

Auspicia was quite distracted. It wasn't every day that she could find someone so good at keeping her entertained without doing anything at all, even for a witch.

That was why she had kept him for seven.

Better yet, Hendrick could do it without actively trying, or even being seen at all. An untrained eye might mistake him for being completely absent from the room. The truth, as with many aspects of Auspicia, was more than it seemed: he was directly in front of her--albeit at an elevation usually reserved for insects and lost pennies.

To say Hendrick was sore from learning what community service to a witch meant was an understatement, and he was not fond of *being* an understatement as it was. Within the cozy white, wooden walls of what Auspicia called home for the time being, where everything was expansive to an exhausting extent in every meaning imaginable, the coyote had quickly found her to be quite a capricious host.

The coyote's tasks had started with exactly what he'd promised: providing manicures for dainty fox claws that rivalled his stature, withholding sighs of regret that would surely be met with wordless lording. That was easy enough, if extremely degrading, but before long, he found himself acting as her personal butler while she worked around the shop. The significance of the task hardly mattered. Sometimes it was bringing her alchemical bases for her work; others, a loose button or two; others still, negligible household objects that were so obviously unhelpful for anything he could

see her doing that he knew it had to be just for fun. Her fun, not his. Important distinction.

Lately, his charge had been enduring the igneous perfume that came with being in close contact with magic being hardened into ink for use in scrolls. The way the scent of raw arcane residue clung to his nostrils was unbearable. Sometimes he wondered how she dealt with it. Other times he was much more self-centered and instead wondered if the potion from a week ago was even remotely worth trying to steal.

After a few days, Hendrick had decided he could take point on one or two things when he wasn't beleaguered with whatever nonsense she had in store for him. He watched her incant when she thought he couldn't care less, read the open books she left behind from time to time, and even practiced getting down the proper utterances for magic words.

Maybe now he was ready.

Auspicia's dainty paws--however relative a term that was at the moment--rose like small cliffs before him, straddling the white sandals she wore when she went out to gather ingredients. The height of her ivory digits threatened a dozen feet--twice his size at least, a fact that never failed to make his heart race, and the footwear only made them seem twice again as large. The very shifting of tendons, however subtle, was a motion that threatened to shake him off his feet.

And *at* his feet lay the final touches on the last rune composing a tight circle of like shapes, woven from threads torn from the carpet forest that rose in the horizon at his back. He produced a pouch of fine, grainy sand and poured out lines. At the third, all of them intersected in the middle to form a shape like an X with an extra appendage. One by one, the runes reacted with a bloody crimson glow.

“*Really* hope this works,” Hendrick muttered. The coyote stood up, ironing out the crick in his silver-furred back, and stepped over his handiwork and into the precise center. And then he waited.

And waited.

The runes were still glowing. He wasn't crazy, least as far as he could tell. He wasn't a mage, either--he in fact had a mild distaste for the craft--but common sense told him *something* should be happening right now.

“Alright, this is--”

Cutting him off was a rising column of violet light that enveloped him, then spirited him right out of the runic circle. The fading light thinned out to the width of a toothpick, then wavered out of existence like a candle's flame, leaving nothing behind but soot.

“--Bullshit...?” he said, right into a wall of grooved, dark leather. He took a step back, nearly tripping over an identical set of runes on the outer edge of the exit portal.

The wall before him finished the job with an exhale, pushing him right onto his rear with a squeak of surprise.

In front of him there was what he now understood to be a sideways monolith of vulpine muzzle, its owner hunched forward and resting on her crossed arms. The faraway curtain to his right cast striating shadows along her roof of ghostly white hair, which spread along her shoulders and fell in ethereal rivers to either side of her crossed arms. Beside his new location on the exit portal sat a teacup, which rose up around ten Hendricks tall, its contents still piping.

The air quaked fearfully as Auspicia turned her head flat while her hazel eyes bore into his soul with relentless eye contact. The gargantuan fox grinned at him, a frightening display of ivory fangs,

“Hello.”

Ah, her catchphrase. “You know, in the week I’ve been here, I’ve never seen you with your hair down. Except that first time, but I wasn’t paying attention. Was anyone, really? It’s a good look! Didn’t know it was so long.”

