The Feasting Grounds are alight with lively conversations, many placing bets on whose to claim me as their prize. Among the ruckus, I can hear odd exchanges emerge.

"I call dibs on the loincloth!" Kieran proclaims, much to everyone's amusement.

"Perv!" raises a chant from some of the gathered, but the mean wolf seems not to mind.

That's when the Chief's voice breaks the murmur.

"Ranok?" he asks, but his son seems indifferent to the question posed.

"I don't care. I don't need a token."

"Oh? Cocky." Kieran responds, always eager to land a jab. "I guess you had a pretty good sniff of him already."

"He's been serving me for three weeks now. And we shared the road." Ranok subdues a growl. "Of course, I know my ward's scent."

"-*A-* ward." The mean wolf reiterates. "He's not *yours* yet."

"That's what *you* think." These are the last words I hear coming from my wolf's muzzle as I am led away.

My mind whirls with a torrent of thoughts I cannot even account for. I want to cry, run, and scream… yet there's also an odd twinge of excitement amidst this maelstrom of fear and despair. I feel helpless – I *am* helpless – but as I trail behind the white she-wolf with some surprising sense of urgency, each step seems to embolden me, steeling my resolve. I can do this… I *must* do this. Once we're out of earshot, entering a veil of woodland stillness, Verissa's sigh, laden with exasperation, slices through the air.

"Mother Moon… what in the Darkest Night are you thinking?!" Her voice, a mix of plea and accusation, is directed at the luminescent orb above. My gaze lingers on the female, noting the slump of her shoulders and the weariness etched into her posture. "Nothing is as it should be…" She mutters, and I venture a hesitant word of solace.

"Or, perhaps… it's all somehow part of her plan?" I propose, but my attempt at optimism is met with a deeper, more resigned exhale followed by a sharp retort.

"With you around, nothing seems to go according to *any* plan."

I hang my head at the cutting words and manage a subdued apology. "I'm sorry."

Hearing that, her gaze softens, and she sighs once more. "N-no… that was unkind of me. With or without you, things have been askew for a while now… regardless of our efforts."

"But you always made it work… we can do it this time as well."

"We better." she murmurs, her voice quivering with doubt, and we continue on.

As we drift further from the light and laughter of the feasting grounds, my confusion mounts. I'm not even sure what is expected of me.

"Come." she beckons, noticing my hesitation, and I try to catch up. Not long after, we come to a halt, and my eyes fall on a small stone altar beside an ancient oak. Its branches burl and furrow high above, forming a dense canopy like a giant spiderweb, while its roots dig deep into the soil, creating knolls and burrows all around. The bark is rugged and cracked in places, revealing greyish, yet still very much alive core of what might be one of the oldest trees in this forest. However, my attention is caught by a cavernous opening in the middle of the trunk, right above the stone altar. Within it, lurking just beyond the moonlight, hides a ferocious muzzle of a mighty wolf chiselled out of the very flesh of the tree that's giving it shelter.

"What's this?" I inquire, nervously eyeing a knife – the very one we bought for her – which rests on the altar.

"Blaid'Mar's shrine…" she answers matter-of-factly. "As a Tribute, you must be anointed, as is our custom."

"Does anointing me somehow involve a knife?" I ask, unable to hide my apprehension, and she chuckles amusedly.

"Patience. We'll get to the knife." Her teasing does little to ease my nerves.

"Not exactly in a hurry in that regard."

"Odd, Vul mentioned you enjoy a good skewering."

"Ha-ha". I grumble, but the female tugs at my clothes and her expression sours.

"I'm afraid this will be rather undignified." She states, slowly but surely beginning to undress me. At first, I'm cooperative, but once she relieves me of my shirt and tugs at the pants, I cringe and she mutters. "Sorry… I need you the way Mother Moon has made you."

"Right…" I hesitate, visibly distressed at the prospect, and she meets my reluctance with a scornful yet reassuring look.

"Seriously, [mc]… there's nothing there that I haven't seen before, and then some!" she sends me an encouraging wink. "Ranok, Vul and I… we've all been bare under the summer sun, bathing together. I've seen all the goods this Tribe has to offer. Whatever you're hiding down there…" she gestures vaguely towards my lower half. "…won't be a revelation to me."

I sigh heavily, trying to undo my pants, but she stops me, taking hold of my hands.

"Allow me. That's *my* job tonight."

Again, fighting my discomfort, I allow her to proceed until I'm finally standing in front of her in the nude, arms crossed at my groin, trying to retain what dignity remains.

She then walks over to the altar, where beside the stone lies a shallow decorative dish with what appears to be a loofa. I groan, realising I'm about to be given a sponge bath. When the female returns, dish in her paw, she gives me a condescending look, indicating my hands with her eyes. Again, I sigh heavily and expose myself, allowing her to take a knee and begin padding me with the moistened wipe.

"Do we really have to?" I try to protest, but she cuts me off sharply.

"I might not be good at my job, but I still take it seriously. It's water and vinegar; it'll clear any residual scent from your body. You're meant to be unadulterated, just as Aluna made you."

"This… feels… *wrong*." I shiver as the sponge glides across a particularly intimate spot.

"We can endure this in silence if you prefer."

"N-no! No…" I respond pleadingly, shaking my head. "I'd rather use this time to figure out how to help me win this."

"You're the prize, silly… you've won just by being the Tribute," she says with a gentle smile, and I roll my eyes.

"Doesn't feel like winning. More like having a target on my back…"

"It is a *rare* honour. You're closer to the White Lady than many wolves could ever hope for." She continues, fixated on her assignment, and I tsk.

"You know what I mean…"

"No, not really." she pauses, placing the sponge back in the dish. "Most could only *dream* to be where you are right now. And as things are, the matters are no longer in our paws anyway. At this point, what will be - *will* be - whether either of us likes it." She wrings the sponge and resumes the bath, getting dangerously close to my privates.

"Oy! I-I'd rather do this part myself… for real." In panic, I grab her paw, looking at her rather sternly. "I think the Moon Goddess or the Great Wolf won't mind if I keep some of my dignity intact."

"Fine." she shrugs, releasing the sponge and stepping back. "Suit yourself."

She sits in the grass, intently observing me as I continue her task. For a moment I consider turning away, but then I'd simply moon her, which doesn't seem as much of an improvement. I'm also not exactly encouraged by her despondent attitude; it's almost as if she has given up.

"This is madness…" I mutter, done with my humiliating wash and tossing the sponge back into the dish. "Can't you divinate something?"

"Divinate?" she snorts. "I thought you were smarter than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know well enough what I mean." she insists, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Okay, enough with the mental games. Can we speak plainly?"

"I thought we were."

"Vee!" I demand, and for the first time, she regards me less like an annoying child and more like an equal.

"Fine…" she gives in. "I can't speak with Aluna, [mc]."

"Because of me?"

"No, not really…" she utters despondently, looking off into the dark forest. "I've never been really able to. This… *life*… it wasn't meant for *me*." Her voice takes on a more assured tone. "If it weren't for Vul or Ranok, I'd have left a long time ago. But… I was happy being part of their group. I bettered myself through hard work and skill and even managed to become an Alpha candidate. I traded potential freedom for a simple life among my friends. But the Ancestors had something else in mind."

"You becoming the Shaman's apprentice."

"I must agree with most; it *was* mad." She snorts on a laugh. "I don't come from an anointed bloodline; I had no training nor special upbringing. In fact, even my predisposition was wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't necessarily *believe* anyone ever communed with our goddess in the first place." She states, looking me straight in the eyes. "Not directly, at least."

"What?"

"You can't speak with gods and dead, like you and I are speaking." She reiterates, mockery clearly lining her voice. "It's all just a guesswork. Vul is right; smoke and mirrors …and hallucinogenic mushrooms." She scoffs. "Don't get me wrong, our sacred rites and traditions have their value; there's immense collective knowledge only generations of struggle and strife could bring, and it's good to rely on the wisdom of those who came before us. But we cannot let it bind us, or worse yet, blind us to the harsh realities of this world."

"Which are?"

"The Moon Goddess cares less about the mortal affairs than we'd like to admit." She concludes coldly. "Think about it – if she had any investment in our Tribe, she would've made it known beyond any doubt. But so far, we're flailing around in the darkness without any *real* guidance." I listen to her argument, the female's expression becoming more resolved with each passing word. "Delran's death made me realise that we - *are* - alone. There was no warning, not the slightest hint of this calamity coming our way. Aluna had plenty of opportunities to intervene… she *chose* not to."

I cannot deny I understand her reasoning better than most could. But at the same time, it's hard to hear her verbalise a crisis of faith so airily. Especially not now, when everything hinges on that very faith. I must have been set on this path for a reason! Otherwise, what is the point of any of this?

"So… Ranok's Coming of Age…" I start slowly, noticing a mocking smirk appear on her muzzle, as she scoffs yet again.

"Oh, don't you start with that..."

"What did you really see, Verissa?" I press, my voice tinged with a mix of fear and urgency, but my demand just hangs in the air.

She sits in silence for a moment, her fingers nervously intertwining, then her eyes, ablaze with frustration, peer onto mine.

"Nothing. I saw *nothing*." she snarls, and I feel a shiver run down my spine. "No visions, no divine whispers. I just echoed my own wishful prayer to that idiot, hoping he'd find a sign in the forest; a blessing from the White Lady herself, to guide his path. It was nothing but a *foolish* hope." The words spill from her in a torrent of bitterness, and I feel my legs weaken as if the earth beneath me has given way.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Ranok was born under the Full Moon, his cry brought Vul to life... ever since he was a pup, Aluna seemed to hold him in the highest of regards. He was her chosen, her Champion, in everyone's eyes." She reiterates somewhat bitterly. "And he lives up to it, - *every* - *damn* – *time*!" Her voice carries a mixture of admiration and resentment. "I thought that if anyone could compel the Moon Goddess to intervene, to do something, *anything*... it would be *him*."

"So, it wasn't a vision?" I ask, desperation creeping into my words. "Not even a voice? Do you even hear those?"

"No, [mc]. It was all make-believe." She confesses with a hint of sorrow and our troubled gazes meet, as if we're truly seeing each other for the first time.

I'm not sure how to take this in… I cannot believe Vul had us all right from the get-go. We've all got caught up in a lie to the point other's lives were put on the line. Damn, I feel stupid! But as this bitter realization dawns on me, I somehow refuse to accept such a depressing truth.

"Vision or no vision… do you think there's any chance at all that Aluna put me in his path?"

"If she did, it's as if she's mocking us." At first, her scoff is piercing, yet her eyes soften quickly. "You're a good person, *Caelan*, but you're not the miracle we've all been praying for. You're a complication in every sense of the word." Her blunt assessment stings, even though I can't argue with it. I notice a shift in her demeanour as she stands up and moves closer. "That being said, I'm glad you're here." she whispers, her gaze intense as she takes the ceremonial bowl. "Now I know that I need – *want* - to make this work. I believe more than ever before that our people must move forward. Ranok *is* our future, but he won't be able to secure it on his own. As a shaman, I can help him lead our people from the darkness of prejudice and superstition."

"Even if doing so under false pretences?"

"Oh, Aluna won't mind. After all, Delran, one of her most devoted of servants, was cut down in his prime by a bunch of foreign wolves who turned their backs on her and desecrated her groves… yet there's no divine retribution to be seen. It seems to me that our goddess is of a far more flexible persuasion than we were initially led to believe." She jests, dabbing a few spots she deems not sufficiently cleaned, while I ponder her words.

I cannot shake off the feeling that I'm partly to blame for her current crisis of faith. The cynicism she displays jars with my own unresolved beliefs. Despite her doubts, I've experienced enough to know that there are forces beyond our understanding at play. The question is… if they have anything to do with the White Lady; that's the troubling part.

I look around anxiously as the cold night breeze caresses my moistened skin, forcing an involuntary rubbing of my shoulders. She notices that, and puts the ceremonial dish away, which I take as a sign to get dressed.

"We're not quite finished." Verissa warns, her tone somewhat playful. "I've only cleansed you, now comes the anointing."

My eyes dart nervously towards the shrine.

"With the blade?" I inquire, unable to mask my apprehension, and she chuckles.

"You really get impatient around sharp objects."

"Not funny."

Ignoring my discomfort, the female moves to the altar, turning over a stone slab to reveal a hidden compartment. From within, she retrieves a small, silver vase ornately decorated with stylised motifs of wolves and moons. "This is dew collected from this very Oak during every Full Moon." She explains, indicating the sprawling tree before us. "It's sacred and meant to entice Blaid'Mar."

I nod, silently observing as she delicately pours the chilly liquid over various parts of my body. The sensation is initially soothing until she reaches my groin, prompting me to recoil and cover myself with a startled look.

"Do we really need to entice him down *there*?!"

"One can never be enough of a catch." she quips, though I fail to see the humour. "Come on, [mc]; we've come this far; it would be silly to back out now over your prudishness. Had it been anyone else, Ranok included, I'd still be doing the same."

I hesitate for a moment, and her gaze hardens as she shifts her weight to the other hip.

"You said you'd do anything to secure your place here. If *this* is where you draw the line—"

"Fine…" I grumble, exposing myself and allowing her to complete the task. For my consolation, at least neither of us seems particularly thrilled about it. Once done, Verissa carefully places the vase back into its hiding spot and secures the altar.

"Now, for the offering."

"The knife…" I utter, swallowing as I see the blade glint in her paw.

"Yes, [mc], we finally arrive at the knife. Give me your right hand." she muses, reaching out to me and I hesitate, staring at my palm, bracing for what's to come.

I guess this part is somewhat familiar to me… feels like I've seen it play out many times across many stories, yet… fuck it! I guess I'll have to toughen this one out.

"Okay, just... do it quickly!" I mumble, placing my palm in hers, and she looks at me, a hint of amusement twinkling in her eyes.

"I only need to prick your finger." The female sneers mockingly. "You really *are* slash-hungry."

"Ouch!" I yelp, as the sharp end of the knife dives into the tip of my index finger, more out of a shock than actual pain.

We watch as a small, scarlet droplet forms there, and she nods towards the tree.

"Now, rub your blood into Blaid'Mar's muzzle. Let him taste your essence."

Cringing at her choice of words, I approach the carving with a mix of fear and reverence, almost feeling as if its vacant eyes are more alert than they seem. I take a deep breath, looking at the wooden, snarling muzzle, and simply put my finger in, half expecting the statue to clamp its jaw to claim the proverbial pound of flesh. Of course, nothing as gruesome as that happens, and I end up simply gliding my bleeding digit across the polished surface.

"Yes, like so." Verissa croons with approval, guiding me back once I'm done. "There, you are ready."

"Can I get dressed now?"

"Pft. No…" she snorts sarcastically, and I feel a surge of frustration.

"W-what?!"

"You will be hunted as you are now."

"But—"

"No 'buts.' We're short on time." she cuts me off harshly. "If you *are* to succeed, you must do exactly as I say. Everything we've done…" she gestures at the shrine and tree behind it "-would've been for nothing if you get caught."

"I know, but... *why* must I be naked?"

"Your scent; it's loud." she explains matter-of-factly. "And most of it lingers on your clothing. Putting them back on would undo all the washing. In any case. Do you remember where the stream is?"

"Sort of…" I respond half-heartedly. "I'm not exactly sure where we are *now*."

"It lies in that direction." she points to our left with a solemn gesture. "You'll have a bit of a head start, roughly an hour or so. You have no hope of outrunning either of them, but you can outsmart them." She taps her finger against my temple for emphasis. "You need to dull your scent as much as possible. Kieran is fixated on you, and he'll have no problem sniffing you out even as you are now. Go to the stream and wash there again." I grimace as she levels me a worried gaze. "It won't be pleasant, with no fur, and with the water being as cold as it is… but you *must* endure."

"I-I'll manage…" I muster up a response, though my confidence falters.

"Use the silt and muck beneath the stones, not just water." she insists. "You must thoroughly coat yourself, particularly... in those areas." Her gaze falls to my groin, and I can't help but wince. "Once you've done this, there's one more critical step. It's important that you follow through."

"Of course! Anything." I assure her, my nod firm.

"Do you recall the flower you mistook for wild lavender?"

"Wolfsbane?"

"Precisely." She nods, a mix of satisfaction and relief evident in her muzzle. "It thrives in the underbrush where sunlight can reach, often in small clearings. Should you discover a cluster, hide close by. We instinctively shun areas where the plant grows."

"Should I rub myself with them, perhaps?" I suggest, only to see her eyes widen in alarm.

"Never!" she exclaims with startling urgency. "Avoid direct contact at *all* costs unless you wish to court death itself tonight!" I blink in surprise, and she exhales deeply. "They're lethal, capable of felling even our mightiest of wolves. In your case, *Tiny*, they'd stop your heart in an instant."

"Oh… right." I respond, a wave of unease washing over me.

"There's little else to it, I'm afraid. Everything is in Aluna's paws now." Verissa admits, her sigh heavy as she smooths out the folds of her crumpled robe. "As much as I dislike Kieran, I cannot flaw his logic; this ordeal is as good a test of this lunacy as any." She pauses, considering her next words. "Do you truly believe that Aluna has brought you here on purpose?" she asks, and I falter.

"I… I don't know what to believe. But I know *someone* has."

"Then let's hope it was indeed the White Lady." Verissa concludes with a harsh tone. "Should Kieran claim you, it would be Tano all over again, rendering Ranok useless to any of us. So… we *need* you to take this seriously."

Her words cause my brows to furrow, a retort teetering on the edge of my tongue.

"It's not exactly like I'm looking forward to changing my master!"

"Good, now off you go." she responds, her nod carrying an odd sense of satisfaction. I watch as the female spreads out her arms and looks to the sky. "Go with the blessing of all the Ancestors that came before us, and may Blaid'Mar guide your step on this journey."

I offer her a respectful bow in turn, but as I am about to depart, my eyes linger on my discarded clothing.

"Wouldn't it make sense to take some of those with me and place them around as decoys?" I suggest, only to see a flicker of surprise, then a tender smile across her muzzle.

"Clever thought, had you been one of us." she chuckles softly. "But alas, you're a mere human. You don't have time for detours. Reaching the stream will challenge your endurance as it is."

"Oh… okay." I mutter, a sense of disappointment settling in as I pick up my leather pants. "Maybe… if I'll just take these."

Verissa looks at me a bit more sternly.

"It'll leave a trail…"

"You say it's all in the paws of the White Lady anyway…" I insist, squeezing the rims of the garment tightly, partly out of desperation, and seeing my posture deflate, the female steps closer.

"Listen… even if Kieran finds you… he won't be able to harm you. The Ancestors' protection—"

"Don't give up on me just yet, Vee." I interject, not wanting to even entertain the possibility as if it could jinx the outcome. Instead, I meet her gaze with newfound determination and the female's expression shifts, a glimmer of respect emerging.

"I'm not."

"Good, because neither am I." I assert, then dash into the cold embrace of the night, setting my course for the creek. I might not be good for much else, but the least I can do is run… run as if my life depended on it!

I rush through the foreboding greenery, blades of grass cutting at my calves like knives while the frigid air stings my naked skin. It’s hard to maintain an urgent pace for the pain, and for the constant reminder of my nudity. Every now and then I stumble, instinctively trying to cover my groin, worried someone might catch me in this compromising state.

