

Intro

Once upon a time
There was a world much like our own
The humans ruled with no exception buffer
While the animals are forced to suffer
A cruel Emperor created a game
A game that put man against beast, none tame
In a battle for survival
Animals now were the human slave's rival
Thrown into The Pit of Despair
Death greets all, this they share
Midnight that night, a strange star is seen in the sky
It is a revenge for all those who had to die
As this comet struck the earth
The people awoke to a world of new birth
Animal people. Anthropomorphic animals
A new world, a new leaf,
Meant to end the suffering and grief
A fate, a lesson, a gift, a blessing
But some feared these new creatures, these Anasiens
This fear grew as the centuries passed.
Humans turned on the Anasiens
They killed them. Hate flashed in haste
The Anasiens flee, all but one
Baby hybrid not yet grown
A wildcat caged, promise not shown
The humans laugh, they think they've won
Anasien intellect long forgotten
For now, the humans simply hunt them
In this world that has become so cruel
The humans again want to rule
Ten years long, this is the range
But all that is about to change
And the hunted Hunter's story finds its way
Predator Turned Prey

-Ravyn Crescent

Chapter 1

*No trumpets sound when the important
decisions of our life are made. Destiny is made
known silently.*

--Agnes DeMille

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“Mira? Ms. Miraina, are you paying attention?” The instructor’s voice cut into Miraina Lilith’s daydreaming. She turned her thoughts, as well as her attention, back to her schoolwork.

“Yes sir, Mr. Confection, I’m listening,” Mira said to her private instructor, Mr. James Confection.

Mr. Confection smiled a private smile, guessing at where Mira’s attention lingered.

“Your father and mother are in the city of Degac today, correct?”

Mira blushed slightly and nodded. “We’re getting another worker,” she informed him.

“Oh?” Mr. Confection’s voice was calm, unimpressed. He himself had several servants of his own. “What for? Your father’s banquet?” Mr. Confection asked, but Mira shook her head in response.

“Not exactly. This one is mine!” she exclaimed with a grin. “Mother and Father said they would buy me a new playmate. That is what they are getting in Degac today. A very early birthday present,” the excited child’s voice rose as she spoke. Mr. Confection smiled, congratulating her.

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The sound of a trolley caught their attention and caused Mira and James to turn to the window.

A trolley was an Anasien invention using recently-discovered electricity to assist horses pulling the passenger carriage. This new power source provided light and kept the horses from tiring out as fast. A trained driver was still required to steer the horses, control the electric motor, and determine when the wheels needed an extra boost of power.

Though the trolley was a prized possession, it was, however, an invention of the Anasiens.

The Anasiens were a race of anthropomorphic, or human-like, animal beings that had once lived side by side with humans, until a war had separated the two species. No Anasiens had been seen in over seven years, at least, no sightings that could be confirmed, and thus few improvements had been made on any of their inventions. Though humans were happy to have electricity and electrical appliances, the despised Anasiens reaped little reward for their inventions now.

Mira hurried to the window and saw her mother step out of the family's trolley.

"Let's finish your lesson later, shall we?" suggested Mr. Confection. Mira nodded, excited, and rushed to the door.

"Miraina!" her father called when Mira reached the front entrance of her family's mansion. She swiftly jumped into her father's arms, hugging him tightly.

As her father held her, Mira listened as her mother instructed a tall, bulky man to place the thick brown bag he carried in the shed at back of the manor. Mira looked at the man and recognized him as the main servant trader in Degac, Darrel. Darrel nodded to Mira's mother, Victoria, before walking back outside. Mira let out an excited gasp as she saw the bag move, confirming that someone alive was inside.

"Is that it?" Mira jumped from her father's hold and raced towards the door. She stopped when the door clicked shut, then turned back to her parents with an excited smile.

"That's it," her mother confirmed, smiling at her dotting husband, Samuel.

Samuel glanced over at Mr. Confection and asked, "Lesson over so soon?"

"Not quite. Mira was so excited to see her new playmate that we decided to adjourn for now," Mr. Confection explained.

"Ah. You won't be disappointed," Samuel Lilith promised his daughter.

"It's supposed to be well trained. It's cute, can perform tricks, and Mr. Darrel says it is quite tame," Victoria Lilith stated, "The perfect pet for my darling little girl."

"Tame?" Mr. Confection questioned.

"Oh, yes. You simply won't believe our luck when you see it," Samuel mused. "Top of the line. One of a kind," he chuckled.

"Ugh..." The figure in the bag moaned. It had been a long, uncomfortable trip stuck in such a small compartment. Being tossed to the ground hadn't helped matters. After a struggle, he finally freed himself from the repulsive burlap sack that he had been forced into countless hours ago. Master Darrel, his previous Master, glowered at him.

"Boy!" Master Darrel snapped.

"Yes, Master?" the boy responded through gritted teeth. Oh, how he loathed that word; 'boy' spoken as if that were his only title.

