

Chapter 22: Dangerous Curiosity

"Please, just stop," Mel begged. "You're only hurting yourself more."

I knew that she was right. She always was. Always so smart, always so kind, always so...nothing, now. Nothing but my own insanity. Nothing but a memory of her voice.

My head lolled, made heavy by the haze that filled me. The needle clattered to the floor, its purpose fulfilled. For a few precious moments, I would be free. For a few precious moments, I would be content. I knew that it was a lie. I knew that, just as I always did, I would wake from the deceptive ease of this moment. I would rail at life, spit at death for refusing to take me.

But for now, I could pretend. I could pretend that I wasn't crushed by taunting memories. I could pretend that I would be okay.

I could pretend that I wasn't just the remnants of a better man.

For a while, I did. I lost myself in the drowsy release. I covered my pain in the wave of chemicals. I washed myself in the cleansing rush.

I was content, this way. Better this way. My anger, my fear, my pain, my loss - it all just...disappeared. They no longer mattered. It was bliss.

The end came far too soon. Then again, it always did.

It started with a knot - whether a knot of tension or a knot in the physical sense, I wasn't sure. My stomach roiled in its wringing grasp, my intestines swimming and twisting. I itched, unbearable heat filling my body.

Vomit spewed from my mouth in uncontrollable shudders, wracking me with heaves and jerks. I was losing it, I knew. The darkness was seeping back, filtering into the corners of my perception.

Tears flowed like nascent rain, dripping down in little droplets that foretold a coming storm. The haze had broken. I could hear her voice again.

"Eran, stop!" she pleaded. "You don't need to do this!"

I reached for the needle again.

Anything to calm the loss that assaulted my soul. Anything to drown out that beautiful voice. Anything to feel okay again.

When I woke up, good as new, I could only weep.



I had never been forced to suffer true addiction, despite my despairing attempts to drown myself in drugs and liquor. Eventually, I always died, bringing my body back to square one. That might have been the worst part.

Some might say that I was looking a gift horse in the mouth; some might say that I should have appreciated the boons I received.

They knew very little.

Imagine the comedown of withdrawal. Imagine the darkest depression, the heaviest crash. That was my baseline - a recurring mental state that could not be defeated, only avoided. Yet the avoidance itself furrowed out new lows, deepening the scars of guilt and loss that had become so much a part of me.

At the end of it all, it would always come back to that.

Regardless, the fact of the matter was that I had more than a little sympathy for those who buried themselves in chemicals. It might have been slightly antithetical for someone trying to be a hero, but there it was. However, what I had sympathy for was the *reasons* that some may have - escape, loss, despair.

I did not have sympathy for the man before me, for he appeared to have none of these concerns.

Instead, he preyed on them - which led to where we were now, in what would have been the shakedown of my life had I actually cared. It took quite a bit of pestering and nattering, but he finally admitted to having a connection with access to gray dust. I wasn't sure why he was so hesitant to admit it, honestly. I could see a few mottled spots of gray on his skin even in the darkness. He didn't hide it particularly well.

A brief exchange of coin later, and we were on our way. I didn't actually bring much more with me than I already gave him, so he would be sorely disappointed at our journey's end. I wasn't overly worried about that, as long as I found what I was searching for.

Together, we wandered through the dingy northwestern corner of Dihaim. I could tell that the man was taking a circuitous route; it seemed that he wasn't entirely trusting. Then again, I had given him very little reason to be. I was well aware that, despite my affected ailments, he was slightly wary of me. In a world filled with Marked, that was likely a commendable attitude to hold. Danger could come from the most unexpected of places.

He muttered to himself under his breath as we walked; I wasn't quite able to catch what he was saying. Every once in a while, he would appear distracted by something, though I couldn't discern a reason for it.

Finally, we entered a courtyard that rested between a cluster of small warehouses. Just like much of the area, litter and refuse coated choice locations, blown by the wind and left abandoned. Despite that, there was a marked reduction in beggars and vagrants; I had little hope that was simply due to a reduction in their numbers. Instead, I was certain that they had been driven away from the area - a suspicion founded on the dried blood that still lightly coated a nearby bench.

I was becoming more and more certain that things would soon take a turn for the worse.

I breathed in a ragged breath, wheezing around the Risen that filled my lungs. My escort stepped away slightly with a grimace; he was doubtlessly under the impression that I was quite ill, based upon the way that he had been shying away for most of our journey.

He pried open a nearby door, grunting slightly as the rusty hinges gave voice to their protests. The poorly-maintained obstruction gave way at last, allowing light to spill from the opening that took its place. An entranceway, dusty with disuse and disrepair, greeted us. The front desk, formed of solid bone like so many of Dihaim's constructions, was chipped and yellowed with age. Behind its empty seat, another door led further inside.

"Boys!" my guide shouted. "We got a guest comin' in!"

