

“Gah! Can’t I ever just relax? Can’t this accursed weather–”

It was a hearty summer sun that beat down upon the Coastal Remains today. The cover granted by parasols and palm trees only provided so much help, the inevitability of sunburn circling around all living things like a raptor high in the sky.

Three days of gentler weather had succeeded in luring two beachgoers into a false sense of security. The eternal blizzards plaguing the Icy Wilderness had seemed like the end of the world. And yet the Ice Princess had soon learned, as she stumbled through the opening of a giant, empty seashell, that the opposite was equally unbearable.

“I don’t want to freeze solid, but I don’t want to be boiled alive, either!” The vixen spread her hands incredulously, glaring at the rays of light that hounded them through the shell’s entrance. “Why has that been deemed as such a bizarre wish?”

Bubbly laughter echoed around the chamber from her companion behind her, ignored for now as she looked for a place to sit down. Their walk could wait for now. If she stayed out in this heat for any longer, she’d start shedding, and things were bad enough without a neat little trail of fur broadcasting her suffering for all to see.

It was no spate of evildoing across the realms, this heat wave. But it irritated her to still be subject to such annoyances, even in a time of relative peace.

The Princess found herself a spot by the back of the shell, and lowered herself to the sandy floor with as much dignity as she could muster. Clasping her hands together, she let out a sigh, her eyes darting across the chamber to her companion.

Teena sat closer to the entrance, further from the cooling comfort of shadow. Her bracelets shone bright in the intruding sunlight. Plastered over her face was the same blithe smile that she’d worn for almost the entire time the Princess had known her.

Oh, to be so unbothered.

So outwardly unbothered.

“I’ll never understand how it doesn’t aggravate you as much as it does me.”

“Oh?” Teena stared at her for a moment, still smiling despite her confusion. “Oh! Oh, the heat! Nothing I’m not used to, he-he!”

That was quite the understatement, and quite the way to brush off what her partner saw as an amazing feat. Quite the resistance she’d built up, indeed, having grown up on an active volcano.

Of course the royal who’d hadn’t set foot outside of the Citadel for years would be impressed by anything that wasn’t frozen over. Nothing unusual there. But the Ice Princess still found it so fantastical to believe, a place the practical opposite of everything she’d known.

The upbringing she'd touted with such pride and—she had to admit it—*some* pompousness had seemed worthless when compared to the tribulations of this realm, eerie in its similarity to the place she'd be told would await her for unladylike behaviour in her youth. It chewed up the weak and spat them out with impunity.

Of course, she knew now that Molten Mount was merely another realm, and not a demonic hellscape conjured up to scare unruly kits. She knew not to put stock in such spectres and boogeymen anymore. But thoughts of a potential visit to Teena's homeworld had still petered out after the hyena's tales—between bouts of hysterics—of wars, volcanic eruptions and beasts infused with darkness. Apparently, the Volcanic Isle was a taxing realm for its people even before Red's attempt to take over.

(Putting aside that Teena had then needed to explain to her who Red even was. She was so sheltered.)

The Ice Princess' delicate tail stirred the sand, twitching in her growing agitation. Teena's patience was incredible, and one of many aspects of her that were inspirational. The vixen hugged herself, finding it harder and harder to tear her gaze from her girlfriend's body.

Would she ever have the nerve to ask for what she truly wanted? So many past trysts were spent lost in the simplicity of kisses. Kisses that, enjoyable as they were, never led to anything more. And those were the ones that bore fruit, instead of being interrupted by tense laughter and averted eyes. Here lay the chance for more. This close proximity, and this relative privacy...would a better opportunity ever come?

"Ah, sorry. He-he. For, uh. Yeah."

The Princess blinked. She stared at Teena, who only held eye contact for a moment before looking away. "Pardon?"

"He-he-yeah, well, I know our holiday's been a little, uh...yeah. Eh-heh." Teena's grin was sheepish. "Could be better, couldn't it, and all. It's not...ha-ha...it's not me, is it?" Her chest heaved, as she evidently tried to suppress more giggles of stress.

A chilly, courtly superiority blazed through the vixen's stance and stare as she glared at her. "Why, in *any* sense," she snapped, "would you be to blame?"

If anything, she could at least put the kibosh on *that* train of thought, as harsh as she may have sounded doing so. In no realm on the planet would she drag her girlfriend into her foolish internal skirmishes.

Her girlfriend. It still felt so strange to call her that. On the one hand, it made perfect sense; she loved her, of course, and knew her feelings were returned a hundredfold. But on the other hand, the sense of finality it held scared her. It forced open a door behind which waited the future in its inevitability and enormity, awe-inspiring and terrifying both.

