

Scars

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21055877) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21055877>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Furry (Fandom)
Additional Tags:	Male Protagonist , POV Male Character , Furry , Human Male on Anthro Female , Wolf(F) , Human(M) , Fantasy , Mildly Dubious Consent , Intercrural Sex , Hand Jobs , Scars , Drama & Romance , HMOFA - Freeform , Vaginal Sex , Missionary Position , Loss of Virginity , Cat(F) , Blow Jobs
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-10-16 Completed: 2021-05-08 Words: 59,168 Chapters: 15/15

Scars

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Summary

A human apothecary is enlisted by a couple of beast-women to accompany them on the delivery of a package. Not everything goes according to plan, and some ravenous desires come to light.

Notes

<https://static1.e621.net/data/c7/b7/c7b78264233e77c0b3dde37ea66dc0db.jpg>

The Lupine and Feline characters were inspired by this wonderful art piece drawn by the talented Reccand.

This is my first real attempt at dramatic romance and I'm not too sure how it fared. Feel free to criticize as harshly as you please.

Chapter 1

A menacing white orb, with a fleshy scar striking through its center. The vein of carnage traveled down, tearing into the beasts maw. Sharp ivory and darkened gums gleamed through the gaping hole. “See something you like, healer boy?” the creature suddenly spoke. Norton shifted in his seat and shook his head. “I’m not completely blind in this eye, you know.” Her torn visage bent up into a smile.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to stare,” Norton replied cautiously. His eyes meandered over to the campfire in front of him.

It had been the second night of their trip. Norton, a freshly trained human medic had sought work with a couple of beast-men. Or in his case, beast-women. They weren’t his first choice, though his status as a plain human made him an easy hire. Delicate hands without the prickly furs or hardened, bumpy scales, and the lack of sharp killing claws had set humans on a pedestal for servitude. Norton hadn’t spent much time around the beast folk, but his first job was going well enough. It was easy, a simple courier delivery. Though he knew it was basically a test run and he was under serious scrutiny.

“Ms. Ava, how far until the next town?” Norton asked. He rubbed his hands together and presented them to the fire.

The scarred wolf smirked. “Don’t you have anything else to ask, dear?” She shifted on the log she sat on, crossing a leg. “Most would ask, ‘what are we delivering, Ms. Ava’ or ‘do you think this is worth the money’.”

“I’ve already agreed to it. That’s pretty irrelevant now, isn’t it?” He pulled his hands into his cloak. “Knowing what it is won’t get the job done any faster.”

“A good choice of words. But a healthy sense of curiosity is to be desired too. I guess human men lose that.” Norton considered a humorous response, but quickly discarded it as he thought about the consequences. His eye caught a blur from the side and jerked back as something hit the ground in front of him, tossing a small plume of dirt into the air. It was a boar, and judging by the gash in its neck, it was fairly dead. “Lydia, please. You’re scaring our apothecary,” Ava joked.

“Then he’d best leave now if a dead pig is enough to frighten him.” A white feline clad in shiny armor stepped into view with a clunk. Lydia grabbed onto the side of the beast and rolled it onto its back with one hand. With that, she went to work gutting it and slicing it to bits with a knife. Norton kept quiet and attempted to keep his composure.

“Did you have to do that here? You’re bloodying the camp.”

“And where would you have preferred to butcher it?” Lydia kept her gaze on her kill.

“In the woods, Lydia.”

“My mistake. I'll merely load the meat into pleasant little pouches next time.” She glanced up at Ava. “For your convenience.” Her blade came down on the creature again, sending a spurt of blood into the fire with a sizzle.

“Good. We'll buy you a few once the job is over”—she looked over at Norton with a smile—“right?”

The man froze and he quickly changed the subject. “I've made our bedrolls for the night. So they're ready when we're finished eating.” He could hear a small giggle come from Ava.

“Quick and efficient.” Stab. “Good work.” Lydia ripped out a portion of the pig. A set of ribs, the man assumed, though it was hard to make out with the darkness. She held it up to him and dangled it about. “Your portion.” Norton stared at it for a moment before pulling out a small knife and taking up the slab of meat carefully. He slid his knife through it and wiped his hand off on the tree stump he sat on.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Lydia looked toward Ava. “And for you?”

“I'm old enough. I'll cut my own pork, dear.” Lydia tore out a chunk of unrecognizable flesh, then retreated to her own seat. Ava yanked the bloodied animal over to her side and began to size it up with a dagger. Norton took a few moments to examine his meal before extending it out over the fire to cook. Lydia merely tore into her choice of meat, letting a stream of viscera run down on her once shining armor while she blankly stared into the flames.

“I had forgotten”—Lydia gobbled another chunk—“humans need their food to be cooked. That may be an issue.”

“He makes do. See? They're very resilient creatures.” Ava chewed on an expertly cut portion of boar. Norton did his best to focus on his meal, though he couldn't help but wonder how her wounds affected her eating. Eventually he caught onto a vaguely appealing smell coming from the bit of meat and delicately chomped away at it. “I think that's already been done for an hour or two.”

“He lacks in olfactory abilities. Are you certain a human was the best option? The kobolds might have been cheaper.”

“Two kobolds to treat wounds?” Ava laughed. “I don't think you know how much of a pain that would be. We haven't even seen him work yet.”

Lydia stopped mid-shoveling of meat. “Are you suggesting we test him now?”

Norton nibbled at his meal, feeling somewhat out of place as his employers openly spoke about him. He could barely taste his food, too focused on the conversation at hand. The prospect of a test was a worrying one, especially at this hour. And the fact that they would have to make something to test him on.

“Healer, dear.” Dammit.

“Yes, Ms. Ava?” He turned to look at her again.

“Show me your best smile.” Norton furrowed his brow and gave an awkward smile. “Well, that's all the testing I need. Carry on.” She wolfed down another chunk of pig. “A very polite young man. You wouldn't get that out of a kobold.” Norton cautiously looked over at Lydia. She stared straight into him. Streaks of red ran down her chin, unnerving him to no end.

“We'll see when the time comes.”

The group continued their meal in silence, giving Norton some time to reflect on his thoughts. One problem scratched at the back of his head. Usually groups like this were larger, at least from what he had seen. Four to five people making a proper adventuring group, but these were only two women. His eyes flicked back and forth between the two. They seemed capable enough, though he hadn't ever heard of such a small band. He certainly wasn't going to help swell up their numbers and was nearly useless in a close fight.

“Yes?” Lydia asked, the moment his eyes met hers.

“It's nothing.” He snapped back to the fire.

“Then let it remain nothing.” She swallowed the last bits of meat and tossed whatever remained over her shoulder.

Ava tossed a bone into the fire. “Taking a fancy to our knight in shining armor? What shy lovebirds.” Norton grumbled and tore into his meal, finishing it soon after. It hit his stomach fairly harshly, with a barely audible gurgle. All things considered, it was probably a good first for freshly hunted hog. “Everyone's had their fill then?”

“Yes,” Lydia replied flatly. Norton nodded and watched the cat woman drag the carcass off, letting it rot just outside of their tiny camp.

“Time for bed then, wouldn't you say?” Ava blurted out.

Lydia eyed her for a moment. “I'll prepare my po-”

“That won't be necessary, Lydia. I'll have first watch.” She stood up and sheathed her blade. “You'll need all the sleep you can get, hunter.”

Lydia let out a low growl and walked off to the bedrolls. “Good luck,” the feline said.

Norton perked up. “I could keep watch if you nee-”

“We don't need our precious pink thing getting hurt. You settle in, dear. I'll take care of the fire.” Ava shooed him away and began kicking dirt onto the flames with what seemed like frantic speed. Norton stood up and took a long stretch. It felt like he had sat on that log forever. His joints let out a few worrying cracks. “So precious indeed.”

“Well, good night.” Norton gave a wave and followed in Lydia's steps.

“Good night.”

—

Norton awoke to a thud. His knapsack had dropped next to his head. Lydia towered over him, peering over the bag. Her armor was near blinding at this angle. “It's morning. We're moving. Now.”

“Right.” He rubbed an eye and wiggled out of his bedroll. He patted down his person, making sure nothing had shifted out of place. An odd wet spot was located squarely on his chest, but he quickly dismissed it and stood up, ready to take on the day. At least he hoped so. The rest of the camp had already been packed up. The only trace of their existence was an arrangement of curious logs.

“Good morning.” A harsh smack came down on the man's back, causing him to cough. “Hope you had a great rest! We're on the final stretch today, no scheduled stops.” Ava hefted the package over her shoulder. It was an oddly bulbous bag that looked like it held a large pumpkin. Curiosity had begun to get the better of him, but he shrugged it off and trudged alongside his new compatriots. The dark, muddy road ahead of them seemed to stretch out forever. No use in complaining.

The walk was long and arduous. The uneven nature of the road, having been battered by different hooves and wheels, made it a pain to walk on. He had fallen behind a small amount as a result. The two beast-women seemed to have no problem traversing it, though whether it was due to their animal-like anatomy or their musculature, he couldn't tell. Maybe a mixture of both. Their gently waving tails poking out were surprisingly cutesy. He resolved to stop staring and strode up alongside them. “How far out are we now?”

“Still on that, are we?” Ava replied. “We'll be there by this afternoon”—another firm pat came down on Norton's shoulder—“if you can keep up.” He gave a sheepish nod and silently winced at his more than likely bruised shoulder.

“If you don't make it, you won't be paid,” Lydia spoke up. She had silently walked along without a peep. One hand firmly wrapped around the hilt of her sword.

“Do you have a shield to go with that?” Norton suddenly asked. He immediately regretted the dumb question.

“No.”

“Oh.”

Ava let out a chortle. “She lost it. Along with her helmet.” She leaned forward to peer at Lydia. “Told you about those kobolds. Always asking for more.”

“No such thing happened.” Lydia's grip visibly tightened. Norton straightened up and held his breath. He began to wonder if the wilderness was more dangerous, or his own group.

“What's the town we're headed to called, then?” He had to pick his topics more carefully.

“Good choice,” Ava whispered to the apothecary. She dug her elbow into his side, dangerously close to a set of fragile vials. “Lerwick. Not what I would have named it, but not everyone is blessed with creativity. What would you have named it, Lydia?”

“Dead.”

“Well. Clearly you've been blessed.”

Norton looked over to the wolfess. “Not very populated?”

“A seedy little town. Not on any trade routes and isn't near the ocean. You've got some shady business to go there.”

“Right, right. I see.” He hefted his backpack and gripped its leather straps tightly.

“Not dangerous. But it is indeed pathetic,” Lydia spat.

Norton looked over to the grizzled knight. “Are you... familiar with it?”

“More than I care to be. I pray this will be the last I will ever have to see it.”

Ava spoke up again, “I'd say maybe we could get you a nice girl there, but, they're certainly used goods.” She let out a huff of air. “We drop this off, have a drink, and spend the night.”

“We're going to stay there?” Norton gulped. “In the seedy town?”

“Hey, that's normal for adventuring.” Ava tossed up her free arm. “Living on the edge of danger!”

“Speaking of danger,” Lydia said. She pointed above the treeline. A dark billow of smoke wormed out into the sky. The last thing Norton wanted, but an inevitability.

“Another set of adventurers?” the medic asked hopefully.

“Even still, healer boy, do you think other adventurers play kindly?” He began to wonder just how naive he had been about this job.

“Our cargo isn't of any interest, but I doubt they'll listen to reason. Assuming they aren't mindless bandits. Then it's merely a small roadblock.”

Ava grabbed at Norton and yanked him toward her. “Stay close. We'll do the rest.” He gave a nervous nod. They continued on in an awkward gait as Ava kept her death grip on his arm. Eventually the road bent left at a large boulder, revealing the source of the smoke in the distance.

A set of men, three or four, from what Norton could see, languidly stood around a messy flame. They all perked up on the small band's approach. Norton's heart quickened and he pulled on the strap of his knapsack. One of the men walked into the road, waiting patiently for their arrival.

“I will do the speaking,” Lydia said. Not the best choice, Norton quietly added. “Watch the human.”

“With pleasure.” The two lagged behind Lydia while she walked on ahead to meet the stranger. A few moments later she held up her hand, bringing Ava, and by extension Norton, to a stop. “As long as he doesn't say anything stupid, we should be fine.” That could be anything.

Norton could only just barely make out their conversation. One of the first words he could he uttered was “cat”. He silently prayed he misheard that and clenched his fist. Lydia remained stoic, almost appearing like a statue during the exchange. Whoever she spoke to was wildly gesticulating, even loudly yelling at certain points.

Lydia held up her arm again. Norton looked to Ava for an explanation. Her face was plagued with worry, her jaws tightly clenched. The man could only watch in confusion as the cat woman undid one of her armored gauntlets, letting it drop to the ground. It didn't seem to faze whomever she was talking to.

“Lydia, please.”

“Wh-what's she doing?” Norton struggled under Ava's grasp, trying to get a better view.

“Something stupid.” She sighed. “Lydia!”

In a flash, Lydia's gripped the man's face. A muffled cry rang out. The rest of the crew froze, seemingly in shock. It was a tense few seconds of silence. Suddenly she threw him to the ground in a cloud of dust. Just as soon as she did that, she retrieved her gauntlet and returned to her previous position as if nothing happened.

“Damnit all.” Ava let go of Norton and the sack, then sped off to Lydia's side. The apothecary scrambled to pick up the package and shuffled closer. He felt exposed without either of the beast-women by his side. His free hand felt for the wimpy knife strapped to his side.

Norton could see the human figure writhe on the ground. He grit his teeth and sneaked closer. Spatters of crimson dripped from Lydia's hand. Something had definitely gone awry. Ava exchanged heated words with Lydia, who still hadn't budged. The others appeared to snap out of their shock and charged at the pair. Norton let out a shaky, “Watch out!” Though the two had already prepared their weaponry in a flash. Norton didn't know what to do, his body locked up. All he could do was watch.

Instantly one went down, seemingly for no reason, collapsing to the ground with an audible thud and a gush of blood. Lydia expertly side-stepped another man, kicking him to the ground and driving her sword through his back. One more aggressor charged into her, slamming her to the ground. He brought down his short blade against her, causing a loud clang. Ava quickly pulled him back onto his fallen partner and stabbed directly into his chest.

What felt like hours was over in seconds. Norton blinked, feeling his senses return to him. “Are you alright?” he asked. Ava gave him a quick smile and pulled Lydia up. They walked back to Norton casually, as if nothing happened.

“Of course I'm alright. I wouldn't get my fine looks if that was a challenge.” She glanced at Lydia, who had a visible splotch of red near her collarbone. “Lydia, on the other hand, has a small scratch.”

“I am fine.”

“Even if you are, isn't the test you wanted? There you go.” Ava knocked on the feline's armor. “One wound for the apothecary.” Lydia's eyes narrowed but she made no protest.

“Right, uh, got it. Let me just...” He handed the sack back to Ava with a nod. “Let's get off the road.” Norton motioned over to the side, away from all the corpses. He quietly wondered if they were dead but quickly dismissed the notion, both out of fear and disgust.

At a comfortable distance away from the mess, Norton began to examine Lydia's wound. She blankly stared at him, which didn't help his mood. A clear piercing in the armor oozed a trickle of red. “Could you remove your chestpiece? I don't think I'll be able to work from here.”

“As you wish.” Lydia nodded and began to do the leather straps that held her armor in place.

Ava chuckled. “Good luck.” She patted his shoulder harshly.

As the last of the straps came loose, Lydia let the rear piece fall to the ground while she held onto the front. Carefully she pulled it away and set it down. Norton swallowed as her chest came into view, his already panicked heart pumped faster. She was completely bare, barring the natural fur. Pink nubs were somewhat visible through the soft white. He was somewhat surprised to find she only had the one pair of breasts before quickly discarding the thought.

The medic cleared his throat and reached for a small pouch at his waist, producing a fluff of cotton. Carefully he dabbed it against her small wound. His eyes practically burned into his hands as he worked, forcing them into position, trying to ignore the modest orbs just below. “Doesn't seem serious,” he croaked. Tossing the cotton to the side, Norton pulled out a vial with a small clump of moss inside. Delicately, he pulled some of it free and pushed it onto the wound. “I don't know much about beast folk anatomy, but this should work.”

“Doing well!” Ava cheered.

Lydia continued to quietly stare, unfazed by the experience. “Could you hold this for a moment?” The cat woman obediently placed her hand over the plant while Norton fiddled with more vials. His eyes gently glazed over her breasts and down at his belt. He reached for a viscous green fluid and glanced back up. Lifting the flask over the moss, he poured some of the liquid and placed the tube back in its spot. The small plant began to slightly glow before dimming and rotting into a dead brown. “You can let go now.” Lydia let the waste drop to the ground, revealing a clean pinkish spot. “There we go. The fur should grow back normally.” He scratched his chin robotically. “I think.”

The knight rubbed the new skin and nodded. “That's fine work,” she said.

“You're welcome.” He immediately took the opportunity to look away while Lydia fiddled with her armor.

“See? I told you he was a good choice. Completely professional.” Ava leaned closer to him. “For the most part.” Her hot breath brushed against his ear, causing him to wince. Once Lydia had made herself presentable, they walked back onto the road. “Oh, one second.” Ava trotted over to one of the corpses and pried a throwing knife loose from its throat. Norton heaved as the crimson blade shimmered in the sunlight. The wolf smiled and flicked the weapon about on her way back to the pair.

Norton tried not to think about how suddenly they had run into a slaughter, but it eventually got the better of him. “Did you need to kill them?” he asked.

“He wanted money. We didn't have money. They attacked. We defended.” Lydia ran her hand over her sword, smearing the blood across it. The man hoped she was trying to clean it. Though it was incredibly ineffectual.

“I could have given him something.”

“He would not have settled for one of your treatments. It was also an opportune moment to test your skills. Simple.” Those words didn't settle well with him. It was almost as though he was being held responsible. Though, chances were they would have died either way.

“We're going to need all of your supplies, dear. I wouldn't have let you gone through with a deal like that.” Ava shook his shoulder. “Where would we be without that special leaf?”

“Right.” Norton pursed his lips. He was not entirely satisfied with that answer.

Lydia continued to scrub away at her blade and sighed. “Do you have a rag to spare?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

Chapter 2

The trek had become easier as the road began to have patches of brickwork laid upon it. Even with the more stable ground, Norton had some trouble keeping a steady pace. Lydia and Ava seemed to falter themselves, a shake here an uneasy step there. He felt happy knowing that there was one thing he had over them. Maybe stamina wasn't worth gloating about. Either way, his feeble human form could still keep up with the beastly powerhouses.

"Lerwick is just around the corner, along with a fresh mug of beer," Ava said, a hint of exhaustion in her voice. She had begun to swing the bag back and forth.

"Are you sure you should be doing that?" Norton eyed the bag as it swished in the air. It was like all of his money was dangling on a string.

"Sure I should. Watch." Ava tossed the bag across the group. Lydia caught it with one hand and slung it over her shoulder.

"No more games. We're almost there." She looked over at Norton. He could feel her icy gaze grind over his skin. "You will not speak to anyone. You will not ask any questions. You will do what you are told. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am." He struggled to make eye contact, settling on her cute pink nose. Her animal-like features were surreal when paired with her harsh demeanor.

Ava piped up, "This is for your safety. Don't think you're being kept in the dark here. Just keep your eyes on the prize and everything will be A-OK." Her arm snaked into his pockets and pulled his knife free, causing him to snap to her. "Oh, and mind your person." She twirled the blade around with a smile and bopped him on the head with the handle.

"Right." He rubbed his forehead and took back the weapon. "Where are we staying?" Something told him he should have asked these things earlier.

"Standard inn. In fact, that's where we're dropping off the package. And then we never look back."

"Do you two know the owner or something?" Norton started to look about for any sign of civilization.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Lydia said. "I would suggest you do not get to know him."

"I didn't plan to."

"Good. That's one more precious human we can keep out of trouble," Ava replied. Norton instinctively pulled up his hand to cover his shoulder, but no assault came. "You behave and I'll buy you a beer. Free of charge!" Then the slap came crashing down on him, just as his guard was down.

Lydia perked up. “And what do you plan to pay that with?” She leaned over to look at Ava.

“I have money outside of the job, dear. Some of us don't live on the scraps of payment.” Ava let out a smug breath of air.

“Is that so? Where was this wealth of money when I had to pay for your bar tab? I can still remember your fresh tears.” A smile tugged at Lydia's mouth. Norton was surprised she could show emotion.

“Oh come now, not in front of the new boy.” Ava batted at the air. “I'm a changed girl.” She looked at Norton. “Believe me, I don't drink nearly as much.” She rolled her eyes in exaggeration. Norton gave her a nod and a smile, but the gash that worked down her face made her expressions still slightly unnerving. He looked back to the road and silently chided himself.

“There.” Lydia pointed off into the distance. “We've almost arrived.”

“There... what?” Norton squinted at the road. It was the same rundown mess of a trail.

“There.” Lydia grabbed at the man's head and crooked it harshly at a distant object.

A small wooden pole stuck up out of the ground, next to the road. It looked as though someone was about to put up a sign but forgot the rest of it. “The— The stick?” The iron grip left his skull. His head started to drum as he rubbed it. “That's not a very good landmark.”

Ava chortled. “It's not as though Lerwick really needs a sign. It's like an outhouse. You can smell it from a mile away.”

“Well, let's get it over with then.”

—

The entrance to the town wasn't very grand, to say the least. Instead of an entrance or any sort of magnificent sign, the village simply started as if the buildings sprouted wildly from the ground. The road work didn't improve either. Norton expected at least a main paved road, but it was as neglected as the miles before it. Usually the peak of the afternoon sun made anything look pretty, though even at its brightest, the buildings seemingly only just barely stood upright. There wasn't any noticeable smell. It was hard to tell if that was a metaphor or the other two smelled something he didn't.

“Remember what you were told,” Lydia hissed.

“Yes Ma'am,” Norton whispered. His eyes scanned the environment for any threats.

“I can hold your hand if need be.” Ava stuck out her fuzzy paw and shook it about. Norton seriously considered it a moment before shaking his head. “Your loss, dear.”

Norton followed his partners exactly. Every step was cautious creep forward. Most passerbys paid them no mind, and the few that had, rushed out of sight. There was a significant lack of pickpockets, murderers, or thugs in general. They must have been watching from the shadows, waiting for the man to slip from the safety of his escort. Probably. Regardless, the

trip was an awkward one. The buildings had been made more haphazardly than he had ever seen, creating bizarre alleyways and hugging towers. Lerwick was bustling in terms of architecture, but lacking in civilians.

“Over there,” Ava said with a nod. Off in the distance, crushed by two flanking buildings, was a wooden pile of matchsticks poorly resembling a stable building. ‘Inn’ was emblazoned along the top of it in fairly immaculate lettering, betraying the building’s poor construction. “Eyes on the prize.” On their approach, Norton wasn’t entirely certain he wanted to enter. The entrance had a wooden overhang with a splintered support beam. His only other option was to stay out in the muddy roads. Between the choices, he would rather be crushed instantly than stabbed.

A fairly pungent smell made itself known as Norton approached the front doors. Lydia nudged one open with a foot, releasing the full force of the aroma. It was alcohol. Cheap and simple. The smell itself was almost intoxicating. Norton must’ve made a disgusted face as Ava was quick to tease him. “First time in a bar, healer boy? You get used to it.” He tried to come up with a response but his mouth refused to open. “Don’t worry, you aren’t alone. Lydia doesn’t like it much either.” The knight’s only response was a hard glare, to which Ava snickered at.

Stepping inside, it was easy to see why the streets were empty. Cramped in wooden tables, wall to wall, were bar patrons of differing ages, sex, and species. It would have been the pinnacle of acceptance and friendship between the races had the place not been so scummy. No one so much as batted an eye at them, maybe either too drunk to care or the trio wasn’t enticing enough to steal from. Whatever the case, Norton was happy to go along unnoticed. That happiness quickly faded once he recalled this would be the very same building he had to sleep in.

The group weaved and slithered around the mess of a bar, moving toward the counter. Some more curious beast folk dotted the crowd that Norton hadn’t even known existed, such as goofy bushy-tailed squirrels and boisterous cat fish. He honed his staring skills at that point, enough to spy on others without being beaten to a pulp. The strange creatures made his own partners seem normal in comparison, for better or worse. Though, he still felt sorely out of place, even if no one paid him any mind.

Eventually they all sidled up to the counter, coming face to face with a withered and clearly tired human bartender. And unfortunately, shoulder to shoulder with more unsavory characters. Lydia plopped the sack onto the counter and eyed the man behind it. “We are here to speak with the owner.” Norton looked away back at the crowd, trying to appear as casual as possible. His eyes landed on a curiously dressed fox woman taking up a sensual pose near a set of stairs. She instantly noticed him and gave him a wave and a wink.

A furred muzzle settled itself on Norton’s shoulder, causing him to shiver. “Not even your best treatments could cure anything you get from her,” Ava whispered. Her voice resounded through his body, forcing out another shiver. “I suggest you keep your eyes on a nice human lady for your first time, sweetheart.” She rubbed his shoulder, a nice change of pace from its regular bruising. His ego took the beating on this one.

“I’m not a-” Norton started.

“What the fuck?” the bartender gasped. Norton immediately looked over at him, curious what could faze such a man. The gruff individual was staring straight into the bag, mouth agape.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Ava's furred hand pushed Norton's attention back to the crowd. “You needn't concern yourself with that.”

“If you... say so.” Trickles of fear pricked at the medic's neck. “So then.” He cleared his throat. “How about that mug now?”

“We haven't been paid yet, hold your horses.” His eyes wandered over to his side, where Ava rested her head. That blind orb stared back at him. “Peekaboo.” He slowly returned his gaze back to the sea of patrons.

“What is there to do in the meantime?” Norton's hand crept onto the counter, settling into a gentle repetitive tap in a vain attempt to soothe his nerves.

“Good question. Maybe you'd like to see our room?”

“No, no, I'm good. I like surprises.” Norton looked at the creature sitting next to him. A ravenous pig-thing, messily chowed away at a bowl. “I guess the food here must be good.” His tapping picked up the pace while he tried to focus on the conversation between Lydia and the man. It was in vain. “Can I ask you a question, Ava?”

“Didn't Ms. Lydia tell you not to?” Her hand ran through his black hair, twirling it about in her fingers.

“I figured this could be between you and me.” He stopped his tapping.

“How secretive. I suppose I can indulge one question.”

“This isn't a normal package, is it?”

“No”—her mouth curled downwards—“no it isn't. But it doesn't concern you. Believe me.”

The two lapsed into silence, looking about over the crowd. A few curious eyes began to glance at them, but none of them threw a fuss over the group. A bang came from behind Norton, but Ava's looming presence made it impossible to turn. Whatever it was, it must've not been important, or at least nothing Ava wanted to draw any attention to. None of the patrons even cared to investigate the noise. That was probably the norm here.

“Ava,” Lydia said.

“I guess that's my cue. Hopefully we can have a more productive chat later,” Ava whispered as she retreated. Her hand ran down from Norton's hair and across his shoulder. He let out a sigh of relief and turned back to the counter top. Norton didn't realize it until then, but Ava was quite warm and comforting, like a very snug blanket. A violent, snug blanket. He watched her disappear into a door next to the bar counter. Once she was gone, he felt oddly naked. Completely unsafe without her.

Another loud bang brought Norton's attention over to Lydia. Both of her armored gauntlets lay on the table, while her delicate palms rubbed her eyes. Light patches of miscolored fur stood out on her snow white hands. "Your eyes might as well fall out with how much you stare," the cat woman said. She slumped down and crossed her arms. Norton was quick to look away and settled on the scratched and battered wooden table in front of him.

"Sorry," Norton muttered.

The weary bartender shuffled into view, fervently wiping away at a cup. "Drink then?" he said. The apothecary looked up at him.

"I don't think so." He nodded at Lydia. "Maybe she needs one, though."

"No." Lydia gave Norton a hard glare. "No, I do not."

"Alright, alright. I don't have the cash, but-"

"If you want one it's on the house. Free. Free of charge." The man sped up his cleaning.

Norton furrowed his brow. "That's... kind, but no thanks."

Lydia perked up. "Go away." She shooed the bartender, who promptly nodded and ambled away. "I told you not to talk to anyone." She propped up her head with one hand. Her tail wormed up onto her lap.

"Sorry-"

"Stop saying that." She let out an annoyed sigh. "Maybe I should have gone in Ava's stead." Her blue eyes shot daggers at him. "She would have kept you busy."

"Look, I'll head up to the room if you want. Just show me the way."

Lydia glanced down at the table briefly before looking back up at Norton. "No. Never mind. Pardon me."

"Did I do something wrong?" Norton set his arms on the counter. He opened his mouth to apologize again, but snapped it shut.

"It's the job, not you."

"Right. The bag," he whispered.

"I can hear you."

Norton shook his head and gave a small smile. "Not used to beast-men yet."

"I'm not used to the generics."

"Generics?"

"That's what you are." Lydia nodded in agreement with herself. "A generic."

“What does that mean?”

“You're generic in comparison to the rest of us. What animal does man take after?”

His smile widened. “A monkey?”

“You would be offending quite a few beast-men with that.” Another smile dared to tug at Lydia's mouth.

“You mean to tell me there are monkey beast-men?” The man let out a small chuckle at the thought. “Why didn't you pick one of those instead of me?”

“I wouldn't want to say this publicly”—Lydia leaned closer to the human—“but they're known for their temper. Generics at least keep themselves relatively levelheaded.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Relatively.” She settled back into her seat and ran a hand over her gauntlets. “Have you truly not spent time around us?”

“One of your kind? No.” He shook his head. “I came from a very small human village. We kept to ourselves.” Norton paused. “If you're not used to uhm, generics, then does that mean you haven't spent much time with us?”

“Felids tend to stay together.”

“I guess that makes sense. I just thought a knight would be around humans more.”

“The armor does not make me a knight, regardless of Ava's jests. I haven't earned that title yet.”

“Then what should I call you?”

The cat's face softened more. “Lydia will do.” They both fell into a comfortable silence soon after, occasionally trading awkward glances. Norton began to think of a new topic to help pass the time while Ava did whatever shady business was occurring.

A loud slam woke Norton from his silent stupor. “Catch.” He snapped to the voice and shakily held his hands up. A fine glass bottle slapped against his palms and he only just barely caught it.

“Ouch!” Norton shook one of his hands about, desperately trying to fling the pain away. Ava settled back into the stool next to him with a sly smile. He held the bottle up. “What's this?”

“Your mug, dear,” she said.

“It seems awfully glass-like for a mug.” He shook it about, feeling the contents inside slosh around.

“Aren't you pedantic? Hmph.” She turned to Lydia, propping her head up on the counter. “Kept our boy company?”

“I did my best. It wasn't difficult.” Lydia began to replace her gauntlets.

Ava drummed on the counter excitedly. “Ready to retire then? Maybe a drink before bed?”

Lydia glanced back at the crowd. “It's probably for the best.”

“I'll call the bartender then.”

“Retiring, Ava.”

“I joke.” The wolf woman patted Lydia's iron-clad shoulder. “Now then”—she whipped back over to Norton—“I'll bet our fragile human is eager to rest.” Norton realized she lacked the bag entirely, so the delivery must have been completed. “Well?”

“Yeah, well, nothing to do here.” He hefted up the bottle. “Might as well get to the room I guess.” Lydia was already up and out of her seat, marching off to the stairs.

“Looks like she's in agreement.”

—

The room was one of many, but surprisingly had a level of cleanliness and order, even homely to a certain degree. It was almost suspicious in its appearance, considering everything else. Norton was in no position to complain, however. His joints still slightly ached from the long walk. He set down his knapsack in the corner of the room and eased onto one of the beds.

Included in the room was a small mirror atop a desk, a table shoved in another corner, and two beds with a night stand in-between. Norton twiddled his thumbs and enjoyed the comfort of the bed for as long as he could. While his politeness demanded that he relinquish a bed for a lady — if he could even call them that — his body begged for the relief of packed feathers and cotton. He stood up, pulled his cloak up and over his head, then discarded it alongside his bag. With that out of the way, he collapsed back onto sweet softness.

The gentle sound of a doorknob turning made Norton shoot back into a sitting position. “Oh, it seems a skeleton has wandered into our room,” Lydia said. Norton looked down and crossed his arms.

“Such a tease,” Ava replied as she walked in after the feline. She held a pair of drinking glasses in one hand. They glimmered faintly in the light of the candles that lit the room.

“I suppose you have claimed that bed for your own?”

“No, no, no, I'll take a bedroll.” He stood up and presented the bed. “Please, go ahead.”

Ava leaned on Lydia. “See? He's a priceless catch.” Norton shuffled to the side.

“I'll be taking the other one,” Lydia replied. She immediately walked to the bed at the far side of the room.

“Well, I guess this one's mine then.” Ava hopped onto the mattress and set down the glasses. “Come join me” She beckoned Norton. He carefully crept over and sat down on the bed. “No

need to be nervous. Or has it been a while since you shared a bed with a lady?" She chuckled and slapped her thigh. "Sorry, sorry."

"It's fine." It stung.

"Here." She held up a glass. "Go grab that bottle and we'll have a small celebration on a job well done."

"You sure?" Getting drunk here was probably the worst idea he could think of.

"Yeah, yeah, go on."

Norton thought on it for a moment and trudged off to his bag. "Do you mind?" Lydia suddenly spoke up. He glanced over at her. The feline had flattened her ears and covered her bare breasts. A subdued giggle could be heard from across the room.

"Sorry!" He spun around to the wall and frantically searched for the bottle before scuttling back to Ava's side. He wordlessly handed her the bottle with a frown.

"Smooth." Ava nodded. "The alcohol, however, is not." She gave a wink. Norton sighed and rolled his eyes. He was somewhat curious about Lydia's sudden interest in decency, but embarrassment overrode that entirely.

"Shouldn't we give Ms. Lydia some? She contributed as well." He motioned toward her, but was careful not to look.

"The good stuff doesn't agree with her. Now I, Ms. Ava, on the other hand"—she draped a hand across her chest—"agree with it very much." She bit on the cap of the bottle, tore it off in one easy motion, and spat it across the room. Expertly she poured two glasses of the reddish brown liquid, not letting a single drop go to waste. Norton could only think about how he'd have to retrieve that cork later. Ava set the bottle on the floor, yanked her cloak off, then gulped down the entire glass. Norton might have described it as "wolfing down", but chided himself for the silly joke.

Ava picked up the other cup and pushed against Norton's chest. "Go on, you've earned it." He slightly panicked at the thought of the liquid staining his shirt.

"I'm not sure this agrees with me either." He eyed the liquid.

"Come on, we've walked all this way and you don't want to celebrate?" She pressed harder against him.

"Alright, alright." He took up the glass. "What is it?"

Ava hefted up the bottle and poured herself another round. "I thought you liked surprises."

"Good point."

