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A WOLF WAS a versatile creature.

Adaptable.

When part of a pack, it was part of something larger than itself. It had a role to play and a place in the way of things. There was safety to be found in a pack.

But a wolf could survive alone, too.

In the dead of the midnight forest, surrounded by predators on all sides, a wolf could slip like a shadow through the trees. He could take refuge in darkened corners, stalking prey of his own.

He could wait out his enemies, and bite back when they struck...

Especially when he held a god sword in his hands.

I was ready for the vampire when he came. He had been trailing me like a wraith through the echoing halls of Ammontraíeth since I'd left Saeris's chambers. I'd felt him out there, simmering. Waiting.

Reading the living took no great skill. There were those who had spent centuries honing their abilities to control their feelings. It paid to ensure your thoughts and feelings remained private as a member of the Fae. But no matter how practiced a person was at hiding their feelings, their bodies always gave them away in the end. It was unavoidable.

Emotions painted the blood.

Happiness.

Anger.

Sorrow.

Lust.

Each gave off its own energy. A vibration, if you will. In the same vein, each of them had its own scent. The Fae betrayed subtle indicators of their moods, no matter how good they were at masking their emotions.

The scents humans gave off could be overwhelming at times. Humans were *not* good at taming their feelings. They felt everything so rudely, right out in the open, with no awareness of how their reactions might affect those with finer senses.

The dead were a different story. Without a beating heart, their blood was barren black slurry in their veins. The only time a member of the Sanasrothian Court gave off any scent at all was after they had fed, when the spark of life that lingered in their victim's blood still echoed with the emotions *they* had felt as they died. Like the faintest trace of perfume that lingered after a hug.

An hour ago, my head had been full of petrichor as I'd sat next to my mate, listening to the lilt of her voice as she'd bombarded Tal with questions about the Blood Court. Ever since she'd woken, she'd been relentless, trying to understand, to prepare, to ready herself for what was to come. The foundations of our plan were laid, and Saeris understood the part she had to play in carrying them out...but she was nervous. Considering that she had been human only days ago, she was already far more accomplished at tamping down her feelings than she had been, but my nose was sharper than most. I'd sensed her hesitation. It was like the scent of hot stone after rain.

I'd been breathing her in, drowning in her, when I'd detected the *other* smell.

The vampire must have fed on a prodigious amount of blood before it had taken up its hiding place, crouched in the dark outside Saeris's chambers.

I'd excused myself, headed out into the hall, and gone looking for the rot.

Two floors down, heading into the bowels of the Black Palace, I found it with the point of my blade.

The vampire was beautiful. He possessed a face that might have been ordinary in life, the kind of skin that might eventually have turned dull and sagged. But in death, he had been preserved. Perfect. High cheekbones. A regal, aquiline nose. His eyes had probably been blue once, but now they flashed like ghostly opals. His lips peeled back, exposing canines bone-white and vicious. His mouth formed a surprised *O* before he could make a sound. He looked down, stunned to find Nimerelle buried to the hilt in his chest.

“You’ve . . . ruined the velvet,” he croaked.

It was true; the god sword’s blade had rent a three-inch-long hole in his black velvet waistcoat. I gave him an apologetic shrug. “Annoying by-product of killing,” I said with a sigh. “Your opponent’s clothes often don’t survive the process, either. You know all about that, though, don’t you?”

A death flower bloomed across the front of his shirt, black as ink. The bastard had the audacity to look affronted as he glanced up at me. “I am . . . familiar with that problem, yes,” he rasped.

“You won’t have to worry about it anymore,” I told him.

I’d known, even before he’d come streaking out of the shadows, that he hadn’t come looking for a fight. With the rest of the Black Palace still sleeping, he shouldn’t have even been awake. This vampire, in his finery, with his belly full of innocent blood, had come seeking something he did not deserve. Something only *I* could give him.

He scrambled for balance, trying to hold on to me, but his hands were already turning to ash. When he spoke, his words were dry as a desert wind. “I’m sorry. I just couldn’t . . . face . . .”

The sun?

Fire?