Because where, exactly, would their relationship go? This warrior who'd walked out of such hardship with nary a scar or a bad word against the world. With...her. A miserable excuse for

a 'ruler'. The very same Ice Princess who was unaware of the Dragon Elder being held prisoner in her own citadel. Behind her back. For weeks.

So sheltered.

"Princess?"

Shocked from her internal self-flagellation, the vixen bit back an undignified yip.

Teena sat there, closer than before, eyes searching her in patient, careful silence. Her muzzle creased in a gentle smile, without a trace of anything mocking in it.

Teena, who had been standing right in front of the teleporter once she'd stumbled off the pad, arms open to catch her. Teena, who was present for her quite frankly embarrassing reaction to feeling soft, warm sand under her paws for the first time. Teena, who was ready with reassurance and kindness to combat every bit of negativity that spilled from the Princess' wretched lips.

Teena, the centerpiece to the Ice Princess' every thought.

She told herself to say something. Told herself to reach out, and brush her shaking hands through the hyena's luscious brown fur. And stayed in a tight huddle, still and bristling.

*Utterly pathetic*, she berated herself. *Are you a fox or a rabbit?* Her girlfriend was right there, real and wondrous and staring at her with...what? Anticipation? Impatience?

She must hate it, having to stay in here. Holed up in this stupid seashell by that wretched sun. All due to her girlfriend ruining things, like always, because she'd been stupid and uptight and couldn't tolerate a tiny bit of sun and—

Warm fur. Soft under her hands, leeching out the tension. Teena had edged closer without the Princess noticing. Her stare stayed resolute, full of that mysterious emotion.

The Princess' eyes were wide. Her gaze was owlish as she spread her fingers. A soft titter burst out of Teena, startling her as much as the Princess. They both floated in this tentative headscape, enamoured by the littlest things.

All the while, the vixen internally thrashed in her self-imposed bonds, arguing with herself over whether to kiss the same woman she'd kissed countless times before.

Ridiculous. That was what her so-called issues were. She wanted, and was wanted. That was it. The world outside may as well be non-existent. She was here. Alone. With the love of her life. There was no judgement. No nebulous standard to aspire to. Nothing else mattered.

The Princess' hand moved, brushing across Teena's forearm. They were close, so close. Matching her movements, Teena shifted, and her bracelets jingled with the movement. Her eyes were deep, dark pools of serenity.

Thoughts of the restrictive frost that had plagued her for her entire life flashed before the Ice Princess' eyes. She recalled the brittleness that it infused her words with, and how delicately it made her tread. How this thing meant to guide her life and solidify her being had instead hindered her for so long.

And, as their lips met, felt its cold hold loosen.

Their kiss enveloped the Princess in a delicious warmth. She cupped Teena's cheek, stroking a thumb lower across the hyena's powerful jaw as her spotted arms wrapped around her. Teena's earring shone as her ear twitched, a moan escaping her throat.

Pulling away with reluctance, they panted like common dogs in the heat. This one kiss, among so many others, had been the one to ignite a fire that had been stoked for so long. As they stared into each other's eyes, they both knew that this kiss would only be the beginning.

The Princess barely paused for breath; as Teena fixed her with a ravaging stare of her own, the vixen dove back in for more. Her hands ventured over the hyena's arm as another kiss ensnared them. Toned biceps and triceps were both subject to her touch. Delicately manicured fingers roamed across pale-grassed plains. Silky fur atop corded muscle: it created a wonderful contrast.

It reminded her of the mysterious purple crystals she'd seen planted around the Citadel, before that dragon had cleared them out. They'd possessed a terrifying aura, and that couldn't be denied...but a kind of fascination also lay in such dark, perverse power.

The comparison would not go further than that, however. Associating her beloved with the darkness? Perish the thought. But the mental image never quite dissipated from the Princess' mind of that mesmerizing force. A dangerous allure. An alluring danger.

More and more often, these thoughts swilled about in her mind. It was painful, in a way, melting away the frost that routinely built back up inside of her. And yet the beauty of her partner continued to enthrall her. How many times had she lost herself in fantasies of Teena's capabilities? Of the strength that lay dormant beneath the surface, and what it could lead to once unleashed...

The Ice Princess blinked, looking up at Teena. Her deep brown eyes flickered between the vixen's hand in her fur and her paler gaze. Her fingertips brushed lightly over one of the spots on the hyena's arm.

