

Silver Bounty

By: IndigoRho

Torrential rain had driven most of the populace indoors despite it only being noon, leaving all but the busiest avenues mostly empty. The sound of the downpour striking stone, roof tile, and canal water was deafening at times, threatening to drown out conversation and even thought. Shutters had been latched tight just to block out the unwanted noise. From the streets the city appeared abandoned.

Andre appreciated the solitude even if he didn't care for getting soaked. It ensured few were around to see the frustrated lion sulk. He'd spent the whole morning at a gambling den and—as usual—his luck had been absolutely atrocious. In private he swore he'd been cheated, but in reality Andre simply didn't know when to quit—whether he was ahead or behind. The next roll was always going to be in his favor or the next hand a winner. A mantra he repeated to himself over and over every time as his coin dwindled.

The lion hadn't gotten any enjoyment from gambling in a long while, but he continued hitting up the city's dens and spontaneous tavern games out of obsession. One day he *would* win big, and then everything from before would have been worth it. Until then his hopeless dream would be funded by the thief's petty thefts.

Trekking down winding side streets covered in puddles, Andre couldn't remember when he'd last passed someone. High buildings and dark clouds created the illusion of dusk. Still, there was just enough light to reflect brightly off something on the ground further ahead.

The reflection on the ground caught Andre's attention. He wondered if it was a trick on his eyes, simply light shining off another puddle. It could be one of many worthless metallic objects, from an abandoned tool to a shattered bit fallen off a handcart. But it was also bright, enticing, and along his intended path. All else was blocked from the lion's mind, his gaze locked on the mystery.

As Andre finally neared he recognized it quite clearly as a coin. He picked it up on instinct, flipping it over in a paw to get a better look. It was pristine, lacking any dings or stains, as if it had fallen onto the street straight from the mint. The markings on either side weren't ones Andre had seen before. The city was a hub of foreign trade, of course, so such a thing wasn't that strange.

Andre wasn't interested in questioning his lucky find, though. He clutched the coin tightly in his paw and nervously scanned the street to make sure he hadn't been spotted. It was a sign of his newfound fortune, and he wasn't about to have its former owner turn a corner in search of it and take it back. He hurried off, taking a convoluted route out of sheer, unnecessary paranoia.

The coin remained cold in his grip, a chill sensation spreading throughout his fist. Andre was so worried about nonexistent enemies he didn't realize the coin gradually softening, like putty.

In an empty alley Andre took shelter from the rain beneath an awning to rest. When he opened his fist to admire the coin's beauty once more, he instead found his paw covered in melted silver. Andre jumped in surprise. Attempting to shake the silver off failed, the goo now gripping him. His eyes widened in horror as the silver began to spread in all directions, wrapping around his fingers and the back of his paw until it looked as if he were wearing a shining glove.

Andre's heart was racing, and the silver showed no signs of slowing. While he hadn't lost much dexterity in the covered paw, there was no telling how long that would remain true. Out of desperation the lion grabbed at the silver and tried to tear it off. It stretched like rubber a short distance, but no amount of force could remove it. Soon his entire arm was silver, including the sleeve of his tunic.

Rain hitting the silver created faint ripples, the water sliding off in their wake and trickling to the street below.

Again and again Andre futilely fought the silver coating. Nothing he did slowed the spread, which had progressed across his chest to his other arm and also down his sides. The more the silver enveloped him the more he felt traces of pressure on his body. It wasn't enough to impede his breathing, at least.

At a loss, the lion finally decided to flee in search of aid. His roundabout route had left him disoriented, so Andre merely headed in whatever direction *seemed* right. Little thought was put into his flight. He hit dead end after dead end, unintentionally looping around and retracing his steps more often than not. All the while he didn't come across a single soul. The solitude he'd embraced earlier had become a curse.

Nearly the entire lion's body was silver, glistening in the rain. It'd formed a soft shell over the fluff of his tail and was creeping along his mane. As the coating glided over his right boot he lost his footing and slipped. Surprisingly, the silver braced his fall, though the lion was still left sore. He stumbled back up, every attempt to step forwards nearly causing him to lose his footing once more. Moving forwards had become impossible.

"Help! Somebody, please, help me!" Andre shouted over the rain, desperate for anyone in the buildings around him to hear. No shutters or doors opened, no heads poked out windows. There wasn't even a single angry shout back demanding he quiet down.

Andre looked down upon his paws, whimpering as silver encased the rest of his mane, leaving only his face uncovered. He felt like a statue that'd come to life.

"Please...no. No, no, no, no—ummmph!"

Once the silver spread over Andre's eyes he frantically clawed at his own face, unable to breathe. The faint pressure intensified, and he felt his whole body stiffen. His screams were muffled, barely audible, utterly incoherent. Fewer ripples were being left on the silver's surface. Andre's writhing slowed, movement a struggle, until he was locked in a cowering pose with his arms shielding his face from an invisible strike.

In the middle of the empty street stood an exquisite silver statue of a lion. The details were incredible, from the flow of the mane to the complicated posing of the paws. The face—depicted in a mixed look of shock and dismay—appeared ready to cry out at any second. Raw emotion was conveyed in the pose, which set the statue apart from those that were more traditional, more dignified.

To the dragon strolling down the street it was an overwhelming success. His scales were a dark royal blue, highlighted by numerous silver bands that coiled around his arms. Silver jewelry adorned his neck and ears, silver caps atop his horns. The dragon's eyes reflected just as brightly, liquid pools of silver. The vest and pants he wore managed to mimic the style of the flowing garments popular with the city's well off, while being somewhat more practical. A pair of lizards flanked either side of him, both sturdy and silent.

As the clouds started dispersing far above and the rain slowed, Argos grinned. He never knew who would find the coins he left out in the open, or how they would appear once their new silver coating had solidified. Usually he found himself pleasantly surprised with the results. Nothing in the world could match the beauty of his collection of silver statues, mainly due to their dynamic forms. Of course there were occasions where the statue was rendered unusable—particularly if the victim had curled up before the end. Though when that happened he could still melt them down and put the silver to better use.

The lion, though, would make a great addition.

"I've been needing a lion for a very, very long time," Argos sighed. "I can't wait to find the perfect place for you!"

A nod directed the lizards to lift up Andre, neither fazed by his weight. A few rays of sun broke through the clouds and shone on the statue, highlighting its beauty as rain continued to trickle down it. Just as suddenly as they'd appeared they were gone, no trace of Andre left for anyone to find.