

Dutches is a muscular woman with a kind smile and mischievous gray eyes. The whole time she looks over my damaged armor, she talks when Herbert in a way that makes me think they are together, but then she looks at me.

“So,” she says, grinning as she stretches the word. “How are you going to pay for the work?” she looks me up and down, licks her lips hungrily and I step back, cheeks burning.

“Dutches,” Herbert says in annoyance.

She laughs. “Look at him blush. Sasha was right. You have a virgin on your hands.”

“Can we not talk about if I have or haven’t done it?” I ask, then swallow.

“Relax, I’m not going to eat you.” She grins. “Unless you’re into that?”

Is everyone out here obsessed with sex?

“I’ll cover—”

“I can pay,” I cut off Herbert. “With money, I mean,” I add at her grin. And my cheeks burn again. I mean, she is good looking, but she has to be at least twice my age. And I’m not staying with the caravan, so...

“Money’s good,” she says.

“Are you sure?” Herbert asks. “The adventurer’s life isn’t cheap, and unlike what the stories say, money doesn’t just show up around every tree.”

“I...received some as part of this.” I look for a way to explain it that won’t involve lying, and can’t think of one.

“Then I’ll give you the friends and family discount,” Dutches says.

“We aren’t family,” I point out.

“But we’re friends.”

“We just met.”

“You do know it’s an expression, right?”

“Oh. Okay, how much?”

“Adding on top of that, you got hurt defending the caravan—”

“I wasn’t—”

“Let her excuse the low price however she wants,” Herbert says. “You have to learn to take people’s gratitude. It’s going to be rare enough in Toronto.”

I’m not even sure where the reticence is from. I mean, she is clearly nice, if too forward for my liking. She reminds me a little of Rich and Daz that way, although not as... slimy.

“Let’s make it a double treen and be happy with that.”

I look at Herbert.

“Ouch,” she exclaims, hand to her ample breast. “And I thought you trusted me.”

“It’s a good deal,” Herbert says with a chuckle. “But if you have the money, you’re going to want to get yourself an enchanted repair kit until your skill’s good enough.”

I hand her the money.

“I’ll have it for you in the morning,” she says, standing and turning to her wagon. She pauses. “You know, I am going to be done with it at some point tonight, if you’re interested in waiting for it here.”

“I’ll be back in the morning,” I hurry to say as the smile she gives me leaves no doubt what she’ll want to do while I’m there. “Bye.” I head toward the cooking fire I see in the

distance by our carts.

I don't know if someone made the clearing, or if it's something the system put in place along the road, but there's enough flat ground without trees here all the carts and wagons can get off the road for the night. They're arranged in arcs between the fires and the forest, making impromptu defensive walls.

"You into guys or girls?" Herbert asks, falling into step with me, and my ears burn. "Sorry, I don't normally pry, but the way you reacted there, and I kind of thought you were looking at Josie..."

"It's not that," I blurt out. "I mean, it's just not something I've ever talked about."

"Not even with your father?"

"My dad tends to make his mind up about stuff and it doesn't matter what we then tell him. So that wasn't a subject I wanted to talk about with him."

"Friends? Josie?"

"System no!" What would she think of me if she knew the dreams I've had.

Herbert chuckles. "Well, I'm a stranger you'll probably never see again once we reach Toronto."

"Who can report everything I tell him to Josie."

"On the system, I promise that whatever you tell me will stay between us."

"What about you?" I ask defiantly. "Guys or girls?"

"Women," he replies without hesitation and grins as my cheeks burn. I didn't think he'd answer.

"I don't know," I finally say, "if it's one or the other. I really like Josie, and Dutches is good looking, it's just the way she was so..." I see Rich's slimy smile, Daz's lewd licking of the lips. "Predatory."

"So you want to be the one going after the girl."

"No... I don't know. I never did anything like that. I just...looked I guess. Guys too. I..." I hesitate. "Wanted to, with a guy, but he turned out to be an asshole."