My mad race through the undergrowth continues, my skin bearing bruises from a few stray branches that whipped me like a cart-pulling horse. In this darkness, with but a sliver of light passing through the dense canopy above, all I can do is guess which way to go. It's like navigating in the void, but even then, I'd still have my senses. Here… all my instincts are awry. It feels so alien, so incredibly disorienting. My worst fear is that I have been running around in circles. And just as that thought occurs, so do I notice, or at least think I do, that some of the foliage and trees look incredibly familiar.

"It's just in your head." I mutter, acutely aware of the cosmic fart messing with my perceptions from the onset of this misadventure.

Thankfully, despite the amount of stress I'm under, my chatty mind-squatter seems uncharacteristically mute. Maybe it's all the anointing and blessing? Here's hoping.

But despite my greatest efforts to ignore the gnawing feeling I'm getting increasingly lost, I finally must come to a stop, not only to find my bearing, but also to catch a breath. I look around in every direction, a sprinkling of Name Trees revealing itself through the Moon Stones glimmering between the regular growth.

"I don't recognise this place." I gasp out loud, not sure whether that's a comforting revelation or not. "At least I haven't been here before, that's a start."

But as I find some solace, a piercing howl resonates in the distance, startling the sleeping birds which immediately take flight. It's urgent, and full of verve; dozens of wolves spurring each other on, celebrating a hunt. My hunt! It began... Fuck! With little choice, I cut my breather short and dash forward with what little strengths remain.

My heart is about to break out of my ribcage, pounding erratically and without mercy. Each shallow gasp of air seems to asphyxiate me, as if I am breathing smoke. My vision blurs and I'm forced to hunch down, supporting myself against my knees. Breathe… just breathe. Another droplet of sweat falls to the grass. As I try to wipe my forehead clean of moisture, the dizziness spins me to the left and I have to grasp the nearby tree to prevent faceplanting into the dirt. I'm exhausted, it feels like I've been running a Marathon, but I doubt I've even gotten far from the village. The moment they all started howling and snarling, and that twig snapped against my buttocks, it's like I've turned into a caged rabbit released at the dog races. All I could do is bolt into whichever shrub and from then on it is all just a haze. I don't even know where I am. I look around, still desperately trying to catch some air, rubbing my left eye, waterlogged with my still cascading sweat… shit… I bet they could smell it a mile away. I don't think I can do this… I…

My knees give in, and I suddenly find myself plopping on all four, still heaving, still panting, until I start choaking on my own saliva. Each cough rattles my chest like a kick into the stomach. Air… I… air…

"Wake up!"

A flash of light pierces my vacant mind and I jolt up as if I've just risen from the dead, long, greedy mouthful of midnight breeze echoing around me. I don't know how long I was out… but judging by my still racing heartbeat, and beads of sweat trickling down my temple, it couldn't have been long. Wobbly and weak I get up to my feet, brushing off dead leaves and moss from my body, and look around. I… I don't recall this place. I don't think this is where I was supposed to go. Damn it! In my panic I got lost in these woods. I was supposed to go for the creek!

As I make my futile attempt to find my bearing I freeze. The same feeling, I once had at the cabin fills my body with chill and as I scan my surrounding, there it is - I notice a pair of eyes far in the distance, glimmering like golden coins in the dark. It's neither Kieran nor Ranok, that's for sure. For a moment my heart sinks at the thought of Andalt, but as the shadow shifts all becomes clear; either I'm seeing things, or its indeed a feral wolf stalking me in these woods.

"Great…" I snort sardonically. "Wouldn't it be something if I got mauled on this hunt by an *actual* damn wolf?"

But that thought, as ironic as it is, causes my heart to sink and I quickly scan the ground for something to defend myself with. I find a large fallen branch, which could serve as a club… if I'm to be attacked, at least I will go down fighting. When I grab hold of it, and take a defensive stance, the creature seems to turn away. The golden glow of its eyes is claimed by darkness, as if it lost interest. And then it strikes me – what if this IS the Great Wolf? Or if not him, then some other spirit? Damn it… of all the times, this is the one I really could've used Kayn's ring!

"Please… whoever you are…" I mutter, my voice wavering both out of fear and exhaustion. "I don't know what is expected of me, but I cannot do it alone. I'm just a boy… none of this was meant for me!"

The shadow stops and for a moment the glimmer returns, flashing briefly in my direction.

"Please… I *beseech* you." I continue, noticing the creature standing still. "I don't care what happens to me, but if the wrong wolf finds me…" I cut off, tears welling in my eyes at the sheer thought of it, and I shake my head as if to dispel a bad dream. "Ranok has enough on his plate as it is! Isn't one heartbreak enough?"

Again, the golden eyes flash in my direction and then into the distance. We stand there, separated by dark forest for a moment, until once more the eyes flash at me.

"You… you want me to follow?" I ask, and without answer, the creature proceeds to walk away at a leisurely pace. Taking a deep breath, I decide to abide. After all, what other choice do I really have? I keep our initial distance, both out of respect and fear. Whatever this creature is, had it wanted proximity, I'd be in no position to deny it, so apart we must stay. We meander between the thickening woods for a while, until I hear a distinct trickle of water. Could it be? I half want to rush forward, but reminded I might be in the presence of an actual magical being, I reign that impulse in. Soon enough, my patience is rewarded, and we emerge onto a small clearing with a stream running through it. I'm not sure if it's the same one as Tano took me to, but it does not matter. What matters is that here in the open, the silhouette of the creature is clear as day – it *is* a feral wolf… but of spectacular size. From this distance he looks the size of a pony! What's odd about him, though, is that the light seems not to affect him; he's black as ink, despite moon shining high above us. I don't know if that's a good or a bad sign, but I don't get to dwell on it long.

"Please… wait up!" I call out, seeing the creature already crossing onto the other side of the creek. "I need to wash off some of my scent. I'm grateful for your aid, but if I won't do my part, it will all be for nought."

The wolf stops within the shade of the treeline, looking at me with those piercing golden eyes. It feels slightly improper to be nude in front of what might as well be a demigod, but then again… God in Genesis didn't seem all that bothered by it in the first place. I try to be as fast as possible, yelping and gasping at the cold nibbles of the spring water. I'm not sure if it's really accomplishing much other than exposing me to potential hypothermia… that's when it hits me – muck from the bank! I throw over some rocks, and soon enough I'm wiping handfuls of frigid mud onto my body. It's terribly cold, akin to rubbing snow into your bare skin, but it must be done. Noticing the wolf's eyes dart away now and then, I realise we've tarried long enough, and I get up to my feet.

"I'm sorry…" I gasp out, coming onto the other shore and spreading my arms. "Do you think it suffice?"

But the wolf does nothing more than turn around and continue his gentle walk.

"I guess I'll find out then…" I sigh and follow at the same pace.

Since the creature isn't levelling with me, nor does it seem to hurry, I assume that both the tempo and the distance is deliberate. That… or I am simply following a random wolf, who's just curious about the strange creature it stumbled upon, and simply allows it trailing behind. Which… come to think of it… I'm starting to seriously entertain. Why would a Great Spirit come to aid me? I'm no one. I'm- wait… where are you, you dumb fuck? Nothing? A moment of doubt and personal torment and… oh god. This is the Great Wolf! I look at the creature walking, and everything about it is eerie and calming at the same time. I bet that his presence alone keeps the Cosmic Fart at bay. I should've had multiple ominous freakouts tonight, but so far, all of them were normal.

"I don't suppose you can speak." I say softly "Or if I am worthy talking to… come to think of it… if I'm even able to hear you…" I let my musing run wild.

What if only Shamans can commune with the Spirits. Isn't that the case? I think I've heard the wolves say it… figures. But if I can't understand him, he definitely understands me, as every time I speak, his eyes meet my gaze.

"In any case… if you're the one preventing… 'others'… from invading my mind; thank you." I smile in genuine gratitude. "If I had them to contend with, I don't think I'd be in a position to be helped in the first place."

Again, the wolf just regards me, but otherwise marches on.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to follow Verissa's advice. I need to hunker down somewhere with plenty of Wolfsbane around. I won't outrun them, not at this pace anyway…" I roll my eyes teasingly, only to suddenly add "…not that I'm complaining! I'm grateful for the help!"

I bow my head deeply, seeing the wolf cast his gaze in my direction, but it seems he took no offense. Realising that being this chatty both is ill advisable during the hunt, and also potentially could lead to further slips of the tongue, I decide to keep shut… which the wolf doesn't seem to mind either way. I just follow, deeper and deeper into the black greenery, until very little light reaches the ground from above the canopy. I crawl under a fallen tree, only to then climb over a small ridge, getting further confused about our whereabouts. Then, about half an hour into our trek, we arrive at a small grove, opening onto lush bushes and purple Wolfsbane flowers dotted all around. It's a well secluded spot, shielded both by greenery, and by the natural groove of the land.

"This… this is perfect." I utter breathlessly. " If only…"

And as if reading my mind, the wolf walks to an ancient oak with a large hollow at its base. Had it had a door in it, I'd say that Pooh lived here.

"Thank you, this is exactly what I was looking for. I am forever in your debt." I sigh, bowing deeply as they do in historical dramas. "If you are the Great Wolf, then I know it is not really me that you are aiding." I say, bowing my head again in deference. "But with Ranok being your chosen Champion, I will repay my debt all the same. I will do everything in my power to serve him well; as a ward, a friend… and a lover." I state, realising that if I am speaking to an astral being, candidness is the least I can do. "I would die for him if needs be. This I swear!" It seems the creature gives me a curt head bop in return, but remembering my manners, I decide not to approach until he takes his leave. Soon enough, his shadow melts into the scenery, and within moments I'm left all alone.

I take a deep breath and approach my now-to-be hidey-hole. It looks rather intimidating, with a damp smell coming out of it. I bet there's all sorts of creepy crawlies lurking within the depths of that crevice, but maybe that will aid in my attempts at masking my scent. Realising I'm still clutching the leather bundle, I unfurl my pants, and hastily put them on. At least I won't be entirely vulnerable in that infested void. Steeling myself for the worst, I simply descend into the darkness, feeling with my hands the wooden walls enveloping me. Every now and then something skitters between my fingers, sending a shiver down my spine. To my surprise the hole goes quite deep inside, allowing me to hunch down some distance from the opening. The ground is a mossy mush, which I don't fancy plopping my butt onto. However, that resolve is soon tested, when within an hour or so, I feel my knees go numb, and I'm forced to kneel. Each time I keep my focus on the sounds of the world outside, I'm brought back into this dampen pit by something scurrying around me. For the most part, no bugs outright walk over me, but I can feel them nearby. It's so gross. As I'm slowly losing my battle of will, a chilling call pierces the air.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are…" Kieran's mocking voice echoes in the distance. He's not upon me yet, but he's close enough to be audible, and I curl up in disbelief. Did I misread the situation? Was the wolf actually aiding that jerk?! How could this be?!

"Here, Cay-ay-lan! Come out you little chew-toy! I know you're here!" the calls ring out closer this time and I cover my mouth as not to scream! I huddle deeper into the cavern, pushing my naked skin against bug-crawling wood and my heart begins to race, while my eyes well up. I can't believe it has come to this! I cannot be saddled with that brute! He'll kill me!

"I know you're here… I tracked your mucky steps all the way from the stream." The nasty wolf reveals, this time no further than a dozen meters away. "If you spare me the hassle, I promise not to hurt you… well, not *straight* away, at least… where would be the fun in that?" he asks mockingly. Why is he monologuing like that? Does he know I can understand them? More panic sets in, as I can hear bushes ruffle nearby. He's going to find me!

"What's this?" and then a quick dash ripples through the greenery. "Motherfucker!" Kieran snarls and I hear his heavy footfalls echo into the night in pursuit. Wait, what? He's leaving…? I fight the urge to approach the opening, and instead stay frozen, only brushing off the more pestering insects from my skin. All I can do is simply listen, straining my ears into the silent night. I don't know how long I stay like this… could be minutes, or even hours… but I stay quiet and still, afraid that if I dare to do anything, the wolf will spring on me, as if lying in wait. After all, this could've been all a ruse to flush me out.

Time passes by, as I'm stuck in this nightmarish limbo, struggling to stay awake, as my legs are already asleep. Then another commotion stirs me back to alertness. There's a clear movement outside, subtle, but deliberate, intertwined with loud sniffing of the air. The light shifts outside, and the footfalls become louder until they're right upon me.

"*Caelan*?" I hear a strained voice, tinged with disbelief, as a dark figure appears in the opening, hunched on its hind legs.

Bathed in the moonlight, it towers over the entrance, and I almost doubt if it's actually him.

"Ranok?" I call out, and he straightens himself, revealing the familiar grey fur.

Wasting no time, I scramble to my feet and pounce into his warm, furry chest. I'm immediately met with a tender embrace, as he holds me fast, akin to his most prized possession. His body is like a furnace, overheating from the whole day and night of exertion, and his fur, damp and musky, reminiscent of gymgoers clothing after a week of vigorous use. As I take in his scent, he is sniffing and nipping at my hair with evident joy, and I can't contain a teary chuckle at his tail swings rustling the bushes below. We're both overjoyed and our glossy eyes meet in dreamlike reunion.

"I can't believe you've found me." I mutter through my trembling lips, trying to contain tears.

"I can't believe it either. How did you even find this place?" he says in turn, looking around in confusion. "I've never shown you this part of the forest… in fact, I don't think I've ever been here myself!" he exclaims, taking hold of my cheeks and pulling me into a short series of distressed smooches.

"I-I…" the words hang for a moment, not only because of the ongoing outpour of his love, but also in hesitation. "Believe it or not, I was led here… by a feral wolf." I decide to be frank, and look to him with worry, but instead of the usual dismissal, I'm met with a loving smile.

"Led here?" He asks, and then nods in some odd amusement. "Of course… all this time I thought I've lost his favour, and yet here we both are… of all places." I look at the wolf with confusion, as he gestures to a plant growing on the side of the grove. It's similar in appearance to common ivy, weaving itself unto the nearby tree, with one significant difference. The vines and leaves seem to congregate around the heart of the plant, crowned with a single, sizable bud.

"What is that?" I look to Ranok, who regards the plant almost spellbound.

"It's a Moonflower." He reveals, still not breaking gaze from it. "It grows exceedingly rarely, appears wherever Moon Goddess wills it, and blooms only once… during a full moon." He gasps with barely contained excitement. "It's already flowering."

"But the Full Moon is not yet upon us."

"Which means it's a Lover's Moonflower." He finally looks to me with a smile only divination could bring to a fate-driven soul. "You and I belong together. My… beautiful Moondrop." He mutters, diving in for a kiss.

"R-ranok." I manage between desperate inhales he allows me, before he renews our tongues impassionate dance. Finally, once he has his fill, the wolf smacks his lips and looks into my eyes with a territorial streak.

"No one will ever take you away from me." He almost growls it, both as a promise and a command, and I nod, as he lays me down onto the grass and peers longingly into my soul. My heart rushes on, meeting the intensity of his gaze, as our lips inevitably rejoin. I feel his rugged breath wash over me, as he’s getting lost in the burning desire, and his eagerness becomes evident in desperate attempts to slide off my pants. A soft growl escapes his lips in frustration, as his clawed paws cannot undo the fiddly fastening and I chuckle, taking hold of his muzzle and planting a soft kiss on the nose. Calmed, he allows me to undo the knot, but once the flap opens, his impatience takes over. He pulls them harshly, almost pulling me up with them, which is just as well, as my feet in the air were exactly where he had wanted them. Bent up like that, exposed and vulnerable, I blush seeing as his nose closes in on my tush. He takes a greedy inhale, followed by gentle licks of my cheeks, when suddenly he slobbers all over, clearly prepping me for what's to come. I writhe and wriggle at the sensation of my ring being worked by his tongue, but just as swiftly as he has started, he stops, and I look back, watching the wolf lick his lips with satisfaction. He almost would've looked cute, had not for the sharp determination shining inside his eyes, but all that is soon eclipsed by his now fully erect wolfhood, casting a dominant shadow over my belly.

"I've got you where I want you…" he murmurs with a coarse, desperate tone, and I swallow heavily.

"Same." I reply, not hiding how dire I need him. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else…"

He huffs heavily, like a steam engine brought to life, and realigns himself with my backside. I feel the tip slide into my cleft, pushing at it gently like a hot poker. He shivers slightly and gasps, looking at me intently, splayed there and bathed in the light of the moon… he almost seems hesitant at first, until I bite my lip and grasp at the grass, nodding to signal my readiness. He breaks our gaze and closes his eyes, inhaling sharply, while I'm forced closer by a firm tug. I gasp for air as he finally finds his perch and sinks inside me. Split open, I yell out, but silence myself, as he dives all the way to the base of the knot. I feel the pressure build around my rim, and shivers shoot all over my body. The wolf, however, is not equally as dazed. Lost in his desire, the hunter doesn’t wait and simply continues to claim his prize, huffing and growling all the while and leaving me no choice but to seek comfort in moans and yelps, which he’s then forced to stifle. His massive right paw covers my mouth, as he cups my head with his left, continuing our impassionate mating. All I can do now is to surrender and in turn, I embrace him tightly, sinking my fingers into his fur and holding onto this wild ride for my dear life. He’s rough, much rougher than he intends, I’m sure, but I knew what I was getting myself into when I decided to get astride a wolf. For some reason, his wild side compliments his tender personality in a twisted way, which makes it all oh so exhilarating. Enjoying my utter surrender, and rather emboldened by it, he claims me in earnest, until inevitably the release he was so desperately chasing, finally comes. Losing the battle with his feral spirit, he sinks his claws into my skin, lifting my waist to receive his final, powerful thrust, and as cascades of his potent seed fill my belly, he dives in for a bite. A jagged maw flashes before my eyes and I gasp in surprise. It clamps around my throat and shoulder and, while my heart, succumbing to the prey mentality tricks me into seeing my life before my eyes, my loins ignite. This could’ve been my end… and… what an end it would’ve been. But of course, my wolf did not harm me, and although it will leave a mark, it is but a love bite. Both shaking and heaving with exertion, we lock startled gazes for a moment, when suddenly I notice that I have painted his chest with my own release. I did not even manage to touch myself, it was all a result of his hard labour, and I stifle a chuckle, confusing the wolf, who is still inside me.

"What’s so funny?"

"I might have a problem." I continue. "You pushed me over the edge just by ravaging me like a beast."

"O-oh…" he stammers, somewhat troubled now that his passion has subsided. "I didn’t mean to… but… all my instincts were telling me that this was what you wanted."

"Well, evidently so." I laugh, flashing my brow at the sticky mess of my very own making, only to then nod to his still firm grip on my waist, maintaining our increasingly uncomfortable union. "Mind putting me down?" I ask, unable to contain amusement and he blinks.

"Of course!" he blurts out in panic, sliding gently out of me and letting me rest onto the grass.

"Thank you." I smile in true gratitude, but as I try to splay myself seductively, I notice the wolf tracing my sides with his paws.

I look at them with slight alarm, only to find they’re slightly bruised and scratched, but nothing beyond that. I grab his paw and pull it in closer, placing onto my chest. “I’m fine, silly. Hear that? That’s the sound of the chirpiest heart you’ll find this side of Tirnan.”

