**[h5][center][b]... without Fire[/b][/center][/h5]**

Gnomes. Nasty little garden ornaments but these ones…? They were moving. Not just being picked up and carried or pushed around. No, they were moving with such life-like motions, walking their legs through the little paths between the trees of the mountain forest. Impossible. Nightshade followed. It was difficult to keep track of them as they disappeared behind trees and seemed to reappear in completely different places. How many were there in total? Five? Ten? If he had to put a bet on it then he would say seven. Even his highly trained senses were struggling. Head pounded. Did he get enough sleep? Did he hit his head on a rock? Nightshade shook his head and pressed on, following the gnomes without questions he perhaps should have been asking… How did he get here?

The forest was as lush as ever; in fact, even more so than usual! But there was a dead haze filtering the colours and a cloudiness that seemed to circle around his sight. Nightshade did not take much notice of this, however, as he was distracted with other strange anomalies. What were these mushrooms doing here, growing from the grassy ground and out the sides of trees? Large red caps, spotted white, and thick stems. One of the gnomes used one as a trampoline to expedite his travels. Nightshade didn't get too close; might be poisonous. It was cold and getting colder despite not travelling any further up the mountain. He shivered and looked down, realising that he was completely naked. What?! He could have sworn he felt clothes on his body a moment ago! And yet? He pushed onward.

Around a boulder. The gnomes were gathering in the oasis. But why? He soon had his answer; kind of. There, washing herself in the waters was some woman. They seemed focused on her. She was a very strange woman... flesh without fur and no scales to adorn herself. Her skin was egg white. What kind of creature was this? Now one of the seven gnomes, the filthiest looking of the bunch, climbed on a rock above the others and called out in a gruff, but somehow squeaky, voice. "Gunnar claims this woman!" Nightshade frowned in confusion. What the hell was going on, on his mountain lately? Especially the oasis?! First it was those poachers and the dragoness and now these little- Oh... it was coming back to him. Didn't the encounter with the poachers just happen? It was strange but he could not entirely recall going home after that. In fact, he couldn't recall anything that happened after he went on the killing spree. Blood. The waters of the oasis turned to blood and the gnomes turned to look at him with hateful looks in their beady little eyes, sharp teeth bared to bite at him. And they staggered forward. Nightshade reached for his sword. He was naked! Where was it?! The gnomes burst into full sprint.

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Nightshade sat up in a sweat, gasping for breath. He was at home, in his bed. The fireplace had a healthy glow and all was peaceful in the cabin. But something was amiss. Half his vision was dark. He placed a hand to his right eye, feeling a bandage. Right... he'd been injured by that blue-crested dragoness after fighting the poachers. She'd looked so terrified. He smiled to himself when he spotted the end of a purple tail at the bottom of his bed. So she found the place, after all, and brought him back here. There she was, sitting on the ground beside his bed, arms crossed as pillows on his mattress where she rested her head. Terrified to sleeping peacefully; quite a contrast. What monsters those poachers were to hunt this poor woman.

The pony laid his head back down on the pillow, for only a second before his stomach growled restlessly. How long was he asleep? He was starving to death! A greater hunger than any he'd felt before and a stomach that violently demanded that he eat before it started to eat him from the inside out! He sat up, now realising just how weeks his body had become in the absence of consciousness. It could not have been such a long time, could it?

Now his stomach roused the dragoness. She groaned in slight discomfort as she began to move. The angle at which she slept left her almost sitting on her hip; not the best way to get rest. And when her eyes began to move she spotted him, fully awake and alert. Surprise came to her face but no disappointment. Actually, it looked like relief.

Nightshade gave her a cocky grin. "You didn't really think I'd go down so easy, did you, miss?"

Now the dragoness wordlessly raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed by his attempt to play it off.

That was a justifiable position; Nightshade did not imagine that he looked very impressive in this moment. He was bed-ridden for gods knew how long and she'd clearly been watching over him. Wait a minute! He really was naked! She undressed him! His left eye twitched; he didn't look so cocky anymore. "How long have I been asleep?"

Now he heard the dragoness speak for the first time since she slashed his face. "Eleven days..." She sighed; a relieved kind of sigh. "I worried you wouldn't pull through."

"If you didn't notice already, I'm a pretty tough guy. And a lucky bastard on occasions..." The last words were muttered. But he found himself increasingly distracted by his stomach and its hunger, sniffing the air and discovering that something was cooking. There! Over the fireplace was a pot of soup! "Can I get something to eat?" He gripped his stomach as pain struck him.

