

The misty forest hung heavy on Circ's whiskers. The droplets of dew weighed each whisker down. The weight of the drops became an unseen hand pushing his head down, telling him to stop, to turn back, or at the very least, to rest. If Circ knew anything about this land, that feeling meant this was the worst possible place to rest.

The young cat pushed on through the mist, clinging to his spear like it would draw him through the woods. His armor creaked softly as he moved, stretching around his slim form. Armor was little help if he was ambushed, though, and he was so slight that only light leather could give him enough mobility to defend himself. His best defense was the small shield buckled to his forearm, followed by the tip of his spear. If anything came at him, the best he could do was put it down quickly before it could get its claws into him.

Minutes crept by and trees emerged from and disappeared into the haze. He had no idea where he was going, but at the very least, he couldn't see any tracks ahead of him, so he wasn't circling around. Every sound of shifting leaves made him turn and squint into the mist. He was almost sure he saw a figure moving or a bit of fleeting motion behind a tree. When he looked again, there was nothing, just the mist playing with his eyes.

At long last, he found a set of stairs. They were so overgrown and moss-flecked that they nearly faded into the forest floor. Rocks that had made up the stairs had crumbled on either side or rolled away. It was hard to tell these steps from a jumble of fallen stones, but Circ made out the path and began to climb up higher.

On one side, the stairs dropped down to the forest floor. On the other, they leaned against the grassy slope. As he climbed, the mist clung to the ground beneath him. Once the fog was finally gone, Circ stood in the ruins of a building, almost as moss-grown and crumbling as the forest around it. But he could see. The air no longer muffled sounds as if there was nothing beyond the fog.

He felt safe here, and not the false, dangerous safety of the mist. He climbed to the second floor of the ruins. Here, he stared out past the pillars that held up chunks of the third floor, and looked out at the scattered ruins in the forest beyond. He settled down against one of the pillars to rest.

The brand that marked him as cursed burned beneath his gloves. The curse had driven him to find this kingdom, where there was rumored to be a cure. The kingdom was vast, though, and far more treacherous than he'd expected, but he'd gotten this far. He was just a small brown cat, and not even very remarkable, but he had accomplished this much.

Circ's eyes drifted closed and his head nodded forward. All through the forest, he had been so tense, and now he finally had a chance to relax.

As he woke, a few new sensations slowly came to him: His hands, lashed together in front of him. His calves, lashed together too. His spear, conspicuously missing from his back. A set of slow, heavy breaths coming from around him.

Fear clenched his stomach, but he didn't open his eyes yet. He sat still, only moving to touch his thumb to the ring on his right hand. It allowed him to hear the thoughts of enemies when they were close. After it had saved him from an ambush, he never took it off. It wasn't very effective if he was ambushed while asleep, though.

Circ cracked his eyes open just slightly, enough to peer out while still looking asleep. He couldn't see that much, He made out three sets of large, heavy paws, beaded cuffs, and scraps of fabric draped around their waists. One of them peeled a growl from the back of his throat and stretched it out as far as it would go. Circ heard the growl, but over it, in his mind he could hear, "Its soul is fresh. Why not kill it?"

Circ's eyes shot open. He took in the three creatures around him all at once: tall lion-men dressed in robes and armor of brown and black, made for blending in with the trees and shadows of the forests. Their dreadlocked manes were pulled back behind their heads. They stood thick and stocky, especially for their tall size: hunched forward, legs wide, with enough taut, corded muscle to heave the huge axes on their backs. Even armed, on his feet, with his spear and shield, Circ felt like one swing from one of those axes would have knocked him down.

"Don't kill me!" Circ said, squirming against the hemp rope that bound him. "I've got lots of good stuff back at my camp. Let me go and I'll give you all of it. All the stuff I have on me too!"

The lions' expressions barely changed: unmoving, savage scowls beneath their heavyset brows. There wasn't even a sign that they understood him. Maybe his words were as meaningless to them as theirs were without the help of his ring.

A different lion growled at the first who'd spoken. "It has something special about it. Killing it would be a waste for a meager soul. Let it grow."

"Let me go?" Circ asked, hoping he'd misheard. He leaned forward, holding out his hands, hoping one of them would cut off the rope.

