Chapter One: A Tale of Two Thieves

Nestled at the foot of a dozen mountains, Amaru was forever hidden by shadow while the surrounding Alps glowed, a silhouette against the burning sun. Outside the mountainous border were miles of forest land, home to dangerous creatures. For this reason, not many had extensive knowledge of Amaru, save for those who lived within it. Their secrets were shared only with those who lived in the forest, and the cottage atop one of the crags. Not many others would survive the trip.

Despite living so high above the valley, the peal of the Amaran watchtower rang clearly through the cottage walls. This didn’t disturb Thanus Agni. Although startled at their first ring, he was fast asleep moments after. The last toll of the bell subsided, and the silence was once again palpable within the Agni household. Eventually, in the distance, another noise sounded. *Thud.*

A second passed, another for insurance. Finally, heat erupted around him. A bundle of flames combusted out of thin air, and as they fell to nothingness, they revealed in their center, an imp.

“They’re gone,” croaked the scaly creature,

By this time, Thanus had already leapt out of bed, sick of the façade. He searched his surroundings for what he would need.

“Double, and triple check Seth,” Thanus said perusing several shelves. The sound of flames resonated around the house as Seth appeared and disappeared in sudden bursts of fire. A useful little creature, who would go on to save many lives. Back then, I suppose he was the imp boy’s reconnaissance.

His bed was high off the ground, and the sheets light, taking their time to float to the floor. The boy who had left their cover was gaunt, and tall, with brown tanned skin and hair that stuck out like the beak of an eagle. His face, the villagers often told him, resembled the shape of a shovel, and he was reminded of all this as he was forced to see his reflection pass by a window. His room was quite empty, with a bed, two torches, and a door. It was quite tidy as well, except for the corner where he kept his clothes.

He grabbed a knapsack atop the pile, filled with hand crafted bombs, weapons, and several scrolls. Unfurling each to recheck its contents as if they might have disappeared overnight. Checking the edges of blades, to make sure they were still sharp. No mistakes today. None.

He’d had plenty of time to think everything over. He’d been awake for hours now, waiting for his two older brothers to finally leave the house. Dante in particular had checked up on his room several times, as if he’d somehow known. His insides squirmed to think he might have let his intentions slip. If he had a leg of lamb for every time he’d leapt back into bed to feign sleep – well, they wouldn’t be starving to death, would they?

Thanus winced. Even the mention of food made him feel queasy. What a stupid thing to remind himself of moments before entering the village. There was another burst of fire as Seth appeared again. Thanus walked past him, forcing the imp to crawl along the wall in pursuit.

“Well?”

“Gone into the forest,” the imp said, he was having difficulty speaking. “No sight of them,”

“Can’t get cocky now,” said Thanus, pulling on a coat. “Wouldn’t put it past Dante to rig the door,”

But the imp didn’t laugh. He continued to watch Thanus, moving with slow determination. He didn’t as much as smile.

Thanus studied a map of Amaru from his eldest brother’s room, checking to make sure it conformed to the one already in his pocket. There were two village stores in Amaru, one to the northern thrall district, and one in the southern silver district. The south store was closer to his house, visible from the window in his room. He hoped it would be as easy to find when he was down there, avoiding the attention of the villagers. Not that he meant to steal, but being seen by the villagers was bound to make things more complicated.

Thanus returned to his bedroom and opened the window, for means of easy return, and locked his room from the inside. Once he was sure he had everything he needed, he extinguished every lamp in the house, and got rid of every trace of evidence. He was heading towards the front door when Seth fell from the ceiling onto his shoulder, ready to head out on an adventure. Thanus paused, and the imp looked at him.

“Not so fast pal,” Thanus said, “I need someone to man the fort. If either Icho or Dante come home, I need you to stall, make hell, and let me know as soon as possible. Alright?”

The imp looked away from Thanus and stared at nothing for a few seconds before swinging off Thanus’s shoulder. He continued to watch Thanus silently, who couldn’t help but notice how skinny the imp had become, the disturbing way his skeleton seemed to jut out through his skin.

