

## Broken, Beat & Scarred

Allison woke up to a vaguely familiar sight. A greenish grey plaster, curving and bending away towards her feet, full of dents. The refurbished inside of a former god's skull. The refurbished inside of *her* god's skull - her bedroom.

*Ah shit. I fucked up again.*

Her head was ringing, and as Allison's vision cleared, she noticed the swelling in her left eye; It wouldn't open all the way. One by one signals from her broken, beaten, and scarred body made it into the registers of her consciousness. Her shoulders were stiff and rigid. Her left elbow was hot. Her fingers were swollen, and her knuckles radiated pain periodically. Her intestines felt like somebody had put them through a blender. A throb pulsed in her thigh. And her knees. She was only twenty-three - not an age where you should feel your knees. Her ankles felt swollen and watery. She also felt the familiar sensation of broken toes aching all the way through her shins and thighs. The sharp stab on her left side made her groan as she attempted to take a deep breath, letting her know that her ribs were cracked at least, if not broken. Her lungs didn't feel full though, and she had no urge to cough, so at least the ribs didn't perforate them. *It's the little things that count, right?*

She heard some rustling to her right.

"Allison? Tha's awake?" Cio asked timidly.

Allison strained to turn her head towards the voice. There she was, kneeling on the floor and leaning against the bed frame; A concerned Cio was looking at her, frowning.

"Hey, Cio," Allison muttered with a forced smile.

” ‘Hey Cio yourself’, blubberbrains. How’s tha feel?”

“Like I got hit by a truck,” Allison gasped as a stabbing pain spread through her ribcage.

“Whassa truck? Arts tha inventing words? Did tha damage thy brain?” There was no trace of malice or jest in Cio’s voice.

A genuine soft smile formed on Allison’s lips. “It’s an Earth thing. A big vehicle.”

Cio stood up and scanned her head to toe. “Tha got smashed bad again, Allison. Arts tha hurting?”

“Yes, everything hurts,” Allison replied with a brave smile.

Cio frowned harder.

“Serves tha right, lackawit.” She sat down on the bed frame. “Going searching for brawls on tha own. What was tha thinking, rattlebrains?”

She gently pulled the covers down from Allison and inspected her bandages.

“That I need practice. And that I could handle it,” Allison sighed and winced at the subsequent sting of her ribs.

“Pah. Now look where that’s got tha.”

Allison smiled again. “I can’t. Can’t raise my head right now,” she chuckled, only to wince in pain again.

Cio shot her a look oozing with rage. *The look of a woman who wants to slap the shit out of you, but can’t*, Allison knew.

Cio carefully detached a bandage soaked with blood from her thigh, threw it in the bin, and began preparing a fresh one. Allison hated the feeling of sticky bandages, intertwined with her healing skin, being torn from the wound, no matter how gently and carefully done.

“Tha was lucky the heateater found tha in time.” If Cio’s tone of voice were actual *liquid* poison, it would’ve melted through the glass underneath it.

"I know. I fucked up." Allison sank deeper into the sheets, prompted by her desire to hide.

Cio concentrated on carefully applying the new bandages.

"So White Chain picked me up again?" Allison asked awkwardly.

"Aye," Cio muttered.

Allison impatiently let the silence that followed grow unbearable for her.

"Look, Cio, I'm sorry, I-"

"Nay, tha isn't." Cio's words cut like whips through the air.

"Yes, I am?"

"Nay, tha isn't. 'tis the third time this month, Allison. Third time Stoneyarse carries thy broken flesh into thy bed. I'm sick of it."

Cio turned to look Allison in the eyes.

"I'm sick of tending to thy wounds. I'm sick of staring at thy broken and battered body every week. I'm sick of smelling thy blood all over the house, Allison. I'm sick of hearing tha squirm and growl in pains while you sleep. I'm sick of it. Na more."

"I'm sorry, Cio. I really am," Allison squirmed.

"Nay, tha ain't. Tha's going to do it again, ain't tha? Ain't tha?" The frost in Cio's voice spread through the room.

"Cio..."

"Just admit it, tha scallop!"

"I need to get stronger, Cio," Allison whined.

Cio jumped on her feet, fuming. "By getting thaself battered to a pulp, hollowhead? Tha's got nothing but draft between thy ears, have tha?" she barked, stomping her feet into the floor.

Seeing Cio upset this deeply stung Allison deeper than any cracked rib she might be nursing.

"I thought I could handle it," she mumbled. "And I totally would've gotten them all if that one bitch didn't sneak up on me and sank her dagger into my knee."

Shaking her head, Cio muttered, "Tha has learned nothing. No-thing." She sat back down on the bed next to Allison again.

"How much more, wollopwit?" she asked with a tired voice. "When's it end?"

"I... I just gotta get strong enough," Allison sighed.

"And when is that, Allison? When? There'll be always a bigger fish to fry. Demi-urges got slaughtered like cattle. Gods' throats were slit. Even the king of kings got himself butchered. So when? When's tha strong enough, Allison? When's tha become unbutcherable? How many more times need I watch tha get battered until then? How many more times must I stitch tha back together again?"

"I don't know," Allison stammered.

"Of course tha don't, sponge-for-brains," Cio hissed. "Tha only thinks of violence and how to inflict it. Tha don't think of the violence tha inflicts when tha fist's not swinging." Cio hastily wiped the tears from her eyes, her anger still etched across her face.

"Cio..."

"Pah. Save thy breath for someone who cares." Cio put the blanket back over Allison and turned towards the door.

"Cio, wait. Please."

Cio's hand was on the door handle already.

"Please," Allison begged with a trembling voice.

Cio paused, her hand lingering on the door handle.

"Please don't leave me alone. Please. I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't mean to hurt

you. I really didn't. But I'm fucking miserable right now, and everything hurts. And I know it's my fault, ok? I know. But I feel like shit, and I'm miserable. And scared. There's some scary shit out there that I'll probably have to face someday. And I'm terrified. I'm no more than an ant to them. Like swatting a fly. And they might come after me. After us. If they find me. When they find us. Meanwhile, I can't even fight a handful of street thugs on my own. So I need to get stronger and better before that happens. Before they come for me. I know I'm still a useless piece of shit, I know. But I'm trying. And I fucked it up, again. I'm sorry. I really am. But please, *please*, stay. Please, Cio. Don't leave me now."

Cio shot her an icy stare. "Tha's lucky tha's got a pretty face," she said, approaching the bed again. Allison visibly unclenched and sank into the mattress as she sat back down on the bedside.

"Thank you," Allison whispered.

Cio took her hand into hers.

"But tha gotta stop acting like a reckless ribbonrat, Allison. I can't do this no longer."

"I'm sorry, Cio. I'll do better."

"Tha better," Cio frowned.

Allison looked at Cio and felt like pushing her luck.

"Lie with me?," she asked timidly.

"Shush. Tha needs rest," Cio said firmly as she eyed whether there'd be enough space for her to lay down next to her. There might be if she let a leg dangle off the bed. She laid down, careful to shake the mattress as little as possible in the process.

"Thank you," Allison repeated.

"Shush, globberbrains," Cio whispered gently. "And rest. Tha needs to sleep, tha fragile human."

Cio let go of Allison's hand so she could caress her palm and fingers instead, gently tracing her nails across her worn calloused skin.

“I’ll be here when tha wakes up,” Cio whispered, kissing her cheek. “Now sleep.”