

Common

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*"And the earth heaved and sighed in the wake of the storm,
relieved of the burdens mankind had wrought upon it,
yet tentative about the novel species that had begun to swarm its every crevice."*

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I

It had been eons since then. Since the great war in which mankind had fallen to a race of peoples that had been believed to exist only within the pages of fairytales and the minds of small, innocuous children. It was an event that, as thoroughly as it had been studied in the years after its occurrence, could not have been prepared for in the slightest. Still, to the many that survived of the fallen race, the loss their people had endured remained unreal. To the older generations, the modern age was but a dream, one they hoped to find themselves woken from. It was those who held that same incredulous mindset about their circumstances that had been the first to fall before the druids. Doctors, scientists, businessmen: all struggled to explain the ordeal with logic, to rationalize the situation as the world crashed and clamored about them. Children alone, their thoughts pure and open, were saved, taken as prisoners of war after being charmed from their parents grasp by the pied piper's enchanting melody. And the earth heaved and sighed in the wake of the storm, relieved of the burdens mankind had wrought upon it, yet tentative about the novel species that had begun to swarm its every crevice.

7023, Anno Domini | Common Era

The sun hung high overhead from the point towards which it had been creeping the entire morning in great leaps and bound of luminosity. Beams licked the earth's surface, scorching members of the unfortunate populace with all the fury of hell. The fourth season Verùn had begun some weeks ago and 1.10 seemed to be receiving the brunt of these overbearing rays. Intangible golden beams danced across the steel surfaces of the many uniform office buildings that arched towards the sky at dizzying altitudes. They blanketed the entire city in a holy glow, but seemed to favor decorating the hair of a particular citizen. Ambling down a well worn sidewalk was a youngling elf, a messenger, marked by his robes of a deep brown hue. His long mane swayed in a gentle, graceful manner, catching the light and reflecting it back in a myriad of colors. His fine, slightly aquiline features were graced by a soft calm smile, that is, until the periodic tolling of the street clocks extended their dark hands to slap him back into reality. Upon hearing the sound, his eyes widened uncharacteristically and at once he took to flight.

Ar'n dashed down a side street, the many layers of his robe flapping about in a most undignified manner. Long locks streamed behind him like a banner as he forced his legs to work faster, faster. His head was now pounding from exertion and fine layer of sweat had begun to bead upon his tanned brow. His thick, standard-issue boots hit the walkway in heavy, uneven steps as he stumbled clumsily around a corner. After several brief, unpleasant collisions with elves of a higher caste, all of whom delivered him acid glares upon being bowled over; Ar'n found himself mere meters away from his intended destination, Innen Square.

The centre of the 01 district was, as of this hour, filled with a multitude of commoners scrambling to make their way to various workplaces. From above, the typically docile section of the district appeared to be overrun by a tribe of angry ants. Ar'n's gray eyes darted about the crowds, searching for an opening in the tight mass. Seeing none, he charged headlong into the swarm, pushing past any creature that

chanced to cross his path as he struggled to reach the opposite side of the Square. A few scornful, abashed cries rang out as the dark head continued to weave its way through the crowd, disregarding all proper terms of etiquette. His destination, the metro dock that formed a makeshift wall for one side of the square, was slowly shaking itself awake as a tram's siren sounded from the depths, signaling its impending surfacing. The youngling urged his worn legs forward the last hundred paces, wobbling along awkwardly like a newborn calf.

He came to a stop just beyond the dock's sliding glass doors and slumped over momentarily, hands coming to rest upon crouched knees as the frantic flutterings of his heart slowly subsided. A sharp whistle cut through the air, the only warning before a sleek sliver tram surfaced from its underground track to dock at Innen Station. Ar?n straightened immediately, fixing his appearance with fastidious hands as he positioned himself still closer to the doors. A gaggle of gangly young half-breed females exited the tram first, their excitement-tinged voices ricocheting painfully off Ar?n's delicate eardrums. A pair of tall figures stepped gracefully into the open after the females, a calm breath following the group's boisterous nature. They towered over the youngling who was forced to look up at them, eyes flickering with trepidation. Long narrow faces and delicately pointed ears immediately signaled their heritage as full-breed elves. Their eyes were veiled by thick lashes through which they gazed at Ar?n, scrutinizing him and evaluating his lineage. One of the two opened his mouth slightly, as if preparing to pass judgment upon the unfortunate child. He refrained though as the last passenger suddenly exited the tram and came to stand not a foot from the messenger.

