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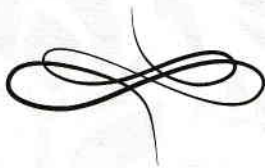
THE WOLVES OF RUIN



SABLE SORENSEN



1



Blood drips into my right eye. Once. Twice. It's blinding and searing at the same time.

I wince, letting out a pained whimper. It fucking burns, blood in the eye.

The pain is real.

The whimper is not.

If there's one thing I've learned in my twenty-three years alive, it's this: Women in pain give men confidence. It stirs up something instinctive, deep inside them, that makes them believe they have the upper hand, even if every logical piece of evidence screams at them they do not.

Confidence makes men sloppy.

And sloppy men are easy targets.

We're in some old emberwine warehouse in the Southern Quarter tonight, the air reeking of rotting fruit. Torches burn around the edges of the ring, illuminating our fight and casting everything else in twisting, dancing shadows. The crowd is hushed in anticipation, but even so, the room seems full.

Good. A bigger crowd means a bigger pot of winnings.

There's a loud *thump, thump, thump* as my opponent slowly approaches me, his steps heavy. He's a large, meaty man with a good six inches on me, which he undoubtedly thinks makes him powerful. He's not the kind of person who understands how lethal grace can be.

"I'll make you regret ever being born, little girl. You'll need a closed casket."

Goddess, this guy is a bore. But our audience is eating it up, if the frenzied roar is any indication.

More blood drips into my eye. He got me good with a right hook to the forehead, I'll give him that.

I turn my head to the side, feigning weakness, my cheek pressed into the packed dirt floor of the fighting ring. There's a flash of movement in the leering crowd as someone pushes their way toward the edge of the ring.

Lee. He must've just gotten off work.

He folds his muscular arms against his broad chest, his spotless messenger's tunic making him stick out in this seedy place. Then he raises an eyebrow at me in amusement.

I can almost hear his deep voice saying: *Stop toying with him, Meryn, and just end this so we can get on with our night.*

He's right, of course. I'd much rather be in his lap right now than face down in this stinking pit.

Right, then. Time to finish the show.

My opponent grows closer and I moan again, waiting for him to reach the exact right spot. He doesn't even see the trap I've set for him, even though it's so obvious. Even though I play this move almost every fight.

He doesn't *want* to see it, because I've made him confident. Certain that he will be the man to bring down Meryn Cooper, the infamous Alley Cat of the Eastern Quarter.

Idiot.

Finally, he reaches my side, preparing to grab me, or sit on me, or choke me out—something predictable. Another roar kicks up in the crowd, the room full of frothing, drunken gamblers all praying that he'll get me good, that their bet against the woman will pay off.

He leans down toward me, his foul breath hitting my face, and that's when I do it.

I loop my leg around his and drive my heel into the fleshy back of his knee with all the force I can muster. Then I roll to the side, out of his way, and spring up onto my feet.

"Fuck!" He crashes to the ground, hitting it hard, making it shudder beneath me. The air rushes from his lungs in an audible whoosh.

The man pushes up onto his palms, but before he can get any farther, I strike. I kick him in the nose, savoring the sweet crack it makes as it breaks. Ruby-red blood gushes down his face, dripping onto the floor. It knocks him backward onto his ass.

Before he can try to recover again, I jump on him, kneeling him in the groin to keep him down. Then I pin him, peppering his face with more strikes. I'm not going for a kill; I fight dirty, but not like that. But I'll be sure he stays down.

My knuckles burst open under their scars and calluses, and blood drips between my curled fingers. For a moment, I let myself relish the adrenaline rush of the pain and the clearheaded focus it gives me.

Then I press a forearm to the man's windpipe until he chokes. "Yield!"

I slap him openhanded. Just for the fun of it, just for the drama of his head snapping to the side. "Louder. With meaning. Let them hear you all the way in the castle."

"I yield!"

The crowd erupts into angry mutters as I let go of the man, standing to wipe my blood from my forehead. The host of tonight's fights, a portly man with a thick mustache, steps into the ring, hoists my wrist into the air, and declares: "Alley Cat wins! Next fight starts in twenty."

Coins change hands, with the bounty going to the few who were wise enough to put silvers on me.

It always surprises me a little, the sheer number of people who bet for the other man. Even with the history to show them they shouldn't.

