

Enough was enough

The two of them had no option but closeness, if they were both to fit on the narrow strip of oilcloth they shared. They had just six of these strips altogether, and had been huddling close to sleep with three for groundsheets and three strung above in an attempt to keep off the rain. It had not been very effective. They were out of dry clothes, let alone clean ones, short on sleep and food, and shorter still on temper where the walkers were concerned. Jesral made a conscious effort to ignore the pain of raw blisters on her feet and keep any complaints to herself – and to ignore the way Vel was staring at her as she ate her meagre share of the rations. She ached inside, she was so hungry, but Vel's rations sat unregarded in the hand he had draped across his knees as he watched her.

The ache was still there when she had finished, and so was Vel's stare. Enough was enough.

'Is something wrong? Have I grown an extra head or turned green, perhaps?'

Vel looked bewildered by this rush of asperity.

'No. No! Sorry. It's your eyes...'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Nothing. Not a thing. I've been meaning to say for a long time that I've never seen eyes that colour before. They're beautiful.'

'You really think so?' No one had ever said this to Jesral before. They were such a reflection of her hair, flecked with amber and coppery brown, and her hair was such a joke to everyone that she had thought her eyes similarly unacceptable. The foolhardy would tell her they were the same colour as her hair, as if red eyes could be an attractive feature in anyone's judgment. She had always longed for blue eyes. Even the soft grey-green Vel had been blessed with would have done. Hankering after the impossible, of course; but now here was someone who thought they were beautiful just as they were.

'Really?'

‘Really.’ Vel set his head on one side, a winning look, and she gazed back at him. He sighed and added, ‘I can’t get over them. The way they exactly match your hair.’

‘Velohim,’ she asked as civilly as she could manage, ‘what colour is my hair?’

‘...It’s red.’

‘And what colour are my eyes?’

He almost said it. She stood.

‘Not red,’ she pointed out tersely, and stalked away.

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