

Chapter 5

Dante

I believe that was the first time Peter had directly called me by my name and not “wolfy”.

As we marched down the main road, I recalled the somber memory of Peter helplessly sobbing against my leg, begging me not to take him into Tynas. I loathed seeing him in such a distraught manner, even if he had been a nuisance during the past few days. He was truly scared, no, terrified of where we were going and wanted to avoid it at all costs. I couldn't blame him. Tales of Capres mutilating any otter that dared to enter his domain had managed to reach my ears years ago and remained in the darkest realms of my memories, where nightmares dwelled while I wasn't dreaming, waiting to ambush me like a snake that waits for a child in a garden.

Even though I wasn't an otter, I still felt a hot broth of fear boil inside my stomach as we neared the City. My fear grew even stronger when I began to wonder what would happen if we were caught. I didn't doubt for a moment that I would receive the same torture as Peter if we were both captured.

To my right, Peter slowly trudged while my cloak was nearly falling off of him. The gravel of the road beneath his boots was silent and didn't seem to move at his touch. He may as well have been floating like some kind of phantom. I thought about picking him up and carrying him on my back in an effort to comfort him, but I knew it would hardly make a difference. We would still enter the gates of Tynas, a City where everyone took bets on how long it took an otter to bleed out in the streets.

I began to regret promising Peter his safety.

Soon, the City gates where in sight, swallowing the road on which we traveled. The City wall that encircled Tynas loomed over us like a giant from a children's story, ready for whatever army that dared to even attempt to siege the City. The wall's grey symmetrical brick seemed to be watching every step we took as we moved even closer. Every crack in the stone was a soldier with a sword and every dirt stain was an archer with a ready bow. Nothing seemed to be able to escape the wall's careful eyes around the City. God help you, if you ever do stand there in front of Tynas. Not all the horrors of Hell could be more antagonizing or more terrifying as that godforsaken tomb.

All hope abandon ye who enter here.

I glanced over at Peter again, who kept his face foreword. My hood concealed his face extremely well, keeping his head in the far back of it and covering a good portion of his face.

The gate was open and its black metal teeth hung overhead, ready to snap down and bite any intruder. Two knights stood watch at the gate, one on the left and one on the right, leaving hardly enough space to walk past them. The guard on the left was a white tiger and the one on the right was a badger, both of who had their visors open, allowing sunlight to brush against their faces. Both of them gave us a quick silent lookover, searching for any sign of trouble. Neither of them found such an indication and let us slide between them without a word. As we passed between

the two knights, I noticed that both wore the Capres Family crest on their breastplates, which was a roaring tiger head that's teeth were dripping with what looked like blood.

We then walked through the open gate, arriving into the mouth of the City.

Immediately, scents of all kinds began to engulf my nose, making me nearly lightheaded, as if I were intoxicated. Just off the top of my head, I could smell wolves, skunks, tigers, jackals and lemurs. And that was just once we had entered Tynas. As we trotted past various houses on a cobblestone road, my nose was drowned in more and more scents that became recognizable to me.

I tried to take my mind off the plethora of aromas and looked around us. There were mostly one-story houses, all of which possessed identical architecture. Their doors were made of dark brown wood that held brass knobs out to greet the warm hands of guests. Stained glass windows watched you as you passed by, judging every step you took. The houses themselves were all made of the same depressing grey stone, which made the entire City look incredibly bleak, despite it being a very sunny day. Every house was also topped off with a chimney that was constructed of gloomy black bricks.

"I've never seen chimneys before," Peter remarked, as we walked down a slanted road. "We don't ever get cold in the South, so there's no need for them,"

At first, I was about to remind him of Cainrin, where we had first met. But I didn't recall seeing any chimneys there. Cainrin was a small town, so it didn't have the budget for such a luxury. "They're quite nice to use, if you ever get the chance,"

"I'd like to...someday,"

"Say," I said, "how did you get all the way up north without seeing a single chimney?"

"Oh," Peter said. "I didn't tell you? I took a boat that went up to Leler and then hitched a ride in a farmer's wagon down to Cainrin,"

"Huh," I said. "Leler's not bad. It's certainly not my favorite Northern Capital, but it's adequate,"

"Hey," Peter said, "it just hit me. Why don't we just take a ship and sail down to Lowpive? That would be a lot faster than walking,"

"How much did it cost for you to sail up here?" I asked, rhetorically.

"Um... A thousand gold,"

"Not surprising," I said. "Sailing is a extravagance I can't afford. So, we have no choice but to walk,"

Peter didn't respond.