Lydia suddenly spoke, "Good luck."

Ava stared intently at her drink. “Oh hush, you,” she grumbled, and downed another glass. She fell back onto the bed and laid an arm across her eyes. “Nothing better than a job well done.” Norton sipped at the mysterious liquid, stifling a cough as it hit his throat. “Give me another.” She held up her cup and shook it about. He merely poured her his own drink, all the while wincing from the aftertaste. Ava was quick to down it again. Small droplets dribbled down her chin.

“Had enough?” Lydia asked. Norton glanced over at her, relieved to find her in more acceptable wear. A tattered and worn gown hung from her frame. Patches of dirt covered it in worrying amounts, making Norton wonder when she had last cleaned it.

“For now,” Ava replied. Norton set his glass down and got up from the bed. “Where are you going?”

“I was going to get my bedroll.”

“What kind of host would I be if I let you sleep on the floor?” Her arm shifted a little, revealing her nearly blank eye.

“That’s awfully kind”—he let out a laugh—“but you don’t need to take the floor.”

“Who said I was taking the floor?” She snuggled into the bed and covered her eye once more. “Lydia would be happy to take you as a bunkmate.”

Norton looked toward Lydia cautiously. She gave him a slow shake of the head, quite firmly dissuading any notion of that happening. “It’s fine, really, I’ll take the floor.” He took another step to his bag.

“Free spot on this bed.” Ava practically pounded the mattress where she lie. “We only paid for two beds, dear. Any more and it’ll come out of your share.” Norton couldn’t tell if she was joking at this point, and a small spark of fear didn’t want him to find out. He ambled over to the bed in defeat and sat down. “That’s better.” Ava let her glass go, dropping it to the bed. Then she snaked her hand over to her chest, where she unhooked the few bags that hung from her. She pushed them off in one shove where they fell to the floor in a loud clatter. The only thing that hung from her frame looked like a patchwork of different clothes wrapped over her to form a very short shirt and skirt, like a raggedy dress.

“Does this door have a lock, by the way?” Norton asked Lydia, who indifferently stared at the lazy wolf.

“It does, but if you believe that is enough to keep you safe, you need to dwell on the matter more.” She settled into her own bed and looked straight up at the ceiling. “Keep an eye open.”

“Right.” He nervously looked at the door before turning his attention back to Ava.

“Like we need a lock. Do you think the people out there can even hold a sword straight?” The man thought back to some of the patrons, and their awkwardly huge muscle proportions that would make even the largest of beasts green with envy. “One little prick”—she jabbed at the

air with her finger—“and they're down.” That was a grim reminder that the pair had murdered a squad of people merely hours before. The prospect of sleeping in the same bed seemed less and less like a good idea.

“Now quit fidgeting around and lay down.” ‘No’ wasn’t even a concept Norton knew anymore. Not wanting to creepily stare at Lydia and not wanting to face Ava, he opted to lie on his back and admire the ceiling. The very creaky and punctured ceiling. “That’s better, isn’t it? Hay and cotton certainly beats rotting wood.” Norton was slightly disappointed his original guess of feathers had been incorrect.

“Definitely,” the apothecary responded. He clasped his hands over his chest, feebly adding to what little sense of security he had. “So, in the morning it’s straight home.”

“Are you hankering for more adventure?” Ava asked. Norton thought briefly to the bodies strewn about on the ground.

“Maybe some other time.”

“Oh? Really? Well, I had considered you an excellent apothecary, and I’m sure Lydia thinks the same. Good enough for a rehire.” Norton saw Lydia nod and shift onto her side, away from the pair.

“I barely did anything.”

“It’s not how much you do, but how you do it.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Even if Lydia won’t.” She let out a chuckle. “Tell me”—she rolled over to face Norton—“how did you do that plant thing?” Ava shook her glass with every word, as if she were begging for more.

“Well, uh, it’s a kind of moss that grows in particular swamps. See, the toads there mix it with their bile and— Well, it produces that effect. I suppose it’s symbiotic.” That was the first time he had ever explained it out loud. It seemed incredibly ridiculous.

“I have not once ever met a man who carries toad vomit around.” Ava slapped his shoulder and let out another laugh. “You’d best apologize to Lydia,” she said with a snicker. “No, I joke. She’s been through worse.” Ava sat back up, giggling all the way. It was kind of a cute display. “Care for another round?” Ava pulled the bottle back into view.

“No, I’m good. Really.”

“You’re going to learn to love the bottle eventually.” She took a swig straight from the bottle itself and set it back down, along with the glass. “I’ve never met a man so unwilling to drink.” With that she pulled her simple dress up and over her head faster than Norton could object, revealing her faded grey and white fur. She was still covered from Norton’s angle, but it was clear even from that position that she was completely bare. Ava fell back onto the bed with a

bounce. Still being male, Norton couldn't help stealing a look. From the brief glance it seemed her fur did a good job of covering her less than presentable bits.

“Aren't you warm in that?” Ava asked.

“No, I'm good. Don't have the fur you do.” He tugged on his shirt to emphasize his point. It was a lie, though. The room was getting awfully muggy and his shirt had begun to stick to his skin. His pants didn't fare much better.

“Good luck, Norton,” said Lydia, once more. She pulled the sheets up to her neck. Norton was surprised at the sudden use of his name.

“Oh, quiet!”

“Something wrong?” Norton asked.

“Someone's just being a tease,” Ava grumbled.

Doing his best to drop the subject, Norton said, “Time to blow out the candle, then?”

“Why so soon? Are you in a rush? Wouldn't you care to chat some more?”

“I'll be honest ma'am, it's kind of hard to do that.” He squeezed his hands tighter. “Us generics don't do the whole naked thing.”

“Where did you learn such language?” She sniggered. “Regardless, there's nothing to be embarrassed about.” She tapped on his arm. “Come on now, let's talk like adults. This is normal for adventurers.” A nearly inaudible noise came from Lydia's side of the room. Ava leaned up from the bed quickly. “It is!” she shouted at Lydia.

“Alright.” Norton shifted onto his side. His eyes locked onto Ava's, not something he was hoping to do any time soon. Her visage was less frightening than all the other times. Whether it was acclimation or not, he couldn't tell.

“That's better, isn't it?” Ava said quietly. They both merely stared at one another for a few minutes. “You're pretty cute for a flat face. Or maybe it's the alcohol.”

“Flat fa-”

“Hush,” Ava said sternly, cutting him off. She stared into his eyes, piercing them cleanly. They then traced down his body and straight back into his eyes. She repeated this several times before speaking again. “I can see you sweating. Take off the shirt, at least.” Norton fidgeted on the spot for a few seconds.

“I'm not sure that would be the best idea.”

“Do it.”

“Ma'am-”

“Norton.” Her face hardened. “Don't argue.” He eventually relented and removed his simple cloth shirt. “There we go.” She brought her hand up tentatively and gently nudged against his chest.

“Miss,” Norton said seriously.

“I. Said. Hush.” Ava splayed out her hand and pressed against him. Her furred fingers were curious to the touch, and he might have enjoyed them more were they exploring him in a different scenario. The wolfess's digits traced down to his stomach and up to his neck. Her sharp claws became very apparent as they glided over him. “That's such a funny texture,” she mumbled, as if Norton weren't even there. Her other hand quickly joined in the greedy experience, similarly soaking up his vulnerable form. He was uncomfortable, to say the least, even with the gentle sparks of pleasure that ran under his skin, causing goosebumps to cover his hide.

Just when it seemed like it couldn't go on any longer, Ava gripped his sides and pulled him toward her in an absurd display of strength. Instantly he was forced against soft fur backed by hardened muscles. “Ma'am, please, I-”

“I don't want you talking.” Her snout dug itself into his neck, causing him to shiver. “Not right now,” she whispered. Norton was more baffled than afraid, and he stayed ramrod stiff. Ava's nose was quite wet. It wriggled about against his skin, tickling his body. He could begin to feel her chest rise and fall. The gentle nudges of her bosom against his chest was very apparent. Subtle bumps under her fur revealed more of her form. His face burned with embarrassment as the bumps brushed against him. Norton's mind was learning more about her body than it cared for, but his raw flesh was eager to learn more about this alien creature in front of him.

Ava pushed Norton onto his back, although she was still firmly stuck to him, eating up his form. The entirety of her weight eased onto him, squishing her breasts against his skin. He looked to Lydia for assistance, but she was directly facing away, clearly not wanting to get involved. A few seconds passed of silent groping. Norton still couldn't decide whether he should be embarrassed or angry. Ava eventually settled into a comfortable bear hug, keeping him in her grasp. She muttered something into his neck. Her warm breath dancing down his skin, joined by the gentle massage of her soft fur.

“Do you think I did the right thing?” Ava asked in a hushed tone. Her grip seemed to tighten with the question. “Tell me. Did I do the right thing?” Norton didn't know how to respond. “Please.”

“Yes.” Ava relaxed. He grit his teeth. There was no way of telling what he was getting himself into, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out. The beast-woman pulled out an arm and took up one of Norton's hands. Awkwardly she pushed it onto her back, forming a very uneasy hug between the two of them. Once she was satisfied, she returned her arm to its rightful spot. The man looked back over to Lydia once more. She barely looked back at him. The glint of her blue eyes was gone in an instant.

Norton remained in silence, wondering if this situation would ever pass. Ava hadn't budged, but from the occasional shifting and heavy breathing it was clear she was awake. He didn't

dare say a word, for a myriad of reasons. Some he couldn't explain to himself. If anything he at least hoped this would be the first and the last time he would have to deal with this. Not that he was disappointed by the raw experience of it, but such a sudden emotional load wasn't something he was used to.

Norton closed his eyes. And hoped for the best.

Chapter 3

The gentle rattle of rain woke Norton from his troubled sleep. He slowly opened his eyes and cast them down. The woman that had been there the night before had disappeared, bringing him some relief. In her place were itchy cotton white sheets. He stretched gently, feeling all his muscles creak. It wasn't his best night ever, and the stiffness of his joints proved it. He took a few minutes to relax before having to go through the turmoil of another trip and the problems it would bring. However much he wanted to push out the thoughts of the night before, they kept creeping back in. The natural morning erection didn't help matters.

"I think our sleeping prince is awake," a familiar husky voice said. Norton turned to the source. On the bed next to him sat both of his traveling partners. Ava was carefully brushing Lydia's hair, prettying it up. Both wore their simple dresses. It was actually quite cute, not that he would admit it. "Has anyone told you that you're quite the sleep talker?" He smiled and looked to Lydia, who gave her trademark stare, though it lacked her usual displeasure. He could barely see the new braids made out of Ava's hair, something he wished he could have seen done.

"Care for breakfast?" Ava asked. Norton rubbed his eyes and nodded. "As would I." She smirked and continued to brush away. "Have I ever told you that you have lovely hair, Ms. Lydia?"

"Yes. Far too many times. It's a wonder you haven't stolen it already."

"Well it's true. I'm sure Norton would agree." She looked to him briefly.

"Yeah," he said with a yawn. He sat upright. "Looks great. Far better than most."

"See? I think he's aiming for your heart." She pulled the brush free and admired her work. "How did we get so lucky with someone like him?"

"You pointed randomly at a name," Lydia replied matter-of-factly. She straightened out her dress. "Is that everything?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't care for one of my bows?" Lydia gave her a blank stare. "Yes, yes, that's everything," Ava said with a sigh. Lydia stood up and went to tend to her items. "Now Norton, sweetheart. Would you care for a brush?"

"Do I really need one?" He tussled his hair and swept it back.

"Even with the sorry state of your fur, humans need a brush too." Ava quickly moved to his bed and plopped down next to him. "I must say, you're a stand-out among humans with your hair." She ran a hand over his scalp. "I would be honored to brush it."

"I'm not sure about that, but go ahead I guess." He scratched at his neck awkwardly. Being in such close proximity again made him uneasy. Within seconds Ava went to work. Brushing

firmly but carefully across his head, hopefully in a way that didn't make him seem ridiculous. The wolfess began to hum a little tune while she brushed.

“Stop fidgeting so much. Relax. I'll make you look good.”

“Can I ask you something?” Norton asked in a more subdued voice than he wanted.

“Of course,” Ava replied. Something about the way she said it made it seem like she already knew what was going to be asked.

“Is everything alright? I mean. With the way you acted last night. I don't mean to be rude, but...” Norton pursed his lips, worried he made the situation worse.

Ava stopped for a moment and leaned against him. “Sorry,” she whispered. A small peck was planted on his cheek. In a flash she was back to brushing as if nothing happened, even picking up that jaunty tune once again. Norton kept his mouth shut. Butterflies stirred in his stomach, nearly nauseating him. For some reason it felt like he'd done something terrible.

“There we are! Go check in the mirror how I did.” She gently nudged against him. Norton practically stumbled out of bed and stared at himself in the mirror. “I take pride in my work. No refunds, unfortunately.”

“Refund what? This looks great.” His bangs were expertly brushed aside and not a hair stuck out of place. “How'd you get it to stick like that?” He prodded at the styling and looked back at her.

“Wolf spit does wonders, I suppose.” She swiped her tongue at the brush and laughed. Norton narrowed his eyes and winced, wiping his fingers off on his pants. “That's my gift to you.”

“Well it still looks good at least,” he said, slightly peeved.

“I'm glad you think so. Maybe you'll win Lydia's hand yet!” Ava got up and retrieved her bags from the other side of the bed and tossed the entire mess onto the mattress.

“I'm not sure your work is that good,” Lydia replied. She had already gotten all of her bulky armor back on. “Perhaps ten glasses would make me more willing.” Even such a jokey jab stung. If it was a joke. It was hard to tell with Lydia's inflection.

The group had finished dressing and collecting their items. Norton went over the room several times to make certain they hadn't forgotten anything. Once he was satisfied they all exited the room and went out into the hall. “Oh,” Ava suddenly said. She held up her bottle of alcohol. “Do you have the cap for this?”

“We don't have time for that,” the feline said. “Ava. Look.” She nodded to the stairs. Ava and Norton moved to see what she meant. The human was held back by an armored hand. “Not you.” The wolf backed up to the group. “And what now?”

“It's just one man.”

“And you don't think there are many more?”

“Are you suggesting the window?”

“The window?” Norton said in confusion.

“He can't make that jump,” Lydia replied.

“Then we should stroll out the front door,” Ava said with a shrug.

“What is this about?” Norton asked, not expecting an answer. His eyes flitted back and forth between the two.

“And be ambushed?”

“Then what is your suggestion, oh glorious knight?” Ava took a sip of her bottle. Her other hand sat casually on her hip. “We smash his head in and take him captive?”

“Not an abysmal suggestion, but I doubt they care for hostages.”

A loud bang rang out from below, causing Norton to jump. The other two snapped to the noise, and dropped their conversation instantly. “We've got a bounty out,” a curious wheezing voice groaned. “Information will be rewarded handsomely.”

“Window,” Lydia promptly said. Ava nodded, tossed her alcoholic concoction, and pulled Norton down the hallway. It nearly felt as though his arm was going to pop right out of its socket. His legs could barely keep up with her speed as they barreled down to a lone window at the end of the hall. Norton could hear Lydia stomping after them. The floorboards beneath them rattled and cracked, deeply worrying Norton they'd give way.

“You can jump, right?” Ava asked.

“Jump where?” Norton couldn't hide the panic in his voice.

“Lydia. You're going to have to help me with this one.” The wolfess slid the window open with her free hand and shoved Norton into Lydia's waiting arms. “Be careful with him. He's a keeper.” With that, she dove out the window without a second thought. Norton gasped and tensed up, his feet instinctively pushing back away from the portal. Lydia kept forcing him forward with little effort. “Ready to go!” Ava shouted from below.

“Don't think. Just go,” Lydia coldly said. Hardened hands bashed him forward, nearly knocking the air out of his lungs.

“No! No, wait!” Norton screamed. It was far too late for objections. The man tipped out of the window, and went careening into the ground below. He flailed wildly while his voice cracked from a prolonged yell. Just as the world seemed to spin out of control, it all came to a stop with a sickening halt.

“Graceful.” Ava grinned. She looked down at Norton, cradling him in her arms. “Your turn!” she shouted up at the window. Moments later a gleaming white cannonball crashed down next to them, creating a storm of dust. “Always with the flashy entrance,” Ava said between repeated coughs. Norton could barely process the world. His heart still hammered and his

head pounded. He felt like a limp fish. His bones had turned to jelly. Ava had no problem hefting him upright. "I think we're clear." Norton hunched over and held his stomach in agony.

"Hey!" another voice rang out.

"Not clear," Ava groaned. Norton was jerked up from his bent over position. "Come on now, we have to run." Norton could only manage a worried blubber as he was tugged after the running wolf woman. "You're doing great!" Lydia ran alongside them. The bulky armor she wore didn't appear to slow her down one bit. The world was back into a wash of blurring colors and sickening shaking. Were they going any faster, he figured his arm might have easily snapped and his stomach turned inside out.

Norton's vision melted from city, to woods, to more woods, and eventually a mess of green plains and foliage. He didn't realize they had stopped until he had slumped on the ground, against the pleasingly cool grass. Norton's head continued to spin, winding down until everything stopped moving. A few seconds passed before his mind was in working order to understand speech.

"Do we take him along then?" a familiar clinical voice said.

"I don't want to involve him," another familiar voice replied, lacking its usual cheery tone.

"We can't send him back on his own. Hull is a ways off."

"I know we can't, but if he's seen with us he'll be considered just as guilty as we are." A pause in the conversation came. "That damned fish. I should've gutted her when I had the chance." The voice sighed. "I don't think we have the money between us to send him back on a carriage." Something plopped down next to him. "Hey there." A gentle hand tapped against his shoulder. "Dear?"

"Hmm?" Norton hummed. He could barely make out the feminine figure through the grass that stuck to his face. Not that he could even muster the energy to properly look.

"Still in working order. A real trooper you are. Sorry to do that to you, but I have to admire your voice."

"Hmm." The man gave a mindless nod, pulling along some blades of grass.

"You still have a map, right?" the figure he now recognized as Ava asked. Norton nodded and flung a hand at his back, patting down his bag. "I'll get that for you. You rest for now."

"I suggest you get up as well," Lydia said. Her voice wormed its way into his head. "I doubt you want to deal with the bugs here." Norton gasped and shoved himself off the ground, wiping off his clothing in a panic. "That certainly woke you up. Feeling better then?" He looked over at Lydia, who squatted down next to him.

"Yeah." His head continued the pounding of a drum. "I guess."

"You came out of it better than I expected."

“Look at you,” Ava began, “such a flatterer, Lydia. Maybe ten glasses won't be necessary at all.” She pulled the map free from the mess of Norton's bag. “Now where are we?” She presented the map to the armored feline.

“And how many times have I told you to learn how to read a map?” Lydia replied, annoyed.

“I can read a map!” Ava pulled the paper back to her. “But we didn't exactly pick a direction to run. We could be anywhere.”

“A convenient excuse,” Lydia said. Ava grumbled and flattened her ears.

“Well”—Norton oriented himself to sit upright—“where's the sun? It's still early, isn't it?” He held his hand up to block out the blinding light and searched for the burning orb. “There.” He pointed at the sun. “So that must be east. I think.” Norton tried to make sense of what he was saying through the hammering of his head. “We came from back there?” He gestured at the gnarled woods behind them. Ava and Lydia nodded. “So we ran right at the sun. I think we went east.” He hoped.

“Resourceful,” Ava said with a smile. She pulled the map back up to Lydia. “Here. We should be abouts here, then. If our human is right.”

“Circle around south, then?” Lydia asked.

“She'll probably have a few men mucking about along every road.”

“As if that would be an issue.”

“Not for us, no, but-”

“You mind if I ask a question?” Norton asked. He massaged his forehead with a grimace. “You mind telling me what's going on?” Ava frowned and opened her mouth to speak. She paused and closed her snout shut.

“We've killed a man,” Lydia replied flatly, though more downcast than usual.

“Is that such a big deal? You seem pretty good at that,” Norton said angrily.

“It is. He was the leader of a guild. That's bound to anger someone, wouldn't you think?” Lydia maintained her composure.

“It does,” Norton said, easing off of his aggression. “This has something to do with the package, doesn't it?”

“Well”—she looked to Ava briefly, who made no protest—“it does.” Norton slouched. “We've been carrying his head.” The man could only manage a stare as the statement struck him bluntly.

“Head,” he mumbled. His body went numb and he struggled to hold a hand over his mouth. The rest of his body faltered and Norton fell back to the ground. Some noises blared in front

of him, but he couldn't make them out. Everything shook violently. Then, darkness.

—

The small pitter-patter of liquid gently eased Norton out of a heavy slumber. The sky had darkened a fair amount and a low rumble seemed to punctuate every shake of his body. He was moving, or rather, they were moving. His body lay upon smooth but hard armor, and out of the corner of his eye he could spy Ava trudging alongside him. Lydia held him to her back quite firmly. He blinked repeatedly, trying to make sense of the strange scenario.

“Hey there,” Ava said with a wave. Much of her fur was a soggy mess. “Feeling better, dear? That was a scary sight.” Norton gave an uneasy nod. His mind began to piece together the events that led him there. “Lydia was nice enough to offer you a ride.”

“For once, it's not a jest,” Lydia replied. Her voice rang through him, being in such close proximity. It was oddly comforting. “Are you ready to walk?”

“I think so.” Lydia came to a slow stop and crouched down, easing Norton back onto solid, but muddy ground. His legs tingled as blood rushed in. He backed off of Lydia and onto his wobbly legs. Within a few seconds he was back to normal. “Thank you. I'm ready.” The other two nodded and started their journey again once Norton joined their side. “Sorry. For acting like that, that is.” Lydia kept her eyes focused squarely on the road.

“I had forgotten you weren't experienced in brutality. I shouldn't have been so rash,” the feline said. That was a strange apology, but he wasn't going to complain. It seemed sincere at the very least.

“We would have told you, but...” Ava trailed off.

“I get it,” Norton replied solemnly. He wasn't exactly happy about it. “Where are we off to now?” It was clear to him he was just along for the ride at that point.

“Your map had a harbor town to the east. Didn't have a name, but we can pick up a few essentials on our way back to Hull.” Ava reached into her mess of pockets. “And here.” She pulled free a small bag that rattled with the lovely sound of coin. “Your pay.”

“Job isn't done yet.” He held up a hand. “You hold onto that until we arrive at Hull.”

“Alright then,” Ava said with a smile.

“I'll make certain she doesn't spend it,” Lydia said.

“Hey!” Ava slapped Lydia's armor with a hollow clang.

Chapter 4

The sky darkened further and further into a solid grey, bringing along with it more rain and fervent thunder. While Norton was practically soaked to the bone, he didn't dare complain when both of his compatriots were covered in a dripping wet mess of fur. Instead of road, the ground was now a long puddle of mud that dared to penetrate Norton's flimsy boots. The passing carriages were a terrible tease. Beacons of dryness that passed on by him without a second thought. It was certainly nice to be in the company of other people again, no matter how uninterested they were. Civilization felt like a rare commodity, especially after the mess of the last town.

After much wading, the group reached a massive stone wall with a set of large metal doors leading into what Norton hoped was the town proper. Judging by the buildings just beyond it, the man figured, his hopes might come true. Naturally a group of guards meandered about the front of the gate. It gave Norton a sense of security, but also slight worry that his partners were wanted criminals. He couldn't shake the thought on their way through. Ava nor Lydia showed any hesitation, so he tried to continue on as casually as possible.

Passing the arch was nerve wracking, but none of the guards made a fuss. A few appeared taken aback or disgusted, from what Norton could see, though thankfully they didn't stop the group. The beast-women proceeded forward without a second look. Norton let out a sigh of relief and walked on as casually as he could.

The town was a breath of fresh air. A proper brick-laid road began just at the mouth of the gate, allowing the group to find proper purchase on the ground. The buildings themselves, while a little aged, definitely held up properly and were laid out in a sensible manner. From what Norton could see, anyways. "See a store yet?" he whispered to the other two. The rain began to hurt somewhat with how hard it came down.

"Not yet," Ava said. Lydia shook her head.

"Could we get out of the rain at least?" Norton shook his head, throwing off some of the water that coated his hair.

"Fine, fine, anything for you," Ava said with a laugh. She nudged Lydia and pointed to a nearby alleyway. The group shuffled in and settled against the chilling brickwork. Norton let out a relieved sigh and wiped his mess of hair out of his face. Ava shook vigorously like a dog would, sending water every which way. The human smiled and stifled a laugh. "That's better." He looked to Lydia, who extended her tongue out and brought her armored hand up to her mouth. She paused and sheepishly closed her mouth. Instead, she opted to slick her hair back.

"I don't think I've been in a harbor town, what about you two?" Norton asked, trying to pass the time.

"Who would want to go out on the ocean? Stuck in a small boat all day, sounds like hell," Ava said. Not exactly what he asked.

“No,” Lydia replied.

“Wouldn't it be nice to sit out on the ocean once and while? No cares at all?” Norton asked.

“I have no cares at all, and I don't have to worry about the waves either,” Ava said with a shrug and a smile. “And no one goes out on the water for anything other than fishing.”

“Utter tedium,” Lydia said.

“Right. I see.” He leaned back against the wall. “I guess I romanticized it a little.”

“Get yourself a nice fish woman and you can romanticize the ocean all you want,” Ava said. Norton furrowed his brow. “Not to your liking, I see.”

“I didn't mean it like that.”

“Oh?”

“Don't get any ideas,” Norton said with a sigh.

“I say Norton should stick with a lovely human. What say you, Lydia?” Ava fluttered her eyes, or rather, eye.

“I don't know what he likes.” Lydia tilted her head and looked to Norton. “What do you like?” She put emphasis on the 'do'. Norton was annoyed that Lydia of all people would go along with Ava's prodding questions.

Ava gasped in delight. “That's a wonderful question. What do you like, dear?” The set of eyes on him was frankly worrisome.

“I'm not a judgmental person.”

“Oh”—Ava looked to Lydia—“he's dodging the question. Hmph, figures.” A clear grin was visible on her face.

“It's a sudden thing to ask,” Lydia replied. “Sorry.”

“Well, what do you like then, Ms. Ava?” Norton asked. Calling her 'Miss' began to feel awkward.

Lydia was quick to answer for her and said, “Someone willing to bring in money and alcohol.”

“That's not a bad answer, really.” Ava nodded. “I'd like to think I'm not as shallow as that, though.”

“You'd like.”

Ava shooed Lydia away with a hand and looked in the opposite direction. “Always picking on poor old me,” she joked.

Norton peeked out of the alleyway. The streets were relatively empty, but the buildings were alight with activity. The warm glow of candles shone through windows. Proof that while the town was at rest, it was still very much alive. He looked about for anything that could be a store, and a shelter from the chill of the rain. He looked back the other way, past his compatriots. More windows lit up by the comforting light of candles, and one of them stood out. It was larger and bore complex writing on it. "That looks like it could be a store," Norton said, pointing toward the beacon.

"Even if it's not, it's better than staying out here," Ava said. She shivered to emphasize her point. The group walked to the edge of the alleyway before making a mad dash to the store, going right back into the fray of the rain. The splash of water on the ground made them all the more soaked. They scrambled into the building and closed the door behind them. Norton took a moment to catch his breath, while the others walked straight off. After collecting himself, Norton was somewhat displeased to find it wasn't quite the useful store he was hoping for, but rather a gaudy place to sell jewelry and other trinkets.

Ava had already taken her spot at the counter, bothering the poor employee managing the store. Lydia watched on blankly just behind her, staring at the contents of the store. Norton sidled up to Lydia and merely enjoyed the warmth the interior brought. "If you'll excuse us, we'll be staying here for just a moment. Not long at all." Her fur dripped water all over the counter. The woman behind the counter was very clear in her expressions. She just wanted to be left alone. Ava leaned onto the table, sticking her rear out. "I must say, you have a lovely place here."

"You mind if I ask you something?" Norton whispered to Lydia. He continued to watch on with more interest than he cared to admit.

"As long as it is not relationship troubles."

"No, not that. I just wanted to know what we're dealing with. The person we're trying to avoid."

"A lamprey," Lydia replied.

Norton shook his head. "I said what we're dealing with."

"I know. We are dealing with a lamprey."

"And what's that?"

"A leech, with more teeth." Norton squinted. His face contorted into utter confusion and disgust trying to imagine such a creature. "I had thought the same thing." She looked over to Ava, who still happily chattered away to the poor girl. "Ava. If you would."

"Fine, fine. Sorry for bothering you." Ava gave a chipper wave and sauntered back to the pair. The employee gave a visible sigh of relief. Norton could only mouth a 'sorry' and walked back to the front of the store. "I was thinking of something in red. Perhaps a nice necklace?" Neither of the two had a reply for her. "Never mind."

“Did you ask where we could find a general store?” Lydia asked.

“Ah, no.”

“I'll do it. Dry off in the meantime,” Norton said as he ambled off.

“Indeed I will.” Ava nodded. “Somehow.”

Norton approached the counter as carefully as he could. The girl seemed to turn away slightly, clearly not wanting another round of bothering. “Hello, sir,” she said, less than cheerfully.

“Sorry to bother you, ma'am. We're travelers and we were hoping to replenish our supplies.” The woman leaned to look behind him, no doubt at the imposing animal people. “Now we just came into town, but as you can see it's pouring rain and we can't exactly look around.” She gave a hesitant nod. “So we would just like to know where we can find some food and drink. If that's not a problem.” He held his palms up, trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible.

“If you go down to your right from here, and... and...” she trailed off. It was clear she couldn't take her eyes off the pair. “Past the statue and make a left.” She nodded again. “You'll find a store there.”

“Great, thank you very much.” Norton retreated back to his partners with a sigh. As much as it wasn't the best conversation, it was refreshing to talk to a relatively normal human. “Found out where it is. Let's get going.”

“It's still raining pretty hard,” Ava replied.

Norton looked back at the employee. “Let's not bother her anymore. The alleyway is still free.”

“Right back into the cold. How dreary!” She opened the shop door. “After you,” Ava said with a smile.

—

Once the rain had eased off its near unending assault, the group moved quickly to the shopkeep's words. The rest of the town was similar brick and mortar, nearly exact duplicates of one another. Were there no landmarks, Norton figured it would be incredibly easy to get lost in this modern maze. Fortunately the statue made a recognizable marker. It was a typical metal statue made to celebrate someone, a soldier, Norton figured, based on the large sword in his hand. He would have taken the time to admire it, had he not been under the constant attack of the rain. “I could take him,” Ava said as they passed the large work of art.

The girl's directions were indeed correct after all. At the very end of a long stretch of buildings lay a market store. It was surrounded by other shops of varying design. 'General Goods' was painted onto a large wooden board in red and yellow paint. It stood out proudly from the rain, as if beckoning all poor souls to it. Perhaps that was only in Norton's mind, as

he considered his situation. Regardless, he still sped up slightly upon seeing it. He could hear Lydia let out an audible sigh of relief as well. Apparently even she couldn't stand the rain.

One final dash to refuge and they were out of the rain once again. Norton took a few breaths and shook his head. He was going to have to get used to all this movement. Lydia opened the door and they all filed inside, welcomed in by the heat. The store was as Norton hoped it would be, a moderately sized store with all the foods they could possibly need for a trek back to their starting point. There were other various goods, but Norton wholly focused on the food. It wasn't until that moment that he realized he hadn't had anything to eat all day. His stomach rumbled uncomfortably. "Poor thing," Ava said.

"Perhaps it's best if you select your own helpings first," Lydia said soon after. Norton wasn't sure if that was an insult.

"Let's just pick out what we'll be eating. Come on." A surprising amount of fresh fruits and vegetables were on display. He had never seen so many perishable foods and it was almost tantalizing. "Can either of you eat fruits?" he asked while admiring the bright coloring of the juicy morsels.

"We're not simple animals, dear," Ava said while clearly eyeing a large slab of meat near the front of the store.

"Hello? Yes. Hello," someone piped up. Norton snapped to the sound of the voice. "Over here. Yes. Here." A green figure waved to the group. "Here I am. Run the store. Here. What do you need?" It was a kobold, or at least Norton assumed it was a kobold. A small little reptile with bright green scales and an adorable set of horns. A darker and more lustrous patch of black scales ran down its head. Norton assumed it was female from its lithe form and chipper voice, but he had never actually seen one in person. At best, he knew one of their scales made a good addition to a cleaning solution.

"There's the culprit now. Better get your shield back, Lydia."

"Hush."

"Speak up, speak up," the creature chattered.

Norton was quick to step forward. "Hello, erm..." And just as quickly he froze up as he was unsure how to address the creature.

"Kunka," the kobold said, pointing to itself. "I am Kunka."

"Yes, Kunka. I am Norton and-"

"Hello, Mr. Norton." It waved.

"Yes, hello. We're travelers and we were hoping we could get enough food for two or three days worth of travel."

"Travel where? Nothing. Nothing is that far from here. Nothing."

“Ah, we're heading back to Hull on foot.”

“Why foot? Horse— Carriage. Carriage makes a day!” Well, Norton had learned one thing. They're certainly curious creatures.

“We don't really have the money for a carriage. Especially not for the three of us.”

“Boat? Water. Cheap.” It tapped its chin.

“We are not traveling by boat,” Lydia quickly responded.

“Ah, felid. Hm. Too much water. Won't like it.” Kunka shook its head. Ava giggled.

“I've got a question for you, Ms. Curious Kunka,” Ava started. So she was a girl. The wolf walked forward and leaned onto the counter. “How did a little thing like you get to run such a big store?”

Kunka snapped her fingers and a small puff of blue flew out of her hands. “Ice magic. Easy. Keep everything fresh.” She nodded proudly. Norton was astounded to see such a diminutive creature perform something like magic.

Ava looked back at Norton. “How come you can't do anything like that?” He shrugged. “Anyways, like our pink friend said, we need some food for a few days. I think a good amount of meat will do us well. Oh, and some fruits for him.”

Kunka sized up the trio, looking up and down their forms. “Humans are biggest eaters.” Norton felt a bit awkward hearing that. “Pack lots of fruit and meat for him.” She hopped down, nearly disappearing behind the counter, before reappearing on the other side with a hefty basket. She tottered along the market and daintily picked out all the little bits of food. “Keeping fresh is extra.”

“We can do without, thank you,” Ava replied. “And some fish for my dear knight.”

“That's not necessary,” Lydia said, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

“Fish is cheap. Take plenty.” Kunka stopped. “Humans eat fish?”

“Yes. Yes we do.” Norton nodded.

“OK. Yes. Plenty of fish.” Kunka nodded repeatedly in tune with Norton. “Funny. Cat doesn't like water. Fish in water. Cat like fish.” She rounded off her basket with a topping of raw fish and handed it off to Ava. “Have a spot to carry that? Bags free for more than a hundred gold purchase!”