Instead, the third lion-man grabbed him beneath the shoulder, lifted him bodily like he was a child, and slung him over his shoulder. Circ twisted away from the blade of the axe, which was dangerously close to his cheek. All he could do was bob along on the lion's shoulder, carted away through the ruins.

They carried him from one ruin to another. Circ could see misty shapes in the distance, but bouncing up and down, it was hard to make out whether they were more lion men or not. They pushed an old door open, entering a room lit through a crumbled hole in the ceiling. The lion lifted Circ off his shoulder and the cat fell to the ground. He winced and rolled to the side, lifting himself off his bruised tail. The lion-men turned and began to step through the door.

"Hey...hey, where are you going?" Circ asked. The lion-men left the room, closing the door behind them. He immediately began to struggle again. If he could hook his bindings on something, anything at all, he might be able to tear them apart. He scraped his calves against the floor and his forearms against the wall, but he was still bound by the time the door opened again.

Silhouetted against the light was a tall, rounded pot, about Circ's height if he was standing. A lion-man stood behind it, pushing it into the middle of the room. On each side of the pot, a broadened face was worked into the clay, with narrow, sinister eyes and a broad grin.

An unrestrained laugh rang in Circ's ears, meandering wildly. The laugh sent a chill through him so sharp that he pulled off his ring and held it in his hand instead. He didn't want to hear that.

A peal of snickers echoed in the stone room. Even without the ring, he could hear it. A low ringing noise, a sandy but sustained tone, filled the space between his ears. A cloud of hazy black drifted around his body like flecks of dirt suspended in air, sinking into his flesh. Dryness fluttered across his skin and a bitter taste hung on the tip of his tongue.

The noise inside his head broke free, into the sound of branches breaking and rushing water. His bones creaked beneath his skin. For a moment, he feared that his ribs might break, but they only forced his chest outward, into a broader, more barrel-like shape. The jabs in his jaw made him bring his bound hands up to prod at his teeth. His canines were half again as big as they had been, bulging out against his lips. His chin was squared off, coming to an angle instead of rounded off like a small cat's.

His armor pinched against his body, digging into his shoulders and his wrists, tight around the top of his chest, snug in the groin and squeezing his feet. He wriggled, twisting to the left and to the right, but he couldn't move enough to loosen any of his armor. His pawpads were dry and the inside of his armor felt rough. His fur itched like he'd just had sand thrown over him. Tufts of coarser hairs sprouted beneath his armor and scratched against his skin, trapped between him and the tight leather. His hair, darker, thicker, was pouring from his scalp and sweeping over his shoulders.

Another teetering giggle ran through the room. Circ wiggled forward to the pot, kneeling next to it. He reared back and rammed his shoulder into the pot, but it was too heavy to tip and too sturdy to break. He recoiled, his shoulder throbbing.

The black haze came back, accompanied by that same ringing noise. No matter how tightly Circ closed his eyes and flattened his ears against his head, it wouldn't stop. It came from inside his own head. Again, the noise broke into a sharp rush.

Circ jerked his legs and bent over toward his lap. His leather chest piece dug into his ribs, squeezing his lungs, forcing him to take shallow breaths. A crack split through the leather around his neck, then widened, inching across its front. He spread his fingers and then clenched them. His claws tore through the front of his gloves. His growing paws shredded apart the gloves' fingers.

The deeper he breathed, the more his armor split open, but the freer his chest became. He took in hissing breaths, teeth clenched and bared. His fangs ached, forced out longer, thicker, curved slightly for tearing meat. A fire rippled across his skin, from his chest reaching up around his jaw line. Circ raised his bare fingers and touched the tip of the mane that had sprouted from his chin. It was thicker and wirier than his fur, jutting out, an earthy black. With his bound hands, he scratched at his chest, widening the split in his chestpiece. Dark fur spilled out of the split, giving him immediate relief from the constant itch of coarse fur against leather.

A deep grunt left Circ's throat in a voice that wasn't his own. He pressed his paw to his chest and growled; the noise was rough and savage. With each motion of his arms, his armor tugged at his shoulders and upper arms. With each twist of his abdomen, it tightened around his stomach. He fell to the side and wriggled like a worm. If he couldn't break the pot, he'd get as far away from it as possible. The cat scooted back until his back was against two walls, wedged into the furthest corner of the room.