We moved past the homes and found ourselves in the marketplace, the heart of Tynas. Everybody, shoppers and merchants alike, made no effort to keep their voices down or display any kind of civility. Crowds of people pushed against each other, keeping the market air alive with their shouts and haggling. Every direction we turned, someone was running somewhere or gold was being handed out for a certain desired item.

I looked to my right to make sure that Peter was still with me and hadn't gotten lost in the swarm of people. When my eyes found that he was just a step away, my chest loosened a little. His hands were tucked into his pockets and he kept

his head hung low. Not that anybody seemed to pay much attention to him, though. All of the shoppers were only concerned about making the purchases of the day.

Merchants hollered from their booths as we continued to struggle against the horde of customers. Each merchant stood behind a cheap moveable table with a tent over them. Half of the time we were there, I was uncertain of whether or not they were talking to me, or somebody else. Yet, every time their voices rang over the crowd, I almost jumped, fearing that Peter had been discovered.

"Get yer wife somthin' pretty! I got dresses of only the finest quality!"

"Fresh meat! Bring home a nice cooked pig for only twenty gold coins!"

"Does your fur reek? Get some perfume! Women *and* men won't be able to resist you!"

"I got the sharpest swords in all the North! Don't let nobody tell you different,"

"Can't get your cock up? I've got some herbal supplements that'll help!"

We then passed by a mob of women, children and men, whose faces clung tightly to their skulls, a sign that they hadn't eaten very much for quite sometime. Their apparel was nothing more than raggedy cloth, which appeared to have been made from potato sacks, bed sheets and carpets that had been crudely sewn together. Their voices were low and groggy as they asked for whatever money or food we could spare, while their hopeless eyes stared at us as we passed them by without a word. I desperately wished to feed every single one of them, but, I knew that if I did, I would have no gold left and would only end up starving alongside them.

"There's so many beggars," Peter said, as soon as the starving people were out of earshot. "There was like forty of them back there,"

"The South taxes the North because the North lost the war," I told him. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yeah," he said and sighed in despair. "I can't believe my dad came up with that idea,"

"All the more reason to keep you hidden," I said. "If I recall correctly, every Northern Kingdom has to give forty percent of their total income to the South. Most common people can't pay such a high tax rate, so they lose their houses and can't afford to buy new goods,"

"That sucks," Peter groaned. "Not their fault they don't make enough,"

"No," I agreed, "it's not. But what do you expect? Who wants to give some of their own gold to people they've never even met?"

"The kings and queens could cut their staff in half," Peter suggested. "You would save a lot of money that way and be able to give it to those who need it,"

"And what about the servants that would be let go?" I asked. "They end up on the streets and beg just like the others, so it's ludicrous to take their jobs,"

"Are you sure there aren't any kings or queens that don't give some of their gold to the common people?"

"Yes, but it's not just their fault these people are starving. Based on how skinny that group we passed was, nobody else has been kind enough to give them any food or money. Some can't afford to help, but others don't want to,"

"Why?" Peter demanded. "Why wouldn't somebody help them?"

"Because," I answered him, "it's easier to complain about how horrible the world is than it is to try and fix it. A crime everybody is guilty of,"

"The South should take away the taxes," Peter said.

"They're not just doing it for the gold, though," I reminded him. "Sure, it's a nice bonus, but the main purpose for the taxes is to keep the North in submission. If you take away a great deal of gold from your enemies and limit their economy, they'll think twice before attacking you,"

After getting halfway through the market, we came upon a fountain that was the only white structure in the entire City. It stood in the middle of a pool and was about seven tall. On top of the fountain, a porcelain tiger lay on its stomach, spewing out a stream of water. The square pool below the fountain, which was six feet long in width and three feet high, was half-full with clear water that seemed clean enough to drink. Children, who had miraculously escaped their shopping parents, splashed in the cool water, throwing the liquid at each other as they devilishly laughed with smiles on their faces. For moment, I forgot where I was and smiled at the sight of the children, who knew nothing about the burdens of the world. Their days were long and full of laughter. I suddenly became disheartened when I realized that those innocent smiles and hopeful eyes would wash away in only a few years when the children would finally learn about the world's sorrows.

Eventually, the fountain was behind us and so was the market place. Houses enclosed us again, rather than vigorous shoppers, which I was grateful for.

"Hey," a gruff voice called from behind me. "Wolf,"

Peter and I stopped in our tracks. Then, we turned to face a lion, who had his visor open and was dressed in sparkling polished armor with a longsword sheathed at his side. A crest of a roaring tiger with bloody teeth was embellished upon his breastplate, letting all who gazed upon him know that he was a knight of King Capres.

"Yes?" I asked, sounding sincere and polite. My fur began to burn with fear. *What does he want?*

"Where are you heading?" he inquired.