Fire wasn’t such an easy thing to come by in this place. A vampire would go up like a pile of dry kindling if it encountered flame. The hearths burned with evenlight in Ammontraíeth. The torches in the walls, too. This piteous bastard probably wouldn’t have even been able to find a match here. And who would have wanted such a final death, anyway? It wasn’t an easy way to go. So painful. So dramatic.

The ash was better.

It was a mercy.

"You have saved me from what...I have...become," he wheezed. There was gratitude in his eyes. Relief.

I leaned in as he desiccated, making sure he heard each word as he sank into his final death. "I don't do it for you. I do it for those you have feasted on. Enjoy hell, tick."

Whatever hope of salvation he thought he might find with me faded from his eyes. "They're going to...*destroy* her, you know? It has already...been seen. This court will...fall...with her inside it." His lips twisted, either a grin of relief or a sneer of contempt, I couldn't tell.

"Saeris is safe," I snapped. "I won't let anything happen to her."

But the vampire just laughed. Rasping, hacking barks of laughter. His chin ached. His cheeks went next. His voice splintered and cracked as his throat went. By the time his canines came loose from his skull and fell from his mouth, he wasn't laughing anymore.

The vampire collapsed, a vampire no more. His teeth hit the floor—*plink, plink!*—and bounced away, down the stairs that led farther into the bowels of Ammontraíeth.

Plink...

Plink...

Plink...

The Black Palace was immense. I'd lost count of how many high bloods I'd dispatched since I'd been here. At first, there had been at least one or two of Malcolm's children lying in wait for me down each dark obsidian corridor, drawn by the heat of my blood. However, the members of the Blood Court had soon realized they were no match for the god sword or the male who was wielding it. They were sleeping now, but soon they would wake. And then, they would *hide* if they knew what was good for them.

"Ahh! There...you are!"

The redheaded figure stood at the bottom of the stairs, panting and out of breath. He glanced down, cocking an eyebrow at the teeth

that had come to a stop at his feet, though he didn't mention them. He turned his attention to me. "You need... to come. Quickly."

"You shouldn't be outside of your quarters, Carrion."

Sound traveled strangely here. The air was thick. It hummed with an inaudible tone that buzzed against the skin. My words were blunted, but they carried well enough for the smuggler to hear. He let out an exasperated gasp, running up the steps, but I was already walking away, back the way I had come.

"I would... *love* to be tucked away in my rooms right now, but... dusk's falling. The palace is waking up."

"Exactly."

"Will you *stop* already? Listen. I was just looking out... my window, and... I saw something—"

"It's called a sunset, Swift. If you want to live to see more of them, I can always escort you back to Cahlish. You can appreciate the sunrise *and* the sunset from there." I could live in hope. I'd offered repeatedly to take the smuggler away from Ammontraíeth—away from Irrín, too—but the male was growing increasingly stubborn.

"An enticing offer, but I'm good, thanks." He had sprinted up the steps to reach me and was now on my heels, keeping pace.

"Dare I ask, once again, *why* you insist on hanging around Ammontraíeth like a bad smell?" I clipped out. "This place is a nightmare."

Carrion answered distractedly, "Oh, y'know. I have my reasons."

And he could *have* his reasons, so long as none of them involved him harboring any sort of hope that Saeris was going to confess her undying love for him. *That* wasn't happening.

"Fisher, gods alive! Just fucking slow down, will you? This is important!"

I huffed out a tortured breath, turning to face him. "Is it *actually* important, or do you just *think* it is?" Carrion thought all kinds of ridiculous things mattered when they did not.

His eyebrows hiked up as he scowled at me. "I don't know. Do you consider your mate's happiness important?"

I glared at him flatly. "Speak. Quickly."

He shook his head. "We need... a window."

When sunlight could kill, a window could be a death sentence; they weren't so easy to come across. We found one on the next floor up, just a foot wide and a foot tall, the glass smoked to keep out some of the sun's rays.

The view it afforded could easily have been too narrow to display the source of Swift's anxiety, but mercifully that wasn't the case. I scanned the narrow field of the horizon, searching the scorched land that stretched out between Ammontraíeth and the river, not finding—

Oh, *gods*.

"I thought it was a patch of snow at first," Swift said.

My heart stalled.

"Then I saw that it was moving. Running. Fast," Carrion panted.