"Heh… my Moondrop." He leans in to plant a lick on my aching shoulder and rests beside. “You’re one in a million.”

"So are you, fluff." I return the compliment, curling myself into his side. "How did you find me, anyway?"

"I followed the scent of the Moon Flower." He reveals proudly. "It was almost involuntary on my part, as if something promised me I would find you here.”

"You could smell it even despite the Wolfsbane?"

"Odd, isn’t it?" he chuckles in genuine surprise. "All I could smell was danger… and then suddenly, like a ray of light piercing a cloudy sky, it hit me. The faintest note of love and longing. It made me immediately think of you. I’ve had to find it. Seeing one is as rare as laying your eyes on a human. Unlike you, though… this one’s well hidden.”

"Heh. I thought you were guided here by the Great Wolf."

"Even the Spirits cannot be in two places at the same time, Moondrop." He responds playfully. "If you say that Blaid’Mar led you here, I believe it. For I was guided by the Mother Moon herself, so it only stands to reason she has sent her most trustworthy son to look after you in her stead."

"You really think so?" I allow myself a hint of doubt into my voice, and he shift to look into my eyes.

"There's no doubt about it. Not now."

"Wish Verissa saw it that way." I mutter in slight discomfort. After all… her words did not exactly filled me with confidence when it comes to our fates.

"Vee is… different than either of us; Vul and me, I mean." He responds, picking up on my unease. "We tend to work our energy outwards when under pressure; Me, through my bachelor’s shtick, Vul through his outbursts and hunts. Verissa always turned inward when faced with difficulty."

"Sounds rather lonely."

"She is a loner, but more by design than choice." The wolf reveals and I lean in to listen. "Verissa’s very resourceful… and proud. Just like Vul, she despises relying on others. Whatever comes her way, she always wants to fix it on her own. Surrendering yourself to outside forces just isn’t in her nature."

"Even if it’s Mother Moon herself?" I nod towards the argent sphere in the sky and Ranok laughs.

"Especially if it’s Mother Moon. Surrendering herself to Aluna would be ultimate defeat to her. To the White Lady we’re just slaves… she made us, and she decides our fate. And Vee knows that… but deep down she would never relinquish this symbolic act of defiance. She wants to make the Moon Goddess work for her, not the other way around."

"Gosh…" I look at the Moon in disbelief. "And I thought Kieran had over bloated ego."

"We're all wolves here, love." His tender voice draws me back to look at him. "Even you are one, deep down. You stand your ground, follow your instinct and never waver."

"True… but I also respect authority. Posturing is not within my nature." I mumble, pondering the next words carefully. "Not that I want to question her, but one has to ask - isn't Verissa's defiance making her ill-suited to be a Shaman?"

"Or maybe it means the exact opposite?" He snickers challengingly and I blink. "She was anointed for a reason… chosen by Aluna herself. I believe it’s the irony of Verissa’s situation that gives Mother Moon true pleasure."

"She said something to the same effect when it came to me being your path."

"See?" He smiles with satisfaction. "Mother Moon is known for having a twisted sense of humour.

"But what would be the point in that? Making Verissa her Shaman and me your path?"

"To humble a defiant child, for one? And two, to shatter an idol so carefully erected in my stead." He proposes and I wrinkle my forehead in utter confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"They see me as a warrior, killer and a breeder. A perfect wolf. The Golden Boy." He almost sneers at the sentiment, rolling his eyes. "You forced them to notice me, for who I am. For the first time in decades, everyone had to concede that nuance is not a character flaw. If I am who I am, and not who they want me to be; if I am to take my place among them, I must come as is. This would not be possible if you happened to be a wolf, or a Sylvan Folk." He pulls me in for a soft kiss on a cheek. "You had to be you; a shock, an outrage… a scandal. And Mother Moon…" he croons seductively. "What a scandal you turned out to be."

I shiver at his hot breath in my ear, but soon the exhilaration boils over when his tip pokes at my side once again.

"Speaking of… someone's turned on." I grin and he only shrugs.

"How can I not be, when you're so damn delectable…"

"Alright… let's go at it again." I feign disinterest, but still roll onto my belly, lifting my butt invitingly. The wolf's eyes flicker with excitement and with moments, I feel his clawed paws take hold of my cheeks. I'm actually more eager for seconds than I dare to admit. Guess we're both insatiable.

Our shaky breaths fill the air, as I lay on the ground, enjoying the afterglow of our repeated union, when my wolf suddenly gets up to his paws. My gaze follows him over to where the Moonflower grows, and I cannot help myself but utter sensually.

"I hate to see you go, but I love to watch you leave…"

He laughs at the remark, catching my lustful glance at his rear musculature. He kneels down, and dips his paws into a shallow pool of water, which I just notices collected at the bottom of the shrub.

"Come." Ranok beacons me with an extended paw, and I stumble to my feet. After his ardent lovemaking, all I can muster is a wobbly gait. I think my thighs fell asleep. "Wash yourself with this." He points to the waters, and I ask, scooping a handful.

"To get rid of the scent?"

"Oh! S-shit…"

"What?"

"There's no getting rid of that, I'm afraid." He mumbles awkwardly. "I… I should've thought about this before we got lost in our foolishness."

"Then what's the water for?" I snort, sloshing it back into the puddle. "It's quite cold and I'm butt naked."

"It's a boon." He responds with an oddly serious tone. "Moonflowers only grow near such pools, because the waters are considered to be blessed by the White Lady. Tears of Alune they're called, and they're the precursors of our Moon Wells." I gasp in realisation, looking at the puddle with a much more appropriate reverence. "In fact, every Moon Well only becomes such, when it's reservoir is sanctified at least in part with Tears of Alune. This is the real stuff; undiluted. If you seek to commune with our Goddess, this is as close as it gets."

"And how would this communion look?"

"We usually just wash ourselves with it… and ingest it."

"Not in that order, I hope… especially not after our little distraction." I propose, looking to the damp and crumpled patch of grass we levelled over the last hour or so.

"No, yeah… right." He nods with slight bemusement. "I'm not thinking straight… it's quite hazy when we're liked this… alone." He sighs heavily, looking to me with sudden worry. "Before beseeching any blessing, we should take care of that scent. It definitely smells like I bred you good."

My eyes shoot open at his blunt words, and my face engulfs in a blush.

"Sorry… just… stating how you'd smell to everyone tonight."

"So… what are we going to do? I can't roll myself in the damn Wolfsbane." I throw my hands towards the flowers around us. "The only thing pungent enough would be lavender, but I can't tell the damn difference between either. Can you?"

"No…" he mumbles with discomfort. "I always dosed off when the Den Mother went over the herbs."

"Maybe if I snuck back into the village…"

"We must return together. They'll be expecting that." Ranok states sternly, crossing his arms and looking increasingly distressed.

"We can't be totally fucked… even if we totally did fuck!" I try a pun to lighten the mood and he winces.

"Well… there is another way." He mumbles, falling his ears flat, yet I notice his tail giving odd jerks. Wait…

"N-no…" I almost choke in sudden realisation. "You can't be serious!"

"It'll be the only scent strong enough to wash away our union." He shrugs and I can't help but stifle a chortle.

"Are you being serious, or just trying to be kinky?"

"Both…?" he gives me a cheeky grin, joining in my levity. "In all seriousness, though, it's the only scent strong enough, and it would be expected, since they see you as property anyway. It would put an end to a lot of uncomfortable speculation."

"How could it possibly do that?!" I lough, both nervously and amused in equal measure.

"It's meant as a humiliation... we mark property, not lovers. You'll become my ward in more than just a name."

Seeing another electrified flick of his tail, I take a deep breath and sigh.

"Fine. If you pissing on me is the only way to shut up this circus... then let's do it. It's not like I'm going to wholly hate it."

"Don't provoke." He sneers and steps closer, to which I can only laugh.

"Try not to get any into your 'holy water'. I doubt that would count as being pee-us."

And with that, I surrender myself to receive two blessings in one night. I guess one could call it "Golden Baptism" followed by a "Moonwater Flush." This whole damn thing's a lunacy.

We walk back towards the village in high spirits, joking and teasing one another; Ranok, ever the eager for roughing up is bumping into my shoulder now and then. It's as if all the nights weariness and calamity melted away in our heated moments of passion. But as we approach the light of the village, with the smoke of the firepit rising above the treetops, our glee subsides, with each of us exchanging worried looks.

"It'll be fine." I mutter, trying to reassure him. "We've done our part. What else could they throw at us?"

"Quite right." Ranok nods, and he adds purpose into his gait. "I didn't need proof to know you were my destiny before… yet now I have it. Unrefutably."

I smile, seeing determination painted across his muzzle, and simply match his stride. Nothing they can throw at us can undo our connection. Whatever's ahead, we'll face it together, just as fate would have us do.

We clear the thicket, met by the decorative cloth stretched upon the wooden pillars, with bunnies scurrying around to fetch whatever fare was needed at the tables beyond. I notice Tryst stopping in his tracks and giving us a surprised look, to which I respond with a cordial bow. He repays me with a gentle smile, and returns to his duty, while we take a sharp turn to enter the risen platform. Before we do so, however, my wolf gestures towards one of the guards, who stands to attention.

"Cloak."

"Of course." The startled sentry hastily removes his garment and passes it to my wolf, who in turn shields me with it.

"Thank you." I smile, not only grateful for the protection of my virtue, but also warmth of the fabric around me.

"Ranok?" The Chief mutters in disbelief as we emerge from the greenery behind the pavilion. It's almost as if Ranok chose this entry deliberately.

"Surprised to see us?" his voice carries with clear defiance.

"Moon-dammit boy! Way to overdo it…" Vithyr swaths his paw around his nose in displeasure. "Did you really have to mark him from head to toe?"

"I didn't want there to be any confusion as to whose property he is, since that seems to continuously slip everyone's mind." My wolf responds with an odd sharpness to his tone. It's as if he's almost growling without even trying to.

"Fine, fine… but where's Kieran?" his father demands, to which Ranok only shrugs.

"I don't know, and I don't care. I was tasked with finding Caelan and find him I did." He proclaims loud enough for all to hear. "I hope this puts an end to this matter once and for all. And should any of you have more doubts… Tibalt?" he shoots towards the rotund brewmaster, who jolts to attention and approaches. "Care to have a look…"

I watch, as he passes him our precious find, and the old wolf almost pales at the sight.

"Aluna be Praised! A Moonflower leaf!"

"WHAT?!" a shocked gasp resonates across the gathering, echoed by the Chief, who approaches with disbelief.

"Cannot be…"

"I left the flower intact, as it's about to bloom." Ranok reveals. " I thought you would want to see evidence, since I found Caelan hiding in its grove, proving beyond shadow of doubt that we have Aluna's favour."

"But… but this doesn't make any sense!" Aldris blurts out, equally spellbound by the plant "It's absurd!"

"Is it?" Verissa sneers, seizing everyone's attention "You all have questioned me ever since Ranok's Coming of Age. By becoming Blaid'Mar's Champion, he proved that he has not disgraced himself, nor angered the Spirits by bringing the human into our village." She states, eliciting a new wave of murmurs among the gathered. "In turn, by leading him to a Moonflower, Aluna herself affirmed his blessing. Ranok is in her favour!"

"That seems to be the case." The Chief exhales almost struggling to believe it.

"But, but- both boons at the same time?!" Aldris chimes in, not out of anger, but almost out of fear.

"I guess… since you wouldn't listen, she chose to speak louder." Verissa shrugs. "Unless you want to argue with our Goddess now?"

"Well, this is not how I expected this night to unfold." Vithyr grumbles, echoing the sentiment of quite a few others, when Enelle springs back to life.

"My, what excitement!" she croons, smiling at me gently when her attention shifts to the Chief. "A Moonflower… how many years has it been? Ten?"

"Twelve." The old wolf responds, "The last one we found was shortly before Aileen left."

"And both being Lover Moon's as well. How marvellous!" The venerable female chirps, drawing a disgusted snort from Aldris.

"Marvellous? It's obscene!"

"Did you just call Mother Moon 'obscene'?" her sibling chimes in. "Aldie, dearest… you will have to answer her call sooner rather than later. I don't think you want to strain that meeting."

"But… but the timing of it-"

"You're reading too much into it." Valris waves her paw dismissively. "Clearly the flower is meant as a sign of Ranok's favour. Had we held this damn thing when we should've, it would've been a Wolf Moonflower."

"Yeah… that does make sense." The Chief agrees, rubbing his chin troublingly. "It's reaffirming his connection to Blaid'Mar."

"Everything happens for a reason." Enelle adds, looking at me with an odd, knowing smile.

"Indeed." Verissa echoes, and I feel like the two of them are on a completely different page from the others.

"But where the fuck is that idiot?" the Chief interrupts my musings. "Since he clearly lost the trail, he should've returned a while ago."

"Hopefully we won't have to launch a search party." Vithyr grumbles, patting his belly. "All this excitement gave me quite an appetite. Isn't it customary to feast until the dawn?"

"Quite right… I myself care little if he finds his way back or not." The Chief scoffs. "So much noise, and over what? A scrawny little human?"

"At least that little debacle is finally put to rest." The brown male smiles, embracing his friend and leading him back towards the table.

But as the relief washes over me, I notice Aldris' ant-sized eyes drilling into me, as the female stands there reminiscent of a statue- not a muscle moving. Feeling her penetrative gaze I wince, and as I'm about to draw Ranok's attention she approaches.

"It would seem I owe you an apology…" she utters, her tone uncharacteristically cordial, catching both me and my wolf by surprise.

"W-what do you mean?" Ranok blurts out, understandingly taken off-guard.

"If the Goddess puts her trust in you… I guess, so should I. For now." She whispers, her voice so low, that even I can barely make out what is being said. Yet it quickly turns, taking on that more familiar harshness we're both used to. "But know this – no amount of trickery will convince me that any good will come out of your little monkey!"

"Enough with this." The Chief breaks up the argument with a stern voice. "The matter is officially resolved far as I'm concerned. Ranok proved his virtue, and the human's presence drew no ire from either Aluna nor the Ancestors. He's in Ranok's perpetual service."

"Under pain of death." Verissa adds in, laying the entire gathering silent like a graveyard. "I don't think I have to stress that their contract became now enshrined by our Goddess herself. Caelan is unmovable." She casts a gentle smile in my direction.

"T-that is so." The Chief affirms with slight reluctance and the gathered return to a spirit conversation.

However, the mood quickly switches to a celebratory one, as Regara approaches my wolf and raises his paw.

"To Ranok! The Great Wolf's Champion!" she jolts her mug into the air, slushing the ale all around and everyone erupts in thunderous cheers.

"Dearest sister… as the Tigers would say it; game set and match." I hear Valris hushed whisper carry between the merriment.

"What are you blabbering about?!"

"Can't go after the human now without going after Aluna herself." The crone muses with no hidden satisfaction. "Unless you're shopping around for a new faith."

"Do you really think my entire case hinged upon that naked monkey?!" Aldris scoffs harshly. "He was just a crowbar to pry open Varok's closet… now all sorts of skeletons can be set loose."

"Wolves amass baggage with age, dear sister." Valris continues undeterred, yet her tone is less malicious than I'd expect. "Closets can be pried open, or burst open… the older one is, the more rubbish one owns, and the wood rots away… hinges get loose."

"Your point being?"

"You're obsessing over Varok's secrets… but what about yours? Are you sure they are all secure, under lock and key? Had I been in your paws, I wouldn't be so sure…" And with that foreboding warning, the old crone marches over to Enelle, leaving her siblings standing there stumped.

I wonder what she had in mind, when suddenly I'm enveloped by a pair of mountainous boobs, swallowing me whole into their cleavage.

"There he is; the precocious little fucker!" I hear Regara's muffled voice between her ample bosom. "All hail the Tribute!"

And as I climb out of that sweet valley of plenty, I see the entire feasting ground raise their drink in a makeshift toast

"HAIL ALUNA'S TRIBUTE!"

I nearly blush at the sentiment of almost a hundred wolves cheering me on, when my face paints red upon a deep kiss from the burly female.

"I love this little shit!" she proclaims, drawing more cheers and howls from the gathering and I stand there, confused, noticing Ranok's pleased and joyful muzzle.

This horrid night took quite a joyful turn in the end, and I for one cannot complain.

The atmosphere at the Feasting Ground turns to a jovial celebration of both Ranok and his now famously precocious little ward. Various wolves come up to the High Table to chat with the Golden Boy and affectionately tousle my hair in approval. It seems that this little stunt made me less of an unwelcome pest and more of a mascot, owed the same level of cherish that its patron awards. Ranok's pride and joy in me became infectious, to the utter annoyance of both Aldris and Vithyr, who, despite their estrangement, seem almost like twins trying to outdo one another with their scowls. I simply sit there, enjoying my well-earned praises and refreshments, when out of the corner of my eye I notice a shadow move in the greenery just beyond the limelight. That's when I realise, it's Kieran, strutting forth, all worked up and bruised, purpose both in his gait and near feral expression.

"Foul! I call foul!" his voice thunders across the gathering, as he emerges from the woods in his tattered loincloth and sweat-stained fur.

"Kieran…" the Chief's voice carries little humour as he notices the arrival. "Kind of you to finally rejoin us."

"That damn thing had no right to evade me!" the nasty wolf thrusts his clawed finger at me, drawing a protective growl from Ranok's throat. But as his hackles rise, the Chief breaks the now foreboding silence with an amused chuckle.

"Right? Wasn't that his actual *duty*; to avoid capture?" he proposes, eliciting laughter from the nearby tables.

"I am one of the best trackers this Tribe has to offer!" Kieran protests, interrupted by Vithyr's risen paw.

"Nope… no…" he smacks his lips mockingly, as he struggles to wash down his previous bite of meat. "That would've been Tano… or Talisin. Which one scored the most?" he looks to his friend for aid, and the Chief shrugs.

"I don't know, I've lost count."

"It's a tie." Tano mutters half-heartedly, to which Vithyr nods with satisfaction, still chewing on his meal.

"Yep, as I thought." He smiles. "A tie. So you definitely ain't one of our best trackers."

"I could've sniffed that fucking whelp with my eyes bound and nose clogged by autumns cold!" the nasty wolf continues his protest, forcing more laughter from the brown male.

"But your eyes weren't bound, and you are not ill… yet still the human evaded you."

"That's why I claim there was a foul afoot!"

"That's a very serious claim to make, dear boy." The Chief, who rarely if ever shows patience when addressed so brazenly, now takes on a more belligerent tone. "You better think this through, before you continue spouting nonsense."

"Someone aided them during the hunt!" Kieran snarls, and a collective gasp echoes across the gathering, yet the Chief and his Advisor exchange a rather bemused look.

"Aluna, perhaps?" Vithyr proposes teasingly, to which the Chief quips with some strained humour.

"Or Blaid'Mar himself."

"Ultimately, the whole point of this exercise, no? To becost the divine?" Vithyr now directs his sharp words back at the accuser, who looks around in anger.

The Feasting Ground is alive with murmurs of conversation, with most not able to decide what to make of it, when the mean male continues.

"Someone was out there, in the flesh… interfering with the hunt."