"Are you Ar?n of Jiin?" the stranger asked in a tone that resembled a lilting melody.

The child in question inclined his head to look at the source of the sound, strands of russet hair falling before his curious eyes. It was a middle-aged female elf, a foreign ambassador from 3.36. Ar?n felt apprehensive at first, due to her rank; however, the feeling began to ebb away upon his noticing her soft, barely perceptible smile.

"I am, my lady," he replied coolly, flashing a smile that put the dazzling sun above them to shame.

An emotion akin to amusement played across the diplomat's features at the antics of the youngling.

"Take me to him then child, I haven't all day to waste," her words were coarse, in a sharp contrast to her airy tone and pleased expression. Ar?n complied with haste, bowing quickly to the three before beginning to walk in the direction of the sector's capitol. The two haughty male elves, who were in fact security and council to the ambassador, continued to watch the young messenger with wary eyes. He led them through the twists and turns of the district's walkways with a calm, surefooted air. Here was his birthplace; the sights, smells, and sounds of 01 ran deep within his veins. At times he felt more familiar with the city than his own skin.

Ar?n halted the short procession just beyond the steps of the capitol. The building was the tallest in the sector, looming over the city with a silent, majestic grace. Etchings wallpapered its surface in much the same manner as an ancient Egyptian temple, and the grandeur of its size nearly rivaled the architecture of that long forgotten age. The three elves accompanying Ar?n were puzzled by the child's behavior in stopping them. Momentarily, another elf with an unlined youthful face came galloping down the marble steps of the building. Rouge robes pooled around her feet like a sea of blood as she alighted gracefully on the landing. She motioned furtively towards Ar?n, a strained smile plastered on her aristocratic

features.

“Ar?n!” she called, impatience present in her voice, “Lord Jiin is becoming testy. Come quickly!”

She turned on her heel and began to go back inside the capitol, without a glance over her shoulder to ensure that the four were actually following her. They passed security with relative ease, save for a brief disparaging glance from a sentinel in Ar?n’s direction. The interior had a regal air about it, even in the simplistic lobby. Lofty ceilings dwarfed all who entered, providing a spacious, humbling feeling. The female sapling elf, whose robes, upon closer inspection, were evidently a size too large, paused before a pair of heavy steel doors.

“Ar?n, you may leave,” she dismissed the low-level messenger with a faint wave of her hand.

The russet head bowed deeply towards the ambassador before scampering off in a manner reminiscent of a frightened spider. The sapling shook her head in disdain as she redirected her attention to the situation at hand.

A large seal adorned the steel plates where they met at a temporary juncture. It depicted an ouroboros encircling the head of a male lion whose mouth was agape in an agitated roar. The emblem had been plated with gold, save for the serpent’s eye which was colored with an ever-changing pool of blues and silvers. The young female pressed a cool forefinger into the serpent’s eye, and then waited patiently for recognition from the building’s security mainframe. Her fingerprint was evidently accepted as the steel doors slid open noiselessly to reveal the interior of a small elevator. She allowed the ambassador to enter first and then slipped in before the two male elves, a smile of superiority tugging at the corners of her thin lips.

They rode up to their destination in a thick, discomfiting silence that seemed to set the two councilors a bit on edge. However, the tension lasted for mere moments before the vehicle slowed and came to an abrupt stop. The ambassador straightened her robes with a nervous running of her hands down the cloth and went to stand behind the sapling who had already composed herself neatly in front of the doors. She glanced briefly at the three other elves in her company before the steel once again parted, this time to reveal a large conference room somewhere about the twentieth story of the capitol.

The space gave off a sterile detached feeling to the occupants as they stepped out of the elevator. Large single pane windows allowed light to flood into the room, but the warmth seemed to become artificial as it struck the bleached furnishings of the boardroom. A lone figure stood gazing out over the city, its back to the newcomers, appearing as disconnected from feeling as the place it inhabited. At lengths it turned, exposing the face of a middle-aged elf bathed in the ethereal glow of the waning sun’s rays that filtered in through the glass. A fine coal mane framed the angelic features which were arranged in an expression resembling a haughty scowl. Impossibly thin eyebrows were raised in a questioning gesture that was directed towards the youngest elf in his presence. The sapling took note of this and bowed with a rapid flourish before addressing the issue which she assumed the young Lord was pondering.

“My apologies, I did not expect the messenger to take so long,” were the only words she offered to justify her lateness. The male to whom she was speaking turned his attention back to the window and the outside world.

“What, pray tell, was he doing, giving a tour of the district?”