“I’ll bring you something special on my way back, alright?” Thanus said. He caressed the imp’s skin and pushed his head into the imp’s chest as he crawled up the wall to listen better. “And I’m not talking nuts, we’re gonna have some real food tonight. I promise.”

He could have sworn he’d seen the imp perk up a little, right before he shut the door behind him.

The Amaran air assaulted him at once. The skin on his face was numb from cold. Grabbing a mask out of his knapsack, he secured it over his face. It gave him a second to reflect somewhat darkly on the state of their home. The cottage windows were shattered, the grass a mossy yellow, and the fence surrounding them was pushed over, graffiti sparkling on its otherwise faded surface. A sigh forced its way out of his lungs. It only mattered one month a year. The other eleven months, snow would cover the village, making it impossible to see. Not like that kept the villagers from their pilgrimage up the mountains.

There were several stones around the cottage, near parts of the house newly damaged. Gathering them, so as to discourage visitors, Thanus resolved to dump them off somewhere in his journey. Probably in a lake, he thought firmly, to quell the part of him that wanted to return the favor.

The path to the village was steep. Without the thick blanket of snow, he couldn’t slide down the Alps. He might get himself hurt. Four hours minimum, six hours max until his brothers returned. He didn’t have the time to walk. With a disgruntled breath, he lopped off the bark of a willow tree with his axe, peeling off enough to provide him protection on the way down. If he really cared about not getting hurt, he wouldn’t be going into the valley to begin with. But he was prepared – he had a mask, a hood, and a scarf. The only way anyone would recognize him was if he volunteered to show them.

The closer he got to Amaru, the more villagers Thanus came across. Some of them were making their way up the mountain, and he convinced himself they were heading towards the forest on the other side.

It was something he’d noticed before, through his few glimpses and skirmishes with the Amarans. Many of the villagers had silver skin with a translucent quality to them. They all had black hair, and eyes that were a bright shade of violet. Their appearance was somehow enticing. They were strange and cruel to be sure, but there was something about their strangeness that made them beautiful. Even the winding dirt roads of Amaru contained the slightest hint at a secret, a whisper of a story waiting to be told. He entered the cover of shadows Amaru slept under, and felt thrill and fear seep into his spine. He could hear the mutterings of the villagers around him which tended to quiet when they neared him, as if for all his caution, his face was bare and naked. Men on podiums spoke to crowds huddled around them,

*“Nomads do not speak for our people,* rang their voices in the background, *Nomads know nothing of our needs – and still don’t after 18 years – because they have no need to know them.”*

Thanus felt his first pang of annoyance while looking around at other villagers as discretely as he could without being seen. They wore barely any clothing at all against the harsh frigid cold. Weren’t they freezing? Sure it wasn’t snowing, but it wasn’t warm either. His clothes were bound to set him apart already. His confusion was blotted out by frustration, in his effort to blend in he’d only become more conspicuous.

*“Think of their plans! The plots they think up in their savage woodlands. Do not believe, even for a moment, that they have our intentions at heart.”*

Thanus had never met a nomad at that point in his life, though he would very soon. All he knew then was that the villagers clearly didn’t like them, which meant they couldn’t be that bad. A dull part of him wondered why he didn’t have his own hate-podium, when –

*“We are tools to them. To Nomads and Mud men. They are the killers, not us, they have stripped everything from us, and walk among Amaru to flaunt their power.”*

There it was. Didn’t take a genius to guess who Mudmen were supposed to be, but as far as slurs went, it wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before. He looked up at the speaker atop the podium, his face was disfigured with gnashes. How did these assholes get money, or food – did handing out tinfoil hats pay well? Maybe he should set one up himself. However little the crazed street preacher made, he still ate better than they did back home.

*“The Mudboy!”*

A nearby villager grabbed at Thanus, who lunged backwards, only to have someone else tear the mask away from his face.