Auspicia was exactly as big as he remembered, and the reminder struck like... well, like an excessively large marble fox. “Your finesse always surprises me, Hendrick.” Her eyes flicked from him to the faint scorch mark at his feet, then back. “And I see you’ve been hitting my books when I’m not around. Keeping busy?”

Hendrick looked at his hands and surroundings in disbelief. “I--oh yeah! It worked? It worked!!”

“Oh yes!” Auspacia chimed halfheartedly. “I’m so very proud of you. Your first teleportation circle. Well, in function, at least. Your form leaves a little to be desired.”

She decided to stand. It was as intimidating as any continent would be if it suddenly decided to unfurl to its full length, draped in enough cerulean cloth to make sails for half a dozen ships.

“I didn’t even have to instruct you on the details... and to think, it only took you two hours.”

Hendrick looked annoyed. “God, don’t tell me you were watching me.”

“Was I on the mark?” Auspacia giggled--a rich, thunderous sound. “I cannot be bothered to watch *everything* you do, Hendrick, but you were missing for an awfully long time. This first little... circle of yours,” she continued with audible scrutiny, “was not here yesterday, so I did what any gracious host would do and waited for you. Still, most apprentices get it in minutes,” she teased.

“Uh... thanks.”

“Oh, you’re so very dull. At least give me something to work with.”

Teleportation circles, then? Intriguing that he would take his own initiative in such a way when she clothed him, bathed him, fed him, and acted as his transportation--all of that was slightly too kind for a thief, and yet, he barely needed anything more. She even gave him his own bed!

Granted, his bed tucked away in her upper drawer, the most he could eat at a time were crumbs, and he was quite expressive about his disdain toward the idea of cleaning himself in a birdbath, but what were details? Besides, she *gave* him his privacy.

Perhaps that was not enough.

“Hendrick.”

“Yeah? What is it?” Hendrick said.

“You do know I can carry you wherever you like, yes?”

Hendrick struggled to answer immediately. The virtues of honesty versus pleasing a mountain of *witch* were at odds. But even the most foolish man ever to have the misfortune of confronting Auspacia eventually knew this: there was no point in lying to her unless she found the response amusing. She would always find out. And Hendrick was far too tired to be clever.

“I just think a guy like me values autonomy a little too much. It’s not that I don’t like it when you pick me up!” Oop. Nope, that was lying. “Okay, I don’t. I feel like I never

know what's going to happen when you do. Like, I'm not freaking out or anything, but... I dunno what I'd want you to change."

He did know, and that wasn't the whole truth, though it was a major part of it. Auspicia could surmise as much even if she didn't have her powers of divination. It certainly didn't take much reading; his soul was barely a paragraph long.

"I appreciate your honesty, Hendrick," she politely lied. "Come. I have no duties for you today, so let us talk."

She started to reach for him, but hesitated. Instead of curling her fingers about his small, fragile body, she let her hand lay flat on the table--like she did those days ago. Let him take the initiative. Let him decide to trust her.

When she felt the tiny touch of little hands on the edges of her fingers, then the tap of paws as he got his footing, she felt the faintest, most fleeting spark of warmth in her chest. Her fingers curled--careful, mustn't appear too possessive--enrapturing him in a cage of fingers tipped like frostbite with rich black fur.

"It is a little funny that for anyone else, I might well take such little comfort in good humor. A preference, even," Auspicia chimed. "But for some reason, with you I do not--perhaps it's that I'm too fond of you for that."

"You haven't managed to kill me yet, so there's gotta be some truth to it."

“Oh, have a mind. That would be easy as it would be boring,” the marble fox snapped, shaking her head. “I am sure if I wanted to, you would not have had so long to contemplate how I would do it. Is that not so?”

She had a good point.

Briefly leaning down to gingerly pluck her teacup with her free hand, she strode, Hendrick in tow, to the space behind her counter. Potions lined rows each further out than the last upon maplewood racks, opposite to a series of shelves whose contents ran the gamut from the magic to the mundane. Animal-headed canopic jars carried the shelves one from the bottom on the tips of their ears and beaks; elixirs and unguents of every color under the sun glistened in the faint light of her window. Goods whose scent alone could draw adventurers to her shop from miles away, even if they didn't always walk the same miles back out.