Circ tasted ash and the scent of dryness filled his nose. He blanched and stuck out his tongue, but it clung to him. The black clouds seeped into his skin again. The ringing came back, along with cackling, like from a grin that filled the room. Circ pushed his head against the wall, trying to shut out the noises, trying to hold his breath and keep his tongue tight inside his mouth.

Again, the curse broke across his entire body. A force knocked into his chest and he reeled back for a moment. The leather cuirass split down his entire chest, letting his weighty pecs breathe. He clenched further down his body, and the split widened, freeing his abs and sides as well. He arched his back, grinding against the wall, pushing off the ill-fitting armor. With a flex of his arms, the stitches popped open and his sleeves burst, like a waterskin filled until it broke. His biceps didn't ripple, but they were thick: a heavy, practical bulk.

At last, no more constant itching. His body fur had lightened as his mane darkened, bringing his coat more in line with the colors of the lion-men. While that worried him, at the very least his fur could breathe again. The tip of his mane, nestled in the middle of his chest, fluttered as he took desperate breaths through his nose.

Circ growled out loud. He rubbed forearm against forearm, trying to snap the ropes that bound his arms. They held strong, but his gloves didn't. The palms had managed to survive until now, but finally they split open, freeing his lion-sized hands from their tight clutches. His toes curled against the soles of his boots until they tore free. The soles tore off entirely, but the upper parts of his boots hung on like ankle guards around his thickening lower legs.

Circ's head prickled from scalp to chin as hair grew fast and thick. His headfur was dense enough that it began to organize itself into thick braids. His mane came in heavier, thicker, like a thick cushion of rough, black fur surrounding his face. The braids poured against his back as he scratched along his jaw and neck, where the scratchy fur grew the fastest.

"Rroooar!" he bellowed. *Help!*

"Gurrr," he growled. *My voice—!*

He reached for his legs, claws spread. The curse built up around him again, like he was breathing in smoke from a dying fire. Circ tried to ignore it and instead tear at the hemp that bound his legs. His claws finally found purchase and tore at the rope, fraying it slash by slash. The laughing echoed between Circ's ears, taunting him.

The hemp rope around his legs tore open. The burnt-black mist rushed into Circ's skin. He rose to his feet, hunched forward, and roared.

The curse curled up into his skull. His thicker fangs drove his jaw thicker, as it had to support the extra force they needed. He gripped his chin and dragged his claws along it, combing out his heavy, dark mane. His lip and gums blackened. He snarled at the pot. Heat poured down the cracks between his muscles. Bone shifted against cartilage, pulling his back forward, stooping him over. His biceps flexed and the hemp rope around his wrists strained. The snap of fibers straining traveled up his arms, but it didn't break. He lashed with his claws, but couldn't reach the rope.

Circ scowled at the rope, baring his fangs. Then an idea came to him. He cocked his head to the side, his dreadlocks spilling along his arm. His heavy lip dragged drool across his forearms. He dug his fangs against the rope, chewing through it until it snapped. He spread his arms, raising his fists, muscles bristling all along his upper body. His mane and dreadlocks swung through the air. He roared out loud, *Free!*

But the curse was building up again. He spat away the drool at the corners of his mouth. It tasted like soot. His rough fur felt dirty, like it was caked in charcoal. The ringing rose in Circ's ears until it broke free and another layer of the curse fell over him.

Clutching both hands together, Circ shattered the pot, sending bits of burnt wood and pottery clattering across the floor. The chuckling stopped, but the curse had already deepened.

His guttural growls slipped down an octave. His narrow eyes gleamed yellow in the dim light. His muscles were not rippling, not bulked like corded rope, but they were bigger. It was the sort of bulk that could swing an axe like a stick of wood and knock an opponent flat, even through their shield.

Circ's jaws were broad and his heavy jowls turned down the corners of his mouth, forming a frown. Combined with the sag of his whiskers, his muzzle almost looked too heavy for its own good. It seemed like, if he didn't have the massive, broad-shouldered bulk beneath his head, he would fall over flat on his face.

His shaggy groin-fur, the same as the dark mane-fur on his face, hid the new size of his package from all but himself. The size of his balls made them squeeze against his thighs, so instead they sat forward, perched on his legs and topped by a thick yet flaccid shaft. At once, he wanted to cover it, and he wanted to show it to the world. He was still himself inside, as far as he could tell, but now coupled with lion-beast masculinity.