Oh shit. Emotion flooded their faces. Not nice ones either, the ‘*hey, how you doing, it’s been a while’*.

No. It was more of a ‘*you don’t belong here’*. The speaker broke off, the villagers began to peer over to see what had made him stop. He would run. Anyone would. But something took hold of him when he saw their eyes. Thousand fold, turned towards him.

*Mudboy* murmured the voices around him,

Shock ran through him. Thanus pulled his hood down, hunched his shoulders, and walked away. It really was nice to see them all, but he had to get going.

*Don’t look behind you. Don’t look behind you. Don’t look behind you.*

Walking wouldn’t cut it, footsteps followed him. He pulled himself over the fence of a nearby house. Which turned out to be a horrible idea. This was all a terrible idea - maybe he’d just scavenge, find some mushrooms; make something like a soup. How hard could it be? Mushrooms….water….salt? Where do you find salt? It was always just there.

*“-AGH-“*

*“-GET OUT-“*

The family in the backyard got a good long look at his face. He began to sprint, leaping off a table underneath an orchard, and vaulting over the next fence to come up on the other side of the block. He could hear their panicked voices….. Then again, the more he thought about it, mushrooms in water would probably just taste like mushrooms in water, no matter how much salt he added. There was no way that could feed a family of three, let alone Seth.

*“-They’re supposed to keep him locked up-“*

He doubled over onto his knees. For whatever good it did, he pretended to be doing the laces on his boots. He pulled his scarf off and retied it so that it hid most of his face, and pulled his hood farther over his head. In all his fumbling with his scarf he realized the color of his hands would give him away just as easily as if he had worn no mask to begin with. He plunged his hands into his coat with disgust at himself for not thinking of it earlier. No mistakes.

And so there was no helping the first few surprised villagers who’d seen him appear on the block.

“-strange that one-“

“-He looks so creepy-“

“-Must be a forest dweller-“

“*Mudboy*”

Once he was far enough, their voices trailed away. He attracted stares nonetheless. He felt tense, as if they were watching to make sure who he was before they attacked him. It would be so much easier to steal what he needed in one fell swoop, but the villagers already hated him. They held open sermons on the streets about getting rid of them. How exactly was he supposed to walk up to a storefront and pay for food? He felt the coins in his pocket weigh him down as he walked. He could have had ten times that amount, and it wouldn’t make any difference. He set down a path filled with many turns, and fewer people, filling his mind with some peace.

Finally the voices stopped, he heard some mumbles of higher prices, riskier roads. Ceivern had a new queen apparently. He snorted at the idea that this would ever affect them. People really had nothing better to talk about. It was on the other side of the world. What did it matter to a village like Amaru? They were so well hidden you’d be hard pressed to find a map with their name on it.

There was one more voice, one that even Thanus could not ignore. The scent hit him like a rock. Villagers pushed by him, and finally, he spotted a mass of bodies around a stand where a mountainous butcher stood over them. He was quite a sight, wider then he was tall, with eyes that were small and pig-like. He waved his food at the crowd of customers he had managed to gather. The other vendors were eying him almost as enviously as Thanus was. Adorning the stall was the sign *Ikran’s Wares*

When the butcher reached the brim of the crowd, Thanus saw his opening. He kept close to the butchers arm, as if a child escorted by his father, while also maintaining a distance by keeping his head down and using the distance between their feet as a gauge. The villager’s skin managed to chill Thanus through his coat. When Ikran swivelled to face the other direction, Thanus ducked under his arm to come up on the other side. There were cages filled with livestock, but their braying didn’t attract much attention, and would cover up any noise he made by accident. Thanus’s attention was focused on the cooked food, a table adorned with pork, chicken, and stews, prepackaged with string and moleskin pouches, labelled with tags that read *Three Silver*.

Sliding a fistful of coins onto the table, Thanus grabbed several sacks off the desk, caressing each one with his gaze. A chicken leg fell out of one of the sacks, and his body tensed. For a few seconds, Thanus froze, and time seemed to freeze alongside him. Unable to think, he stood there and stared.