“So you're just that committed to my safety, huh?” the coyote asked, half his brow disappearing into his bangs.

“Am I doing a good job, Hendrick?” Auspicia asked, hope feigned in her voice. Exaggerated, but not fake.

“You tell me--you gonna break your promise?”

The sky above him smirked. “Never,” it said.

“Then yes. You're doing just fine.”

Quaint little thing, wasn't he? She so dearly wanted to keep him. "I am more than pleased to have the honor of your approval."

"One thing you could do for me, since it has nothing to do with me trusting you or not," Hendrick prompted. "Why do you like saying my name so much? You do that... *thing*, where I feel like you're trying to get my attention with it."

Auspicia rolled her shoulders, lowering herself onto her stool. "Hendrick is a very... how should I say it? Noble, yes, noble name. Many of the soldiers that have come in need of healing potions have had a similar cadence to theirs. I can't help but find it charming to say. Blessed with good looks *and* a pleasant name--lucky, aren't you?"

Hendrick silently swore not to be swayed by flirting.

Lost in thought, Auspicia assumed a lounging pose; her svelte legs propped over the top of her counter, suspended by their knees. Their impact as she shifted her posture to accommodate them was cataclysmic to Hendrick, even from his vantage on her palm. His ears rattled with the sound of wood groaning like the movement of earthly discs.

"Vandrick, Cedric... lots of names ending in ricks. Strangely, not a single Rick among them."

"Th... that so?" he managed to reply.

Auspicia leaned a little closer. Hendrick had to whirl his head back to the right just to see the other hemisphere of her body, the one that was trying to hold a conversation with him.

“A little inclined to think that knights can’t *have* any other names. Or maybe someone makes all the knights themselves. They could just be not real people.”

Hendrick laughed, just barely managing to make it sound less nervous than he really was. “Well! I’m certainly not one, so I think your name theory doesn’t really hold up. Though I seem to remember considering it once... figured I’m way too much of a coward for it.”

“Not at all. If anything, you simply knew that discretion is the better part of valor. After all, if you had gone through with knighthood, we might not have become such good friends. Hee... *Sir* Hendrick.”

The coyote’s brow furrowed. “Friends... right. I could say we’re getting there. And don’t call me that.”

“Not once did I say you had to stay *this* long, you know.”

His hackles prickled up almost audibly. “Yeah, and you never said I could leave, either! Anyway, not that it’s any of my business, but if me being a *knight* is the thing that would set you over the edge and not me being a thief, I can’t help but wonder what makes you think we make such good pals.”

It seemed Auspacia was waiting for that question--for how long, he wasn't sure, and which part of the question, he was even *less* sure.

"Make no mistake, I have no love for them either, Hendrick. You are frankly lucky that I have taken a liking to you and that you settled for something so unimportant; others are not so fortunate, or they lack decent judgment. Most knights, however..."

Hendrick listened obediently--possibly for lack of options, and possibly upon hearing it said so plainly that she liked him.

"It was a long time ago, but I recall it with all due clarity. They were bunnies, five of them--adorable, really. I was quite charmed until one of them tried to put me to the sword. Rive my poor, frail body--can you imagine? 'At the behest of our Gilded Great One,' in his words."

"...That raises a lot of questions, but the first is... should I ask what you did then?"

"Well, after their trenchant proselytism, I sent them home. No violence, I do solemnly promise. But the strangest thing happened when they got home, or so I heard: one of them started to think *he* was the king. And then the next morning, so did the next one. The morning after that the gardener of the Great Embarrassment arranged a private coup and chucked the king--whichever it was at the time, I don't know--right into the sea."

Hendrick looked some flavor of surprised at the answer. For one thing, it was much less direct than how she treated *him*. But then, how she treated him had nothing to do with setting political upheaval into motion. Those sorts of things probably required a bit of finesse. Probably.

“So... he’s the king now?”