"Oh," I said. "I'm just taking my friend home. He's really drunk,"

On cue, Peter hunched over and started to balance himself on me as if he were in danger of collapsing onto the ground. His body swayed as though he were a sail and as if the wind were blowing him against me. Anybody who happened to look down at Peter would surely believe that he had been drinking. Even I, for a moment, began to think that maybe he had grabbed a drink in the marketplace when I wasn't looking.

"We had a *bitchin'* time!" Peter exclaimed, altering the volume of his voice on every slurred word.

The guard's eyes widened a little, as if he were taken back by Peter's outburst. Then, his eyes returned to their normal size once again and his face remained a slab of steel. "It's a little early to be drinking, ain't it?"

"I know," I said, rolling my eyes and placing a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"That's what I told him. But his wife got real pissed off at him and he wanted to go get some ale,"

"What tavern?" the knight probed.

Shit. I didn't have answer for that and, if I didn't give him a name of one of the taverns in Tynas, he would know that I was lying.

Peter broke out into slurred speech once again. "Alderman's! *That's* where!" He gave a curt laugh and continued talking. "Our barmaid had HUGE tits!" He then put his hands in front of his chest and began to make exaggeratedly large ovals.

"Really?" the lion said, offering the smallest hint of a grin. "I've seen that place. I'll have to try it sometime,"

"I'm sorry for my friend's rudeness, sir," I apologized. "Weasel's are nasty drunks,"

"Weasel, eh?" the lion said, his grin fading. "I couldn't tell with that cloak on him. Why's it so big, anyways?"

I laughed and held out an open hand. "It's mine, sir. He forgot his back at home with his wife and got cold,"

"My wife!" Peter gasped and threw himself off my side. "Oh, shit! She's gonna leave me and take the kids!"

Without warning, Peter turned and staggered away from the guard and I, his hands outstretched as though he were attempting to balance himself.

I glanced back at the knight and widened my eyes. "I really should go, sir. He might slip on his own puke and break his neck if I don't help him,"

The knight didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on Peter, who I imagined was still waddling away awkwardly through the street. Then, after what felt as though a century had passed, the knight looked at me once more. "Go. If he dies, you clean up the mess,"

I smiled before tuning around and chasing after Peter. "Thank you, sir!"

Peter had only made it a few feet away, still swinging his body around and holding his arms out like he was a bird about to take flight. I held his left arm, once I caught up to him, and continued to walk, fearing that the guard was still watching us.

We had walked in silence for a few moments before I spoke. "Peter,"

"Yeah?" Peter asked in his normal voice.

"Is the guard still looking?"

A moment later, Peter looked over his shoulder. "No. He's walking into the market,"

"Good," I sighed and released Peter's arm. "That was amazing! Forget being a prince. You should be an actor,"

The otter lowered his arms and stopped his sluggish movement. "Thanks. Turns out my dad was wrong. You can learn something from drinking! And I could never be an actor. Too many damn lines,"

I chuckled at the notion of Peter standing on stage, stumbling through a lengthy monologue as he wore a purple leotard. "I believe you. Hey, how did you even know the name of that tavern?"

Peter shrugged nonchalantly. "I saw its sign hanging on the front door. It was right before we got to the market. Place looked like a shithole, which was the only reason I even noticed it. Are we close to the store yet?"

"Uh," I looked in front of us and could see that we were nearing the southern wall of the City. "Almost. It's the third right up ahead,"

He didn't respond.

When we turned up the road, we came upon a place deserted of all signs of life. No voices from the market could be heard and the streets were filled with broken glass.

"How come your friend isn't down in the market?" Peter asked me. "Wouldn't he make more money there than...here?"

"A lot of people wouldn't approve of his, let's say, lifestyle," I elaborated. "And, he sells a lot of...exotic...things. So he makes a good amount of money,"

"Exotic? As in illegal?"

"I wouldn't say that too loudly, but yeah. He gets stuff that people want, which, in my case, is bullets. But he does sell other special items to those who can afford them,"

Peter became silent once again.

When we arrived at the shop, Peter and I stopped to gaze at it for a moment. The building was almost identical to all of the houses around it. Hell, it didn't even have a sign, so there was no way of knowing that it was a shop. However, unlike the buildings around it, the shop held no windows on its face.

I edged towards the door and Peter followed carefully behind me.

The door didn't make a single creak as I opened it, despite its incredibly heavy weight, which was something I had never understood, since it was made of wood and was not very thick. As I stepped inside, the scent of citrus perfume brought my nose to life. The perfume wasn't overbearing, like it is in most brothels, and the shop held just a hint of the sweetness in the air that made you want to smell it again, even after your third or fourth whiff.