This was one of his stupider moves.

“Sir,” squeaked an old man seconds later, “That boys eating your produce!”

Thanus turned around, chicken leg still in mouth, before realizing who was being addressed.

The table shook and toppled over as the mountainous butcher swivelled to face him. Thanus made eye contact, the butchers silver face contorted in anger.

The leg of chicken fell from his mouth.

“Oh shit,”

A knife, several knives were flung through the air. Thanus scrambled next to the table’s protection and heard several thuds. A gasp left his lips when the tip of a silver knife protruded an inch from his nose. Whether the crowd spread out or others had come to watch Thanus didn’t know, but the tent was surrounded. He could hear their whispers and slurs.

A wave of weariness came over him. He looked over the table he hid by, his day had just become much more complicated.

A scimitar impaled the table, and the butcher flung it across the premise. The knives Thanus packed chipped and broke with simple taps of Ikran’s blade. In one smooth motion, he swung it back into Thanus’ midriff. Thrown back, Thanus swore at his ripped robes and rubbed the torn skin on his forearms. He was going to have a hell of a time staying inconspicuous now. He lobbed chairs and sacks clumsily at the butcher and in his path, making for the exit only to be pushed back. Someone grabbed his scarf, and it unravelled, his hood falling back. A villager held something heavy and wooden, Thanus put his hands up a second too late. A crack sent his mind into shambles, suddenly feeling sick. He was hugging the floor again.

Thanus didn’t know what he’d been hit with. It was a bat, it was metal too, not wooden, but he didn’t know that, and was very sure it was wooden by the sound it made against his head.

Thanus pushed himself up, forcing himself to ignore his forearms which were now grey and oozing blood. Something hooked onto his robes, Thanus swung at the Ikran’s hand, but this only disturbed his footing. He was picked off the floor like a paperweight.

“This is what happens to thieves,”

If he wasn’t being strangled, he could have said something. The villagers didn’t make way for Thanus before, but did now. When Ikran threw him, his body sailed out of the tent quite unimpeded.

He thought it was over until he turned around. The colossal butcher paced towards him. An intense heat filled his body, his palms searing hot, before he took a deep steadying breath. He couldn’t act out of turn. He couldn’t give any emotional response. He couldn’t lose control. He had to stay calm and wait for the right opportunity.

The butcher was directly in front of him, saying something, giving a speech maybe – he had the audience for it. But no, Thanus wasn’t listening. This was time he had to use properly. The crowd was still watching from the tent. They weren’t an obstacle to escape anymore, as long as they stayed put. The best way to get out was the way he’d come in, full of twists and turns. The only other way was a straight path, but that butcher was a bit too good with knives for his liking.

The only problem was he hadn’t been able to stand up since the second and third blows had landed.

“Are you even listening?”

Thanus’s head rolled over his shoulders to stare at the butcher lazily, “Was it that obvious?”

“Ego, eh?” he raised his knife, “See where that gets you,”

So much for time.

There was someone atop a house some ways behind the tent, wearing a silver mask. He disappeared, before appearing on the next nearest rooftop. He leapt once more landing atop a tent pole, then the butcher blocked his sight.

“Mud men–“

Thanus caught another peek at the masked man in mid-air descent towards them. The butcher, halfway through stepping towards him stopped, faltered, and swayed.

Realizing what happened, Thanus scrambled to get away. He felt a gust of wind and a tremor as the butcher fell and sent a cloud of dirt into the sun.

It was through enormous effort that Thanus got to his feet. He had a horrible limp, if anything it was more of a hop. Attempting to get away from the masked figure only made him fall over. Dismounting Ikran, the figure approached Thanus, and just when he expected another blow, maybe several in quick succession, the thief threw five sacks of meat at his feet.

Thanus blinked, still as stone. He’d expected rocks, knives, bricks maybe, but this was undeniably food. Poison? He’d have to test for that. He was fixed in the glare of the masked man. Bait, maybe? He grabbed a branch from the corner of his vision, the thief was light weight, he should be easy to over-

He was wearing Thanus’s mask, the one he’d dropped in the other block. Thanus’s mouth fell open and his eyebrows raised in confusion.