"Okay. Then something you need to know about caravans. The people come and go here. Chuck's a bit of an exception in that he has fixed routes. So there's a core of people who stay; like me and my team. Dutches has also been here for a while, along with maybe half the wagons. But the rest they're like you. Traveling with us because it's safer than doing it alone. What I'm getting to is that if you want to try something, this is a good place to do it. Everyone's looking for variety. The regulars always see the same people, so we look at the new arrivals as a way to change things up. We don't expect attachments or anything serious."

I nod and try to figure out how I feel about learning that. "What if... I think it should be serious?"

"You mean that sex is just between you and whoever you marry?"

"Maybe?"

"Then, are you sure you want to be on the road? This isn't a lifestyle that leads itself to making committed relationships."

"I'm sure I don't want to," I reply, then realize I'm not as certain as I sound. I do want to go back to Court after this, right?

I look at the trees and things I can't quite make out darting in the growing shadows.

There's danger in there, out here. And I'm going to be on my own facing all of them unless I find another caravan to travel with to Kansas City.

It's scary, like fighting that Warg was. But it was exciting too. And I won. It was hard, but I did.

"Here's my advice," Herbert says when I'm looking ahead, and our camp fire is closer. "You don't have to have sex if you aren't ready. You tell anyone who asks, no. And if they push, you put them in their place, hard."

"I don't think Daz will let me," I grumble.

"You might be surprised," then he continues. "But the flip side to that is that if you come across the guy, or girl, you want to try something with, don't let what you think sex is about keep you from trying it. Out here, on the road, a lot of the rules of the settlements go away, so you get to do things you might not think you'll be allowed there. And before you think I mean just about sex, it applies to everything. The wild doesn't follow the same rules at the settlements, so you need to keep that in mind with every encounter. People aren't the same out here as they are in cities."

I nod and before I work out what to make of what he said; we reach the others and Max takes me aside for archery practice. He hands me a quiver to attach to my belt, then spends time showing me how to take arrows out quickly without them getting stuck.

It takes a few tries before I have an arrow out without others spilling, then more to complete the motion putting the arrow to the string. Finally I go from an arrow into the quiver, to the bow and shoot at the tree Max pointed to as the target.

I miss, and the arrow vanishes among the trees.

"Normally I'd have you go find it, but there's going to be things out there that might consider you food."

"I could use the practice." I say putting my finger to the fletching of another arrow.

Max snorts. "It's not practice if your life is in danger; it's combat. And maybe you could take on whatever would go after you, but it wouldn't look good if we'd let you die so close to town." He nods and I quickly pull the arrow, and drop it.

George calls out that food's ready after I shoot just under a tree's arrows. Only one missed the tree. Max lets me keep the quiver and ten arrows.

Food is a thick stew I have trouble believing was cooked over a fire. The meat's tender, the vegetables have just enough of a bite to them; they don't turn mushy in my mouth. And it's spiced better than anything I've managed yet.

I'm resting against the log we were using as a bench while we ate, enjoying the post meal lethargy when I spot movement among the trees. The shadows are long enough, I wouldn't expect to notice anything there, then I realize it's kind of white and big.

Really big.

"Monster!" I yell, hurrying to my feet, bow in hand and nocking an arrow.

"Easy there," Herbert says, pushing my arms down, as the monster steps out from between the trees. "That's just Silver."

I stare at him. That's not *just* anything. It's got to reach my chest at the shoulders. It's massive, with a long, thin muzzle.

"Chuck must be doing the rounds," Helen says.

"What does that," I point, "have to do with Chuck?"

“They’re something of a set,” Daz answers.

“I’ve never heard of him having a pet,” I reply.

“Silver’s not a pet,” George says with a warning tone. “And I’d be careful calling him that when he’s close enough to hear.”

“He might get away with it,” Daz says, “being new and all.”

“Doesn’t that depend on if Silver fed already?” Sasha asks, and I look at them in disbelief. Are they seriously not worried?

“We’re about to find out,” George says and nods.

I look; and stare into an open maw lined with sharp teeth. With a yell I scramble back until someone stops me.

“While roasting yourself is a good way to keep Silver from snacking on you,” Herbert says. “I personally don’t recommend it.”

“And it looks like he ate already,” Evelyn says, and she has a surprisingly deep voice.

The...thing is sitting, closing its maw and looking at us, head canted and pointed ears straight up.