I took off at a dead sprint, hurtling past Carrion, flying down the stairs. The smuggler followed suit. "I found you as fast as I could! I didn't know if—I should tell her, or—"

"Just shut up and run!"

"What—what are you doing?" he panted.

"What do you *think* I'm doing?" I snarled. "I'm saving the fucking fox!"



I'd left him in Cahlish.

Not in Irrín.

In Cahlish. *On the other side of the mountain.*

The Omnamerrin mountain range was one of the most treacherous, lethal ranges in all Yvelia. Its slopes were steep and nigh impossible to climb for a member of the Fae. I only knew of a handful of warriors who'd scaled its jagged peak and survived to tell the tale. Onyx had been born of snow and ice, but even he shouldn't have survived the crossing. There would have been avalanches. They would have buried him, again and again and again. He would have had to dig his way out. He would have had no food. No shelter from the cutting wind.

He'd left the safety of Cahlish. For *her*.

He'd climbed the mountain. For *her*.

He'd snuck through Irrín and crossed the river. For *her*.

And now he was being chased across the dead fields of Sanasroth by a horde of feeders. He must have been tired and ready to give up, but he was still coming. For *her*.

And *I* was not about to let that little fox die.

I sprinted through the palace and down, through the Cogs—the multilevel settlement that had been built over the years around the palace's perimeter. The cobbled streets were empty for now, but they wouldn't be for long.

Bill.

I had to get to *Bill*.

The horses despised Ammontraíeth. They couldn't be kept in the stables. The high bloods kept their deadstock there, and a hungry feeder would pull a wall down with their bare hands to get to warm horse flesh. Bill, Aida, and two other bay mares had been stabled in an outbuilding five hundred feet away from the main yard, just beyond the high wall that enclosed the lowest level of the Cogs. I damn near ripped the outhouse's metal door from its hinges to get to my mount.

I didn't bother with bit or bridle. I vaulted onto Bill's bare back and kicked him out of his stall. My faithful friend didn't need telling twice. Carrion hadn't even made it across the courtyard by the time we came charging through the open doors.

"Get back inside!" I roared.

"*No!*"

"Gods and fucking sinners." I cursed at him in Old Fae as I galloped past him, reaching down with my right arm. The idiot clasped hold of my forearm and jumped, vaulting up onto Bill's back behind me.

"Aren't you going to ask where I learned how to do that?" the smuggler yelled.

"No," I snapped.

"Lorreth showed me!"

If he wanted congratulating, he was going to have to wait. A mile

of ankle-deep ash and loose shale stretched out between us and the fox. Normally, the horses had to pick a path carefully over the loose, dead ground, but there was no time for that now. Bill snorted and blew, charging at the oncoming feeders; he didn't even flinch.

"That's it. Keep going," I whispered under my breath. "Thank you. *Thank you.*"

I should have made Carrion stay behind. There were more feeders sprinting after the fox than I'd first registered. Twenty of them? Thirty? More than I could face down without access to my magic this side of the Darn, and the male was a smuggler, not a blooded warrior. The sun had fallen below the horizon, though. And if the light was dim enough for the feeders, then it wouldn't be long before the high bloods of Sanasroth were awake. Without an escort back through the palace, the moron would have been dead in a matter of seconds...

We were gaining ground.

But so were the feeders.

They were ever hungry, and it had probably been an age since a living creature had dared to cross into Sanasrothian lands. The mindless foot soldiers of Sanasroth wouldn't allow this opportunity to pass them by for anything.

I could see Onyx properly now.

His black-tipped ears were pinned flat to his head as he ran for his life. He launched himself from a rock, soaring through the air, a streak of white against the growing dark, and then his paws were back on solid ground, kicking up a trail of ash as he sprinted.

"Come on," I hissed through my teeth. "Come on. *Run.*"

Less than a mile now. The gap between us was closing... but so was the gap between the feeders and the fox. He was tired, I could tell. His tongue lolled from his mouth, waving like a banner. The whites of his eyes were showing. The little fox was terrified.

I hadn't noticed Carrion was clinging to the back of my armor. With no saddle to grip, he really had no other choice. I bit back an annoyed curse, leaning forward, urging Bill on. Faster he went, faster, never faltering. Not once did he break his stride.