“There! Guards!”

It was the old man, the same one who’d brought attention to Thanus in the first place. He came waddling into view with a horde of guards. The masked man scarpered up the side of a house.

“That’s him! He killed Ikran! He’s deranged!”

One day, Thanus would hunt down that old man and show him exactly how deranged he could be. Today, he didn’t need to give the guards any more incentive.

~~Since Thanus lacked the enormous talent of the theif that had saved him~~, he was forced to shakily get to his feet and limp around the corner with the branch for support. He was far enough to evade their sight for a while, but it wasn’t enough. He could turn as many corners as he liked, but they were running and he was only managing to limp with the help of a stupid stick. They were gaining.

He turned another corner. Blending in wasn’t an option with the state of his clothes. He spotted a railing and vaulted over it without thinking. To his great displeasure, the river underneath was freezing cold. He panicked for a second of irrational fear, clouding his mind with the certainty that he would drown, that the water was deeper than it was, but he silenced the thought. He waded through the current towards the underside of a bridge, and moments later, heard a torrent of footsteps from above. It was only after several tense minutes when all was quiet that Thanus let out a sigh of relief, followed instantly by violent shivering breaths. He had been in Amaru for all of two hours and so far; He was branded a murderer, soaking wet, and framed for an assault he had nothing to do with.

Just a regular day in the village of Amaru.

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Hours later, Thanus was at the village well drawing water. Obviously, he could no longer visit a store with the label ‘murderer’ hanging over his head, and even if he could, the villagers all recognized him anyway. He might as well take some water back, there was no point going home empty handed. Maybe if he gathered some mushrooms, he could make that soup. Not like he had much option now anyway. His best hope was being passed off as a beggar for long enough - but no…no that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? Voices were already pressing in on him.

*“-Mudboy-“*

*“-Should be locked up-“*

*“-Locked up? I’d have him killed-“*

The last voice made him flinch so violently, he almost dropped his bucket. Staring around at the crowds, it was impossible to discern who had spoken. Contempt flitted past the eyes of nearly every villager, and Thanus mirrored their dark expression.

His forehead furrowed in concentration, as he struggled to pull the bucket back up the well. Was it especially heavy or was he just imagining it?

“Dante – Is that you?”

This time, Thanus really did drop the bucket. Out of nowhere, a figure had materialized in front of him. Thanus fell back in surprise. He tried to get up, but let out a hiss of pain, his leg was still badly injured. The hooded man towered over him,

“No, I’m sorry. Of course not,” the figure said slowly, “You must be Thanus.”

Thanus looked up at the sound of his name. The speaker was dark skinned, with black and silver robes. He had a silver bristle on his chin, and shocking green eyes watching him as if he had done something very suspicious. His long neck made him particularly owl-like.

“My name is Venir,” said the man, he helped Thanus up. “I’m a friend of Dante’s, why don’t you come with me?”

No, Thanus thought immediately, but he was in no condition to argue, much less fight or run away.

There was no other option. There was no way this would end well. If he was a villager lying to gain his trust, then hours from now Thanus was unlikely to retain what use of his limbs he had. If he wasn’t lying, and he really did know Dante, then the trouble he’d get into back home might be just as bad.

But any escape would take effort, and even as Thanus made to take a sharp step to make away, he let out a moan of pain.

“Oh dear,” said Venir, and helped straighten Thanus back up. “Try not to put too much weight on that leg,”

No. It was easier to allow himself to be gently guided down the road, using the old man’s surprisingly strong arm for support. Until he could persuade himself to ignore the pain and run, he’d only need a couple minutes. At least, that was what he told himself,

“You shouldn’t be out this late, Dante would be terrified if he knew,” chided the old man,

Dante would be terrified if he knew Thanus was with a stranger he barely knew, a villager, no less.

