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PITY THE VAGABOND

by Sara Phillips

The life of a traveling merchant sounds exciting.

And, well, it is! It's very exciting. Valentin couldn't imagine himself pursuing any other lifestyle, and he doesn't even have to imagine it; he's tried, once or twice, the whole "settling down" business. It works, for a time, but all it takes is for a few months, tops, to pass him by, and then the soles of his feet start to itch from walking the same roads day in and day out.

He sees the seasons change around him—the trees warming to oranges and reds, the crisp morning breeze tickling his neck, the morning dew turning to frost and crunching beneath his shoes—and all he can think about is how the world continues to spin and change all around him while he stays rooted in one place. As he watches the birds fly south for the winter, his heart aches to soar away with them, far from whatever bustling town he's tried to learn to call home.

But they're never home. None of them. Not for him.

So, back to traveling he goes.

He loves it. He loves wandering across the world, meeting countless people from all walks of life, earning their admiration and approval, seeing sights others could only dream of one day getting to witness. By the time he circles back to the same place a second time, if he ever even does, it's grown and changed just as much as he has, and he gets to rediscover its secrets and charms all over again. The world is vast and diverse, and it would be torment of unparalleled obscenity to live a life without getting to experience what each corner of it has to offer.

Val wouldn't trade his lifestyle for anything—not for every shining gem on the planet, not for every drop of the finest wines, not for every piece of gold ever and yet to be minted. His wealth and wares are dispensable, replaceable, meant to be lost and gained and swapped for better trinkets, stories, affairs. The drum of his heart beat solely for this purpose, and to lose that part of himself would be the same as losing his life in its entirety. He'd rather someone cut him down where he stands than condemn him to imprisonment in one place for the rest of his days.

And yet...

Sometimes, on late nights when he drinks a bit too much and he's caught sleeping under the stars between two cities, a certain melancholy blankets his campsite as its fire burns out and leaves him alone with his thoughts and whatever gods may be listening in.

Being alone is the hard part, he thinks on those nights, gazing at the stars and wondering what it might be like to touch one. When others see him, when they learn him, when they *know* him—is he a star in their skies? Or is he simply the darkness in between?

They're all stars to him.

They burn so brightly, glittering and shining like jewels, always so very far away and never getting any closer. The world only continues to turn, shepherding in new stars for him to watch, and watch them he does. He gazes at their brilliance until he can trace their constellations

with his eyes closed, because if he doesn't, he fears forgetting their shape as the sky changes once again.

Everything changes. Everything constantly changes.

He can't be everywhere at once. He'll always miss something somewhere.

When he leaves, does he leave a hole in anyone's life? He knows they remember him fondly, for if he returns, so too does the kinship between them, but he knows it's only temporary. They know it's only temporary. He moves on again, to others who greet him as a friend but let him go just as easily, and others beyond them, and others, others, others. For every constant they all have in their lives, he has at least a dozen wildcard variables that are about as stable as the sands tousled by changing tides.

Valentin loves to return to find that places have changed since he's been to them. That's not a lie. But on quiet, drunken nights, no amount of joy can quite fight off the fierce loneliness that chips away at his heels wherever he goes. It's so easy to hold others at arm's length, but when that's as close as anyone can get, that's the closest they'll ever feel. Sooner or later, Val finds himself floundering in the dark, pushing toward them with all his might and wishing his fingertips might reach an inch farther to brush against their skin once more. Try as he might, he cannot break through the walls he built himself.

Instead, alone he remains, taunted by distant memories of jovial games of chance, shared laughter, gentle hands tracing his scars, soft lips on his skin. As they occur, those brief and fleeting exchanges are as much as he can handle, but the memory of them lasts much longer than one night.

He can try to drown them out, but that, too, only ever lasts a night.