“We have a good person to carry it, yes,” Ava said with a smile. She held the basket up to Norton, who quickly went to work packing away all the perishables into a bag to then shove into the mess of a pack that he carried, but set aside an apple for himself. He was feeling less like a medic and more like a fancy chest with legs. At least he was getting paid either way. “And how much is that?”

“Thirty two gold,” Kunka said near instantly.

“That was quick. Didn't even weigh it.”

“I know the weight. I know. Pay up. Pay up now.” She stuck her hands out and greedily presented her palms. Ava pawed through her pockets and accumulated all the pieces, dropping them into the kobold's green hands. “Very good. Good business.”

“You deserve it,” Ava said. “Say, you remind me of another cute little thing. She was also good with bits of magic. Do you perhaps have a sister?”

“Yes. Yes, one sister. Mehni.”

“That's the one. She helped us with a little task. Happy to see the family line doing well!” Ava patted the reptile like a child, clearly much to her chagrin.

Lydia stepped in. “Do you mind if we stay until the storm passes?”

“Stay. Paying customer. Do look at more products!” The sound of the front door opening rung through the air. “Ah, welcome!” Norton turned to look at the door as he bit into his apple. He nearly choked on the piece once he saw the thing that squirmed through the door.

“Mammals,” it wheezed, “where are your manners?” It was slimy, and large. A beast-man. Droplets of water slicked off of its hide, which lacked clothing. It instead wore something of an odd net, with proper coverings. It had less of a head and more of an elongated tube that came to a sudden stop. Two sunken eyes peered at the group. And its mouth. Its mouth lacked a jaw and sharp teeth threatened from the rim of its long lip. Lydia pulled Norton behind her, where he continued to gawk at the monster.

“We don't need to do this here, fish,” Ava said grimly. “We know how this will end, and we'd rather not deal with the law here. Let's go our separate ways.”

“I need to pay you back for your stupidity. Who would have guessed you would be dumb enough to meet up with the lizard's sister?” It let out a raspy laugh. Norton looked at Kunka, who quickly slunk behind Ava. “Did you buy a pet with your blood money? What is his name?” Norton froze.

“You were right alongside us when we made that choice,” Lydia replied. “You could have left all of that behind, as we did.”

“And miss out on more riches?” The fish creature produced a large vase and took a swig from it. As it tilted its head up, the entirety of its frightful maw came into view. It was all teeth. All of it. “The perfect scapegoats for my rightful place.” It took a step forward, while water dribbled from its mouth.

“Don't,” Ava commanded. She drew one of her many blades.

“He didn't expect to be struck down. Did he?” it asked, clearly ignoring the wolf. It took another step forward. “How many hacks from your blade did it need?” Ava growled and tossed the knife. It struck the creature squarely in one of its large shoulders, causing it to hiss.

It pulled the blade free and tossed it aside like a toothpick. “Too hotheaded, as usual.” It charged forward, straight for Ava.

“Move,” Lydia said. She shoved Norton off to the side, sending him to the floor. Lydia pulled her sword free in one swift motion and smashed into the creature with the brunt of her shoulder. Norton scrambled away and stuck to the wall, watching the battle from an uneasy distance. Lydia shoved her sword into the mess of teeth, straight through the middle. A loud screech of metal erupted from the clash. Lydia began to visibly shake as she struggled to push forward. The lamprey barely seemed to exert any strength. “Ava!” The wolfess dashed around to the fish's other side and stabbed directly in its back.

The lamprey tossed the sword downward with the flick of its head. It threw a punch at Lydia, who barely managed to avoid it. Ava jumped on its back proper and came down on its neck with another blade. Norton could only guess she hit her mark as a spurt of bright red gushed out onto the floor. Then, in a horrifying move, its head flipped backwards to snap at Ava. She let out a cry of anguish and pushed off of the creature. Norton's heart leaped and his mind forced him into action. Awkwardly he tossed his apple, striking the creature's head. It took mere moments for him to regret his stupidity. The thing faced him and bared all of its teeth. In the center a pair of incisors gnashed at him.

Lydia gave it a hard punch and retrieved her sword. The lamprey reeled from the strike. Just as Lydia was going to bring her blade down on the creature, it was suddenly obscured in a mist of blue. The smoke cleared, revealing the creature encased in ice. Norton quickly looked to the kobold, who was peeking over the counter, arm outstretched. “Guards!” a voice from outside screamed.

“Go. Customers. Go!” She barreled over the counter and held her hand on the frozen statue. A small glow of blue emanated from the spot. Norton nodded and rushed to Ava's side.

“I'm alright. Let's get going before the law gets here,” Ava stressed. The apothecary stuck out his hand to help Ava before Lydia stomped over to her partner and picked her up. He then ran to the door and opened it for the two, trailing after them. He gave the kobold a wave just before he departed. They rushed past the encroaching crowd and into the maze of the city.

“Where to?” Norton asked worriedly.

“Away from here,” Lydia said flatly.

“I'm fine, set me down.” Ava gently tapped the feline's shoulder. A streak of red ran down Lydia's armor.

“She's bleeding pretty badly. We have to stop soon.” Norton reoriented himself on Lydia's other side. “Do you feel woozy at all?” His professionalism struggled to override his fear.

“No. It's not that bad,” Ava mumbled. The trio moved back into one of the alleyways. This one was cluttered with miscellaneous wooden crates, which would have to serve as simple cover for now. Lydia carefully placed Ava down against the brick wall. Norton quickly pushed her cloak aside to examine the wound. Several gashes of varying size ran down her

forearm. All of them were bleeding, not as badly as he had first assumed, but still enough to make his heart drop.

His hands quickly went to work, producing all the necessary tools for the job. Cleaning away the cuts with balls of cotton and adding his own mixtures of cleansers to the wounds. Ava hissed, though made no protest. Lydia stood off to the side, peering past the crates. Occasionally she stole a look at the two. A subtle amount of worry visible on her face.

Norton pulled out a bundle of gauze and carefully wrapped it around Ava's arm. He made it firm but not uncomfortable. Trickle of red oozed through the bandages, staining the clean white. "I guess I should be happy I got my money's worth," Ava said with a laugh. Norton gave her a weary smile and continued on with his work, finishing it off with a cut of the gauze. Ava tentatively touched the wrappings, running her fingers across them.

"Don't use that arm, and try not to poke at it."

"Well, there goes my afternoon plans."

"I have something for the pain if you need it."

"What a lovely catch you are." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "You don't get my astounding looks if pain is an issue, sweetheart." Ava leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek. There was something depressing about her response. She passed it off as a joke, but the pain was there. Norton cast his gaze away to the ground. His chest became very light as he looked back at Ava. There was a silent pause as they stared at one another. Her lips parted ever so slightly. Norton didn't think. He pressed forward.

The pair locked lips. It was a curious sensation, feeling her soft fur brush against his lips. Not an unwelcome one, though. His nose brushed against hers as they adjusted around, exploring just a little more of each other's alien mouths. Norton dared to inch his tongue further, gently caressing hers, sampling her mouth a tiny bit. She responded in kind, pushing forward into his. It was a wild taste. Animalistic in its flavoring. He wanted more. He needed more.

Consciousness edged back into Norton's clouded mind and he gently pulled away. They traded their stares again. Ava's ears swiveled and flattened. Her brow furrowed into uncertainty, something Norton hadn't ever seen her do until that moment. "We'd better get going," Lydia said. Neither of the two turned to look at her. Ava nodded and stood up uneasily. Norton contemplated what had happened for a moment before following suit.

"The guards are beginning their search." Lydia pointed off to distant armored men. "Either we move further into the alleyways or we leave now. Unfortunately I know of only one way out. The way we came in." She sighed. "We may have to go by boat."

"I doubt any of the transports are going to let us on," Ava replied.

"A few gold pieces might convince a cargo ship."

"Our money continues to dwindle."

“It's that or facing court.”

“On to the boats, I suppose.”

“Port is this way.” Lydia motioned off to the left. “Come on, Norton.” The human nodded mindlessly and followed after the two. His thoughts continued to replay that moment over and over in confusion. That was such a stupid thing to do. He chided himself repeatedly. Why did he do that? The taste of Ava lingered on his tongue. He tried to ignore it, and yet, one part of him embraced it.

Chapter 5

The constricting buildings gave way to shorter hovels and piles of crates. In the distance, Norton could see a sizable docks and massive ships balancing on the water. The smell of the sea lingered in the air, leaving a salty taste in his mouth. The ocean peeked through the dozens of ships, almost as if being smothered. Gruff workers dotted the landscape, going to and fro from boat, to crate, back to boat, and even into the water.

“Where do we start?” Ava asked.

“One of the workers must know a captain,” Lydia replied.

“Then I'll find one,” Ava said before marching off.

“Nothing seems to tie her down.”

“You think she's going to be alright?” Norton asked.

“You should know that the best, should you not?”

“I don't know if she's used to those kinds of wounds.” Norton could see Ava stop one of the workers and begin to speak with him.

“She's more than alright. Relax.”

“Well, OK. Then can I ask if you're alright?” Off in the distance, Ava pointed out the pair to the sailor.

“Why would you ask that?”

“We are going on a boat after all. Hopefully.” He looked behind at the road they trekked. No burly fish creatures or angry guards trailed after them. “You don't seem too enthused.”

Lydia turned away a little. “I am not afraid of water, but seasickness does plague me.” She showed a hint of a frown. Norton figured she was either embarrassed at the thought, or didn't want to acknowledge a weakness. He wasn't going to ask directly either way.

“I do have a herb for nausea, but I'm not too sure if it'll work on you.” He began to rummage about in his pockets. Lydia held up a hand, bringing him to a stop.

“It is something I will conquer myself.”

“I see. Do let me know if you change your mind.” He went right back to staring at Ava. The uneasy emotions of what transpired prodded at his mind every so often. It always went back to the question of 'Why?' and he still didn't have an answer.

“Recall my comment about your eyes falling out?” Norton immediately shifted his eyes to the floor and gave a small nod. “Pray that she makes the right choice.” Ava nodded and

gesticulated a bit. Knowing her she could have been saying any number of ridiculous things, but from her reactions it seemed everything turned out alright. She turned around and walked back to the two.

“Hurry up. Our boat leaves in ten minutes,” Ava said.

“That was fast,” Lydia replied with an air of relief.

“Apparently paid stowaways are standard around here. Real cheap. Thirty coins for the lot of us.”

This would mark the first time Norton had ever been on a boat or anywhere near the ocean. He wished it could have been under different circumstances, but hoped it would be a pleasing experience all the same. He followed after Ava and Lydia onto the docks. The gentle lapping of the waves could be heard swishing about underneath their feet, which was surprisingly soothing. Maybe being a sailor wasn't so bad.

The group stepped onto a medium sized cargo ship. On his first step, Norton could immediately feel the effects of the water on the boat as it rocked back and forth. An uneasy lurch pushed his stomach around. At this rate he might have to join Lydia in the seasick crew. As soon as they were onboard, they were quickly shuffled into the dark deck below by another one of the many sailors that worked on the ship. It wasn't long until the sailors let out a series of yells, signifying the start of the voyage.

“Everyone alright?” Ava asked.

“Yes,” Norton and Lydia said in unison. The human was essentially blind. He could only imagine that the light was only a minor inconvenience to his partners.

“Take a seat,” Ava said from somewhere in the black void.

“Give me a moment,” Norton replied. Eventually his eyes adjusted to the darkness somewhat and found the beast-women sitting down on some wooden crates nearby. More accurately he saw movement near some crates, which he hoped were them. He shakily walked over to the pair and tried his best to not stumble with the rock of the boat. Norton practically fell onto his seat and awkwardly sat upright. Lydia and Ava were more like vague figures in the darkness, and he tried his best to visualize them.

Lydia appeared to be staring at the ground quite furiously. No doubt staving off the effects of the seasickness. Ava, on the other hand, looked directly at Norton. The glint of her eyes was wild, much like a feral wolf hunting its prey in the dark of night. Yet, from what he could make out from her expressions, she looked quite somber. Even if he could barely see her, he knew she could see him well enough. Norton cautiously looked away in uncertainty. More doubts began to plague his mind. It was a wonder he hadn't been cast out by Ava already.

Ava let out a long humming sigh. “I think I'll have a walk abouts,” she said. Lydia gave an acknowledging grunt. Norton couldn't respond before the wolfess disappeared into the darkness, leaving her uneasy partners behind.

“Are you sure you're alright?” Norton asked.

“Yes. Quiet.” She paused. “Actually, it would be best if I tried to keep my mind occupied.”

“Then you don't mind me asking about the lamprey, do you?” Norton also needed to occupy his thoughts.

“I do not mind if you do not mind. I won't have to carry your limp body again, will I?”

“I think I'm past the shock.” He nodded reassuringly to himself. His stomach stirred.

“Probably.”

“Her name is Miriam.” The explanation had begun and already he was blindsided by the revelation that it was female. “She brought forward the deal first.”

“It couldn't have been good coming from her.” Norton settled back on the crate he sat on.

“We were desperate. We wanted out. She told us she had contacted royal officials to trade a dismissal of crimes for the head of our employer.”

“Oh.”

“By the time we had”—she let out a low growl—“finished the deed. She had already alerted the rest of his group and claimed her spot as their new leader.” Norton could barely see her cross her arms. “Now we are being hunted for sport. The final loose thread.”

“And that includes me now.” Norton shivered.

“Unfortunately. Had we known the kobold were tied to the port town, we would not have gone. Her sibling helped us preserve the head. Despite all of this, I doubt Ava is too troubled about Miriam's appearance.”

“What? Why?”

“Your sudden mouth to mouth. Of course,” she said. A twinge of smugness was present in her voice.

Norton cleared his throat. “You saw that, then?” He scooted farther back on the crate.

“I am not blind nor am I deaf.” The man realized he might have been more rigorous than he thought.

“I don't know what came over me.”

“You mean, what came over the both of you. She was just as much a participant as you were.” The ship lurched again, causing Lydia to stabilize herself. Norton ignored the sickening shift and stared at Lydia, somewhat hopeful he didn't ruin the odd relationship he had with Ava. “I suppose obliviousness extends to all males, regardless of species.”

“I guess so.” He rubbed at his neck.

“Do you think she makes her romantic jokes simply to get at me? That's not her standard banter.”

“Then she's not angry?” He leaned forward.

Lydia gave an annoyed sigh. “More than likely confused. Given her profession and... appearance. I will tell you now that you are the only other soul we have traveled with in several seasons.”

“That's a relief.”

“You should speak to her yourself. I suggest you be polite, but I'm certain you will with your excellent manners.”

“What should I say?”

“Must I do everything?”

“Sorry.”

“What did I say about that?”

—

The salty air consumed all of Norton's senses. The roar, the smell, the feel of it billowing past. He wasn't sure if he liked it yet. His gaze was cast out onto the sea, which was a bluish grey. It was hard to imagine anything living in the depths below. The storm still loomed over everything above and threatened to drop another torrent of rain. Despite being a depressing grey, the experience was an interesting one, though Norton had hoped the stereotypical bright blue of the sea would shine sooner rather than later.

Staring at the sea, however, wasn't a productive way to spend his time. Norton was ignoring the inevitable awkward talk with Ava. There wasn't much else to think about. Either he could contemplate how the force of an unknown amount of murderers were raring to kill him, or he could think about the strange kiss with a beast-woman a mere hour ago. While the former was obviously more dangerous than the latter, he couldn't decide between the two.

Lydia sat near the aft of the boat. She focused on the waves below with a grim expression on her face. Were Norton not aware of her motion sickness, he would have been severely afraid of approaching her. Ava, on the other hand, stood near the fore of the boat, near its bow. She gently rubbed at her wrappings while blankly staring into the sea foam that crashed into the side of the ship. The human stood near the middle, finding a comforting balance between Lydia and Ava. He would have ambled about the boat, but didn't want to bump into any of the gruff sailors that moved about the deck. They wholly ignored the trio, which was probably for the best.

Just as Norton considered creeping to Ava's side, the sound of footsteps came from his right. “Hey there, healer boy,” Ava said softly. He gave a nod but remained focused on the horizon. “I suppose this means you aren't interested in Lydia, huh?”

“I honestly don't know what I'm interested in anymore.” He folded his hands together. “I hope I didn't... I don't know, scare you or anger you, I suppose.”

“It certainly made me jump. I can't complain about the quality, though.” Her jokes lacked the usual pep in her voice. “I'm not angry, if that's what worried you.”

“It's not only that. I've never really done something like that. Feels like exploitation.”

“I'm a grown woman, dear.” She chuckled. “If it was exploitation I would have broken your arm.” Norton relaxed a little. “I probably gave the wrong idea when we were at the inn,” she said in a near whisper. “I don't think I'm really cut out for this life anymore.”

“What?” He turned to look at Ava.

“You go out on the road long enough and the shell begins to crack. The other adventurers don't care for what you've been through. It's all work.”

“Lydia certainly cares.”

“She does, but she's only one woman. Emphasis on woman. I can't turn to her for everything.”

“Well”—he looked back to the ocean—“I care too.” It was awkward, but comforting to say that.

“Such a way with words,” she said jokingly. Ava sidled closer to Norton. “Do you... Do you mind if I ask why you did that?”

“I'm not too sure myself.” Norton shrugged. “I just felt like I needed to prove you were worth something.” That's so stupid. “And some other things.” He had already cemented himself as an idiot, so he figured he might as well get it all out.

“I don't know where that leaves us.” She ran a finger across her stained bandages. “I don't want to dissuade you, but I wouldn't be the best wife.” She shook her head. “Sorry. Forget it. It was just a kiss. I don't know what I'm thinking.” She let out an awkward laugh. Her mouth then crooked into a frown.

“It's not as though it was just that. I mean— It wasn't so simple.” He rubbed his eyes. “I guess I'm saying there was something there. Maybe not a big one.” He grumbled. “Never mind. I don't know what I'm saying.”

“I think I get it.” Ava shuffled closer to gently graze Norton's side. “Thank you,” she mumbled. Norton could only manage a nod. He was happy to get it over with, but disappointed for being a bumbling mess.

“So what now?”

“Hush.” Ava nuzzled her head against his shoulder. Norton glanced over to Lydia. She stared back at Norton and gave him a small wave. He returned the greeting and looked back to the

murky depths below.

—

The satisfying crunch of fruit was a godsend. Norton's stomach was finally put to rest as he tore into a fresh apple. The lingering chill of magic still kept it in pristine condition, much to his delight. He sat next to Lydia near the aft the boat, atop some discarded crates. Ava was directly opposite to him, eating away at a chunk of meat. Lydia feebly nibbled at a fish, letting its scales scatter to the floor. "I still have that medicine," Norton said between bites. The cat woman shook her head.

"So then," Norton began, trying to break the silence, "about the lamprey."

"I'm sick of her," Ava said. She stuck out her tongue. "Talk about something else."

"Right." He took another bite out of his apple as his eyes wandered. Norton stopped on one of Ava's many knives. "How'd you get into this business?"

"I was good at it," Ava said with a shrug. She looked down at her meal. "You figure out at a young age if you're good with a blade." She glanced back up at Norton. "At least where I'm from." Ava perked up. "Lydia, on the other hand, has proud warrior blood running through her. Isn't that right, my dear?"

"Proud warrior blood tends to thin out after the sixth child," Lydia replied with a frown.

"You have five other siblings?" Norton asked, barely masking his surprise.

"Seven. If they are still alive." She spat out a bone overboard. "Perhaps more."

"Is... that normal?"

"No, but mating laws are less restrictive if you serve in the military."

"Do you have litters?" Norton paused for a moment and realized how poorly he worded that. Ava stifled a laugh while Lydia gave her regular stare. "I mean, as a species."

"Generally." Lydia nodded. "It depends on the female, however." He considered asking the same of Ava, but with their current dilemma that would be strange no matter how he worded it.

"Do you ever speak to your family?" Norton asked.

"No, and I doubt they care to." Lydia finished her fish and threw the rest of it off the ship.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"No need to feel sorry. It's probably for the best."

"So you actually are a warrior then? That's very impressive." Norton nodded and took another chunk of apple.

“Not exactly and certainly not by choice.” She shook her head. “Felids are put into a training school at a young age. I never officially passed, therefore I am not officially a warrior.”

“Surely you've earned that title by now, right?”

“Perhaps I have.”

“You certainly have,” Ava chimed in. “I've met actual warriors with less abilities than you, Lydia, dear.”

“I think that's more telling about the people you associate with more than my skill,” Lydia replied.

“I associate with you the most, Lydia.”

“Fair rebuttal.”

Following in Lydia's example, Norton finished off his apple and tossed the core right off the ship. Quickly he moved to retrieve another from his pack. “Don't want to eat everything we've got,” Ava joked. “I remember what that little lizard said.” Norton rolled his eyes and pulled a juicy fruit loose.

“I doubt I could eat everything before we got to Hull.” He tore into the apple.

“I don't know about that. We've got to walk there after we hit the next port.”

“Figures.” It dawned on him that there would probably have to be another night spent at an inn, or a camp. “And how many days from the port?”

“Just one, don't fret.”

“I kind of have to considering our situation,” Norton replied, somewhat annoyed.

“I doubt Miriam knows our location. Even if she did. There would be far too many boats to search,” Lydia calmly said.

“Wait. Isn't she a fish?”

“Some kind of strange fish,” Ava said with a shrug.

“Couldn't she...” he trailed off and motioned toward the side of the boat. “Follow us?”

Lydia tilted her head. “I doubt she thawed before we left. But logically, yes.”

“Don't worry, precious. If that Kunka is anywhere near as good as her sister, Miriam will be stuck for a good while.” Norton wished Ava didn't say that. An image of a bloodied head stuck encased in a chunk of ice flashed through his mind. He lowered his apple.

“Right. Hopefully dead, either way,” Norton replied. “What about the others? Her new clan?”

“Not worth mentioning.” Lydia shrugged. “There's a reason the group enlisted our outside help.”

“That's a relief. For the most part.”

“You shouldn't have anything to fear with us around in the first place,” Ava said, beaming.

“If you say so.”

Chapter 6

The port was essentially the same as the last one. The grandiosity of its large ships and wavering sea was slightly lost on the second time around, even still, it was a fantastic sight. The sun had set, leaving a sea of purple, gold, and blue in its wake. Norton was happy to be back on solid land, or at least solid dock. Lydia was the first off the boat, and had already begun taking deep breaths. “Good work,” Ava congratulated her. “We should celebrate with food!”

“Keep moving,” Lydia replied between breaths.

“Oh fine, c'mon then.” Ava beckoned Norton and Lydia.

“Where to?” Norton asked.

“We moved down the coast, south. So now we just head west toward Hull and everything will be dandy.”

“Can we get there before the dead of night?”

“I don't think so,” Ava said, shaking her head.

“We should find an inn, then,” Lydia said, stepping forward.

“Perhaps.” Ava's gaze slowly lowered down.

“Scared?” Lydia asked. The wolfess shot her a glare. “Regardless, we cannot travel by night.”

“So be it,” Ava said, somewhat solemnly.

“Why don't we look around then?” Norton asked, trying to ease the odd tension. “I'm sure we'll find one quickly.” Ava and Lydia nodded in agreement, and the trio moved off of the docks and onto dry land proper. The town that sprung up around the port wasn't nearly as prim and proper as the last one. It contained more wooden hovels and similar structures, but still maintained a proper layout. Most of its citizens appeared to be sailors, or at least Norton assumed they were based on musculature and clothing. It made sense in any case, being a port town.

The hustle and bustle of the town was out in full force, creating a mess of people crisscrossing past the group. To and fro, the citizens swarmed into and out of all the buildings that made up the area. Most of it seemed to be company buildings made to run business, although a few restaurants and other eateries dotted the place. Norton might have wanted to stop and try one, but with dwindling funds and a fresh supply of food, it was hard to justify it.

As expected, one of the larger buildings was an inn. The small sign out front was a paltry title for such a large building. Faded stone painted in blue made up most of the building, while stained white window frames broke it up. “They shouldn't be too expensive, right?” Norton

asked. His companions gave no answer and wordlessly walked to it. He quickly followed. Lydia opened one of the large wooden doors and the other two slipped inside.

The lobby was relatively small in comparison to its massive exterior. Norton's only guess was that it was packed to the gills in terms of rooms. He was surprised to find the floor covered in carpet. Most of its color had changed to a dead white, most likely from all the salt water brought in. Behind a desk sat a very prim and proper woman at full attention. Lydia approached her near instantly. "We would like a room for three, if possible." Ava stood by and watched. Not a peep of a joke or a snide remark left her lips.

The inn woman nodded and produced a small booklet and ink quill. "Fifty coins. Sign," she said robotically. She slid them forward to the armored feline. It was somewhat of an amusing sight to Norton. The bulky warrior beast-woman delicately writing away. Norton stepped forward to make certain the documentation was in order. His brow furrowed when he saw the felid's impeccable script. "Room 27, second floor." The woman pulled back the book and presented a set of stairs to the left along with a key. "Thank you for your patronage." Her face lacked any sort of smile. Lydia nodded and gestured to the other two, then took the key.

It was oddly quiet on the way up. The carpet dampened any sound making everything eerily silent and unnerving. It was the first time Norton had ever felt any distaste for flooring. The hallways were fairly barren aside from door frames. A curious set of candles lined the halls. They weren't regular wax candles, rather metal tubes that seemed to spout a fire. Their orange glow bathed the hallways and mixed in with the golden light from the windows to give the building a calm and angelic look. "Here," Lydia said, breaking Norton out of his bored observations.

The door opened to reveal a comforting sight. Three separate beds were lined up against a wall. Norton immediately took to one and started to glance around the room. Aside from the bare essentials of a simple dresser and some tables, there wasn't much in the room. A large window allowed Norton to peer down at the people below. The second floor towered far above the ground, moreso than regular buildings. The edge of the ocean peeked in from the side, adding a nice sense of serenity to the view. "Still quite a bit of food left if either of you are hungry," Norton said as he stared out of the window. He almost wished he could have a view like this back at home, without endless forest plaguing the landscape.

Norton turned his attention back to his partners. Ava lay on the bed next to his and stared up at the ceiling, her many pouches and scabbards splayed out on either side of her. Lydia sat at the far end, her tail gently tapping at the bed. It was clear that she was thinking pensively. "Not hungry?" Norton asked. Neither of them said anything. The silence was becoming heavy and oppressive. The man set down his pack as quietly as he could and removed his cloak. The room was comfortably cool — a nice change of pace from the last few nights.

"I am... going to check the perimeter," Lydia said suddenly. Ava glanced over at her languidly.

"Alright then, be safe." Norton gave her a wave. Lydia retreated from the room and closed the door behind her quietly, leaving him and Ava in silence. Norton slowly drifted back to the window and the world outside. Everything was so quaint from his perspective. The daily grind of life. It wasn't so long ago that he did very much of the same grind, and now it

appeared almost untouchable. Now he was stuck in this odd job, fearing for his life. Clutched by a wolf and cat.

Anger would have bubbled over in him, it should have, but it was pointless. The ordeal was tiring, even. There was no use in getting mad at his situation and certainly not at the only ones who could protect him from demise. Still, he felt miserable knowing that he would probably never truly know if normality would return. And for what? A measly bag of gold. That was the trade for his life and, if things were to continue, indentured servitude. Who was he to deny either Ava or Lydia for their assistance and protection?

Norton's eyes strained to peek at the wolfess on the bed over. Ava was stirring, he knew it. Her odd behavior at inns was becoming a trend. Not that he strictly disliked it. She was a comfortable creature to say the least, and her feminine features added to that. Being used as a living pillow and stress relief, however, wasn't something he could agree to without some distaste. Even if the more primal side of him was drawn toward her exoticness.

"So then, do you want to chat?" Norton asked. Ava scooted away from him slightly and nodded her head, then patted the bed gently. He stared at the spot, unsure whether or not he should take up her offer. Hesitantly he got up and sat next to her, leaning against the head board. "The window has a lovely view."

"I've seen enough lovely views for today." She unfastened her bags from her belts and shoved them off to the floor.

Norton looked down at Ava. She lay on the bed uneasily, slightly fidgeting on the spot. "The boat was a little sickening, but I'm glad to have gone on it."

"Maybe you should be a sailor after all," Ava replied. "It was as miserable as I expected."

"Sorry, I guess the first time is the best." He looked to the door. "I hope Lydia's OK. She didn't seem to take it too well."

"She's fine." Ava wormed out of her cloak, tossing it onto the mess. Her boots came clattering down next to them.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Ava said, annoyed. She looked away and patted the bed again.

"Do we have to go through this-"

"Did you mean it? About being worth something?" The man froze as she looked up at him. "I want an answer." She grabbed his arm. "You have to tell me, Norton." Her claws danced dangerously close to his skin. He opened his mouth to speak, but his mind refused. Any certainty had disappeared. Ava eased off of him, sliding her hand down his arm. "Sorry," she grumbled. Norton frowned and looked down at her. Carefully he moved down next to Ava, as if he were approaching a vicious animal. "You don't need to do that." To Norton it felt like an agonizing hour, but within seconds he was lying down next to the wolfess.

"I don't need to, no." He looked up at the ceiling and cleared his throat. His mind was abuzz with thoughts, wondering exactly what he was doing. This was for her, he figured. A vague apology. Yet, he knew the actual reason. A part of him also craved their close contact, despite how one-sided it might have been. Ava closed in on him quietly.

Ava looked at him and placed her hand on his shoulder and moved closer before pulling back. "No, not this side," she mumbled. "I can't really feel..." She delicately ran a finger over the gash in her face. Without another word she straddled him and lay down on his chest, nuzzling into him. Her form was soft, yet powerful. He could feel every breath she took. The expansion of her chest, feeling it run through her and blowing past his ear. Her heart settled down to a soft beat.

This was simply a symbiotic exploitation, wasn't it? It was a troubling thought. Ava had lured him into wanting more of her, and he had gladly accepted through a mask of some discomfort. That wasn't to say he was entirely enamored with the idea. Being treated as a comfortable meat pile by someone he could only consider little more than an acquaintance. A tug on his shirt broke him out of his worried musings.

"Just for a little bit," Ava said. She continued to tug. "For a little while." She had gotten straight to the point, no obfuscation. Norton hesitated and looked into her eyes. Her grip tightened and she gave a forceful yank. The man held his breath and pulled at the collar of his shirt, prompting Ava to sit up right and quickly remove her own dress. For a brief moment he saw her nude form before she fell back upon him and gripped him in a stiff embrace.

Norton knew it was pointless to protest. "I need this," Ava said, as if excusing herself. He stared down at her body, seeing her curves laid out before him. Her tail hung limply from her behind, barely hiding her surprisingly shapely rear. Norton's mind relented under the pressure and allowed his hand to wander, settling it uneasily on her back. Ava's fur was soft and had a slight amount of depth to it. It was interesting to picture her as a fluffy creature. Toned muscles sat below the welcoming fur, a sharp disconnect between the two.

Ava remained slack aside from the bear hug she had on Norton. Occasionally her head would dig into his shoulder, feeling like she were trying to hide herself away. Sleep, unlike last time, would not come so easy. Thus he was left to ponder his situation. His eyes drifted to the door where he hoped in vain Lydia would return. Certainly their situation was embarrassing and somewhat confusing, but having Lydia close by gave him some comfort. A small fear in the back of his mind said Ava might try something worse without the cat to keep her in line. Worse for his emotional state, but not so bad for his physical.

After some uncomfortable seconds, it was clear that Lydia would not return. Furthermore, it became apparent to Norton that she had left for this very reason. She was right, men are oblivious and he had proven her correct yet again. "Thank you," Ava said suddenly.

"I don't-"

"Quiet," she growled. He unwittingly flinched. A hand forced its way up to his neck and pushed him ever so slightly closer to her. Her other hand ran down his arm, stopping just at his wrist. Furred digits teased into his palm, gently massaging it. Slowly her fingers slithered into place, locking hands with him. Ava let out another relaxed sigh directly into Norton's

neck, causing a subtle wave of goosebumps across his skin. They remained frozen in that position for another few minutes. Naturally, the more primal side of Norton eased into his body with the combination of sensation and pressure. Blood flowed to his groin, causing an erection to stir.

Despite Norton's obliviousness, he began to feel the arousal due to Ava's unwanted affections. It was more than likely Ava didn't care, or didn't notice, yet still it made the situation all the worse for him. More and more, Norton's groin pressed against Ava's hips. It must've been apparent to her by now, but she made no movements and made no remarks. With any luck she would have her fill and leave him alone soon enough. It quickly occurred to him that he didn't know exactly how much time that would require.

Ava squirmed a little and let go of the human's stiff hand. For a brief moment she was still. Norton hoped it meant she had enough of her consuming and would be free. He wasn't so lucky, however. One of her fingers edged at the band of his pants, hooking into it. Immediately his chest became light and butterflies stewed in his stomach. His mind battled with itself before grabbing the offending hand. "We shouldn't," he said quietly. Norton couldn't see Ava's reaction, but she had frozen in place as if planning her next move.

Without warning, Ava pushed forward, running her finger along the inside of his trousers. Her claw menaced his skin as it brushed past. The fear of her sharp nails added another layer of excitement to the twinge of electricity that ran up his spine. Norton sharply inhaled and barely managed a response. "Ava, please." Her soft finger graced the tip of his erection, forcing his hips to slightly grind against her in desperation.

"You're eager. You want this too," Ava said flatly. "Don't complain." Norton grit his teeth but gave no rebuttal. The wolf was very aware of his situation. "We both need this, don't we?" She was pushing him further along the track into acceptance. The part of him that rejected this open sexuality had practically been all but smothered. Carefully, Ava pulled at Norton's pants, edging them ever so slightly down until his erection met her coat. He let out a relaxed sigh as his cock met cool air and warm fur backed up by soft flesh.

Without warning, Ava gripped at Norton's penis firmly. She gently pushed it about in her hand, running her delicate fingers over all its features. Up and down his shaft, smoothing over its head, and back down to tease at his balls. The tension had begun to melt away within seconds. Norton eased into the comfort of the bed and the softness of the woman that lay on top of him. He could only barely make out the motions she made from her position, but he could see her shift her head from his neck to look down at his manhood.

Before long, Norton had broken his chaste silence and fell into various soft moans and grunts. Ava remained silent as she worked his erection. All he could hear was the increasing speed of her beating heart. She continued to work away at his groin, seemingly more interested than aroused with the way her hand curiously moved around his cock. It was pleasure all the same to Norton, and he had to stop himself from trying to move in tune with her movements.

The pleasure he had craved stopped, bringing both relief and disappointment. Ava pulled her leg up and over his cock, sliding her thigh against the tip of his erection. She settled it in-between her thighs and relaxed. Norton took a moment to appreciate her muscular legs,

coupled with the plumpness of her rear. Her tail lay atop the tip of his erection, which brushed against it gently with every little twitch of his manhood. Ava took a moment to wiggle into place and then she dug her head back into his neck. Slowly, Ava pumped her hips against him.