For a dwelling that was as big as a normal house, the shop was certainly small. However, the room was rather dark on account of there not being a candle in sight, so my eyes took a moment to adjust. There, before us, were three tables filled with about ten patrons altogether, who calmly sat while drinking what smelled like wine. A few feet to the left was a flight of stairs, which led to a door above. Below them, a second door was hidden in the shadows. Just straight ahead, beyond the men drinking at the tables, was a red fox that stood behind a wooden counter, just to the right of a doorway that was closed off by strands of violet beads. The fox was wearing a bright purple tunic, brown trousers and golden pendant, which held a green jewel so large that I could see it from the far side of the room.

I closed the door as Peter trotted in.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Peter whispered, while glancing around. "Everyone's drinking! This is a tavern,"

"Shhh," I told him. "He probably started selling drinks since the last time I was here,"

I moved across the room towards the counter, which the fox stood behind, and Peter obediently followed.

As I stopped in front of the wooden counter, the fox, who was only as tall as my collarbone, coolly greeted me. "Welcome, gentlemen. What can I do for you today?"

I smiled. "Oh, come on, Pan. There's no need to keep up the charade,"

Pan's ears flattened and he squinted his dark brown eyes at me. "I don't know what you mean, sir. Have we met before? I don't seem to recall,"

I laughed at his persistence. "Okay, then. I'll take my money elsewhere,"

"Fine," Pan sighed and let his cool persona melt away instantaneously, allowing the walking-talking stereotypical gay man that he was out. "Jesus Christ, Dante, you suck the fun out of everything," he said, in his typical prissy voice.

I shrugged. "Hey, when I want something, I get it,"

Pan gave me the devious smile that only foxes can give with their scheming eyes. "And that's why I cherish you as a customer,"

"You cherish my money!"

The fox shrugged. "A man's gotta eat. What will it be today, hun?"

I leaned against the counter, folding my arms and pressing them against the smooth wood. "Oh, I don't know. What do you have?"

"Dante," Pan said, shaking his head with a grin and feigning disappointment. "You know I can't tell you that. In a game of cards, you can never let somebody else see your hand. That's why you've never accepted any of my invitations to sleep with me. Your one of those men that can't stand the fact that someone else knows something they don't,"

My smile widened. "Please! The only reason I've never gone to your bed is because I'd break you in half!"

"I'm a big boy, sweetheart," Pan replied as he leaned against the wall behind him. "I never bite off more than I can chew, especially when it comes to cock,"

"You bite cocks?" I said. "No wonder you're so horny all the time! Everybody gets out of your bed just as you go down on them!"

Pan laughed and so did I.

"So," Pan tried his best to stop laughing, "what'll it be?"

"I'll have forty bullets, fifteen arrows and something to help my friend here,"

"That's quite a list," Pan cooed.

"Do you have them?" I asked, knowing full well that he did.

"You bet your cute ass I do. What's ailing your friend?"

I leaned over the counter, fearing that the drinking men behind us might overhear me, and whispered, "I need a disguise for him, preferably something that makes him look like a weasel,"

For a moment, Pan scanned Peter. "Take off the hood. Let's see what I can do,"

I turned and placed my hands on the sides of my hood that concealed Peter's face. But, before I could pull the hood down, Peter's hands shot up and grabbed both of my wrists. I looked at his hands, which were shaking, and then looked into Peter's eyes. The prince's entire face was contorted in fear.

"There's people around," Peter whispered.

My eyes never left his. "Don't worry. Pan would never let anything bad happen to his customers,"

Peter's uneasy gaze told me that my words gave him little comfort. "How can one fox fight off ten men?"

I smiled. "You don't know Pan like I do. He *always* has a plan,"

After a moment of silence, Peter released my hands and I lowered the hood off of him. Then, once my hood lay down on Peter's back, I turned to face Pan.

"Oh, my," Pan admired and leaned over the counter to stare down at Peter. "I don't think I've ever seen an otter before. Well, one that hasn't been butchered by Capres' knights, that is,"

"Do you have anything that could help?" I asked, trying to avoid the "butchered" otter subject for Peter's sake.

"Hmmm," Pan groaned, covering his mouth with his hand while he thought. "Yes, I do. Let me go in the back,"

The fox moved away from the counter and passed through the door with the beaded threads, which heavenly rang as he exited.

A few moments of awkward silence passed and Pan returned, carrying a bundle of arrows tied together by a piece of red ribbon, a small knapsack and a wool bag that was twice the size of my fist. Pan delicately placed each of the items on the counter, as if they were the eggs that he was going to eat for breakfast.