Now, having implicated others, the conversation hushes, and all eyes land squarely on the nasty wolf, whose graphite fur shone in the light of the flickering torches.

"Tibalt and Gwaltir were in charge of keeping the Feasting Ground under lock." The Chief grumbles." Do you suggest either of them failed in their duties?"

"Someone has."

"Bold words." Vithyr nearly growls at the petulant youth. "Tibalt! Come here, you old cock!" he summons the wolf in question with some tender humour in his voice. "This little shit claims you've let someone slip through the cracks."

"Bullshit." The brewmaster snorts in clear offence. "No one has left since the hunt has started."

"But-"

"Fucking Moonless Night!" The Chief thunks his mug against the table and raises to his feet. "Alright. Roll call, everyone! I want each table to confirm whether they've been in full set during the hunt."

An orderly 'aye' surges from the gathered, much to Kieran's distress.

"See? Everyone's accounted for." The Chief sneers, taking his seat back, but as he reaches for the mug, however, Kieran steps forward.

"There was someone in the woods, leading me astray!" he calls out for everyone to hear, and the murmur of conversation subdues until the Feasting Grounds are silent as a graveyard, part from a solitary cough.

"No one likes a sore loser, lad." Vithyr mumbles, taking up a flagon of Everclear and pouring it down his cup. He might be drowning his sorrows now. "Let this one rest-"

"What about Andalt?" Kieran proposes, drawing a good bout of laughter from the gathered. "He's the only one unaccounted for!"

"If you claim that this raving loon has duped ya… I don't know what to say, lad." Vithyr continues after a spiteful chug of his poison. "Perhaps you're even worse a hunter than this ordeal proved you to be."

"He was aiding Ranok! I am certain of it!"

"That fool couldn't aid himself even if his life depended on it!" The Chief blurts out, irritation clearly straining his muzzle, when he shoots a softer gaze to the rotund male. "I'm sorry, Tibalt, but it's true."

"No offence taken. I very much doubt my son had anything to do with Ranok's success."

"See? There you have it. Now be gone before I'll have you removed from our table." The Chief growls in an apparent threat he's all too keen to follow through on. Seeing this, Kieran's expression falters, and as he casts me one last spiteful stare, he relents and walks off, shoulders slumped and his pride bruised, an injury exasperated by growing jeers and laughter from his peers.

"He won't soon forget that humiliation…" Tano offers hushedly, immediately countered by Regara.

"Good. Otherwise, one would be forced to give him a reminder."

"Many wolves need less to form a grudge." The white wolf continues to caution, undeterred. "This might be a beginning of a true rivalry."

"So?" Vul scoffs in mild amusement. "There's five of us and one of him. I think we can manage."

"Five?" Tano blinks at his sudden inclusion, and the black wolf scoffs.

"Unless you want to suck his cock so much…" he tsks playfully. "…though I took you for a more principled cocksucker."

"As if!" Tano retorts a tad too late, playing right into Vul's jab and eliciting a burst of hearty laughter from the others. "You damn well know I meant the first part!"

We continue on, nibbling and drinking in high spirits, until the sky starts to split in the hues of purple and blue, announcing quickly approaching dawn. Then, the wolves take it as a chance to have last round around the tables, chatting and reminiscing similar escapades of old, making our seating less crowded. Once Chief, Regara and Tano take their leave, Verissa budges over.

"This went better than we could ever hope for." She murmurs, her voice less celebratory than appropriate. "I'm not sure how far our luck can stretch, but I fear it is not going to last."

"Rich, coming from a Shaman. After all, you're responsible for this fate." Ranok flashes his brows, drawing a panicked reaction from the female.

"Don't even joke about that!" she sneers. "I have little if anything to do with this!"

"Ranok was always a lucky git." Vul quips in calmly, taking a protracted chug of his ale. "No matter what you throw at him, bad luck ain't ever gonna stick."

"You say that… yet the stakes keep rising higher and higher. From a hidden contraband, this damn naked weasel has become a celebrated prize!" she gives me a startled look, but her words, despite being harsh, don't carry a spiteful note. "Now he's akin to a bejewel brooch; it's exactly the type of attention I wanted to avoid!"

"Who cares?" Vul shrugs indifferently. "Piglet was gonna stuck out no matter what you did."

"This little charade of ours seems to be spinning out of control." Verissa grumbles. "It was ever meant to be us three involved… now you have Cora and Tano."

"And my father… and Vithyr." Ranok adds, drawing a surprised gaze from his friends. "I'll explain later, but it all came naturally."

"As if…" Verissa scoffs. "So that's what? Seven wolves in on this little secret? If we can even call it that anymore."

"I forgot Tryst." Ranok adds absentmindedly, much to Verissa's growing annoyance.

"And Drair…" I offer awkwardly, drawing a surprised gasp from all but Vul.

"Drair knows?!" Ranok exclaims, quickly hushing his muzzle as others take notice. "Who else?!" He demands and I wince, when Vul pipes in amusement.

"My granny also knows. At this point it'll be simpler to ask who doesn't."

"Not funny!" the white she-wolf growls softly. "That's exactly what I meant when I said we're losing control here. It's the very definition of it!"

However, our conversation falls silent as the burly female returns from her spirited dancing by the bonfire. She pours herself a generous mug of ale and downs it with a thirst born of fiery exuberance.

"Don't mind me…" she snickers, noting our sudden hush as she collapses onto the bench. With a swift motion, she seizes a sizable slice of gammon, devouring it in a single, impressive chomp. She then flashes a meaningful wink at Vul, gesturing with her mug in his direction and the black male exhales deeply, retrieving a concealed flagon from beneath the table.

"It don't come cheap, you know."

"I'm well aware." she replies, her eyes twinkling flirtatiously. "There are a few ways I could recompensate ya."

"A new belt buckle will suffice." he states calmly, though her seductive lip-licking visibly unsettles him, and she responds with a suggestive purr.

"I had something along the lines of trade 'in nature' in mind."

Vul shudders as he pours her a measure of what I guess to be a particularly potent Everclear. Just a whiff of it makes me shudder; yup, it does smell flammable. Noticing my intrigued gaze, he then offers the bottle my way, but I decline with a shake of my head. I'm too exhausted to fuck around with what I assume to be undiluted ethanol.

"What a night!" Regara exclaims, slamming down her share of the fiery liquid. "I had some misgivings about this, but truth be told, Delran would've been proud."

"He would have..." Ranok echoes with a slight tremor of lingering grief, the loss of his brother in arms still a raw wound.

"And Vithyr, putting that uppity bitch in his place? Pure magic that was!" the burly female continues, her voice bubbling with mirth, when she returns her gaze to the black male. "So, about that belt buckle, Vul. What ya had in mind? Is the current one not good enough for ya?

"It's not the pin itself, but the latch at the back." Vul explains in a measured tone. "It caught on a branch during our last hunt and now it's loosened. My kilt requires constant readjustment."

"That's our metal for ya." The female quips, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Better get used to that, as without proper provisions there's not much I can do." She then leans back in the seat, idly slurping her ale. "Speaking of provisions, where do we stand on the Tigerii steel?" Her gaze shifts subtly, but keenly, toward Ranok.

"It's...complicated." My wolf's ears fall flat, as his muzzle pulls into a tight line.

"Complicated how?" Regara's eyes glitter with a mix of curiosity and wariness.

"Only one smith is skilled enough to forge the damned thing." Ranok says, pausing to measure his next words. "And his terms are... rather specific. Terms I need to present to my father first."

The burly female sets her tankard down with a thud, its contents sloshing over the side. "Do tell. Don't leave me in suspense."

At that, Ranok sighs, a weight visibly lifting from his shoulders as he speaks. "He's demanding access to Truesilver."

Everything grinds to a halt, as their eyes turn towards him, expressions fraught with concern, until Regara finally breaks the silence. "And why, pray tell, would he want that?"

"His ego, mainly." Ranok begins dismissively and I discreetly elbow him, urging to offer up the full story. "He claims he wants to cater to a growing Wolven population outside of Tirnan."

"Hmm." Regara pauses, mulling over the matter carefully. "Plenty of pups without moonstones and armbands, that's for sure. Tell your father that I, for one, support this arrangement. It might carry some weight, seeing as I'm the village smith."

Verissa, who has been silently fuming, suddenly erupts. "Are you out of your mind? I would never agree to such a deal!"

The burly female looks at her genuinely surprised. "Why not?"

"Why not?! Because it is our most prized possession!"

Regara swipes the air dismissively. "It's just fancy ingots of silver, which are neither prised or useful if not made into such."

And at that, Verissa's eyes blaze. "Are you serious? You would trade our Truesilver with the tigers?"

"I'd trade half this fucking village for some quality steel." Regara retorts, causing the white female to sputter in disbelief. "We're at war, girl." the brawny she-wolf continues, her gaze taking on a hard edge. "We have neither ore nor ingots. All we do is reforge whatever junk lies around. With each such cycle, our metal gets more brittle and weaker. Only the lucky few of us enjoy real Moon-damned weapons."

"We can trade other things for steel." Verissa protests, only to be met with a raucous laugh from her friend.

"Like fucking what? Anything we make here; they can make two times faster and cheaper."

"If not better." Ranok interjects, catching Regara's approving nod.

"Precisely." She leans back, her eyes locking onto Verissa's. "We've got plenty of Truesilver gathering dust. It's high time we put it to good use."

"Not with that attitude. Trade enough and we could run out!"

Regara tilts her head, eyes narrowing just so. "Not if you make more."

"W-what?" Verissa stutters, her hackles rising, eliciting a satisfied swish of her friend's tail.

"Come now, Vee." Regara's voice drops to an ominous timbre. "We both know what this is really about."

Whatever she meant, Verissa's eyes flash, pulling her out of her troubled haze. "No. You're wrong." She snaps. "I simply cannot bring myself to entrust our most sacred metal to outsiders."

"Outsiders, like him?" Regara gestures toward me with a flick of her paw, and I wince. "Didn't hear you howling at the Moon when Ranok put that collar on his neck. How is this any different?"

"He's in the village." Verissa retorts, her voice tinged with steel. "And the Truesilver was Ranok's to begin with."

"Fine." Regara sighs, almost theatrically so, only to lock eyes with Verissa in a more challenging way. "You want to go down that rabbit hole, have it your way. Let the individual wolves decide whether they'll trade their Truesilver for steel."

"T-that's... insane!" Verissa erupts, her words heavy with disbelief, only to be met with a dismissive shrug from the burly female.

"Why? Don't you trust your fellow Tribsewolves to make up their own minds?"

"It's not about them! It's about trusting a stranger from beyond our lands!"

Regara swings her cup towards my wolf. "Then trust him. He's never been known as a poor judge of character. If he says the tiger is sincere, that's all I need to hear."

"The guy might be cocky, even abrasive, but it's because he's straightforward." Ranok responds, drawing their attention. "He wants the Truesilver to craft heirlooms for our scattered kin, so that they can honour our traditions."

"Seems like a worthy cause, even if only half true." Regara muses, taking a contented sip of her ale.

Verissa, however, is far from convinced. "You cannot be serious!"

"I also met a Master Leatherworker there." Ranok interjects. "A she-wolf of unparalleled skill. She's respected among the tigers and in turn holds them herself in high regard. She very much reminded me of you with her industry." he adds, nodding at Regara, who chuckles appreciatively.

"Well, that's all the recommendation I need."

"But-" Verissa opens her mouth, only for the burly female to cut her off.

"Vee, you need to let go of that crippling fear of yours. It makes me so angry to see a talented lass like yourself let those fuckers get to you." She sets down her mug, gaze stern and unwavering. "You are the Shaman, for better or worse, and if anyone can cock it up, it's you alone."

"W-what are you saying?" Verissa stammers, her eyes widening as she grapples with an implication that eludes the rest of them. But not me. I have a bad feeling where is this all heading.

"I know you've stopped trying— with many things." Regara exhales, the sound heavy with weariness that draws our eyes to her, yet her gaze is firmly fixed on Verissa in a mix of concern and disappointment. "Dejection might as well be etched into your muzzle. This wee little shit here-" she gestures toward me again. "-is the first instance in a long while when you've actually acted. Done something. Anything. No one got it right from the get-go. It took me years before I smelt my first proper ingot… Shamanism, Spirits and damn Moon Goddess of all things sure as fuck won't come easier than a role of a village smith." The brawny female chortles, a sardonic undertone threading her voice, much to Verissa’s rising distress and their growing realisation. "It'll take hard labour, sweat and tears, but the longer you'll tarry, the longer we'll be left in the dark. We need our Shaman, and you are her. Stop depriving us of guidance for the fear of failure. We all fell down before we learned to walk. Get yourself off your sweet self-pitying ass and start failing. The sooner you do, the quicker you'll succeed." As she finishes, she lifts her mug in a mocking toast, meanwhile, Ranok's eyes remain locked on Verissa, a dreadful realization etching itself onto his muzzle. Finally, he breaks the silence.

"Wait. You haven't been able to produce a single Truesilver bar?"

Verissa freezes at the question, reminiscent of a deer staring into the headlights. Finally, she lowers her eyes and admits in a near-whisper. "No…"

"Does anyone else know?" My wolf continues, but Regara shots him a look of stern disapproval.

"Why? So they could pile on her more charges of incompetence?"

"Then how do you know?"

"Because I'm the smith, you dolt!" The burly female snorts. "I do the smithing; she does the blessing. And we worked together only once."

"Once? Then how do we make heirlooms?"

"Carridan's leftovers." Verissa mumbles, visibly shaken.

"They still bear my father's mark." Regara adds solemnly.

"So, even if we were to concede to this trade, we lack the Truesilver to sustain it?" Ranok concludes with a grim tone, and the white female nods.

"Pretty much..."

"How much remains?"

"Thirty ingots, more or less…" Verissa responds sheepishly, only to be corrected by Regara.

"Twenty-six. My father began crafting a new series of armbands. Still, it should suffice for an initial trade." She says, meeting imminent white she-wolf's flash of indignation head-on.

"You can't be serious!"

"I am." Regara declares. "Perhaps this will provide the urgency you need to pull yourself together. You can't keep waiting for a miracle, Vee. Sometimes, you have to make your own." She states harshly, turning her gaze to Ranok. "What was that smith's name?"

"Orastes."

"Orastes? Hmmmm…." The burly female strokes her chin thoughtfully. "The name rings a bell. I believe many of our tools bear his mark. Father was always vocal about that male's craftsmanship after his trips to Strandbard."

"What's your point?" Verissa cuts in, her voice sharpened by impatience.

"The point, Vee, is that we're not dealing with a charlatan but a master of his trade. That alone lends him a measure of credibility." Regara shoots back.

"Not to mention, the Tiger Chief personally recommended him." Ranok chimes in and the brawny she-wolf's eyes narrow.

"Even better. Couldn't get more stellar credentials from a stranger even if you tried." She snorts, rubbing her nose in satisfaction and continuing. "And you say he's propelled by a sense of personal glory?"

"Mhm."

"I respect that." Regara nods approvingly. "I too take great pride in my craft and would love to lay my paws on some Tigerii Steel."

"What if it's all a ruse?" Verissa insists, to which the burly female scoffs.

"To what end?"

"I wouldn't know, but my misgivings still stand - I don't think we should surrender our sacred metal so easily. Especially when we have so little of it left. What if he misuses it?"

"How could he?" Regara demands, and seeing lack of response from her friend, she continues with doubled resolve. "The only people to whom Truesilver holds any real value are our own. The Weeping Moon don't need heirlooms, they were banished along with them. The only real need arises from newborns, and I for one am in favour of having them inducted into our way of life."

Verissa's eyes flare up. "And just like that, our laws and customs are to be forlorn?"

"Look, Vee…" Regara sighs heavily. "I understand your point, I really do. But-"

"There is no 'but' here!" Verissa interjects. "You said it yourself - for better or worse, I am the Shaman of our Tribe. A custodian of our ways of life! I cannot put a blind eye to blatant dismantling of our very culture!"

"You should at least consider it, Vee." Vul pipes in, finally breaking his silence. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"Are we the beggars, then?"

"Sort of?" The burly female shrugs indifferently. "Wasn't Ranok just now begging the Tigers for a trade?

"Whatever he did, sure as the Moon, I hope it came short of begging! Our people went through too much hardship to humiliate themselves like-"

"You're starting to sound a lot like Aldris…" Regara warns, a hint of mockery lacing her words.

"Not everything she says is wrong, you know…" Verissa retorts defiantly. "…nor does it come from a bad place."

"Maybe so, but sometimes compromise is essential. Especially if we want to get our paws on some quality steel."

"What I want is a clear conscience." Verissa states, drawing a scornful laughter from her friend.

"And when did you acquire this taste for luxury? Sentimentality is something we can currently ill afford. But, alright. Let us remove your quandary." Regara sneers, setting her mug down with a thud. "I'll even do you one better and put our Tigerii smith's integrity to the test at the same time."

"How?" Verissa's eyes narrow suspiciously and Regara grins.

"We invite him here." She states as if it were the most obvious of solutions and we all exchange confused looks. "Surely if there's such a demand for Wolven heirlooms, then he must have a list of potential customers lined and ready. And if money is not an issue and he indeed promises his undivided attention to our needs, he'll have no objection moving here." She explains, pressing her clawed finger into the tabletop. "He'll work alongside me, and perhaps even teach me how to work with their metal, so that we speed up the production of new arms, while I'll oversee his use of Truesilver. Everyone wins."

"This is insane… you would have a tiger work in your father's forge?" Verissa murmurs, her eyes clouded with disbelief.

"Yes. Why not? Aside from taste for luxuries, did you now also acquire Aldris' prejudice?" Regara retorts half-mockingly and Verissa fires back.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"I'm not being ridiculous. You're the one poking holes in a perfectly good plan." Regara shakes her head in mild amusement. "We owe the tigers ten letters of unrestricted trade. Orastes could be one of their wielders."

"And you think your father would agree to this?" Ranok ask, seemingly on board with the idea, and the female shrugs.

"I don't see why not. And if it comes down to it, I can work him around. He's never refused me before." She states confidently, flashing her brow at Ranok in turn. "Question is… will - *your* - father be equally amiable."

"Just like you, I'm certain I can bring him around."

"Very well then- it's decided." Regara smiles, taking a final sip of her poison, when Verissa barks back.

"I haven't agreed to anything-"

"Vee." The burly female's voice takes on a more tender note, as she levels her friend with a soft gaze. "Don't make me do this… don't make me appeal to your bonds of kinship with either of us. We're your friends. You've always had our confidence and unwavering support. This one time, we ask-"

"One time?!" Verissa lets out a mocking laugh, locking gazes with Ranok and causing Regara to snort in self-reflection.

"Alright. My fault. Let me rephrase that." She tries to regain her earlier composure. "This one time, - I - ask you to keep faith in *me*." The burly female reiterates. "I don't think I've ever expended my credit of trust with you before."

"N-no…" Verissa nods with deep sincerity. "You haven't."

"I know what I'm doing, Vee." Regara states coldly, flicking her head towards Ranok "He might be a rash idiot, but he's a pure-hearted one. And this time, he's absolutely right."