I have a name. He thought. *It may not be the name I was born with, or all that thrilling of a sound... but it is a name.*

"This is your last chance," Darrel started his rant of a speech, the same lecture he gave every time the boy was sold. "You've been given too many chances, if you ask me. Sir Goibniu let you off easy."

The boy gave no reply. He had heard this speech too many times before and no longer bothered to ask what it was he had done so wrong to have this being 'let off easy'. He just nodded, agreed, and listened to nothing.

Darrel continued, "The Lilith family is very well known. They expect you to behave and my reputation counts on it. Look at yourself! You aren't worthy of the ground you walk on, half-breed. But if you get sent back again, I'll take you back to Sir Goibniu's manor. He'll deal with you, understand?"

Of course the boy understood.

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He would always understand that threat, for it was a fate far worse than death. That threat was the only reason he behaved as well as he did.

The young servant's very first owner had been Sir Goibniu, bringer of war, potion master, harbinger of torment, forger of weapons.

Animal hater.

Egotistical maniac worshiped by those who only want power. Sir Goibniu was the man the boy had been brought to after he had been found on the beach of Tiren, on the continent of Valhan.

Yes, the boy remembered that man.

With a shudder, he replied a simple, "Yes, sir."

"Good!" Master Darrel snapped a metal collar around the boy's throat. The heavy chain attached to the collar and wall told the boy that his new living conditions would be no different from what he was used to.

The boy knew there were other 'servants' at the Lilith's Manor. He'd heard them upon arrival, and he had, of course, heard about the Lilith family.

The Lilith lived near Degac, in Ragna, and owned many servants. However, the boy knew that the company of the other workers would be rare, if at all. He was never allowed around the other unlucky souls called 'workers', even though he himself worked just as hard as they did. The boy, like the other workers, was never rewarded for his efforts; it was simply something expected of him. He had been raised only to serve since he was a child of eight years old and had been found all alone, with no family to protect him. Then he'd been taught that the only parental figure he would ever know would be his Master, his trainer.

Master Darrel left the boy to his new surroundings without looking back.

"May I go see him now?" Mira begged, "Please?"

Samuel and Victoria shared a laugh, accompanied by Mr. Confection's wide smile.

"I suppose. But not for long, dinner is not far away. Correct?" Victoria looked at one of the older staff members who had just entered the room.

“Yes, Milady. Three minutes ‘til supper,” the cook, a woman named Anna, confirmed.

“Good. James, you will be staying for dinner, won’t you?” Victoria asked hopefully.

“Of course, of course!” Mr. Confection laughed.

“Now, Father! Please?” Mira begged once again.

“Yes. Let’s go show Mira her new pet,” Samuel suggested. Mira glared at her father a moment, unnoticed by her parents.

“Pet? I said I wanted a playmate!” Mira shouted. She had finally heard the word ‘*pet*’, though her mind was clogged with excitement.

“This one is a little of both. You won’t be disappointed when you see what we got you. All your friends will be jealous. I promise,” Samuel said with a smile.

Mira sighed, but then nodded and followed her father. Her mother and teacher stepped in line as Samuel led the way to the shed.

Standing outside the shed door was Mr. Darrel. He greeted them with a smile and congratulated Mira on her newest servant, then accompanied the group into the shed.

Mira blinked a few times as a bright light was turned on. She looked around expectantly, nearly tearing her new red silk and hand-loomed lace dress on an exposed nail, but she saw nothing.

“Pet!” Samuel called, “Pet! Show yourself!”

The golden figure silently stepped forward, out of the ambient shadows and into view.

At first, all Mira could see were the worn-out, dark black boots and the stone-gray pants the boy wore. He seemed almost afraid to come into the light.

Samuel solved the problem by giving a quick, hard tug on the chain attached to the nearby wall, as well as to the collar around the servant’s throat.

Mira then saw black gloves covering flexed hands fly out as the boy attempted to regain his balance. His arms were a pale white color making the gold strands in his hair stand out more and seem darker against his fair complexion. He

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wore a black shirt with the sleeves torn off and his eyes were hidden behind stray strands of brownish-gold hair.

His shape was that of a human boy, but there was something different about him. The way his mouth was shaped, thin and at the same time full of emotion. The form of his nose; it was too perfect. His whole face seemed to be more... complete than a regular boy's face. His eyebrows were so thin and seemed to have unusual... markings, but it was his eyes that completed the look. His eyes were huge once she could see them! Almond shaped. Perfect.

His body frame was small with strong muscles showing faintly, but definitely there. Mira guessed his age to be around thirteen or fourteen, yet he looked stronger than the average human boy.

Everything about him was perfect, as if he had been hand-sculpted to be indefectible. Victoria had been right. He looked cute. Almost like a puppy, but fiercer... more exotic.

"Next time you will come when someone calls you," Samuel sneered. Mira wasn't surprised by her father's sudden change of attitude; he always was tough on the servants.