“He’s the king now.” Auspicia sipped her tea. “I heard the other one made quite the arc on his way down.”

Hendrick bowed his head, trying to avoid eye contact. He was only temporarily successful. He got that her mild distaste for knights likely stemmed from a stronger hate for kings, and he unfortunately understood why, to an extent.

“I guess you gotta get by how you can...” he finally said, rolling his shoulders.

“A man ought to know better than to threaten a lone woman in a cottage in the middle of the woods, you’d think.” She began to trail off, dispassionate about the topic. “Such wretched border policies on top of that very needless curtain call. If it were not for them, I very well could have lived in a place as nice as that.”

“Frankly I’m--surprised you didn’t just--I don’t know, with the knights, why didn’t you do what you did to me? It would be so much easier than all that.”

He was persistent. “Mm... it’s not always about it being ‘easy’, Hendrick. If it is easy, how can it be fun? I suppose I could have scared them a little. That is what I like

to do with those most discourteous of people.” She sized him up with a flick of her eyes. Her amusement at his barely-mentionable height renewed quite visibly; even her ears sprung up. “Scare them a little.”

While he was staring at them, Auspicia’s eyes suddenly shone with gilded knowing. Hendrick wondered in vain at what it was she’d thought of.

“I will save that for next time, thank you for the suggestion--the fates know there will be *another* monarch springing for my throat eventually. Eat the rich, and all that.”

Hendrick nodded, started with, “Yeah, I--” and then thought more about the way she smiled at him as she said that. “No. You wouldn’t.”

“Hubris has an exquisite taste, Hendrick... you wouldn’t understand.” She saw the way his eyes lit up in fear. It had been a while since she did that to him. It was *fun*. One little tease more before their week was up wouldn’t hurt...

“You’re bluffing. I’m not gonna believe you’d do something like eat someb--hang on.” Hendrick had the look of one slowly realizing they were cornered prey. “Why did you move this conversation to the counter?”

Auspicia’s fingers drummed to the side, a clawed fusillade. The hand that held him cupped closer to the grin forming on her face. “So that I can see if I have a customer coming while I do this.”

A gust of hot, minty breath was Hendrick's only warning as Auspicia's jaw loosened and a long, pink tongue lolled free. Before Hendrick could move, two fingers came to rest with expert precision upon his shoulders, their claws curving wickedly over his back. He was pinned like a work of art. He struggled vainly before the shock of a full-body kiss plowed like a fort of pillows against every inch of him, spreading an unnatural euphoria through every nerve ending he had.

He learned in that same instant how it was that Auspicia got away with so much: men were simply putty in her hands the moment she chose to strike. He would have doubted internally that *any* orientation could resist her, but his brain was currently a scrambled omelette of unfinished impulses and signals incapable of crossing synapses.

What came after that shattered him--the wet sensation of a heavy lick plowed against his whole body, punctuated by the metal weight of the stud on her tongue as it worked slowly, carefully, all the way up from waist to chest.

"Hubris is exquisite, but I could settle for you..." came Auspicia's voice, a harsh whisper. "You asked me how I could kill you, and I must say, savoring you as a snack is looking far more suitable for someone so detestably sweet."

Hendrick's own claws, mere pinpricks to her mountains, dug into her palm and his heart rammed at his chest so fast that even Auspicia could hear it.

"I--uh," muttered the coyote. A silent pall fell between the two as Hendrick reacted in none of the ways Auspicia had expected: scrunching up his legs with muzzle

dipped shamefully to his chest. The sight of her gilt irises widening for the first time he'd ever seen was memorable, but brief and blotted out by the stretching shadow of embarrassment.

Hendrick went rigid, and as a flick of the fox's eyes confirmed, in more ways than one.

"Darling..." she said through wavy giggles, "I was going to apologize, but now that I know the mouse fancies his cat, I'm not so sure of its necessity."

Panic took over the tiny coyote's features and wrinkled the sides of his muzzle in a completely non-threatening growl. "What?! No, get off my back!! I just... didn't expect you to do that, that's all!"

