

"You should get up," I said.

It felt stupid to say that, but I always mean what I say. The skies looked angry, and rain pelted down not moments later. Mithras didn't answer me. Or he wouldn't. I couldn't tell at the time and I still can't recall it now.

"You should get up," I said, a little more urgently. I wasn't aware that I could even feel a sense of urgency, let alone act on it. "Before you get too wet."

He rolled over just enough so I could hear him, though he didn't speak up and it took a tremendous amount of effort for the bare minimum. "Leave me alone. [Unseen], I am done."

"Done with what?" I think I knew the answer, but didn't want to acknowledge it, so I didn't. That had been an incredible strategy during Banishment. Ignore the truth or be undone. Many many Crooks had lost their sense of self by acknowledging the truth.

"Everything."

And then he went limp, content to let the lands swallow him whole. Well, it wouldn't have been the lands. It would have been the human constructed organism that would have swallowed him. Eventually, someone would have dragged him somewhere else, and he wouldn't have fought them.

That someone was better off being me, I figured.

The problem was that he was very large compared to me. I don't have legs, and he was twice as tall as I was and just as wide. I was strong in my own rights. If we had ever fought, it might have ended in a stalemate. Or I would at least have been able to cut him down to my size. Admirable in other circumstances.

I wasn't sure if I would be able to manage that, though. Carrying him. Dragging him would be more appropriate.

I wasn't going to leave him, though. We were not supposed to do that. At least, I didn't think we were. He'd been the closest thing to an ally that I had ever experienced. We were not friends, but we were not enemies. I did not owe him assistance and he clearly did not expect anything from me except for maybe a swift death if I was going to be the one to end his life.

I wonder if he was expecting me to eat him. If we had been in the woods, maybe I would have.

I pushed all the bags of garbage off of him. **The rain was relentless, and I could barely hear myself think as the water fizzled uselessly against my bleeding magic. It was making the whole area fill with a heady fog, soup-like in its viscosity, obscuring the area. I suppose the magic in the rain was being nullified by my defect.**

When I tested Mithras's weight, I could tell that this was going to be a chore. Much more than that. It was going to be a monumental task that I would have to complete on my own. I had learned fairly quickly that Crooks did not gain any sympathy from Skire at large. The people of Skire. The land itself had missed us dearly and was suffering from many afflictions that were confusing to my mind.

It took more tries than I'd like to admit to find the best way to move him. I didn't bother trying to encourage him to help or to stand. He wouldn't have done either and we both knew it. I wanted to hate him for giving up after finally gaining freedom. He'd given me the impression that he came from the time before and now that he was back, he was going to just roll over and die?

I didn't get it, but yes I did. Remember, I had lost everything that I had ever known, and it was only now that we were created equals. I realized later just how depressing that really was. It

was hard to really think about it like that, considering how transient Banishment was. I suppose you don't really understand the totality of any experience.

"I hate you," I muttered. I hadn't meant to, but I was going to yell at him anyway. I didn't hate him. I didn't hate anything about the physicality of the situation I was in. I hooked my larger set of arms under Mithras and pulled. Didn't get very far, but he did move.

I had to use my smaller pair of arms to give me leverage, and I extended myself as much as I could, only being able to drag him a few feet each time. The rain by then had become a deluge, constantly falling with no end in sight, hissing. Eventually, the sound of water rushing through storm drains accompanied it.

With each heave, Mithras made a soft 'whuff' sound as he hit the pavement. I cursed a lot at him. The scars on the ends of my thighs ripped open a few times on the particularly neglected sections. Eventually, he was bleeding too, but I couldn't do anything about that other than heave him a few more times and then rest.

I will never forget how many glassy eyes peered at me from the windows. Not one of them came outside.

I suppose the rain ended up being good for us. It gave both of us a lot of time to think. I assumed Mithras was thinking things like "Why is she doing this?" and "Just leave me." though I never asked him. The reason was because I wanted to. I will do whatever I want, even if it's hard.

When we finally got back to the house, I was exhausted, and had seriously considered eating him to regain my strength. Not all of him, just part. But then the one youngling that had stayed asked me if I was going to eat him and I said no.

I just couldn't do it.

We'd made an agreement in Banishment, about who was allowed to eat whom when the terms hadn't been met. He would feed me fresh Crooks if I allowed his protection to access the lake safely. They were not allowed to drink without my permission, and he was the one who did all the talking. And if any of his members had broken the rules, I would be allowed to eat a part of him instead. If I attacked one of his protection members while they drank, then he would eat a part of me.