"Of course!" The dragoness got to her feet, causing the bed to dip as she pressed down on it for support. Nightshade was left in awe of her strength. If she was in a rush and suddenly used that much force she could have launched him out of the bed! But she had a strange gentleness to her manner and her strength poured out gradually rather than in bursts. She took a bowl, the only one Nightshade owned, and scooped out a big helping of soup from the pot. And when she brought it back, the pony realised it was thick with a variety of meats. Actually, it was a lot closer to stew than soup.

"Now, I know I didn't have any meat in store... Is it game you hunted?" Nightshade asked. One might think he would bury his face into the bowl already but he was a man of caution and there was one thought on his mind that needed to be put to rest. "We're not eating the guys that were hunting you, are we?"

"What?! No!" The dragoness looked horrified by the suggestion. "I buried them in the woods... Why would you even think that?!"

The pony raised an eyebrow. He'd heard stories; probably a load of crap but you never knew. "I just needed to make sure." A testing taste. And that's when he began to messily eat, slurping, munching and gulping his way through the bowl he'd been served with.

Little did he notice but the dragoness watched him attentively, sadness slowly overcoming her face until she finally looked away. "I am very sorry..."

It was sheer coincidence that Nightshade happened to finish eating at that moment. If not, he mightn't have heard her. "Sorry? Whatever for?"

"Your face..." she answered. "Your eye... I- You realise it is gone don't you?"

Nightshade frowned, raising his hand to his right eye. Then he laughed. She was sorry for his eye? He had death coming for him! Hell, he thought he was dead on that night at the oasis. "It is just an eye. I'm still alive so... I think that counts for something, don't you?" She didn't answer. Nightshade shoved the empty bowl towards her, silently asking for more. "Hey." He called her attention with a much more serious tone. "I don't exactly know how you got me back here but I'm sure you've been looking after me for the last eleven days. Where would I be without you?"

The dragoness managed a small smile. "Probably drowned in a pool of water."

"Eh?" Nightshade raised an eyebrow. "More like bled out."

"You fell into a pool when you passed out." The dragoness filled in the missing part of his memory. "I pulled you out and carried you back here. You were completely soaked through and I didn't know where to begin helping... trying to save you. I got you out of your clothes and tried to warm you up by the fire. And your face..." Nightshade felt around his eye again, wincing in pain when he provoked it. "Stop touching it!" Nightshade pouted and shoved his bowl at her again. "And no more food!"

"What?!" shouted Nightshade. "Why not?!"

"You'll be sick! You didn't eat in eleven days!" she shouted back. "I'm not letting you out of my care until you've recovered. It is the least I should do."

The dragoness didn't put her hand anywhere near the bowl. And Nightshade was too weak to get out of bed. He rolled his eyes, or rather eye, and put the bowl aside. "What's your name?"

The dragoness stood and curtseyed to him. "Shary'natek Virani." She was huge and imposing. But again, there was that gentleness.

Nightshade gulped, feeling slightly paralysed, but he managed to speak further. "And I am Nightshade. It's nice to finally meet you, properly Shary'na... Ah..."

The dragoness shook her head. "You southerners... Just call me Shary. It's always easier."

Nightshade smirked. "Shary it is then." Food settled into his body quite quickly and, with the demand met, he found himself being claimed by exhaustion. Though having never left the bed, he'd moved around an immense amount compared to the last several days and it took a toll on his body. He held his head, laying down. "Do you need to know anything about the cabin? Like where I'm keeping things?"

Shary shook her head. "I've already had a good look around and don't have any trouble. You should-" But before she could even finish the suggestion she realised he was sleeping soundly. She smiled. "What kind of a maniac are you to forgive me so easily?"

A couple of days passed before Nightshade woke again, but, when he did, any doubts he may have had about Shary remaining to take care of him were put to rest. He'd half expected her to take her leave after he woke up the first time and she was assured he was alive... but she turned out to be a woman of her word. She helped him regain lost strength, providing regular hearty meals and aiding him in walking around outside of the bed. She changed the bandages over his eye and kept him entertained with a few stories about her homeland. He'd not heard all that much until now but it sounded like a dangerous place, especially for non-dragons. It took a few days for the headache to fully leave him and a few weeks more to heal enough to remove the bandage for good. But she'd gotten him there.