"He-he...uh, what are...what are you doing? Ha-ha..."

The words barged out of her mouth. "Appreciating you."

Sudden, and haphazard in its declaration, but true. Teena needed appreciation, and the Princess needed to provide it. It was a fact, as true as the sky being blue and the sun holding a grudge against her. She needed Teena to know that she loved her, down to the tiniest speckle on her pelt.

After a second to gather herself, the Princess added, more curtly, "If you'll allow me."

Teena seemed more than willing. As her partner returned to her bicep, giving it a careful, admiring squeeze, Teena flexed her arm, accompanying the action with a soft snicker. Firm, unyielding muscle bunched under dainty fingers.

"You are a wonderful creature. Has anyone ever informed you of that?"

"Ah-ha...not really, just you."

The vixen huffed. "That's just absurd. It's simply a fact. I will remind you as often as I can."

"He-he-he...so cuuute!"

That...was never a compliment the Princess would ever get used to. Teena's smile tightening alerted her before her awareness of her own ears flattening.

"Ah, Teena, it's fine. Just...unexpected."

The Ice Princess' hesitance still showed, evidently. Despite being leaps and bounds beyond the sad, bitter creature that had haunted the Citadel, she suspected that some of her doubts and nerves would never truly leave her. However, she'd come to accept them as part of herself. Allowed them to hold court, but refused to let them control her.

Being called *cute* seemed like such a strange source of mixed feelings for her, but it was no praise for her *conduct* or *elegance* that she strived for in her youth—or, rather, was *made* to strive for. And yet it threatened to melt the frosted walls that she had built around herself. It was sweet, and well-meant. The Princess told herself to realise that, and accept it.

And, having noticed the hyena's nervous grin, assured her of her feelings with "It's welcome, Teena." She was blushing as red as the pelt of any common fox. "More than welcome."

Her partner's praise was certainly valued, but she was also the main attraction right now, and needed to be reminded of that. The Princess leaned in, gracing Teena's neck with first a kiss, and then a careful lick. The brief, wet touch made her jolt as if struck by one of that dragon's electric blasts. The Princess nosed at her jaw, feeling her pulse flutter like a butterfly under her skin.

A quiet exclamation from Teena stalled her. She grunted in response—half-frustrated, half-fond. "Yes?"

"You, uh, he-he...um. You want to keep going, and all? Because, well, hah, um, we are..."

...Outside. In public.

Where the security of their little get-together balanced on a knife's edge. Where one too-loud sound could lead to any number of approaching footsteps, followed by eyes blown wide and then a whole lot of embarrassment for everyone involved.

A problem that would, quite frankly, just have to go ignored for now, due to the simple fact that the Princess was going to combust if they didn't take this any further.

Leaving less and less to her words, the vixen leaned in to press a palm against one of Teena's breasts through her bikini top. Eyes grew lidded as breaths grew heavier.

Drawing closer still to give the hyena's cheek another little peck, the Princess soaked in her proximity and warmth. It was as if she would lose all solidity if she didn't keep reaffirming that she was real. She found it hard, sometimes, to believe that she was.

A warrior, and a survivor. A hero without a single accolade, next to a royal in name alone. A dummy queen with sovereignty dropped in her lap, who did nothing but sit under its weight. A so-called ruler who had remained holed up in her Citadel, griping about being cold, while a tyrant threatened the realms.

Fingers stroked her cheek and ushered her out of her thoughts. "Hey..." Teena guided the Princess' gaze towards hers. "It's alright."

Her response came in the form of a long, drawn out huff.

"I mean it!" Her eyes narrowed. Then they widened. "Oh! It's...the whole...hey, I get it."

So perceptive. The vixen only huffed again.

"You didn't do anything wrong, okay?"

The Princess looked askance. "I did nothing at all."

"You kept yourself safe! You didn't get in the way or make things worse!"

"Praised for cowardice?" The vixen smirked despite herself. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"Don't call it that!" Teena's scowl was short-lived. "I mean, anyway...it's dragon business, really! Ha-ha! You're not a dragon!"

"I'm not? Goodness. I never noticed."

Teena's giggles threaded through the warm air. The Ice Princess found herself smiling again. Her hand reached up to join Teena's, fingers stroking the back of her partner's hand.

This discussion would be tabled for later. Standing aside while others fought to save the world wasn't ever something she'd take pride in. Neither did she believe many would try to convince her otherwise. The beautiful woman before her may have been an exception, but there were more important matters at present.

“Regardless.” The Princess straightened up, imperious. “This is not about me.”

