liquid she poured for him. She remembered he liked his tea strong and bitter. "Hmm... That's at least one proficiency you haven't seemingly lost." Peering up at her, he waved his hand vaguely another chair. "Sit, Selene." She did so, and he gave her a thoughtful frown. "It's a shame your lovely assistant isn't around. Of the two of you, I'd have rather had the pleasure of her company. I remember her well."

Selene seethed silently. Cheap shots at her vanity, she could handle, but the reminder that Luna was viewed as just as much of an object as she threatened to make her shake with rage in her seat. "My apologies, Master." she murmured smoothly, showing none of her true emotion, "When she returns, I will be sure to show you to her. I am sure she remembers you just as well." That wasn't likely going to happen. She had sent Luna away specifically for this occasion. Her love would be hard to hide, and if the crocodile even hinted that he had done to her what he had done to Luna, he would not survive long enough to give her any information.

"Yes..." he replied, his stupid, dull eyes thankfully empty of understanding, "I do try to make an impression. I must admit, Selene. You have worked wonders with your little operation up here in the middle of nowhere. It looks like you've been doing rather well, all things considered."

He couldn't have set a more obvious trap for her. She *was* doing well. Her operation had expanded rapidly; she had her own complex, and the room in which they now sat was one of the smallest of her workspaces. That would lead to the question of why her work had declined in effectiveness in recent months, given the apparent efficiency of her setup. He knew that; she knew that.

She remained silent, and he just looked at her. He expected acknowledgement of his compliment, but she knew where that would lead. He waited patiently, however. "Yes, Master. Thank you, M-"

The crocodile slapped her, lunging forward and throwing the back of his rigidly-scaled hand into her cheek with enough force to knock her from her chair. Selene hit the floor hard with a soft, pained cry. Starbursts swam before her eyes, tears blurring her vision. She tasted the blood that ran over her lips from the cut over her cheekbone, but she struggled to push herself upward nonetheless, unwilling to let him see her beaten down. If Luna were there, he would have been crushed to a bloody pulp, but that was precisely why she wasn't there.

His bulky body cast a shadow over her as he loomed. With a brief, frightened squeak, not entirely artificial, she felt his meaty fingers wrap around the back of her neck, and he hauled her off of the ground, throwing her roughly back into her chair. Crouching before her, he put his long, savagely-featured face level with hers as he dug his claws into the fabric of her robes, now a pallid, almost-white grey rather than the black she had worn for years.

Taking a second to lick her blood off of the scale that had split her cheek, he regarded her coolly for a short moment. "You are quite welcome, Selene. No one can say I do not recognize accomplishment when I see it. That, however, does lead me to question why our mistress found it necessary to send me out to the middle of this Gods-forsaken no-place. You see--and I'm not sure if you're aware of this--your shipments, such as they can be called, have been found wanting recently. While not quite detrimental... this has somewhat irked a few rather powerful people, especially since you have proven time and again that you are reliable."

With a heavy, tired sigh, he released her, pushing her back into her chair and flopping heavily down into his own with enough disregard to make the wood groan under his weight. "Surely you see the source of my distress, Selene." he grumbled, once more crossing his arms over his chest, "I remember teaching you. You learned quickly, and your achievements reflected well on me. Needless to say, your apparent deficiencies have begun to reflect just the same." Leaning forward, he loosened his arms to allow him to steeple his fingers before his snout. "Tell me, Selene. What's happened? Has the altitude addled your mind? Have these chemicals burned away the sense I worked so hard to cultivate within you? What. Has. Happened?"

He thought he was being clever, mysterious. She remembered his lessons, the coarseness of his fingers on her skin. She learned, yes. She learned because to do anything else would have killed her. She had ignored all else, put her mind to absorbing all she could. Knowing what would come next, Selene did her best to remain calm, buy time. She steeled herself, her eyes darting upward to him for a split second. The crocodile patiently awaited an answer.

She bowed her head respectfully, knowing what she needed to do now. She needed to stay strong for a little longer, for Luna. "Yes, Master. You see, Master, I-"

A heavy, sturdy fist blinded her as it impacted with her face. Her head snapped back, and the momentum behind his thick arm carried her backward, knocking her chair over and sending her sprawling onto the floor. Selene felt it with a detached, emotionless calm as she blinked numbly at the smooth stone below her. Her jaw was broken. Blood oozed fitfully from her

crumpled nose and cut lips. She hadn't expected such violence so soon; he must have been more displeased than she had thought.

