

Astor sat at the bar with Sylas at his side, both of them drinking out of cold glasses of beer. He watched Sylas take a long swing of his drink before setting it down on the glass table of the bar, staring straight ahead of him.

"A *pirate*, Astor? You're a merchant. You both are basically oil and water," Sylas said, turning his shoulder and giving him a questioning look. In a sense, he wasn't incorrect. When he'd found out that Treasure was a pirate and a thief, it was difficult for him to accept. He'd tried to talk her out of it, to convince her to join him, but ultimately, it was a path she wasn't willing to stray from.

"We've talked about it, Sy. Her mother is one of the most terrifying pirate captains you'll ever meet. It's no wonder she's strong willed." In truth, Astor was fine with her pirating and stealing ways, as long as it was separated from his own work. In fact, ever since they realized their bond, his business had grown tenfold.

Sylas sighed and shrugged, finishing off the last of his drink in a single swallow. "Whatever makes you happy, bud. You deserve it,"

The sentiment meant a lot coming from Sylas, the shiji who's known to be cold shouldered upfront. Astor has known him for a very long time, but very little time could he recall him being sympathetic.

"She'll be here any second, I'd love for you to stick around and meet her," Astor said hopefully, signaling the bartender for another drink. "Want another?"

Sylas looked as if he was pondering for a second, before ultimately nodding and accepting another beer. They caught themselves in idle chat when he heard the door to the bar open and his lovely mate strolled in. Even the air around her seemed to bend, just like his resolve when he was in her presence.

Her normally hard composure softened when she spotted him, and she trotted up to him with a slight skip in her step. Her gaze became weary when she spotted Sylas, pressing close to Astor. He laughed, putting an arm around her shoulder and shaking her slightly.

"My love, this is Sylas, a very old friend of mine. Sylas, this is Treasure,"

Sylas grinned, giving her a friendly salute. "It's a pleasure. Never seen this old man so happy before he met you,"

Treasure grinned, but it didn't reach her eyes. Astor offered a sheepish smile to Sylas, but he waved it off. It was not uncommon for Treasure to be distrusting to strangers.

"Astor, we need to make arrangements," Treasure reminded him, and he hopped up from his chair.

"Ah, I can be so forgetful," he downed the rest of his drink and turned to Sylas, giving him a friendly clap on the shoulder. "My friend, we're off to finalize our preparations for the Trial. We'll meet again, yeah?"

Sylas grinned and did the same with his own drink, standing up from his stool and returning the gesture. "Absolutely. Good luck, friend." They parted ways, Astor looping his fingers through Treasure's as they exited the bar.

"I like that one," she said simply, tossing a look behind her shoulder as she watched Sylas leave. Astor laughed, nudging her with his shoulder.

"Maybe next time you could be a little more friendly?" he joked, leaning over to plant a kiss on her cheek. She only shrugged, and they entered the main part of the city.

Typically, Treasure was not one for cities. Too many eyes, as he recalled her saying. It was easier in the Oasis, or on trading seaports. While he would never contribute, or even begin to understand, he respected that as her line of work. Their bond was strong and impenetrable, and he'd give anything to keep it that way.

"Vashaa's temple is located at the center of the city, it'll take us about fifteen minutes to get there on foot," Astor noted as they strolled, passing street vendors and merchants selling their own wares. He couldn't help himself, Treasure having to pull him away from interesting looking objects.

"Why did we choose Vashaa?" Treasure asked, and he thought for a moment.

"I figured Vashaa is the most forgiving Elder that we can find," he said softly, and Treasure gave him a look.

"Because of me?" she asked, her eyes going wide.

"I think we can both agree that being a thief isn't necessarily the best occupation."

"How could she even *know* that?"

"I don't think she would, but I like to play it safe," He shot her a look, but she ultimately yielded.

The temple came into view not long after, the streets lining with the leaves surrounding the massive building. Those who tended to the temple were lazily sweeping them up, enjoying the brisk Tianshu weather after many hot months. To his surprise, nobody was waiting to meet the Elder at this time.

They walked up the steps hand in hand, until Treasure stopped abruptly.

"The offerings-

"-Are down in the cart below the temple," Astor huffed a laugh, squeezing her hand in his. "Don't worry, love."

Treasure sagged with relief and studied him for a moment before turning her attention to the massive doorway that yawned open before them. They entered into a massive clearing with none other than the Elder they were seeking lay before them, massive and elegant in her size. They bowed their heads immediately, but the Elder remained silent. Her hair pooled around her incredible size in massive pools, leaves and flowers decorating the strands like a garden. Her large horns towered above them and almost glistened in the light from the sunroof that poured in the natural light.

"Astor, Treasure," Vashaa said in a sing-song-like voice, dipping her head low. He felt Treasure stiffen next to him, and he also questioned how she knew their names. If she knew those without asking, it was likely she knew that they did for a living. "You're here to bond your lives and your souls together, I take it?" she asked, and they both nodded.

"Wonderful. Let's begin, then."