It was then, as her father jerked the chain once again and the new servant reached out to catch his balance, that Mira saw why he was so very different from any of the other servants her family had; different, for that matter, than any person she had ever seen on Valhan or any other continent.

He had a tail.

Mira gasped. Victoria giggled, "Your father told you it was one of a kind."

"That it is. I guarantee you won't find another one like it anywhere else. Not even Lord Goibniu knew fully what it was," Mr. Darrel swore as if he still needed to make a selling point.

Mira took a step toward the strange creature, but her father held her back.

"Be careful, darling, we do not know its temperament, cannot predict its behavior." Samuel's words were sharp but tender with love and concern, as always, when he addressed his precious daughter.

"It's tame. He knows better than to misbehave," Mr. Darrel insisted.

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“I think we should all get to dinner now. We don’t want the food to get cold,” Mr. Confection suggested, though his voice was hesitant, as if he were making an excuse for something. Darrel bowed and left the shed after having cast one last, sharp look towards the boy. As the group filed out, it was Mr. James Confection who lingered at the door a few seconds before joining the others for dinner.

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Chapter 2

*There are many questions which fools can ask
that wise men cannot answer.
--George Polya (1887-1985)*

I have never minded the way this family goes through workers... They are some of the nicer people, as far as how they treat their servants; they hardly ever beat them and give them many luxuries most Masters would not even consider. The Liliths give their servants much more freedom than the majority of the owners.

There had been a time when people of another race were tormented, murdered, treated as if they were nothing...

Then the comet came.

Seeing this boy reminded me of that. I have never felt pity for my workers... they are older and I rarely ever see them. My work keeps me too busy.

I hadn't given much thought to how they might feel. After all, before the comet came workers had been treated so much worse, things were different now. However, I felt something like pity toward this child.

He had an aura around him that shouted he did not belong where he was. His stance screamed he was once a predator, true to his Anasien heritage, now turned into simple prey.

Mr. and Mrs. Lilith could not stop talking about this latest servant and that their daughter Miraina was so very excited about her new pet... Ordinarily, I would have joined in; they

really had found an amazing specimen, a boy that was noticeably half Anasien. Never before had anything like him been seen...

Yet all I felt was confusion. Humans had tried to annihilate the Anasien race ten years ago, and for good reason... or so it was said. No one had seen an Anasien in years and the theories were that all the Anasiens remaining were in the town of Revoc, a town hidden from the humans many centuries ago. So where had this boy come from? What had happened?

Mr. Confection had these thoughts running through his head the entire time he and the Lilith family ate their dinner. Regardless of his troubles, he refrained from speaking these thoughts aloud. They might think him crazy.

After dessert had been served, James took Miraina back to her classroom to complete her lesson.

“Ms. Miraina, let’s finish up your lesson for today,” Mr. Confection suggested. “What year is it now?”

“1776,” Mira answered. She rolled her eyes at the all-too-easy question.

“Correct. Now, we are going back in time, back to the year 13 BC... What does BC stand for?” Mr. Confection quizzed.

“Before Comet. AC is After Comet,” Mira breezed.

“Correct. So, we are now in the year 13 BC. The day is October 31st. What happened that day?” Mr. Confection asked.

“At dawn, the Emperor of the great country of Valhan threw thousands of unwanted slaves into a pit as a new form of entertainment.”

“No, that’s not right. Explain it from the beginning, the events that led up to that Day,” Mr. Confection requested.

Mira pouted, “Fine. The Emperor became bored with the usual shows the people put on. Be it gladiators fighting each other or traitors put against lions, it wasn’t the thrill he was looking for.

“He found the answer in the slaves. The country had thousands of slaves, so many that the fear of them uprising was becoming strong. People felt outnumbered. The Emperor found a solution to both his boredom and the high number of slaves at the same time. The slaves who were not needed daily lived in their own city, a very, very large pit. It was

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cheaper having them live there as it took less people to guard them, the steep walls being twenty feet high with only one door at the base of a slope leading into the area, no buildings near the walls, no way out even for a skilled climber with such straight-edge walls.

“The Emperor ordered the slaves to build a separate, smaller pit next to theirs, then another and another and, for a while, he let them use the extra pits for whatever they wanted, never letting them know his plan.

“Then one day, he gave new orders which forced all the slaves out of the pit. The slaves worked day and night at building up the town, never allowed to return home or given even the slightest bit of charity as they became weaker each day. He had his soldiers raid their pit city and take out everything to be auctioned off, given away, or simply destroyed and replaced with only a few simple items.

“As large as a major city, the pit had buildings with no doors and a grand fountain at the center of the city. Hidden in the buildings were weapons, shields, and water which had been contaminated with the leaves of Lily of the Valley plants, causing a very deadly poison to be disguised as life-saving water. The only drinkable water was from the fountain.

“The slaves had been starved and dehydrated for many, many days and were on the verge of death, willing to do anything to get water. The Emperor ordered that every beast they could get be caught in preparation for this event. The fearsome creatures had also been starved. They caught thousands of wild, untamed animals that were predators, capable of killing a man on their own. A few animals that were prey and good only for food were also captured for this event.