The enraged crocodilian leaped to his clawed toes and kicked away both chairs. "No, Selene, I'm afraid I don't see! What, pray tell, is there for me to see?!" He advanced, swinging his foot into her midsection hard enough to crack ribs and send her skidding across the floor. "I see a facility easily capable of manufacturing what is expected of you! I see the slave I pulled from the dirt and gave purpose! I see you taking the trust we all put in you and throwing it back in our faces, back in *my* face! I see you wallowing in your betrayal! What else is there for me to see?!"

He took another step, but his foot landed awkwardly, making him falter. It was enough to make Selene heave a sigh of relief through the blood that kept trying to fill her mouth. About time. The crocodile was big, but she had given him a proportionally large dose in his tea. Still, it had taken longer than she had anticipated, probably due to his anger. Once more, emotions were interfering with her work.

His next step could barely be called such, and he stumbled, falling heavily to the floor to gasp for air. She smiled; she hadn't prepared the poison to be merciful, but he wouldn't die. She needed him for a while yet. Watching him thrash on the floor, his thick tail thrashing about, knocking over glassware-laden tables, Selene pushed herself up to her knees. "So much..." she said as she observed him crawling weakly toward her, "There is so much to see, Master, but I... I'm afraid you are blind to it." He spluttered, choking on his own tongue, half-formed words falling from between his irregular teeth. "That's alright, Master." she murmured down to him as she struggled to her feet, a hand over her injured ribs, nothing not easily fixed, "Just sleep now. I'll get you situated soon enough. I just need to get a few things ready first."

He awoke with just as much surprised violence than that with which he had fallen, his eyes fluttering open as he sucked in a deep breath, ridding his mind of the tranquilizers clouding his thoughts. That, too, she watched with academic interest. He always snapped back to consciousness with the same sudden jerk of motion. It was almost funny.

Beady, hate-filled eyes snapped to her, and he lunged at her, heedless of the table he was shackled to. "You!" he shouted, snapping his teeth together an inch from her skin, "You worthless slave! You drugged me?! *Me*?! I will grind you to dust! I will boil the flesh from your bones! Release me now and you will die quickly!"

Selene had heard it all before. She thought it boring. There was no creativity, no spirit to his defiant threats. "Come now, Master." she cooed to him, giving his eversteel restraints a once-over. They would hold; they were some of her best work. "You know as well as I that you're lying to me. But... that's okay; all I needed was some information."

The crocodile struggled anyway, flailing on the table to which he was secured. "You won't get anything from me, you whore!" he seethed, hissing between his teeth, "You may as well let me kill you now, because you're signing your death warrant with this insubordination!"

She shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid you misunderstand me, Master. You've already given me everything I needed, even some that I didn't. We've been at this for a long time, now."

With a huff, her one-time master renewed his struggle, "You bluff! You can't-"

She silenced him with a wave of her hand, and as she had known he would, he quieted... pathetic. "It matters not what you believe, Master. Do you think it beyond my ability to wipe your memory between questions? I recall you teaching me the beginnings of those potions yourself. Do you think yourself faultless, impregnable? Did you believe that you had no buttons

to press, no soft spots to probe, that those scales were thick enough to hide behind? I think, Master, that after a while, your arrogance started to surprise even you."

Gritting his teeth, he glared at her, but remained remarkably silent. She nodded down at him. "I'm out of questions to ask you, so this will be the last time, I think. That means I get to tell you a few things of my own." Stepping softly, she walked in a slow circle around him. "You're probably hungry; you've been here for a few days, just in case you needed a little bit more evidence. This previous break took longer than the others. I had to take the chance to clean up a little bit." She swept her arm down her robes, cleaned of the blood that had been splattered over them. "A tidy workspace is key, if you remember giving me that lesson. I thought I would put it to use practicing something other than alchemy."

She took a seat next to him, lowering herself demurely into a chair next to her workbench. She ran fingers over the tools she had assembled, lifting a few, showing them to him. "You never expressed any interest, and I wasn't keen on telling anyone, but I'll let you in on a secret. When I was taken into the care of my masters and mistresses, you were the one responsible for seeing to my indoctrination." She grinned at him. "You failed." Saying that made pleased warmth well up in her. "I kept my memories. I remembered the life from which I was taken. My parents were cobblers, and I was in the middle of learning their trade when I was stolen from them. I think I was doing fairly well, despite being so young, but it's been a while since I've had the chance to practice much."