"Very well… I trust you. If you really believe we need this steel so much-"

"I do." Regara doesn't even let her finish the sentence. "You haven't been there, Vee. Those foreign wolves… their clad in armour from head to toe… and not just any armour; real castle-forged steel. Our arrowheads won't be able to penetrate that."

"Arrowheads?" Ranok blinks in confusion.

"Yes… what did you think I wanted the Tigerii Steel for? Surely not swords." Regara snorts in bemusement. "By the time we'd make two, we'd already be under Vortigern's paw. We need arrow and spear heads to even the scales. Otherwise, our skirmishers are as good as bait for those foreign bastards."

"And here I was, placing our first order for a longsword." My wolf winces uncomfortably, eliciting a throaty chortle from his friend.

"Well… I did call you an ‘idiot’ for a reason. Good-hearted one, but a fool nonetheless." She snorts, as her gaze trails off towards Tano, who emerges from the shadowed growth behind one of the screens. "Hey there, Snowball! How's the night treating ya?" Her voice carries a rough edge, teasing yet earnest.

"Good…" He responds sheepishly, ears flat, and Regara quickly picks up on that.

"What's the matter, squirt? You can't be *that* bitter…" she probes, her muzzle creasing into a frown as she glances back at my wolf. "All that kissing nonsense is water under the bridge, right Ran?"

"It's not that. I'm happy for Ranok, truly." Tano interjects, shaking his head, his tail betraying his agitation. He casts a meaningful glance our way, and Ranok nods in quiet appreciation. "But it's hard to feel at ease with everything that’s happening. First Andalt, now Kieran." He rubs his neck awkwardly, his voice tinged with worry. "The number of wolves we need to watch over keeps growing every day."

"Hey, leave Kieran to Vul and me." Regara lets out a snort, her paw thumping against her bosom." You just focus on our little lost shaman. I've heard some troubling tales."

"What did you hear?" Ranok's eyes flicker towards her, a mix of curiosity and concern, but Regara dismissively waves a paw.

"I ain't one for gossiping, and none of it affected me directly." she states, though her expression darkens. "Needless to say; if at least half of it is true and had Andalt try to pull any of it with me, we'd have two funerals instead of one."

The tension in the air thickens as Ranok exchanges a glance with his companions. Vul appears keenly alert, while Verissa looks visibly unsettled, but it's Tano's insistent nod that finally breaks the silence, drawing a long, resigned exhale from my wolf.

"Alright…" Ranok begins, his voice slow and measured. "This stays between us, but... Tibalt approached me earlier. Andalt tried to shank him."

"What?!" Regara almost chokes on her ale. "Why the fuck did we waste time hunting your little pet, instead of that maniac?!"

"Tibalt's holding onto hope for his son. That's why he came to me and not my father. He asked for advice." Ranok explains, his gaze steady.

"Odd he'd come to you and not me." Vul, bristling slightly, narrows his eyes.

"That's because your answer to everything is 'snap its fucking neck'." Ranok retorts, earning an unwelcome nod of approval from Regara.

"A damn good piece of advice, if you ask me." The burly female sneers. "Tribal slaying is one thing, but attacking your own father? We're talking Eternal Night, not just banishment."

This seems to give Ranok pause, and he buries in deep thought for a moment. Finally, his eyes venture to his former lover, and his voice takes on a pleading tone.

"Tano, would you be able to actually track him?"

"What do you think I've been doing in-between your little charade?" Tano scoffs, frustration evident as he gestures towards me. "I even told that twerp to steer clear of him!"

"Told him?" Regara's eyes widen at the revelation.

Realizing his slip, Tano's muzzle shows a flicker of mortification before he masks it with a dignified gulp of ale, smoothly brushing off the situation.

"Well, he's not dumb, you know. Andalt happened to be skulking in the village. I simply pointed him out, and the kid caught on to the warning. I think…"

His slyness is evident, yet Regara seems convinced by the tale and she shifts her focus back to the heart of the matter. "When was this?"

"About two weeks ago?"

"And nobody's seen hide nor hair of Andalt since?" she inquires, her brow furrowing in thought.

The others around the table shrug, unable to provide any further details. Regara contemplates this new information, her expression pensive. Meanwhile, Tano, his gaze shifting between Ranok and our shaman, interjects cautiously. "Not to overstep, but I believe Ranok and Verissa might have more to add to the matter."

Wearied looks are exchanged before Verissa, with a resigned nod, breaks the silence. "He broke into our dens."

The table goes silent, all ears attuned.

"What do you mean?"

"He ransacked my hut, took a bunch of supplies…" Verissa reveals, her voice edged with frustration.

Ranok then follows with his own revelation. "He rummaged through my cabin too. Didn't take anything, but left the whole place reeking of lavender, likely to cover his scent."

"Damn Moonless Night!" Regara curses softly, her anger palpable. "Delran's gone barely few weeks, and everything's falling apart."

"What do you think we should do? Ranok asks, weighed down by the gravity of the situation, but the burly female is dismissive.

"If you're dismissing Vul's approach, you surely won't favor mine."

"He was one of us…" my wolf insists, his tone tinged with a mix of sorrow and determination. "We grew up together."

"That's why I gave him a chance to make things right!" Vul snorts impatiently, clearly displeased with his friend's leniency. "I offered him a place in my pack. He spat in my open paw in response."

Regara, taking a deep, ominous sip of her ale, slams her mug down with a thud.

"Ever since last year, Andalt's been spiralling out of control. I respect your attempts to set him right, but there comes a time when one must cut one's losses." Her voice is stern, strained with the weight of hard truths. "For now, though, finding him remains an issue... especially since he's vanished without a trace."

"I'm doing all I can." Tano barks out, a defensive edge to his voice, which draws a soft laugh from Regara.

"No one's questioning that, hon."

Not fully appeased, the white wolf continues. "There's something off about him. He did something to change his scent, and it's not just herbs, otherwise, he'd have stripped the glades bare by now."

This gives them some more to mull over and Ranok pats the table with determination.

"I'll reach out to Erof, see if he could spare Talisin."

"And Scree." Regara adds in approval. "I'll send word to my uncle. With those three on the job, there won't be a crevice where that loon can hide."

Tano nods, a newfound sliver of confidence in his voice. "With two extra noses, it'll be a breeze."

Verissa, however, tempers their rising spirits. "But will your father consent to spare them? It means rearranging three packs. With Kieran settling in and my stepping down... it's going to be chaos."

Ranok ponders this briefly, then dismisses the concern with a firm shake of his head. "He loves Tibalt, and is very much aware of the distress his son caused him." He asserts. "He won't object. Besides, with the Howl coming, it would be prudent to have our only wild card under lock and key."

"Welp, at least we have a plan." Regara sighs, draining her mug. "But let's not burden him with it just yet... they're in surprisingly high spirits, all things considered." She nods towards the wolf in question who re-emerges amidst a cloud of tobacco smoke, his brown-furred companion at his side.

"Huh… will you look at that." Vithyr observes, a note of mirth in his voice. "No more squabbling and bickering like pups?"

"It became quite cordial at this table." The Chief echoes his sentiment equally merrily. "Good omens bring out good spirits."

"Depends on how you interpret them…" His friend retorts, albeit with less bite than before, earning a playful nudge in turn.

"Oh, come off it. All is well, and we enjoyed some good sport." the Chief chimes in, settling back with his refilled mug.

Having our little conspiracy cut short, everyone simply returns to clearing up their meal for the night, when Verissa gestures towards the treeline where a spear of golden light pierces the dawning sky.

"The sun rises." she announces and the Chief and Vithyr exchange a knowing glance.

"That would be that," the brown male nods, and the Chief rises to his paws.

"Dran! Step forward, my friend!" he calls out warmly, cutting through the chatter.

Dran, emerging from the Elder's Table with hesitant steps, approaches our Pavilion, drawing curious glances from Aldris and others. Once in place, the Chief nods to Tryst, who quickly hands Dran a cup.

"Tonight's celebration, I hope, has lightened your burdened heart. Let's raise a final toast to Delran, our beloved son and brother!" the Chief proclaims, prompting everyone to rise. The Feasting Ground resounds with the clatter of mugs and the scraping of wood. "To Delran, may our Tribe yet see more like him!"

"To Delran!" The chorus rings out, united and strong. Even I join in with a subdued whisper. The wolves lift their mugs high, their howls and cheers filling the air, the bereaved father's eyes shimmering with emotion. Then, in a solemn gesture, each wolf tilts their vessel, spilling a portion of their drink in honour of the departed, before quenching their thirst in a single gulp.

"May he stay ever watchful!" the assembly thunders.

In response, Dran's façade of stoicism falters, his muzzle buried in his palms as his body shakes with suppressed grief. Varok, glancing towards Vithyr with evident discomfort, looks as if he might descend to offer a compassionate embrace to his old rival. However, Enelle saves him from this duty, darting gracefully to Dran's side.

"There, there... my love," she whispers soothingly, her voice a balm to his anguish. "That pain will never go away, but it'll dull with time, I promise."

A hush falls over the crowd as Enelle guides Dran back to their table, where he receives a mouthful from Aldris, her expression filled with disapproval. Noticing her older sister beside, I could swear the crone is using all the willpower not to break her club-like crane over the head of her nasty sibling. Sensing the shift in mood, the Chief straightens up.

"Right, time to head home! Let it be known that the packs are relieved of duty until tomorrow!" His voice cuts through the tension, commanding the attention of all present. "Let there be no trade in the main square either… allow the sleeping wolves lie."

The gathered nod with acknowledgement and the male simply turns to his friend.

"As for me, I'm not up for the journey back to the damn villa. Mind if I stay at your place?"

"Not at all." Vithyr shrugs nonchalantly. "We do have ledgers to review. But won't that cause some stir?"

The Chief dismisses the concern with a wave of his paw.

"This Tribe's already in a state. I'm beyond caring about ruffling a few hides."

As they depart, Cora approaches, her arms wrapping around Ranok in another celebratory embrace and then offering me a gentle pat in turn.

"If you're going home, I'm off to the nursery." she tells the burly female. "We can walk together, if you like."

"Oh, no, lassie. I'm headed to Delran's name tree. Might even have a kip there." Regara responds in a voice heavy with emotion. "I don't want him to be alone just yet."

"That's incredibly sweet of you." Cora's eyes gloss over with unshed tears, quickly brushed away. Turning to Verissa, she asks. "What about you, Vee?"

"I'll be accompanying Ranok and Vul. We have matters to discuss."

"I'll walk with you." Tano throws in, noticing her dejection.

"You? But your home is the other way."

"A walk will do me good. Besides, I have a favour to ask. I might be gone a few days." He reveals and the female blinks in evident surprise.

"Gone? But you've just returned!"

"Don't worry. I'll explain everything." The white wolf says reassuringly, guiding Cora away with a gentle paw.

With the gathering dispersing, Ranok downs what remains of his ale and extends a paw to help me up. Soon, the trio of my guardian wolves escorts me back towards the village, a silence maintained amidst the crowd. But once we're clear of curious ears, Ranok breaks the quiet.

"So, Vee... what did you want to discuss?"

Verissa hesitates for a moment, then sighs.

"Actually, it's more of a conversation between Caelan and me." she mutters uncomfortably, and Ranok raises his brow.

"Oh?"

"A Tribute and a Shaman conversation." The female continues a little bit more insistently. "A confidential thing."

"Oh, of course. I'll give you two some space." Ranok mumbles, stepping aside to align with Vul's pace.

Since we've entered the square, the black wolf simply nods towards his door invitingly. "Come, we'll have a quick toast at my place."

"Why not…" Ranok agrees with a nonchalant shrug, his gaze following Verissa and me as we enter the shadowy recess of the butchery. "So, the lover's Moon is approaching in a week. That should be... interesting."

"Bah… to whom?" Vul grumbles in response, his tone laced with a mix of indifference and disdain, just as the doors swing shut behind them.

In the solitude of the workshop, Verissa's gaze meets mine. Feeling uneasy, I break the silence.

"Is something troubling you?" I venture carefully. "You seemed... unsettled by tonight's outcome."

"I wouldn't go that far." Verissa counters firmly. "It's more confusion than anything. This uncertainty is unfamiliar to me... but perhaps our faith was rewarded tonight."

"Our faith?" I look to her challengingly and she smirks.

"That's the paradox of faith. Cling to it in failure, and you're a fool; cling to it in success, and you're pious. I suppose I'm neither."

"You and Vul have more in common that you'd dare to admit." I muse, watching her reaction.

"Perhaps…" she concedes with a shrug, her gaze turning inquisitive. "But not as much as you and Ranok, that's for sure."

"W-what do you mean by that?" I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks.

"Oh, come off it, [mc]. You might fool them, but you can't fool me. I can still smell it…" she grimaces unpleasantly. "It's potent. I guess that is that when it comes to rumours about Ranok having a go at other girls." She sighs with genuine relief. "Thank the goddess for small mercies. One Vithyr in the Tribe is quite enough."

"Is that what you wanted to discuss?" I grimace at the topic, not eager to delve into private aspects of my relationship with Ranok, even if we are all friends here.

"Of course not." she says, shaking her head. "I needed to confirm there was no foul play during the hunt. Kieran's accusations... they troubled me. And this talk of Andalt has me on edge."

"There was no Andalt in the woods during the hunt." I offer her reassurance. "But I wasn't alone either."

"What?" Verissa's eyes widen in evident shock.

"A feral wolf guided me to safety."

"But that's impossible. We've scoured these woods; there are no wolves here!" she replies sharply, disbelief ringing in her voice, and I shrug.

"I don't know what else to tell you. I saw, what I saw. And it secured our success. Ranok believes it was Blaid'Mar himself-"

"Ranok's a fool." Verissa smears in bemusement. "The Great Spirit would not entangle himself in such trivial affairs. Whatever aided you in that forest, Blaid'Mar it was not."

"Then what was it?"

"I don't know…" she splays her paws in surrender, her tone one of resignation and doubt. "A spirit, maybe? Dumb luck? A familiar?" She offers half-heartedly, clearly struggling to reconcile the reality presented before her.

"Then perhaps we should place our faith in that…" I suggest, and the female blinks, taken aback.

"Where's that coming from?" Her piercing gaze nudges me into a jumbled explanation.

"Well, even gods need intermediaries, right? Besides, I might have not been entirely honest with you regarding my… condition." I groan, rubbing my neck uncomfortably. "But I'll explain that later… I'm too tired for worldview altering conversations. Just know this - I believe that I was sent here for a reason. I’m sure I'm meant to aid your people in their time of trial."

"You? A human..." her voice drips with disbelief and I shrug.

"I know it in every fibre of my being. Aluna chose me; even you must see that now."

"And why would the Moon Goddess pick someone so... mismatched for such a task?"

"For comedy, I suppose." I offer with a wry smile "The gods often have a twisted sense of humour."

"I guess an unassuming boy snatching the most eligible bachelor in all of Tirnan *is* quite funny." She muses, subduing a chuckle and I wince.

"That, I think, wasn't the part of her grand plan."

"Oh?"

"It seems to be more of my side quest."

"Don't tell that to Ranok." she snickers. "Seeing how he screams fate at every passing shadow, I don’t think he’d take kindly to being relegated to a happenstance rump."

"I won't." I reply, sharing in the humour, when my expression hardens. "But I will tell you this: you underestimate yourself." She looks surprised at my sudden conviction. "You anointed me and asked for guidance in this trial. I received it. Perhaps…" I pause, grimacing at the cheesiness of what I'm about to say next. "Perhaps Ranok's Coming of Age wasn't a fool's errand started by an empty wish. Maybe… you are a Shaman for a reason."

She stares at me blankly for a moment, absorbing my words. Then, as her eyes start to gloss over, she rubs them and laughs off the sentiment.

"Right, we all have places to be. Let's get your groom before they drink themselves under the table."

I nod amusedly, and we step out. Verissa knocks loudly, as their raucous laughter nearly drowns out everything else. Ranok opens the door, a clay bottle in paw, with eyes slightly glazed but cheerful. "Vee! Is your Shamanism thing done now?"

"Yep. I shamaned the crap out of him." she sniggers playfully, and I step closer, eyeing the bottle with a growing sense of alarm.

"That doesn't look like wine to me."

"Nope." Ranok affirms through a chuckle, a hint of mischief in his muzzle as I fan at my nose.

"Your breath could light a torch!" I exclaim, half-joking, half-concerned.

"Right, I'll take that." Verissa says, prying the clay vessel from Ranok's grasp, much to his bemused protest. She ushers him out of the cottage with a firm pull. "Go home, sleep. I shall call on you past noon. A few hours of rest till then will do you good."

"Whatever for?" Ranok begins to ask, but his attention shifts to me as I gently take hold of his oversized paw, his gaze softening with the love and devotion of a smitten youth.

"We need to rest, silly…" I remind him, receiving in return a playful, almost seductive for a drunk, smirk.

"No rest for the wicked." he croons, leaning down to my level with a toothy grin. "We'll be wicked all-"

"Alright, time for a nightcap!" Verissa interrupts, thrusting the bottle into his muzzle and ensuring he takes a hearty gulp. I stifle a chuckle at the scene, when she hands the bottle to me. "You too, take a swig. It'll help you relax."

"I'm not restless." I protest, but her knowing glance towards Ranok's evident arousal leaves little room for argument.

"I need you two rested, so no shenanigans!" she insists, and so, with a shrug, I down the remaining contents in two substantial gulps.

"What shenanigans?" the black male narrows his brows as she returns to him his now empty bottle.

"Vul, you're to blame for his current state, so better shut up, before I give you what for!" she issued a subdued growl, and he raises his paws in surrender.

"Silent as a grave."

"Anything specific you need from us?" I ask, trying to keep now swaying Ranok somewhat level.

"I'll explain when I arrive. I need some shut eye myself," she dismisses, massaging her temples. "I have a cluster headache and I desperately want to get out of this damn robe!"

"You look striking in it, Vee! Like a Tigerii statue…" Vul chimes in, drawing an exasperated, yet playful at the same time groan.

"Oh, blow it out your nose!"

With that, Verissa takes her leave and I simply tug at Ranok's palm and lead us to the cottage, trying to hurry on the count on his increasingly frisky mood. He keeps touching me in places most would find hard to misconstrue and nips at my hair playfully. Fortunately, with the feast going until the bloody dawn, and everyone being doused with amount of booze that could support a whole pub throughout a month, the place seems completely deserted. Or so I hope at least.

Once inside the cottage, I usher us both to bed. Ranok's intentions may have been amorous, but fatigue and alcohol soon take their toll, and we settle into a tight cuddle between the sheets. Sleep comes easy after a whole day of wild exertion, and both Ranok and I drift off as if into a coma.

We are roused around midday by persistent knocking echoing throughout the cottage.

"Must be Verissa…" Ranok mumbles in a coarse voice, recalling her promise to visit.

He groggily makes his way out of bed, the previous day's exertions catching up to him. I'm equally sore, my legs feeling wooden, and I groan into my pillow as the knocking grows more insistent.

"Alright, alright… I'm coming!" my wolf's strained voice carries over the kitchen, and inevitably, the doors creek open.

"I don't have all day. I'm needed at the Den!" Verissa scolds, entering briskly and dropping a bag onto the table.

I can't even force myself to look up, staying frozen in the least painful configuration when a kick jolts the bed.