“Eventually, the slaves were taken back to their pit-city. All the ones that didn't have private owners who still wanted them and who were not needed at the time, were forced back into the pit along with the many prisoners who had committed any sort of crime, be it as low as theft to as high as murder or treason.

“The massive door was shut and locked behind the captives. The slaves were confused. Never had they been allowed anywhere near weapons before. They didn't understand what was happening.

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“Then the Emperor released the animals from the separate pits the slaves had built. People of nobility, or nobles as they were called, lined the top of the pit for a view of the game, taking bets and chanting for the fights to begin.

“It was a death trap. Both the animals and the human slaves had to battle hunger, thirst, and each other.

“The humans tried to claim the fountain as their own. Nevertheless, the brutality of the animals overpowered the humans. The humans were resourceful, working hard to find the weapons and shields. Many died when confronted by the animals, and more died when they drank the poison, thinking it was water. The audience cheered.

“Noon. The struggle for water was even greater. Many from both sides died trying to reach the fountains.

“A few hours later, all the prey animals had been killed by both the humans desperate for food and the starving beasts, with the water almost gone. The slaves and traitors found a way to poison the water without the animals seeing them and attacking. Desperation sank in and the carnivorous beasts had gained strength. They would leave the water to hunt down the humans, and the humans’ terror blinded them to the consequences of their actions.

“The humans used the poison they had found and flung it into the fountain. The animals drank and became sick. The humans attacked when the animals were nearly dead. It was not yet sunset when every living thing thrown into the pit was dead. Driven mad with greed and fear, they killed each other,” Mira reported. Mr. Confection smiled.

“The Pit of Despair,” he stated. “Go on.”

“Midnight that night, a strange star is seen in the sky.

“The star turned out to be a meteor, different from any other. Many did not believe it was a meteor, but a magic ball sent from the gods. They named it The Comet Despair, as it would surely destroy them all.

“As the comet hit the earth, its blast destroyed the Emperor and his city. The blast was an odd one. Any maps of the crater’s location have been lost, but what we do know is nothing but buildings seemed to be destroyed, though odd scorch marks covered the ground forming a message that was never written down and that has since been forgotten.

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“The world started over. The wicked had perished, as had their cities, yet so many people still remained. It has been recorded through thousands of records that the blast had been bright, filling the world with a blue-white light that no one could see past. The next thing anyone could remember was waking up on the ground and not remembering how they had gotten there.

“Everything changed. Human civilization was forced to start over; only now humans do not have the advantage. The people found out that some animals could talk, walk, act, and fit in with humans and had awoken beside them, also not remembering what had happened.

“Same size as humans, too, these new beings seemed to be humans with animal heads, paws, tails, and fur. They were named Anasiens, taken from the words *animal* and *Homo sapiens*, as they were different from regular animals, but not human. Humans and Anasiens lived side by side, ignoring their differences in order to survive. For a long time, neither species seemed to remember a time when it had been different.

“Correct, Mr. Confection?” Mira smiled, sure of her answer.

“Correct!” Mr. Confection congratulated Mira, who yawned.

“Last question, why is it 13 BC instead of, say, 1 BC?” James inquired.

Mira thought about that a moment. “No one is fully sure, aside from the fact that in the historical records, people marked it as 13 BC. It is guessed that either it was an attempt to remember the actual date, a symbolic endeavor at moving on, or they could only remember thirteen years into the past. Most historians believe that thirteen years was as far back as anyone could remember, as in most of the ancient scriptures thirteen years signifies a great change. No records have been found of anything before, so it is hard to tell for sure.”

“Wonderful,” James said with a nod.

Deciding to end the lesson, Mr. Confection wished Mira good night and left.

However, instead of going home, Mr. Confection walked to the shed.

James did not know why he had so many questions he thought this boy might be able to answer. James Confection was an educated man who had spent his life devoted to the study of The Comet Despair. How could this servant know something that James did not?

The young servant faced Mr. Confection as he entered the shed and switched on the light. The boy did not seem surprised to see him, or happy for that matter.

“Do you know about The Comet Despair?” Mr. Confection asked in a gentle tone. He felt the unusual need to be kind around this creature.

The servant stayed quiet.

“Do you know of the events that took place that day?”

Again, there was no response. Just a blank stare on an emotionless face.

“Do you speak English?” James asked. No response.

“Can you speak at all? Do you know human word?”

Growing more desperate every passing moment, Mr. Confection’s voice began to break like shattering glass. He had never felt so confused in his life, so confused his head pounded and his heart screamed for answers. This servant betrayed everything he had ever known and he might never get the answers as to why this boy’s existence was possible.

The servant youth’s face seemed to change, as if he knew exactly what the educator was thinking and was debating if it was worth an answer.