The distinct clatter of skidding bone, wood, and metal called out in response. I trailed the man further inwards, following the footprints that his boots etched in the grimy floor. My sense of unease continued to grow. This had been far too easy, for what was supposed to be a rather troublesome group.

I coughed, freeing one of my final two Unified Risen from its temporary home within my lungs: an orthopt, a diminutive member of the same family as locust, selected for its excellent sense of hearing. I crawled, climbing down the folds of my clothing to reach the floor below. From my new perspective, I was forced to traverse a tangle of dirt, dust, and refuse. I climbed soaring mountains and gently rolling hills. I leapt from their peaks with powerful hops, spreading my diminutive wings to catch the air for the brief moments before I fell. Compared to the relatively miniscule size of my orthopt-self, slightly mutated though I was, the dingy little room was a city unto itself. Still, I would cross it eventually.

From my perspective as Markus, that city was already far behind.

"Who's this?" a man asked brusquely as we entered a new room. Three men were standing beside a table, the chairs pushed back haphazardly. A set of cards and coins lay upon it, likely part and parcel of some sort of game - now interrupted.

My guide motioned me forward with a wave of his hand, once more revealing a section of sickly mottled gray that spread across his forearm. His companions had the same distinguishing features, I noticed - some more prominently than others.

One in particular was a mess of gray patches; the color crawled up his neck and spread its fingers across one cheek. His eyes were more feral than the rest, reflecting an ominous glint. If the others had the look of predators, then he was more akin to a rabid beast. A sick, dangerous animal. I kept a closer eye on him than the others.

Still, the other two men were troublesome in their own ways. Whereas the former man felt dangerous in an irrationally aggressive sort of way, the remaining members all possessed the same telltale intensity that all Dusters I had encountered so far held. The same predatory fervor; the same callous eyes. I wondered whether that indicated the type of person that was likely to become involved with Dusters or if it was somehow a byproduct of the gray dust itself.

My musings were interrupted by my guide's response.

"He was asking around about gray dust."

"And you brought him here?" The man's words had a sharp edge, an undercurrent of anger running against them. He stepped closer to us, leaving the other two slightly behind and baring his teeth. They were yellowed and disgusting; if his plan had been to make me back away, he very nearly managed it with that. I heard a scuffling in the corner of the room, where a canid Risen rose from its haunches. Even with a cursory glance, I could see the resemblance to the Risen possessed by the two thugs from the night before. Another bad sign, though it could have been just a coincidence. While I could simply give up and [Swap] away from the potential danger, I would have preferred not to spook them. Thus, I stayed my hand.

My guide made some sort of hand motion; I couldn't quite make it out from my angle. "Why not? He was willing to pay, he said." The rabid-looking man muttered something under his breath, but was quickly hushed by his nearest compatriot.

Just like that, the man's anger softened. His jaw unclenched; a smile formed on his mouth. It didn't reach his eyes.

"Well that's a different story then, isn't it?" he said, beckoning me forward with a wave of his hand. "Let me show you what we have available."

I stepped forward, my guide falling behind. The other two took their positions on either side of me, not quite close enough to touch, yet still close enough to make me feel uneasy. I glanced to the side, meeting the rabid eyes of the gray-patched man. He grinned at me, the

expression slightly off-kilter and somehow aggressive. I decided to call him Lucy, in honor of an old family dog from my childhood. She had been an ornery girl, but I still loved her.

He twitched, muttering something under his breath again. Seeing that Lucy was growing increasingly agitated, I turned my gaze away.

His partner, flanking me from the other side, was more congenial. He offered me a slight smile and a respectful nod, artificial though they might have been. Just as his compatriot, it didn't reach his eyes. He looked like a Tony, I decided, so Tony he would be.

As we walked, I finally managed to make it past the door in my orthopt-self. I watched from the secondary view it provided as my former guide slowly turned and walked to the door. With a quiet motion, he shut the door and pulled out a key.

I pretended not to hear the slight snick as the latch shut.

Instead, I scratched my arm, tracing the ribbons of red that had begun to appear through the course of the night. I rasped uncomfortable little breaths, wheezing unhealthily. I followed. I continued the sickly addict act, though I knew that we would soon reach a deadly climax.

One that I would have to play along with.

Maybe I could do things differently. I could try to subdue the four men; I could try to question them and *make* them tell me the things they knew. I wouldn't. Forced answers were remarkably unreliable. With no way to quickly verify the information I was given, it was all but useless - and I wasn't about to torture someone for information, anyway. That was hardly heroic. There were other ways to get the information I desired.

The fact of the matter was, this was a different situation than the night before. The Dusters were dangerous, to be sure, and I knew that they would make that readily apparent in a few moments.

But there was nobody to protect this time, and I had my own ways out of danger.

It was for those reasons that I made the choices that I did.

The reasons why I dismissed the obvious threat of my new companions. Why I let the other men pull me into inane, distracting conversation. Why I ignored the club that was being brandished behind me.

Why I didn't duck a split second later.

I was curious.

I wanted to see where it all went.