“Go ahead,” Herbert urges. “He’s just curious about the new smells you bring.”

“I’m not getting close to... that.”

“Someone’s scared,” Daz says in a mocking tone.

“No shit!” I reply. It takes a step and I try to back away, but Herbert has a hand at my back; and I feel the heat of the fire. Right. That direction isn’t a good idea. When I look at it again, its muzzle is close to my neck and I stupidly close my eyes and crane my head to get that out of the way.

Its nose is cold against my skin, then it snuffles. I crack an eye open and it’s looking at me; bright blue eyes inquisitive.

“You’re going to want to do something before my shirt and you back catches on fire.”

“Like what?” I demand, voice strident.

“Pushing him away could help,” Daz says.

“Help get me eaten,” I reply.

Daz reached forward and shoves the large... animal. It doesn’t budge, only turns its head and yawns at him.

“Yeah, yeah. You aren’t moving unless you want to. I know,” Daz tells it. “How about you give the new kid space? You’re scaring him. His name’s Dennis, by the way.”

It looks at me again, then steps back.

“It did what you said?”

“I’m talented that way,” the man replies smugly.

“Silver understands us,” Helen says. “And he’s nice, if a bit pushy. He’s not going to mind if you touch him.”

The... Silver sits and looks at me again.

I guess that if it didn’t bite Daz’s hand off for trying to shove him, I should be fine, right? Its fur is surprisingly soft and thick. I step forward and sink both hands into the fur.

“Wow,” I whisper.

“And Silver makes another friend,” Daz says. “I swear, he has more of those than I do.”

“Maybe if you’d stop trying to sleep with all the guys you come across,” Evelyn says, “you’d manage to make some.”

“But guys are so yummy. How am I supposed to resist them?”

“With that think called willpower,” she snaps.

“But I need it for more important things.”

“What are you?” I whisper and realize I never got a system message about it. I don’t even get a query response to my question. I focus on it, and nothing.

“Making more friends I see,” someone says, and I hurry away, hand up as if that absolved me of touching it.

It snorts, then looks over its shoulder at Chuck. It yawns, before walking to him and sitting at his side.

“He was just getting a sniff of Dennis,” Herbert says.

“Didn’t find him to his taste,” George adds, “so I guess we have to keep dealing with him.”

“What is it?”

“He,” Chuck replies harshly. “Silver’s not a thing. He.”

“Sorry,” I hurry to say. “What is he? I’m not getting the usual system message when I look at an animal.”

“Maybe that’s because he’s not an animal,” Chuck replies, his tone no friendlier. Silver bops his head against Chuck’s side and he looks at him. “Hey, you might not mind, but it pisses me off.”

I take note of the fact that not one person around the fire comments and keep my mouth shut.

“Anyway,” Chuck says, tone softening. “How were things?”

“Good,” Herbert answers. “Saw a few of the spiders at the edge of the forest, but they kept away.”

“Dennis fought one,” Max says. “Did okay.”

“Max killed it,” I add, not wanting Chuck to think I’m taking credit for someone else’s work. “I was overconfident and just rushed it. I got in a few hits, but it did too. Then Max shot it.”

“You’re going to want to work on that always explaining thing, kid,” Chuck says. “Glad you’re okay,” he adds in a tone that leaves me uncertain if he means it, then he head for another group of wagons, Silver at his side.

“Does he really mean Silver’s a person?” I ask when they’re out of sight. The system’s changed a lot of things. Before it, only humans lived here. Then it changed a lot of them into other species. Humans tend to be the largest groups around here. I don’t know if we have even a dozen non-humans in Court.

But I never heard of someone being...four-legged.

“No idea,” Max says, “and I know better than to ask Chuck about that.”

“And he hears it—him?”

“Maybe,” Sasha says, then shrugs. “It’s not like anyone of us is going to question him about it.” She smiles at me. “Will you?”

I look in the direction they went and shiver at the tone he snapped at me with. “No, I’d like to keep on living.”

“Smart kid,” Daz says. “Now show me how smart you are and sit next to me.” He pats the log.

I sit opposite him.

“Wow,” Evelyn says. “He’s even smarter than that.”

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