James often wondered what the world would be like if The Comet Despair had never struck... He imagined the world would be a much different place. He wanted to know what the world would be like without the Anasiens, because he felt the need to be prepared.

For ten years the humans had lived in a world without any new Anasien influence, just left with that they already had. This servant showed a bond between the humans and Anasiens. He was like the missing link and James thought, for a reason he had yet to figure out, that this boy had the answers he had secretly prayed for. James was filled with the need to know, to understand, yet all he felt was confusion

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worse than he'd ever known. Still, the servant boy stared back at him without a shred of mercy or a hint to an answer.

There was a long silence, loud enough to make a deaf man cry. Mr. Confection looked at the ground to hide the disappointment in his face.

Then at last:

"Of course, I can speak." A voice of pure elemental fantasy broke into the silence, a voice never to be fully described, without any way to be able to compare it to anything worldly.

Mr. Confection looked up at the servant who stood sideways, arms crossed, staring at James. It was a regal pose, a power position meant to inform everyone around that they were inferior in comparison to him. It was nerve racking to see a worker strike such a pose.

"Do you know what The Comet Despair is? You know what happened those many years ago?" Mr. Confection repeated the question. He received a nod from the young servant. "You know what happened nearly three centuries ago?"

Again, the servant nodded.

"What happened?" Mr. Confection asked, hopeful to get a real answer.

"I know what everyone assumed stopped happening nearly five years ago," responded the young servant.

"What?" Mr. Confection pleaded for an answer that would mean something, anything.

He received a glare from the boy and a brief answer that stated more than what was said.

"Ten years ago, you humans were out to destroy anyone who was different from you. Five years ago you ran out of innocent victims to openly hunt." With that, the boy turned and walked back into the shadows.

Mr. Confection asked many more questions, but to no avail. The boy refused to say another word. Mr. Confection was forced to give up. He left without another word, or any more questions answered.

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Chapter 3

*Friendship improves happiness and abates
misery, by the doubling of our joy and the
dividing of our grief*

--Marcus Tullius Cicero

Mira woke up early, rushed to her bathroom and, half an hour later, she was in her newest outfit consisting of a pink silk blouse and a blue cotton jumper. Her new suede boots were laced up to her knees and she pulled her hair back with two red clips shaped like hearts.

Mira ate breakfast quickly then rushed out to the main field to find her father.

“Father, Father!” she called and rushed up to him.

“Hello, my little angel!” Samuel greeted her. Mira smiled and they headed for the shed.

“Listen now, darling, I do not want you to get hurt, or scared, or anything... but I understand that you want to try this on your own. However, my little girl, you call if he gives you any trouble and I’ll be there in no time. Understand?” Samuel said.

“Of course, Father. Thank you!” Mira led the way into the tiny shed.

“Pet!” she called, following her father’s example.

“Come here, pet!” she ordered. The figure at the other side of the small room made no movement. He leaned against the wall and pretended not to see them.

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Samuel jerked the metal chain forward, hard. He did it once more even faster, causing the boy to stumble and fall. "Answer when you are called!" Samuel snapped. He then patted his daughter on the head and walked out of the shed.

Mira stepped forward. She stood tall; back straight, shoulders back, head held high, and hands on hips. She looked down at the boy.

"I am Lady Miraina. That is how you will address me," Mira stated. "And you are...um...hmm... I know! Your name will be Fe-,"

"I have a name," the boy interrupted.

"Oh? Well what is it then? Hm?" Mira pouted.

"They call me Hunter," he replied.

"Hunter? Why did they name you that?" Mira gagged.

"I hunt... I guess," Hunter answered, though he honestly had never been sure why that name had been chosen. It was a name for a predator, something he was not allowed to be.

"Hm. Well, what are you, anyway? You look weird. Are you some type of mutant? Or freak or something?" Mira boldly asked. Hunter glared at her.

"I'm not that different from you! I'm part human," he growled.

Mira jerked at the chain. Hunter was forced forward. He hissed his protest, but was quickly interrupted.

"I asked you a question! Answer it!" Mira demanded.

Hunter snarled, and then gave an overly exaggerated bow.

"I, Lady Miraina, am a hybrid. Part Human. Part Anasien cat."

His smile was a wide grin. All this annoyed Mira more than anything.

"Hm. Well then, pet, I guess I need to come up with a better name for you," Mira mused.

"I have a—," Hunter began, but was quickly silenced.

"Felix! No... Leopold? Leo the lion!" Mira laughed.

Hunter, however, was un-phased. "I'm part jaguar... not lion."

"Then where are your stripes?" Mira demanded.

Hunter sighed, rolling his eyes. “Spots? You have heard of dye, correct? Master Darrel has always demanded I disguise my spots. Humans want no association with the Anasiens. My being what I am seemed to confuse people; therefore my spots were dyed gold to make me appear as full-blooded human as possible. It has never worked, except a few people mistook me for being part mountain lion or some other species. Even to the most intellectually challenged, my tail betrays my Anasien heritage. If you wait, the color will fade. Or perhaps, if you have a stronger shampoo than the soap in this shed, the dye can be washed out.” Hunter’s voice contained no emotion. It was as if he had given the same answer every day of his life, more a trained response than a real answer.