There were warm days of basking in the sunlight and absorbing its life giving energy, and cool nights spent huddled around the fireplace. The pony had to admit, as much as he enjoyed the solitude and his retirement... it was nice having someone around for a change. He'd had people around of course but they were all roped up in the underbelly of the land. Drug dealers, killers and shills... not the most pleasant company and not at all the kind to make you feel safe. A lot of them made it feel like a knife was pressed to your back. But Shary? Shary wasn't like any of them. For all of her strength, he continued to witness that gentle side. Well, what should he expect from someone who stuck around to care for him? She showed him a warmth he'd never experienced and it grew the bonds of friendship. Ha! What a way to begin one, having your eye sliced away! He didn't mind though... in fact, he'd call it worth the price.

Finally, Nightshade regained his strength but losing his depth of vision was something he still needed to get used to. What a powerful blow it was for someone who'd honed hand and eye coordination for a lifetime. Yes, the price was worth it but the price was extremely high. Recovery would take time... He told the dragoness that he was fine yet, for some curious reason, she still stayed. If it was her desire he wouldn't push her away. And so he invited her to assist him in retraining his hand and eye coordination. She eagerly accepted, as he expected.

Nightshade raised his stick and swiped at Shary, stopping the moment she shielded herself with both arms and cowered away. "Seriously? Come on, Shary, you said it doesn't hurt even if I land a blow. Just fight back." She was big and strong... but she didn't much seem like she enjoyed using that strength for violence. Now that the pony was seeing it, he wasn't sure why the thought had not occurred to him before.

"I don't want to hurt you," said Shary, furrowing her brow. She looked concerned. Was it because he was a cripple?

"I know I'm not what I used to be but I'm no weakling," declared Nightshade. "Come on, I'm only going to get better if you give me the best you've got! I need to get used to having just one eye." He raised his stick again, assuming a fighting stance.

Shary practically pouted at his assistance and recomposed herself. "Alright, alright... If it'll help you, I'll do my best."

Nightshade grinned. "That's more like it." And took a swing. But losing depth of vision was obvious now more than ever as he failed to even reach her... and she swung a low fist, hitting him right in the gut and sending him reeling backwards onto the ground, rolling over once before he came to a stop and cradled his stomach. "Ah... Damn it... Ouch..."

"Nightshade!" Shary rushed over to him, kneeling down and holding a hand on his back. "Are you alright?"

Nightshade wheezed. "Yessss..." And gasped for breath. "Okay... Maybe I've been overestimating myself... or underestimating you." He spent a minute there, recuperating, and, all of a sudden, started to laugh.

Shary took her hands away with a surprised expression. "What? What's so funny?"

"You really walloped me!" he exclaimed. "Wasn't bad but... yeah, maybe we should stick to you dodging my attacks for now; see if I can land a hit."

Shary smiled, giggling back at him. "That sounds like a much better option." She helped him back up and they returned to their places before getting back into the training.

It was rough. Nightshade had to endure this training for months with improvements showing at a snail's pace. Sometimes he wondered if he'd ever get back to his old self. He couldn't defend himself like this and he couldn't expect Shary to stick around forever. Those were the bad days... when he didn't want to leave his bed. But Shary always got him out, one way or another, and they would train some more. Consistency is key. That's what she said... The woman was no fighter but she'd clearly trained someone before. He was grateful to her between the bouts of depression. She was a desperately needed source of inspiration; a light at the end of the tunnel for him to crawl towards. And the day she left... Nightshade knew that he would feel a void.

It was sometime during the training, roughly two months into it, that Nightshade was sitting by the fireplace. Another cold night and Winter was upon them but there was plenty of firewood. Shary had no trouble gathering it when needed with her resistance to the cold. And she worked hard today, out there in the snow. It left her exhausted and she now soundly slept beside him in a pair of chairs they'd hacked together to be big enough for her to sit in. On this evening, Nightshade's mind turned to the adventures of old once again. All his assassinations, contracts and desperate moments... he was glad he left them behind. But he still kept that marble over the fireplace. Little more than a child's toy he played with many years ago but still precious to him.

The first kill; carpet stained red with blood. He didn't take anything from that prick's house except for the marble that belonged to him. The marble that was stolen from its home. Nightshade stood there over the body for gods knew how long. He was terrified, entire body shaking with fear of what he'd just done. What the fuck did that guy want with a child's marble? Why'd he get violent over it? Why did he make Nightshade kill him? Why'd he turn a child into a killer? The pony grimaced amidst the thoughts. He'd never know. But what happened, happened. It was his first kill and his entry into the life of an assassin. Turned out he was good at it. All for a child's marble... But at least having it made him happy.