A grand landscape of eager hyena lay before her eyes. A toothy grin stretched across her face, her passiveness seeming to have gone the way of the Princess’ self-doubt.

This new atmosphere between them felt utterly intoxicating. The vixen’s mind simmered in a mix of flustered nerves and contentment as she bent down, her partner’s firm abs being the next part of her to receive a kiss. Teena jolted at each and every touch, arching into the Princess’ affections.

Her heart felt close to beating out of her chest. Her breaths came thin, ruffling the sandy fur under her lips. She felt airy, bubbly. As if she’d float off into the sky without her partner’s solid presence to keep her grounded. To keep her existent.

“He-he...hey, why are you shivering, Princess? It’s not cold.”

“Oh, hush, you.” She gave Teena’s thigh a playful swat.

Her partner’s strength was palpable; she’d felt it even in that briefest moment of contact. Moving to straddle that same thigh, something sparked within the Princess; she shuddered as it rose up through her fur and set her stomach aswirl. This was a more appealing kind of heat, for sure.

And judging from what she could feel poking against her, Teena felt equally eager to ramp it up.

“Is there something you would like to suggest to me?” The Ice Princess’ tone was as clipped as ever, and yet she smiled.

Teena grinned back. A chuckle shook her chest before her reply. “How about I show you?”

Huffing with amusement, the Ice Princess shifted back, leaving room for Teena’s intentions. Her eyes were glued to the hyena’s darkly-furred fingers, following their journey down her body, slow and deliberate, tracing across the curves of her own body in a seductive yet playful performance.

Down, down past her toned stomach to her bikini bottoms, hooking her claws around them and starting to pull—

“Hey, dudes?”

It was as if a dragon had breathed a flame under both of them. The Ice Princess failed to keep down her yip this time, pulling herself up and assuming as unassuming a position as she could manage. An unbalanced Teena squeaked and toppled over, unnoticed by her girlfriend whose frigid glare seared into the blond head peeking in through the opening.

His own gaze flickered between both of the girls. It lacked any interest beyond simple acknowledgement, but remained remarkably casual. “You dudes alright in here?”

The Princess soon stirred her stilled tongue to action. “Ex-CUSE me!”

“No harm meant, dudes.” He squinted into the darkness. “Uh, lady-dudes. Ladies—”

“*You!*” The Princess bared her teeth. Confirming that Teena was blocked from view while she made herself decent, she focused the full brunt of her icy rage onto the new face. “Otto,” she spat, “get out!”

“Hey, uh, no intent to harsh a dude’s mellow or whatever—”

“*We* have business here! This is our spot! So, again, *get out!*”

Otto blinked slowly, cat-like. “Your spot? I don’t rightfully recall any dude making a ruling on that, dude. It’s every dude’s beach. Free reign for all, and all that.”

Puffing up in preparation to yell at him some more, the vixen paused. The fact remained: he wasn’t wrong. In all of her agitated fervour, words snapping like icicles off of an overhang, it was easy to forget that the two of them were getting intimate in a public space. Plus, Teena had dealt with her bitterness enough—their friend (slash-acquaintance, slash ‘stranger they knew by name’) shouldn’t be subject to it either.

The Princess glanced between Otto and her girlfriend, now beginning to nervously giggle into her palm. With a somewhat measured exhale, she addressed the otter. “Well, regardless of what we’re doing, why, exactly, are you here?”

“Just gone and misplaced my board. Been wonderin’ if any dude’s got eyes on it. Thought I might have gone and left it round here.”

“Well,” said the Princess curtly, after a brief examination of the chamber, “you have not.”

“My bad. This dude’s bad, entirely. Still thinkin’ I’m on the right track...” He trailed off, seemingly in no hurry to go anywhere.

The vixen’s grin was starting to crack. Staying silent, she fixed him in her gaze, hoping for him to come to the conclusion by himself and losing said hope by the second.

“Can’t say this is the place to get too cosy, by the way.”

Well. So much for having faith in the consideration of others. Or for keeping their actions a secret.

“Full disclosure? I like the vibes. Think they’re pretty rad. But there’s dudes round here that might not be so down. A dude’s got no intention of crampin’ your style, but there’s buzzkills about. Don’t want them on your tail. Don’t wanna be a downer, but...you get me, dude?”

The Princess' teeth worried at her lip. She still felt less than enthused by the end of this sequence of events. The urge to lay into the otter for interrupting what was going to be a perfect moment was a strong one.