Now that he was out in the open, Mira got a good view of his eyes— blue sapphire-colored eyes that almost seemed to change in the light. They were impossibly, inhumanly blue, and unearthly even. They kept changing. The colors went from the darker sapphire to a brighter blue topaz. His eyes shimmered like diamonds in the light.

She still viewed him as little more than a pet, despite the mystique within his eyes; he was below her in status no matter how he looked. “I thought we humans killed all the freaks like you,” Mira mocked before she walked out. With a click of a switch, she left Hunter alone again, in the darkness of being the only one left on earth.

You humans killed the full-blooded Anasiens, Hunter answered silently, *you forgot to kill me.*

Hunter hated the situation from the beginning. He despised Mira, Lady Miraina, who for the next few days took it upon herself to make his life miserable. Lady Miraina had a bad habit of ordering one of the maids to come and wake him up at various times in the night by constantly knocking on the door. For at least three minutes this went on, and Hunter’s chain stopped just a few feet away from the door. Try as he might, he couldn’t get it open. This happened constantly throughout the nights that passed.

When the morning came, Hunter was always so tired he barely had enough time to clean himself up for the day, when

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the new trainer Lady Miraina had hired, Sir Leroy, would start knocking on the door.

Three minutes later, training started. Hunter annoyed the new trainer, Leroy, who Hunter gave various nicknames, because he knew all the commands, all the right actions, how to address lords, ladies, Masters, owners, guests, etcetera, and he would do what he was told, but his attitude showed power and refined strength, unexpected in a creature so young. Hunter made it known that he did as he was told only because he had been forced to do so, not because his Master wanted it. He also had his own pace. Though he responded immediately, Hunter took his time in whatever task was given. In a social situation, it would make the owner and trainer look bad, yet make the kinder owners hesitate before dispensing punishment.

That was how Hunter wanted it to stay.

Even though Hunter knew he could do much better at just about everything he did, he refused to do anything completely right the first time. Hunter found these ‘training’ sessions dull and irrelevant. He couldn’t comprehend why this family would purchase him for their daughter when it was obvious they had no use for him.

The Lilith family was well known for their horses. They raised race horses and grew vegetables. Their farm was once much larger, but as their wealth grew and they found horses to produce a better income, they turned more toward the racetrack than the crops.

Since Hunter was not allowed outside the shed, or inside the house, the trainer Leroy spent most of the time just gawking at the cat-boy.

Hunter was used to it. His tail had caused quite a fuss for many years, but he did his best to ignore the attention and focus on the task at hand, the only thing the trainer had left to order Hunter to do. This being his new home, Hunter was required to clean it and his new Masters hadn’t made the job easy. The Masters left everything in the shed that had been collected there for the past few years and he wasn’t allowed to keep hardly any of it. Hunter had to organize and repair everything for the Masters to come and decide what they wanted. His job for this morning was to turn the shed or

barn or whatever it had been used as before his arrival, back into the builder's house it once was.

He had lived in a few of these before. The Masters built them so that, while their main house was being finished, someone could supervise the work.

It was a dull task, something he was used to doing, and all too easy, but still, he took all the time he wanted.

At noon, Lady Miraina came into the shed, and the trainer informed her of what he had instructed Hunter to do. Many times, Leroy also brought up how Hunter seemed to know exactly what to do, but would find a way to do it that wasn't satisfactory. Then Leroy left for his lunch hour, leaving Mira and Hunter to each other.

"Why do you not ever listen?" Mira snapped.

"But, Lady Miraina, I do listen," Hunter responded.

For this, he was yelled at, but he didn't care and just watched the girl, who was only a few months younger than he was, act like a five year old. He got some slight pleasure at seeing how juvenile she behaved.

After an hour, Leroy came back. He worked with Miraina, teaching her how to give commands, starting with simple orders, and then moving on to the more advanced procedures, as if training a dog.

Hunter once again found himself wondering why she needed to be taught commands. They spoke the same language, so why should it be so difficult to give orders? Servant owners did everything they could to separate themselves from their workers, and it seemed Mira would not be any different from the rest of them. The Masters didn't want to see innocent people. They wanted to see pets or ignorant beasts too stupid and fearful to know any better than to follow direct orders in certain tones like you would use with animal.

The worst part was that the trainer Leroy taught Mira to use a whip.

The girl was clumsy at first and nearly hit herself a few times, but she was getting better. She hit Hunter a few times in her practices. Though it was played off as an accident, Hunter knew what was really going on.

Why hire a trainer for a servant who was already trained? It was foolish, but this was not his trainer. Darrel was his trainer; Leroy was Mira's trainer. He would be responsible

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for making sure of three things: that Mira was not hurt, that Hunter learned to fear the girl, and that Miraina would grow up to be a strong, commanding Master.