"Get up!" the white she-wolf commands, yanking the covers away and I shiver, protesting.

"We've barely had a few hours rest." I muster a complaint, immediately met with an equally sharp retort.

"That's more than I had. All I was afforded was a quick one-hour nap."

"That's inhumane…."

"Maybe, but we're wolves." She tsks, extending her paw to me and helping me crawl upright. "We have lots to discuss and even more to accomplish."

"Seems like just another day here…" I grumble, but there's a hint of appreciation in my voice. Despite the exhaustion, there's a certain charm to this eventful life.

"No time to grumble, get decent, and let us head out." She chides as I take a prolonged stretch, and Ranok bolts in, startled.

"Head out where?"

"Oh, not you." she swishes at him dismissively. "It's just between [mc] and me."

"Again? Why do you keep excluding me from things?"

"I'm not excluding you… rather… I don't include you in things you have nothing to contribute to." She responds somewhat tauntingly, and my wolf narrows his brows in annoyance.

"None taken." He mumbles, returning to the kitchen while I try to put on an attire with whatever clothes I find lying about. I settle for the pantaloons and tunic from yesterday, fastening my belt under her increasingly impatient gaze.

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I can be for… whatever this even is." I flutter my hands in despondent surrender, and she scoffs.

"Trust me, it's nothing exciting. I just need you to do the only thing you can't help doing – talk." she gives me a telling look and I blink.

"W-what?"

"Remember the favour I asked of you before this whole Wolf Moon debacle? Turns out I must call it in sooner than I hoped…" Verissa sighs, giving me a knowing look. "I need you to accompany me to the Den of Vigil today."

"What? Are you sure?" Ranok blurts out in evident panic, causing the white female to shrug awkwardly.

"I'm afraid you weren't part of our little arrangement." She reveals with an apologetic tune. "I need Caelan to interpret between me and the rotund human."

"You're bringing the outsider as well?!"

"Well, strictly speaking, both of them are outsiders, distinguished only by a half-moon, no?" she gives him a bemused look and my wolf snaps in annoyance.

"You know what I mean!"

"What's it to you?" the female narrows her eyes. "With all due respect, Ranok. I think you have your plate full enough to worry about mine. I can handle myself."

"The Elders will blow their gasket if they hear of this." My wolf cautions, eliciting an amused chuckle from Verissa.

"At their age, they avoid the place like their own Name Trees. It's perfectly fine." She swishes her paw dismissively. "Besides, I'm past worrying about appearances. Eneya is in trouble. She's overtaken by a fever I cannot extinguish by any means we here possess."

"You mean-" Ranok dares not to finish the sentence, dread painted on his muzzle, and Verissa nods solemnly.

"Yes, I feel rot has set in, and her blood is being poisoned. I need a professional's help."

"What about Carridan's writings?"

"Our medicinal ways are not quite what you'd like them to be." She scoffs in contempt. "We cull the weak. As it stands, the amputation failed, and according to whatever scrolls and tomes we have, Eneya should be taken into the woods and left under her Name Tree for nature to take its course."

"What?!" Ranok calls out, aghast, echoing my very own sentiment, and she snorts mockingly.

"Why do you think we call it the Den of Vigil? Wolves who end up there are in perilous condition, and most that is left to do is watch them wither or miraculously recover. I intend to change that."

"How?" He asks, and the female reaches out to her bag, rummaging through various items until she pulls out a small booklet, no larger than her palm, bound in blue leather, embossed with a symbol of a staff ensnared by a serpent.

"With this." She reveals, and Ranok's fur might as well have gotten one shade lighter.

"W-what?"

"Not only you have some dangerous contraband." She quips with satisfaction, skimming through the booklet nonchalantly.

"What is it?" I ask with curiosity, and she passes the tome to me.

"It's a Tigerii medicinal journal." She states, as I glance over the pages covered in handwriting of precise quality. "Quite brief, and lacking detail, but it gave me enough insight into what's possible outside our forest." Seeing Ranok's still not following her logic, she levels him a determined gaze. "I was the one to cut her fucking arm off, I sure as Moonless Night am not going to watch as the Final Dark falls upon her." She states adamantly, and I nod in understanding.

"I think that's enough reason to just go for it. Elders be damned."

"Exactly." She smiles in gratitude for having her back, as I return her volume.

Seeing our unison on the matter, Ranok exhales heavily and attempts a weary smile.

"Fine… who am I to oppose you… but this could potentially break off the tenuous truce we've just accomplished."

"What is a truce, if not a recess between the fights?" Verissa shrugs indifferently. "This one is worth picking up. Come."

She bids, walking through the kitchen and cracking the door open. I glance briefly to Ranok for permission, and when my wolf gives me a subtle nod, I abide her summons.

Since it is past mid-day, despite last night's festivities, there are already quite a few wolves about, shuffling between the huts after their daily errands. Even without Verissa's telling glance, I would remain silent all the same. As we pass the main square, some of the tribe members give us approving nods, and even an occasional cheer. That’s when I realise, that for the first time since I woke up in this world, the air of hostility has completely lifted. I was the Tribute, and I've confirmed what most wanted to believe anyway – the Golden Boy does not err. From a complication, I became a boon. Once we leave the village, entering a wooden path, the female finally regards me in a more relaxed manner.

"I see you're enjoying their change of attitude." She comments, most likely hinted by more than just my growing smile.

"A bit." I nod, trying not to come off as too eager. "Before I was met with growls and evil eyes, so it is a welcome shift."

"And that's all it is. A shift." She says in an oddly cautionary tone. "The Tribe is as capricious as it is cantankerous. Be vigilant, especially when scrutinised under a different light."

"What do you mean?"

"Before you were but a nuisance and a pest. People tend to disregard them blinded by contempt… curiosity, though, invites a more careful eye, and you my friend… read like an open book." She states coldly and I swallow, realising the gravity of the situation.

Indeed, the wolven gazes began to linger on me longer than ever before. Even in the broad day light I was melding into the background unless someone drew attention to me. Now… now I'm like a torch in a cave. All anyone can do is stare.

"Are you worried someone might find me out?"

"Someone always will." She gives me an aggravated look. "They constantly do; from three wolves to almost a dozen." The female scoffs, shaking her head in disbelief. "Discrete you are not."

"What is there to do then?"

"Make you indispensable for start." Her voice shifts into a lighter tune. "That's what we're going to do now. I do need help with the Den, but I also need to give you a chance to demonstrate your value. Once our secret is exposed, and it – will – be exposed, it must be neither a secret nor a problem at that point."

"Being helpful I understand, but how not being a secret is going to help?"

"The more wolves in power are aware and accustomed to you being literate and fluent in our tongue, the less of a shock it will become." She explains and I still struggle to follow her logic. "We need to avoid obvious antagonists like Aldris and Kieran, but Regara, Tibalt… even Cullen? Those wolves can be both brought around and reasoned with."

"I thought you wanted to contain this…"

"I did, but now that the human is out of the bag…" she muses, stopping in her tracks as we approach a clearing with a rocky ledge at its other side.

There's a cavern at the base of it, with a massive willow tree growing above it, it's lush strands of leaves hanging down like a verdant curtain.

"Wait… why is Leaf here?" finally Verissa breaks her confusion, drawing my attention to the sour bunny waiting at the entrance with Mr Abelard in toe.

The man seems to be in good humour, a stark contrast to the ever-scowling female. We proceed to approach, with the merchant waving his hat as he notices us emerge from the greenery, much to the displeasure of his escort.

"Ah! My dear lad! We haven't had a chance to speak yesterday, after your triumphant return!" he laughs merrily and pats me on the back as we come to a stop. "What a spectacle! What a show!"

"Good morning… or rather afternoon Mr Abelard." I smile at him courtly, and he continues, almost as if about to burst with barely contained excitement.

"Let me congratulate ya on whatever you accomplished yesterday. I have understood about half of it, but whatever it was, it sure impressed those wolves like nothing else!"

"I… I just got lost in the woods." I chuckle, eliciting a bout of good, humoured laughter from the man.

"And masterfully so! Haha!" But as Verissa stands there, eyeing us out impatiently, her expression slowly matching that of the she-bunny, his merriment subsides. "Alas, I suppose we should leave the chatter for a more suited moment. Perhaps near a fire with a mug full of ale?"

"That would be a picture." I nod in agreement, and the man gestures awkwardly towards Leaf.

"I've been summoned here by this little… well… can't say a peach, she's more like a sour apple, that one. Not chatty either."

"Hmph!" the female scoffs, but that sound gives Verissa a chance to pose her own question, which seems to trouble her since our arrival.

"Leaf! Where's Yarrow?"

"Vithyr." The bunny responds somewhat belligerently. "He need Yarrow. I replace."

"Odd…" Verissa narrows her eyes, as the tawny female stomps off, not even waiting for dismissal.

Seeing that Verissa is still frazzled despite Leaf's departure, I pat her back with worry.

"Everything alright?"

"Y-yeah." She responds half-heartedly, and I realise we've hit yet another snag to her plan. "I'll deal with it later, as I always do." I nod in understanding and look towards the dark expanse in the cliff's side.

"Is this where you live?"

"What? No…" she scoffs in bemusement. "This is the Den of Vigil."

"Oh…"

"I thought you told me she needed assistance in healing… seems more like we're about to commence a bear hunt." Mr Abelard blurts out, eyeing out the cave with equal confusion as I am.

"Verissa says this is where the healing takes place." I explain, and the man blinks between me, her and the cavern in question.

"Wait… you mean… this cave is?"

"The Den of Vigil she called it." I shrug, and as we keep gawking there, stumped, the white female leans over to whisper a question.

"Why is the human staring at the entrance as if it were haunted? Is he overwhelmed?"

"Are you overwhelmed, Mr Abelard?" I decide to relay her question and his moustache bristles with anger.

"Overwhelmed? Underwhelmed is what I am…"

"What's the matter?" I ask worryingly and he simply thrusts his hand into the dark opening with contempt.

"You tell me… she can't possibly mean to heal people in there. Those are no conditions for recovery!"

"He thinks the Den is not a right place for the sick." I convey his objections and it's the female's turn to be indignant.

"What rubbish. We've healed wolves for centuries in here."

I translate her answer, drawing a bemused scoff from the merchant.

"And what was the success rate, pray tell… or better yet, leave it unanswered." He waves his gloved hand at me. "May Light illuminate the souls of those who end up in this unsanitary place."

Seeing our exchange, Verissa sighs and simply marches past us.

"Right, I see your kind shares an affinity for the theatrics. I have no time for that, let us continue."

She waves us in, and exchanging wearied glances, we follow her inside.

The cavern is dark and damp, with solitary droplets tapping out an eerie ambience, empowered by a gentle hum of wind. Every now and then, an opening in the ceiling lets in a strand of light, illuminating the blackened void in small spots, where grey of stone and green of the moss break up the monotony.

"Oh dear… oh my…" Mr Abelard twiddles with his hands nervously, and the female narrows her eyes.

"Why is he so spooked?"

"Mr Abelard?" I ask, and the man simply shakes his head.

"This won't do at all… it's like they don't even try. Worse yet… seems like the intent here is opposite to what they claim!"

"Cut through this blabber, [mc]." The white female sighs annoyingly. "I haven't got all day. Translate for us."

"Oh, yes… of course." I nod and turn to face the man. "Mr Abelard, your reaction is concerning to her."

"My reaction is concerning? What about this… this… hole in the ground?" he throws his hands around. "And where is the equipment? Does she even have a laboratory?"

I relay his question to her and she grimaces impatiently.

"All I need is a knife and that bench. I work with herbs, roots and such, to make poultices, balms and tonics."

I translate her answer, and the man pinches the ridge of his nose in defeat.

"It's like a witches' lair. No sign of mind troubled by thought anywhere I gaze."

"Mr Abelard!" I chide him, trying to force the man to reign in his emotions, but he simply bristles at me.

"I'm sorry lad, but… how can one even claim this to be an ambulatory? Anyone who enters this type of care is all but guaranteed to never walk again!"

"What is he saying?"

She ask and I ponder what to respond. I decide to censor some of his comments, and give her a half-answer.

"He… he has some doubts about your medicinal abilities… not yours personally, but the Tribes as a whole."

"Dammit, [mc]!" Verissa snaps at me, exasperated. "Don't lie to me; it's very out of character, and extremely annoying. I asked you to translate, so translate – word for word."

Being effectively called out, I swallow heavily and decide to rephrase my previous translation to match the merchant's exact choice of words, and after a short pause, she nods.

"Tell him that I agree. This is why I had him summoned; to get this place up to speed."

I relay this to the merchant, and he coughs uncomfortably.

"Oh… well. I'll try as best as I can, but I can't promise miracles, laddie."

"I'm also going to translate you two as is - unadulterated." I give him a slight warning, so that he's aware nothing said we'll be omitted in their exchanges. "It was Verissa's request, and I see no reason why I should not honour it.

"Much obliged." He bows his head respectfully, putting on a cheeky grin. "I will try to refrain from sharp tongue. After all, we wouldn't want to shoot the messenger." He laughs, and then regards the female, taking yet another, shallow dip. "Tell her, that I'm at her service, although I have some worries as to what my service could amount to in such… limited facility."

I relay his words and Verissa smiles softly.

"His expertise and knowhow will be enough. I'd like him to simply confer with me."

"Ah… a second opinion. Always a good idea. I'll strive my best." Mr Abelard nods eagerly, and the female gets us on the move again, deeper into the cavernous complex.

Wherever there's a lack of an opening in the rocky ceiling, a torch is placed at the side, burning precariously, and bathing everything in orange hues. But in all, the place simply looks more like an underground maze rather than a hospital, and Mr Abelard and I exchange increasingly worried glances.

"We have a wounded wolf that progressively weakens despite all my attempts. I need her saved." She states, and as I convey her message, Mr Abelard blinks.

"Well… whatever was the matter?"

"A crushed paw, with both forearm bones turned to gravel. I had no choice but to amputate." She says candidly, and once my mediation is done, he brushes his beard with worry.

"Oh… my… dear me. That is not exactly my area of expertise… but the patient lived?"

"Almost a week now." Verissa responds with a slight hint of hope in her voice, and I translate.

"That is quite good news." The merchant nods, still very much pondering the matter. "Every day after amputation the chance of survival increase drastically."

"Not in this case. It seems something went wrong." She sighs, stopping in her tracks and placing a paw against the moistened wall.

"Oh… right. Shall we see to the patient?" Mr Abelard asks, giving me a side-eye and I immediately interpret.

"Of course, right this way." The white female indicates, and we follow through a decorative curtain of glass beads and what I assume are small bird bones.

Immediately we're hit by a thick smell of damp and death. It's almost choking, depositing a sweet residue upon the tongue and I fight the urge to wretch.

"Goodness gracious! The stench!" the merchant voices my own thoughts, using his hat to cover his mouth, while Verissa leads us to a bedding in an alcove, occupied by a she-wolf in the throes of a burning fever.

It's hard to watch her twitch in pain, mumbling some inaudible nothings into the air. Her fur is dampened either with sweat, or moisture continuously dripping from the walls and ceiling. Mr Abelard leans forward, retrieving a pair of spectacles from a pouch behind his belt and carefully inspects the amputated limb, dressed in unexpectedly clean and tidy bandages. As he continues his study, I jump in fright as what I assume a rat ran past my leg.

"It's gangrene, alright." The merchant concludes in a downcast voice, much to Verissa's dismay.

"But I have washed the wound in alcohol and cauterised it! I was thorough!"

"Being thorough is neither here nor there…" Mr Abelard sighs, removing his glasses. "Amputations are very risky procedures, even in the Tigerii Chirurgicum." He nods for me translate and I do so.

Verissa's expression crumbles in dismay and she shakes her head.

"Aluna Almighty… I cannot lose her!" she almost yells out. "Ask him, if he has any insight at all!" her voice echoes at me demandingly and I relay that to the merchant.

He brushes his beard with his fingers in deep contemplation, leaning yet again over the stump with deep concern, when he finally speaks in a heavy voice.

"Well… accepting that this is not an infection from without, the only possibility is an infection from within."

"What does that mean?" I ask, and he shrugs.

"Internal bleeding. Amputating an arm severs multiple major vessels. How did she close them?"

I relay his question and Verissa responds.

"I burned them with a hot poker."

"That very well may work on smaller vessels, but not on an artery." Mr Abelard retorts when given my translation. "I dare to venture, once this poor soul came to, she was in a lot of pain."

"Indeed." Verissa responds to my proxy, and the man continues.

"That would increase the heartrate, put the strain on the now dull end of a major vessel…" he ponders for a moment and then continues. "I think she's bleeding. Not profusely, but enough to create abscesses. She's rotting from within."

"Moon Goddess be good! What can be done?" she demands with true terror, and I can see a tear dangle in the corner of her eye. "Tell him we must save her!"

With a heavy heart, I relay her plea and I can see that the merchant is equally shaken by the situation. With a trembling hand, he reaches behind his coat and retrieves a small phial, the very same I saw him use at Teagan's farm. He takes a shallow sip and with his nerves steadied, he inhales deeply and again looks over the arm, going as far as reaching for and manoeuvring it to see all possible angles. Once his inspection is over, he sighs and looks to us with a serious gaze.

"We must remove the stump all the way to the elbow." He motions, as I translate. "But that gives us no guarantee of success, in fact I'd dare to say we'd venture to repeat the same mistake and prolong if not compound her suffering."

"Is there no other way of saving her? What about sedation?" she pleads, and after my mediation, he shakes his head.

"Long term sedation is not a good idea… you're effectively pump the poor soul full of poison. Besides, the further up the arm we go, the bigger the artery. We'd need a surgeon to close it properly."

"We don't have a surgeon… do we?" I look to Verissa with worry, and she closes her eyes, shaking her head in defeat.

My stomach ties in knots, more so that Eneya issues an agonised groan, and I barely manage to relay the answer.

"Well, I'm afraid that is that, then." Mr Abelard lowers his gaze in sorrow, but after a moment he levels me an empathetic gaze. "Tell her, that I understand and commend her desire to save a comrade, but… this is not possible. Not with our limited resources. I might have some general knowledge, but I'm not a practitioner. And I've never operated on anyone. All I do is tinctures." He insists, distress clearly lining his voice. "I'll gladly ease her pain and afford her comfort in her passing… but pass she must. Attempting another amputation would be akin to torture at this stage."

Verissa listens to my translation, eyes locked on the female's rattled chest as she struggles to breathe. She is clearly brokenhearted, and eventually, she closes her eyes, resting one paw on Eneya's arm. It would seem she feared this outcome but also somewhat expected it at the same time.

"Whatever you can do, at least ease her passing." She utters with a broken voice laden with emotion, and Mr Abelard nods. "I need to stay here with her… [mc], can you please escort him back to the Villa?"

"Of course!" I nod, and touch her shuddering shoulder comfortingly.

Seeing that she needs space, I bop my head towards the exit and prod Mr Abelard to follow.

We leave the underground labyrinth in silence, the merchant clearly mulling over something as he brushes his bushy beard, while I simply feel defeated. Had this been my world, this would be a simple procedure, but here… here certain things can prove fatal, that otherwise our modern society brushes off as benign. It suddenly downs on me that I'm in more danger than I actually thought… Immediately I recall Tano's warning.