But after a look exchanged with Teena, she kept it to a simple "I...see. My apologies."

She still saw no harm in hardening her gaze at Otto—who, this time, took the hint and backed away.

A wealth of silence remained in his wake. It enveloped them both, a chill carried in on its edge.

With a deep breath, trying to carry gravitas just as deep, the Ice Princess clasped her hands together. "...It is time for us to depart, I suppose." Her ears flicked back briefly, and she winced. She just didn't want to feel cold again. Not now.

"Guess so, a-ha..."

The Princess said nothing more, busying herself in fixing up Teena's bikini. She maintained her calm like a gardener would their crops. Emerging afterwards into the wrath of the sun, she kept the curl of her lip to a minimum; as she watched Otto back out of the next shell over, board now in hand, she managed to avoid any snide remarks.

"Ah, sorry about that!" Teena shouted across to him with an apologetic grin.

"No skin off my back, dude." He raised his thumb and little finger, hefted his board, and ambled on his way. "You dudes keep it real, alright?"

When he passed Teena, however, he slowed down with an "Oh, real quick, though, dude?" before launching into a half-whispered speech that seemed, overall, quite far from 'quick'. The Princess raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, waiting with her hands on her hips until the otter was finished.

Neither of the ladies spoke for a while even after Otto's "Alright, peace," had faded into the air, and his tail had disappeared from view. Teena fiddled with her bracelet; the Princess raised a hand to block her eyes from the glare of sunlight.

This interruption only stalled them for so long. The fact remained that they had taken a big step today, and one that couldn't be walked back—not that they intended to.

The sun cast its unrelenting eye over the beach. It seemed strange to believe, but its heat felt more bearable than before. Not a cloud existed to impede it from warming the two of them down to their bones. Quite the feeling, for some, after so many apparent year-long winters.

...In moderation. The Ice Princess gave an imperious toss of her head. "Come, Teena. We should be heading back. Let us find some *proper* privacy, and then we shall resume our vacation."

Receiving a small nod, she scanned their surroundings for any other beachgoers before setting off. After so much time in the shade, the light made her squint. She kept close to the palm trees, gleaning whatever she could from their partial cover.

As they passed by more colourful shells, the Princess looked to her partner. "What did that otter say to you, just then?"

"Oh, ha-ha, he-he-he, well..."

The simple question seemed to set off a bit of a nervous fit from Teena; between a bevy of *ohs* and *maybes* and strangled-sounding giggles, she managed to relay Otto's candid description of several more enclosed areas around the Remains, and what exactly they could get up to in each of them.

"Ah." The Princess had discovered new heights of heat to feel today. "...Hm. How...informative."

"He-he...yeah."

"I see."

"Eh-heh."

A brief moment of silence.

"Well, which is closest?"

Teena jolted as if her partner had shouted. "You—you wanna know?"

"Y-yes. Yes, that is what I said."

"Wait, a-ha, hold on, you still want to—"

"I—well. I feel I've tortured you long enough, have I not?"

"Oh-ho—*torture*? No, no, not at all, don't call it that—"

"Merely a jest, my dear."

Teena giggled again, looking down at her toes as sand clumped between them.

Straightening up, hands clasped together, the Ice Princess regarded her partner with a small smile. "So, then, shall we?"

Another moment of silence stretched between them, yet one both brief and one far more companionable and easygoing. One that cultivated a sense of calm. Soothed tempers under breeze and sun and sand.

Teena was the one to break the spell, in her own brand of conciseness. "E-he-he! Okay!"

A shocked yelp escaped the vixen as she was promptly and effortlessly swept off the ground. Fur spiking up, her arms shot around Teena's neck as she was hoisted high, before being carried bridal-style along the sands towards what she assumed was the nearest actual 'hideway' in Coastal Remains.

Teena's laughter drowned out the Princess' exclamations, and soon became the only sound other than her footsteps as the vixen quietened down. However, she remained far from calm. Thoughts of what they'd done and of awaited her raced through her mind. That heady entanglement of bodies and breath. The possibility of going...*further*. All of which reignited her blush as she held tight to her partner and tried to steady her breathing.

Perhaps there would be greater hiccups to come in their relationship. It wouldn't always be as simple as how it played out in many fairytales. There would always be difficulties, both external and self-imposed. Doubts and what-ifs and whatnot; moreso on the Princess' end, from what she could tell.

But as she listened to her girlfriend's joyous whoops and cackles, the thought of all those worries retreated to the furthest recesses of her mind, as the Ice Princess felt filled with a warmth to which no summer's day could compare.