A towel hits me in the face and I pull it off to see my trainer and neighbor,

Igor, assessing me, his brown, weathered face unreadable. I duck under the sides of the ring and step over to him, holding out my palm.

“Always straight to the coin with you, huh?” Igor grumbles.

“Me?” I bat my eyelashes, my voice high and sweet. “A refined lady like me would never think of something so crude as silvers. All I care about is tea and dresses and gossip.”

“Careful, you’re going to make that forehead wound bleed again.” Igor presses my winnings into my hand. “Good one, kiddo. Went on a little long for my taste, though. You should join a theater guild with those pained cries of yours.”

I shrug, counting the coins and doing quick math. Eight silvers today, which will cover Mother’s medicine from the apothecary for the next two weeks. “You know the crowd needs to have hope, Igor. It makes it more fun for all of us if they think they actually have a chance.”

“Whatever gets you the win, kid.” He hands me a water flask and I gulp it down. “Davey is setting up a fight in two weeks for Colbridge. Remember that slippery motherfucker from last year? Fancy another go?”

I crack my neck, scanning the packed room for Lee. Even at my unusual height, it’s hard to see over the heads milling about the crowded floor.

“Sure, as long as you make certain the odds are against me. The apothecary has hiked up their prices. Apparently, some ingredients they need grow close to the front and have gotten hard to acquire. I’d like to see double this amount next time.”

Igor’s perpetual frown deepens. He’s an unhappy-looking person, always has been for as long as I’ve known him, which has been my entire life.

He’s probably going to offer me help with Mother’s medicine costs, something I’ve declined for years. Everyone is struggling.

I’m not about to take food off Igor’s plate. We’ll get by; we always do.

Just then, a warm arm slings around my shoulders and I’m hit by the clean smell of pine soap, a familiar scent that instantly puts me at ease. I lean against Lee’s hard body and look up into his face—the sharp lines of his jaw covered in a light scruff, his dazzling sea-blue eyes.

He never fails to make my fights, and it never fails to please me, having someone by my side who is unfailingly and reliably supportive for once in my life.

Lee shoots me a wicked grin that makes my thighs tighten and raises up a small clinking bag.

“Nice fight, kitten. Buy your sister something nice from me for her nameday.” He slides the bag into my pocket as I lean up, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling his face down toward mine, desperate for his touch.

Before I can kiss him, a throat clears and I glance up, my lustful brain gone hazy.

“I’m going to go see Davey about the next fight,” Igor says, shifting awkwardly. “Leave you two at it. Find me before you head out, Meryn.”

He turns and walks away quickly, and I can’t help the laughter that spills out of me. “Poor Igor. I think we’ve scandalized him.”

Lee grins lazily down at me, his hands gripping my hips and tightening in a way that holds dark promise. He puts his mouth to my ear. “Glad he can’t read my thoughts,” he whispers, the heat of it sending my pulse into overdrive. “He’d never be able to look at me again.”

I move closer, but suddenly, a commotion kicks up. A disheveled man is pushing his way through the crowd.

His yellowed, unfocused eyes glare toward me.

“You cunt!” The man’s words slur as he staggers forward. “You fixed the bets, you stupid little bitch. I know you did!”

I laugh. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Lee watches the scene coolly, amusement briefly turning up the edges of his mouth.

The man pulls a knife from his pocket, its dull blade glinting in the dim light. There’s always one guy who can’t handle me winning, who lets it push him over the edge.

“You lost me my last silvers! You’re gonna pay for that.”

He brandishes his knife toward me, but before he takes another step, I’m

in motion. A sharp kick to his wrist and the knife slips from his grip. I catch it before he can blink, pressing the edge just under his Adam's apple in one swift motion.

"What was the plan here, then? You were going to, what . . . confront the person who just won a brutal, well-attended fight with this pathetic little dinner knife? Shake me down with this extremely dangerous weapon you're so skilled at wielding?"

I press the knife harder into his throat, and a thin red line of blood seeps out from under the blade. The man winces. The stench of urine hits me, and I realize he's soiled himself. Pathetic.

"That's what you get for betting against a woman. Get the fuck out of here. If I see your face at one of my fights again, I'll finish the job."

The man shoots me one last wild-eyed look and then turns and scurries back through the crowd. No one bothers giving him a second look. They're too busy getting ready for the next fight in here.

