

THEY LIVE AMONG US

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He eats the shadows, one by one by one. They always squeak such as rats are prone to do when you douse them in kerosene and violate their noses with phosphorus. Not that his elegant claws have ever done such a grotesque thing; he leaves that sordid business for the calloused help.

Sometimes though

There are times

(When he's not filling his misshapen belly with the souls of the unfortunate, whistling a perfectly pleasant howl that would raise the hair on anyone's skin)

That he perches on the slants of roofs and stares down at the abyss of humanity. He watches the swarms scuttle by as the roaches they are. They crawl over each other, clambering to the top, sliding back down under a stampede of kicks, knuckles, thrusts; they look quite orderly though. They never actually press flesh, but they all know what they're doing every single day.

Except...except they're always oblivious to the unseen and while they scrape their knees every day to their owners, they actually believe they are free.

And he simply must filthy his hands with the Homo sapiens. How can you not?

Some among the circle of brethren argue he has a choice. Why be amid them at all, they say.

Because, he tells them, humans are art in motion. To ignore them would be to sip the finest wine ever tasted, but sully it with rotten meat, and decaying flowers. Of course he must be among them.

He drifts to the pavement now. Old glass crunches underfoot and a tin can rattles as something scurries away from him. It's sundown and the city's odor shifts from putrid pollution to the

spices of a restaurant's barbeque and sautéed mushrooms. His lungs take in a deep inhalation of air and another scent: the delicious aroma of human.

Humans have intense scents; exquisite and varied fragrances. Fear gives off a sharp taste, while anger is a bitter and musky thing. Happiness is faint, but sweet, and nervousness seems sour. Everything in between merges into a blend of fine eating, and he can smell it all wafting by the alley.

He falls in behind a young couple. They're holding hands and walking their ridiculous little lapdog. To the world they seem Quaint and happy. To him, he smells the truth; the woman is wafting off bitterness, anger, resentment; the man is slightly angry, but mostly nervous. "So, where were you last night?" she asks suddenly.

The man shrugs and mutters something about just being out with a friend. And why did she have to be so nosy?

That sets her off. He'd love to stay and listen to the couple fight, but he just spotted supper.

It's an old woman sitting alone on a bench, tucked away in an alley. She wears a too-large coat, probably a rescue find from the Goodwill. Her hair is frazzled and thin. She's the lady children often stop to stare at, or talk to, before their parents whisk them away.

He lands just beside her, eyeing the ragtag coat's hem. It reveals a sliver of still unwrinkled flesh...

"Oh there is my baby, oooh? You cutie, have you been naughty, hiding from mama?" she asks. She throws a handful of crumbs to the ground and he, as well as a dozen other pigeons, begins pecking away.

(He can wait. What species ever reveals itself right away?)