"The process had been refined when the woman I took with me was... brought into the fold. I've tried undoing what was done to her, but I fear it is beyond my current abilities, as always." She couldn't stop the happy smile from washing over her features. "She's always the one pushing me to get better, even if she doesn't realize it. I wish you could see her now, but trust me, it's better for us both that she's not here for this. I'm not sure she would understand. I made a promise that I don't know she would let me keep if she were here. As you will soon see, I care not what you may have done to me. I forgot you long ago. But... she is a different matter entirely. I didn't think I would be able to feel for anyone ever again, but she reminded me. I saw a soul in the innocence behind her eyes, something I thought had been spirited away from me. I remember myself in her."

Letting her head fall, she only just managed to stop herself from balling her hands into angry fists. "What upsets me most, Master, is what you and the others have done to *her*. She, who is so pure, was dragged through the muck by your hands. The bliss she deserved was beaten from her time and again. Your fingers scoured the happiness from her life. I intend on bringing that happiness back, even if it means taking away those who have caused her so much pain. Perhaps... perhaps if I can spare others from your... tender attentions, I can start repairing the damage for which we are all responsible. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

He growled and opened his mouth to reply, but all that escaped his throat was an agonized bellow when she spun a short blade into her hand and jammed it into the side of his thigh. She raked it down his leg, slicing between his scales with professional care. Reaching his knee, she pulled the thin, razored wafer of eversteel from his thigh, returning it to the tray from which she had swiped it. "I apologize, Master. I didn't mean to imply that question required an answer. It was more for myself. Let me fix that for you." He flailed against his bonds to no avail as she smeared a thick paste on the wound she inflicted, making sure the shallow cut sealed itself quickly.

Wiping the blood off of his scales, she tossed away the soiled cloth and inspected his leg. No lasting damage. Good. "Sorry about that. I digressed a bit from my intended point. What I

was *trying* to say was that I have a dire need." Selene lifted her legs, pulling up the hem of her robes to show the crocodile the soft leather of her knee-length boots. "The terrain out here in the mountains is rough, and it's tearing my boots to tatters, see? Not that I mind, of course. I rather like what all this walking has done to my body, but I'm not going to be able to keep them foot-worthy for much longer. I think it's time for a new pair, and you did always remind me to never let anything go to waste."

With idle fingers, she indicated a large, crystalline flask sitting on the table next to her assembled tools. It was full of a viscous, pale green fluid, and she lifted it to show it to him. "It took me a little time to get it right, but I had plenty of opportunities to refine it. You'll be proud, I think." She tilted it slightly, letting a few drops of it drip onto his abdomen. He tensed, frightened. His clothes had long since been removed, and it splattered over his scales, harmlessly running over the contours of his muscle. "See, Master? Nothing! Those nice, sturdy scales left untouched. But watch this!" Taking up her scalpel again, she moved lower along his body.

She put the blade to him once more, cutting a thin, neat line down his calf, only an inch long, before she let another drop fall onto the fresh incision. It hissed and bubbled on contact with his flesh, and she spread the cut open to allow the solvent entrance to his lower leg. He screamed, a high pitched sound that didn't seem capable of being created in his throat as his muscle started to dissolve under his skin. His breath ran out quickly, and he was reduced to spasming weakly against the dark, eversteel bands that held him secured to his table. "See, Master? This compound should burn through muscle and bone with equal ease, but will leave your hide alone. With a little bit of work, there should be plenty left to use. I know I told her that I would skin you a square inch at a time and this isn't quite skinning, but I don't have the necessary skill to ensure I would have enough left for a pair of boots. Perhaps the others when we find them, but you're first, Master. You get to be first. Aren't you excited?"

He gurgled what might have been a whine, and she grinned up at him along the length of his body. "I know. I'm excited too. I'll take it slowly for you Master. I wouldn't want you to miss anything. Just remember to breathe, alright? I gave you enough stimulants to keep you awake the whole time. I'll start with your extremities and work my way inward. I promise I won't let you die until I'm ready, alright? Just sit tight and try to hold still. If you make me miss a cut, I'll have to start over from scratch."

Throwing his head back, he howled his fury. She just took the opportunity to close the band that she had left open around his neck, pinning him back against the table. That would help a bit with his movements. She had him almost completely restrained now. "Alright, Master. I'd like for you to do something for me. I need you to remember. Remember the woman I took away from you. You shouldn't find that difficult, I think. Remember how lovely her eyes are. Remember how soft and smooth her skin was before it was scarred from her punishments. Can you remember her tears as she begged you to stop? Hold that in your mind, Master. This is for her, not for me."

With that, she bent to her work and started cutting.