“Don’t tell,” he managed to slur, and for some odd reason, Venir’s face split into a wide grin. This did not soothe his paranoia.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Venir, without a moment’s hesitation. “But you are in an awful state, come, sit down here,”

“M fine,” mumbled Thanus matter-of-factly, as Venir sat him down on a bench.

“Cracked ribs, broken leg, scraped hands, extremely malnourished, and you’re likely to develop a cold over the next few days. To top it all off, you seem to be unable to focus – probably a result of everything else,” Venir muttered quickly under his breath, “Fine indeed,”

Thanus sat on the bench, feeling much like a toddler as Venir took out a series of pastes, and herbs. He inserted a wad of green mush into Thanus’ mouth, which stung his tongue.

“Just try to bear that for a second,” he said with a remorseful grimace, “Talk to me Thanus,”

“How do you know my name?”

The bitter juices slid down his throat as he talked. His mind was suddenly clear, and he became aware of the searing pain on his forearms, aching midriff, and slightly blocked nose. His head was ringing. He definitely preferred it before.

“Your older brothers hunt in my forest,” said Venir, “I speak with them on a daily basis, they mention you quite often, along with your gifts.”

Thanus eyed him sharply, but the reaction seemed to please him.

“Good, good, got that mind of yours clearing up quite nicely already,” now bashing herbs in a mortar. “I’m afraid you’ve picked a rather horrible time to visit the valley,

His mind didn’t feel so clear, “You live in the forest?”

“With hundreds of students,”

Thanus lolled his head back, “You’re a nomad?”

“A teacher of nomads,” remedied Venir, “My students copy out passages of books and ancient scriptures for days, months, and sometimes years,”

“What’s the point of that?” his voice sounded like a child’s whine,

Venir actually laughed, “Preservation and absorption of knowledge. Every one of my students, has read every book ever written, at least twice, before rewriting them. It’s our way.”

Venir dipped bandages in the liquid he’d extracted from the mortar, before wrapping Thanus’s torso. His eyelids felt so heavy, he was about to close them when –

“Stay with me Thanus,” said Venir, and Thanus stirred. “The valley is doing badly, but I cannot believe they would treat you like this.”

Thanus laughed, “Yeah, like that’s new,”

Venir stopped what he was doing to look at Thanus, whose voice rose an octave.

“I don’t come here often, I just – They come up to the house sometimes,” Thanus was regretting every word he spoke. *Just shut up,* he told himself. A fault of Thanus’s that would cause me much misery, whenever he was caught in a lie, he tried to get out of it by telling more truths.

“Hmm,” Venir murmured, not fooled. As he was bandaging Thanus, his hands passed over several wounds that were not afflicted that same day. “Your brothers…never mentioned anything of the sort… I would have thought Icho at least,”

His voice lowered, as if talking to himself, before noticing Thanus doze off again.

“You’re going to be fatigued for a few days Thanus,” said Venir, “It’ll be a good idea to get some bedrest, and not engage in any sort of strenuous exercise until it’s passed.”

Venir sighed, and helped Thanus up with a strong heave. Expecting pain, he winced, leaning on his uninjured foot before realizing he didn’t feel any pain at all. His forearms were also sealed somehow, his torso firmly bandaged.

“Feeling better?”

“I – yeah! Wow,”

Venir smiled, and pushed a silver bottle into his hands.

“Cure for the cold – well not really,” Venir relented, “But it’ll help. It will make you drowsy, so you ought to take it before bed –“. Thanus tensed. Venir’s shadow seemed to grow until a figure rose out from it, and handed him a bag, which he passed to Thanus. “And with this, the treatment is complete.”

Only one thing could have drawn his attention away from the hooded nomad who now bowed and disappeared. A wonderful smell wafted towards him from the bag.

“No, keep it,” said Venir firmly, as Thanus automatically made to give it back. “And no, I don’t want you paying for it either…your brothers really haven’t mentioned me at all, have they?”

