

“Clean this. Wash that,” Isaak grumbled to himself, heaving the large basket in his arms higher. His legs shook due to the stress of a long and, though uneventful, busy day. Yet, every day was a busy one if he was to be honest with himself. There was no rest for a farmer’s boy and even less rest for someone whose apprenticeship was mostly restocking and proving that he could heave large objects around without complaint. The thought caused a smirk to rise onto Isaak’s face, he complained, but only when another’s ears could not hear.

“Isaak!” his master shouted, though Isaak didn’t genuinely like to use that title to describe their relationship. This man was more of a boss who somehow found a loophole that didn’t require him to pay Isaak. Not only that, but he received fresh produce from their farm’s plot, or at least what Isaak could give. If the town had relied on his farm before, they had moved their interest to other aspiring farms for his land had given up on producing. Or, perhaps Isaak had given up on it first.

“Delivery for Arnell. Make sure he pays the full amount too, last time you were ten ruho short.” Isaak let out a low grunt to let him know that he heard, going over to the labeled crates and grabbing Arnell’s. Arnell was the baker. A kind fellow, if not remarkably cheap, with bad speech manners. He talked to children like he would a grown man, and to a man like he would a lovely maiden who had smiled at him out of kindness. But Isaak liked him far better than the other workers of Akrisos, if only because of his friendliness and his ability to go the extra mile in understanding Isaak’s plight.

He walked down familiar paths, whistling a tune of his own as he went. He heard the sound of hoofbeats upon the beaten road and clenched his eyes closed, praying to the High Gods that he wouldn’t be bothered like all of the other days. The hoofbeats neared, and he let out a sigh of relief when he spotted the rider, a guard, but not one that sought to chastise him. He nodded to the man, who rightfully ignored him and continued about his way. As did Isaak.

“Ser Arnell?” Isaak sang out, placing the crate right outside the door, using his now free hands to knock heavily on it. “I have your delivery.” Arnell had a weird habit of showing up to answer his door at impromptu times, once Isaak had wasted away an entire hour waiting for the man to show his face. His reasonings never made much sense, either. Due to the frequency of it, Isaak had made up an interesting game to remedy his waiting, figure out what Arnell was doing. Whenever Arnell did finally answer, Isaak would then question him on whichever idea he settled on for that day. Of course, Isaak has yet to figure the correct activity. Most times, Arnell just gave him a questioning look; other times, he’d question how Isaak had come to a thought so outlandish or even why he cared.

As Isaak sat, ready to begin his guessing, a figure caught his eye in the distance. He spared them a glance but then paused when his brain decided to catch up to his eyes. Who around here wore clothes like that

and colors so bright? Isaak glanced again, his eyes widening as he got a better look at the person who walked as if they had no knowledge of their destination. A knapsack loosely hung from their shoulder, and a few pieces of paper held tightly in their hands. They were a deity in disguise. An ethereal being who wished for more fun and so touched down to mess with mortals. There were a few attractive people in Akrisos, but Isaak had yet to see someone of this magnitude. Akrisos was also a reasonably decent town, nothing close to their neighbor, Drasier, but large enough to have a lord and lady appointed to watch over it.

Isaak didn't think twice as he sprung to his feet and dashed after the character. Only slowing down at the last minute, realizing how pathetic he looked. He paused, discerning that all of this was foolish. He couldn't even catch the eye of those who lived here, let alone of someone whose attractiveness was on this level. The more Isaak thought through his lack of a plan, the more the negative voices sprung up in his head. He turned on his heel when he heard them speak.

"Hey, you're from around here, right?"

Isaak spun back around, so fast that he worried he would topple over. Thankfully, his body was on his side, and he stayed upright, his eyes wide as the celestial being approached him.

"Yea ... yea, I am. This is Akrisos."

They chuckled, a sound so sweet that Isaak now had to wonder if there was any veracity behind his previous thoughts. It wasn't an odd thought to wonder if one was indeed a deity, there was many a story surrounding such events. But was he really so lucky to have it happen to him?

"I know," they say, "but that is pretty much all I know. You see, I'm trying to find a Master Audouin, his hut."