The pair let out their own array of pent up noises and gasps. The tight grip of her thighs provided perfect pressure for his enjoyment. Norton shuddered with every thrust. Before long he gave up and pushed against with every smack down. Soon the familiar sound of flesh on flesh resounded through the air, although muffled with the padding of fur. A slick wetness began to coat his erection, an encouraging sign that pushed him to go a little faster.

Muffled bestial whimpers escaped from Ava's mouth, devolving from the humanly groans she once emitted. She retreated back into a bear hug and hugged Norton tightly. He barely noticed that he had taken the lead, as Ava now stiffly clung to him. Her powerful form shivered with every new thrust, adding to the sparks of pleasure that washed over his body. Whatever reservations he held were long gone. He was simply enjoying the moment.

A particularly violent shudder and an exasperated moan from Ava stirred Norton from the haze of pleasure. Hints of worry picked at his mind, which were swiftly put to rest as a new coat of slickness dribbled over his erection. In seconds he was back under the influence of ecstasy, spurred on by his partner's orgasm. A few more forceful thrusts and tensing of the muscles marked the beginning of Norton's orgasm. His mind went blank as he returned Ava's tight hug, grabbing on in orgasmic intensity. Ava let out a few more prolonged whimpers. Suddenly, multiple streams of semen hotly shot out of Norton as he frantically thrust against any part of Ava that he could.

—

An uncertain amount of time passed until Norton gathered his senses. He was still in the damned bed he sat on some time ago, though now made messy through copious amounts of sweat and other fluids. Ava was stuck to him, unmoving aside from her relaxed and gentle breaths. Guilt prodded at his thoughts, which he quickly pushed aside for now. The sky outside appeared to be unchanged, so it must have not been long. Norton shifted underneath Ava, trying to pull himself loose. He hadn't realized how heavy she was. His escape was in vain, though he couldn't exactly say he was trying his hardest.

Norton craned his neck to look around the room. No trace of Lydia could be found, not that he'd want her to be around considering his current situation. She must have still been out “patrolling”, which made him wonder what she was actually doing. He looked back down at Ava. Whatever it was Lydia was doing, he somewhat wished he was there with her instead. Disappointment soured his mood as the full weight of this illicit contact came down upon him.

The man plopped his head back on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling. It was more his fault this time than ever. Maybe adventuring was getting to him, but to be fair to himself, he thought, he was essentially on the run. He had never been under such duress. Not in all his pathetic time wasting his life away in his village. Though at least he would probably live a full life there.

Norton looked back down at Ava and tried to pull himself free once more. With actual effort this time, he was able to pry himself loose and sit on the side of the bed. Unfortunately he left behind a sticky trail of their bewildering contact, furthering his embarrassment about the situation. In this scenario he didn't exactly know what to do. Usually one would wake up their partner to get dressed or wash, but he didn't exactly want to deal with Ava. Especially not after that. She would probably share his shame, or at least his annoyance. What would he even say to her after she awoke? No, it was better to have her sleep than awkwardly share the silence. Quietly dressing up as they fretted over too many stains was the worst experience he could imagine.

Try as he might, Norton couldn't bring himself to leave the bed. The situation grew more conflicting by the second. He sighed and pulled his pants back into position, covering his shame. The shirt he wore was covering the bundle of discarded objects Ava tossed to the ground. He left it where it lay. Norton braved to take another look at his partner. Ava still hadn't moved from her spot. It was odd to see her so subdued and relaxed. Her animal features were made all the more adorable as she slept. From the twitching of her nose to the flutter of her ears. All of it was cute. For a moment he felt as though he were the one at fault for this scenario. He shook his head.

With as much delicacy as he could muster, Norton covered Ava up with the crumpled sheets. For a moment he worried if that would be too hot in combination her fur. He shook his head at the thought and returned back to his designated spot on the edge of the bed. Without much else to do, he returned to staring out the window. The little port had lost some of its luster as a grey cloud began to edge in on the last remnants of light.

Hours passed as Norton blankly looked out through the window into the real world. The sun was almost all but gone. What little remained of the light had slipped beyond the horizon, being replaced with a luminous blue that settled comfortably on the planet. A small click turned his attention back to the door. Lydia cracked the door open a peek and slipped through the gap, loudly scraping her armor against the wood. Norton gave her a nod.

"Perimeter's clear, then?" Norton asked, somewhat jokingly.

"Yes. It is." Lydia closed the door behind her and moved to her bed. She looked at the pair silently before peeling off her armor.

"Was it nice out there?" Norton asked as he stared out at the increasingly blackening sea.

"No problems that I could see." Not exactly what he had asked, but it would do. A dull clunk came soon after, which probably signified Lydia's shell coming off.

"Do you happen to know if the inn has baths?" He peeked at Ava out of the corner of his eye.

"There is a bathing area below the lobby. Would you like me to show you?"

"I think I can find the way." He got up from the bed. All of his joints creaked and his muscles ached. It wasn't until that moment that he realized how long he had sat there like a statue.

“I believe you are forgetting something,” Lydia said flatly. Norton turned to see her looking down at the wolfess. The cat woman knew what happened. Instead of expected embarrassment, Norton didn't feel much of anything other than indifference. Maybe he was drained, he considered. He nodded and leaned down and gently nudged Ava. Her eye opened slowly. She quickly zeroed in on the man's face before glancing away. Her body twitched with the relaxation of a subdued stretch.

Chapter 7

It had been quite a few days since Norton had bathed. The griminess of adventuring made him miss the cleansing feeling of water washing over his skin. He squirmed in the small wooden tub, and continued to miss the comfort of larger outdoor baths. Though, he was surprised to see an inn have such a bathing room. It was akin to a large basement with a bumpy stone floor, but it also had more of those odd metal candle sticks and spouts that gave fresh, clear water.

Norton splashed more of the cool water on his skin and sank further into the bath. It would be wonderful to have a traveling bath, he thought to himself. It would also be wonderful not to have to flee a murderous gang. He peered at a nearby tub. Ava's head and legs poked out of it. She was practically lounging in the water. The wolfess quickly returned his gaze. "Want me to wash your back, dear?" she asked with a smile. It was almost baffling to see her act so casually.

"I'm good, thank you."

"Oh, come now." Ava emerged from her tub. Her fur had become a wet mess that dripped water all over the ground as she walked. More of her intimate portions were visible now that her fur had clung to her body closely. Norton was so preoccupied with staring that he didn't notice Ava dragging her tub over to his, and then stepping back inside. More water splashed onto the floor as she sunk back down into her bath. "See, now we can wash one another. Easy." She crossed her arms and settled on the rim of the wooden tub.

Norton eyed her injured arm. "Are you feeling better?" he asked simply. A dull red was visible on the wrapping. "Your arm isn't hurting?" He worried it would unwind itself in the water.

"Care for a feel?" She stretched it out over to him.

"No, I'm good." He held up a hand to stop her.

"Yes, it's feeling better." Ava crossed her arms again. "I didn't think she could pack that much of a bite." A brief, worrying image of the battle flashed through Norton's mind. He slightly winced upon re-imagining Ava collide with the ground. "You think I can take this off now? It's getting a little itchy."

"Wait a day or two more. It needs to fully heal."

"Couldn't you have given me some of that moss?" She pushed his shoulder playfully. "Saving the good stuff for yourself, huh?"

"I didn't have nearly enough for that."

"If you say so," she replied with a roll of her eyes. "Maybe you do prefer Lydia after all." That sentence hung awkwardly in the air. It was absurd that she continued the charade.

“Are you sure about that?” Norton unwittingly said out of annoyance. He sank further down into the tub, vainly trying to escape the conversation. It was apparent that Ava quickly picked up on what he was referring to, as her face grew more solemn. Her ears uneasily shifted between being at attention and sulking down. She eased back into her tub, slipping from the side of it.

“It was good, wasn't it? Just for that moment?” Ava asked quietly. Her voice echoed around the room. Norton gave no response — he couldn't. She was right, it was. Just for that moment it was perfect. “It's been a long time since...” she trailed off. “That's no excuse, I know,” she said solemnly.

They lapsed into silence. The only sound echoing through the room was the gentle drip of water from the faucets. Norton secretly loathed that her soft voice and tone was enough to guilt him. It probably wasn't her intent, but it worked all the same on him. He sighed and sat back up in the tub, sending water sloshing all about. “We can't keep doing this,” he said. He wanted to continue, 'not without knowing one another', but he held his tongue. “I'm sorry.” Now he was the one apologizing. He stopped himself from shaking his head.

Norton cautiously looked towards Ava. Her gaze was focused down into her tub, unmoving. “You don't hate me, do you?” she asked.

“No,” Norton quickly replied. He didn't want her to think otherwise. Norton couldn't formulate a proper answer. Not at the moment. That's all he could think in regards to disliking her. While yes, she had gotten him into a fair bit of trouble, he couldn't exactly blame her for it. Lydia would also have to share the blame if that were the case. He supposed the real question was if he could blame her for her unwanted advances. That could be standard affair for her and other beast-men, but even still, she should have been aware of his own culture.

“I don't think I could hate you,” Norton said with a frown. He looked to the stone wall in front of him. “I'm not comfortable giving myself up so easily. That's not how relationships work.” He was well aware how ridiculous that sentence was on its own. The man was in no state to lecture Ava on relationships considering his past experiences.

“I thought maybe if you liked it too, then... that would make it better. That was stupid. I just get so caught up in the moment.” Ava let out a low, animalistic whine. “It feels like if I don't grasp it, I'll never have another chance.”

Norton looked down into his tub and relished the water for a few more seconds before frowning and standing up. “I understand.” That was all he could give her - his understanding. Trickle of emotion wanted more, but it just wasn't there. He looked to Ava, who was blankly staring at the wall. Droplets of water ran down her hide. Norton stood up and stepped out of the tub. “Come on. Let's go back.” He offered his hand. She looked up at him with a moment of hesitation before grabbing hold and pulling herself up.

The two stared at each other. For the first time it felt like Norton was truly looking into her eyes, unmasked. Her blue eye glinted in the orange glow of the room, a mixture of emotions exuded from a single glance. Ava stepped out of her own tub and stood next to Norton. She practically fell into a limp hug, barely hanging onto the man's frame. Norton returned it with

a firm squeeze. Her toned form was laid bare but he didn't pay it much mind. All he wanted was to ease her nerves.

It took Norton some effort to get himself to pull away from the wolfess. Ava made no attempt to hold onto him, her hands slipped away, dragging them across his body and returning to her sides. They gave each other one last look.

—

The cool sea air was made all the better by the bath. The lingering dew of water cooled Norton's skin, making him feel as clean as he had ever been. He sat on his bed and watched the twinkling stars sparkle over the horizon. It had been the first time he could see them clearly dance on the edge of the horizon, unobscured by a forest or a building.

Ava and Lydia sat on the nearby bed in their raggedy dresses, illuminated by a set of candles on a nearby nightstand. "Quit fidgeting," Lydia said. She ran an aged brush across Ava's fur, which had become slightly fluffier after drying off. Her silvery mane had been brushed into precise straightness that looked quite cute on her. Norton might have admitted that with some prodding, but certainly wouldn't say it outright.

"Now, Lydia is good, but don't get any funny ideas, I'm still better at it," Ava said with a nod.

"I said stop moving." Lydia sighed. "It's no wonder your fur is always a mess."

"You're the one who does my hair, Lydia."

"I'm the one who fixes it." Lydia pulled the brush through a knot of hair. Ava visibly grimaced as it pulled loose.

While Norton had been attempting to act as casually as possible, he still found himself glancing away as Ava looked at him. She did much of the same. He was happy, at least, to have Lydia back in the room. She was a hard comfort that seemed to dispel or at least discourage Ava's more 'direct' behavior.

"How did you get good at brushing hair?" Norton asked. Ava opened her mouth to reply. "I understand Lydia, since she has sisters, but what about you, Ava?" The wolfess rolled her eyes.

"You don't need a sister to teach you everything. Did you ever consider I'm good at it just because I am?"

"No," Norton replied instantly. Ava huffed.

"Regardless, I did not know any of my sisters," Lydia said as she continued to go over Ava's hair. "My mother taught me about proper grooming. Ava should be very happy she isn't here, otherwise she would have a fresh welt across her wolfish face."

"How rude," Ava said jokingly. "I didn't have the siblings for it anyways." She winced again as another bundle of hair broke loose. "Do you mind, Lydia?"

"I do mind."

“As I was saying before being so rudely interrupted, I learned when I was younger. I had lovely friends to teach me.” She beamed proudly. Norton considered asking how long ago that was, but figured that was rude for several reasons. For one, he realized he didn't actually know how old Ava was. Nothing about her suggested advanced age, nothing that he could pick up on, anyways. Lydia was similarly an enigma, perhaps even moreso with how little she emoted.

Even if Norton were to know their exact age, he didn't exactly know what their lifespans were like. For all he knew, they could live far longer than he could even imagine, or shorter than he expected. Both were terrifying thoughts. “His eyes could bore through the hardest of armor. Would you not agree?” Lydia said, pushing Norton out of his thoughts and causing him to focus his attention elsewhere.

“Something wrong?” Ava asked.

“It's nothing.”

“It is always nothing,” Lydia replied. “I am beginning to think you sleep with your eyes open.”

“Can humans do that?” Ava asked with a tilt of her head. Lydia quickly pushed her back into place and returned to brushing. “I've seen rabbit beast-men do that, very unnerving!”

“I don't think humans can do that, no,” Norton said. “I certainly can't.”

“Good. So what is it then?” Norton began to respond before being cut off by Ava. “And don't say nothing because I'll bother you all night about it.” She smiled. “Just a warning.”

“For both of our sakes I suggest you simply come out with it,” Lydia replied. She had finished her brushing and defaulted to running her hands through Ava's hair.

“Well. I was thinking about uhm, how long a beast-man lives?” He shook his head at awkward question. “It's just a random thought that struck me.”

“Again he thinks of us like simple animals. Tch, tch, tch,” Ava chided lightheartedly. “I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to wait for us to fall dead. Can't get rid of us that easy. No, we take after the generics in more ways than one. Oh, pardon my language.” She giggled.

“I believe it is poor manners to ask a woman her age,” Lydia added, as if she were seeing right through to Norton's actual thoughts.

“Very,” Ava said in agreement.

“Right,” Norton replied. He nodded and pursed his lips. The man fell back onto his bed. “A shame it's not the same for men.”

“Oh don't worry, dear, we already know how old you are. We can smell it,” Ava said. Norton perked up worriedly. “I tease, I tease.” Ava batted her hand at the air. “But you seem very spry!”

“If only we could,” Lydia said as she retreated to her own bed. “That is not to say we cannot smell some certain... things.” Norton rested his head back on his pillow, more intruding thoughts worming their way into his mind. His original fear was being replaced by others. It was impossible to tell if Lydia was making a jest to test his nerves or not.

“Time for bed, then?” Ava asked quietly.

“I suppose so,” Lydia said from somewhere on the other side of the room.

Norton merely nodded, unwilling to verbally agree. After a few silent and uncomfortable seconds, the candles went out in a single breath. Trickle of starlight and the last sparks of a sleepy port shone through the window.

There was a certain uneasiness that plagued Norton, and it took him some time to figure it out. As he buried himself under the sheets, a revelation crept upon him. He actually missed having a warm, soft body by his side. Only one night was enough to have him addicted to the experience. He clutched his eyes shut and tried not to dwell on the pathetic neediness.

An empty aching gently pushed at Norton's skin, much to his disappointment and disgust. Not an hour ago he was explaining to a woman the impropriety of their contact and here he was, desiring her presence. His eyes snapped open and he stared at the familiar ceiling once more.

Norton considered peeking over at Ava. Maybe simply confirming her presence in the room would ease his nerves. Regardless of what he thought, he didn't want to risk goading on Ava. Even a casual look would confirm his inner-desire to her, he worried. He was very aware this level of light was more than enough for the wolfess to see — to stare.

Out of the corner of his eye, Norton could only just barely make out the shape of the woman in the bed next to him. The white sheets traced out her body, vaguely illuminated by starlight. He dared not venture further. A sense of fear and contempt for himself reined in his gaze. The thought itched at his mind, even as he tossed about in his bed.

Eventually Norton relaxed and reprimanded himself silently. A ridiculous display for a grown man, he thought. Wrapped up in the desire for even the slightest bit of physical contact. It was made all the worse by the thought that Ava would gladly indulge his pathetic desires. The only string pulling him back was his own will, which he had to give himself some credit for.

The man gave Ava a wayward glance, confirming she wasn't far away. Fortunately she had faced the other way, showing only the back of her head and pointed ears. Norton followed her example and turned around to face a blank wall. He closed his eyes once more and tried to will himself to sleep with little success. The uneasiness of not having something to hold still lingered, but Norton smothered it with shame.

Norton clenched his eyes. And prayed for the best.

Chapter 8

“Norton. Wake up,” a calm voice ordered.

The apothecary stretched and opened his eyes. Lydia towered over him menacingly, causing him to snap awake. She was still in her simple gown, which was a blinding white with the morning sun on it. “Is... Is everything OK Ms. Lydia?” he asked cautiously with a squint.

“Yes. There are no issues, but I had worried you would never awaken within a reasonable time.” Lydia nodded and walked back to her bed. Norton sat up and looked about the room. As he rubbed his eyes he realized that Ava was nowhere to be found. The pile of her belongings was similarly gone. He stared silently at her bed, wondering what happened. “She went outside to patrol the perimeter,” the cat woman said. That was a familiar excuse.

“Guess we should wait for her to come back,” Norton replied with another stretch. “Off to Hull today then?”

“If everything goes according to plan, yes.” Lydia sat on her bed, idly looking about the room.

“May I ask you something?”

“You may.”

“What did you actually do when you went out to patrol?” Norton replaced his shirt. He wished he had packed more than two.

“While it was a convenient excuse, that is indeed what I did.” Lydia nodded. “Though I must admit, I took the time to indulge in a bath.” She left an awkward pause. “I do hope this will not become a frequent occurrence between you two.”

Norton slowly looked down to the floor. There was a sense of uneasiness, but not embarrassment. He somewhat missed that feeling, since its absence only told his mind he was acclimating to their patchwork relationship. “Well, it won't be. We part ways at Hull.” He crossed his arms. “Should be about midday.” By saying it, he wanted to make it true. As if that would help.

“Can you afford to leave?” Lydia asked directly. Her eyes locked on to his, though they were soft and open. “I am afraid some of our exploits have affixed you to our side.” Norton was beginning to tire from the feline's propensity to be correct. He knew he couldn't leave them, not with a band of murderers nipping at his heels. A funny thought that his choice was between being murdered by savage killers or traveling with a simple pair of killers. Such a wealth of decisions.

“Probably not, no.” He grit his teeth. “I guess I'll think about it after we return to the guild.” Lydia stood up and quietly walked to Norton's bed. They glared at one another until the cat woman suddenly sat down and wrapped her arms firmly around the man, much to his

confusion. It was a familiar feeling, almost like a hug, but being performed by a vise. A fluffy vise. The man merely looked about in unsureness. “Pardon?” he wheezed.

“I noticed you were uncomfortable. Thus, I am soothing your emotions.” She relaxed her grip. “Aren't I? Perhaps if you return the expression, it will work.” Norton contorted his body to return the favor, while keeping his head focused straight forward. While Lydia was barely larger than him, she felt quite massive, as if she were a purely muscle powerhouse. It made sense considering her occupation, but being covered in an obscuring snow white fur made it hard to see any of that. His imagination had originally painted her in a more soft and curvaceous form. “Did it work?” Lydia asked earnestly.

“I suppose.” Norton certainly felt something. Perhaps more awe and slight fear that Lydia could snap every bone in his body. A change in thought and emotion nonetheless. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Lydia freed Norton and returned to staring at him. Not at his eyes, no, it felt more like she were looking at him as a whole. “Do you require anything else, then?”

“No.” Lydia instantly stood up before he could even finish the single syllable. “Thank”—he watched the feline speedily march back to her bed—“you?”

“You are welcome,” Lydia said with a bow of the head — all the way on the other side of the room. “I suggest you be prepared when Ava returns. I am certain she will want to move as quickly as possible.” She had already begun removing her gown.

“Right.” Norton nodded and turned away.

“I must say, you are not very good at returning hugs.”

“S-” Norton started and then stopped to purse his lips. “I'll work on that.”

—

“Everyone's ready, then?” Ava asked cheerily. “Didn't forget anything, did we?”

“Not that I can see,” Norton replied. He glanced back at the room. Slight disappointment hit him at the thought of having to leave such a nice place.

“Let's give it a once over.” She turned to the feline by the door. “Lydia? Care to return the key for us?” Ava held up the tiny bronze trinket. The cat woman snatched the key, nodded, and disappeared through the doorway without a word. Norton quickly turned around to explore the room. “Norton, please. We don't need to do that.” He froze and turned back around. Stupid.

“Then what are we doing?” he asked.

“I wanted to apologize. Properly.” Ava took a step toward Norton. “About the past couple of nights.” Her ears wiggled ever so slightly as she looked down at the ground.

“You already apologized.” He waved his hands dismissively. “There's no need.”

“Look, I'd rather apologize while I'm dry and clothed. It's less demeaning.” She let out a small, awkward laugh. “So.” The wolf's eyes met Norton's own. “I'm sorry. I know what I did was wrong but- but I can't say I didn't like it. Even if it caused you some distress. I have to be honest. I just-” She grabbed Norton's hand. “I just wanted this.” Her hand squeezed his. “That's all.”

“I understand. I forgive you.” It was hard to maintain his gaze on her. It was even harder to restrain himself from saying anything more.

“So then... I wanted to try one more thing.” Ava looked back at the open door. Before Norton could ask Ava what she meant, she snapped back to him and plunged into a kiss. Her long animal-like snout met his lips. Gentle licks brushed against his mouth, as if beckoning him to her and then in an instant, it was gone. Norton had no time to return with his own kiss. It was brief, but it was enough to set his mind alight with emotions and sensations. “Let's leave it at that. For now.” Then she was gone. Bolted straight out the door.

Norton had little time to gather his thoughts. His brain had wholly focused on trying to recreate that sensation of contact. The way it made every little nerve in his body light up. It felt like forever, but it was perhaps only a few seconds. Consciousness returned to him soon after, bubbling up as he pried his mind away from the contact.

The man was left there, still dizzy with sparks of confusion. Even in her apologies, Ava had him wrapped around her finger. He shook his head and followed after her, nearly tumbling down the stairs in his rush to catch up. The magnificence of the architecture was all a blur now as he rushed down into the lobby.

Lydia and Ava stood near the entrance of the lobby. The concierge paid them little mind, tending to her desk and papers. The cat woman waved Norton over while the wolfess pushed the door open, letting in the blinding light of the outdoors. The smell of the ocean washed in along with it. Ava motioned towards the door with her head.

Norton took one last look at the hotel and then walked through the wooden gates.

The port was far more lively than it was last afternoon. The bright sun brought out the full extent of the settlement. Hundreds of bodies bobbing and weaving in the sea of people, pushing and pulling all sorts of different things about. Some curious beast-men dotted the crowd, but it was mainly a human affair. Norton was stunned for a moment, trying to figure out how best to penetrate or even approach the living mass. His compatriots merely watched for a few moments before pushing forward. Ava grasped his hand and dragged him into the mess. He dwelled on the sensation for a moment before hitting the wall of people at full force.

It was a living jungle of flesh. Not one Norton would ever want to return to. It may have been an interesting experience to observe from on the outside, but the interior was a hellish battle to move forward. From what glimpses he could see between the battle of bodies, the beast-women effortlessly navigated through the crowd. Ava opted to weave and squirm around, while Lydia muscled through, pushing aside the weaker bodies like a boat cutting through water. Norton merely winced and went along with Ava, barreling through everything.

Just like that, they were on the other side of the crowd. A horrible ordeal to say the least. Norton hung his head and gave a sigh of relief. "Here," Ava said suddenly. He perked back up. A familiar pouch came into view. "I don't know what this is, but I believe it belongs to you. Mind yourself in a crowd next time. Dear." The apothecary nodded and took the bag. Where would he be without his bag of fairy wings? He placed it back in its spot and quickly felt up his body for any other missing items. Norton ambled along after his partners mindlessly, checking up on every object he could.

Before long, Norton realized they were back on the road. The gentle cool breeze of the ocean slowly faded away, taking away the scent with it. The familiar green of nature coated the landscape. Norton missed the blue of the sea already, or grey, rather. He rubbed his eyes and continued to trudge forward after his partners. Norton tried to focus on the road, but he found himself lingering on Ava every so often while her words echoed in his mind. His nerves soothed at the thought. He briefly looked at Lydia. Only bone crushing terror was there.

—

The road to Hull was a long one. Norton had already tired of walking everywhere, or running everywhere, or being dragged along everywhere. He looked to his partners walking alongside him. Maybe he could buy a horse with the payment. His thoughts tumbled into one another, suddenly imagining himself atop a equine beast-woman, proudly trotting through town on the muscular female form.

"What will you spend your share on?" Lydia asked suddenly, pulling Norton out of his mess of thoughts.

"Pardon?" Norton asked, surprised.

"I asked, what will you spend your share on?"

"I know what you said, it's just..." He shook his head. "This is living money. I don't know what else I'd spend it on."

"I understand it is not a hefty amount, but I had figured you would purchase something with it."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You have all those small bags with Lord knows what. Surely you wanted something?" Norton looked down at himself. "Something more bizarre than toad vomit, I wager?"

"It's just a job I was good at, not much of a hobby." Norton shrugged. He realized a little too late how careless that made him sound.

"A fortunate soul to choose your occupation like that," Lydia said with a nod.

"Well what are you going to buy, then?"

Ava steered closer to Lydia and said, "A gift for me, of course. What else?" She gave a toothy smile. Lydia gently pushed Ava away, sending her careening off path before correcting

herself.

“As you said, living money.” The corners of her mouth bent downward ever so slightly, or at least it seemed that way to Norton.

“Is nobody going to ask me what I'm going to spend my share on?” Ava placed a hand on her chest.

“I am already very aware of what you spend your money on. Indeed, I know what you do not spend it on as well.” Lydia squinted.

“It gets a little hard to count out the coin sometimes.” Ava gave an over-exaggerated shrug. “Not like they'll miss a bottle or two. Maybe three.” While they chattered, Norton looked back at the ground they had covered. No murderous pursuers. “You know, if you look back like that, it'll only speed up their hunt.”

“What?” Norton asked, somewhat frightened.

“I tease. For the most part.” She gently patted his shoulder, causing his muscles to relax. “Ease up.” Her smile lessened to a soft calmness.

“Right.” He nodded, returning her smile. A nice warmth massaged at his chest.

“I believe we are almost at Hull,” Lydia said. “Any following parties would be foolish to follow us this far in. Though that's exactly what Miriam would do, I imagine.” She hummed. “I suppose that reflects poorly on us for following through with her plan, hm?” Lydia looked directly at him.

“Desperation can make people do the strangest things,” Norton replied.

“Indeed.” Lydia nodded. “Indeed.”

Bricks started to dot the road. Norton had never been so happy to see masonry. While he had already acclimated to uneven dirt and mud, he relished the feeling of proper ground for every little brick he stood upon. Each one meant he was a little closer to civilization. Just a little bit longer until rest.

“What were you before you were a professional vomit slatherer?” Ava asked with a small giggle.

“What were you before you were- whatever it is your occupation is?” Norton replied.

“Ah, ah, ah, I asked you first. Oh, and my job is expert problem solver. Lydia's is expert knight problem solver.” She nodded in agreement with herself. Norton briefly considered lying, but something told him Ava would probably see straight through a lie. Plus, she had seen him in the nude, any embarrassments were already out.

“I was a cook.” Norton shrugged. “Mixing things works well for both jobs.”

“Really?” Ava exaggerated surprise. “Hey, how about you whip up something with what we got?” She slapped his knapsack, somehow managing to knock the wind out of him.

“I didn't say I was a good cook.” He stifled a cough.

“Well, you didn't need to be so down on yourself.”

“What about you, Lydia? What were you before?” Norton looked over at the quiet knight.

“I simply am,” she said plainly.

“Fair enough.”

The group lapsed into silence. Norton was quick to notice Ava didn't expand on herself. He couldn't bring himself to pry any further. She had reason enough to keep her secrets, especially considering their current position. Though, Norton did wish he had something to pass the time. Watching the trees flow by was beginning to lose its luster, and they slowly blended into a greenish-brown blur. Norton yawned.

Chapter 9

A loud ring yanked the weary man's eyes from the road. Off in the distance, a proud spire rose above all the greenery. Near its top shone a bright gold bell that swayed rhythmically from side to side. It was almost like it was signaling the opening of the heavens, and to some, it might as well be. Its radiant sound meant new jobs were posted for several adventurers to take on. They had arrived at the outskirts Hull.

“Think I could break that thing?” Ava groaned, barely audible over the gong.

The group marched forward. Norton pressed on a little faster, eager to turn in his job and seek a properly cooked meal. A familiar grey wall and imposing gate came into view. Now they were welcoming sights that meant the end of a long trek. The man paid little attention to all the curious characters that now populated the road. Blindly he moved forward until he passed right through the gates and into the city proper.

“Hey! We're part of the job too!” Ava called out. The sentence barely glanced Norton's mind, but he slowed down all the same as he saw booming adventuring center. A large building dedicated to sending all sorts of people, big and small, to menial tasks and suicidal missions. It was large and rectangular. Long windows marked its front, adorned with columns on either side of them. Four knightly statues stood proudly on each corner of the building, though only two could be seen from Norton's perspective way down below. The colossal architecture seemed all the more imposing now that he had finished a job and found out how rigorous the ordeal was. It was like returning to a place of death.

A heavy hand gripped the apothecary's shoulder. “Relax,” Lydia said. He sighed and nodded. “We would like to finish as much as you would.” They walked into the building, dodging around the crowd of adventurers eager to receive another job. Heavy armor, light armor, no armor. Bows, staffs, sword, clubs. Muscular, wizened, nimble. It seemed like just about everyone within a mile was bungling into the building. Up until that point, it hadn't occurred to Norton that he didn't see a single beast-man anywhere in the crowd, although no one appeared to even mind the presence of his partners. Perhaps they were too focused on the prospect of another bag of gold.

The interior was massive and cavernous, as if stepping into a whole different world. The main floor was the general occupation area. On either side of the first floor was a row of tellers dealing with several adventurers. Swathes of people formed around them like a wild mob, all chattering wildly in vain to be heard. Few people took to waiting their turn in the center, where several seats and tables sat for any gatherings. Far above, the other floors could be seen through a large hole in each one, they were essentially rings stacked up on one another. “Well?” Ava asked, looking out at the crowd.

“I suppose we wait,” Lydia said.

“I definitely don't want to go in there,” Norton said. All the desperate energy evaporated as soon as he even considered trying to penetrate that mass. He rubbed his eyes. “I wouldn't

mind taking a rest.” Without even consulting his partners, Norton's legs carried him straight over to the seats, melting onto a couch as the last of his energy gave out. Ava took up a large armchair opposite him and began to lounge about in it. Lydia slid down next to Norton not long after, causing the cushion to quite visibly deform inwards. The concavity pulled the man slightly closer to the feline.

Lydia rummaged about in Norton's bag, pulling free a slab of meat. “You could have asked,” the man said.

“Why?” Lydia bit into the bit of flesh without another word, tearing it in half cleanly. It was a plain reminder how inhuman they could be at times.

“Don't stare,” Ava teased. “How about something for me?” Norton nodded and turned around, reaching into his backpack for a morsel of food. A sudden clatter and growl caused him to whip back around.

A curious sight greeted him. A short, black lizard creature stood atop the table in front of him. It must have been a kobold, based on a few familiar features, but a small hood covered its head. In its grubby hands was the half-eaten mess of meat Lydia had claimed. “I should take more than this,” it hissed. Lydia's brow crinkled ever so slightly and she lunged at the creature with an audible swipe. Norton flinched and hugged the armrest next to him. The kobold effortlessly dodged the assault and gobbled up the meat.

“Now Lydia, let's not assault our business partners!” Ava said, somewhat worriedly. The feline grunted and leaned back into the couch. “Mehni, dear!” The lizard turned around. “What brings you here?” Norton relaxed once he recalled the familiar name.

“Payment.” The creature pulled her hood down to reveal a cutesy face with bright amber eyes. Two smaller sets of horns were present just behind the main two, giving her a somewhat devilish look. A set of scales on her face glimmered a little brighter than the rest. She certainly looked like the little shopkeep he had seen before.

“We already paid you, my love.” Ava smiled. Lydia retrieved another meal for herself. “Remember? Just after you took care of the - ahem - package?” She fluttered her eyes.

“That was before you brought your partner to my sister's store.” She spat out the word 'partner' quite harshly. It was clear who she was talking about. “Did you buy that generic with your share?” Mehni gestured straight at Norton, much to his displeasure. He began to wonder if human slaves were a standard.

“If only we were so lucky.” Ava shifted in her seat. “Now, we don't have much to spare, so I don't know what you expect from us. We didn't know Miriam would be there either.”

“You're lucky you already paid Kunka. The meat will do.”

“Then we are done. Leave us.” Lydia shooed the kobold away.

Mehni spun around to face the felid. “Not yet, deserter.” Lydia narrowed her eyes, causing Norton to scoot away from her. “I want payment from you.” Her small digits did their best to

appear imposing as they pointed at Lydia.

“With what?” The knight leaned forward, her mouth curling downward.

“I want you to speak with your father.” Lydia froze on the spot. Her face blanked. In a flash, the feline clutched the kobold by her throat and stood erect. “The negotiations... begin,” she sputtered. Her little limbs pathetically slapped against Lydia's hard shell of armor. A blue hue emanated from Mehni's arm. Norton fought the urge to slink back in his chair and try to hide. Ava merely watched the situation play out.

“Ms. Lydia,” Norton said quietly. He stood up and placed a hand on the assaulting arm. It was cool to the touch, but his nerves screamed to get away, as if touching a burning fire. The knight relaxed and let Mehni drop back to the table. She took a moment to stare daggers into the feeble creature before dropping back onto the couch in a huff. Norton returned to his seat, shaking ever so slightly.

“So he does talk,” Mehni said in-between coughs. “You're lucky your pet stopped me.” She nodded at Norton. “Thank you.” She reoriented herself on the table and stood up as if nothing had happened. “Now, as I was saying. You need to speak to your father. Before my whole clutch is crushed.” Norton blinked. The fear slowly left him.

“He has nothing to do with this,” Lydia said through grit teeth.

“He knows about our little arrangement with the head.”

“And how exactly?” Lydia perked up. Another flash of anger breaking her cool facade.

“Who do you think arranged your ridiculous pardon? Who could possibly care enough to let criminals off free?” She let out a smug laugh.

“Friends in high places,” Ava murmured.

“Exactly.” Mehni nodded. “And now your friend wants me dead.”