"We're almost there!" Carrion bellowed.

I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw cracked. "Hold on!"

There was no stopping. If we stopped, we died. I grabbed a fistful of Bill's mane and prayed to the gods I hated for the second time in less than a week.

Save the fox.

Save Bill.

Save the fox.

Save Bill.

Please...

White spittle foamed at the feeders' mouths. Their mindless baying filled the air as we drew closer, closer, closer.

Save the fox.

Save Bill.

They were right on top of Onyx now. Only a hair's breadth away. The fastest among them, a male with a filthy, torn shirt, lunged forward, reaching for his prize. Bill pulled back, rearing, whinnying in terror. His hooves slipped on volcanic glass as he desperately tried to turn away from the approaching threat. The feeder's jagged claws grazed the little fox's fur, and the fox *leaped*...

Carrion caught him.

...And then promptly came off Bill, sliding backward over his haunches.

Gods and *fucking* martyrs! "*On your feet, Swift!*" I roared. The copper-haired prince clutched Onyx tight, scrambling to get up. He moved quickly, but it wouldn't be fast enough. I drew Bill around, reining him in a tight circle, facing him toward the feeders, and dropped from his back.

"Steady, friend. Whoa. Wait for me," I whispered to him. Then I drew Nimerelle, and the killing began. The god sword bled black smoke as she scythed through the air. Where I swung her, necrotic flesh and brittle bone parted like wet paper in her wake.

"*Draw that weapon, Swift!*" I bellowed over my shoulder.

Carrion was on his feet. Simon, his god sword, was in his hand.

Onyx had bolted from his arms and was hiding between Bill's legs now, which wasn't doing much to help calm the horse. Bill stayed close, though, stamping his hooves and blowing, eyes rolling—afraid but wanting to obey. The tide of feeders would be on us any second. "Take their heads," I shouted. "Don't fuck this up, Carrion!"

"I won't!" He took up position next to me, adopting a readying stance, and I was struck with a flicker of surprise. The footwork was there. Almost. And when the ravening feeders fell upon us, he didn't immediately die. *Shocking.*

Silver and Fae steel swept through the air, cutting the bastards down. I caught most of them. The few that avoided me and targeted Carrion dropped to the ground, too. Most of them still had their heads and were still trying to kill the smuggler, but at least he put them down. Behind us, Onyx let out a terrified squeal...

Seven feeders.

Eight...

The three Carrion had downed were joined by a fourth.

Forty feet stood between us and the next wave of feeders. I grabbed Carrion by the scruff of his neck and shoved him back toward Bill. We'd been lucky so far, but we wouldn't stay lucky forever. I scooped up Onyx and vaulted onto Bill's back, pulling Swift up behind me.

Ammontraíeth loomed ahead—a clenched fist with knuckles for spires, punching skyward out of the mist. Not a palace, but a *fortress*.

I gripped Bill's mane, sending one last prayer to the gods, and we rode like the wind.



Hell was awake and grinding its teeth by the time we reached the Cogs. High and low bloods alike peered over the obsidian walls that guarded the small city at the foot of Ammontraíeth, their monstrous eyes full of judgment and hunger as Bill trudged reluctantly back toward the outbuilding. Lorreth was there waiting for us, arms crossed over his chest, a scowl etched deep into his face. "I swear to all the gods. You leave a

room and say you'll be right back. Next thing I know, I see you galloping across the dead fields, charging headlong at the undead!"

Carrion groaned as he slid down from Bill.

"And *you*? Are you out of your godscursed mind?" Lorreth hissed. He squinted at the smuggler as if he could actually *see* the stupid on him.

"Don't mind me. I only killed four feeders and saved Fisher's life." He affected his usual devil-may-care tone, but there was a note of true fear beneath it now. Our near brush with death had had the appropriate effect on him, it seemed.

I was going to kill him. "You maimed them at best," I snapped. "And the day you save *me* on a battlefield, I'll put on a dress and dance a fucking jig." He could have gotten us *both* killed by following me down here. He'd fucking fallen. If anything had happened to him, then what? Saeris would have been *pissed* at me.

But...

Onyx whimpered.