"Oh, Master Audouin, of course," Isaak paused. Why did he say it like that? As if he knew all along that that's what they wanted? "Are you his new apprentice?"

"Indeed, I am," they stretched out their hand with the friendliest of smiles. Gosh, their smile could calm the most rabid of dogs. A warm summer's day with just the right amount of wind rolling in, and cherry blossoms in bloom. The sun setting just over the mountains perhaps, or even rising, both views equally beautiful. The velvety midnight sky with stars dotting its thickness, but one orb shining brighter than all.

"Excuse me?" Isaak came back to the now at the sound of their questioning tone. How long was he in his own head? Why oh why was he like this? He blamed his father, instead of telling him about romance and how to keep his head on, he taught him about dirt and how to properly plow a field. Useless.

“I’m Isaak,” he blurted, not knowing if that was what they were talking about or not. It was as good a place as any to start.

The Apprentice stared at him long and hard, a look that he was used to receiving from pretty much everyone. His heart fell. He had ruined this, all because his wandering mind held no restraint. Then they smiled again and laughed, Isaak practically feeling his cheeks heat up. He should go, he needed to go.

“You’re an odd one, aren’t you, Isaak?” He didn’t know how to answer that, especially in a way that wouldn’t make him appear even odder.

“I daydream, it’s a problem,” he said nervously, rubbing his arm.

“I don’t agree,” the Apprentice smirked, tapping the side of their chin as they stared Isaak over. Isaak paused as he lifted his gaze to meet theirs. Was this really the first time he chose to look them in the eyes. He stared back into a pair of pale, almost seafoam colored eyes. Eyes that barely held a pupil of any form for they were seconds away from being washed away by the tone of the iris.

“Your eyes,” he found himself mumbling, kicking himself again.

“Wow, that is truly a record. Many start the conversation with that.”

“I didn’t realize,” he began but then decided to stop, lest he says something else insulting.

“No one really does. I’m not blind, I see you as clearly as anyone else.” Isaak didn’t restrain himself this time, cocking his head to the side, allowing those pale eyes to render him defenseless and naked.

“How?” Was all he managed to get out.

“Beats me, I was born this way but have never not been able to see.” He nodded as if he knew this, or as if he was being told a story and was asked to fact check. “I’m really sorry, but I do need those directions.”

“Master Audouin,” Isaak blurted, remembering why the Apprentice had approached him in the first place.

“Oh yes, he lives right down the road going that way.” He pointed in the direction, “his house is fairly big if only because it also is his shop. He has a sign hanging above his window, can’t miss it.”

“Thank you kindly, I thought I would be lost for the remaining day,” they laugh.

“I’m here if you ever need help. I’m Isaak, by the way.” He stiffened when the Apprentice bent over with laughter, rubbing their eye.

“Yes, yes, I know. You told me that.”

“Oh yea, sorry. I ... I’m going to stop talking now.” He bit down on his tongue, making double sure that no words could find their way out of his mouth.

“You were much help, Isaak,” the Apprentice said, resting their hand on his shoulder, “would you mind giving me a tour whenever you’re free.”

“Tomorrow,” he blurted, the words springing from his mouth as freely as a rambunctious colt. “Free. Tomorrow I am free.”

“Wonderful. We could meet at Master Audouin’s hut if you would like. Hopefully, he is not like some other masters I’ve heard of and will be kind.” Isaak wished to reassure the Apprentice, but he was unable to. Since Master Audouin had moved into the town, Isaak barely said two words to him. Isaak mostly saw him tending to his garden or walking towards the woods to pick herbs. It wasn’t that Isaak feared those who controlled magic, but Audouin had a stern look about him. And there was always sadness in his eyes as if his mind was far away, and Isaak was too frightened to pull him back to the now.