“If this is as you say, for what reason would you be slain?” Lydia asked. “And why would I want to stop you from being gutted? Rightfully so.”

“Loose ends. Your father might want to protect his little girl, but he doesn't want any lizards talking about such an illicit arrangement. Strings and connections. Didn't expect you to contact outside help. I guess he puts more faith into you than he should. How nice.”

Lydia leaned forward. “And why I shouldn't let it happen?”

“Because the strings only go so far. A few words here, a few words there, and you're back to being hunted. Officially, you pardoned yourselves with cold money. Unofficially, you were given a little test. I don't know why.”

“Maybe we should hear the lizardling out,” Ava said.

“Dealing with that man would only cause more issues.”

“For us, or for you?” Ava stared at Lydia. “I don't think we have a choice. I'm already sick of this”

“Let us simply end this now, then.” Lydia clenched her fist.

“Don't be stupid, cat,” Mehni hissed. “Out in public like this?”

Norton started to feel completely out of place. He had suddenly been thrust into the depths of a familial connection that didn't even occur to him. It wasn't his place to barge in on anything like that. Unfortunately it tied directly to his own existence. It was a strangely amusing thought to think of Lydia, the strong titan, having a rousing disagreement with her father. The violent backdrop made it all the more surreal.

“Take your human's example and shut your maw,” Mehni said. She snapped to Norton. “Aren't you the cutest thing?” He furrowed his brow in confusion, unsure how to react to such a sentence. It was baffling to think this one was related to the cutesy and kind shopkeep. Aside from maintaining some trademark endearing kobold features, she was a complete opposite. Mehni crooked her neck to look at Ava. “If she refuses, how about I take the flat face off your hands?”

“We don't deal with slaves. Norton is part of the group,” Ava replied grimly.

“Oho! You didn't strike me as the human type.” Mehni hopped onto Norton's lap, much to his surprise. He pushed back into the cushions in a vain attempt to get away. “What does he do?” She closely studied his features, and he did much of the same. It wasn't until that moment that he realized she was essentially naked, aside from her brooding cape and hood. The kobold wasn't particularly heavy, but her open nudity made her presence unbearably hefty. “Kunka does have a good eye. Good work, sister,” she mumbled to herself.

“Ma'am, if you would,” Norton said with a frown.

“Such nice manners.” Mehni paid his objection no mind and continued to gawk at him. Her small digits prodded at his head and hair with amused fascination.

“I will talk. Pry yourself from my apothecary,” Lydia said with a grunt.

“Until next time, little one,” Mehni cooed. Norton watched her hop back onto her table platform in further confusion and annoyance. “Good choice. We both benefit now. I keep my life, you keep your servant.”

“And where must we go?” Lydia asked. It seemed like a silly question to Norton, not knowing where one's own father was. Lydia was clearly a special case.

“Lucky you. He's in this very building.” Mehni pointed down. Lydia straightened up and her face hardened. “I was just on my way to collect my last payment and skip town. Perhaps the continent. I'd much rather you save my hide. There's just too much good to exploit here.” She rubbed her chin as her eyes scanned the crowd. “Go on.” With that, she scampered off a little too quickly. She disappeared into the crowd and soon after the sound of her footsteps on the tiled floor faded away.

Ava watched the kobold vanish before turning her attention back to Norton and Lydia. “I suppose we'd better get going then.” Lydia didn't budge. Her eyes burned into the table in front of them. “Lydia?”

“I would rather not.” She stood up. “But we must.”

“Where would we go? This is a pretty big building,” Norton said. “He could be anywhere, right?”

“He is a military official. His responsibility can extend to seeing over some of the more... violent requests here.” She looked up at the massive floors above. “He can be easily found.”

Ava stood up. “Well then.” She nodded to Norton, who promptly followed their lead, though unsure about this new obstacle. “One more bump on the road.” Lydia walked toward a grand set of stairs at the far end of the massive room with Ava in tow. Norton took a moment to look back at the crowd that Mehni ran into. His eyes dragged across the chair Ava sat in. Claw marks were visible on its armrest.

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The trek upward was like an ascent into heaven. The elaborate glass windows and the bright sunlight from the outside lit up the entire building. Sparse few chandeliers on each floor helped to make up for the small patches that the burning light could not touch. The rest of the floors were meeting areas and large libraries filled with books that Norton had, admittedly, never looked at. He had spent little time on any of the other floors, having no reason to.

Ava and Lydia continued to move forward, paying little mind to the grand scale of the building. Norton considered moving up alongside them, but he didn't want to approach Lydia. She didn't seem too pleased with Mehni. There would be little to stop her if she extended her anger once again.

Up, and up, and up, and up. The staircase went on forever. The floors became less and less populated, until only a scarce few were even visible on the entire plane. For all Norton knew, they were leaving reality behind as they knew it. Their journey stopped on the final floor. The man had already begun to curse the fact that they would have to go back down.

The last floor was far different from the others. It was far shorter, for one, nearing the very ceiling of the behemoth of a structure. It took on the appearance of a more subdued, regular building. It had its own lobby area with a selection of doors to choose from. One set stood out in particular, however. Large, brooding guards stood side by side in front of them. And they were not human. Indeed, they were felids. Their outfits were lurid, to say the least. Being dressed in bright red coatees with golden trimming. Similarly flashy swords hung from their belt with elaborate hilt designs.

Upon approach, the set of guards stomped to attention, fazing neither Lydia nor Ava. Norton subtly twitched. He was getting better at that. “Halt,” they boomed in unison. “As a guard of the High Echelon, leaders of the Western Militarized forces, I ask you to state your business,” one of them continued.

“We have business with Byron. Step aside,” Lydia replied.

“Lord-” the guard started.

“Yes. Him. Move aside. He has to tend to his daughter's woes.” Lydia grimaced. The guards appeared to be taken slightly aback, breaking their hard visage. After a moment of silence they robotically stepped aside, cleanly presenting the way. Lydia nodded and marched forward, straight through without another word. Ava and Norton filed after her. The man did his best to keep his eyes focused ahead and arms at his side, lest he somehow insult the bulky warriors.

The next room was a waiting area of sorts. More guards were inside, set against the walls. With their stillness and elaborate suits, one could mistake them for statues or mannequins. A severely imposing wooden door was on the other end of the room. Lydia spun around to face her partners. She gave a soft sigh. “I suggest you stay here,” she said.

“We're always here for you, when needed,” Ava replied. Norton was still disconcerted by the guards, giving only a nod in agreement. “I don't know what we can do, but the offer is there.” Lydia nodded back with the slightest hint of a smile. In an instant the softness was gone and she turned back around, walking stiffly to the door. She disappeared behind it a second later.

Norton and Ava were left in the company of the ceremonial guardsmen. The apothecary wasn't sure what to do in the meantime. There were no chairs, no free spots anywhere on the walls, not a single thing he could lean on. The pair were left squarely in the middle, for them all to see. “You think these guys get out much?” Ava said casually. Norton grit his teeth as his eyes widened. “Oh come on. They've got no business with us, ease up.” She bumped an elbow into his ribs.

“I hope Lydia's alright,” Norton said quietly. He eyed the guards in the room. They paid him no mind, staring right past him.

“I've never met her father, but I'm certain she can handle anything.” Ava paused. “Except her alcohol.” She chortled. Norton smiled and shook his head.

The door in front of them suddenly opened to reveal another gaudy guard, this one dressed in blue. “Approach,” he said simply. Norton was all too eager to accept his orders. Fear returning as quickly as it left. Ava kept up with his panicked pace into the next room. The door closed behind them, sealing them in.

It was dark. Few candles lit the room. Norton felt as though he stepped into a crypt. He could only make out a familiar feline, a desk, and a far larger creature sitting behind it. White and fat. “I see you still travel with the Lupine,” it said with a grizzled voice. It nodded, or rather, he nodded. “And what's this? A new face in your pack.” He coughed up a raspy laugh. “Come forward, new flesh, let me see what my offspring has picked out.” Norton stepped forward. “A human! Interesting choice. Interesting choice indeed!” he roared cheerily.

Lydia's father was an impressively boisterous person, wide as he was jolly. He wore his own fancy set of fabrics that struggled to keep themselves around his rotund form. His fur, much like Lydia's, was a snow white. “If you stare at me, it's only fair that I stare at you. Lean forward,” Byron said with a beckon. Norton uneasily shifted forward. Byron had an odd mane about his chin and sideburns, giving the appearance of fluffy mutton chops. “Male,

yes? I've always found it hard to tell with your people.” He nodded and leaned over to look at Lydia. “It's been quite some time since I've seen you interact with a male.”

“Father,” Lydia said seriously.

“A human isn't a miserable choice. Heart of civilization they are. Though I must remind you that conception is scarce between-”

“Father!” Norton began to slink back, embarrassed.

“Was I mistaken? Your mark lingers on him.” Byron waved his hand. “No matter. What brings my daughter to my weary heart today?” He adjusted his coatee and folded his hands.

“Your arrangement.” Lydia stepped forward to loom over the desk. “Why was I not made aware of this?”

“Not all intricacies of assignments are to be known to a warrior.” His cheery demeanor lessened. “It was irrelevant. Convenience such as this is rarely afforded in our line of work. Do not bother with the details.”

“This is not the academy.” Lydia gripped the table. “My life and the lives of my allies were placed in danger due to your assignment.”

“You accepted the challenge. Would it have made a difference who gave it? A thanks should be in order for pulling you out of your poor choices with such a simple task. Perhaps now you will return to something sensible. I would hope.”

“Had I known you offered it, I would have accepted my fate. A band of roving criminals is our reward. Not much difference from the guard I would say. Did it turn out as planned?”

“I would much rather you be hunted by criminals than law enforcement. Clearly you do not agree.” He sighed. “As you said, had you been told you would not agree to it. If I had the power to strike your crimes clean from records, I would. Perhaps hard to believe, but my reign only extends so far. A favor for a favor.”

Norton wasn't sure how to respond to any of this. He found his eyes wandering about the room for something else to focus on, which was impossible with the feeble light. From what he could see of Ava, she appeared bored or annoyed. Whatever the case, while no one paid him any mind, he felt completely intrusive.

“Lydia. Mehni,” Ava cut in. Lydia nodded and pried herself from the death grip she had on the table.

“The kobold. Are you truly here for it, and not me?” Byron gave a soft chuckle. “Heartbroken. It's so rare to get a visit these days.”

“An arrangement,” Lydia said. “Their silence in exchange for freedom.”

“That seems fair enough. Consider it done.” He shrugged and leaned back in his chair.

“Just like that?” Norton blurted out suddenly.

“Just like that,” replied Byron. “I see no reason not to. I doubt the kobold will talk. For now, that is. I'm sure they'll be back with some poorly arranged blackmail.” He rubbed his chin. “But we will be ready by then. Suppose I should begin the paperwork now, hm?” A smile tugged at his mouth. “Enough about the trivialities of work.” He clapped loudly. Instantly a duo of guards emerged from the darkness with a bottle and some glasses. Norton wasn't entirely sure what it was, but if he had to wager a guess, it was wine.

“Now is not the time for this, Father.” Lydia's tail stood on end, in tune with her rising voice.

“Nonsense! One of my youngest kittens visits me and I'm not to celebrate?” He beckoned for the guards. The glasses were carefully placed down on the desk without a sound. “Hm, it seems we are one short.” Byron looked over at Ava and Norton. “Perhaps you two would be willing to share? I do hope you understand. Rarely do I get such a surprise visit.”

“Of course, Sir,” Ava replied. “I wouldn't dream of stealing away a glass from my dear friend Lydia. Neither would Norton.” She pulled him close to her side with an arm and rubbed his shoulder. “Isn't that right?”

“Certainly,” Norton said with an uneasy nod. “Thank you for the kind gesture, Mister ah-”

“Byron will do, I suppose. Seeing as how my dear little snowball is comfortable enough to call you an ally.” He laughed as he poured himself a glass of murky fluid. Lydia's ears flattened as she glanced away from her father. “Come now, my love. Let me indulge in these pleasures before I meet my eventual end.” He slid two full glasses forward. Lydia hadn't even raised her hand before Ava snatched one up and retreated back to Norton's side. She held it up to her nose and gave the glass a small swish.

“What is it?” Norton asked.

“Not a clue! Definitely smells good, though.” She took a hefty swig and paused. Her hand came up to her snout. “That's spicy,” she said hoarsely. “Care for a go?”

“I'm good, thank you.” He looked back to Lydia. She had taken up her own glass. From this angle he could only make out a hint of doubt on her face.

“None of this makes up for anything,” Lydia said with her eyes trained on the glass. Byron's expression soured some, but continued to enjoy his own drink. After having stared into the liquid for what seemed like forever, Lydia finally took a sip. Her tongue flicked out to dab at the little stain on her mouth. Slowly she brought up a paw to her mouth and let out a dainty cough. Norton couldn't help but smile at the display, which he poorly hid with a hand.

“Her mother doesn't handle alcohol well either. It's why I'm here and not at the homestead!” Byron roared with laughter. Ava tittered with him, much to Lydia's visible displeasure. “So!” he started, “Tell me Mr. Norton. What does a human such as yourself do for an occupation?” He picked up his bottle, glanced at it, then shook his head and set it back down.

Norton stood at attention, poorly mimicking a soldier's stance. "Apothecary, Sir. A medical practitioner of sorts."

"Ah, so it is true." Byron raised a beefy hand and wriggled his sausage-like digits. "Soft, delicate hands, perfect for tending to the wounded. Good to see my ruffian in excellent hands." His extended hand moved to his chin. "You don't seem awfully sure about your position."

"I can't say I've done much medical work during our travel. Mostly errand boy, you see."

"Well that should be a blessed sign, and of course, more relaxation for you. Praise be, hm?"

"Don't let Norton fool you, he's an excellent medic," Ava piped up. She stepped forward towards Byron's drinking table and presented her bandaged arm. "Fine handiwork, wouldn't you say?" Before the bulbous cat could respond, she turned to Lydia and knocked on her armor. "He personally helped dear Lydia as well."

"Ah! Then another drink is in order!"

"I'm fine, Sir, thank you. It's part of the job," Norton replied.

"Denied a drink. Hm. Well, I have no other way to thank you." He chortled. "Perhaps, when your employment is over, you would be willing to work as my personal physician. It pays very well!" One of the guards stepped from the darkness to whisper something into Byron's ear. "I'm aware, but we can make an exception." Lydia looked back at Norton, her eyes staring deep into his.

"I'm flattered, Sir. Perhaps in the future." He nodded. Lydia took another sip, keeping her eyes trained on Norton.

"I see why you travel with this one, snowball. I think it would be better if I let him tend to your care exclusively."

"He would be a far better choice than those you have given me previously." Lydia took one last hefty swig and slammed the glass on the desk. Norton was surprised it did not shatter into a million little pieces. "We are done. See to it that the family receives my regards. Whatever remains of it."

"Oh dear," Ava whispered. Norton cleared his throat and sidled up next to the wolfess.

"And what of me? Surely I get some warmth?" Byron asked somewhat solemnly.

"Tend to your alcohol," Lydia replied. She swiveled on the spot and stomped out of the room.

"Only natural, I suppose. Though it didn't turn out as well as I had hoped." The large cat poured himself another glass. "Do accept an apology from me on her behalf."

"I suppose we should be going, then," Ava responded.

"I suppose you should." The human and wolfess turned away. "Please, do keep taking care of her. I'll be watching to make certain you do. Good luck."

"We will!" Ava said over her shoulder. "Not to worry!" The duo hurried after Lydia, right past all the sentinels, and into the hall again. Lydia stood near the stairs, back turned to both of them. She stared straight into a nearby window. Norton was almost scared to approach her. Byron didn't appear as brutal as he expected a military official to be, but it was clear to him that something had to be off.

Before Ava or Norton could say anything, Lydia spun on the spot and lunged at the man, grabbing him by the shoulders. Panic immediately settled in as he felt the iron daggers dig into his flesh. "Don't you ever dare work for him. Do you understand me?" Her words were fierce, but reserved as always.

"Yes, ma'am! I was just being polite!" Norton said with a frantic nod. His heart went into overdrive, preparing his body to flee as quickly as possible. Lydia stared at him for a moment, as if considering whether or not she should atomize his skeleton.

"Lydia. Relax," Ava said. She gripped the feline's arm. Slowly, Lydia pulled away from Norton, though her eyes still pierced through him. "You know how nice Norton is, don't you? Imagine if he said otherwise. Wouldn't want to anger someone like him, would you?"

"No. No I would not." Lydia yanked her arm away from Ava. "I apologize."

"It's alright," Norton said with a nod. He tried to suppress his trembling with varying degrees of success. Deep in Norton's skin and bones, he could still feel where Lydia dug into him. "Should... Should we turn in now? The lines are probably shorter now." He looked down to the ground, a little scared that Lydia might snap again. A small part of him wanted to apologize in return, although he didn't know exactly what he would apologize for.

Lydia grimaced and looked away. "Might as well," Ava replied. "I'm eager for the payday. How about you, Lydia?" The feline, as expected, gave no answer. Instead, Lydia began marching down the stairs, back down into the awaiting gargantuan room below. "Eager, of course. C'mon then." Ava beckoned Norton, who continued to have doubts about following the knight.

Chapter 10

Bang, bang, bang.

“Please don't do that, madam.”

“I will do what I want.” Lydia rapped against the metal bars again. Bang, bang, bang. “Hurry up with the pay. I am sick of standing in this building. Sick of dwelling in these fetid lines. Sick of-”

“I understand, but you must wait.”

It had been several minutes, perhaps half an hour, of standing in a line with several other eager adventurers pushing and shoving to work their way to the booth. A tired, greying man sat behind the iron bars, twiddling away at several bits of paperwork that flowed in at a constant stream.

“Please excuse my friend here, she's been having quite the day,” Ava replied. “Take all the time you require.”

“I would have imagined that doing this every waking moment would help you improve, but-” Lydia was cut off.

“Don't finish that sentence. Don't do it, dear. That's the alcohol talking.” Ava settled her hands on Lydia's shoulder. They were quickly shrugged off.

“I will talk how I please. Liquor or not.” Norton could only stand there quietly, not wanting to goad on any negative behaviors. Had he known Lydia would react so negatively, he would have chugged her entire glass and dealt with the miserable consequences. It was too late for that now. All he could do was wait for the storm to pass and tread carefully.

“Do understand that your contract has to pass through several other confirmations from far too many officials to speak of,” the attendant replied quite plainly.

“And the more you speak of them, the more of my time you waste,” Lydia shot back. The worker shook his head and returned to his writing in a huff. Ava opened her mouth, but was quickly shut down by Lydia. “I do not need to hear anything from you either. We finish this and you can fritter away your funds. Perhaps pick yourself up another toy.” Norton desperately wanted to disappear.

“Quiet now, my little knight. You'll be asking for my forgiveness soon enough and tear my ear off with apologies,” Ava replied with a smile. Disdain dribbled from the sides of her toothy grin. She immediately turned to Norton, who was still in the depths of his mind trying to figure out how to make himself invisible. “Give her an hour or two. Just make sure to be nice when she apologizes.” Lydia glared at Norton from over Ava's shoulder. He gave a vague nod of the head in response.

“Here, your payment,” the teller said suddenly. Three separate sacks were set on the table with a very audible clink and thud. “Two thousand a piece.”

“Well, goodness! That's more than what I bargained for,” Ava said. She rubbed her hands together in jubilation.

“A piece?” Norton asked. “I was separately contracted under additional assistance. What's this for?” He stepped forward to examine his share. A small sense of curiosity was trampled over his natural excitement over large sacks of money.

“Uh-oh,” Ava whispered.

“Uh-oh?” Norton turned back to look at Ava.

“That is what it reads here. A piece. It was a short notice change, but it's here within the listing,” the teller said matter-of-factly. He tapped on an illegible document in front of him, filled to the brim with black ink. “A piece. I suppose the employer wants you to come back for seconds?” Lydia punched the metal bars. “Easy!” Norton backed away from the teller as smoothly as his body would allow.

“Lydia. Not here. Not now,” Ava commanded.

“He believes some pocket change will help!” Lydia reeled back her hand for another punch. People began to stare and chatter from a distance. What was once a line abuzz with aggressive greed had eased back into quiet observation. Norton quickly grabbed at the feline's elbow. His whole form screamed, begging him to do otherwise and back off. “Release me,” Lydia growled.

“I understand, Lydia, you don't like this, but-” Norton started. His brain rushed to finish the rest. “But. This wouldn't be getting back at him. This only hurts everyone else. We just take the money and uhm...”

“Do something utterly pointless with it,” Ava chimed in.

“Forget it.” The cat retreated from the teller and walked off. The crowd immediately cleared her path and then quietly shuffled back into place. Norton shook his head and took a deep breath. Ava nodded towards the teller. The two approached the man behind the bars.

“Sorry for the trouble. We'll be taking our pay now. Do you need anything else?” Ava asked. The older man shook his head. “Good.” He slid the bags forward and lifted a smaller gate to push them through. “We'll be leaving now. Come on, Mr. Norton.” Norton nodded and gave the accountant a weary smile. The wolfess picked up two bags, while the apothecary took his own share. Not that he wanted to. The bag of money now felt like an explosive waiting to go off.

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Lydia had settled herself against one of the large columns that rested against the building. Ava and Norton cautiously approached her and stood there in silence. The trio merely stared at one another. Despite the hustle and bustle all around them, the atmosphere was absurdly

tense and worrisome, at least for Norton. Ava seemed more disappointed than angry. Lydia softened somewhat into a plain annoyance.

“Ready to apologize?” Ava asked. Lydia only stared at her. “Fine, I’ll leave this here.” She plopped the bag next to the feline’s feet. “Then, when you’ve relaxed, we can go buy a nice dinner. Hm? Yes?” Ava paused. “Yes? No?” Lydia looked away. “Fine. I’ll go with Norton, then.”

“As I would expect from you. Going off with your toy.” The ‘toy’ grit his teeth.

“Excuse me?”

“How is it that my only reward is this rotten gold?” Lydia gave the bag a kick, causing it to tip over and drop some of its contents. “My lot in life is receiving pity money from my father. And what of you? Receiving string-free payment, on top of a regular man who would fall for your every word. On to the next adventure.” Norton looked down to the ground before snapping back up to Lydia.

“You are being very rude. I suggest you shut your mouth.” Ava slung her bag over her shoulder, her free hand fell squarely on her hip.

“How did you do it? Even with a appalling gash across your face and your embedded criminality, you managed to manipulate someone else into being your servant.” Lydia turned her gaze to Ava. A crude, smug smile was splayed across the cat’s face. “Go on. Tell me. Sexual wiles?” Norton’s gaze drifted down to his feet. His mind latched on to her words far too tightly.

“I knew I should have stopped you from drinking that. We’re done here.” Ava leaned forward. “Tend to your money,” she mocked. The wolf woman spun around on the spot and walked away without another glance. Norton shifted on the spot, trying to figure out what would be better or which one would end without a broken arm. He turned to follow after Ava while still keeping his eyes locked on the cat woman. He gave her a nod and a wave, but felt that wasn’t enough. She looked away with a shake of the head.

Norton followed after Ava, who took up an annoyingly happy jaunt. “Are you sure you should have said that?” the Apothecary asked with more sting than he wanted.

“Hah, after what she said?” Ava sneered. “I should’ve done worse. I should’ve taken her share too!” Norton moved through the bustle of the city without much thought. “You of all people should have- Well, maybe not, but you shouldn’t give her an inch.”

“How can you say that? It’s clear she needs some help. I mean was she...” Wrong? Norton rubbed his eyes. “I think she needs someone to talk to.”

“So? Why didn’t you stay?” Ava asked with a shrug. “I’m sure she would love to hear all about her woes coming from you, hm?” Norton didn’t have an answer. Well, he did, but not one that he was happy with. “You give her an hour or two and she’ll come to her senses.”

“It’s not like she was drunk.”

“Ohohoho, she was very much drunk!” Ava plopped down onto a bench. “When's the last time you saw her take a good hearty swig of alcohol?” Norton pursed his lips. “Exactly. Now come on, take a seat.” She beckoned him down and crossed her legs. “We can wait it out here.” The man looked about for any sign of an angry cat woman and sat down hesitantly.

The town of Hull was probably the most civilized he had ever been to. Perhaps he could go so far as to call it a proper city. Several extravagant buildings stood proudly, soaring over more squat and broad sturdy constructions. The city had a slight gleam to it, brought on by the white masonry that decorated most of the city. Little bits of greenery stuck out between the roads, adding some level of nature to what otherwise would have been a sprawling, but pretty, mess of stonework. A shame the experience had to be so soured. Norton's expression darkened.

“So what's on your mind?” Ava asked with a playful shove. A smile was plastered on her face as always.

“Just admiring the view.” Norton clasped his hands together and leaned onto his knees

“Yeah? Just like you did when we walked in, huh? Did a lot of admiring then?” She snickered. “So what's really on your mind, dear?” Instantly she crossed her legs and scooted closer to him.

“Was she really wrong?” Norton asked somberly. “All of this. Us. Was she wrong?” He couldn't bring himself to look at Ava. A long pause came.

“Even if she can be a bastard, Lydia is rarely wrong.” Norton could see Ava's legs shift around. “I pushed too far. I know.” She sighed. “But that's behind us now, isn't it? I would like... it to be.”

“We'll have to see, I suppose.” Norton looked down at his hands, trying to ground himself in the moment. Behind them. Could it be so simple with a few words and a kiss? “I would like it to be too,” he mumbled.

“Glad to hear it,” Ava replied. Norton smiled slightly. He chided himself silently for forgetting beast-folk's hearing.

“You think Byron is going help with Miriam?” He shifted back onto the bench properly.

“I don't think he can afford to send out a whole troop after her. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Maybe that would be a convenient enough excuse to stay. Just for a little while.

“I see.” Those words hung in the air, not followed up by any sort of probing or a jokey punch to the shoulder. “So then. What do you want to do in the meantime? I mean, I love hauling around money as much as the next gal, but we're starting to get some curious stares.”

“I don't know. What does Hull have? Haven't spent much time here.” Norton looked about the area. As pretty as it was, everything was looking very similar and nearly confusing. “You probably know this place better than I. Anything good?”

“I know a bar or two nearby, but how about a nice walk down the city? It would uh, help pad out the time, you know.” Ava nodded and motioned over at the adventuring center.

“Alright then.” Norton stood up. “Where to?”

“Not going to offer your hand?” Ava fluttered her eyes. Norton sighed and stuck out his hand. The wolfess happily took it up and stood alongside him. “Thank you.” Her hand was firmly stuck to his. “Come on then.” She pulled him forward with long strides, giving him little time to relax and enjoy the city. Not that he could possibly focus on the world around him. Instead, his thoughts immediately latched onto the fact that the pair looked like a couple. At least, it seemed that way to him. Perhaps that was his own pathetic desires speaking.

Through the rolling waves of people, Norton could only see Ava in front of him. Her bushy tail a cute beacon as the way forward. He shook his head at his desperation and tried to look elsewhere. The aggregation of people around him were mostly humans, with some beast-folk dotting the crowd. None of them gave even a wayward glance at the duo, but a slight fear that someone would nagged at his mind. As ridiculous as that was. His attention then turned to the massive buildings around them. It appeared more homey and residential, with people chatting idly at entrances, overlooking balconies, personal affections decorating windows, and bounds of clothes freely flapping in the wind to dry. A few children ran boundlessly about as well. The man looked between all of these things, trying to occupy his thoughts.

“You're like a puppy. Relax,” Ava said back to Norton over the crowd. He nodded and found himself focusing on her once again. It was all for naught. Not that he minded one bit. “We're almost there. How do you feel about ale?”

“I can't say I'm partial to it.”

“Oh you will be, believe me. The bottle is the best comfort.” Ava slowed down for a moment after saying that, then returned to her burst of speed. “Aren't much of a drinker, are you? Good. You can carry me back.” She giggled and sped up further.

As they continued forward, the buildings started to shrink, becoming smaller and more cobby. The flow of the population had slowed down to a casual stroll. The buzz had faded and been replaced with a shallow hum that was a nice change of pace. Businesses dotted the structures. From equipment stores with sharpened blades to casual bars that served fresh food. What they all had in common was their eagerness to exploit the constant stream of adventurers coming and going.

Ava came to a halt. Norton nearly smashed into her, having been mindlessly marching forward. He looked up to see what their destination was. “Catching the Gulper?” he asked with a laugh in his voice. “Is this where we're going?”

“Something funny about the name?” Ava asked sarcastically.

“No, no, nothing at all.”

“Good. Let's go then!” Norton started to move forward, but was quickly yanked along by Ava first. Straight into the bar's front doors. It was reasonably lit, with wooden chandeliers

decorated by tons of little was candles. Smaller tables stood on the main floor, in neat rows that implied some level of housekeeping. A sparse crowd was seated, with a gentle murmur filling the air. Like most bars, a long bar counter was positioned at the far end of the room. The scent of alcohol was present, but not overwhelming, instead being joined by the aromas of cooked meat. It became clear why Ava was keen on this place specifically.

Without stopping, Ava trotted over to an empty table and practically whipped Norton around to the opposite side. He stumbled into his chair and the wolfess dropped into her own. They stared at one another. It was more one-sided than that, however. Ava looked into his eyes while Norton struggled to return her gaze. It was brief, but felt like an eternity. Ava then shook her head and suddenly let go of Norton's hand, letting it limply drop to the wood table. "Sorry." She cleared her throat and looked away. "Service! Hey, service over here!" Her arm stretched out and waved wildly. The man considered asking her to stop as he worried her gauze might come undone.

It wasn't long before a waitress came over, gussied up in a generic bar-wench outfit Norton had only heard about from lonely friends. She was all smiles, though her cheery expression soured for a moment on approach. "What can I get you today?" she said in overemphasized happiness.

Ava set her haul of money on the table with an audible thunk. "What do you suppose I could get with this?" She stifled a laugh.

"Ava, please," Norton whispered.

"Alright, alright. One ale for me. One ale for my friend. And a big set of dragon ribs." She set the bag down on the floor.

"Ava."

"What? We have the money," Ava said. "OK, OK, just regular ribs. Whatever animal you've got. Make it good." She casually waved away the waitress, who was all too willing to speed away without another word. "Believe me, you'll love it. The meat practically melts in your mouth."

"And what about the ale? I can't imagine that being smooth."

"Not really, but that's part of the fun." Ava propped her arms on the table. "You do like fun, don't you? I'm starting to wonder, honestly."

"I do. Just without drunken stupors is all." Norton shrugged and folded his hands. "I prefer remembering the fun I had, you know?"

"All too funny to hear it coming from someone else. Well, it would be, but Lydia isn't the best storyteller." She quickly grimaced in exaggeration. "You know."

"I can imagine." Norton refused from elaborating further, as saying anything more risked death.

“Don't you hate this?” Ava asked suddenly.

“Hate what?”

“This?” She circled a finger around. “We can't talk about anything. It just falls flat.”

“Um,” Norton started, “what would you like to talk about?”

Ava propped her head on a hand. “Why not tell me about yourself?” She smiled. Something was awfully familiar about this scenario.

“That's awfully broad. Could you scale it back?” Norton rummaged through his mind for anything vaguely interesting to talk about.

“Hm, OK. How about where you live?”

“Lived.”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind.” Norton shook his head. “A small collection of hovels without a name. Somewhere abouts the shining forest.” He tapped on the table.

“Sounds lovely! Yellow leaves year round, hm?”

“It's alright. Too blinding sometimes.”

“Come now, it has to be better than that.”

“Not really. There's a reason I'm here and not there. You don't get any restaurants like this back home. Maybe one.” That sense of familiarity hit him again.

“Surely you get homesick though, right?” The barmaiden silently walked over, placed down a candle and lit it. “Oh, thank you.” Ava didn't glance at the waitress.

“Maybe in due time, but not right now.” Norton shrugged. “Every time I close my eyes, I can still see those blinding leaves.”

“Well, at least you can close your eyes.” Ava chortled. Norton crooked his brow. “I'd like to visit it some time. When there's less killers on the loose, of course.” She nodded pensively.

“A whole forest of yellow.”

“Anything else you would like to talk about?”

“That's not how a conversation works.” The wolfess grabbed his hand. “You have to come up with something naturally!” The waitress approached their table, with a large platter in-hand. It then occurred to him what exactly what was going on. The food was lowered onto the table. Ava looked down in clear excitement and let Norton's hand go. “Thank you!” A couple of full mugs were lowered onto the table. This was a date.

Roasted, juicy meat that glistened under the candlelight. What seemed like mounds of sauce dribbled down onto the plate. A sudden sense of hunger smashed into his growing embarrassment, causing his stomach to knot up. “Well? Dig in!” Ava quickly ripped a piece free and tore into it with wild abandon.

“Any forks or knives?” Norton's hands hovered near the meal. Eager to begin and yet worried about the mess. Ava gave him a smile and returned to tearing into her food. Carefully, the man moved to a lone piece of meat and gently pulled it free. His stomach continued its battle itself, with hunger winning out in the end. He cupped his portion and chewed away as delicately as the dripping morsel dribbled away.

“So”—Ava swallowed—“enjoying yourself?” Norton chewed some more and nodded. “Good. Good. That's the best part of a job, relaxing with all your honest-gotten gains.” Bits of sauce ran from the gash in Ava's mouth. The man quietly tapped on his cheek. “Hmm?” He shrugged and leaned forward, swiping away the offending juice with a finger. “Oh, thank you, sweetheart.” Norton paused and eyed his finger before giving it a small lick. Sweet. He sheepishly went back to eating.

“Do you think Lydia is-”

“Don't. Let's not sour this right now.”

“Alright then.”

“Let's talk about anything else. Anything.”

“OK then, uhm, how about you then?”

Ava ripped a strand of meat free from one of the ribs and slurped it up. “It took you long enough!” She giggled, licking her fingers clean and held them up. “My favorite drink is Chambord. I like the color red.” A finger fell down for every object. “I'm from the north, and I prefer the cold. There's not a food I won't try once. And I can play a lute.”

“That's nice.” His eyes looked around the room as if he could find another topic amongst the scenery. “Uh, where in the north specifically?”

“Just the north.”

“Just the north?”

“Mhmm, just the north.”

“Is that the name of a place?”

“No. I don't know where in the north. Just the north will do. Makes me more interesting, doesn't it?” She nodded.

“Definitely. More interesting than shining woods in any case.” He paused to think. “What's a Chambord?” Not that he particularly cared.

“Oh, this lovely raspberry drink. It's cognac and- You don't know what that is, do you?” Norton shook his head. “Hah. We could try some if you like. We have the money.” Ava nudged the sack next to her. “Hm?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Let's just finish our ale first, shall we?” The murky fluid sat in the corner of his eye.