"A simple stab here… or here… or especially here." I recall him touching various parts of my torso.

I begin to understand why Ranok is so overly protective and worried about me.

We return to the village in silence, Mr Abelard mumbling some deep thoughts to himself, probably still battling with the fate of the injured she-wolf in his mind. I don't know what else to add, nor do I want to interrupt him, as he works. He might come up with something that we did not yet consider. Our silence is now enforced, as we enter the village proper. I do not wish to antagonise anyone by conferring with a stranger in a foreign tongue… I might have built a credit of trust with the yesterday's event, but I cannot test it just yet. We continue onto the Sylvan Road, still not talking, still very much perturbed, until, halfway to our destination, I spot a figure approaching from the distance.

"Tryst!" I call out, as we near each other, and he gives me a bemused smile.

"Pain in the ass…"

"Where you headed?"

"To the brewery." He bops his head behind us. "I need to order some stuff for the villa; those two pilfered the cellars, and now only one cask of ale remains."

"Were they heavily drinking?" I ask and he shrugs nonchalantly.

"At first to celebrate your departure, then to drown their sorrow for your return… any reason to break in a new cask is good enough."

"Heh…" I smile awkwardly, when I remember the odd exchange at the Den. "Oh, by the way… Verissa sent a bunny named Yarrow to fetch Mr Abelard… but it was Leaf who brought him instead. She seemed troubled by it. Any idea why?"

"Leaf is one of Vithyr's." Tryst states, his eyes narrowing in concern. "If there was a switcheroo, then it was at his behest. Technically he transferred her wardship to Varok, and she works at the villa, but her loyalties lie with the baker, no doubt about that."

"I thought your loyalties lie with your own." I propose and he nods uncertainly.

"Yeah. Unless you find a way to work a wolf to your kins advantage. Vithyr is lenient towards Leaf's burrow and he treats her well enough. We all work our own angles here, kiddo."

"What is your angle?" I ask, and the bunny shift to the other leg, arms folded at the chest.

"Getting the fuck away from here… but that's not going to happen anytime soon. In the meantime, I simply want to stay out of trouble, and keep myself in good graces with the Chief."

"Is Varok treating you alright?"

"As good as any wolf would." He shrugs again. "He's still my captor. So, I have no sympathies beyond what's prudent."

Our exchange is interrupted by a rather enthusiastic exhale from the lips of the merchant.

"Fascinating! What a marvellously melodic, and fast-paced tongue!"

"What's up with the fatso?" Tryst gives him an inquisitive look and I smile.

"He's just curious and giddy at everything." I respond meekly. "I think he needed a distraction after our morbid visit to the Den of Vigil."

At that Tryst narrows his eyes and ponders a moment.

"I've heard tales of how bad the place used to be when injuries were frequent. In recent years there was peace, so it hasn't seen much use. But from what I heard…" he pauses, piquing my curiosity with his now hushed tone. "…it used to be like a monster's cave; blood and gore everywhere you look, with wolves issuing their last breath like pray on butcher's slab. Quite poetic if you ask me."

"Poetic?" I blink and he simply snorts in genuine amusement.

"Hunter laid bare like a defenceless fawn? Doesn't get any more just than that."

"You yourself eat meat." I point out and he shrugs.

"Yes… but I'm prey all the same. They might not eat us, but they see us as overly talkative could-be-food." He sighs, when he looks upwards towards the sun above the woodland canopy. "Anyway, I must run. If they run out of drink before I get back with more, I'm gonna be in real trouble."

And with that, he darts on, this time at a much faster pace, most likely to catch up from our little chat.

"What a handsome and pleasant-sounding little fella!" Mr Abelard muses with a weak smile on his face, and I chuckle.

"Appearances can be deceiving. Tryst is kind enough, but he has a bite appropriate for his choppers."

"Hah! Good, good." He nods, amusedly. "Small kin need to know how to stand up for themselves."

But despite this short shift, his humour has not yet truly returned, and the man falls back into quiet sulking as we resume our trek. The silence increasingly bothers me with each additional step, but I find no means of breaking it's choking grip, and I simply surrender myself to it.

"Why such sullen faces?" Elin's voice carries over the greenery, as we pass the bend onto the courtyard walled-off courtyard. "You were positively giddy to visit their sanatorium-"

"It's a mortuarium if anything!" the merchant snaps back at her taunting words. "Blasted savages! No offense, Master [mc], but what I saw there equated to some of more notorious leonine dungeons than a house of healing!"

I have not much to respond, and noticing my silence, the girl slips from the wall top and approaches with a cheeky grimace.

"Ooof. That bad?"

"Horrible!" Mr Abelard brings us to a stop, visibly shaking with anger. "Tisanes, herbs and roots; no medicine in sight! Not to mention a proper medician." He sighs in distress. "Their shaman is not only young, but completely out of her depth!"

"You can't blame her…" I interject, and he nods in mild agreement.

"I don't; I blame their backwards savage society! Leaving the sick and weak to die… my word, which century do we even live in?!"

"That depends more on location than the actual date, I have found." Elin muses, yet her sarcasm wanes from her voice. "Walk a mile from either Tigeron or Lyonesse, and it's like you're moving back in time."

"And that poor girl, lying there in pain… I couldn't bare watch it." I notice he's unable to contain tears welling up in his eyes.

He takes out a napkin, rubbing one side with it, then another, and Elin's expression turns serious.

"Wait… couldn't you help her? You've got cures for all sorts of maladies."

"It's not an illness that she's grappling with. It's a botched amputation!" the merchant responds in misdirected anger, yet Elin does not take it personally, and simply enquires further.

"How badly botched?"

"You should've seen it..." Mr Abelard's lips tremble, as he clears his nose. "The gangrene already set in. The whole forearm must come off and without a surgeon, that's but a death sentence."

"Don't they have someone in that capacity?" she continues, despite the subject clearly distressing the man with each further exchange.

"I doubt they'd subject one of their own to such torture had they did."

"Hmmm…" Elin ponders, glancing to me for a moment. "I'm not a surgeon, but I have a surgical kit." She offers and I blurt in surprise.

"W-what?"

"I've done patchwork before…" she shrugs casually "…could I be of any help?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Mr Abelard is as equally stumped as I am, and she chuckles.

"A young girl traveling the world on her lonesome must know how to take care of herself, Mr Abelard. Scuffles and scrapes often end with a little bit of needlework."

She pulls up her shirt from her pantaloons, revealing a grizzly set of scars along her side, causing the old man to jump startled.

"Goodness me!"

"Yep." She smirks with satisfaction, tucking the shirt again. "There's few more at my upper side, but… they're harder to showcase without betraying one's modesty."

I regard her with newfound respect; she seems one tough cookie, that's for sure… but I also feel sorry for someone so young having to be so… experienced. Life was not kind to her. However, my musings are quickly derailed by Mr Abelard, who simply shakes his head in distress.

"Be it as it may, we're talking about an open artery, not a cut-"

"I've had to stich my vein once." She interjects him casually, pointing to her left leg. "An arrowhead, straight to my thigh. Thank Fhrey it was just a nick, but I still had to close it."

I blink, looking at the hidden spot she indicated and shiver. All I've experienced was a stab from Vul, and despite how painful it was, it begins to feel more like a love bite than anything.

"So… you think you could save Eneya?" I ask reluctantly, and she shrugs, ever honest and straightforward.

"I don't know about that, but I could close the vein. However, you'd have to knock her out for twelve hours… and knock her out *real* good." She says to Mr Abelard who blinks. "No elevated blood pressure for six hours before and after procedure, otherwise it's all for naught."

"I… I've got just the thing for that, but… are you sure this is sensible?" he sounds almost pleading. "Why disturb-"

"Have you ever seen someone die of gangrene, Mr Abelard?" she asks in a more accusatory tone now, and the man stumbles to respond.

"I-"

"No, I didn't think you did." She answers herself, and the man's expression falters. "It's not pleasant, nor remotely peaceful… so the only thing we'd be disturbing is the death's order of the day. I think saving a life is worth a try, no matter the unpleasantness."

And to that, the merchant can only but nod with a weak smile. Seems to me he doesn't have a stomach for blood and suffering… but it's also good to see that despite her cool demeanour, Elin is not as much of a killer as she paints herself to be.

"Right, I'll go grab my kit… while you need to fetch us an expert carver." She points at me, as she starts walking towards the villa and we instinctively follow.

"Huh?"

"From what I gathered that black brute is the local butcher… and torturer."

"W-what?" I blurt out, much to her growing annoyance.

"He's tending to someone in the dungeon, is he not?"

"How do you-"

"Never you mind that." She swishes her hand at me. "What's important now is his skill. He can remove the stump the cleanest. I'll deal with the rest."

"What about Verissa?" I ask and she scoffs nastily.

"Ain't she the one who botched the previous amputation? If so, I don't want her anywhere near the procedure."

I frown at her retort but cannot fault her logic. I only hope the white female won't take it personally. We follow her, matching the urgent tempo of the girl, and disappear into the servant quarters of the Villa. She bursts into her chamber, rushing over to the cupboard, which she quickly ransacks in search of a small leather satchel. She unfurls it, revealing an array of glistening steel instruments, eliciting a whistle of approval from Mr Abelard.

"That's quite the kit you carry, Miss Stern."

"Standard issue." She shrugs, once satisfied she has everything she needs, and begin to furl the thing back up.

That's when one of the bunnies passes by, and notices our more than conspicuous congregation, bolting in panic while muttering "Weapons! They're up to something!"

"That can't be good…" Elin groans.

"Astute, as always, Miss Stern." The merchant snorts, and gives me a wearied glance. "I hope you'll be able to handle this… complication."

I nod, even though I'm uncertain how things will play out. We decide to walk out at a calmer pace, as to not draw more attention to ourselves, but it's already too late. As we emerge onto the courtyard, we are met by an unamused committee consisting of the startled bunny servant, Leaf, whose pointing at us and chattering into Vithyr's ear, and Drair, who darts his eyes at me and his dad in utter panic.

"It would seem that you have settled in more than appropriate." The baker grumbles with clear annoyance, his hostile gaze lingering on me longer than on others. "The condition of your stay was respecting the peace of the Villa. Now I hear that weapons are being concealed within your chambers."

"You will find no weapons on us." Elin protests in a calm voice. "We surrendered our steel as requested upon admission."

"Then what is in that satchel of yours?" Vithyr points at her bundle, and the girl shrugs.

"My surgical kit."

"So it does contain a blade."

"No larger than a table knife." Elin shrugs even harder. "Should I surrender my fork and spoon as well?"

"Send for the Chief." He leans over to his son, and the brown wolf nods and rushes to the villa, all too eager to be removed from the situation.

We wait but a moment, before Drair leads his query onto the quad, the Chief's stride vexed and impatient.

"Why are you interrogating them in the courtyard?" he nearly growls at his friend, who blinks, quite surprised by this reaction.

"Would you prefer if I did that in the cellar?"

"Anywhere with four walls would do! What's the matter with you?" the Chief sneers, not even regarding us, his annoyed gaze Vithyr's sole burden to bare.

"They've been caught concealing weapons-"

"A surgical kit!" Elin issues a rude correction, causing Vithyr to narrow his brow in anger. "Here, have a gander!" she then unlatches the satchel and unfurls it like a scroll.

It hangs down all the way to her knee, displaying all the various tools shining in the sunlight.

"I see no weapons here, Vithyr." The Chief concludes, somewhat bemused, and his friend barks back in mix of shock and annoyance.

"You see no-" he cuts himself off in disbelief. "That there is a knife sharp enough to cut a cured hide like paper!"

"So will a carving knife, what is the matter with you?" The Chief gives his friend a bewildered and somewhat concerned look. "First it was that whelp over there, now it's the bitchling… poison is as effective a weapon as any blade, why is the apothecary none of your concerns?"

And at that question, I blink, looking to Mr Abelard with puzzlement. Vithyr was outright chummy with him, but it couldn't have been just the merchant's charm. When I look back to the brown male, he's as confused as the rest of us. Eventually, he blurts out incoherently.

"Do you know Verissa confers with them?"

"That would be the point of letting them into our forest. Whatever aid they can offer to her, is much welcomed." The Chief rebuts, turning on his heel and slowly approaching the entryway.

"I wish you treated this more seriously." Vithyr calls after his friend, but the old wolf only waves his paw dismissively, without even looking back.

"And I wish we'd stop barking at those damn naked monkeys, as if they were squirrels." He quips, disappearing into his domicile.

Left alone and ignored, Vithyr throws us one last begrudging look, before he too waves us away, contempt lining his strained voice.

"Off with you, then…"

And with that, we take our leave. The first leg of our journey onto the Sylvan Road elapses in awkward silence, but once we're out of the Chief's estate proper, Elin gives me a subtle, knowing look.

"The shaggy one does not seem to like you and I."

"You can say that again…" I chuckle uncomfortably and she snorts.

"Very well – he doesn't like us."

"That’s not what I meant-"

"I know what you meant." She sneers annoyingly. "But instead of acting a clueless fool, I expect you to *clue* me in."

I blink, pondering her meaning a moment, and simply shrug.

"He's looking out for his best friend. You and I are-"

"Shady as fuck, yeah." Again, she beats me to the punchline. "But there's more to it. He was fine around Mr Abelard when it came to their little gauntlet. He knows he's an apothecary, and carries explosives… unless his friend did not confide that little detail in him."

"I doubt it… Vithyr and Varok are thick as thieves." I rebuff, much to her satisfaction, and the girl nods.

"Exactly my point. So why is it, that only you and I fall under scrutiny, when our charming little merchant is far greater a threat than either of us could ever be."

"Well, come now, Miss Stern." Mr Abelard grumbles under his bushy moustache. "That's not exactly a flattering assessment."

"And yet the most accurate." She continues, looking at me with narrowed eyes. "You've done something to upset him… and now that thing is rubbing off on me."

I burry in my thought for a moment, trying to think why Vithyr might be out to get me. After all, she isn't wrong. He was the one who wanted me gone to begin with. At first I thought it was about getting Cora in trouble, but since the debacle with Kieran, it seems less likely of a reason. It's almost as if I somehow got in his way… he wasn't hostile from the get go. Maybe… maybe he realised that Ranok and Cora's relationship is a sham? But then… would he not reveal that to the Chief?

"Your consternation proves I'm right." She pulls me out of my stupor. "More yet, it reveals there's an entire list of things that might have caused this animosity."

"I suppose…" I shrug, deciding not to indulge the conversation further, both on account of my mood and the now increased scrutiny as we approach the village centre.

I steer us towards the butchery, where loud chopping signals the presence of its master cleaver. The black wolf is working hard, dismembering the catch of the day, a now unrecognizable hunk of meat and bones getting smaller with each chop and shank removed. We approach the ladder, and noticing our arrival, the wolf impales his hatched into the wooden block.

"Piglet?" Vul looks our assembly with a cautious gaze. "Bringing the passel to slaughter?"

I motion with my head towards his workshop and it takes a while for him to decipher my meaning, but soon enough, reluctantly he leads us inside.

"We need you to close down and come with us. You're needed at the Den of Vigil." I say, finally out of sight and able to speak.

He narrows his eyes suspiciously, scanning my companions with increasing apprehension.

"Did Verissa sent you?" he demands harshly and I wince.

"Sort off. Eneya's arm is infected and needs further treatment."

"She botched the amputation…" he concludes through a soft growl and I nod.

"Y-yeah."

"Fuck…" the black wolf exhales heavily and rubs his neck with growing annoyance.

"We need you to help us fix it..." I continue undeterred "You're the only one skilled enough with the knife to get it done. Elin can patch it up, but the cut has to be as clean as possible."

He gives the girl a careful glance and having a good measure of her, he nods reluctantly.

"Yeah, I can do that. But, fuck… why didn't she ask me in the first place?!" he spits in anger and I shrug uncomfortably.

"I don't know… would you?"

"Piglet…" he issues a warning growl, but it no longer holds sway over my resolve.

"You're all so proud and independent, I doubt any of you would ask for help even on your damn deathbed!" I huff in defiance and although displeased at first, he doesn't say anything to refute my point. "Anyway, no time to waste. We need to get going."

"Very well…" he sighs in agreement. "Let me just wash up and grab my stuff."

He doesn't take long, retrieving his prized dagger from the tabletop, where it sat next to a bottle of polishing oil and a cloth. He then rushes to grab few more blades, one curved and reminiscent of a sickle, as well, as dousing his hands with a generous serving of moonshine. Satisfied with his get up, he steps out onto the street, and we follow at a lively pace. For a moment I wonder if he should not 'close up' or at least hide the meat, but then I realise that their open-door policy comes from their 'tightly knit community'. I doubt theft is a common occurrence… not to mention I doubt anyone would be crazy enough to steal from Vul.

We walk the path towards the Den, with Elin and Mr Abelard engaging in sporadic chatter about the shortcomings of the Wolven society, the merchant focusing on architecture, or lack thereof, while I ponder my standing with Ranok's adoptive father. Vithyr seems far less what he appeared to be initially, and I don't know if I like that. At the risk of sounding like a Karen, I believe he's a bad influence on Varok. Or maybe they mutually bring out their worst impulses, which again, is not an ideal situation. But his animosity is becoming clearer by the day. I worry this could potentially put a strain on Ranok. I wouldn't want him to be forced to choose, or worse yet, side against any of us. I'll have to find a way of dealing with Vithyr in the least confrontational way.

"What's this?" the white female greets us with a comically startled expression, as we arrive and find her hanging linen outside the Den of Vigil.

"Elin can help!" I reveal, pointing to the girl with an open hand. "She believes she can make the secondary amputation viable, as long as Vul is the one to perform it."

"Vul?" she eyes out the black male with even greater confusion, and he shrugs.

"Piglet told me everything. I won't say I'm not miffed that it was him, not you, with enough clarity of mind to ask for help."

She grimaces at the harsh tone of his voice and stumbles on words.

"I… I didn't think-"

"No time for chit-chat, if gangrene set in, every moment counts. Let's get to it." Elin barges between them, clapping her hands for emphasis and the white female nods.

"Quite right."

"Mr Abelard, which is your strongest sedatives?" the girl asks the merchant, and he furrows his bushy brows for a while.

"Tincture of poppy." He finally reveals with a tad too much uncertainty for my liking and I pry into their exchange.

"Is it safe?"

"Well, for humans, half the bottle could prove lethal, but considering the wolves size…" he ponders a moment. "I'd say it will sooth our patient beyond pain."

"I don't need her soothed, I need her out cold!" Elin calls out in mild annoyance. "For this to work - as close to dead as possible."

"Well, I've never done this on an otherkin before." Mr Abelard flusters, his hands shaking in slight apprehension. "I would have to measure doses and check the effects every now and then. Adjust it as we go."

"Well, let's get started on it then." Elin bids him towards the cave. "Whatever time you need, use it well and cut it in half. The more we tarry, the lower the chances of success become." She states with solemn urgency, and finally understanding the weight of the situation, we exchange looks and with Verissa's invitation are beaconed into the Den of Vigil.

It would seem Vul has not visited this place before either, judging by his strained grunts of disapproval… I begin to think that this indeed might be a place for the Tribe refuse to simply await their expiration.