He came back to the now himself, realizing that the Apprentice was no longer at his side. They were already a few feet away, walking with purpose now as they headed in the direction that Isaak had told them earlier. He whimpered, he really needed to get the whole ‘daydreaming’ thing under control.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, smiling to himself at the thought that he would see them again tomorrow. With a skip in his step, he wandered back over to Arnell’s house, only to see that the crate was now missing and no ruho pouch in sight. He groaned loudly and pounded on the door again, “Ser Arnell, you have to pay for those!” He put his ear to the door and heard nothing. There was no way he was going back to his master without a ruho pouch, and seeing that he didn’t hold enough coin to pay for the goods himself, he would have to hound Arnell until he paid up.

With a thud, he took a seat outside Arnell’s door, resting his head on the smooth, porous surface. Instead of thinking about what Arnell could be up to, he thought of a lovely witch who just so happened to stroll into town. And for some odd reason, sought the company of Isaak. It was a friendly conversation, to say the least, but the blush that spread across Isaak’s face caused him to think of much more. He supposed he would just have to see what would happen tomorrow ...

Tomorrow took its time in arriving, and Isaak was allowing his impatience to get the better of him. He tapped his foot rapidly against the degrading cobblestone path that went outside of Master Audouin’s hut, jumping in fright whenever he heard a voice or a grumble. Part of him hated that he had agreed to meet in front of the Ecriid’s store, mostly because he was terrified of the witch and what he could possibly do to someone like Isaak.

“Isaak,” the Apprentice greeted in a cheerful tone, closing the door to their master’s house behind them.

“Hi, um, how is it?” The Apprentice raised a curious brow, not understanding Isaak’s question. “Him? I mean him, the Ecrid?”

“You’re not one of those biased humans, right?” the Apprentice asked, their words serious though the smile on their face conveyed something else entirely.

“No!” Isaak shouted, “I love other species, even more than my own. I mean, I’m not saying my own species sucks. But other species are better. Wait, I mean –” The Apprentice’s chuckle caused Isaak to stop speaking and increase his want to burrow inside of himself and hide until the embarrassment passed him over. He wasn’t this bad, was he?

“I know what you’re trying to say,” the Apprentice reassured and then opened their arms out to the surrounding area, “so, how about that tour?” Not trusting his words, Isaak nodded and headed for the market street. He pointed out the bakery, the blacksmith, and the tailor. About to talk about the armorer when Arnell appeared.

“And who is this?” Arnell questioned, huffing as he moved a few boxes around.

“Arnell, this is Master Audouin’s newest apprentice. Meet Arnell, the grocer.”

“Make yourself useful boy,” Arnell huffed and pointed to a few crates that still needed moving, “you know where those go.” Isaak’s cheeks flushed as he apologized to the Apprentice and then quickly went to the side to do what Arnell had asked of him. As he worked, he kept an ear on their conversation. It was mostly Arnell questioning the Apprentice about their eyes, life, and abilities. Isaak sighed as he immediately picked up on the respectful tone that Arnell chatted to the witch with. A sound that was entirely foreign to Isaak’s ears. Arnell was kind to him, that much was true, but niceties and respect were two different domains.

Isaak’s hands froze as he placed the last crate in its allotted place. Was he in over his head? He was hoping that he would be able to show the Apprentice a different version than what the townsfolk saw. The real Isaak and not this meek and useless version that questioned his place in Akrisos whenever his mind got the opportunity. But what if that was just it, there was no other side to him? Isaak rolled his eyes as he dusted his hands off on his clothing and turned to join the Apprentice’s side once again. He didn’t know why he was thinking these thoughts, but they were pointless. There was nothing to be afraid or cautious about.

After Arnell was done, Isaak took the Apprentice further down the row, telling them all he knew about the area and the shopkeepers. He spoke about the tavern and how things were done. He believed it would be important for the Apprentice only because Audouin ran his own store. The two talked about interests and their lives, though Isaak mostly let the Apprentice have that one. What was he to say? He was born, grew up, and would die in Akrisos? On a farm that was trying desperately to kill itself despite all of Isaak's hard work.

"What is it that you do?" the Apprentice asked him as they stepped onto a dirt road, Isaak pointing at the woods and telling them a bit about what rested within. "I've been trying to figure that out since you started. Do you work for Arnell?"

"What makes you think that?" Isaak asked, regretting the question as soon as he asked.