"You didn't expect it, and you *liked* it. Very lucky that you were just so *big* all your life or a fixation like this would be quite dangerous for you... but, oh, what's this? You're not so big anymore. It would be so easy to give you what you want... my little sunflower seed."

The image of being popped into the vulpine's muzzle and sucked on like the pet name she'd just assigned him squeezed a reticent shudder out of Hendrick. *Auspicia* flared with excitement that Hendrick found wholly uncharacteristic. It *should* have been terrifying.

The right words were simply not coming out. No, *Auspicia* had taken all of the best ones. He knew she was just cornering him, he really did--but it didn't make her

accusations any less true. He didn't even know they *were* true until it happened. The coyote was learning way too much about himself.

Hendrick slowly sat up again now that there was no tongue pinning him down. He ineffectively wiped the thick layer of drool from his body, his tail fluffed up but sagging to the floor with the extra weight.

Auspicia hummed. "Hendrick... I will only ask you this once, so please listen. Do you trust me?"

They say the eyes are the window to one's soul. If that was true, Auspicia's windows were fogged over and made of stained glass that was hastily and poorly put back together after being shattered in a freak storm. He could never get a bead on her at all, and that was especially true now. B-but what she did to him... he liked it.

"I-I do. You coulda gotten rid of me right there and you didn't," he blurted. Regret seeped into his skin almost instantaneously.

Auspicia didn't question it. "Good."

Before Hendrick had even a moment between the last word and the slow, deliberate parting of her lips to contemplate what she meant, the sounds of saliva strands stretching into tension groped at his ears as they bridged her carnivorous teeth. The broad, spongy flesh within became his new horizon--ending with a uvula dangling over rich darkness.

The tongue lurched. A slick swallow pounded against his eardrums. She had practice doing so with her mouth open.

“W... what are you doing...?!” Hendrick choked out, only to be interrupted by a blast of hot breath shrouded in a gentle moan. Her leathery black lips sealed her teeth and tongue once again, and the same buffeting sensation rolled out in staggered waves with Auspicia’s next few words.

“Scaring you a little. I suggest holding your breath.”

He was no more ready than last time for the unfurling of her thick, wet tongue. It pushed up, initially at his midsection, and slowly bulldozed him against the “floor” in another passionate lick. Hendrick’s legs already had their constitution tested, but the bead of her diamond stud completely bowled him over this time. He feared being hurt, but he remained wholly intact and none worse for wear. His senses had time to swim with a unique, never-before-felt sort of overstimulation: the heat of her breath, the slickness of fox-drool on his chest and arms, the rattling thunder of her very voice as it took pains not to speak. The ability to think was a thing of the past.

“A-Auspicia?” he squeaked.

But she was done speaking. He had already agreed.

After lapping up to the top of his head, tousling his hair brutishly, the muscular wall slipped down between his legs to scoop him up. It seemed even Auspicia

underestimated herself; it ended up forcing his lower half out from under him, bedding him flat on his stomach onto the spongiform mattress.

Humidity choked the air and matted his fur as continental shelves of soft, leathery lips drew him partially inside bright pink walls. The slight prick of her teeth combed dangerously against his tail as Hendrick tried to land any grip on her tongue, but it was like trying to punch underwater. He was helpless, exemplified by the resounding giggle throughout the cavern walls, and in that moment it became all too clear to Hendrick that Auspicia's paling of gravitas hid someone who was not above playing with her food.

A lurch of motion rattled his senses, pulling him into the rosy-walled abyss before a clack of ivory teeth deprived them outright.

Inside, it was darker than night and wetter than a swamp, with a stifling temperature to match. Only combs of dim light lanced the darkness; Hendrick could only see hints of the ground twisting before it pressed him to one side, smacking face-first into a wall of soft flesh smattered with predatory drool. The scent of tea lingered amid whatever it was she had last eaten, her every breath now a primeval force like raging fire and rumbling thunder.

"Nngh... Auspicia!!" Hendrick shouted. Th-this wasn't what he asked for! He clenched his teeth and braced against the tide of breath. Nothing. His own voice assaulted his eardrums as it resounded from the heavily acoustic walls.

Maybe it was too late to protest... what was going to happen to him?