The pony left the dragoness where she was sleeping and silently stood up to walk in front of the fireplace. He picked up the marble, turning it over and examining every little bit of it. He enjoyed the way it shimmered. The blue glow was beautiful; Shary said it herself once while he was still bed-ridden. From nowhere the thought struck him... or perhaps there was something to it that he did not fully connect; something so deep it would take a philosopher to interpret. The marble seemed to possess some kind of sight. It did not necessarily see but it could peer into... something. That didn't occur to Nightshade at all. What did occur to him was that the marble was spherical and about the right size for an eye... He'd always carried his past around with him. All the bad that he did. The marble represented innocence lost but... it was also a memory of a child. All those times he played with it before the first kill. As an eye, he'd carry those memories around too. And so he inserted it into his empty eye socket. Quite an odd feeling but... it settled in quickly and, in minutes, just felt right.

Shary stirred, peaking her eyes open with her jaw pressed up against her arms on the back of the chair. She looked around and spotted him there by the fire. "Nightshade?"

"How does it look?" he asked.

Her answer came with a smile.

The season passed and would be remembered as a peaceful Winter. And, with Summer, energy came to Nightshade. For months he'd been lethargic during the training sessions but when the snow began to melt he seemed to become more focused and disciplined. A duel with Shary in the early morning, quite eagerly instigated on his part, brought them outdoors. She dodged a good half of his attacks but he landed many with ruthless aggression. The simple stick didn't hurt a bit and Shary barely registered the force of the strikes. But then Nightshade did something unexpected, tackling her. Not a common move for an assassin but the surprise was sometimes useful. Only, he should not have used it on a larger, stronger opponent. The two of them tumbled around, Shary fighting back to stay upright and ultimately landing on his face. Crotch pressed to his nose, Nightshade found himself in quite the embarrassing situation... Wait, what was that he could feel? Not what he expected to find between her legs... Not that he was planning to ever check!

Shary scrambled away from him, stopping only when she put a few feet of distance. She didn't give herself the time to stand up though and simply looked at him, blushing with a mortified expression on her face. Nightshade shook his head and sat up. "S-sorry... are you alright?"

Shary nodded, seeming hesitant as if she was confused as to what answer she should give. She clearly realised that he noticed.

"Uh..." Nightshade scratched his head as he wondered what to say. He wanted to put her mind at ease, whatever her concern was. He wanted to say that he wouldn't think any differently of her, wouldn't go around telling people when he went into town in a couple of weeks. The problem was that he didn't know what the problem was. And more than that... how could he approach this subject? It was awkward no matter what equipment she was packing down there. "So uh..."

Shary blurted out a few words instead. "Forget what just happened!"

They were barely understandable, frantic and mixed together as they were, but Nightshade managed to catch them, almost instantly responding with a simple, "Yep."

The rest of the day was awkward, of course, but they really did seem to forget it by the evening and everything, feelings and routine, went back to normal. More days filled with laughter and enjoying one another's company. Nightshade was much better these days. Not a perfect replicant of the man he once was but... who could tell the difference. And so it came as a surprise, once again, that Shary did not move on but, once again, Nightshade had no complaints. He liked having her around.

Finally the time had come for Nightshade to travel to Silvan Peak. It must have been a year since he'd last been into town and the two of them had burned through many supplies that needed restocking. It was the evening now but he planned to leave at first light so it was early when he began to wind down and prepare for bed. He sat by the fire, with Shary as usual, relaxing in its warmth as much as hers. She was in that rickety old pair of chairs they'd strung together... She had no proper place to sleep. The bed was too small even if he wasn't in it so she just slept on the floor in front of the fire most of the time. She always ducked through the doors and didn't see a lot of comfort living here. More and more, Nightshade thought about expanding the cabin to accommodate her. A bed she'd fit in, a nice chair...

So what if she never left? What if she stayed with him? How to ask? They'd never talked about it. Shary had shown him such kindness he never expected and he'd grown a bond with her he'd never had with anyone. He didn't want to let it go out of the blue one day. He needed time to process her leaving. No, he wanted her here. Her leaving wasn't an acceptable option. Feelings came to his heart that he didn't recognise and, when he looked at her, the feelings only intensified. He began to lean in. He began to lean towards her face.

Shary took notice, surprise coming over her for a moment. But then she stopped him with a hand gently placed on his shoulder. She looked sad. "You really did forget it, didn't you? I wondered..."

Nightshade smiled, placing a hand upon hers and gently shaking his head. "I just never cared..."

"Y-you didn't?" Shary blushed. "I didn't realise..."

"Of course not... I got to know you and what I care about is who you are... And how special you are to me..." He continued leaning in, this time without resistance.

Shary was shocked, heart pounding. And then it came. Their lips locked together.