Hunter insulted them in his mind all the time, but the truth was easy to see. These creatures terrified him. Even though Mira was younger, smaller, and weaker than he, she scared him. Hunter had known nothing humane about humans since he had met Sir Goibniu. Now they all scared him.

He'd be damned before he let them know it, though.

Once the sun set, both trainer and Master left and Hunter was alone again, and again without food.

The next day was the same. Leroy left for lunch, and Mira walked over to Hunter, who was trying to pull an exposed nail out of the wall.

"You know... you're supposed to be my playmate," she informed him.

"Fascinating," Hunter replied unenthusiastically.

"Why don't you pay attention to me? Why don't you respect me? I am your owner, your Master, you should treat me better," Mira said with a pout.

Hunter rolled his eyes, and then turned to face her. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, staring blankly at her.

Mira threw a stick past him to the other side of the shed. Hunter watched it go past, and then looked back at Mira who was smiling and watching him with expectant eyes.

"... Well?" she prodded.

"Well what?" Hunter asked.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Mira looked toward the former small limb of a tree, then back at Hunter.

Hunter leaned forward and looked at the stick, then leaned back.

Mira stared at him... waiting. "Aren't you going to get it?"

"If you wanted it so badly, Lady Miraina, why on Valhan did you throw it?" Hunter inquired.

Mira's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I assume it must have somehow angered you and is now a prisoner held captive with me in this shed? No need to chain that one up, Master, it has not legs to flee with. Nor pulse... dare I say it, Milady, but I think it's dead," Hunter mocked with a slick grin.

Mira narrowed her eyes and thrust her hands onto her hips. "No! Fetch!"

Is she honestly telling me to 'fetch'? Hunter scoffed to himself. "... What?"

"It's a game, watch." Mira walked over and retrieved the stick only to throw it again. "Fetch!"

"Ooooh, I get it!" Hunter declared.

"Finally," Mira sighed.

"You named the stick Fetch. Hello, Fetch," Hunter cooed, then pushed himself away from the wall.

"... You really are a dumb animal," Mira grouched.

Hunter gave Mira a smirk and got back to work fixing up the shed.

Mira grumbled and muttered but did not directly speak to him again, though she did tell Leroy upon his return that Hunter was still not obeying her.

The trainer Leroy scowled and snapped the whip at Hunter's heels as a warning. Leroy hardly ever spoke to Hunter, just snapped the whip and assumed the cat-boy knew why.

Hunter focused on his work. It was not an easy task to try and fix up anything when he had no tools to use except the rusted things he found hidden amongst the junk. He had to wait till Leroy and Mira left before using them or he was sure the utensils would be taken away. He had not yet proven himself trustworthy with any sort of weapon, so any tools he found he kept hidden.

This went on for days, until one night, when the knocking on the door came again...

Hunter had found out a way to open the door. He stepped as far as he could forward and stretched his legs out in front of him, barely able to support himself without practice. He could just about reach the door handle with his foot, the tip of his boot touched and he could push the handle down and pull it toward him. Hunter used his long tail for balance, but

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it was not a prehensile tail, or he'd have used it to open the door, as it reached past where his foot could.

When the knocking began this time, he had it all worked out. Hunter pulled the door open a few inches and then powered his strong legs to move him back into the shadows that the light from the door created.

The knocking stopped and Hunter could see a woman standing there who seemed surprised that the door could open, that there was someone inside. She had begun to believe that this was her punishment, not someone else's.

Hunter waited for something, anything, for walls to crash down, the earth to split, some sound to signify the shattering of his confinement. In the end, he heard only his voice. "Please! Come in."

After a moment, he felt obligated to add, "I won't hurt you."

When Hunter's anticipation had peaked, the hesitant sound of footsteps entered the room.

The woman was around seventeen years old. She was thin and tall and had her uniform on, a white cotton dress with a black, lace-edged apron.

Hunter hid his tail and asked if she would turn on the lights. She did. When she turned from the light switch to actually look at Hunter, he was glad for the billionth time that he looked relatively human with his tail hidden. He was even glad for the retched dye that hid his spots.

"I'm sorry, Milady Victoria's daughter commanded me to come out and knock on the door. I did not know there was anyone being punished by it, or I would have found a way not to do it. I'm sorry." Her voice was honest, also with something else Hunter had not heard in years, and therefore did not recognize.

"No problem," Hunter said, trying out a smile.

The woman half smiled back and then asked, in a much less formal tone, "Are you the new worker my Piyip speaks of?"

"I am new here... Yes," Hunter responded, afraid to give out any more information. The last place he had been sold to, the other workers had come to the conclusion that he received special treatment, since he got his own room. Hunter paid greatly for it, even though he doubted the other workers

knew how awful it was to have no one to talk to, ever, at least no intelligent conversation.