It had never come to that.

This wasn't the same thing. So I rolled him onto an old ratty carpet that had come with the house, and let him rest. All his eyes were closed. He was still breathing. I told the one youngling to get him one of the dinner boxes that James had given me. To feed Mithras. I didn't know how to make it yet, so I placed the box in front of him. I didn't expect him to eat right away, so I left him there to eat on his own time.

Each day I placed a dinner box in front of him. After a week, there were seven untouched boxed dinners piled in front of him, and I did not stop placing boxes in front of him. Not for a while. James thought it was concerning behavior whenever she came over, but she never pried. I suppose I respect her for having the wit not to. I would have stopped working with her if she had.

Before I went on missions, I would tell Mithras where I was going and what I was doing, and to watch the younglings while I was gone. He never moved from his spot. Not once. Sometimes I came back to a house that was in shambles. Sometimes, the younglings would have run away and I'd have to go search for them and bring them back.

When he was getting smelly, I would dump this dry shampoo on him and brush his fur with my claws until he didn't stink anymore. Many CCCats formed in the house around that time. I was starting to think that I had made a mistake doing what I was doing. If they weren't CCCats, then they were eaten as Wormlings. The Crooks that formed ran off immediately. I took to talking to Mithras about my plans. He didn't respond, just laid on the floor in the same position, only ever changing if the younglings changed him, or a tower of dinners fell over on him.

"Skire made a mistake," I admitted one day.

I was sitting on the floor as compactly as I could, thighs splayed out, tail along the length of an old couch I found and brought home. It was just as ratty as the rug that Mithras laid on, but it could hold my weight okay enough to lay on it sometimes.

"I can understand what I must do, but all it has done is make me feel bad." That wasn't it. I just didn't have the words for it. "I want to go back to my lake, Mithras. It is easier in the lake. I don't need to read and write to live in my lake. Or ask permission to live there."

Nothing.

"The one that stays is not able to go out into the Skire that is here. I did something wrong." I just didn't understand what it was. "They don't know enough about anything. I cannot teach them, and I cannot find someone who can."

It wasn't for lack of trying. James had explained to me that sometimes people with a lot of money would take pity on people without money and give them some so they could keep doing what they were doing. But only if it was for a good cause.

I explained what I was doing many many times to a lot of different kinds of rich people. I find Wormlings and give them hosts and keep them safe when they form until they learn what they need to live on Skire.

Over time, I changed the words I used. Made it more vague and palatable. Not too many details, and no gruesome ones. It was starting to work because I'd be given physical items. Food and clothing. Nothing outstanding, but I am not picky and my younglings were not picky either. I got a desk once, and I put that somewhere I thought James could use to help me with the paperwork part. I had to meticulously detail everything that came in and went out of this house.

I named it New Paths. It made sense to me.

"I should do something different." Give up. I wanted to give up.

"Boil a pot of water," Mithras grunted.

It took me a minute to realize that Mithras had spoken at all. I was so used to just talking to a breathing mass of fur, that I'd almost forgotten that he had a voice. It'd been months since I heard it last.

But, I got up, waddled over to the kitchen, and set a pot of water to boil. Mithras's whole body cracked and popped as he peeled himself off the floor, being surprisingly careful as he stepped around the towers of dinner boxes. He picked up the first one I ever left him, made obvious by how battered the box was, and trudged over.

When the water was boiling, he pointed to the back of the box. Instructions, I assumed. I couldn't read yet.

"Stir in pasta." He tore the top of the box off and fished out a couple packets before dumping the whole of the box inside the water.

I thought he was determined to be dead. I was elated to see that he was in the right frame of mind to engage with what counted as life again. I didn't question it. He was up and about. We stood in silence for exactly eight minutes, and when Mithras grunted again, he tore open the packet with the number one on it.

"Turn off heat." I obeyed. "Drain pasta. Add packet one. Stir until mixed. Add packet two. Stir until mixed."

I followed each instruction, trying to remember which word meant what on the back of the box. As soon as the meal was made, Mithras took the biggest bowl we had and dumped the entire pot of box dinner into it, forced me to sit at the kitchen table, put the bowl of dinner in front of me and sat across the table.

"Eat," he said.

"This is yours," I shot back.

"It is the least I can do." He pushed the bowl even closer to me, looking humbled and small. He kept his head bowed to me, and his cluster eyes all focused on my face. "You gave this to me to do what I want with it. That's all I have to offer."

He felt like he was on his Banishment autopilot.

"Eat," he repeated. "You first."

I did. It was delicious.

"Thank you."