His voice was deep and even in tone, yet cut through the confidence of the sapling like a blade. Lord Jiin rounded on the unfortunate female, whose thin hands were now clammy and trembling within the voluminous sleeves of her garment. Cerulean eyes glared at her from underneath thick bangs with a degree of contempt that caused her heart to leap into her throat out of fear. Fortunately, the Lord's anger was dispelled in nothing more than a short dissatisfied grunt, and he recomposed himself to conduct business.

The ambassador had situated herself at a small glass table during the brief conflict, and was now fidgeting idly with her hair. On either side of her stood a councilor, self-satisfied expressions affixed to each of their faces, causing each one to appear as a mirror image of the other. Lord Jiin came forward to take his place opposite the ambassador at the far end of the table, allowing the foreigner's eyes to capture him properly for the first time. Her courage first wavered upon seeing his great height. Tallness was not uncommon among the elven race, but the young Lord before her seemed to gaze down at her thoughtfully from a highly intimidating distance. Indeed, it seemed that Lord Jiin might touch the vaulted ceiling with ease if he wished to do so.

As he sat down, his robes settled about him in a thick expanse of cream, serving as a backdrop to enhance the angelic glow he possessed. In her subconscious, the ambassador assessed his wealth as her ever attentive gaze flitted back and forth between the gold embroider of his sleeves and the many bands adorning his throat, all inlaid with precious jewels. Lord Jiin coughed as discreetly as was necessary in order to bring the ambassador's attention back to the situation at hand. Her eyes widened slightly before going down to look at the suddenly fascinating tabletop as she realized she had been staring quite unabashedly at the young Lord.

"I understand you are here to discuss a trade agreement," Jiin began slowly, ignoring the female's obvious embarrassment.

She jerked her gaze up to meet that of the Lord's, her cheeks growing increasingly red with each passing second.

"Yes, you are correct. I have the terms here," gathering her composure, Ambassador Lund clicked her fingers at one of her council, directing him to hand her the paperwork.

Jiin tapped his fingers rapidly on the table in agitation. He had been required to attend meetings well into last night, and this trade agreement was eating into his naptime, as ludicrous as that sounded. He groaned inwardly; the system was effective, after all, it had placed his family in power, but he failed to see why everything had to be so formal. Jiin was momentarily caught off guard at the feeling of a thin packet of paper brushing against his arm as it slid smoothly across the table.

He grunted approvingly, "I'll have my staff take a look at it and have your answer later in the day."

Usually he handled such minor matters directly, but the voices at the edges of his consciousness were calling him back to sleep, and he feared that mistakes might be made.

A bit shocked at being dismissed so easily, Ambassador Lund rose quickly, nearly tripping over herself in the process, and attempted to make a clean exit. Her ensuing embarrassment was wholly unnecessary, as Jiin's gaze did not stray from the table until well after she had left the room.

“Lord Jiin,” the elf woke with a start to a soft voice near one of his delicate ears.

The sapling was attempting to move her boss who had unknowingly fallen asleep with his head pillowed on the trade agreement. Jiin doggedly rose to his feet, struggling to keep his eyes open. As he did so, Midori grabbed his wrist and held it in a vise-like grip, preventing the young Lord from walking away.

“I’m having a car sent to take you home.”

“Why?” Jiin asked pointedly, “I’m tired, not drunk.”

“Lady Ren insisted that you refrain from taking public transit, for at least a few weeks.”

Jiin’s eyes narrowed wearily. She lived on the opposite side of the globe, yet still managed to maintain complete control over his life. However, he was far from annoyed with his mother’s god-complex. The issue that concerned him was the matter of ‘why’. Why had it suddenly become dangerous for him to take the tram? Jiin squinted slightly, looking into Midori’s wide jade eyes. She was useless when it came to concealing her feelings, so it would be simple to tell whether or not she had been informed about this sudden development. But there was no trace of involvement present in her glass eyes, and Jiin was forced to be resigned to his present state of ignorance.

“A state of mass hysteria may come about if the situation is not contained; you are aware of this Chancellor, yes?”

“I am well informed of our present condition Tarn, but containment is another matter entirely,” Lady Ren replied calmly from her seat at the head of the table. Almost immediately after she had said this, an elf five seats away leaped to his feet, smacking his hands down on the table in the process.

“Chancellor,” he began in an impassioned tone, “this is not a mere pest, these things threaten the life of every member of our race. We cannot sit about here being idle and wait for them to simply decide to leave!” The others seated at the table nodded their heads and murmured approvingly.

