

The moment he'd closed the door, Sonci slumped onto the nearest box.

It was too much. Each time he left his room he met strangers who viewed him with too much interest and too little distance. Even when they didn't explicitly talk to him there was an unflinching interest and wariness, burning into his back until he just slipped through the nearest door and hid.

*I don't even know why I'm here*, Sonci thought, tugging his cloak a little tighter around his body. It had been days since he met the wolf who called itself Zev, for both the first and last time. Zev's offer of a safe place and allies had felt like the teeth of a bear trap, and when Sonci's refusal wasn't heeded he had tried to fight the wolf off. He didn't win.

He had woken up in a regular room with an unlocked door, treated as a new tenant rather than a prisoner.

Sonci tucked his chin into his chest and pulled his legs up. It made absolutely no sense. Why take in someone that had tried to harm you? Someone who didn't even *want* to come?

He sighed and leaned his crossed arms on his legs. The people he had seen regarded him with either frightening friendliness or the disdain reserved for a dead rat, and neither felt reassuring. He had no idea how to deal with either reaction.

Someone knocked, and Sonci jumped.

A few moments passed in silence, then the door opened and an orange fox android stepped through.

"You alright?" the fox asked simply, shutting the door before sitting a few steps away. Sonci opted not to say anything, letting the question hang unanswered, but the acknowledgement of personal space was reassuring.

"I guess all this is overwhelming for you. Do you remember who I am?"

*Of course not*. Sonci furrowed his brow and nuzzled into his cloak collar. Sure, they'd talked, but he'd been too anxious to retain much.

"My name is Fireball," the fox said and pointed to himself with a vague smile. "You're Sonci, right?"

Nod. *Everyone seems to know that*.

“... Well, I can’t blame you for being wary...” Fireball sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “This isn’t usually how it goes, you know.”

Puzzled, Sonci looked up. “What?”

“The recruitment process. That isn’t how it goes.”

*It isn’t ...? But then what is it normally like?*

As though he’d read the question on Sonci’s face, Fireball laughed. “Normally it’s a choice. Zev looks scary, but he’s softer than you think. He won’t *force* anyone to join.”

The fox leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. “... But there are exceptions. Some Strays, like you, are just too scared or hurt to listen. Leaving them would just make them easy pickings for the cops, so ...”

“... So you take them in anyway,” Sonci filled in quietly. He couldn’t deny that he’d perhaps been unreasonable, but ...

“Exactly, then they make their choice when they’ve recovered. Think of it kind of like catching a hurt wild animal, it can’t know you’re helping.”

Sonci’s face flushed and he hid in his cloak to hide it. A stifled laugh told him Fireball had noticed. A wild animal-- sure, he’d felt cornered and lashed out when they got too close, but...

“Actually you’re still kinda acting like one,” Fireball joked. “I haven’t seen someone so intent on hiding from interactions since Nyoka was new.”

“Well I just... it’s just hard to... I’m not good at talking,” Sonci murmured into his collar, the cloth muffling his words. His face felt hotter than ever. If he had any practice with small talk *at all*, there wouldn’t be a problem, and yet ...!

Shuffling followed by a nearby thump told him that Fireball had sat down next to him. “It’s okay if you want to leave, too. But you’ve been all over the news lately, and you were in pretty bad shape.”

Giving up on hiding his flushed face, Sonci settled for just rubbing his cheeks and looking aside. He struggled to find the right words, but Fireball made too much sense to ignore. He’d been in poor shape from the very beginning, and there had never been an opportunity to actually catch his breath until now. It may be the only safe place he’d ever find.

“... I know.”

Fireball smiled consolingly as though he'd expected that answer. "Well, you don't have to decide right now."

Sonci shook his head. "I'll stay."

"You're sure?"

"I am." Sonci raised his chin in a show of confidence, watching Fireball properly, and the fox's smile grew gentler.

"That's good to hear. I hope you settle in well."

Right. Living here was one thing, but Sonci was hardly the only person in this building. Breaking eye contact, he glanced off to the left somewhere. "... I still don't know how to talk to the rest."

There was a momentary pause before Fireball laughed. "Well, you'll learn. I think Hanacha and Nyoka would like talking to you, they got the 'wild animal' treatment too."

Hearing it described that way made Sonci's cheeks heat up again, and he turned away fully. "Well, right, I'll try that."

Fireball didn't laugh this time, but the amusement was audible in his voice as he stood. "Glad to hear it. I'm sure you have a lot to digest, so I'll leave you to it, but just ask around if you want to talk more."

With those words, the fox left and Sonci found himself alone again. His most pressing questions had been answered, but somehow he felt like there was more on his mind than ever.