"Here," Pan said, as he pushed the bundle of arrows forward, "are your arrows," The fox's hand then moved over to the small wool bag and slid it over the counter. "And here are your bullets,"

"And that's the costume?" I asked, as I squinted at the knapsack. "I don't know, Pan. A walking bag would seem pretty suspicious,"

The fox chuckled as he loosened the straps of the small knapsack and reached inside of it. He then placed four jars on the counter. The first three held solid substances, two of which were pink and one that was white. The fourth jar, unlike the others, held a clear liquid inside.

I scanned the jars and my tail twitched in confusion. "How is this stuff supposed to-?"

The door behind us burst open and light flooded the shop.

Swiftly, I turned around with my hand on the grip of my rapier and witnessed five of Capres' knights storm inside, none of which had their visors closed. They quickly moved past the drinking patrons and formed a line no further than seven feet away from where I stood frozen in place next to Peter. Two of them were bears; one was a cheetah, another was a tiger and, in between them, stood a lion, the same lion that had stopped us earlier.

"Well, this is truly an honor," Pan announced with a mocking tone as the door to his shop slammed shut. "Five knights here in my store? What a tale this will make the next time I play cards!"

"Shut it, merchant," one of the bears snapped.

"I'm sorry?" Pan replied, bitterly.

The lion broke the line and stepped forward, almost shouting. "You have a vile otter in your shop!" He then lifted his right arm and dramatically pointed at Peter.

"Yes," Pan said. "And there are several other species here, too. Care to point them out as well?"

"The vile Southerner," the lion continued, "is to be executed,"

"How did you even know that he was an otter?" I asked, still holding the grip of my sheathed sword.

For the first time since he had entered the room, the lion looked at me with his fiery brown eyes. "When this Southern *scum* held up his hands earlier, I saw his webbed fingers,"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Pan interrupted, "but I fail to see why you are here, if not to make a purchase,"

The lion raised his voice. "We're here to execute this otter and wolf. We're also going to be executing you as well, shopkeeper!"

"Oh?" Pan asked without the slightest hint of worry. "For what crime? I'm only selling my goods, just like all of those screaming idiots down at the market. It's how I make my living,"

"For not informing the Royal Guard that this filth was in our City!" the lion roared.

"Who I sell my goods to in my own store is my business," Pan said.

"May I remind you," the lion said, taking another step forward and glaring at the Pan, "that your shop is in Tynas, the very City that King Capres rules? It is his laws that you so guiltlessly disobey!"

Pan laughed behind me. "The King can suck a cock for all I care,"

My fingers tightened around my sword's grip.

The knight's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared in rage. "The King gives you protection and yet you take gold from these criminals?"

"King's protection," Pan scoffed. "I'd rather have the gold,"

"Of course," the lion said. "How could a sodomite such as yourself understand loyalty?"

"Hey!" Pan said. "Those rumors were never proven!"

"Either way," the lion said, drawing his longsword, "you're coming with us, faggot. You and you're two *customers*,"

"I'm sorry, Sir Bigot," Pan said. "But I'm afraid I'll have to decline your rude invitation,"

The knight pointed the tip of his sword towards Pan. "Don't make me drag you out by your legs, vulpine!"

An eerie chuckle came over my shoulder from Pan, chilling my spine as though I had been touched by ice. "Tough talk for a man who's all alone,"

Pan, who still remained behind the counter, then gave a sharp whistle.

Suddenly, hands evaporated out of thin air, each holding a sharpened knife, and slit the throats of all the knights, except for the lion. Each man's vulnerable neck sang out rivers of rich blood as the daggers danced across them with the fluidness of water. The blood drifted down the knights' armor, turning the pure reflective breastplates into ruby mirrors, just before splattering onto the ground to create a red sea at our paws. The guards, in turn, each fell to the ground and gurgled their last breaths into the blood on the floor, causing bubbles to ring around their heads. Not a single one rose again.

The lion turned around and faced the bodies of his fallen comrades, who were currently bathing in each other's blood. Over their dead bodies, the ten men who had been drinking stood tall, four of who held knives that were stained with red.

And then, Pan spoke once more. "You see, this is my shop and my home. And, in my home, my rules are the law. Not the King's. Mine!"

The lion looked back over his shoulder at Pan, determination and fury still burning brightly in his eyes. "I'll scream for help. Someone will call for more knights,"

Pan laughed. "I highly doubt it. You see, when I was having this building built, I gave the architect a handsome sum of money and an unforgettable night in bed. In return, he filled the insides of these walls with lead. They are completely soundproof. Nothing gets in. Nothing gets out. Why do you think my store doesn't have any windows? And the door? That was hollowed out and has about thirty pounds of lead in it, too. So, you can scream all you like, but nobody is coming to save you. In these walls, I am God and I say that you shall bleed,"

The lion turned his head back to face the armed patrons, but, before he could even raise his sword, a hyena lunged forward and slit the lion's throat. Without a word, or even a scream, the knight collapsed onto the ground and bled with the rest of his men.