“Sit down Miran,” the Chancellor’s dull tone indicated that such outbursts were not uncommon. She waited until the dark-eyed elf reluctantly sat down to resume speaking.

“We cannot simply take immediate action in dealing with these people—”

“So we’re calling them people now?” Lady Ren glared darkly at the speaker, waiting until the other’s gaze dropped to the table to continue.

“They,” she spoke only one word before glancing around at all those seated, challenging another interruption, “are far more threatening to us than we are to them; therefore, we must abide by their terms.” She frowned at Miran, who looked as though he was planning to have another fit.

“What do they want that we have?” A member near the end of the table piped up.

“A child of theirs has wandered into one of our main cities, and they would simply like to have him back.”

“So resolving this will benefit both our races.”

“Yes Tarn. Unfortunately, we do not know where the child is and sending our own forces to locate him could be potentially dangerous.”

“Why don’t we let them search for the child?” the female who had interjected earlier asked, with more than a little trepidation present in her voice.

“I am not about to be the cause of histrionics,” Lady Ren replied with an air of finality before rising slowly from her chair, “Prime Minister Areth is conducting a hearing which I must attend. This meeting is adjourned.”

Lord Miran met the Chancellor’s eyes challengingly. Her nose wrinkled distastefully at this and she turned to leave the boardroom, the three members of her council trailing after her like ducklings waddling along behind their mother.

Lord Jiin leaned back into the plush upholstery and allowed his gaze to wander to the window. The plebs were staring. Private transportation was practically unheard of in this age, and while the elves were disinterested, knowing that only a higher caste member could possibly be inside the vehicle, the plebeians were astonished at the mere sight of a car. They clustered at the intersection where the car stopped as it paused for pedestrian traffic. Jiin shifted in his seat, the crowd was making him uneasy; they eyed the twin flags with a degree of contempt that made the young Lord glad for the car’s tinted windows. How long could it last, he wondered, this imbalance between the two races. Tyranny had a nasty historical habit of backfiring in one’s face, but then again, never before in history had the ruling and lower classes been so unequally matched. Deeply unsettled, Jiin demanded to be let off at the next intersection. He felt a pang of guilt run through him at his blatant disobedience, but somehow he had a feeling that roaming the streets would be safer than riding around in a ridiculously obvious automobile. Besides, his flat was only a short distance away and Jiin had been growing restless inside the small space, feeling that it would show a gross lack of decorum for him to fall asleep in the presence of his driver.

Jiin had closed his eyes for what surely could not have been more than five minutes when he was rudely reawakened by someone pounding on the front door. The elf remained where he was, draped across the sofa for a good while, contemplating whether or not he would be able to get away with not opening the door. It was well past the time when Midori would be visiting him, since, in truth, he had been asleep for several hours. And even if there was an urgent situation, chances were slim that it would be him and not a higher-up who would be burdened with the responsibility. So, Jiin reasoned that he could stay put; however, the incessant pounding only grew louder with each passing moment, and the sheer torture of the sound eventually drove the young Lord from the sofa. He swung the door open haphazardly only to reveal a grinning blonde elf with a pair mischievous olive eyes. Upon recognizing the figure standing before him, the dignitary’s expression shifted quite dramatically. The delicate features molded themselves into a grimace: eyebrows furrowing deeply, pert mouth turning slightly downward, and his nose doing an acute impression of a prune. Jiin took a brief moment to gather his senses and calm his temper, which by now was like a raging lion in his chest, waiting for the opportune moment to bust forth.

“Xi,” he began slowly in a deceptively steady tone, “I trust you have a good explanation for your presence,” here he paused, drawing in a breath shallowly through his clenched teeth, “as in a family

death or the like.”

The Lord's eyes squeezed shut as he exhaled in agitation, patiently awaiting a response from the other party as the carnivorous beast crept slowly up his throat.

Xi, who was unfazed by his cousin's less than hospitable greeting, responded in way he knew would only serve to fuel Jiin's rage.

“You know,” Xi stated cheerily, eyeing his cousin's floor-length garments, “if you want to be a girl so badly, get a sex change, geez.”

Jiin scowled unbecomingly. He was indeed not the more womanly one of the two. Xi's features were deceptively feminine, his face too round and soft, much unlike the harsher, more chiseled features of Jiin's people. The light eyes flashed dangerously, though the anger which they transmitted was lost upon the intended receiver.