"Well, unless this area does apprenticeships differently than others. You're of the age to be one, seeing that you're with me and not there, I would think that you work under Arnell. Is it that you wish to be a grocer?"

"Of course not," Isaak informed them, a hint of offense lining his words, "I work for someone else. The food supplier, and sometimes a grocer as well. I have a farm." Isaak still seemed unable to grasp the idea of 'less is more.'

"So, you're a farmer?"

"No."

"I am so confused," the Apprentice laughed, but they were unable to question him further when the two heard a whistle. They both turned to see a group of young men and women approaching. Their clothing stating that they were apprentice levels while the short swords at their side said, guards. That was what the Apprentice saw anyway, a sight that they weren't unfamiliar with. But Isaak saw a large group filled with harassers.

"We should go," Isaak urged, grabbing the Apprentice's forearm, but they refused to do so.

"I should introduce myself to them."

Isaak whimpered just loud enough for his own ears, "please don't." But they had already flagged down the group. Isaak could just walk away, make it seem like he had just happened to pass by the Apprentice on the road. He took a peek over at the group, immediately spotting Ansellus, Celene, Audri, and Peyton. There was no way he was sticking around.

He took a step and felt his stomach shift in discomfort. Was he really going to leave the Apprentice to fend off that group by themselves? Audri took a step closer to the Apprentice, shaking their hand with a wide flirtatious grin that was basically Audri's entire personality. Isaak once was jealous of the fact that they could slip themselves in between anyone's sheets, but then he realized that flirting was the only thing Audri was good at, and so Isaak wasn't as jealous anymore.

"Isaak," the Apprentice called him over, all eyes shifting to where he currently stood.

"Oh, we know Isaak," Ansellus chuckled, walking past the group and approaching Isaak with calculated steps and a malevolent leer.

"Give me one reason why I should spare you right now," Ansellus ordered, whispering the words to Isaak so that the others didn't hear. Isaak said nothing, unable to speak, the only time truly. He wanted no part of this. And even worse, the Apprentice would see it. His earlier thoughts came back to him. Thoughts about how respect was not something he garnered from others. Why did he think the Apprentice would be different? Everyone in the town either looked upon him in pity or looked at him in disgust and had a malicious intent that hovered just below the surface.

"The thing you should know about Isaak," Ansellus laughed, planting his foot on Isaak's stomach and kicking him to the ground, "is that he's just shit with legs." The others laughed as Isaak hit the ground with a large thump, his body sighing as it prepared itself for another onslaught. Only this time, Isaak could feel the tears that were ready to spill. This would never get better, and it was foolish of him to believe that, for even one person, he could change that.

A tremendous surge of wind sent Ansellus flying through the air, causing him to land a few feet away from the small stream that retreated into the woods. The laughter died down as everyone stared at the person who had done it, the Apprentice, though they could care less. With careful steps, they approached Isaak with concern in their eyes, leaning over and holding out their hand.

"Sorry. I didn't suspect that these guys were those kinds of guards."

"You mean wannabe guards," he mumbles, his heart doing small skips and tricks as the Apprentice snickered at his words.

"Are you up for finishing our tour? Guard free?" Isaak nodded as he accepted the Apprentice's help and dusted himself off. He looked into their pale eyes, finding a warmth that made him uneasy in the best way possible. There were a few emotions within that he couldn't put a name to, but the only one that mattered to him was the hint of respect there.

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“Then let us be off. I’m eager to see more of your town here.” The Apprentice reached out and grabbed Isaak’s hand, dragging him away from the guards who were crowded around Ansellus and sending glares their way. In the back of Isaak’s mind, he knew that he would be approached for this, that they would make him pay for an action that he didn’t do. But he didn’t care. The softest hand he’s ever felt was currently grasping his own, and he couldn’t be more ecstatic. He told himself that this was nothing more than friendliness, perhaps even the Apprentice being more concerned about the guards. But it didn’t matter, his heart was racing, his smile could not be tempered, and only prayed to the High Gods that he didn’t mess this up. That he never messed this up ... this was his first friend.