As if in response, the pressure on his midsection tightened before spreading to his whole body. His vision was quickly becoming clogged by a rising tide of tongue as it lurched in a bid to press him to the top of the chamber, muzzle fixed between wet muscle and hard roof. Everything was going in slow motion, but everything that transpired had only taken a second or two.

At that realization, it all sped up again.

Gravity thrust backward as Auspicia's neck tilted up. Foolishly, Hendrick peered behind him; indelible blackness stained the horizon past the studded pink mass, and over it hung that fleshy teardrop, pointing to his doom. A practice swallow squeezed the back shut, then opened it again with a silver thread of saliva drooping from the walls.

Countless things had crossed this very same threshold. Everything he was about to experience was something only experienced by meals; things Auspicia had eaten and forgotten about, for their purpose was done.

That was him now.

One more surge of pressure overtook him as he was effortlessly flipped to the back of the tongue. One more powerful contraction of muscle, and he was squeezed down through a damp, pulsating tunnel.

Hendrick wanted to say something, anything, but all that came out was a squeak.

Glk.

The shock and sting of cold sweat on his body was what sprung Hendrick up from his bed. It wasn't the soft rocking of the caravan, or the light trickling in through the age-tailored gaps in the fabric, nor was it the heavier rumble that shook him left to right a few seconds after he awoke.

...A caravan?

Tree lights. A haze of color spinning his world in a horizontal blur.

Hendrick's eyes slowly began a bid to focus. He threw his legs off the footboard past the open curtains, careful not to knock off the thing that was starting to look like a teapot on the side, and looked out. The image of a quaintly small clearing of grass tucked past a sequoia copse eventually came into view, and his mind spun at the implications.

Was that real? Any of it?

"A thousand pardons if I woke you," a voice softer than silk called out.

"What the--oh... Auspicia?"

Oh, right, last night. Yup, he was going to hell. Worse than hell? *Super hell.*

Upon realizing who was speaking to him, albeit with a decided lack of depth and boom, he tucked his head under the ivory crown board and peered up, finding nothing but a cloudless blue sky. Then he looked down and to the right, where he finally found

the marble fox. Her sylvan figure padded along the dirt with paws that could have covered up ten of him just yesterday, stopping with a leisurely twist of her heel right in front of him. That typical flaunted wardrobe had been replaced by a modest sky-blue blouse, wrapped loosely about the waist with a thick, ribbonlike sash.

He'd honestly forgotten how dainty Auspicia actually was.

"I've loved how easy it is to get your attention ever since you walked through my doors." Auspicia giggled--one of the sort with a level of sincerity that was difficult to gauge. "How are you feeling?"

Hendrick found difficulty in a reply. His head was a maze, and not just because he'd been swallowed like a breadcrumb the previous night. He realized that he was perfectly clean and dry, too. The whole thing felt like a dream.

"...Ah... warm, a little sick to my stomach, for some reason. You cast any spells lately?"

"Already feeling well enough to joke! That's simply darling. You know, I think I was starting to miss your face at a size I could see."

It was possible that his conflicted brain made it easier to throw a verbal hook back. "That's funny coming from somebody whose ears do most of the heavy lifting."

"Now, Hendrick--I was being completely sincere, but if you insist on not watching your mouth, you can always watch mine again."

At that, Hendrick's already flimsy smile inverted instantly. "Y-yes, ma'am."

Auspicia came near to the back of the wagon, extending a svelte, silver hand. Hendrick took it and let himself down, clumsily establishing his balance over weak knees. The feeling of natural earth under his feet was something he'd come to miss over the week he'd been with her--and yet, he'd almost gotten used to Auspicia being an absolute continent of a person, as absurd as that sounded. It was almost funny how now that she was standing right next to Hendrick, Auspicia only came up to the peak of his chest.

"Well... what now?" he asked.

"I was only just thinking about that myself. You *have* done your part... and then some," she added coyly. "I don't get a man who treats me to dinner nearly often enough, so I must say, it is difficult letting you go."

Hendrick winced, deciding his mental tangle was becoming too obvious. "Yeah, about that--I've been meaning to ask..."

