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## Predators and Pets

by Mia Sundby

He'd noticed her watching him from the shadows of the Queen's court. Ashir had ignored her, of course; why waste one's attention, when one could paralyse a mortal with little more than a glance?

She had been waiting for him afterwards, though. Leaning against a stone wall in the corridor outside, playing with a wicked-looking dagger, she'd called, "I didn't know the court still hosted one of your kind." She glanced up. "I had heard the rumours, of course, but it's unusual for a vampire to be kept as a pet."

Clasping his hands behind his back, Ashir prowled over to her, smiling dispassionately. "I didn't know that the princess had seen fit to adopt a new stray of her own." He arched a dark brow. "Should you really be playing with such sharp things? You could hurt yourself."

Her own lips curled into a mirthless smile. "Afraid of a little blood, leech?"

He eyed her. Slouched, she was nearly his height --though this was scarcely a feat--, and contained within that height was a head of mouse-brown hair shorn right down to her scalp, skin which might once have been tanned was now drawn and grey-looking, as though she were still recovering from an injury or illness, and every inch of exposed flesh was riddled with scars --some small, paper-cut slices, others palm-sized protrusions of paler flesh. Some of the scars were fresh and if he looked too long seemed to shimmer with a strange light.

Her eyes, perhaps blue in kinder lights, were stormy grey. He recognised those eyes from the mirror. The eyes of a predator.

"No," he responded lightly, "I only dislike problems." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you going to be a problem, Isobela Rhinde?"

Her jaw tightened.

"That depends, Ashir Penholde." She straightened, the muscles beneath her sickly skin shifting as she did so. Her next words were quiet, her gaze filled with unspoken threat. "Do I need to make myself a problem?"

He considered her, eyeing the dagger she had slipped away so smoothly that he hadn't noticed her hands were empty until this moment. His brows lifted in surprise. It was a rare thing indeed that anyone startled him.

Pensive, he returned her stare. "You lost your Order recently, did you not?"

"I did." She said flatly.

"I see." He responded easily, as though he hadn't crafted the question to sting her, to test her. "So now... You work alone?"

She hesitated. "I work for the throne."

He waved a hand. "Yes, of course. But you are alone?"

She worked her jaw a moment. Then, "Yes."

He smiled softly. "So am I."

With that, he turned, his robes fluttering, and left her behind him. Ashir recalled the shabby appearance of the famed warrior and mused. She wasn't much to look at but she was something to think about.