

Her black eyes were absolutely delighted.

Raven ran his knuckles down the sole of the left one, finding a tender spot halfway, and then contributing below that as she stretched and sighed like a cat.

He ran the bottoms of her toes through his palms and put pressure down their lengths. When he squeezed his hand shut around the joints her grin finally faded and her lids fell halfway.

She was still looking at him as her eyes shimmered and went smoky and half lidded, but at least that obnoxious smirk had slid off her lips.

As for him, there was an edge to it now. Her toe-hold of control. The boss. The employer. The delicate silk of her socks and the way it slid between their skin.

Raven slid a fingertip to the webbing between her toes, running along its underside, in a semi daze of sorts, still wondering how the hell he ended up in the situation, to the point where it seemed almost surreal to him. Not that everything that happened antecedently wasn't just as unreal.

So, he gave up on understanding her for the time being.

What could possibly be gained from questioning her strange, eccentric behaviors and her odd motives, anyway? Even if the alchemist's objective had been simply to annoy or humiliate him—and judging by the sparkle in her eyes and her childishly mischievous smirk, that could've very well been a distinct possibility.

But eh, so what? A foot massage for one gold coin? That would never be an unprofitable deal. Besides, despite the fact that Raven's past life would've never accepted this arrangement, this was a different life.

Cassandra closed her eyes, inhaling deeply, and tilted her head back, clearly enjoying it to the fullest.

Raven alternated between massaging and squeezing, watching Cassandra slouch even more and lazily sway her foot with his rhythm.

She let out small groans occasionally and gave small giggles when he reached a spot she seemed particularly sensitive at, prompting her toes to curl and contract in his fingers.

"There! Ahh..." Cassandra mumbled and sighed in a lulling, pleased manner.

Damn, Cass. Was it necessary to enjoy this much?

Maybe so, but that wasn't the problem.

This wasn't just an innocuous game anymore.

If it hadn't started out that way, it was quickly becoming something else.

When a sudden throb shot straight to his dick, Raven hissed a curse, dropping Cassandra's foot immediately, his body jumping to attention with such urgency it could've probably shattered windows if he hadn't had the sense to yank it back in.

"What's wrong?"

Cassandra tilted her head, not phased in the slightest. She seemed curious as she peered down.

Raven coughed and shifted. Eating like a normal person and training under Nova's relentless daily routine must have provided the boost he so needed, and a secondary boost that made things seem not as funny. As a twelve-year-old growing boy, these kinds of changes had the potential to occur any moment of any day, no matter his attention to it.

And Raven found himself so surprised by how reactive it was, contrary to what his previous life memories were giving him. A young body had been the reset point he needed, apparently.

He shrugged with the hope to act casual. "It's nothing, just felt a cramp in the legs is all."

Cassandra paused, raising a finger thoughtfully at her lips as if pondering an answer. Then, an almost wicked grin crawled up her lips. "Oh... I think it's a little something *more* than that."

"Nothing more than that, stop."

"There's a cramp somewhere in the legs, for sure. Though, from my educated opinion, it's probably more centered somewhere else, and—"

Raven suddenly leapt out of the chair and backed a few paces away, all under Cassandra's gleeful scrutiny and her taunting laugh.

"Goodness, kid. So sensitive~"

Was this some sort of fantasy medieval mindset that I couldn't fathom? Why was she even bringing this topic up in a casual conversation between us, knowing how awkward that could turn out? Is that a normal occurrence around these parts? Between an adult woman and a prepubescent boy? What the actual fuck?

He just wanted a job, nothing else!

Cassandra rolled her eyes as she leaned back in her seat, crossing her legs again but this time placing them on her desk instead. "You're too jumpy for someone who's trying to look tough."

"I'm not trying."

She didn't miss a beat. "Sure. Anyway, it's getting late, and I'm quite satisfied with your service, as unprofessional as you are. Come back tomorrow, little rat. We have much more to discuss." She then pointed towards the door. "Now get out, I have things to attend to."

"What about my payment?" Raven asked, frowning. He'd have to keep a neutral face, but he wasn't going to work for free.

She reached into her desk's drawer and tossed a small sack towards him. "Here."

Raven's hand reflexively closed around it, the coins inside making a satisfying clink. He was one greedy bastard alright, but money was money. He gave her a curt nod without even counting the coins. He knew she wouldn't short him. Probably.

xXx

Was there a bank in this world? Raven pondered as he made his way out into the city streets.

Having a sword holstered to your hip made the pouch of coins safer, but he was still on alert. One thing he learned was that carrying weapons openly was legal only if you were an adventurer, a guard, a soldier, or some other recognized profession. As a random person, you could still get into trouble for it, though that was rarely enforced if you didn't act like a fool.

Even then, it wasn't a guarantee.