“Right, I nearly forgot.” Instantly, Ava dropped her food onto the plate and snatched the mug, downing it voraciously. She slammed the cup back down and let out a satisfied sigh. “Good stuff. Have a try.” She motioned towards Norton's drink with her own, sending some droplets spattering all over the wood table. The man looked to the other patrons fearfully, but no one seemed to give even the slightest care to Ava's outbursts. He took his mug and peered into its depths. “Go on.” Norton sampled some and let it rest on his tongue. He struggled to stop himself from wincing and swallowed. Bitter. Beyond bitter. “Well?”

“Not the worst,” he lied.

“So it's good!” Ava took another swig. “Maybe we should get you something a little more refined. Humans like that, right?”

“Do they?” Norton raised an eyebrow.

“Well you're the human! What do humans like?”

“I don't know. Doesn't seem like we differ all that much.” He took another bite. “Don't you like refined things too?”

“I will soon with our payment.” She giggled. “All the pleasures I could want.” She swirled her cup around and then set it down. “Won't have to work a while after this.”

“Good thing, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” Ava looked down at her plate. Her nails ran around the rim of her cup. “So have you decided?”

“Decided? Decided what?”

“You know. If you're going or not. I don't know if- Could you?” She started scratching the side of the cup. “I think Ms. Grouchy was right.” Norton realized she hadn't gone too far during her perimeter search. “Little stuck. Right? I don't know how far away the shining forest is but, um, it can't be too out of the way. I don't know if Miriam can- Never mind.”

“I think I'll have to stay. I can't say I'm the biggest powerhouse around, wouldn't be an apothecary if I were.” He chuckled softly. “I'd probably have to rely on you two.”

“Only on me. We'll see about the pussycat when she apologizes.” She sped up her scratching ever so slightly. “You'll be staying then? With us, that is?”

Norton paused to think on it again. “I don't see how I couldn't.” It seemed too easy. He gave in too quickly, he thought, as if there were really any other option. He pulled away fruitlessly

from his lonely desires, but was pushed back into place by the brutality of circumstance. “I guess that's that.” He shrugged and took a sip of ale.

Ava withdrew her hand from the cup and went straight back to chowing down on her food, quite energetically. “That's that,” she said between bites. “Care for seconds?” The plate had degenerated into bones and sauce, with few bits of meat scarcely stuck to the ivory.

“I'm good, thank you. Had fun?”

“I should be asking you that! And besides, who says we're finished? Maybe we should ask for the chef's special, and you can comment on his handiwork.”

“Again, I'm not the best cook. It was more of a side job.”

“Maybe I should just have you cook me something and we'll see once and for all.” Ava nodded with a 'hmp', then broke back into her regular grin. “Come on, ease up, you look like you're going to petrify. Live a little! If you don't, I'll have the rest of your drink.” Norton shrugged. “Ahhhhh, forget it.” She waved a hand dismissively. “What do you do for fun? You have fun, don't you?”

“Sometimes. It gets harder as you get older, you know.” He sampled his drink again. It hadn't improved. “The forest provides little entertainment.”

“You're in a city now. No complaints. Shows, fights, plays, and more. We're at the more part, if you didn't know.” Ava loudly slurped up another round of ale. “Though, I think we're running out of more.” She peered into the mug.

“I haven't been to any of those. Are they good?” Norton tried to imagine what those looked like, but aside from travelers and books, he had little knowledge to go on.

Ava opened her mouth and paused. “I... don't actually know. I've never been to them either. Lydia's not one for sitting still for an hour unless it's hunting or sleeping.” She shook her head. “Look at me, bringing her up again.”

“It's only fair since you're such good friends and partners.” As soon as Norton said that, an odd pang of jealousy struck him. “I would hope.”

“Not that fun having a white golem for company. Not all the time. Just look how she drinks.” Her eyes ran up and down Norton. “Look how you drink.” She snickered and rolled her eyes. “You ever think I could talk about men with her, or share deep secrets?”

“You've talked about me with her, haven't you?” He rubbed his neck.

Ava pulled back a little. A hint of befuddlement worked its way across her face. “That's true. That's true. Still. It's hard to hold a conversation with her sometimes.”

“Maybe you should ask her what she would like to talk about. A warrior like her has to have a few stories.”

“Yes, I imagine they would. Unfortunately I can't even get one little snippet from her. Years of traveling and killing people, and she doesn't have even the slightest courtesy to open up.”

“With how she reacted, I can see why. I certainly wouldn't do that to my father.” He smiled and immediately felt bad as a result. “Ahem. It can't be good, in any case.”

“My life isn't all sunshine either. As my dashing good looks show.” Ava turned her head to accentuate the shredded flesh along its length.

“Right,” Norton said flatly. Her scar was little more than a blemish to him now.

“So let's keep this conversation going.” She turned away for a moment and help up her mug. “Waitress! Another few rounds!” Ava quickly looked back to Norton. “Now, I would like to know how you ended up as our little medic.”

“Well, I—” Norton was quickly cut off by a familiar gleaming sight stepping up behind Ava.

“Room for one more, I trust,” Lydia said. Her eyes were narrowed, but didn't seem to bear any malice, which only worried Norton.

“Lydia,” Norton croaked.

“Lydia,” Ava huffed, not looking up at the feline.

“That is indeed my name.” The knight stepped around the table, moving to its side. “I see you are both enjoying a lovely candlelit dinner.”

“Yes, one without you,” Ava replied. Her eyes trained on her mug. “Unless you've come to apologize. Hm?”

“I can save that pleasantry for later.” Lydia flicked her hand.

Ava perked up, face slightly aghast. “Lord above. You didn't.” Norton looked between the two, trying to figure out just what it was he was supposed to be terrified of.

“Aren't I suppose to live a little? That's always what you tell me. I am living now.” Lydia plopped her sack of gold onto the table. She pulled a rickety chair from nearby and placed a foot on it, then rested on the raised leg. “Norton.” He froze. “I would like to know what it is like.”

“To... To what?”

Lydia tilted her head and smiled quite crudely at Norton. It was like a feral animal trying to be as polite as possible. “What it is like to kiss a generic. Heart of civilization you are.” Her smile soured for a moment before returning full force. Ava shot daggers at her and opened her mouth, but before she could interject, Lydia grabbed the human by the shoulders and lifted him up into a kiss. If it even was a kiss. The feline mashed his face into hers, trading spittle and forcing her tongue against his, invading his mouth. Norton was too baffled to react, and clearly outmatched. The strong scent of alcohol hit his senses quite suddenly as she sighed into him.

And just like that, it was over. He was plopped back into the chair without a word. Lydia wiped her mouth off and blankly stared at Norton. Ava was now standing up, teeth bared. "Better than I had expected. Better than a hugger, at least." She shook her head and let out a curious giggle that sounded something like a repeated hiss. Norton was still lost in confusion, unsure how to react.

"I suggest you leave. Right now," Ava growled.

"Something wrong? Tend to your meat." Lydia shook her head. "No, not the human." She smiled again. The knight jerked back as Ava swung at her, barely catching her balance on the chair. "Easy, you would not want to dirty your pet."

"I'll do more than that, damned cat."

"Please. Stop," Norton said dryly as she stood up. Naturally, worried patrons began to stare at them. "Lydia doesn't know what she's doing."

"That doesn't make it any better! I'll beat her into sobriety if need be!" She snapped at the air.

Norton gripped the sides of the table. "Ava, please. You don't want to do this." He pursed his lips. "I don't want you to do this."

"Not here, not now, hm?" Lydia scoffed in mocking agreement. Norton refrained from talking her down. Who knew what the drunken brute was capable of. "How about I take the apothecary off your hands while you cool down?"

Smack.

Lydia slowly reeled back and shook her head. Norton went wide-eyed and his heart dropped. The feline gently touched her nose as a stream of red dribbled down her face. Norton quickly grabbed at Lydia's arm and tried to pull her away, but was effortlessly shoved off, sending him stumbling away. "I see now," she hissed. The two smashed into one another instantly. Ava might have been faster, but Lydia was far stronger. The cat easily took every glancing blow that came her way and returned it tenfold with a glance to the wolf's stomach, causing her to deflate and shakily crumple. She tried her damndest to stand back up. Norton gulped and ran back in, throwing all his weight onto the armored beast. Lydia pushed him back without so much as a look in his direction. "Not now, generic. I have no qualms with you." Lydia hefted up Ava and placed her into a headlock.

Norton only barely registered all the other bargoers filing out, only making the situation worse. It would probably only be minutes before any law enforcement would rush in. "Lydia, please! Let her go!" he pleaded. Ava struggled fiercely against Lydia's iron grasp, kicking and swinging. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for her, her blades were squished firmly up against Lydia's armor, disallowing access.

"Maybe if she apologizes," the cat replied casually.

"Go to hell!" Ava grunted through her teeth.

Norton gritted his teeth. "Damnit Lydia. I know you aren't having a good day, but that gives you no right to kill our friend!" He pulled on her arms again with all his strength. "What has gotten into you?!"

"Hm." Lydia's blank stare dragged across Norton down to Ava. "I wouldn't kill her." She hefted the wolf up, causing her to snarl. "It would be such a waste."

"And yet you would still doom her with a prison sentence? You've only just freed yourselves, don't ruin it now!"

Lydia's tilted her head, thoughts clearly working through her inebriated mind. Her grip loosened just enough for Ava to pry herself free, stumbling back to Norton's side and pulling knife free. Norton quickly grabbed the wolf's wrist, much to his own surprise. "Very well. We can settle this later," she replied with a sneer.

"Try it again and you'll be apologizing with no tongue," Ava said grimly. She jerked her hand away from Norton and menaced Lydia with her knife.

"How then would I explore your pet's mouth?" Lydia asked, that crooked smile returning.

"Shut up and leave!" Norton shouted. The two looked at him, causing his nerves to jump, but he held his ground. After a tense moment of staring, the two walked out. Lydia took the lead, with Ava following far behind her. They might have had it in with power here, but Norton didn't want to abuse that. Even a father's actions can only extend so far. He turned back to their table. The sacks of gold sat there, untouched. He hefted a handful of pieces out of his own bag and onto the table. "I apologize for their actions. I hope this covers some of it," he yelled out. No response. Reasonable. Norton then took up the two bags and trudged after his feuding compatriots.

Chapter 11

There were no sign of guards riding up to arrest them yet, fortunately. A few of the patrons that were inside had taken up spots just outside the building, then quietly headed back inside without so much as a glance at Norton. It must've been a common occurrence for adventurer types to get so worked up. Lydia and Ava were stationed much farther away, taking their own sides between parallel buildings. He approached the two, setting down Ava's share next to her side, where she squatted. She still fiddled with her blade. Lydia leaned against a wall, watching Norton closely, which was made more unnerving by the dried blood.

"Put the knife away, Ava, please," Norton asked. Ava looked up at him, then slowly stowed away the weapon. He also considered asking them to move farther away from the place they just terrorized, then quickly dismissed it as a bad idea. Norton looked between them, wondering where he should settle in. It was clear neither of them would budge, and that was probably for the best. However, he didn't want to seem as though he were taking any side. A lone, withered stump was set past them, nearly clouded in foliage, a perfect spot to wait out the silent treatment. He sat down, dropping his pack and money along with it.

Not a word was traded amongst them. Ava kept her focus mostly on the ground, occasionally stealing glances at both Lydia and Norton. Lydia, on the other hand, stared at Norton in-between bouts of staring at the sky. How long did it take for cat folk to sober up? Were she not incredibly mad, Norton might've offered to mix up one something for her to speed up the process. No, all he could do now was wait for something to happen.

The scenery was serene, despite the situation. Flowers and other greenery sprouted in this little field, fenced off by the street ahead, which carried a number of various people and cargo. Norton wished he could just slip away into it and get lost in the crowd. Not happening. Not with his new burden in life.

"Looks like I was wrong about you being a slave," a familiar voice said just behind Norton. He whipped around to see that diminutive lizard, Mehni, wearing her usual outfit of bare naked covered by a cloak.

"We aren't in the mood for you right now, kobold," Ava said. Lydia remained silent. Norton could only imagine what kind of death glare she was giving Mehni.

"What do you want, Ms. Mehni?" Norton asked.

"Miss. Even when faced with two brutes, you manage to be polite." She gave a toothy grin. "I came to give you a gift."

"For what?"

"For saving my tail, of course, and my sister's. Brothers too, but we don't speak much." Mehni presented an orb with a bug encased in its center. At first Norton assumed it was a crystalline formation, but as soon as he touched it, he felt a chill to it. Ice, of course. The

insect was a large, bulbous grub that faintly glowed orange. One he had only read about in passing.

“A dragon's tear?” Norton pulled it closer to examine it. “Where in the world did you get this?”

“Where would a small kobold get something so unique? I stole it, of course.”

Norton looked back at her with a furrowed brow.

“They were terrible people anyways. It's better in your hands.”

“Well, you have our than—”

“Not a gift for them. Just for you,” Mehni quickly replied. She ran a claw up his neck and across his chin. “You're such a nice generic... Pardon. A nice man. Unlike your partners.” She leaned over to glare at them. “I doubt they would have much use for something like it anyways.”

Norton shook his head. “It's not as though I actually did the work to help you.”

“You were there, that's enough.” Mehni patted his cheek. “I hope we can meet again in less miserable circumstances.” With that, she was off, running into the distance and around the building's corner.

“I should have let the cat strangle her,” Ava huffed. Norton turned back to the two to make sure they weren't at each other's throats. Confirming that, he shifted his attention back to the bug. It was a grim reminder of the package he delivered and also an absolute wonder. A terribly delightful gift.

“What trinket did you receive?” Lydia asked, vaguely casting her gaze in Norton's direction.

Norton held up the orb. “A dragon's tear. It's a rare grub for an even rarer insect.” He couldn't hide the excitement in his voice. “If exposed to enough heat, you could create things like an ever lasting lantern, or an instant heating implement to boil water!”

“Couldn't you do that with magic?” Ava asked.

“Not without a constant stream of magical essence, no. Partially why alchemy is superior to magic.” He tightened his grip on the ball. Even with the icy chill surrounding it, he could faintly feel that twinge of heat radiating from the insect. It must've been a perfect preservation. He had to admit, magic still had its perks. “To think, someone actually plucked it from somewhere near a lava flow.”

“Are you going to use it then? That would be more useful than gawking at it,” Lydia said.

“Not now. I don't want to be hasty.” He ran a thumb across the slick, icy surface and stowed it away. The two of them seemed slightly more open to conversation, at least with him. “Where do we go next? Should we sleep at an inn fi—”

“I am not sleeping here,” Lydia said.

“Fatherly issues are such a bother, aren't they?” Ava asked Norton. He frowned.

“We should be safe around the city regardless. We have the food for it too,” Norton said.

“Around the city? The cat can go make her own camp. I'm getting a nice warm bed.”

“We can't do that. Lydia is still part of our group, whether you like it or not. If Miriam catches her that's one less person that will help us get away.”

Lydia scowled. “As if I would ever be caught by that walking leech!”

“See? She volunteers willingly,” Ava said with a smile. “Go on.”

“I should have let that thing devour you whole,” Lydia shot back, gripping the handle of her blade. “It's only a pity that it would make your pet cry.”

Norton stood up. “Stop it, both of you! You aren't making this situation any better by killing one another. You both got me into this mess and I do not want to die because of it.” He sat back down. “Now what is our next move?”

Ava looked to the ground. “I suppose we sleep outside if need be.”

Lydia was quiet for a moment as she eased back into her leaning position. “If we keep heading north, we should be able to slip out of their grasp eventually,” she said. “She'll know we were here and based on our movements, it would be sound for her to assume we are going north as well.”

“Should we get going then?” Norton asked. The group looked at each other before silently getting up and preparing themselves for the trek ahead.

“Meet me at the edge of the town,” Ava said sternly, and walked off. Lydia and Norton watched her stroll away before trading glances.

“Norton,” Lydia said, walking over to him.

“Yes?”

“If you'll indulge me in one last thing.”

“What is it?” Norton asked. Lydia's answer was leaning down and pulling him into a kiss. It stunned him into silence. The experience was more reserved than previous, lacking the forceful tongue and mashing of faces. Her tongue was still rough, and having it run across his mouth was arousing and distressing at the same time. Quietly she parted from him, licking her lips in much the way a regular cat would.

Lydia stared at him with that worrying blankness and a tilt of the head. “Shall we get going, then?” she asked. Norton quietly nodded.

Escaping Hull was just as wondrous as entering it. All the tall buildings and people whizzing by. The city wound down to more respectable smaller, more reserved buildings as they approached the exit, where Ava stood waiting. Those gates were less imposing on the way out as well. Norton was quick to note felids making up some of the ranks of soldiers stationed around the gate. Ava nor Lydia gave them a passing glance. He briefly wondered if Byron would keep a closer eye on his daughter after everything that happened. The thought worried and comforted him.

Just like that, they were out of Hull and back into the wilderness. The stark contrast made him feel like he had never been in a city at all. The only remnants of civilization in front of them was the brick road they walked on and the small groups of people moving past them.

Norton's beast folk companions walked on either side of him, using him as a barrier between them. A good choice all things considered, but he would be dead if caught in the middle of some sort of spat. He adjusted his pack and tried not to think about it. Neither of the two seemed to be in the mood for fighting regardless. Ava and Lydia both stared out onto the road ahead. Not a sly remark left Ava's lips. No order barked out of Lydia's mouth.

The walk forward continued on much the same, only over time the groups of people splintered off into their own roads. The group was left alone again, with only the howl of the trees and their footsteps for company. Sunset was right around the corner, threatening to plunge them into darkness at any moment. "When night falls, stay close, Norton," Lydia said quietly.

"I will."

"We'll work in watch shifts again when we make camp. Get as much rest as you need," Ava said soon after.

"I can watch as well," Norton replied.

"We don't need as much sleep as you do. It won't help."

"I suppose not. Alright."

Norton found himself looking to Lydia more often than he'd like to admit. He had suppressed it thusfar, but his mind wandered back to that brief kiss in the city. It wasn't one made out of jealousy or a desire to enrage, rather, it seemed more like something done out of curiosity. Intrigue. The brunt of the alcohol seemed to wear off by then, so she was entirely aware. Ava was approachable, perhaps even amicable. Lydia, on the other hand, still had the visage of a stern golem. She was practically alien to him.

Whatever the kiss meant to her, it had no lingering effects on her, at least not visually. She marched on without a wobble in her stride. Now he only had to worry about what Ava felt. Should he tell her? They were... something, now. Friends seemed like the closest approximation to it. Acquaintances with too much skinship between them. Acquaintances that were perhaps trying to force something more. It would probably be best to do nothing. Not let the secret slip and risk someone dying. As flattering as a catfight over him might be, literally and figuratively, he didn't need them at each other's throats.

The lack of banter between them was almost painful. It helped to break up the silence of travel, which was far more worrisome in the darkness. Norton expected a group of bandits led by an angry fish to sneak out of the woods at any moment. "We should make our camp here," Lydia said suddenly. "Split off the path into the woods."

"Alright. Lead on then," Norton replied. He looked to Ava for her reaction. She didn't say anything but did follow along with the idea. They swerved off the path into the woods proper, searching for a relatively comfortable clearing to settle into. For once, Norton envied his beast counterparts and their vision. He was stumbling over every twig and root in the area until they came to a stop.

"Here," Lydia said. Norton set down his pack and Ava went to work on the fire, loudly snapping random bits of wood. It wasn't long before they had settled into their campsite and stared into the flames. Norton considered breaking the silence just to ease the tension, however he couldn't think of anything to even say.

"I'm going to hunt something," Ava said, standing up. Norton was going to interject. They still had a fair amount of food, but it was clear she wasn't hunting for food. "Shout if anything happens," Ava said, directly to Norton, and walked off into the dark.

"Be safe," Norton said, and turned his attention back to the fire. Lydia sat not far to Norton's left, laying back against the trunk of a tree. "Lydia." Her name stung on his tongue. He looked to her. Lydia's cold eyes snapped to him. "What was that?"

"I assume you mean the charade in the city."

"I understood the charade, but not what came after."

Lydia's gaze briefly flicked to the floor. "I was interested." There was a pause. "In you."

"Thank you, I suppose." Norton crossed his arms, unsure how to react. Interest from Lydia seemed almost deathly.

"The wolf spends much time doting over you. I wanted to see why."

"I doubt it's for the kisses. In fact, I doubt it's for me at all."

"Perhaps." There was another long silence before Lydia started to pry her armor off. Curiously only the upper-half, however. Norton quietly averted his gaze. "It was good."

"What?"

"Your kiss."

"I don't care for jokes right now, Lydia."

"It's difficult to joke about something I have so little experience in."

Norton furrowed his brow and glanced over at Lydia before quickly averting his eyes again. "Pardon?"

"You would be my first kiss, Norton."

"I find that hard to believe." Well, not really. Norton only assumed she was outwardly attractive. Her personality was a different story.

"Romance is difficult to find when training."

"You've finished training for quite some time, Lydia." Norton rubbed his eyes.

"True, but it was shortly after that I met Ava. If you think romance comes easily with her company, you're sorely mistaken." There was some shuffling. "Did you enjoy it, Norton?"

"That's... hard to say, Lydia. I'm not used to such a sudden push."

"Oh? What of Ava?"

Norton shook his head. "I'm still not used to that, nor do I want to be."

"Then perhaps you'll indulge me in a question?" Norton could hear her walk over to him and sit down next to him. "Will you?"

The human crossed his arms. "I suppose I will."

"Do you like me?"

Norton paused as he mulled it over. "I don't see why I wouldn't, Lydia." That was partially a lie. He had every reason to dislike Lydia, but she hadn't killed him yet.

"My father made me realize something. I had lost interest in my original goal." She laughed softly, almost worrying Norton. "Did you know, I wanted to be a mother?" Norton turned to face her in surprise. Her blatant nudity seemed entirely tame in comparison. "I expected that face from you."

"I'm sorry, Lydia." Norton hardened his expression. "I just... The thought isn't entirely what I pictured from a warrior like you."

"I didn't want to be a warrior. In fact, the thought disgusted me. It is why I left training."

"So then why are you here? Being a knight?" Norton asked.

"Being a wife isn't exactly a paying profession. Certainly not when you come across as a poor mate." She straightened her posture. "Made all the more impossible by my physique."

"Then it was circumstance?" He frowned. "Forced into the profession?"

"Who would take on a disgraced warrior? One who is the child of a powerful felid at that?"

"I suppose anyone would be essentially asking to be killed at that point." Norton looked out at the forest. "You're a lovely lady, Lydia." He turned back to her. "Once this is all over, why not take your funds and find yourself a proper husband? Certainly someone would agree."

"I suppose then, you mean to say you aren't interested in me?"

Norton furrowed his brow in confusion. "That's-- That's not to say I wouldn't be, but what use would I be as a mate?" Picturing Lydia as a wife was nigh impossible. In fact, he couldn't imagine her in much of anything except her raggedy nightgown and suit of armor.

"None, I suppose, but I must admit my options are limited."

Norton shook his head and gave a nervous smile. "Come now. Just like I said, Lydia, someone else would be willing to marry you."

"After what has happened?" Lydia started. Norton's smile lessened. "Unlikely. As much as I am free of legal repercussions, I am not free of the social ramifications."

"So I am merely the final option? I can't say that's exactly flattering."

"I apologize, I did not mean to offend you."

"Even still, Lydia, it's not as though I could fulfill your desire of being a mother." Imagining Lydia in a lewd situation wasn't something he expected, but didn't exactly dislike. He moved hands between them. "I am human and you are cat." Suddenly he hoped that referring to her as a cat was crude. "Pardon my wording."

"There is a spattering of human in my lineage, Norton." Lydia placed a hand on her chest. It trailed down past her breasts and onto her stomach. "I would be able to bear children easily than the average beast-woman. Certainly better than Ava."

Norton held up a hand in protest. "What makes you think I would want children with Ava?" She seemed more like a 'wife' but not someone who came across as motherly material. A part of him was even surprised he was entertaining the idea, but it had crossed his thoughts during their salacious encounters. "I understand we've had our moments. They still aren't enough to be an item."

"You may not want children with her, but I've seen her reactions. She would very much like to do so. Maybe as an escape from this life she's led up until now."

"So you want me to choose, then?" Norton asked.

"Not as such." Lydia leaned forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. Despite her hand being clad in that hard armor, he could feel the tenderness in the expression. "I simply figured it would be best to let you know our feelings on the subject." She gave him a gentle squeeze before releasing him. "I hope you do not mind if I sit here."

"I must admit, being so bare does make me object to it somewhat," Norton said.

"My apologies I figured it might make me more approachable."

"I am not that shal--" Norton paused. "Well, I suppose I am man, but it's quite alright, Lydia. You don't have to do that for my sake."

"Then I'll simply enjoy the fresh air for now."

The two returned to silence. Marriage? With either of them? It would be funny if it weren't happening to him. That's what loneliness does to you, Norton said to himself. You attract the other lonely types. He looked to Lydia out of the corner of his eye. The brute. Norton looked to the forest. Or the rogue. Lydia may have said it wasn't a choice, but it was plainly clear she was still hoping to be picked. And for what? A fleeting sense of normality? To chase a long loved dream of motherhood and the pain it brought? Though knowing Lydia, it's possible bearing children would hardly hurt her at all.

Chapter 12

A faint grinding of dirt could be heard off in the distance. "The wolf returns," Lydia said, standing up and retreating back to her tree. Norton looked around to find the source of the noise, eventually finding a shadowy figure intruding on the camp, dragging something after it. The campfire illuminated the wolfish face of the figure. Indeed, that was Ava. Trailing behind her was the corpse of a deer, which she dropped near the edge of the fire.

"Dinner is served," Ava said, stabbing into and slicing open the carcass. In the faint light Norton could make out a strange wound that wasn't a knife, but rather, seemed to be a bite on its neck. "Put your top on, Lydia. You're making us look ridiculous." Ava stabbed into the thing again, carving out a chunk of flesh and holding it over the fire. She moved over to Norton once she was done and sat down. "A choice piece for the human," Ava said with a smile.

Norton smiled in turn. "That's quite alright Ava, I can feed myself."

"Oh, but do you know the best part of a deer? Ah, ah, I don't think you do."

"Fair enough then," Norton replied, taking the knife from her. "I'll be sure to return this to you."

"Oh, not to worry, there's plenty more where that came from." Ava wagged a finger.

"Aren't you going to have some?" Norton asked.

Ava shook her head. "Believe me, I've already had my fair share."

"We still have a few rations in my pack."

"That's alright, dear. I'm fine."

"Alright." Norton started to chow on his selected piece. Indeed, it was a nice, firm cut of the creature and cooked excellently to bring out some of the faint flavors the deer gained from its grazing. Lydia walked over to the creature and carefully sliced out a piece of the animal, then similarly cooked it before returning to her spot.

"Oho, suddenly concerned with being clean, are we, Lydia?"

"Hush," Lydia replied, biting into her food.

"We'll continue heading north, correct?" Norton asked.

"Indeed we will. Should be farther than what Miriam is willing to travel. She's a simple creature after all." Ava chuckled.

Lydia lowered her food and said, "Do not expect her to give up easily just yet."

"Then we'll have to remain vigilant."

"Vigilant for a lumbering beast," Ava said. "How funny!"

"There are others in her group, Ava," Norton said.

"Rookie lowlifes wasting their lives for coin. They won't be an issue," Ava replied.

"You say that, but only one Miriam was enough to take on the both of you. What happens when she surrounds us?"

Ava lowered her head. "A fair point, I suppose." Norton drew his eyes down to her arm. He had almost forgotten they were there as they practically blended into her roguish appearance.

"I suggest you remove those bandages," Norton said. Ava quickly obeyed, slicing into the wrapping and unraveling it. He half expected to have to cover her up once again. She tossed what remained of it into the fire and began flexing her arm. "Everything feel normal?"

"Better than normal," Ava replied with a wide smile. Norton nodded and turned his attention to Lydia. Rather than the firm glare he expected from her, she was instead staring into the fire, eyes half-lidded. Either she was deep in thought or intensely bored. Norton figured he'd much prefer the latter as there could probably only be two things on her mind. Miriam, or him.

"Who will take first watch tonight?" Lydia suddenly asked, snapping her attention to Ava.

"Seeing as how it's your fault that we're out here, why don't you take the whole night?" Ava replied.

"Ava, that's not reasonable," Norton started. "You can't possibly expect Lydia to--"

"So be it," Lydia replied, tossing a bone into the fire.

Norton shook his head. "We're going to need all the sleep we can get." He was surprised Lydia didn't strike back in annoyance.

"And I am trained to go for a few nights without sleep. I am more than well rested with all the 'pleasures' we partook in the city."

Ava snickered. "Are you certain? I thought you'd stumble over once we left the bar."

"Are you ready to take your spot for the night?" Lydia asked plainly.

"I don't know. How about you, Norton, are you ready to call it a night?" she asked with a tilt of the head. Not particularly. He was worried either the two of them would go at each other's throats or something would slither in from the woods, but he supposed it was best that he take a good night's rest to ease his nerves.

"I suppose I'd better," he replied. Norton began to unpack their feeble bedding.

"Care to share?" the wolf said.

"Not for tonight, Ava," Norton said firmly. "If we are assaulted, it wouldn't help much to stumble over one another."

"For the next inn then, very well." She took her bedding, set it out, and settled in. Norton then handed Lydia her own, which she set aside for later. The man set his bedding on the opposite side of the fire, lest Ava get any ideas. Not that he would necessarily hate some... small amount of intimacy. More that he feared how Lydia would react. Maybe he was overthinking it, but her offer of a relationship seemed more than desperate. He lay down and shut his eyes. What hope did he have?

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"Norton," a soft but firm voice said. "Norton." There was a slight shake. "Norton, I have to speak to you." Norton opened his eyes. It was still pitch dark out. Lydia was crouched down next to him. Her light blue eyes glinted in the still potent campfire. She was wearing only her ragged gown, which was a curious choice for a nightwatchman, Norton figured.

"Is something wrong, Lydia?" he replied.

She placed a hand on her shoulder. "Keep your voice down." Lydia glanced past the fire, no doubt checking on Ava. "I have something to request of you." Lydia couldn't have worded it more vaguely. "Will you follow me?"

Norton glanced at the fire, trying to see if he could make out Ava past the flames. He couldn't. After much silence, he replied, "Alright." Lydia helped him up and lead him off into the woods. Not far enough to worry. Not far enough to frighten. But just far enough to make him wonder. They stopped in front of a large tree, where Lydia looked at him for a time. "Was there something you wanted?" he asked, unsure what to make of the situation.

Lydia sighed and held up her hand, palm toward him. "I ask something of you, Norton." Her hand faltered for a moment. "What is your last name?" she asked.

"Lowell," Norton replied.

Lydia raised her hand again. "Norton Lowell, I ask something of you." She nodded to her hand. "If you would please." Norton quickly placed his hand on her own, and she grasped it. "I ask of you to..." Her grip tightened. Her eyes narrowed. "To mate with me, Norton Lowell." Norton froze, unsure if he heard that correctly.

"Lydia?" he said, flabbergasted.

"I am asking, Norton. It is only a request." Lydia relaxed. "You may turn it down as you see fit."

Could he? He felt as though there was little choice, but she did ask, he supposed. "I must admit, that's a very sudden question." Norton looked to their little campsite in the distance. It seemed so far away now. He could make out that prone figure still sleeping. "What brought this on?"

"I have already bared my heart, Norton. This is the only opportunity we may have."

"And what if we're approached?"

"As much as Miriam is stupid, I do not think she would attack so closely to organized forces. Especially with my father at their head." She paused. "He was correct. You are indeed heart of civilization and... an oddly relaxing partner to have."

"Haven't you given thought to another partner?"

"You know that I cannot. Do you not like me?" Those words caused his heart to stutter. Surely there was some arousal to her powerful form. He was still a man, through and through, and no doubt he had been put through more stress than he cared to. And yet, there was one hangup. "You care for Ava, then?" Norton looked to her eyes. "Is that it?"

"I suppose you could say that. Not that I expect anything out of it." There was almost none. Ava still had that touch of dubiousness to everything she said. That kiss at the inn. Did it truly mean anything? The comfort at the baths. It could have all been a ploy just to draw him back in. For all her faults, Lydia didn't lie, nor did she exploit him. "I would say that I like you, yes." Perhaps now was her exploitation, however.

"Then"--Lydia unhooked an arm on her dress--"you would care to be with me? For just a night?" Norton's loins stirred. His body craved another's touch, yet his mind still tugged on the reins. Was this right? Ava wasn't your partner but you had shared more with her, hadn't you? Then again, she had pushed you into those moments. Norton looked to their hands. Lydia was asking. You were equals. Partners to share, not to take.

"Wouldn't I be your first?" Norton whispered. "The first to claim you like this?"

Lydia's ears flittered. "You would." She squeezed his hand again. "A human would be an odd choice for my first, I suppose. Though it is also odd that we are together in the first place."

"And you are OK with this? You do realize the... the gravity of it all?"

"I do." Lydia tugged on their grasp, bringing him closer. "Will you be my mate, Norton Lowell?" Norton's thoughts boiled over, piling on themselves in confusion. All he could manage eventually was a nod as he became light headed. Lydia grasped his other hand and pulled him into a small kiss. "Would you then, teach me?" She dropped her dress, revealing the rest of her snow white fur. Her tail whipped out from behind her and began moving in its own strange ways, betraying her mostly subdued demeanor. "Show me." Norton briefly wondered if he was really going to do this before undoing his pants and exposing his growing erection.

Lydia took a step back, leaving his grasp. She looked down at his member, somewhat embarrassing him with her intent focus. "As smooth as the rest of your body," she said, running a hand down his chest. "May I see the rest of you in full?" There was slight amusement to her stoic questions. Norton obliged her, letting the rest of his coverings drop to the forest floor. There was a nip in the air that rushed by him, causing goosebumps to run across his skin. She continued to explore his body with curiosity. Norton took the opportunity

to do the same with her, running his hands across her soft, deep fur that hid a muscular form beneath it.

As Norton slid a hand over her breasts, Lydia let out a small mewl. The cute moment was completely lost on her as she moved over him unfaltered. Their shared groping came to a stop once Lydia pulled him into a hug which, at their differing sizes, rested his head on her chest. His erection pushed against her thighs, flanked on either side by ticklish fur. Her powerful heart sounded through her chest. She sighed. "Thank you," she whispered. Norton refrained from moving his hips, though he desperately wanted to. Instead, he tightened their embrace, making certain she knew he appreciated the moment as much as she did.

"I suppose we should begin, then," Lydia said. She was still herself, even during a time like this. Lydia stepped around the tree and pulled out her bedding. Just how long was she planning this? She set it out next to them, then lay down face up. "Shall we?" Norton wasn't going to deny her now, despite the small thoughts that stewed in his mind. He knelt in front of her, settling between her legs. Was this truly happening? Was he going to lay with Lydia so plainly? After all that had happened in his life, what choice did he have? Surely his choices were limited now. He took a deep breath and pushed the head of his cock up against her bright pink slit. Lydia gasped, then shuddered.