"Fucking idiot," Lee mutters under his breath. Then he grabs my hand in his large one and turns into the crowd, pulling me behind him toward a cluster of tables and chairs at the far end of the warehouse. We settle in and he quickly opens the rucksack he's brought with him, pulling out an antiseptic cream and some bandages.

He pulls me toward him on my chair and then wraps his long fingers firmly around my chin while he dabs the stinging cream onto my forehead, gentler than any other man has ever touched me.

"Hold still, kitten," he says, his stern voice brooking no argument. "This one's kind of nasty."

This has been our after-fight ritual ever since he started coming to these a year ago. I get hurt; he fixes me. I like it more than I'd ever admit, having someone to take care of me.

We met in the market in the Northern Quarter. I was coming to pick Saela up from school when a spooked horse broke loose from its merchant. It was heading right for my little sister, and I was too far away to do anything about

it. At that moment, I was sure I was going to watch her die in front of my eyes, helpless.

And then Lee jumped in front of it, his hands held up in a calming motion, and the horse just . . . stopped. He calmed the animal down and saved my sister's life.

I went to thank him, and the moment our eyes met, I knew I would be his. It takes a special man to tame a wild thing.

"Did that worry you? The guy who just attacked me?" I ask. He's been unusually quiet.

Lee's gaze connects with mine, deep and unreadable. "I knew the Alley Cat would hold her own. But I wish you'd end your fights faster. Injuries like this aren't necessary. Someday, Meryn . . . someday, you might come up against someone who has outmaneuvered you. You might not even see it coming."

He strokes a finger down my cheek, and I crawl into his lap, pulling him closer and closer. "Thank you," I whisper against his lips. "For fixing me. For caring if I get hurt."

Lee winds one of his hands into my dark hair, holding me in place as he crashes his lips down on mine. His other hand wraps around my back and he pulls me deeper into his lap, where I sense him hardening underneath me. I groan into his mouth at the feeling, and he pulls back, laying me bare with his look.

"Come back to my place tonight," he says—a demand, not a question.

Lee has a small flat to himself in a building in the Northern Quarter, though as a castle messenger, he lives there only part time, often grabbing a few hours of sleep in the castle dormitories between his duties. I'm there as frequently as I can be, but my mother's condition and Saela's care mean I don't see him nearly as often as either of us would like.

I'm about to assent when a grave voice calls, "Meryn."

Igor cuts quickly through the crowd, his expression tight. "Word's spreading. Another child's gone missing from Eastern."

My stomach bottoms out as I quickly extract myself from Lee and stand. "Description?"

"A girl. Ten or so. They said . . . they said she has dark hair and hazel eyes."

No.

I shoot Lee a quick look, already thinking about the fastest route home.

"Go," Lee says quickly, standing as well. "You have to." I nod in agreement.

"Meryn," Igor says, "it could be a hundred girls."

But I don't acknowledge him. I'm already shoving my way through the rowdy crowd, my heart pounding a frantic staccato beat. Wood bites into my palms as I shove open the exit to the warehouse, and then the always frigid night air hits me like a punch. I left so quickly that I forgot to gather my things or put on my threadbare coat, but Igor will grab it, I'm sure.

Who needs a coat, anyway, when panic is setting your blood on fire?

The streets of Southern, the farthest neighborhood from the castle, are eerily dark and as foggy as always. The residents around here don't bother spending their few coins to keep the street torches lit. They can't drive out the darkness of this neighborhood, anyway; this quarter has darkness set deep into its bones.

Southern is where you go when you want to do something illegal, illicit, or otherwise morally bankrupt. A couple of torches wouldn't stop it.

I do a rapid calculation. A normal route from Southern to Eastern takes at least forty-five minutes if you follow the main path back through the Central Quarter. But I'm fast, a benefit of my long, muscular legs. And I know my way around neighborhoods that no well-bred person should ever know.

I can make it in twenty, maybe fifteen, if I take alleys.

So I take a deep, fortifying breath and then sprint, heading past the many decrepit warehouses. My legs carry me through the dirty market square in Southern, and then I push into the tenement alleys, the neighborhood that borders both the Central Quarter and Eastern.

The air smells like poverty here, and I try to breathe in through my mouth to avoid the scent of unwashed bodies. Though Southern is the poorest quarter, it's not much better in Eastern; nowhere in the royal city of Sturm frost is truly well off.