He shivered against my chest, tucked into a ball, his glassy black eyes still full of fear. His coat was filthy. Blood matted his fur on his back right leg. He yelped when I ran my hands over the injury, clearly in pain.

There would be time to yell at Carrion Swift later.

"Come on," I said. "Let's just get inside before these fuckers decide to take a bite out of one of us." I looked to my friend. "Any luck finding him?" I asked softly.

Lorreth's nostrils flared, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "No. I've searched high and low. If Foley's here, then I couldn't tell you where."

Unfortunate. We needed Foley. I sighed, shoving down my disappointment. "All right. Well, keep looking. I have a feeling we shouldn't give up just yet."

"Who's Foley?" Carrion asked.

Lorreth opened his mouth, halfway to answering, but then he hesitated, looking to me.

The universe could end and Carrion Swift wouldn't have run out of

questions. But in his position, I probably would have felt the same way. I inclined my head, glancing away while Lorreth explained.

“A friend once. Still a friend. One of *us*. We lost him at Ajun.”

Saeris said that Lorreth sang a ballad about the Ajun Gate, about the battle that had taken place there, but that the quicksilver had claimed the song in return for allowing Avisiéth, Lorreth’s sword, to be forged anew. Carrion had asked about the Ajun Gate since then. While we’d all waited for Saeris to wake after the Midnight Kiss, Lorreth had recounted plenty of our exploits to the smuggler. He’d talked of the friend we’d lost to the dragon. He just hadn’t told him the whole story.

“If you lost him in Ajun, then how . . .” Carrion’s brow furrowed, realization dawning on him. “Oh. You *lost* him. But he still lives. Here?” he said, looking up at the razor-sharp walls of the Black Palace that towered above us.

“Yes,” Lorreth said. It was remarkable how one word could hold so much tension. The warrior cleared his throat. “I’ll tear the place apart if I have to, Fisher. Don’t worry. I’ll get it done. Go. Get inside. Saeris was putting on a brave face when I left her, but she was panicking. I’ll rub Bill down and get him cooled off.” Even as he said it, he scrubbed a hand up and down Bill’s sweat-slicked neck, clapping him on his shoulder. I got down, careful not to jar Onyx too badly as my boots hit the ground.

I landed softly, but he still yelped. I could feel his bones through his fur. With a sinking heart, I saw that his paws were cracked and bleeding.

“You’ll have to hold him,” I told Carrion, as we headed back toward the Cogs.

“What? I can’t hold him. He does *not* like me.”

Quickly, I drew Nimerelle and spun the sword over, holding her up for Carrion to see. “Want to carry this instead?” I asked. “You’ll need both god swords if *you* want to carve a path for us back through the Cogs and into the palace.”

The smuggler paled as he assessed the sword. At best, you’d wind up with severe burns if you touched another warrior’s god sword. At worst, you might lose a hand. Or your life.

"I'll stick to the fox," he said, eyeing Nimerelle warily.

It took longer than I would have liked to make it back up to Saeris's rooms. We left a trail of teeth in our wake, canines skittering and bouncing off the cobbled streets and then off polished floors as we climbed each floor of the palace. By the time we were safely behind closed doors in Saeris's room, I had lost count of the vampires I'd killed, black blood painted Carrion's clothes, and Onyx had passed out from exhaustion.

Saeris was by the door, tears streaking down her pale, beautiful face. She was dressed in a thick black robe with elaborate golden embroidery at the pockets. Her expression was stricken as she took in Onyx. "Gods. Is he okay?" she whispered, as if she were too scared to ask the question for fear of the answer.

"He'll be fine," I told her. Gods, I wanted to sweep her into my arms and hold her. I knew the slope of her shoulders so well. The way the fine wisps of her hair curled at her temples. I knew the hard defiance she wore on her like a shield, but I hadn't met her grief yet. It was an unwelcome stranger I wanted to banish as soon as possible; its presence in the room made my chest ache.

Despite his injuries, the little fox writhed in Carrion's arms, determined to reach his destination at last. Only when he was safe, pressed up against Saeris's chest, did the tension seem to leave his body.

He trembled, panting, as he stared up at Saeris. She had cursed my name and bared her teeth at every threat she'd faced since I'd met her. Even when I'd found her on the steps in the Hall of Mirrors, dying from the injuries Harron had inflicted upon her, she'd been full of defiance. Now, she wept as she cradled the fox in her arms, and I couldn't fucking bear it.