"I'll go slowly," Norton whispered. Lydia nodded with a low growl. Her tail slowly whipped about. Lydia's entrance was not entirely alien as he expected, in fact it had felt much like the vague memories he had of his last, distant experiences. Her legs wrapped around him as he inched forward, which made him reassess his memories. No, in fact, this was far better. She was as warm as she would have expected. Her insides slightly quivered as he fully inserted himself into her. Norton groaned once he was fully immersed into Lydia. It had been far too long since he felt that encompassing heat, melting away all your woes. After collecting himself, he asked, "Are you alright?"

Lydia's breaths became heavy, but she was still as stoic as she had ever been. "Yes." Heave. "Yes, I am. Please. Please continue." Norton leaned forward, bracing himself on the ground. He sighed as he pulled out, exposing himself back to the cool of the outside, and relishing the strands of fur that ran across his skin. With a firm push back in, Norton sunk back into her with a moan. Lydia wasn't far behind him, moaning soon after, followed by a cute mewl. "I had not ever expected this," she said quietly between bated breaths. Norton eventually worked himself into a slow back and forth, working out more tender noises from Lydia with every thrust.

"Stop for a moment," Lydia said, catching her breath. Norton froze in place, as difficult as it was. "Apologies... It was simply too much." She took a deep breath. "Are you enjoying yourself?" Norton couldn't help but smile at her stilted response.

"I am. Thank you, Lydia."

"We are partners now." She placed a hand on his cheek. "It matters that we both enjoy this precious moment." Partners. Such a simple word, and yet it carries such a heavy implication. At the same time there was a pang of some underlying pain, writhing in his skin. Norton eased down onto her, trying to find some comfort in Lydia's soft fur. She brought a hand onto his back. "You may move again." Norton hesitated at her words. His body craved it, instantly

reacting to that simple sentence. Yet that pain lingered underneath, poking, prodding, annoying. In the end, lust had won out and Norton's hips quickly worked back into thrusting. Not as excitedly as before.

Norton buried his face in-between Lydia's breasts, listening to the sound of her deep breaths. She squirmed and writhed underneath him, but remained generally stoic in her behavior. He briefly wondered if she was struggling to keep up a cold facade. Is a knight not supposed to whimper during lovemaking? The thought was a cute retreat from the reality of what was occurring. The flickers of the distant fire caught his eyes every so often, calling back to him. "Would you mind if I--" Norton started.

"I do not," Lydia replied. Not wanting to speak any further, Norton increased his thrusts. Pleasure smothered out pain. Lydia grabbed onto him tightly, claws teasing at his skin and threatening to pierce into him. The danger brought an added excitement to his bothered thoughts. Legs slowly wrapped around his waist, sealing their connection. Nowhere to go. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on his part but it felt as though her legs pushed back for every time Norton pulled out, pushing him cleanly back in.

Lydia's compliance only made Norton thrust faster. Moments later, Lydia froze in place and let out a quiet, shaking groan. The man came to a stop, much to his libido's annoyance, letting her ride out the orgasm that took her. Her legs shook briefly, then came to a halt. A gentle pat let Norton know to start moving again. Lydia growled, clearly becoming far too overstimulated for her to handle. This was her first time after all. And somehow, it felt like his first as well.

Norton came to a forceful stop, pushing his hips as far as possible. Lydia groaned in unison with Norton as he came, shooting deep into her. A brief thought of impregnation crossed his mind, both worrying and causing another flash of heat in his heart. He managed another rope of semen and went limp. While the afterglow was heavenly, reality quickly swept back in. Bringing the night, the cold, and the sounds of the forest right back to the forefront of Norton's mind. Lydia hadn't moved or said anything, only making soft purrs in-between scattered breaths. That fire in the distance continued to burn. His eyes struggled to peer past it.

Chapter 13

Norton awoke with a start, sitting up. He found himself back in his bedding, positioned right next to the fire. The previous night had been a blur for the most part, aside from-- Norton glanced around him, finding no trace of his illicit lover. Ava, however, was poking and the ashen remains of the fire with a stick. "Good morning," she said plainly. "Had a good sleep?"

"Where's Lydia?" Norton asked warily.

"She went off to find a pond to wash off in."

"I see." Norton averted his gaze and stood up. He began folding up his bedding.

"I tried, you know? I was really trying," Ava said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Norton replied.

"You know what I mean." Ava tossed the stick into the firepit. "You reek of it. You and your clothes." She stood up. "Why did you do it?"

There was no point in lying. "She asked," Norton said simply. There might have been more to it than that. "I don't know."

"So? Would you have done it if I asked?" Ava said. Her gash became more apparent as she spoke and a frown formed on her face.

Norton turned away. "You've never asked, Ava." It hurt to say that somehow, yet it was true, wasn't it?

Ava stepped up to him and grabbed him by the chin, forcing their eyes to lock. "Didn't it fucking matter when we made that promise?!"

Norton pulled free. "What promise, Ava? You kissed me! That's it! May I remind you what happened afterward when you two nearly killed one another? Is that improvement?!" Norton huffed. All the hot air had blown out of him. He felt as though he were only a hollow shell now.

Ava stepped back, her frown only hardening into a scowl. "That drunk bitch tried to take you. What was I supposed to do? Let you go?" Her scowl wavered. "Let her take that kiss without a word?" A tear trailed down her face as she stepped back up to Norton again. "I wasn't going to do that!" Her hand formed into a fist and she weakly beat on his shoulder. "It's not fair," she whimpered. "It's not fair."

The pain flared in Norton again. "How am I supposed to trust you, Ava?"

"This isn't about trust, is it?" She hooked a finger into the scar that ripped across her mouth, pulling it back to reveal more of the gored flesh. "It's this, isn't it? You would rather be with a

golem than this slaughtered meat, right?"

"Ava. This is only about trust." He placed a hand on her shoulder, but was quickly slapped away. "Do you truly think I'd be scared away by your damned wound?"

"Don't you dare speak my name after what you've done. Don't you--" She broke into more tears, falling to her knees. "Don't you-- Damnit! Damnit, Norton! " Norton frowned. You've chosen terribly. He quickly sat down next to her.

"Ava, I'm sorry. I..." What was he supposed to say? The mere sight of Ava's displeasure tore at his heart, but what was he sorry for? Sorry for choosing someone else? Sorry for denying her aggressive advances? Sorry. "I'm sorry." He embraced her. "I'm sorry I didn't think of you." He tightened his grip. "I should have given you some chance, but I was a fool and--"

"You let that cat soil you." Ava grabbed at him, forcing him into a kiss. Her tongue forced its way into his mouth, before pulling back in an instant. "Sorry," she whispered into his ear. "I can't just let go of you. Let me try, please." Her snout pushed into his ear.

Norton pulled his head away from her, but didn't stop his embrace. "Ava, I don't know if--"

"It's not too late."

"Ava."

"Lydia doesn't have to know! Just give me a chance."

Norton frowned. "You know why I can't do that."

"Did you actually give me a chance?"

"No. No I didn't." Of course he didn't, and how could he? Yet, in some way he felt that he should. Why? Perhaps he was a pathetic soul, wanting to ease her pain. Perhaps the scar in her face made him pity her. Or yet perhaps, he truly had some misaligned feelings for her that he couldn't yet express. The first woman he mingled with in a while, joining her beastly heart to his. "Then you'll calm the feud? For our the sake of our lives?" Ava nodded. "I will try, for your sake." And only her sake.

Thoughts of Lydia hit back. Norton stood up, helping Ava right up alongside him. Were you committed to the cat now? Have you made your choice? "Believe me. I will be better," Ava said, grabbing at his hand. "Believe me." Norton could only give an uncertain nod back. "The cat approaches." She broke her hand and sniffled, wiping away whatever moisture fell on her fur. And like that, everything was snapped back to normality, leaving Norton in the wake of uncertainty. He sat back down and awaited Lydia's fiery response, but it didn't come. Instead she calmly took her spot on her bedding and quietly groomed her unkempt fur into place.

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The group had quietly moved back onto the road without so much as a word. Norton walked in-between the wolf and cat as before, but rather than feeling like an uneasy boundary between them, he instead felt like a prize to be pawed after, to be played with. His allies felt

less like companions and more like hunters chasing a prey they couldn't have. That made three pursuers, and an untold amount of minions scattered through the mix. The pressure of the world was on him, and it was all because he felt he could be of some help for a simple task. Simple money. He should've known work is never simple. What was even the point of his presence? He was a dangling deadweight at this point.

"We have not seen Miriam in quite some time. Keep on guard for anything," Lydia said.

"I pray she's gotten sick of the land and crawled back to the ocean," Ava replied.

Every word they spoke made Norton worry they would only break into a fight to the death, thus he kept his mouth firmly shut. Focusing on the road ahead was difficult, as he only felt he was marching toward the enemy. As if Miriam would turn around the corner and break their bodies in one swift motion. Though for however long they walked, the pain never came. Indeed, the few people to cross paths with them seemed less than fit to break anything in their bodies, bearing wounds themselves. Several wagons of them rolled on by without so much as a word. Only curious glances.

Worry eventually got the better of Norton. "Are we certain we're going the right way?" he asked in a hushed tone.

"What do you expect when treading on war?" Ava replied. Norton's eyes widened. "I forgot you come from a smaller world. Don't worry about it. I doubt it would affect you anyways."

"It's affecting me now with all these dying people," Norton said.

"Warriors," Lydia said sternly. "They were aware of what they were fighting. Do not worry for their sake."

It wasn't long before the group came to the source of the trail of people. A small camp had been established in the area, and it was clear it was dedicated to treating the wounded and the fleeing. "I would say it's time for a break, wouldn't you agree?" Norton asked. Lydia and Ava stared at him, but eventually nodded.

"Do not expect any goodwill from the people here," Lydia said. She and Ava stood at the edge of the camp, watching the busywork as it rolled by. They stood on either side of the entrance, like beastly guardians. Norton himself took to treading inward. He had little to offer in comparison to the field doctors here, but he felt as though he had to assist in some way. Moreover it gave him some escape from the grasp of his partners. A terrible idea to leave them in each other's gaze, and yet at the moment all he cared about was himself. For once, he figured he could afford that.

Norton navigated to a more central tent, where inside he could see rows of beds, some not even framed, holding the battered forms of different people. Some human and some beast-folk. Amidst the wounded there were a few healers going about their business, watching over all of the injured. In the center sat a male feline at a desk, going over several pages of something. Death counts, possibly. Norton approached them. Without lifting their head, they growled something in what he could only assume was feline language. "Pardon me," Norton replied.

"A feline not knowing their own tongue. Truly dark times indeed," he said.

"I'm not--"

The feline glanced up. "Oh." He tilted his head. "I assumed by your sc-- Never mind." He ran his eyes across Norton in clear confusion. "You don't appear injured. Head for Hull if you have no business here." He waved him off.

"I was hoping I could assist in some way," Norton said, pulling off his pack.

"Why?" the feline shot back. "There's no profit to be made here, if that's what your intention is. Though I doubt I would accept the help of an apothecary in such dishevelment."

"Believe me when I say that I have no interest in profit. I just find my experience has not been put to use and I have supplies to assist."

"And believe me when I say I find it hard to believe someone such as yourself would be so willing to help. I should trust you to tend to the wounded out of a friendly desire?"

"That is correct," Norton said. While it made sense to be so suspicious, Norton was becoming increasingly aggravated. "I have the salves and tinctures for smaller wounds."

The feline's tail whipped out from behind him. "So be it. I suppose you can't cause much harm to the lesser injured." He growled something, and another one of the feline nurses came to his side. He nodded to Norton. The nurse presented the way, and Norton followed.

"Thank you," Norton said as he departed.

Back outside, there were more of what appeared to be refugees and some sparse soldiers. More guards stood on the sidelines, talking between one another and occasionally glancing out into the group. It was little wonder that he was entrusted with the help here. "Start wherever you'd like," the nurse said.

"Certainly," Norton said. He went about looking for the more grievous wounds, but none seemed to be in any real danger. Out of the soldiers, he had to wonder how many had taken on wounds to get out of duty. Not wanting to delay any longer, he started on one patient with abrasions. Salve here, rub there, done. Don't touch it. Onto the next. He continued this process until the nurse watching over him began dialogue.

"You're a traveler?" they asked. It was somewhat difficult to make out their sex through their clothing, but based on their voice, Norton assumed they were female. Black and orange splotches of fur made up their face.

"What makes you say that?" Norton said.

"You're a mess of scents. Odd scents. Familiar scents."

"I suppose you could say that I am. Not that I wish to be anymore."

"You've mated with a feline too," they said flatly. They sounded curious, as painful as that was.

Norton turned his head and silently cursed their sense of smell. "I suppose I have. What of it?"

"I've just never heard of such a thing. It's dripping off you at that." Norton saw a few eyes come his way, so he continued through the injured at a hurried pace.

"Yes, well, I'd rather not speak about it right now. We have work to do, don't we?"

"Apologies, it's such a bizarre feeling to notice a mark like that coming from a human." The nurse shut their maw for the next patient, but quickly started up their barrage of questions after that. "What higher class was it?"

"Pardon?" Norton asked, halfway through wrapping a cut. "Sorry," he said to the patient. They moved onto the next one.

"The higher felid. It must have been an honor." An honor? That couldn't be more far from the truth. In fact, it felt as though he might die if it was brought up in the wrong company.

"Let us just focus on the task at hand, if you would." He paused for a moment. "Actually, might I ask you a question?"

"I believe that's fair."

"Do the... felids mate for life?"

"That depends on their hierarchy. Which is why it must be an honor to be chosen like that." They smiled.

Oh no. "Naturally." Norton and the nosy nurse continued through the patients until they were all treated. It hardly put a dent in what Norton was carrying, but it felt good to be of some use for once, or treat something that didn't risk death. Norton glanced aside, feeling eyes-- or rather an eye glaring at him. Ava leaned up against a set of boxes, tearing into meat. She gave him a small wave. "I believe this is where we part ways. Thank you for your service."

The cat looked to him and nodded. "Thank you as well. Do give my best impressions to the higher one!" In a flash they smeared their hand against Norton's sleeve, no doubt imbuing it with some terrible scent. He had just about enough of those.

"Right," Norton replied. He shook his arm and headed off to Ava's side.

"Care for a taste?" Ava asked, presenting the thing to him.

"Not at the moment, thank you." Norton wanted to ask where Lydia might've gotten to. He decided not to after realizing how Ava might react. "Settled in comfortably to the camp?"

Ava looked up at him from her meal then tore out another chunk. "No. I already want to leave. Far too similar to home." She gulped down the last of the treat. "I don't suppose you'll

be mating with that cat as well?"

"No." Norton frowned.

"Forgive me. I still feel the blade in my back. It's hard to not joke about it."

"There was no betrayal, we were hardly in a relationship, Ava. The sooner you admit that, the easier it'll be."

"We shared that promising kiss, didn't we?"

Norton huffed. "I suppose we did, but does that and an apology make up for what's happening? Or what has happened?"

"And? What should I do, pray tell?" She shook her head and sighed. "I can't believe this, I'm arguing with a man to make him love me. It's hit me like a runaway horse how pathetic I've become." Ava chuckled.

"Remember that dinner we had? Before Lydia, that is."

"I do."

"That was nice."

Ava's expression dropped and she nodded. "I get it." She turned, letting her back rest on the boxes. "I was angry, you know. Really angry, but the more I thought, the more it made sense. I suppose self-control is part of being a knight. I can only imagine how much worse it would have been had she not done that training." She giggled softly, but then frowned. "Tell me, Norton."

"Yes?"

"My wound. My eye. Does it matter to you? They weren't what made you do that, was it?"

Norton shook his head. "No, Ava, they weren't." He tentatively reached up and traced a finger along the wound's edge. That empty eye stared back. "To tell you the truth, that's part of your charm. I... I don't think I'd be able to keep up such a cheery demeanor like that. You have strength far beyond what I could muster." Norton lowered his hand and looked away in slight embarrassment.

Ava leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you." As much as it pained him, that simple act was enough to fill him with warmth. "Desperation is obvious but I've really come to like you. Honestly." Her hand reached up toward his head tentatively, then pulled back. "I feel like such a fool speaking like this. How about we enjoy a fine drop of swill instead?" Norton opened his mouth to dissuade the suggestion but was stopped by an uproar nearby. "The feline is back to ruining our fun," Ava grumbled.

The pair navigated around some tents to find Lydia being accosted by some other felines. From the expression on the unfamiliar cats' faces, the situation must've been quite amusing. "Rejoice, friends," the feline at the front started, "for the deserter has found its way home

from human lands." Norton began to move to Lydia's side but was promptly yanked back into place by Ava.

"This is not your confrontation, don't involve yourself," the wolfess said.

"We are part of the same group, aren't we?" Norton replied.

Ava released her grasp on the man. "Sometimes I wonder."

Norton walked over to Lydia's side. Before he could even greet her, the other feline spoke up again. "I knew I smelled something amiss here." Norton sighed. Everyone really knew. "Brought yourself a trophy as well, have you?" Their brown fur clashed horribly with their red garments that made them appear as some sort of official within whatever military force they were in. A few soldiers stood behind them at attention, though not particularly interested in whatever was occurring.

"I do not know who you are and I do not care. Please leave," Lydia replied.

"Oh no. I get to see where the pride of the Kaur bloodline has run off to. Father's money has gone dry?"

"Thank you for coming, Norton," Lydia said, nodding to the man. Norton looked to her and returned the gesture. "If you would," Lydia said, returning to the official, "I have no interest in your petty struggles of superiority."

"Is that so?" The masculine feline stepped forward, his soldiers in tow. "What do you have interest in?" His whiskers twitched. "The boy, perhaps?" The feline's hand reached out for his shoulder but was caught by a grey hand.

"Do not touch my trophy, thank you," Ava said, stepping forward between the human and cat. Lydia only glared.

The soldier yanked his hand away and dusted it off. "I should have you gutted for that."

"Yeah?" Ava snickered. "Likewise." She patted Norton's shoulder.

"So one Kaur, one wolf, and one human. This is Byron's spawn at its finest." His nose twitched. "And soon to be, spawn of spawn." Ava huffed at that. Lydia's blank stare hadn't changed.

"Have you finished your pointless prattle?" Lydia asked. "We have matters to attend to."

"Oh you bet we do," Ava replied.

Norton shook his head and said, "Look, I'm sorry whatever trouble we've caused you, Mister ah-- Sir, but we must get going."

"Hold on now," the soldier replied. "I have something to ask of you, now that the opportunity presents itself."

"You heard the man. Get lost. We're not doing anything for you," Ava said. She waved him away.

"You had best listen unless you want to lose your other eye," the official feline replied.

Ava played her hand along one of her many knives. "Mhmm?"

"Ava, let's not push ourselves back into trouble so soon," Norton whispered to her.

"Anything for you." She pulled her hand away.

"And what is it you want?" Lydia asked. She crossed her arms.

The soldier smiled. "I'm sure you're aware of the bounty on the fish." Ugh, Miriam. Norton hoped he had heard the last of her.

"We don't need money, thanks," Ava said. Her words almost surprised Norton.

"Oh, money isn't the point." He shook his head. "A bit of greasing on the wheels of promotion is all I ask. So the task is simple. Kill the fish and I will take that little bit of notoriety."

Ava crossed her arms and said, "Yeah? How about we just leave and we won't have to tell anyone about your stupid little scheme? Hm?"

"What? And let everyone know how Byron manipulated a few things?" He placed his hands behind his back. "I don't think you'd like that."

"Feh, what do I care?"

"Ava," Norton started, "we should care. We don't need to continue our rat race forever."

"Maybe Lydia can't. I can." Ava looked to Norton.

"Like it or not, Lydia is our friend."

The wolfess tossed up a hand. "That was ruined quite some time ago! Keep up, Norton!"

Norton frowned. "Ava."

"Fine."

"And that is all?" Lydia asked.

"That is all," the official replied. "Though with your little misfits, I wonder how that will turn out."

"So be it."

"Look. Without another thought to you, she accepts," Ava whispered to Norton.

"I would have accepted the same," Norton replied.

The soldier waved his hand. "Now leave. We don't need ex-convicts scaring the populace." Norton sighed. Just when he thought he could experience more rest. Already he was worried about having to go up against the lamprey. Not because of her overpowering strength, but the fact that he had to do it with Ava and Lydia. He placed a hand over one of his pockets and held it tightly.

"Naturally," Lydia said. "Come, Norton, we have work to attend to. You as well, wolf." Another huff from Ava. Norton nodded, glad that Ava didn't have a fit. The official didn't say another word. The trio moved on, passing by the tents and back onto the road. "Miriam is likely still in pursuit. I suggest we make a circular turn backward and come down upon her."

"Good idea, cat. Maybe we should just tell her band of lackeys to simply leave too?" Ava responded. As much as Norton didn't want them to have another spat, Ava was right. What were they going to do about the large band following her?

"And you think they'll be an issue?"

"Lydia, you hardly managed to repel her last time," Norton replied. He was going to add "Ava" to that grievance, but decided not to bring up the pain of her wound.

"I would have crushed her had I not been stopped by the guards." She shook her head. "Regardless, we have to deal with Miriam swiftly."

"No, we don't. We can keep moving forward and forget about this stupid battle." Ava moved closer to Norton. "Where we can live without issue."

"The Western Militarized forces have already spread north, wolf. Any perceived life you could have would end swiftly, especially knowing that my-- Lord Byron, has taken care of our problem."

Ava growled. "Cats. Everywhere. Norton, let's take a ship east. Find an island."

"Ava, I can't do that," Norton said. "Even if you want a life with me... I can't do it on the run like that. We aren't cut from the same cloth. Do you know what it's been like, worrying about that fish?"

"Norton, Norton, Norton." Ava pulled him into a firm embrace. "You don't need to worry about a thing when you're with me." Her voice was soft and comforting. For a moment, he did feel safe, wrapped in slender and fluffy arms. Her breath was hot on his neck. She pulled back, the safety pulling away with it. "How about it?"

"Thank you, Ava, truly, but I wouldn't be able to bear seeing you hurt trying to fend for me." He turned to look at the feline. "Neither you, Lydia. You're both my friends." Ava's eyes narrowed but she made no protest. Her hands slipped away from him.

"Well, thank you."

"Thank you, Norton," Lydia said. A slight smile broke her hardened visage. Norton quickly remembered that without Miriam driving them away, they would turn inward. On each other. On him. This would have to go on forever regardless. "So what shall we do?" She stepped forward, coming up to Ava's side.

"You're asking me?" Norton replied. Ava glared at Lydia. "I understand." He looked to the ground and rubbed his forehead. "You two have to realize we can't go on like this. Not when we have to run, do you understand?" The two didn't say a word. "Do you understand?" They eventually nodded. Norton glanced back at the camp, wondering just how easy it would be to slip away from all of this. Run off into the hills and escape. He couldn't, not now. "What are we going to do about Miriam?"

"Kill her," Ava replied.

"We have to be more intelligent about it, don't you think?"

Lydia nodded and said, "She's most likely traveling with at least twenty men by my last measure."

"She could have taken on more," Ava replied. "Assuming some saps were willing."

"She would have had to have avoided Hull, right?" Norton asked.

"Miriam hasn't been allowed in for quite some time. It would mean death," said Lydia. "I would say no more than ten more men harvested from the spatters of towns around."

"Thirty men," Norton mumbled. How were they to deal with thirty whole men, plus one odd fish? Ava and Lydia were capable, but they were not taking down an army. "We only need to take care of Miriam. Is there some way we can lure her out?"

"Gold?" Ava said. All of which had been stored away in Norton's pack for safe keeping.

"We would need to send a message to her," Lydia replied. "Something that would draw her away from the horde. Enticing."

"Mehni. She could do that, right?" Norton said. She still somewhat owed them in a way, and she did work with Miriam before. The thought of tossing her into the flame like that didn't sit right with Norton, but he had best do it for his own sake.

"Must we?" the wolf said with a sigh.

"We must," the cat replied.

"And, dear Norton, pray tell how we find that little gremlin? Shall we sniff her out?" She tapped her nose.

"Not as though that would be impossible, would it?" Norton asked. As amusing as the thought was, they were still beastly. Admittedly, however, he wasn't sure how far that extended, nor was he going to ask lest they see it as an insult. "I doubt she's far behind us. Having helped with her situation, she may still be following us." And having been tossed

right back into the situation they had crawled out of, she couldn't bargain for much else. "We have more than enough gold to spare for her services."

"What? I receive the largest payment of my life and you want to fritter it away so soon?"

Norton looked to Ava. "We will have no life if you don't. Certainly no island getaways either."

"That is not to say the entirety of the gold will be wasted. There may yet be something to scrape by on," Lydia replied.

Ava snapped to the knight. "Don't you think for a second that you'll--"

"Ava!" Norton barked.

The wolf growled and crossed her arms. "Fine. We find the kobold. Get her to lure Miriam. Then what?"

"We kill her," Lydia said. That was essentially the plan, as crude as it felt to Norton. Miriam may have wanted him dead in turn--or perhaps he would be a mindless casualty on her hunt for the cat and wolf--but planning the death of another felt a step too far. Isn't this what you wanted? To leave the confines of the shining forest and enjoy the world? The world bit back. These were its circumstances.

"I agree with the cat." And its circumstances were wholly embraced by its denizens. "No help from the others. No guards. We get rid of her. Leave the body to rot."

"Let's get moving before someone else drags us into another circumstance," Norton said. "We'll take one of the off-beaten paths."

"Lead on, Norton."

Lydia nodded, but before turning to leave, she grabbed Norton by the arm and held it up to her face. Her whiskers tickled as they ran over his skin. "Do not indulge in another feline's play for status," she said before letting go.

—

Despite not being on the main path, there were still a flow of people back and forth. Refugees, guards, soldiers, and those looking to make quick coin. Then there was the three of them. Mercenaries now, or at least Norton was now. Not a fighter, merely a mass being dragged along by Ava and Lydia. Except now he had to lead because of a twisted affection. At this point he couldn't see himself with either of them. The more he thought back to their illicit encounter, the more Norton wondered if Lydia had truly cared for him or if it was just a petty way to get back at Ava for their bar spat. At the same time, she had marked him, leading to some horribly embarrassing moments. Though for all he knew, Ava did much of the same with how much she pawed at him.

Norton could hardly pull himself out of his thoughts about his inevitable doom. He hoped Mehni would come soon and end this long trek. Not that he was looking forward to being

beaten to a pulp, but the sooner he got it over with, the sooner he could stop fretting about it. Not many figures matched the description of "short and scaly," or "small and hooded." It was possible she stuck to Hull after all and they were only wasting their time. "I smell something," Lydia said suddenly.

"Manure and sad lives, perhaps?" Ava replied.

"Kobold." Norton perked up and looked around, but could find no small lizard anywhere. As a wagon passed, Lydia lunged to the left and yanked something off.

"Augh! You damned brute!" yelled the small figure. "You have no sense of respect within your hollow skull!"

"I take back everything I said, Mehni." Ava smiled.

"Set her down, Lydia," Norton said. Lydia complied. Mehni dusted herself off and huffed.

"Make sure you put your forsaken knight on a leash," the kobold said.

"Mehni, we have a favor to ask of you," Norton said, lowering himself to her eyelevel. "We still have plenty of gold as compen--"

"As cute you are, smooth one, I don't want to have anything to do with your traveling troupe."

"Reconsider," Lydia said.

"Fall upon your blade and I just might, cat. You and your family are poison."

"I take back everything. Everything, everything," Ava said.

"You won't even hear what the request is?" Norton asked.

"Oh, I know what the request is. Something only the two ruffians won't do themselves." She was more than right.

"And something I cannot do. So I ask you myself."

"Something you can't do? You don't put enough faith in yourself, cute one." She tapped him on the nose.

"We need you to attract Miriam's attention," Norton said simply. Mehni's face scrunched, and she bared her fangs.

"What have they put you up to, poor pet?" She shook her head. "Those miserable goons."

"We're still standing here, Mehni," Ava said.

"And that is my way of saying you should be gone." Mehni sighed. "Now why would you want such a thing, precious pet?"

"We have to... deal with Miriam."

"So innocent. You want to kill her, then?" Mehni nodded.

"Yes, that's the word I'm looking for." As much as it stung his tongue. "I know you're the only one who she might still trust."

"So you see the poor, defenseless kobold as bait? Hm?"

"I've seen Kunka at work, you're not defenseless. You just need to move Miriam somewhere is all I ask. Please."

"Oh, such a charmer. Lovely Norton." She pulled her hood down to reveal those little horns, then glanced down the road. "Tell you what, Norton. I have a proposal of my own." He could hear Ava sigh behind him. "I'll do your job. One thousand pieces of gold." Norton reached back to retrieve the the payment. "And." He froze. "One kiss from you." Naturally, it wouldn't be so easy.

"Maybe I don't take back what I said," the wolfess muttered. Lydia made no objections, but Norton could almost feel her eyes digging into his back, straight through his baggage.

"Mehni," Norton said. "I really don't think we can do this right now." For several reasons. One of which might be her life.

"Nonsense." Her small hands gripped the sides of his head and pulled him in close. Her scaly snout mashed against his lips. A tongue quickly slithered into his mouth, filling him with a curious taste. Norton just let it happen, lest someone get hurt.

"Alright, you've had your fun!" Ava said. A forceful yank back ended the kiss. A bag of coin plopped on the ground next to the illicit couple. "Now count your coin and be done with it."

"Not the best kisser, but we can work on that, can't we?"

"You can not," Lydia replied.

"Whenever the brutes ditch you, I'll always be here." Mehni's eyes narrowed. "Always." She laughed and dug into the bag of coins. Another yank up from Lydia steadied Norton back on his feet. "I'm shocked. Not a single fake in here. Father's money really pays, hm?" Norton quickly put a hand on Lydia's now balled fist. The cat huffed in response, shaking her head. He tried not to think of the state either of them would be in had he not been there.

"It should be more than enough, Mehni."

"Of course it is, but how could I miss out on a show like this."

"Mehni, please."

The kobold slowed her riffling. "You know, you're going to have to take charge eventually, Norton. You can't trust these two as far as you can throw them. With your muscles, that's not very far." He supposed she was right. He had already fallen into the leader role out of

necessity rather than interest. But trust? The only thing he trusted them not to do is kill one another.

"Then you have your money. Now listen."

"Ooh, so quick!"

"Get word to Miriam that there's some extra treasures for her, but you must speak to her privately."

"Where exactly?" She bit into a coin, testing it.

"I doubt she would go so far north, so into the woods east of Hull, near the coast." Norton looked to the animal women next to him. "Does that sound right?" Both of them nodded. "Good. Stress the point of privacy and treasures."

"Yes, yes, I get it." She hefted the bag over her shoulder, noticeably putting her off balance. "What makes you think she trusts me, though?"

"Nothing, but we have little choice."

"And it is a good way to burn tainted coin," Lydia said.

"Care to give more, then?" the kobold asked.

"No."

"Figures. Consider it done, Norton." Mehni patted his hand. "If you're still alive by the end, I'll be happy to see you again." Him? What about her? Actually, that made quite a bit of sense.

"Say, kobold, indulge me in a question, will you?" Ava said. Mehni sized her up and eventually nodded. "What were you doing out this way?"

"Avoiding the cat's family before they dragged me into another little job." She looked to Norton. "And maybe I wanted another glance at the pretty boy."

"Be on your way," Lydia said. She flicked a hand.

"Believe me, I am. Farewell!" Mehni scampered over to the other side of the road. As soon as another carriage came by, she disappeared. Off back to Hull, then. Dragged back into hell by a thread. If murder was an option, why didn't they simply kill that damned cat in the camp? Norton shook his head. Now he was wanting bloodshed.

"Something wrong, Norton?" Ava asked.

"I just think this is going to get far worse."

"Not while I'm by your side. Though we may have to ditch someone else."

"Let's not start fighting again, alright?" Norton replied, holding up a hand. Lydia stayed silent, but the man knew she was stewing. "We have to settle this."

"There's nothing to settle. We knew what happened. The one who started it should apologize, shouldn't they?"

"And you?" Lydia said. "Have you ever apologized for what you have done?"

Ava snapped to Lydia. "You know damned well I have. You're at fault here." Ava jabbed a finger into the feline's armor. "We were friends, and you had the damned gall to do that to me."

"Ava, I'm at fault too," Norton replied, stepping forward.

"I know!" Ava huffed. She put on a smile and turned to Norton. "I know. And we'll be working on that." She looked back to Lydia, smile gone in a flash. "What have you done to better yourself? You think you deserve anything?"

"And what do you deserve for all you have done?" Lydia said. "Something to soothe your woes in knowing that the only thing that could possibly love you is something you violated?"

Norton reached forward and grabbed both of their hands. "We're not doing this here. We're not doing this now. We have to get moving back to Hull, OK?"

"And when is the proper time?"

Norton paused and looked past them. "I don't know."

Chapter 14

The trip had tossed them back into the thick of things. At that moment, the trio had moved back to the exterior of Hull. In the distance Norton could see that shining golden bell. It was merely a speck now, and hardly noticeable through all the foliage, but he so desperately wanted to be back there. Maybe he should've just stayed with Ava there. Forgotten about all of his woes behind the safety of large walls and even larger military. But Lydia? He couldn't just leave her either. Norton cursed himself for running circles around in his head again.

"This is far enough," Lydia said.

"And so we simply wait here?" Ava asked. "Days? Of this?"

"It may not be days, Ava," Norton replied. "Miriam is coming toward us, right? Then Mehni will only reach her quicker." Lydia had already begun setting herself up against a tree, undoing her armor.

"Look at her, already on her exhibitionist show." The wolfess scowled. "And I'm the disgusting whore?"

Lydia undid her gauntlets and sat down on a log. "You are," she said simply.

"Fine." Ava took Norton by the hand and pulled him over to a flat rock, where she and him sat down. Norton didn't know whether he should stay the distance or just go along with it, but it had already begun to wear on him. "I'll claim my partner then, as the slut." She wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close. Lydia didn't reply, but she didn't seem upset either. "Have you chosen yet? Norton?" Ava mumbled.

"You know I can't do that," Norton replied simply. "Look, is this really the time to be arguing so pettily? We have to deal with the rest of our lives here."

"This is the rest of my life." Ava cast her gaze to the ground.

Norton frowned. "Whether we live or not, is what I meant."

"Every job was a matter of life or death, Norton," Lydia said.

"It wasn't for me. I'm out of my element. If you so desperately want to be with me, then perhaps consider my feelings for one moment." The two beast-folk stared at him for a moment. Ava pulled off of him. "I'm sorry, but I can't stand this smothering when we can't even be sure we'll survive." He crossed his arms. If they were going to kill Miriam, then it may yet be possible for him to leave all of this. He still had some of his share, he could make some living off it back home. The only problem would be getting away now and... Did he want to?

