

I hate it when he looks at me like that. Ollivyr has the kindest eyes I have ever seen. It's a wonder he's survived in the Mud District as long as he has. We have a little peat log burning on the roof and I'm looking out at the district, at Spirea above it, and I'm thinking about how I wasn't even that kind when I left home. Kind people aren't made, I think. They're not people who've suffered less than the rest of us. They're born that way. I didn't want for a damn thing as a kid, and Ollivyr has already seen more hunger in his life than I'm likely to ever know, but he's still kinder than me. He has all the reason in the world to be angry, and yet...

"Lisander." He takes my hand and I have to look over at it, then up at him. "You're thinking too much. You have that little..." Ollivyr reaches up with his free hand, pushes a finger into his chin to make his bottom lip stick out. "Pout that you do."

"I don't pout." It comes out harsher than I mean it to, but the faint smile on Ollivyr's lips tells me that he doesn't mind. "And if *I* don't think, who's gonna keep those kids fed?"

"They're keeping themselves fed now, thanks to you." His thumb rubs the back of my hand and I have to look away, focusing on a couple guards underneath a streetlight down below, up to their ankles in mud. I remember how I used to be called *young lord* by the servants at home, as if my name was too holy to pass their lips, and about how the motes call me the Dust Lord now, as if that's such a great title, and how still nobody knows that I'm here. Ollivyr does, and Wallis does, and the kids who come to me know I'm here, but...

"It gets brighter the higher up you go," Ollivyr says, following my gaze. The Marble District is almost glowing with its white buildings reflecting all that light they horde.

"They have better lights," I say. "No torches. All energy." And despite myself, I slide my hand a little more securely into his, my knuckles slotting between his fingers. "The mud here soaks up the light, and the water reflects it back. Makes it hard to see. They have storm drains up there to keep the streets dry."

"I didn't know that," Ollivyr says. "I've never been."

"You're not missing much." I think about everyone up there in their high-heeled shoes, good for nothing more than walking from carriage to couch, or around the lawn if they're feeling adventurous. "The guards would pick you up in an instant if they caught you walking around looking like that."

“And then I’d say,” he affects a Marbled accent, the accent *I* taught him that would get him out of any scrape, “Oh, no! You misunderstand, sirs! I took a tumble off my horse and I’ve lost him now. Just walking home now. These streets are bleedin’ hard, aren’t they?”

I almost laugh, but the thought of Ollivyr getting picked up by a couple of guards brings a sour taste to my mouth, and my lips twist around it. “You can’t go there.” I say, and I *hate* how hard my voice sounds. “Every time someone goes up there—,”

“I know, Lis.”

“On *my* orders—,”

“Hey.” His voice is stern, and soft, and full of so much care it’s like being slapped in the face. I look over at him, but only because I know he won’t start talking until I do. I’m still not sure I want to hear what he has to say. “The only way we can learn is if we try, right?”

“Yes,” but I’m thinking of the faces of everyone I sent up there.

“And you’re a leader.” When I don’t say anything to that, he just continues. “Whether you like it or not. You’ve given these kids hope, and I’ve been here long enough to say they *definitely* didn’t have it before you came around and started stealing watches off all the guards.”

I’m looking at his eyelashes and how, even in the damp darkness of the night they’re still a few shades lighter than his hair. “I was just trying to survive.”

“But you cared about them. About us. You could’ve kept your skills to yourself and had the pickings of every wrist of every guard who came through here. But you didn’t, did you?”

“I still *do*, kinda,” but he cuts me off.

“You could have kept the wealth for yourself, but you’re feeding all of us. Right?”

“You’re infuriating. Do you ever shut up?”

“No. Never. Listen. Those kids would have gone up there anyway. At least with your orders, they had a chance—,”

“They were *children!*” I start to stand, to storm off, but Ollivyr puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me back down to sit. “They were *children*, Ollivyr. And I sent them to die. That’s not what a leader does.” I try to pull my hand away, but he won’t let me. A raindrop falls on the roof between us, then another.

“These kids have no one to fight for them. No one who cares for them. They die on the streets every day and the guards don’t even blink. Don’t you think they’re happy to have something to hope for?”

I grit my teeth and try to keep my voice steady. “They shouldn’t have to die at all.”

Ollivyr takes his free hand and covers mine with it. I can’t tell whose skin is colder. “They shouldn’t. And maybe one day they won’t have to. But you can’t keep beating yourself up like this. It’s killing you.”

*I wish it would kill me*, I think, but I don’t say it aloud. I look down at our hands, then out at the streets. The guards have moved on, and the water on the street ripples with new rainfall. Behind us, the hatch in the roof opens up, and Wallis’ voice calls to us through the darkness. “Hey! You guys wanna bring that peat in before it goes out? The guards are all gonna go hide in the tavern like they always do when it rains. Let’s put them all together and make this place roasty!”

And Ollivyr looks at me, and damn it all, his eyes are still soft, even after I’ve been so rude. Every day I send kids out to steal and loiter and harass and *die*, and *still* he looks at me like that. “If anyone’s killing me here, it’s you,” I tell him.

“I know.” And, damn him, he looks so *pleased* with himself about it. “Come on. Let’s get inside before Wallis decides to heat the place with an explosive, yeah?”

And he stands up and reaches his hand out for me, and I can’t help but take one last look at the city, at the street below where a woman and her child struggles home in the rain, and then up through the districts to the towering spires at the top, and I swear I’m going to make it worth their lives. Every single one of them. And then I reach out and take Ollivyr’s hand and let him pull me to my feet, and I let him pull my hood up too. And I think that the world can’t be all that bad if people like him can survive in it.