Circ walked forward in a loping, swaying pace. He pushed open the door of the ruins and stepped into the outside air. His breath fogged in the mist. Waiting outside the door, flanked by a ruined stone threshold, was one of the lion-men who had captured him.

*What did you do to me?* Circ snarled. *Turn me back!*

The lion-man raised a black wooden staff and passed it through the air. *It is one with the tribe*, he said.

Circ squinted and blinked. His heavy brow tightened and he rubbed his arm across his eyes. His muscles un-bunched themselves, relaxing, no longer tense and flexed.

As the lion-man passed the staff through the air in reverse, light trailed from its tip, sparkling in Circ's vision. He couldn't look away. He drew closer with each step, but not to fight. His hands were down at his sides and his jaw hung open slightly.

*It will serve the tribe*, the lion-man mage said.

Circ knew he needed to close his eyes. He needed to stop listening. He put his hands together and groped for the ring, but he had dropped it some time ago. He was hearing the mage's growls as words—he couldn't take off the ring to stop hearing the words he was thinking. Those words drove straight to his core, appealing to the lion-thoughts that rose up from between his legs. Power and control, territory, fear and prowess in battle.

*It is Lion Tribe, and lion is greatest.*

Circ puffed out his chest and snarled proudly. Colors popped in front of his eyes and swam in the glowing trail behind the mage's staff. All other tribes were weak before the might of the Lion Tribe. Their manes were bold, their fangs sharp, and their axes true. There was nothing more handsome, nor more fearsome, than one of the Lion Tribe.

*It is slave, lowest of Lion*—the mage began to say. Circ's hand grasped the staff just above where the lion-mage held it. The lion-ferocity had stripped Circ down to his core. That little flicker, the something the lions had seen in him, was coming out. It was a furtive thing, hidden deep, but there was an indomitable will inside. It was what had driven him to this cursed land, and it was what had given him the strength to stop the mage's staff.

Circ peeled back his lips, growling with a sneer. *It is chief, highest of Lion Tribe*, he said. The mage's shoulders drooped and his narrowed eyes relaxed. Circ drew the staff through the air, mimicking the mage's slow swing.

*It leads Lion Tribe to glory. You will serve*, Circ said. As the mage's eyelids drooped, a slow expression of awe slid across his thick muzzle. Circ's unstoppable will had found his new leonine aggression, and the two had become one. The mage wilted as the new lion chief's fanged grin grew.

*You will serve*, Circ growled. The mage's arms dangled limply, his eyes clouded over. One eyelid drooped lower than the other, and his jaw hung slack. Next to Circ, with his shoulders spread, chest out, back straight, the mage cut a pitiful silhouette. The Lion Tribe had this weakling as its leader? No wonder it hadn't yet reached its full glory.

*You will SERVE*, Circ roared. Birds fluttered in the trees beyond the mist, startled by the noise. The lion-man's body dropped out beneath him and he fell to his hands and knees, begging in some pitiful whine with his snout pointed at Circ's feet.

Circ alone held the staff now. He stopped swinging it and looked down at the former leader. He grabbed the lion-man's thick dreadlocks and crushed the mage's snout against his groin. *Serve*, he rumbled, without moving the staff. The mage made another pitiable whimper as he opened his muzzle for his new chief.

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Weeks had passed. Chief lurked in his lair in the old ruins, waiting for reports from the trapper teams. The mage that Chief had cowed trailed behind him, but kept his distance, as a servant who knew how strong his master could be.

The sound of two Lion Tribe warriors came through the air before they emerged from the mist, each with an unconscious adventurer slung over their shoulders. Chief greeted them with a burly growl, then inspected the fruits of their traps. The first was an adventurer in steel armor, with dark hair and pale fur and a willowy form, like royalty.

*It goes in the curse pot rooms*, he said to the first warrior. He moved to the second, grabbing the adventurer by its long, whitish hair and lifting its head up. Soft features, robes of fabric, a singed smell in the air. Some sort of mage, perhaps a pyromancer. He sniffed more closely and a pleased rumble rose from his chest. Female. It was one thing his beastly instincts had been urging him toward that he hadn't indulged in, simply because Lion Tribe lacked any.

*Put it with the pots, in the room with the barred windows. I will watch it*, he said.

With Chief at its head, Lion Tribe could claw its way back to power from the edge of obscurity. Already his scouts ranged beyond the protective mists of the forests, searching for easy targets for raids.