I reached for him. "Here. Give him to me," I said.

Saeris's eyes were the pale blue of a winter dawn breaking over the mountains. Bottom lip quivering, she gave me a questioning look but didn't give it voice. She swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and handed Onyx over to me.

Carrion was gone. For once, the thief had assessed the situation and

made himself scarce. Saeris followed me with wide eyes, her heartbeat pounding in her throat as she watched me carry the fox over to the door that led out onto her balcony.

As the first of all the vampires and king of the Blood Court, Malcolm had claimed these rooms once, as was his right, but he hadn't spent much time here. According to Tal, he had slept in the tower above us, his paranoia urging him to lock himself behind a series of two-foot-thick iron doors while he slept. I couldn't imagine him standing out on this balcony, out in the open, with the night sky bristling with stars over his head. He would have been too afraid of his own shadow out here...

Saeris was radiant under the moonlight. Her hair whipped and snapped like a banner on the cold breeze. "Just..." Tears shone in her eyes. "If you have to do it, then at least make sure it's quick."

A band of iron cinched tight around my chest. She thought I was going to put the poor creature out of its misery. She thought that, and she had still handed him over to me. She'd trusted me to do what had needed to be done, to save her companion from pain...

I shook my head, smiling softly. "I told you. He's going to be fine, Osha. I promise." I sank down onto my knees, placing the ball of blood-stained white fluff in my lap. A pair of eyes, black and glassy as jet, stared up at me, wide and trusting.

"Healing is a small magic for me," I whispered to him. "I guess it's lucky for both of us that you're small, too." I waited for the current of magic to warm my palms. I'd used it to heal bruises when I was a Faeling. I'd used it to fix a broken thumb, and that had almost depleted my entire reserve of healing energy. When I was young, I'd complained to my mother that my healing gifts were so negligible, but she had laughed and ruffled my hair.

"Never doubt your powers, sweet one," she'd told me. "Each one of them is a gift. Each one will prove exactly enough when you have need of it. Have faith in yourself. You will always be enough."

I prayed she was right as I held my hands over the fox's injured hind leg. At first, I felt resistance—a barrier that didn't yield as easily as the

one that stood between me and my shadows. It gave eventually, though, allowing a wave of pain to wash over me. I winced—

“What is it?” Saeris asked. “What’s happening. What are you doing?”

Onyx whined. His head rested on my leg, his exhaustion seeping through the connection I’d just forged between us. He was weary to his bones, and his leg was pulsing with pain. Not broken, thankfully, but fractured. He’d been running on it for *so* long.

“Fisher!”

“A moment, Osha,” I said. “Trust me. This won’t take long.”

I closed my eyes, and I *pulled*. Some members of the Fae didn’t have access to small magics. A small magic wasn’t a part of a male or female’s birthright, like my shadows were. It was a much smaller well of energy—a faint affinity that a person might have toward a specific line of magic. Unlike birthright magic, small magic was a finite resource.

My hands shook as I dug deep, searching for every scrap of healing magic that still flowed inside of me. Once I’d visualized it there, in the middle of my chest, I poured it all into Onyx.

The fox shuddered, and within seconds, his rapid breathing began to ease. The pain radiating from him ebbed until it was only a dull throb in his leg. His paws were healed. The fractured bone fused... but not fully. I didn’t have *quite* enough healing magic to heal him all the way, but it was enough. He could manage the rest on his own.

The little fox yawned, then kicked, wanting to be free of me. His coat was clean again now, the blood that had stained it gone. His limp was barely noticeable as he ran back to his mistress.

Saeris’s eyes were full of wonder and relief as she stooped down to pick him up. “What? But... how?” She laughed as the fox nuzzled into her neck and licked her cheek. “I didn’t know you could heal!”

I shrugged. “I can’t now. Not anymore, anyway. It wasn’t much, but I gave him what I had.”

Her joy faded a little. “But... if you have healing magic, shouldn’t it just replenish? Like it does for Te Léna?”

Ruefully, I shook my head. “Some magics don’t work that way, Osha.” I would explain it to her some other time. There was still a