“Why are you here?” Jiin asked pointedly. Surely his cousin had something, anything better to do than stand in his doorway grinning like a fool. By this time, Xi had begun to edge his way into the apartment in a none-too-discreet fashion.

“You work too much,” Jiin opened the door fully to let his cousin inside, though the moment he did so happened to be the moment he thought better of it. “I thought we could go out somewhere, and plus it's your birthday so—”

The dark-haired elf cut him off abruptly. “Birthday?” he echoed, “Xi, just how much time do you spend around those plebeians anyway?”

Xi stuck out his lower lip in indignation, “I thought we could go out and do something.”

The blonde was finally far enough inside the doorway for Jiin to noticed the bottle that was cradled in one of his petite hands. It was surely a bribe, for Xi would never go to any sort of trouble unless he expected something in return. Jiin sighed deeply, threading his fingers through his hair in an exasperated manner.

“Sure,” He eyed the bottle carefully, “Now give me the sake.”

Jiin went to resituate himself on the couch while Xi fumbled about in the kitchen for a pair of glasses. The young Lord settled tiredly into the pricey 6.23 leather and prepared for everything from the present moment on to be a blur.

Lord Jiin felt uneasy. He had never before roamed the streets of the district in such a manner, dressed as a plebeian in a pair of tight fitting pants and a T-shirt belonging to Xi that, by its scent, defied all proper standards of hygiene. They ambled about the city seemingly without purpose, not exchanging a word. Xi, renowned for being ever the imperceptive one, could not employ his talent of obliviousness towards the abstracted, pleading look his cousin wore. He leaned up slightly, slipping an arm over the poor Lord's shoulders in an attempt to banish the uncharacteristic expression.

“Relax Jiin, No one of your class ever comes near this part of town,” Xi chirped with a wry smile.

“I can hardly imagine why,” Jiin snarled, forcing his cousin’s arm away with a violent shrug.

“You could at least try and cooperate for my sake,” the younger male snapped back, his eyebrows slanting down in agitation, “I want to take you to this place,” he paused momentarily, trying to gauge how irritated Jiin was, “I know you fancy guys so—”

“You’re taking me to a brothel,” Jiin cut in, his voice leveled out in a humorously deadpan tone. He had not found it at all difficult to predict what his perverted cousin would perceive as a good time.

“I’m not like you, Xi,” he continued stiffly, body tensing in indignation.

“Prude,” came the dismissive answer.

By this time, Xi expected his companion to have gone slinking back to his loft in disgust. Yet, the young Lord still remained, trailing alongside his cousin in much the same manner as a lost dog. Perhaps Jiin was harboring a wild side, or perhaps it was merely the result of the seven glasses of sake he had consumed hours earlier.

The brothel did not meet Jiin’s gruesome expectations. Contrariwise, the interior of the small building resembled a traditional Japanese tea room, the likes of which Jiin could only recall seeing in pictures within the pages of his history textbooks as a child. It was epitome of cleanliness and solitude, save for the suggestive noises that were drifting down in a continuous stream from the upper levels of the house. While Xi was unaffected by the muffled din upstairs, Jiin found himself dangerously near the point of having to retch.

For all his beautiful, gracious features, the Lord had never taken a lover. He was raised to reject the feeling of love within his own life while merely condoning the practice of it among other beings. Such an emotion clouded one’s rationality and ability to judge, aspects of thinking which an elf presiding over the tenth most populous sector could not afford to sacrifice. Out of learned instinct, he now abhorred love in any form, which was partially the reason he was now standing in the midst of this quaint tea room. Xi, his personality being what it was, had taken Jiin’s refusal of any form of a relationship with a number of female elves to be a sign that his cousin preferred males. A more perceptive or intuitive being would have observed the Lord’s aloof manner and deduced that he simply preferred solitude; however, Xi was neither intelligent nor very accurately empathetic, which had landed the two elves in a questionable area of the district during the wee hours of the morning.

While he had been studying the antique furnishings with nothing less than a scholar’s eye, Jiin had quite missed another elf emerging from the back of the room. He was disturbingly feminine, a hard thing to say about any male elf, since the race was fairly androgynous. It became evident that he was the shopkeeper of sorts as he sauntered up to the pair and nodded curtly towards Xi in a small gesture of familiarity. He then beckoned for the two to follow him to a thick curtain of midnight fabric, which they passed through, only to emerge into a large corridor. As they trailed along behind their host, Jiin found himself having to squint in order to make out their surroundings in the meager, sensual lighting.