Auspicia plucked the tea set from the footboard, pushing on her tiptoes to lean into the wagon's interior and set it somewhere to the side. "This should be good," she said amusedly behind her.

"I've heard stories of witches doing all kinds of things... maybe not exactly shrinking people and eating them, but more like enchanting someone to make them fall for them. You didn't do that to me, did you?" he asked cautiously.

The marble fox finished and twirled to find a seat of her own on the footboard, svelte legs dangling over the dirt path. Whatever expression he was hoping Auspicia might make, it wasn't the widest, toothiest grin he'd ever seen on her.

"I had no reason to. I fear that your feelings are your own, my little mite. As are your... fixations."

M... mite? Why did that tickle him so much? The sudden interest in finding out if there was a word for his strange feelings about what Auspicia did to him--fixations, apparently--coiled sinisterly around his brain.

"I was just hoping you'd at least let me think last night wasn't *my* fault."

"I did my due course! I took you at your word, love, and Hendrick," she paused, turning to meet his gaze with brutal force, "words have meaning and power, especially for me. You would fain learn this."

Hendrick motioned to the open clearing, askance at the sheer nothing that was there. "You say it like we're going to see each other again. My time's up, isn't it?"

Auspicia thought for a moment. She normally had a response to most questions primed, but not that one. The black streaks of fur underlining her eyes gave emphasis to the way her eyes flicked away, then back.

"I did say that, didn't I? Yes, you can go. Yet... allow me, if you will, to propose another deal. I've a mind to see how the township has changed since my last visit--I

only ever go for the sake of bread on my table. You aren't terrifically busy, are you?"

She crossed her legs indiscreetly. "Not too busy to show a lady around, at the surest?"

Hendrick looked utterly dumbfounded. He wasn't protesting, though, which Auspicia happily leveraged by hopping off of her wagon and walking a small way ahead of him, facing the dirt path leading out of the forest. Striped shadows layered her features, shaped by the thin blades of light slicing through the canopy.

The coyote shook himself awake. "I... okay. Here's the thing. You literally ate me. But... how did you... *why* did you..." He paused. "How am I still standing here?"

"This kind of confusion you're going through is called afterglow, Hendrick."

Hendrick fumed with embarrassment, but managed to find the wisdom in not replying. Auspicia cocked her head at him curiously.

"Trouble really is the last thing on my mind. You are hardly my first plaything... but your *tastes* are quite unique. I only did what you so obviously wanted, and the fact that you are not refusing my offer or even acting slightly vexed with me tells me I was right. Yes?"

Damn it. "Fine, yes..."

"Good. I'm so glad we finally see eye to eye." There was no hint of playfulness in the way she spoke. She sauntered back to Hendrick and beckoned his cheek down with a curling fingertip, planting a soft kiss on the side of his muzzle. "Besides, I thought

you'd have figured out by now that I'd never waste someone so fun to toy with. That's even if I *wasn't* fond of you, and I must be honest and say that I am."

Perhaps it was for lack of addressing the elephant that never entered the room, but Hendrick realized something that a smarter man might have caught onto much sooner: that her trust mattered much more than his. He could swear that maybe now he'd earned that trust--was he being too eager? He felt... a little closer to her, somehow, though he doubted her true self was within view just yet.

"O-okay. Well, um, I like you too..." he said, pressing his fingers together. "A-anyway, my old place is in Gendria. It's a hamlet a small way from the city, so we aren't going to have to go there yet. I can take you tomorrow, though? Maybe?" His tone ended up sounding hopeful.

"Mmm... yes, good." *Very* good. She could never be pursued there. "It sounds rustic. Peaceful. Shall we go?"

Auspicia extended her hand, palm up. Hendrick was hesitantly about to take it when he heard an ethereal whipping of wind, punctuated by a whimsical pop, twisting around to find that there was no more caravan. The fox then slipped something into her pocket and started off on the path, tail swishing like a paintbrush.

Hendrick blinked airily, then hurried to match her pace. The clearing where Auspicia's curio shop had recently stood slowly folded into the slumbering forest behind them both.