I stood there, absolutely shocked by the mass of bodies that lay before me. Pan's men had killed the knights so easily. And it wasn't as though they had just killed some bandits out in the woods. No. These were Capres' knights, all of which appeared to be old enough to have fought in the Yurl War. Yet, there they were, lying in their own mess, having put up no fight at all.

My inner trance had been broken when Pan began to give orders to his men. "Seven of you, drag these bodies to the basement and burn them in the furnace, armor and all. The other three of you can clean up this mess,"

A metallic bang erupted behind me and I turned to see a metal bucket sitting on the counter, with water and sponges inside, along with a few dry rags next to it.

With only a few grumbled words amongst each other, the men moved to their jobs. Seven moved the bodies through the door underneath the stairs and closed it behind them. The other three took the bucket and began to work on the lake of blood on the floor, using the rags to soak up most of it before scrubbing the rest with sponges. Everyone moved automatically, like ants gathering food. My instincts told me that this wasn't their first time cleaning up bodies.

Peter stood next to me like a statue. His eyes didn't blink and his mouth gaped open like an imbecile's. I was about to ask if he was fine, but I realized that we probably should leave as quickly as possible, so I turned around and continued to barter with Pan.

Pan stood behind his counter with that welcoming flicker still in his eyes, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "I apologize for the interruption. Now, where were we?"

"I was going to ask how those jars would help my friend look like a weasel," I said, finally taking my hand away from my rapier.

Pan snapped his fingers. "You're going to love it,"

"Now," the fox said and began to unscrew the lids of all the jars, "I decided that making him look like a weasel wouldn't be possible. His ears would have to be very different and his muzzle would have to be narrower. I was thinking that it

would be a lot easier if we made him look like a white ferret. Unless you have a better idea?"

I shook my head.

"Great!" Pan squeaked and came around the counter. "Dante could you get... I'm sorry. I didn't catch your friend's name,"

I looked down at Peter, who still stared at the blood on the floor and kept his back towards Pan.

"Peter," I told Pan.

Pan's ears flicked and he shot a curious glance towards me. "Peter Gannish?"

I returned my focus to Pan nodded.

"Well," Pan said and put his hands on his hips. "I see how it is, Dante,"

I squinted at the fox and could feel my forehead furrow in bewilderment. "I don't understand,"

"Apparently you have to be a prince to get some love around here,"

"That's not what this is about," I said, shaking my head and rolling my eyes. "I'm just doing it for the bounty,"

"Sure," Pan said, as he crossed his arms. "And I'm straight,"

"Jesus Christ," I groaned.

"Don't you bring Jesus into this," Pan smiled and chuckled at my discomfort, informing me that he was only jesting.

"Could you please just show me how this disguise works?" I finally asked, hoping to move on from the subject of whom I was or wasn't sleeping with.

"Sure!" Pan said.

"Thank you,"

"Nice to meet you, Peter," Pan said with a smile as Peter finally turned around to face him. "Dante, could you go grab a chair for Peter to sit on?"

I turned and sauntered over to the nearest table. "Sure,"

As I reached out to grab the nearest chair, I happened to see one of the cups the men had been drinking from and gazed at the red liquid inside. Carefully, I lifted the drink to my mouth and took a sip. *Water. Probably dyed with something.* But why did I smell wine?

"I soak the mugs in wine overnight," Pan called to me from back over by Peter.

"They were never patrons?" I asked.

"Nope!" Pan explained, as I placed the mug back down and carried a chair back over to him. "When you're selling shit, legal or illegal, it's always nice to have a bit of security,"

The fox looked at Peter when I set the chair down. "Have a seat,"

Peter, with hollow eyes, walked over to the chair sat down without a word. It was unusual for him to be so quiet, so I knew that he was distressed by what we had just witnessed. *He'll need to get used to it.*

"Here," Pan said, as he moved behind Peter and removed my cloak from the young prince. "Wouldn't want this to get this stained,"

Pan then held out my cloak towards me and I took it with a smile of gratitude before placing it on myself.

The merchant circled around Peter, like a buzzard over a carcass, and tilted the otter's head so that his face looked up at the ceiling. Pan's punctilious gaze took in every hair on Peter's head from every angle, even when he turned the otter's head left and right with a hand placed on Peter's cheek. Peter, meanwhile, didn't even look at Pan. Instead, he gazed emptily up at the ceiling above.