Eryndor had a sort of peace of mind to it. The day-to-day bustle and noise was a comforting background he was starting to get used to.

After leaving Cassandra's laboratory and taking some distance from it, Raven's thoughts inevitably drifted back to Adley.

He had given her two silver coins. Not much, but it should be enough to buy a few decent meals and maybe a better lock for her door. He hoped she would be smart about it.

But he couldn't shake off the feeling that he had left her in a precarious situation. Woody's gang might come looking for revenge. She might not be safe. He had saved her from immediate danger, but he had done nothing to address the root of the problem.

What was the root of the problem, anyway? The poverty? The corruption? The general shittiness of the world?

He didn't know.

What he knew was that he couldn't just forget about her. Not because he felt a particular responsibility towards her, but because the thought of something happening to her—of seeing her face again, this time for real, in some back alley exactly like how he left Woody and Trunk, probably defiled on top of being dead.

But he wasn't her guardian. He wasn't her savior. He was a twelve-year-old boy swordsman-in-training trying to survive in a new world.

So, he did what he did best: compartmentalize.

He pushed Adley's face to the back of his mind, along with the image of Woody and Trunk bleeding out in the alley, and focused on the immediate future.

Raven continued to walk, with no real sense of direction or purpose. Or at least, he thought so, because when he snapped out of his daze he found himself in front of the bulletin board in the town's square. With so much free time on his hands before he had to return to the dojo, he'd might as well see what kind of work could be done to earn him some extra coin.

So he'd read them.

A handful of people were already crowded in front of the board.

Raven squeezed through the throng of people as 'politely' as he could. The sheathed sword certainly had some give him a wide berth. He made his way to the front, his red eyes scanning over the many requests.

They were a mess of paper, parchment, and even a few scraps of leather, each tacked onto the board with varying degrees of care.

"Help! My cat has climbed a tree and won't come down. Reward: 5 copper coins."

Raven snorted. *'Hard pass.'*

"Looking for able-bodied men to help with construction of a new warehouse. Good pay. Contact Foreman Grumbles at the docks."

Too much like real work.

"Lost my lucky sock. It's green with yellow stripes. If found, please return to The Leaky Mug tavern. Reward: 3 copper coins."

Raven sighed. *'Is this entire board just a collection of people's personal problems?'*

He was about to give up when a particular notice caught his eye. It was written in a crisp, bold handwriting.

"Wanted: Volunteers for goblin subjugation in the nearby woods. Goblins have been sighted near the logging camp. Report to Captain Valerius at the North Gate for briefing before sunset. Reward: 5 coppers per goblin."

The request was signed with a simple, official-looking stamp.

Goblin subjugation.

It was the kind of work an adventurer would take. In fact, why was that even on the public board and not the Guild's? That was weird.

He figured that trying to figure it out on his own would be a waste of precious brain cells, so he decided to ask someone instead. He turned to the person beside him, a burly man with a braided beard and a worn leather apron.

"Excuse me." Raven said, his voice level.

The man glanced down, a flicker of surprise in his eyes at being addressed by a child. "Yeah?"

"What's the deal with this goblin subjugation? Why is it on the public board and not at the Guild?"

The man grunted. "They did post it at the Guild, but adventurers don't give a damn about small fry like this. Goblins are a nuisance, not a threat. Five coppers per goblin ain't enough for them to bother with, wouldn't probably even cover the expenses of setting out. So the City Watch is trying to get some of the local lads to do the dirty work."

"So anyone can join?"

"Aye. Anyone with a sword and a death wish, more like." The man replied, shaking his head. "Goblins might be weak, but they're cunning little bastards. They hunt in packs, and they're not afraid to use dirty tricks. You never know if you're facing one or ten of 'em until they're already swarming you." He gave Raven a once-over. "You're a bit young to be thinking about goblin hunting, aren't you, kid? Go home to your mother."

Raven ignored the last comment. "Where's the North Gate?"

The man pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "That way. Just follow the main road. You can't miss it. You'll see a crowd of fools with more bravery than brains gathering near the gate."

He shook his head one last time and walked away.

Raven looked back at the notice. It was tempting. He had a sword. He had some training. The money itself was probably not worth the risk. Five copper per goblin? He'd probably have to kill a dozen of them just to make a decent amount, but he'd like to see how he would fare in a real fight against a monster.

Woody and Trunk probably didn't count. While they were monsters indeed in their own special way, they were still human. They bled, and died just like anyone else. A goblin might be something else entirely. How many goblins was worth a single Woody? Or was Woody even a good metric?

Raven tilted his head in thought. He looked up at the sun, which was already about to announce its descent into the horizon. He still had some time.

Besides, going would probably put him on the good side of the City Watch, no?

Just as he was about to turn around and go, he saw a mop of red hair bobbing through the throng and making its way towards the board.

'Lyla?