Norton was still male after all. The idea of two women battling over his hand didn't go unnoticed by his masculinity or libido. What other scenario would that ever happen in? The

golem and the broken were his choices, however, and it seemed unlikely either would heal. "Do either of you like me?" the man blurted out. A question he needed to ask, but not one he wanted to. The damage was done.

"Of course."

"Naturally."

He heard both of the responses, yet no faces to tie to them. Truly? "Why?" Norton asked. "Because I'm here? Because I'm your only choice?" He looked to Ava and then to Lydia. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

Lydia crossed her arms, affording herself some decency. "In some way, yes," she said.

Ava bowed her head. "As trite as it might seem, you've been the only one to accept me. That's not to say I don't like you for other reasons."

Norton sighed. It hurt that much more that their reasons were pitiable. Then came his libido speaking again. Why not both? No. He was better than that, or rather he wanted to believe he was better than that. They were both better than that themselves. He assumed. If there was one thing he knew for sure, is that he liked them. They were crude, brutal, and yet they had touches of femininity. Those scraps of delight in what was a war-torn psyche that he found all the sweeter. Lydia, the calm yet angry ball of fluff. Ava, the smug but fragile scarred. He did want to hold them, for many reasons. Some good. Some terrible.

"Shall we make a fire?" Norton said finally. "It may be some time before Miriam makes an appearance, right?" Making a fire had become routine now, and Norton had already gone about clearing a space for it. Lydia gathered some of the firewood. Ava lit the thing. The sun hadn't quite yet set so there was little to light that wasn't already covered by the calming blue light that filtered through the forest. What was he doing here? The siren call of the city still cried in the distance. He could just retire there for a bit, couldn't he? Lydia wouldn't follow, and Ava wouldn't be allowed to follow. Could he manage that at least?

The apothecary placed his hands on his knees and stood up. "I'm going to head into Hull to see if I can buy more healing supplies," he lied.

"You can not. It is far too dangerous," Lydia said.

"We're right next to Hull. I'll be fine."

"I'd best go with you anyways," Ava said.

"You need to be here if Miriam arrives, right?"

"The cat said she wanted to fight the lamprey on her own."

"You know you can't let her do that," the man replied. He looked to Lydia. No doubt she didn't want Ava to go with him nor did she want her to stay. "I won't be gone long." The two presented no more complaints. Norton knew it probably wasn't best to leave them alone, but at this point he needed the faintest shred of solitude from them. He took his steps toward the

distant town, eventually relaxing into a steady gait after not being pulled violently back. He marched onward and only glanced back once he was near the edge of the road. One grey figure and one white remained. He was free. For now.

—

Norton found himself back on a bench somewhere in the maze of Hull. His thoughts were not of the violent way set out before him, rather instead he pictured himself living here. Enjoying the people go by. Indulging in one of the many stores. Watching a play, as Ava mentioned. His mind came to a stop. Even here in the cityscape he couldn't escape it. Not having them breathe down his neck helped somewhat. It was merely a delay, he knew. They would be right back next to him, and soon, something larger and more menacing would too. Miriam, the violent fish. Someone he had only ever seen once and was now the centerpiece of his dilemma. If it weren't for her, he wouldn't be here.

Wouldn't have met Ava.

Wouldn't have met Lydia.

Wouldn't have shared those moments with them. He really was to blame for some of this. The stress and the allure of their different forms tugged on his libido in much the same way his willingness to indulge them did to their hearts. Who was to say he didn't really deserve their violent struggle? He roped them in, in much the same way they did to him. Norton looked to the city streets, at all the people sauntering by without a care for what happened outside these walls. Why not join them? You have the coin. You could run away, as always. No one could really find him in this mess, right? He glanced up at one of the walls, noting the feline guards. Assuming Lydia wouldn't enlist the help of her father, as unlikely as that was.

The man rubbed his eyes. The one time he had made a choice, to go on this job, and it was the worst one he could've made. He pulled his hands away to find a familiar wolf walking toward him. Oh God, not now. "What is it?" he asked. Ava sat beside him. "Well?"

"Just thought I could join you," she said, staring out at the road.

"I'm surprised you came."

"Lydia simply told me that whatever I tried wouldn't work." She shrugged. "I guess at this point that's true, so no harm in talking, right?"

"No, not really."

"I suppose you didn't find any good supplies?"

"No."

"Do you remember, back on the boat? I said I wouldn't be a great wife. Thought about that a lot."

"Ava, we really don't have to talk about this now."

"Yeah. We don't, but you did say you wanted to make it work, right?"

"I did." A mistake, maybe.

"I was only thinking that, what future could I give you? I've never managed a homestead. I've never had a litter. All the work I've done in my life is to steal or... or to kill. What kind of partner would that be?"

Norton sighed. "Aren't I much of the same? I've never sired a child, nor have I managed to run a home. I was a chef before masquerading as a healer. I could feed someone, that's it." He looked to her. "That's simply how relationships work. You grow into them, don't you?"

"Can't teach an old dog new tricks." She put on a half-hearted smile. "I'm not too much older, but I suppose I can see that edge of my life. I can't stay like this, running around, getting into trouble."

"I don't think I could see you any other way." His gaze shifted to the ground. "I... haven't committed to Lydia. I'm not sure where I sit anymore. I'm sorry that happened."

Ava's smile shifted to a small frown. "I guess I can't blame you. Much. You don't live this life. We all need our release." Her head shifted to look at him, scarred eye coming into view. "I'm sure you know."

"Yes. I do."

"I guess I'm just saying, I'm not sure if it's good we try."

"Ava. I do want to try."

"Wouldn't prefer Lydia, then?"

"I don't know what to say about that." Not as though he preferred her. They were two sides of the same coin. "I would say you're inseparable, in a way."

"Best not be suggesting you have both of us." She let out a low chuckle. "I guess we were for a time. Before you. Lydia wasn't so much a friend as she was just a fact of life. Couldn't really picture getting up in the morning without her staring me down." Ava shook her head.

"I think I'm starting to feel the same way about both of you. Not that I don't consider you friends." Or more. "Just in our situation."

"It's probably really funny we'd break up over a boy. Surely it should be the reverse."

"I already feel bad enough about it."

"I know." Ava placed an hand on his shoulder. "I think we lost sight of you for the chance." Her ears flattened. "But I still love you." The word made Norton uneasy and lightheaded. It must've been the first time she used it. How could such a plain word hold so much power over him. "Maybe love isn't... quite the right word."

"I guess I wouldn't know either. Love doesn't treat me well." Nor did it continue to do so. "Do you think you will love me?" What a sad thing to say, but it's really all he wanted to know.

Ava looked back up to him. A twinge of doubt was in her eye. She pushed forward, bringing their lips together in a short kiss. A bit of tension slid from his mind. They pulled back. His body whimpered for another shred of closeness. "I think I could love you," he whispered. There he was, pulling himself back into this hell he constructed for himself. Dare he do more?

"I think I could too." Ava embraced him and gave him another kiss, slipping in some of her large tongue. Norton relaxed as he returned the gesture, carefully running his tongue around hers. Ava retracted her tongue and whispered, "Maybe we should go somewhere more private?" Norton glanced toward the road. Indeed, they were getting a few odd stares from pedestrians. Anxiety turned to embarrassment. The wolfess stood up and pulled him off in-between the alleyways of the buildings. They zig-zagged for a while before stopping in a small clearing between more buildings.

For the briefest moment it felt as though they were star-crossed lovers. That sense of escapism lingered and then quickly disappeared, leaving Norton stuck in an alleyway with Ava. The towering buildings let little light filter in. They were cut off from the city despite being in its heart. The two of them lay back against a wall. They traded glances between one another before sliding to the ground. "I know I should be worried about that nonsense with Miriam, but I can't really care right now," Ava said.

"It's hard to feel like it's relevant here." Norton looked up. A small fragment of the blue sky was visible. "I almost wish I could just sleep here and forget about it."

"We'll let you have some well deserved rest after we take care of her. We can agree on that much."

"You really need to make up over this. It feels wrong to have you so bitter between one another." The comfort had evaporated. "I don't want you two to kill one another."

Ava shook her head. "I don't think I could. Friend or not, she's the status quo. As for her not wanting to kill me, well..."

"I don't think she would."

"I suppose you would know more than me now." A simple statement, but it stung. It wasn't exactly a betrayal, and yet, it felt like he had done so a thousand times over.

"If we're going to get together, how does she fit in?"

The wolfess perked up. "Don't make your choice yet." Ava kept her cool, but he could tell by the flutter of her ear and the twitch of a nose that wasn't entirely true.

"I hate it being called a choice. As if I'm choosing what to eat so casually."

"We could part, after this was done." She leaned over and buried her snout into his neck. "If that's what you'd like."

"I'll be honest, Ava. I don't know what I want anymore."

"Where would you go now, if you could?"

Norton glanced down the alley. "I think back to the bar. Have another rack of meat." He adjusted his head against hers. "I would like company too."

"After that?"

"Like I said. Sleep. Guess I would like company there too, but I'm not sure if that's because I'm used to it."

"I'd say that's a good thing. Getting comfortable with someone." She placed a hand on his thigh. "I think I'd like to sleep too. Haven't gotten much these past nights." The wolf let out a low whine. That little sound reverberated through him.

"Then I can promise one thing. We'll sleep in a proper inn again."

"Not sure what lies in the northern territories. Hope it's nice."

"You know, without Miriam, we don't have to run much farther than that. What do you plan on doing then?" Ava could probably have stayed in Hull, had she not been so recognizable.

"Would I sound silly if I said settle down?"

"Not at all."

"As much as I tire of cats," she mumbled.

"Maybe then we could... try?" Without the fear of death.

Ava giggled. "You know how to make a woman feel teased." Her hand shifted on his thigh. "I can tease back."

"Wouldn't you want to save that for after?"

"There may not be an after, right?" Somehow there was a calming factor to that sentence. Enjoy everything while you can, right? The idea didn't sit right with him regardless.

"Don't say that. We'll get through this."

"We." Ava nodded. "That's right. We." Her hand shifted again. "Let me give you a small treat. Just one. I think you deserve it."

"I don't deserve much of anything, Ava."

"That's for me to decide, isn't it?" She licked at his ear. "Just a treat. For the future." Her hand inched toward his crotch, bumping against his stirring erection. Her hot breath and sultry voice still had their effects on him.

"Alright," Norton whispered. Stress and lust pushed him over the edge again. How miserable were you to be so easily swayed? Swayed so close to the end. Doesn't matter. Ava's hand

pulled his erection free. The air was intensely cool. A sense of shame hit him, quickly overridden by whatever treat Ava had in mind. She wasted no time, gripping his erection and gently stroking it. Her digits were soft, just like the rest of her, but also firm in their grip.

"You know, I like how smooth you are down here," she whispered. Her wet nose bumped against his ear, sending a tingle down his spine. "I think it's time for the main course." She leaned over and rubbed her snout up against the side of his cock, eliciting a gasp from him. "You have a lovely scent as well. Has anyone told you that?"

"Not... not that I can recall." He wanted to look around, see if anyone was watching. Unfortunately, his eyes were glued to Ava as she pushed up against his crotch. Her short, quick breaths were teasing, only increasing his arousal. "Ava," he groaned.

"I know." She stuck her tongue out and ran it along his erection. Norton sighed, relishing that warm and wet member slide across him. A jolt. A spark. He was now putty in her hands. It might not have been as tactful as a human's tongue, but its sheer size more than made up for it. The wolf's sharp grazed along his fragile flesh. A dangerous and exciting dash of spice to the event. Ava wouldn't dare harm him, he knew. The man's hand settled on the back of Ava's head, gently stroking her. "No more teasing."

The wolfess adjusted herself. The tip of her nose nudged against the head of his penis. She opened her mouth and carefully lowered down to fully take his length. So close. Norton stroked the back of her neck. He hardly noticed, but it was his body's way of encouraging her. Then she closed her mouth, enveloping him in that warm wetness. He relaxed, all the stress pulling out of him like a string. Due to her anatomy, Ava couldn't quite blow like a regular human. She still had her own ways of working his cock. The wolfess suckled gently while her tongue circled around the shaft. Norton tensed for a moment before melting into her mouth.

Ava continued on, leaving Norton in something of a dazed state. His thoughts about what would happen quickly evaporated. The town? The camp? The incoming battle? None of it mattered. Ava pulled away with a parting lick. "Am I doing well, dear?"

Norton hummed a yes. That didn't do it justice enough.

"Good." She returned to her work, adding a gentle bob. The roof of her mouth rubbed against his head, giving him that much needed friction for him. Her sharp teeth slid past. A flicker of danger for every tooth.

"God," Norton muttered. Ava giggled, sending more jolts through him. Her bobbing sped up. Her tongue working in tandem to pleasure what it could. With its length, her warm muscle was able to reach down to his balls, giving them a swab of spittle every time they bumped. The man couldn't help but push her head in tandem with her work. Only a little harder. Only a little further. There was a quiet pop of spittle every time she came up. The raw, primal side of him wanted to push all the way back to his throat. Not that he could manage with her muzzle. Regardless, his hips slowly joined the effort. He was getting far too into it, he knew. And he loved every bit of it.

They sat there for quite some time. Licking, slurping, bumping, grinding. Ava seemed to be able to keep him from pushing that edge too far. Whether she was teasing him or drawing it out, he could hardly care at this point. "Ava, please," he moaned. "I can't stand this much longer."

Ava pulled back with a loud lap. "I was having too much fun with myself there. So be it." She shifted again, this time onto her knees. The wolfess then pushed him back against the wall. Her other hand settled on his thigh. "We'll finish up." With that, she plunged down and then back up. Norton's hips inadvertently pushed forward as she assaulted him. Up and down. Up and down. Without end she loudly took his erection into her mouth.

"Ava." She sped up. "Ava!" Faster. "Ava!" Norton's hips bucked as a hot stream of semen shot into the wolf's mouth. She didn't stop. "Ava!" Another stream. He groaned as his hips bucked again. "God." One more dribble of cum. Norton was loudly gasping at this point. Ava merely came to a stop and looked up at him. A curl of a smile tugged at her wide mouth. Gently, her tongue ran around his member, cleaning up the mess of semen that dribbled down it. Once that was done, she pulled up and tilted her head back. Despite the haze, Norton could see the bump of her throat, taking in all of his seed. She wiped her mouth along her sleeve and settled back next to him.

"I think that was a good enough reward. Don't you?"

Norton barely managed a nod.

"I'm glad." She rubbed his softening penis and carefully slipped it back into his trousers. "Do you mind if we sit here a while longer?"

"I don't think I can move much."

"Then it's settled." She leaned on him once more. "Maybe a little ridiculous to say after what I did, but I can think we can make it work." Norton wanted to say something about relationships not being built on lust, but he knew his mind wasn't in the right train of thought to argue such a motion. They would get better, perhaps. And Lydia? What would he do about her? Did he deny her in turn? Was this the end of their own little affair? He couldn't deny. That night had something bloom in him, seeing that softer side of her. He sighed. "Don't worry about a thing," Ava said. "Everything will be alright." He wanted to believe that. Could he?

"Thank you. For being here with me, that is."

"And the little treat?"

Norton's ears burned. "That as well." Hopefully a treat no one saw.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Slinking back to camp was an odd feeling. Norton felt nothing much at all as he marched back, aside from fear. Not fear for himself, or fear for his future, rather, fear of what may happen to Lydia or Ava. They were the ones to fight Miriam, not him. Whatever happened to him afterward was really his own fault. He looked to Ava, then down at their joined hands. He gave her the slightest squeeze, embedding her feeling in his mind.

Ava broke off their hands as they encroached upon the camp. "Sorry," she said. "I know we need the cat in high spirits."

"Right." Norton nodded. Lydia soon came into view. She was cleaning off her sword. "No word yet on Miriam?"

Lydia shook her head.

"All the more time to prepare, then," Ava replied.

"Is there much to prepare?" He did manage to retrieve some supplies after all, but aside from that, they weren't working with much.

"Sure, preparation of food, my chef." She patted his shoulder. "Get to it."

"Fair enough. And what will you do?"

Ava placed her hands on her hips. "Little tricks and traps to know when the fish approaches." She produced her knife. "She might know a few but I'll do my best."

"That sounds good. Uhm, do let me know if you need help."

"I'll probably need help slicing up her body." She ran a thumb along the blade. "But no, I'm fine." Ava spun around and walked back into the woods. "Keep cleaning that blade, cat!" she shouted.

"I suppose I'll get to cooking now," Norton said. He moved over to the fire and set down his pack. "Is there anything you might like to eat, Lydia?" He dug through the backpack. What a mess of food and items it had become. Out of all things, he would probably be most happy to stop lugging this damned thing around.

"Fish." Naturally.

"Then fish it is." Not many cooking implements but he could do something with what he was provided, he supposed. He went to work cooking up the meal, skewering it on a stick.

"Had fun in the city?" Lydia asked. She didn't move, still focused on the sheen of her sword.

"I suppose."

"I can tell she tried one of her tricks." Lydia let out a short chuckle.

"Something like that." He watched the fish cook. "Lydia, may I ask something of you?"

"I hardly think you have to request permission for a question at this point."

"When we made love." Such a funny way to put it. "Did you mean it? It wasn't just something to get back at Ava, was it?"

Lydia briefly paused. "I suppose some of it was that. An annoyed act. Yet still, your kiss did fire something within me. Striking back at the wolf was merely a bonus of sorts." Norton let that hang. He wasn't sure how serious he was about her wanting him to choose now. Cowardly of him, he knew, but he hoped she might drop the issue. That is not to say Lydia didn't have her allure. He didn't need two admirers. "So boldly flaunting money from a killer, and with such cheer too. Fair I strike back, hm?"

"I don't think Ava meant much by it." Though, knowing her, maybe she did.

"Intent is irrelevant. She was aware."

Norton looked to her. "Do you miss that bond you once had?"

"Bond? Ava is attached to my side through circumstance." Her ears fluttered. "Were it not for falling into the stupidity of joining with Miriam in the past, I'd have never met her or glanced in her direction."

Norton shrugged. "It always felt as though you were good friends, and... I'm sorry I've come between you two." The feline offered no response, which comforted Norton in a way. Maybe that was how she silently agreed with the sentiment. Or she was stewing in anger. Lydia's expression remained an enigma, making it hard to ever picture what she was thinking. Her body did the speaking. For the most part. Norton pushed those thoughts away and focused on cooking the meal. It might be the last good one they have for a while.

With only the stare of Lydia and the crackle of fire for company, Norton finished up the meal, cutting it into three pieces. Just as he finished, Ava came waltzing back with a large grin.

"The cook is finished. I could smell it a mile away," the wolf said.

"I hope you enjoy. I'm a little rusty on the particulars," he replied. Norton held up the stick. "Take your pick."

"Why thank you, dear." She plucked a bit of fish and tore a chunk from it. "Delicious. Is that some apple in the mix?"

"We had a few to spare. The leftovers will make good food for the forest."

"What a cute fellow you can be."

Norton moved to Lydia's side. "And your pick."

Lydia instantly pulled one off and shoved the whole thing into her mouth. "Quite good," she said between chews.

The man nodded and returned back to the fire's side to quietly eat his last piece. The forest was quiet, aside from that flame snapping and biting at the air. The fish wasn't the best meal he had. Perhaps cooked too long, or maybe he had the bad piece. His nerves could have been getting to him as well. As much as he was calm about the inevitable before, the closer they crept to their confrontation, the more a burning settled on his nerves. Maybe Miriam wouldn't be alone. Maybe she was prepared for them. Maybe she was already watching them.

Norton's eyes flicked to Ava, then to Lydia. Not a hint of fear or nervousness in their expression. That was what he should strive for. He was one of them now, right? Right. He straightened himself up and continued to munch away at his meal. It would be a long night.

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Every minute felt like a tightening grip around Norton's neck. He had taken to cleaning his one knife for the sake of passing the time, which had been hours now. Night had come, leaving only the fire and the distant lights of the city as illumination. Neither Ava or Lydia had budged from their spots. The man wasn't sure how they managed to remain so still without losing their minds. Norton's cleaning sped up. "Norton, you can go to sleep if you'd like," Ava said. She stood up and walked over to him, promptly taking a seat next to him. "We'll take care of Miriam before you know it."

"I don't think I could sleep, even if I wanted to." His eyes didn't shift from the blade.

"She is right," Lydia replied. She was clad in her armor once more. The feline took up the other spot next to Norton, leaving him smushed between them. "There will not be much you can do against Miriam." Norton sighed. "Your work will be afterward, tending to our wounds. That will be the most important work." Lydia certainly had a way of lifting his spirits.

"Very. Now," Ava petted him, "leave your woes to sleep. Who knows if she'll even arrive today?" The wolfess smiled. "We'll need you at your best to save us afterward."

"Well, alright then." He looked up from his knife and stored it away. "Just promise me that you'll wake me up. I won't stand to be left asleep while you fight."

"If anything we'll take care of her while you sleep."

"Ava."

Lydia placed a hand on his shoulder. "Rest. We will awake you when the time comes," she said.

Ava pulled him over to her bosom, away from Lydia. "Then we'll celebrate with drinks in the morning."

"I get it." Norton stood up. "I'll set out my resting area. Be careful, please."

The two beast-women nodded.

—

A snap tore Norton out of sleep. He shot upright and scrambled to his feet. Ava and Lydia were already prepared for the assault. The feline simply had her sword drawn, while Ava took position behind a tree, blades at the ready. Norton froze, unsure of what he should do himself. Ava nodded over to another tree. As much as the thought of hiding pained him, he obliged, settling behind a trunk. There was a distant squeal. A cry that pierced the quiet of the forest that went quiet. Then, nothing. For several minutes the only thing Norton could hear was the pounding of his own heart. He placed a hand on his knife, running a thumb across the handle. It did little to assuage his fears.

A low thump began to permeate the quiet. Footsteps. Large ones. The crunch of foliage accompanied each step. It would pause every once in a while and a loud crunch would follow. Ava's traps? Norton took deep breaths. Were you supposed to do nothing? No, he had to partake, somehow. Those thoughts quickly fled his mind as a figure came into view. It was an odd mass that he could only just barely make out. It was large enough to be Miriam, but there was a large formation on its left side. Had she gotten bigger? Do lampreys do that? His answers were soon answered.

Now made visible from the orange of the fire, Norton could see Miriam proper. A large deer hung from her shoulder. Her head had firmly latched to its side, and at this proximity, he could hear her loudly sucking its innards. She let it drop to the ground with a thud, now revealing her rows of teeth bathed in a crimson red. "Mammals," she groaned. "I expected the reptile to do something so poor."

"Lay down and die," Lydia replied instantly.

"Why? I have a good life." Miriam chugged from her jar of water. The red of her teeth washed out and spilled out over her. The jar fell to the ground. "It may yet get better." Her elongated head looked every which way. "And the dog? Where does she hide?" The lamprey's head then snapped to Norton. "And your human. He is poor at hiding." He froze. The beating of his heart quickened. Miriam's head lowered again. "And what do you hope to gain from death?"

"Freedom."

"Shallow. Return to being a beast of the land if you wish for freedom." Miriam stepped forward, bringing more of her unsettling visage into the light. "I desire life. Which I receive from death." She readied herself, putting up her fists. "And I would like yours first." Miriam charged forward, smashing into Lydia with a clang. The cat's sword came close to the fish's neck, but was held back by her large hand. Move now, Norton urged himself. Move now. Lydia hissed and pushed back, digging the blade of her sword into Miriam's neck. Before the fish could retaliate, Ava dashed out from her place and jabbed two daggers into the fish's side. She screeched and backhanded Ava, sending her a short distance. Norton knew she was fine, yet his mind still screamed.

Lydia yanked her sword away, and with it, a gash of blood. She steadied herself and pointed her blade forward, readying to plunge into Miriam. The fish raised her hand. "I wouldn't dare,

mammal!" she yelled. Lydia paid the threat no mind as she dashed forward. The tip of the sword pierced the fish's chest. Miriam's hand came down, catching the handle of the blade, stopping it. "I warned you." Lydia seized and began shaking violently. Norton inadvertently stepped out of his spot, yet his body would step no further. Lydia shook for a moment and came to a stop, falling limp. "Well worth its gold." The man could only make out a small, glowing rock in her hand.

Now it was simply Ava and Miriam circling around one another. "Think you'll make a good cloak, fish?" Ava asked. Her fangs were bared. Knives at the ready.

"And you, a coat."

"Her hand, Ava! She has something magical in her hand!" Norton croaked. He took another step forward and looked to Lydia. What would he do?

"Magic or not. I'm coming away with your head," Ava barked. She howled and dashed forward, narrowly dodging another brutish punch. One dagger firmly lodged into the fish's neck, the other twisting into her stomach. The wolfess was fast, but not quick enough to dodge the kick to her stomach. She reeled back but was undeterred, pushing forward with another assault. Two more strikes to the lamprey, and yet another hit came back to her. Miriam was now dashed in stripes of red from her wounds, yet seemed no worse for wear. "Land too much for you?"

"I find it just fitting." Miriam let the rock fall and raised her hands again. Ava managed to land a few more nicks.

Then, Miriam grabbed her.

Ava wildly stabbed at the fish's arms, but it made no difference. Norton's eyes widened. His heart raced. He ran forward stupidly, only to be pushed back with a simple kick. He fell to the ground, having all the wind knocked out of him in one simple motion. He could only watch as Miriam tossed Ava to the ground and stomp on her chest. A crack rang out. Ava screamed. "Blood is best when it runs." Miriam pulled her foot off Ava and looked to the human. "You know your place." She stomped over to him, dripping blood. "I find that to be an excellent quality in humans." Her head raised to show those teeth again. Gnashing incisors.

Miriam stepped over Norton and lowered herself. A hand pushed against his shoulder. "And what shall I do with you?" Her head turned. One eye glared down at him. He had no words to speak with. No breath to yell. He craned his head to look at his partners. "I know your story. The poor boy swept into hell. What happens to you now?" She let out a gravelly chuckle and traced a finger along his face. "I could have you myself as a pet." Her teeth gnashed. "Or as a meal after the others. Maybe before. I doubt you would want to see them drained."

"Don't," Norton whispered.

"I will."

"Don't you dare."

"And what will you do?"

What would he do? Norton's mind raced as he stared at the beast. Between the stabs of her neck were those little holes. Gills? "What will you do, human?" she repeated. Her head swiveled back to look at the bodies. "They failed, good as they were." Norton hardly heard her. Knife, you have a knife. And what else? What else could you use? All you had were medicines. No poison. No deadly concoctions. His hand traveled over his pockets. "It's a shame. I could have used them more, but they grew a conscience." Norton's hand bumped into something. He pulled it out. That icy orb that held fire. The dragon's tear. "They became too... generic." Norton stabbed at the thing, forcing his blade to its core. It fizzled, then burned brightly, leaving only that burning orb. Norton grabbed the thing.

God. It burned. It burned so much.

He yanked free from the hand on his shoulder and punched with all his might into one of those gills. There was a crunch of cartilage. Miriam screamed and pried herself off of him, clutching at her neck. One hand clawed at the hole. Her body heaved as she tried to speak, only wheezing. She fell onto her back, groaning and yelling in agony. That wasn't enough. Damn her. She deserved more. Norton scrambled to his feet, knife in hand. "I'll kill you!" he yelled as he leapt onto her and began stabbing wildly. "You godforsaken, worthless creature!" Every plunge of his blade into her made him more fervent. She deserved to die for all she had done. Pathetic worm. His blade began striking at her head.

His blade snapped. It took several more thrusts for his mind to realize that fact. He dropped the handle and stared at his work. Miriam was a still mess of red, nearly unrecognizable. The dragon's tear still sizzled in her throat, smoldering inside. The man stood up and stumbled off of her, falling to the ground as he did. It was done. By his hand. Something stirred in his stomach. No. He looked up at his fallen partners. He had to help them. The man forced himself up. He hissed as the pain of his burned arm hit his now conscious mind. That would wait.

Norton stumbled over to Ava. Her breathing was ragged, but stable. Lydia? He moved over to the feline. Her breathing was strained and halting. The rock that hit her sparked nearby. Electricity? Norton set out to pry her armor off as fast as he could. His head forced against her chest. Only a quivering uneasy heart could be heard. Instantly he pulled back and placed his hands over her chest. It hurt so much. He began pumping her chest and breathing into her mouth. Norton listened again. No change. He grabbed the rock and stared at it. A gentle squeeze made it zap. He raised up and slammed the rock against her chest, then quickly listened again. Lydia gasped, giving way to a steady beat. Norton sighed and fell back.

After collecting himself, Norton moved back to Ava's side. His good hand carefully moved across her chest, putting the slightest bit of pressure. Her breathing deepened as he pushed against a rib. Cracked or broken. Carefully he undid her clothing. No spatters of red. Fortunately nothing had torn through her. He could only pray that the bone didn't pierce anything else. He moved back to his pack and pulled out one of the slices of meat. Still extremely cold. Kunka's ice magic worked wonders. He laid the slab of meat against her broken body and went over the rest of her, checking for anything he might've missed.

"You really do like them, hm?" a familiar reptilian voice said. Norton looked to his right, seeing a small figure standing at the edge of camp. "I expected worse, really."

"Hello, Mehni." Norton rubbed his eyes. "Thank you again, for your service."

Mehni moved over to his side. "No need to thank me. Your money was enough."

"May I ask why you're here?" He lifted his arm and wrapped it in gauze.

"I wanted to see how it would go. Maybe take something." She looked to Miriam. "Turned out well, it seems."

"I'm afraid I had to use your gift."

Miriam's corpse sizzled. "Not what I had intended for, but I'm happy nonetheless." She sat down next to him. "What happens to you now?"

"I get these two proper medical treatment."

"I asked about you, Norton. Not them."

Norton looked at the two beast-women. "Not sure. Being on the run has blinded me for some time."

"You have to be your own person. I knew from the moment I saw you, this wasn't your line of work."

"And what? Go back to the forest? Hide in my home?"

"Why not settle in Hull?"

"I can't imagine that will go over well with Byron."

"Ah, the fat cat, right." She hummed. "I guess you did lay claim to his daughter."

"Can all the beast-folk smell it?" That was getting tiresome.

"Oh yes. Yes we can." She smiled.

"Naturally." He tapped the bit of food on Ava. "Would you mind chilling this more?"

"After I've done so much?" Mehni touched the thing with a blue finger. "Really, Norton, I should be asking more of you."

"You should be. Don't suppose I could ask you to help me get them to a camp?"

"Oh no. Once the fat one catches wind that his daughter is in this condition?" She whistled. "No way there won't be an army to drag you and her back to Hull. Plus the wolf."

"I suppose I should just ask Byron, then? Lydia won't be happy about that." He smiled. How simple that seemed now. "Ava would probably find it really amusing."

"And you? How do you feel about it?" She nudged him.

"Byron is a nice fellow, but I can only imagine what he'd do to me if he felt I was at fault." And he would be entirely justified at that.

"There's the generic's feelings. I knew he had them."

"I wish I didn't. Then maybe I wouldn't have gotten myself into this mess. Enticed the love of those two."

"And which do you love?"

Norton shook his head. "I'm not sure I'll ever have an answer for that." He brushed aside some of Ava's hair. "Maybe I should leave them once we reach Hull?"

"I would offer you to join me, but you have a habit of getting in trouble."

"The kiss meant nothing?" Norton laughed, then winced as his arm flared up again.

"Not to say I don't find generics appealing, but it was more for fun. Riling them up has been a highlight of these dreary weeks. No, you're better off with your mammals."

"Please, don't say that word."

"Understood." She leaned close. "Still, don't hesitate to visit me again."

"I doubt I could find you."

"You will if you want to."

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"Lord Kaur would like a more succinct account of what happened," a feline warrior said. Norton found himself in a medical ward in the heart of Hull, surrounded by more guards than he cared to count. In front of him lay Lydia and Ava in two separate beds. "You must understand the circumstances are more than curious."

"I explained it as is. We had reason to turn around deal with the lamprey ourselves."

"After spending so much time evading it?"

There was hardly any reason to rat out the cat that pushed them back into this mess. "Even if we kept running, we knew Miriam was more than unhinged."

The finely dressed warrior nodded. "And the kobold? Any word on her whereabouts?"

"She left as soon as she realized there was little to take." Norton looked to Lydia. "Is Byron not going to visit?"

"That will be all, Mr. Lowell." As he said that, most of the troop vacated the area, leaving only a couple of guards at the far end of the ward.

"They are gone then?" Lydia whispered.

"Yes, they're gone," Norton replied. He sat down on Ava's bed, settling between the both of them.

"Not so loud," Ava said, rubbing her head. "I've had enough of their moaning."

"Was it necessary to have us brought to Hull?" Lydia asked.

"Hush. Norton did what he had to do. We're lucky we're here to complain. Though I almost wish I didn't, with this headache."

Norton nodded. "I couldn't be sure you had internal wounds, so it made sense."

There was a short silence, then Ava spoke, "What you told them was true, then?"

"Yes." Norton nodded. As much as he didn't want it to be true. He briefly pictured Miriam, bathed in red and gagging for life.

Lydia sat up. "And you did the deed?"

"Lydia, please, you're still hurt, lay down."

"I had arrhythmia of the heart, not broken bones like a certain someone else."

"Wanna trade?" Ava replied, shaking a fist.

"I am sorry I was not there, Norton," Lydia said. "Little did I expect Miriam to make use of simple magic."

"Try rethinking a conductive suit of armor, dear." Ava cleared her throat. "Likewise, I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

"I'm fine. Suppose I should be grateful I seemed so pathetic in that moment." As much as it pained him.

Ava reached out and patted his hand. "You're far from pathetic, and hey, no need to worry about a fish anymore."

"It takes a level of bravery to do what you did," Lydia said.

"Or anger," Norton said.

"Hardly different in battle."

"I know Miriam... deserved that, but I can't help but feel like I did the wrong thing." Norton conveniently left out the various swears he yelled at Miriam as he assaulted her.

"Dear, you're not meant for this life. You did what you must, but maybe it's time you left it?" Ava patted him again.

Lydia nodded. "Returning to the world of relaxation and calm. I envy the ability."

That was your way out of this all. To discard the romantic hell and the tribulations he went through. Passing by the adventure, slinking back to the old and dreary. It had been a painful process to be sure, going through everything and have it sink further and further into his heart. It was good in a way, wasn't it? He was alive, for once, and had never seen so much in all his time on this boring mortal plane.

"And who would look after you two?" Norton finally said.

Chapter End Notes

I believe this is the story's "soft" ending. It will get a continuation, somehow, but I felt it proper this end here for now since it would be odd to drag them into another scenario. Additionally, it was a bit meandering and lacking in the protagonist's characterization, that I hope to have a fresh start on in a sequel. Please do tell me if this requires some touching up or any other criticisms you may have and I apologize for taking so long on this and then immediately ending it like this.

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