"Okay," Pan said. "I have a plan,"

After releasing Peter from his delicate grasp, Pan returned to the counter and scooped up the jar with the white material inside. He placed the index finger of his right hand inside the jar. Then, he retracted his finger, which now bore a pale paste, and moved towards Peter. He then set the jar down next to the side of the chair and began his work.

He held his right hand up and carefully dabbed his white-coated finger onto Peter's cheek. After the clump of the goo was stuck to Peter's fur, Pan began to rub it around Peter's cheek in a hypnotizing circular fashion. "I chose a white ferret because, well, they're mostly white. So putting this stuff on will be easy, since you don't have to worry about so many colors. This is also a very high quality item because nothing can take it off except water,"

"Just water?"

"Yes. Not wine and not by rubbing. Just water. Unless if it gets on your clothes, though. If that happens, it'll stain and won't come off,"

Pan withdrew his hand from Peter's face and inspected the perfect white moon that Peter's cheek had transformed into. "There! See how easy it is to put on?"

"Wow," I admired. "It looks real, too,"

"Damn right it does," Pan said, with proud flick of his tail. "You should try putting it on him, Dante,"

I crept forward and leaned over to dip my finger into the jar. The cream was thick, yet smooth and without any lumps or odd growths. Then, I raised my hand up and began to whiten the cheek that Pan hadn't touched.

Soon, after about fifteen minutes, Peter's entire face was ghostly white and didn't possess a single indication of its true brown shade. I also colored his tail too, which, of course, required Peter to stand for a moment so that he could take it out from inside his trousers.

"Now," I said, "what about the other jars? He already doesn't look like an otter, so why do we need them?"

With a roll of his eyes, Pan walked back over the counter. "Dante! If you're going to use a disguise, you can't half-ass it!"

The vulpine then turned and stood diagonally to allow me to see both of the pink jars. "The bright pink is for his nose and the slightly darker one is for the insides of his ears,"

As Pan dipped his middle finger into the lighter colored jar and began to work on Peter's nose, I found myself baffled at how I didn't even realize that the pinks were different shades of color.

When he was done with Peter's nose, Pan smeared the other pink on his thumb and painted the inner circles of Peter's tiny ears. Much like Peter's nose, they only took a few seconds to color.

"Doesn't it look great?" Pan asked, as he stood back to admire his work, his right arm held up in front of him to avoid staining his clothes.

"It looks amazing, but I still don't know what the last jar is for," I said.

"Ah!" Pan said and walked away to the final jar that held a clear liquid. "This is the icing on the cake, my handsome friend,"

The fox dipped the index finger of his left hand into the liquid and withdrew it. He then wiped it onto the palm of his right hand and moved over to Peter once more, where he began to pat the otter's face, arms and tunic.

A moment after he began, I realized what Pan was doing. A musk had filled the air, one that managed to even fool my strong nose. Pan was spreading ferret-scented perfume all over Peter's body. No longer was the scent of otter even detectable on Peter. Instead, all I could smell was a ferret.

When he was finally finished with his task, Pan stepped back a little and glanced down at Peter. "Would you like to see?"

Slowly, Peter nodded.

Pan returned behind his counter once more and bent over, only to stand back up while holding a silver mirror with no handle in his hands as he walked back to Peter.

Gingerly, Peter took the mirror, placing both of his hands on the sides of its border and gazed at his own reflection. "Holy shit!"

Pan shot me a look. "You see? Somebody admires my work!"

"He isn't the one paying for your work," I said.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot to tell you the price," Pan said.

"Sure you did,"

"Now," Pan began his list, "the arrows are only going to cost you ten gold. But, the bullets will be thirty and the disguise will be fifty. So, you're total will be ninety gold,"

"Ninety?" Peter gasped as he looked up from his mirror.

I raised an open hand to show him that it was all right. "Works for me,"

"Of course..." Pan said and gazed at me with a frisky grin. "There's always that discount I've mentioned,"

"For the last time," I said, "I'm not going to take your 'lover's discount',"

"Fine. Just remember, it's always there if you want it," Pan said, before returning behind his counter.

As Pan began to gather all the items together and close the jars, I threw my knapsack up onto the counter so that I could dig for my purse. I eventually found it and placed it on the table. I then reached into my bag and withdrew the fox and squirrel pelts I had kept. I pushed them across the wood of the counter towards Pan. "I'd like to use these for store credit,"

Pan examined the pelts without even touching them. After a moment of dramatic silence, he spoke. "I'll take ten gold for the both of them,"

I nodded. "Okay. Oh, yeah. I'll take a pair of gloves for Peter to wear. Wouldn't want somebody else to notice his hands,"

"Sure you don't want to use that discount?" Pan asked, as he plopped some black gloves on the counter that he had seemed to pull out from thin air. "You'd get fifty percent off your final price tag,"

"No thanks," I snickered at the fox's enthusiasm and began placing gold onto the counter.