We do hear rumors about how lavishly the Bonded live. At the very least,

I'm sure they don't have to worry about their children getting kidnapped from their beds in the middle of the night.

Saela.

The thought fuels me, and I pick up my speed, my lungs and legs burning in tandem. As I near the border of Central and Eastern, King Cyril's castle looms over everything, the solid gray stone lurching over the city, and its well-lit walls make the streets brighter.

I duck under clotheslines and hop over broken cobblestones, faster and faster and faster, racing through the edges of Eastern and finally into our quarter's market square. It's cleaner than the one in the Southern Quarter, actually put to use by the people in our neighborhood.

The sound of a mother's wailing carries through the night air. *Please, goddess, no.*

A crowd huddles together in the fog. I push forward, shoving through the other citizens gathered around until I reach the center.

Not my mother, not my mother.

The woman on the ground looks up at me, her eyes wet. It's Mrs. Sawyer, a seamstress who lives several streets away from us. Her husband and older sons surround her. She wails again.

"Leesa," she moans. "Leesa!"

The knot in my chest loosens but doesn't go away.

Leesa Sawyer is one of Saela's good friends from primary school. She always begs me to show her how to throw a punch, but I know her straitlaced parents wouldn't like that. Leesa's bright-eyed and funny and clever. Or she was.

Now, Leesa is just the latest in an ever-growing list of kids who have disappeared.

And the Nabbers never return what they take.

Backing away from the crowd, I try to calm my breathing, still erratic from my run. Then I make my way toward my home. All the dwellings around here are half timbered and stone, and our home is no exception, although it sits shorter than its neighbors. My father always said he was going to add a second story.

Of course, he never returned from the war to build it.

I head down our darkened street, my steps echoing off the stone buildings. The shingles on our roof look worn, I notice. Another task for another day.

The interior is dark, except for a single candle burning on our bare wooden mantelpiece in the living area.

Mother paces back and forth, her dark hair unbrushed and wild. She's muttering to herself, yanking at her moth-bitten nightgown, which is inside out. When she spots me, her eyes alight with an awful, vacant recognition, and I wonder which stranger I'm about to get.

My heart sinks. She doesn't know me when she's like this. She doesn't know anyone, lost to a world of her mind's own creation. Sometimes, she's sweet in her madness, cooing and loving. And sometimes, she's violent, breaking the few possessions we have and raising her hand to us.

When she gets like this and I'm not here, Saela knows to lock herself in our room from the inside. Only I have the key.

"Lumina!" Mother exclaims now, her voice pained. She races up to me, clutching my arm tightly, almost painfully. "Oh, Lumina. They've been terrors today, the twins. They're trying to find you, but they never listen to me, never, never, never—"

"Mother, hush." I run a hand down her hair, gently, calming. Lumina and the twins, whoever they may be, are some of her common delusions. "Come to your bed. I'll make the twins go away for you."

I lead her to her room and help her onto the lumpy mattress, then reach for the medicine bottle at her bedside, the one we get from the apothecary. Both he and the medic say it helps with her episodes, and some days it does, but often it's like nothing will bring her back at all. I feed her a thick, pungent spoonful of the sludgy medicine and pull her scratchy, too-thin blanket over her.

Mother takes the dose without protest, her eyes drifting shut almost as soon as her head hits the pillow. My stomach churns while I watch over her. The pain of this, of having to drug my own parent into complacency, never dulls. Finally, her breathing evens out, and I go check on Saela.

As I assumed, Saela's locked the door to our room, so I pull out the key and let myself in.

My sister is cozied into her small bed, sleeping soundly, her dark hair spread across her thin pillow. Ten, almost eleven—the same age as Leesa Sawyer.

In her sleep, Saela looks so much like our father, the father she's never known. She has the same stubborn chin, the same aquiline nose. My own memories of him grow fogged as the years pass, but she brings him alive for me.

I sit down next to her on her bed, running the back of my finger down one of her soft cheeks. "I won't let anything happen to you," I whisper, a fierce, protective instinct burning in my chest. "I promise."

This nauseous, terrified churning in my stomach—I'm absolutely fucking sick of it. Of living a life where I just accept that I have no control, that our children can just disappear and no one will do a single thing about it.

Tonight was too close of a call.

And if no one's going to stop this . . . well, then I will.