The floor was thickly carpeted, a deep scarlet hue to accent the mahogany walls which Jiin could not see properly but knew by passing his hand along the panels. The ceiling was vaulted, as was the style

since the revolution, and Jiin was only barely able to see the gothic style chandeliers hanging high overhead, providing the dim illumination by electric means. The Lord was taken off guard by Xi, who suddenly grasped his shirt sleeve in an attempt to gain his attention. Obediently, the pale eyes left the light fixtures and went to gaze instead in the direction Xi was pointing. Somewhere, Jiin could not be certain where exactly; large panes of glass had begun to line the walls at evenly spaced intervals. Now that he was looking at one instead of merely feeling it with his fingertips, it was evident that they were actually one-way mirrors. Each one allowed them to peer in at a different plebeian boy seated idly atop a small bed. The sight startled Jiin, and he turned, confused, towards his cousin.

“Geishas,” the tan-headed elf replied simply.

Jiin found himself caught between disgust and curious surprise at Xi’s implied proposition and the fact that such a practice had managed to survive for a prolonged amount of time.

“The auction is tomorrow,” Xi continued, unaware of the rage filled gaze that was now upon him, “but I managed to get us in beforehand to spare you the aggravation of bidding.”

Jiin’s scowl seemed to pour out from his eyes and spread like wildfire across each miniscule muscle of his face. He found himself fervently wishing that a freak bolt of lightening would crash through the building and cause his cousin’s untimely death.

“No,” Jiin said decidedly, turning to leave. He was only mildly concerned with the dejected, slightly angered expression on Xi’s face that meant a small tantrum was likely to follow. Which, it did.

“Jiin!”

“No.”

“At least look,” Xi griped, upset that all his troubles were about to be wasted.

“You are a freak,” Jiin sighed, weighing the decision in his alcohol muddled mind. Which would end in more pain? Staying here and dodging Xi’s futile attempts to coax him into purchasing a whore, or going back to his flat only to have to deal with his idiotic cousin’s pathetic whining tomorrow morning? Jiin opted for the former, as he had a conference to attend in the morning which could not be delayed by Xi’s foolishness.

“Alright, but not for long.”

A small, triumphant smile crossed Xi’s face. His fingers latched on to Jiin’s wrist and tugged, forcing the older male to follow him. He marched down the hallway deliberately, pausing momentarily in front of each pane, his calculating eyes staying glued to Jiin’s face, watching for a reaction. It had only been a few minutes, and already Jiin’s patience was beginning to wear thin. True, some of the boys were quite beautiful, but the Lord’s only interest was in getting in some sleep before he had to battle the raging hangover that he was sure to have the next morning.

Xi pouted and began to tap his foot impatiently. Jiin had a distant look in his eye and was clearly not paying any attention to his cousin or his surroundings. Exasperated, Xi began to gripe about what a

prude Jiin could be, whining out his cousin's name in what the other believed to be the most feminine voice he had ever heard. Jiin rounded on his cousin suddenly, his light eyes narrowing in a sign that more violent tactics were about to be employed.

"No." The deceptive calm was gone from the Lord's voice, alerting Xi that he had overstepped his boundaries and was now to pay the price for his actions. "I came here and I did what you asked," Jiin seethed, "And now I am going home."

He turned and began to walk down the hall rapidly, well aware of the sound of footfalls following him out. There was no doubt in his mind that Xi would make some number of futile attempts to stop him. His cousin was an insolent, whiny brat who was accustomed to getting his way; he had been like this since the two were younglings, and little, if anything, had changed over the years.

Xi grabbed the other's shoulder, continuing to ignore the fact that he was playing with fire and had been doing so for quite some time. Once he had forcefully turned Jiin to face him, Xi employed all the begging and whining tactics that immediately came to his mind. Jiin, by this time, was done with the little "outing"; his nerves were shot and he needed to leave this place. Going home would be preferable, but anywhere he could find solace from this blonde brat would suffice.

"Stop acting like a two-year old," Jiin shot back through gritted teeth, "I can't believe how moron—"

Jiin suddenly stopped short of finishing his sentence. His gaze had become fixed to the room behind Xi's head, inside which there was a pair of golden eyes gleaming so brightly in the semi-darkness that they appeared to be artificial. Jiin's pupils dilated in rage, causing his own eyes to appear nearly black in the dim lighting. Xi, now fully aware of the danger he was in, took several cautious steps back. It was only when the back of his head collided with the pane of glass that he turned and discovered what Jiin was actually glowering at.

"Drow," Xi breathed, his voice echoing eerily off the lofty ceilings.