"All right then," Pan groaned, disappointingly. "If you want to pay all that money, I'm not gonna stop you,"

After I placed exactly eighty gold coins on the table, I pushed them over to Pan, who, naturally, recounted them himself.

"All-rightey then," Pan said, as he crouched down and placed a wooden box on the table that was the twice the size of a jewelry box, which he opened and set my gold inside. "Pleasure doing business with you, Dante; as always,"

"Wait," I told him. "I didn't pay for the gloves,"

"Hun," Pan said, raising his hand. "It's fine. You're a friend and I value your loyalty as a consumer. Take 'em. They aren't that expensive anyway,"

Surprised by Pan's generosity, I took the gloves and placed them off to the side as I put away the other goods I had purchased. "Thanks. I'll tell your sister you said hello if I stop in Ansil,"

"Please," Pan scoffed and shut his box. "She'd never believe you,"

"True,"

"If you are heading south, you may want to be careful," Pan said, looking up from his box to gaze at me with caution. "I hear the Talth are looking for an otter and a wolf that killed three of their men on the road,"

"How do they know it was a wolf and an otter?" I asked, trying to mask my fear with haughty derision, as I tied my knapsack closed and put it on my back.

"They found hair and scents near the bodies," Pan explained. "My friends tell me that they're out for blood. The Talth may be stupid, but they're persistent. Watch yourself, Dante. The world would be a much darker place without you around,"

"Thanks, Pan," I said, while picking the pair of gloves up from the counter.

"Of course," Pan grinned and arched his head slightly back. "I still have faith that one day you'll accept my discount,"

"We'll see," I laughed.

Suddenly, I thought about the knights who, moments ago, were slain. I then recalled that we were still inside Tynas, where more of Capres' guards lurked. "What if those knights told somebody that they were coming here? You could have the rest of the Capres' men storm through your door any second!"

Pan chuckled at the sight of my flustered voice. "This isn't the first time Capres' knights have come to my door with their swords in hand. Not once have they ever told anybody that they were coming here. Why? Because they want all the glory to themselves. They all want to be heroes at the end of the day. And it's true what they say," A grin spread across Pan's snout. "Pride comes before fall,"

I thought for a moment, analyzing what he had just said. Then, after I realized that he was probably right, I relaxed a little. "Pride comes before fall... Isn't that from the Bible?"

"Yep," Pan nodded.

"Since when do *you* read the Bible?" I said.

"What? Just because I take it up the ass, I can't go to church?"

"You're going to church, too?"

"Well," Pan said, rubbing the back of his head, "mostly because some of my clients get a kick out of seeing me in the pew next to them. And, if it makes my customers happy, then it makes them want to come back to my store. Never been fond of church, though. Sitting around while some old geezer goes on about how everybody is going to Hell has never been an appealing way to spend my Sunday morning. But I have read Bible before. It's good...in some parts,"

Amused and interested, I placed my arms upon the counter and leaned forward. "I never pegged you as a Christian, Pan,"

"Why?" Pan shrugged. "Just cause I suck dick? That doesn't mean shit. I've gotten this far without getting killed, so somebody's watching out for me up there,"

I nodded, admitting that it was borderline miraculous that Pan had managed to survive in Tynas that long. He didn't present me with a straightforward answer about whether or not he believed in God, but I wasn't going to question him about it. His beliefs were none of my business. "Well, we'll be leaving now. We've taken up enough of your time,"

"Oh please, sweetie!" Pan assured me. "It's always lovely to see you again,"

Pan stepped out from behind his counter and approached me. His arms were spread and he embraced me, placing his head on my shoulder. "Come back soon!"

The strong scents of fox and lavender scented perfume crept up my nose as I repaid the friendly gesture, wrapping my arms around Pan's warm torso. "Of course,"

Pan broke the hug and took a step back, smiling.

I then turned to look at Peter, who still sat in his chair and quietly looked up at me with the mirror lying flat against his thighs. I stepped closer to him, holding out the pair of black gloves, which Peter took and began to put on his hands without a word.

"Let's go," I announced.

He remained silent and rose from his chair with the mirror in his hands. He then set the mirror back down onto the seat.

Together, we walked around the pool of blood that was still being cleaned by Pan's men. We reached the door and Peter opened it, flooding the room with sunlight again.

"See you soon!" Pan called out from behind me.

Peter went outside and I stepped in the doorway before turning around to see Pan waving goodbye from behind his counter.

I raised my hand and mirrored the gesture. "Goodbye!"

After turning back around, I stepped outside after Peter and closed the heavy door to Pan's shop behind me.