One of the workers there had demanded that Hunter stop getting special treatment, so their Master made Hunter work harder, from one hour before the sun arrived, without a break at noon, or at all for that matter, until three hours after the other workers were allowed to go into their joint houses called dorms. The Masters took advantage of Hunter's ability to see in the near pitch black when the other workers could not.

Hunter's living quarters had been changed from the garage to nothing but a room missing a little less than half of one wall, allowing the other workers to see that his living quarters were worse than theirs. When the rain came, Hunter had gotten sick; his behavior changed because of it. His coughing fits scared the Masters, so they sold him back to Darrel and claimed he'd become violent and needed more training.

Hunter was going to make sure that didn't happen again. So when the woman asked, "What are you doing in here instead of in the dorm with everyone else?"

He answered, "I wish I could be. But unfortunately, I am Lady Miraina's newest playmate, and she just loves to take all her anger, frustration, and boredom out on me. Being in the dorm would no doubt disturb everyone else."

That seemed to be a good answer. Mostly true. Except Hunter saw himself as more of a pet than a playmate.

"Oh! I'm sorry. We didn't know," the woman apologized.

We? Hunter thought, *Perfect, if I can convince her I'm okay, then she can convince the other workers!* Hunter's tail twitched excitedly, still hidden in the darkness.

"What's your name?" he asked. It was his attempt to establish some form of friendly conversation, though he wasn't sure exactly how friendly conversation went between servants in Valhan.

"I'm called Matsi," she informed him with a smile. Hunter smiled too.

Matsi meant 'sweet and brave' in one of the languages the workers used as codes.

"And you have a little brother?" Hunter observed. Piyip, a name she had mentioned, meant 'Little Brother'.

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“Yes,” Matsi laughed. “He and I have been able to stick together through thick and thin.”

“That’s amazing,” Hunter agreed.

Most families were split up at servant auctions. Family clans had more power together than if they were separated, so the trainers hardly ever kept parents with children over the age of ten, or older siblings together.

“You know, you look pretty young ... How old are you?” Matsi asked.

“I’m thirteen,” Hunter lied.

He was used to saying it, though. No one wanted a twelve year old; it usually meant the worker had only had two years of training for anything requiring hard labor, so Master Darrel decided Hunter would be thirteen, and if anyone found out the truth he could simply claim it was hard to tell, and that one year wouldn’t make that much difference anyway.

“Piyip is fifteen. Maybe you two can be friends?” Matsi suggested.

Hunter bit his tongue to keep from announcing that he thought a friendship would be unlikely. Hunter had never had a real friend in any of the places he had worked before. The Masters either wouldn’t allow it or the other servants had wanted nothing to do with him. He didn’t want to spoil the chance this time.

“And Ayet is fifteen, too,” Matsi informed.

Ayet meant ‘Little Sister’.

Hunter blinked once.

“You have a sister, also?” he asked.

Matsi laughed, “No! Let me explain. Ayet is Motomo’s little sister.”

“Is everyone here named in this language?” Hunter felt compelled to ask.

“No. Only the ones the Masters plan on keeping. We give each other nicknames. Everyone has two sides, even if they aren’t that different, you know?”

Hunter smiled. Yet another form of rebellion he hoped he would get to participate in.

“I’m being rude,” Matsi started. Hunter quickly shook his head, mentally begging her not to leave. “I haven’t asked you your name,” Matsi added.

Hunter breathed a sigh of relief before straightening his posture and pointing at himself with his thumb. “They call me Hunter,” he stated and acted proud. It was much better than anything he thought Lady Miraina might try to call him.

“The Mighty Hunter,” Matsi smiled.

“That’s me,” Hunter confirmed with a short bow.

“No one has been told to bring food here. What have you been eating?” Matsi’s voice was... strange. It was... soft. It just sounded nice. Hunter wanted to hear more words spoken with this tone. He liked it; it awoke something inside of him.

Hunter was afraid of his voice at that moment. He didn’t know what he might sound like to Matsi. He wished he could learn to speak as she just did, in that same feather-soft tone.

He didn’t want to anger her, or want her to leave. Hunter frowned at the idea that he would be alone again. Matsi frowned too. She put a hand over her face.

“Oh, god. I’m so sorry.” Then she turned her back to him.

Hunter twisted his head around, trying to see if maybe his tail had somehow become visible. Then he panicked, wondering if maybe he had moved too much into the light and she had seen how much of a freak he was.

When he looked back over at where Matsi had stood, she was gone.

Hunter fell to his knees, his eyes shut tight as if he were crying at the sudden loss. A familiar, sharp fear of being alone again crept through him like poison.

Dry sobs, he called them, because not once in his life had he released a tear. Even if he wanted to, his eyes might water up, but no tears ever fell.

Cursed I am. That though I feel... I cannot show enough to let the people I care for know. If cursed is one who cannot cry, then I answer again, cursed am I. Hunter quoted the lines from a script he had once read long ago. Six years ago, to be more exact. He couldn’t remember the ending of the play, but he was sure the one speaking those lines died.

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