“No,” said Thanus, trying to keep his eyes off of the bag like a normal human being. “I’m sorry,”

“Suffice it to say, I’m a very old family friend,” he pushed the bag back firmly into Thanus’s hands and parted from him. “This is nothing.”

Thanus inhaled the scent. It was extremely heavy, and waves of gratitude washed over him as he hugged it to his chest. A small part of his mind, overpowered by hunger, tried reminding him to be wary. He still had no real proof this man wasn’t another villager.

“Well, we should be off,”

*We?* Thought Thanus instantly, and the flood of hunger pangs stopped followed by panic, and everything fell into place perfectly. He had already imagined the old stranger luring him somewhere alone before he realized Venir was not looking at him at all, but instead at their surroundings. The whispers had not stopped.

“I’m headed the same way,” said the keeper. “Why don’t we go together?”

“Yeah, good idea,” said Thanus, in what he hoped was a level voice.

Venir knew his way around the village much better than Thanus did, they took several shortcuts that Thanus hadn’t seen before on his map. He pointed them out as they walked.

“Some bridges…like this one over here…have unusually low levels of water. They are dead ends, actually…” They circled around the canal they’d just entered. “But at the slightest provocation, they will reveal a new path.

The stone rumbled and gave way as Venir leaned into it, Thanus was about to enter, but Venir held him fast.

“I just thought I’d show you.”

He smiled slyly at Thanus, and made off in the opposite direction, back out of the canal towards the dirt roads. It occurred to him then, that Venir meant for Thanus to use these passages in the future. He stared at the keeper.

“How did you do that?”

“What – with the door?”

“No, I meant, that other …student of yours?”

“He was a seeker,”

“What does that mean?”

Venir looked over Thanus, “My students are separated into scribes, who record knowledge. Seekers, who discover knowledge. Then Keepers, who keep knowledge. They make up the three orders of our Creed.”

“What does knowledge have to do with what he did? How he appeared like that?”

“Knowledge comes in all shapes and forms Thanus, some lost, some forgotten,” Venir’s hand glowed with strange green runes. “But not by us. Knowing is our profession, Wisdom is our creed.”

As noble as that all sounded, living in the forest probably meant surviving on berries and nuts like Thanus was forced to. Perhaps his face betrayed him,

“It’s not for everyone,” Venir acknowledged, “One of our numbers in particular, has always wanted to live among Amarans – but you’ve seen what they’re like.”

Thanus was still hugging the package of food close to his chest, breathing in its fumes as they walked. They had left the village outskirts now, and land began to slope upwards towards the mountains Thanus’ house was perched on, making the ascent difficult.

“Thanus, maybe there is something you can do for me,”

“Mmm?” he said dreamily,

“Let my nomad live with you,”

This was just about enough to wrench his gaze away from the food in his hands.

“What?”

“Your cottage is close enough to the village and the forest, so he won’t be in any real danger. If you have any troubles with him, I’ll arrive within a week and take him back to the forest.”

“I – I don’t know,”

“And if you harbour one of my people, it’ll give me an excuse to send more food – Dante and Icho have always been too proud to accept anything from me.”

His stomach grumbled loudly, and Thanus held in a groan. He had to get home, he couldn’t stand this much longer. Venir was still waiting for an answer, but there was no other answer he could give. There was no way this could work. He’d only met the old man an hour ago, and he still had no idea what he really wanted. But surely, if he’d meant to do Thanus harm, he would have done it by now. Wasn’t he being paranoid?

Besides, the idea of food, free food arriving every week without having to chance the dangers of Amaru, the idea of it was enough to make him agree to anything.

It’s only paranoid when you’re wrong. Thanus had an art gallery’s worth of scars splashed onto his body to document all the times he hadn’t been.

“It isn’t a good idea” he said at last,

But Venir didn’t seem to accept this as an answer,

“Just one day.” He said instead, “I’ll introduce the two of you soon, and I’ll take him back promptly the day after. I am convinced, you won’t even notice his presence, and am sure, you will get along famously.”