"I wouldn't even try to prepare meat here… and what isn't good for dead meat, can't be good for living one either." He grunts, and I nod in agreement.

Once we approach the hidden alcove, the air fills with the groans and heavy breathing of the mutilated female. She's in a lot of pain, and the scent of rot and sweat permeates the air. As our troupe stops at her bedding, Mr Abelard looks around with sudden surge of panic.

"Shouldn't we… confer with her first?" he mutters shakily. "Alleviate some of the worries?"

"The bitch is looking like she's already knocking on the Pearly Gates, I don't think she's too worried about anything Mr Abelard!" Elin snaps back in annoyance, and simply continues to prepare her station. "Just get her nice and steady like a statue."

He nods in understanding and just as earlier, takes a short swing of his calming balm, before proceeding to procure the necessary ingredients from his pouch. While he does, Elin levels me and Verissa out with a stern gaze.

"Oh, yeah, and you two need to leave."

"What? Why?" I ask, quite sure that the white female won't take kindly to such dismissal in her own place of work, but Elin is quick to bark her explanation back at me.

"Miasma. We all breathe it; the more present, the more miasmic vapor in the air." She states, shooing us towards the exit. "You don't want all our work go to waste, do you?"

"N-no."

"Then out you go!"

Despite the fact I didn't yet manage to translate, Verissa surprisingly follows the direction, nodding in slow realisation once I give her the reason for our dismissal.

"Yes, that does make sense…" she mutters, but her voice is cracking, her ears flat and her tail tucked neatly.

It's clear she's distressed at the prospect of being useless, but at the same time I admire her that her own pride did not get in the way of saving a friend. Her ego might be bruised, but there's an undeniable air of relief about her, and we emerge onto the light of the open sky, finding a nearby stone to perch on for the unforeseeable hours to come. But as I sit, the white female simply paces about, reminiscent of Ranok at the Magistrate's palace. Realising how set in their ways those wolves can be, I simply let her cope in the fashion most suitable to her needs.

"I should be in there…" Verissa breaks the silence after what feels like an eternity.

"They know what they're doing." I assert, empowered by the deathly quiet of the forest.

No sound echoed from within the Den, meaning that the procedure goes peacefully at the very least. Of course, there's also a chance that Eneya didn't make it, but ultimately that was her destiny to begin with… so…

"I should be there to see, observe!" Verissa continues, more exasperated, and I can see she's tethering on the edge of storming in.

"Elin is right; we pose a threat with our presence." I try to reason with her, and her ear flicks in my direction, muzzle still locked on the hollow. "I'm sure they'll gladly share their experience with you once everything's done. Besides, Vul is in there. You won't miss a thing." At the mention of the black wolf, her gaze finally meets mine, her eyes heavy with worry and I venture a cheeky grin. "It'll give you something to bond over other than his desperate need to woo you." Verissa chuckles involuntarily and I continue. "Who knows… it might be pleasant. He's very in the zone when he talks about his butchery work." And with that, she nods, relaxing somewhat, and even going as far as sitting herself beside me. I almost blink in surprise, when her fur leans against my naked arms… it's warm and pleasant, and it makes the following wait that more bearable.

"How was it?" I finally spring to life, noticing Elin's silhouette appear in the entryway after another hour or so.

She walks at a brisk pace, wiping her bloodied hands into a linen cloth she simply tosses near the exit.

"Easy as a pie." Elin grins, rubbing her nose and pointing to Vul, who walks out soon after. "This one could flay your skin from your body in one large continuous piece had he wanted to."

"Heh… I kinda knew that already. And the vein?"

"Used my pincers to close it shut, then stitched it twice over, and cauterised it." She explains, smiling at Mr Abelard who joins us outside with a pleased expression. "With as low as her heartrate is now, it'll heal no problem within a day."

"You're amazing!" I exclaim, jumping off the rock and throwing myself into a tight embrace with the girl.

She looks a bit stunned and I half-expect her to beat me senseless, but she only sighs in bemusement and pats me on the back.

"Nah… I'm just alive. You should pick up a needle if you wish to remain such." She snickers. "All of us are akin to wineskins, but humans more so than others."

"They're chirping like little squirls." Vul grumbles to Verissa, giving me an uncomfortable side-eye.

"Yeah… their language is fast-paced." The white female concurs and looks to me with a pleading expression. "Can I go in to see her?"

I relay the question to Elin and Mr Abelard and they both nod.

"Sure, but don't touch the dressing." Elin cautions and once the instruction is translated, Verissa nods and rushes into the Den.

The human duo simply walks towards my little rock and plops down, clearly exhausted. Mr Abelard fishes out his little phial and again, takes a few drops from it, intent on calming his nerves.

"I don't suppose you have any booze, do you?" Elin asks, but the man shrugs embarrassedly.

"Afraid not."

At that, Vul retrieves a small pouch from behind his waist and tosses it to Elin, almost as if reading her mind.

"Thanks, big guy!" she genuflects to him teasingly and uncorks the vessel, taking a deep, thirsty chug. "Fuck, that's strong!" she exclaims with satisfaction and wipes her mouth, passing the pouch back to the black wolf.

In turn, Vul also takes a chug, offering me my own share, but I refuse. What would I need to steel my nerves for? I haven't done much of anything really. Instead, I join them in taking a well deserved rest in silence.

"Eneya seems stable." Verissa says with evident relief, rejoining us in the sunlight. "I don't know how to thank you, Mr Abelard, and you too, Miss Stern."

She darts her eyes to me, and I mediate.

"Nothing to thank us for. A life saved is a time well spent." The merchant responds.

"For once, I can agree." Elin adds with a strained smile.

The two wolves take to the side, to speak with one-another, while Mr Abelard rummages through a pouch, retrieving a small linen parcel. He carefully unfolds it to reveal a mouldy, pungent cube of cheese, marbled with dark green veins.

"What's this?" I ask, grimacing after having an unfortunate whiff of the 'delicacy'.

"Aged Cheese." He states the obvious with a smile. "Remind Verissa to feed it to the patient regularly. She needs it to fight the miasma." Mr Abelard instructs. "The source of rot is removed, but the poison can still linger within her blood."

I look over the unassuming cheese with a sceptic eye. Sounds like one superstition replacing another.

"And tell her to move the poor bitch out of that hellhole. It's no place for convalescence." Elin chimes in before I can even translate and I pause, looking them over with worry.

Catching my mild discomfort, Mr Abelard clears his throat and mumbles.

"I mean… it's not entirely hopeless. It just needs a bit adjustment."

"Braziers for starters to get rid of moisture. Illness lingers in moist places." Elin states sternly. "I think, beyond any other nonsense, this should be their people's primary concern now; to have a proper place for convalescence."

"Why do you say that?" I blink at her ominous words with slight confusion, and she shrugs.

"Because you have a war coming."

"How do you-"

"That was a combat injury, not a training accident." The girl scoffs, clearly offended that I took her for a fool. "And since you're not in an open war yet, it's but a prelude of things to come. She needs to learn to cut flesh like the big fella." She motions to Vul, who's currently talking the procedure over with Verissa. "The previous amputation screamed of emotions running wild. Steel nerves is what's needed. Tell her to train with him at the butchery; cut stakes, flay boars. Anything to get her accustomed to the blade, while Mr Abelard and I can help bring this shithole to some sort of standard."

I nod, ignoring her abrasive words, and taking to heart the main sentiment. Truth sometimes hurt, and I'm sure Verissa is ready to hear this one. Especially, since she's been fighting this battle alone for almost a year, at least now she has some allies.

"Right, I need to get back to the butchery before my meat spoils." Vul says, looking back towards where the village lies.

That's when Verissa reaches out to him, gently grabbing his shoulder.

"Actually, before you do… could you do me one more favour?"

"Anything." He asserts and she continues, looking at me with worry.

"[mc] has put his hide on a line already with his involvement. Could you get a ward, any at all, to escort the humans back?" She asks softly. "I don't think they should be seen together every time they're out and about."

"I'll do you one better. I'll take them back to the villa myself." Vul proposes to her surprise.

"But that'll implicate you." The white female cautions, but he shrugs indifferently.

"I'm already implicated. And if anyone would ask, I'd implicate myself anyway." He scoffs. "Point is, with me involved, fewer will be bold enough to ask questions."

"Thank you, Vul. You're a true friend." Verissa says, embracing him gently and for a split moment I can see a blush paint his muzzle and the insides of his ears.

"Try to remember that next time you want to bitch me out." he clears his throat, pushing her away in embarrassment, although I can see he's loath to do so, and Verissa laughs.

She shakes her head, disappearing into the Den with a lighter step. It's obvious that a massive weight has lifted from her shoulders and I'm all the gladder for it.

"Right. Tell them to follow. And no funny business or chatter. I *hate* chatter." The black male sneers, eyeing out the merchant and I almost allow myself a snort of a chuckle.

I explain to them the following, and they comply without much fuss. Seeing them depart, I simply stand there a moment, as if lost, when I decide to head back for the cottage. I bet Ranok's worried sick… or at the very least curious of my morning's misadventure. I've been having a lot of those, so I'm pleased that my trek back home elapses with no surprises.

"Hey there, pet!" I hear the familiar, pleasant chirp coming from the bakery. "Would you come over a moment?" the tawny female asks, beckoning me and I comply.

"Hello Cora." I reply, smiling, once we're out of the street. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, yes; everything's fine!" She chuckles swishing her paw, realising that she might have startled me. "It's just that with Ranok gone, I thought you could use some company."

"He's gone? Where?" I blink in slight worry and again, she laughs me off.

"He's with his Pack; he'll be at it until the end of the day I'd wager. You can wait at the cottage if you want, but I thought we could spend some time together. You could even help me out." She winks and my expression brightens, despite slight apprehension.

"Won't that land us in trouble?"

"With whom?"

"Your father for one…" I wince and she snorts a harsh scoff.

"Honestly, do I look as if I care about my dad and his temper tantrums?"

"No, not really." I snicker and her frown disappears, as she swishes a napkin, revealing plump ball dough already risen beneath it.

She begins to kneed it in earnest, continuing with equally worked up tone.

"I only stay in this dump, because I worry that without me around to ground him, he'll drink himself into an early grave."

"Is it that bad?" I ask, leaning over the table, watching the dough being stretched and rounded up.

"You have no idea." She groans, and I could swear she's transferring some of the anger into her workout.

"I suppose it's understandable for someone grieving." I propose idly, then my eyes drift with worry to her muzzle; I don't know if it's a sore topic or not, but still, I decide to finish what I've started. "From what I understand, he lost a soulmate, while you lost a mother."

"He *pretends* he grieves, but I think it's more of an excuse for his erratic behaviour than any true mourning." She states coldly, not breaking from her task for one moment. "He never cared for the she-wolf mom really was, just the idea of her he made up in his head. They fought a lot, and disagreed on almost everything." She sighs, taking a short pause and giving me a week smile. "Sometimes I think the only thing that truly connected those two was *me*… and still, with mother gone, his idea of who I am has run awry from their joint vision they used to have."

"You mean the sexist patronisation?" I try to sound a little playful to lighten the mood, and she smirks.

"That happened *after* mom died." Cora explains, returning to her spirited kneading. "Before, my dare-dos and tomfoolery filled him with pride, now he dreads the idea of me being put in harms way."

"You're the only thing left he has of his beloved."

"I know, but it's suffocating! I'm not allowed to live, [mc]!" she calls out, her exasperation echoing across the chamber. "We all are headed for the Great Beyond sooner or later, but that doesn't mean we should be barred from living. Life's precariousness is the reason why we should live to its fullest!" she states assuredly, levelling me a knowing gaze. "You wouldn't try to stop Ranok from being his reckless, dutiful self out of fear of losing him, would you?"

"W-what do you mean by that?!" I blurt out in panic, and Cora only raises a brow challengingly. "Of course I wouldn't. No one should!"

"Exactly." She concedes with a soft smirk, returning her attention to the dough. "True friends and family look out for you, yes, but they also allow you to fulfil your potential without clipping your wings. There's a difference between being protective and overbearing."

"Indeed..." I sigh, watching as she continues to work the dough.

I guess I can understand what she means… Ranok's been doing that to me… and I might have been tad overbearing with him as well. I exhale heavily and simply observe Cora work. There's something hypnotic about her rhythm and I decide to pull up a stool and take a seat.

"If you don't mind, I think I hunker down with you… Vee's getting antsy about me spilling the beans, and people tend to barge in on me when I'm left alone."

"The secret’s now out in the open, huh?" she chortles, and I cringe a little.

"Sort off… I’m still to keep it on down low."

"Ha! As if you did up until now…" she now erupts into teasing chuckle, and I frown.

I have been less than discrete, but then again… who wouldn't be in circumstances such as mine. It all feels daft and silly, even three weeks into this fever dream of mine.

"Anyway, do you need any help?" I pat my knees, feeling a bit useless just watching her work.

"Actually, I could use a paw, if you don’t mind." She says as she divides the playable ball into smaller portions. "I’ve got a whole bunch of sweet rolls to make, and I’ve wasted half of my morning arguing with father."

"Was it bad?" I asked worriedly and she snickers.

"You have no idea… I have little patience for drunks on the best of my days, but when they get sanctimonious with me?" Cora snorts. "Oooh… you better believe I won’t be having any of that! Drair took off the moment he saw my muzzle."

I laugh, feeling sorry and somewhat responsible for their current troubles. I can't imagine what Drair is going through, especially on the count of our confrontation. I hope he won't do anything any of us will regrate later. One unhinged wolf out there is enough to worry about.

"So… what do you need me doing?" I ask, standing up and saluting her like a sentry ready for duty.

She gives me an equal measure of amused and confused look, shaking her head at my clearly not landing antic.

"Just crush the walnuts for me, please." She points to a mortar on the side table. "I’ll get the butter and sweet cheese ready." She says dusting off her paws and walking over to the far-off wall.

"You make your own?" I ask, watching as she picks up a sizable clay amphora and places it on the table.

"Of course. Doesn’t take long." Cora replies, and begins to rock the vessel back and forth, the contents merrily sloshing inside.

"And you’re churning butter in an amphora?" I blink in astonishment, as the sound of crushed nuts joins the dairy farm medley.

"Yeah… much easier on the arms this way."

"Huh..."

Each time I feel these wolves are too far behind the civilised world, they managed to pull me back in with their rustic ingenuity. Although Cora's job seems far more demanding, I'm getting equally worked up grounding nuts, and we remain silent until our respective tasks are done. My hands are sore from pounding at the mortar and I think I've crushed a ton of nuts into smithereens. Cora sifts a very milky liquid out of the amphora and retrieves a white ball of hard curdle. She twists it inside a cloth into a tighter form, wringing any excess moisture from within, and then presents me with it.

"Here we go! A pinch of salt and… fresh butter!" She smiles, dusting the white glistening mass with sprinkling of crystals. "Go ahead, try some."

I don't need much more inviting, and simply pinch the side, bringing my fingers to my mouth.

"Mmmmm! That’s SO creamy!"

"Tee-he!" She smiles toothily and puts the butter away.

Cora then takes the remaining liquid and pours it over into a copper pot.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Cottage cheese." She winks. "Just gotta boil it up and it’ll curdle like a charm."

My smile widens at her resolve, and I simply observe as she sets the pot into the warm hearth of the oven. As it slowly brings to boil, and the tawny female gets busy again, I try to break the awkward silence by touching up on what transpired at the Wolf Moon.

"I hope you weren't upset by yesterday…"

"Upset? No… more… surprised." She says calmly, sorting through the nuts and removing bits of shell I have overlooked. "It was all a bit much, to be fair. I'm not exactly cross with Ran, I know where his heart is… but he did not discuss this stunt with me either." She sighs, looking at me with an evidently hurt gaze. "It backfired, true, but even if it all went according to his plan, I'd be as badly off if not worse."

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted to leave the pack, regardless of Delran's death." She reveals, her words lined with great weight. "I just didn't feel like spending my life doing drills and patrols in the woods. I wanted to plan my exit slowly and quietly… it's Ranok's meddling that made it this spectacular fiasco."

"So you – are - upset." I reiterate, and she shakes her head.

"Not at you being the Tribute, or ending up being captured by your intended." She shrugs casually, giving me an encouraging smile "It's a happy story, and by gosh, by golly, do we need more of those around here."

My heart skips a beat, and my eyes widen like two saucers.

"Wait... I'm confused. You know about-"

"Least said, soonest mended." Cora muses, pressing her clawed finger against her lips. "Point being, I ended up a collateral. I'm getting used to that by now." She shrugs yet again, yet her voice takes on a sharper edge. "If it's not my father, then it's my brother… and if it's not Drair, it's Ranok. Everyone sees me as a dolt, even though it's just a part I play. Off all the dummies, Ran should've known better."

"I'm sorry." I mumble, and the female stops her task, looking at me for a moment, until she banishes the notion with a quick shake of her head.

"Don't be. At least it's a clean cut." She snorts. "No looking back, nor open doors. That chapter is now closed, and I can focus on what matters."

"The pups?"

"Yes."

"You're the sweetest." I smile at her impassionate expression but then wince at a following realisation. "I feel ashamed that at first, I actually wanted to hate your guts."

But Cora only levels me a satisfied smirk and chortles.

"It works like as charm doesn't it? Our little schtick." She winks. "After all, that was the point."

"Yeah. You two have it down to an act." I laugh back, but our merriment does not last long and she sighs.

"Well, it's all in the past now. Ranok won't be able to play the eligible bachelor for much longer."

"Is it that obvious?" I look myself over, startled I still reek of our union, but she waves her paw in dismissal.

"Oh, I'm not talking about that. The Equinox is fast approaching." Cora explains. "But a month away, and Maeve will be all anyone can talk about. Our little game will end there nonnegotiably."

"Oh…" My mood plummets at the reminder of the impending third wheel.

My heart races and I feel cold sweat dot my body… so much for keeping it casual.

"Anyway, the cheese is done, and I think my previous batch has finished baking." She pulls me out of my mental torture, opening the hatch to the oven and allowing the smell of freshly baked tarts to fill the air.

My fears are banished like winter's snow on a sunny day, and my mouth waters, as the only thing I can think of now is this delectable treat in the making. Cora quickly collects the curds from the boiling pot and akin to the butter earlier, strains them in a basin lined with linen. She then deposits the freshly formed cheese into the bowl with crushed nuts and mixes them thoroughly with a few dollops of honey. Finally, she uses this stuffing to fill the still cooling tarts. It all looks absolutely delicious and I'm getting impatient, like a child watching his mom preparing their favourite treat. Noticing my excitement, Cora smiles and presents me with one of her finished pastries.

"Let me drizzle it up with honey." she asks for one more moment of patience, and I watch as she swirls ribbons of the golden syrup on top of the tart. "Now… tell me what you think?"

My fingers wiggle as she pushes the pastry closer to me and I can't stand the anticipation any more. I grab and chomp into it hungrily, feeling as the flaky crust crumbles, allowing the creamy cheese to melt into my mouth with bits of earthy nuts and sweet honey. It's amazing, thrice over on the count that everything is freshly made.

"This is delicious!" I appraise, much to her joy. "I bet the pups will love it!"

"Thanks… my mom taught me how to make them." Core nods with gratitude and a sense of pride. "She always made those when the days were grey… Drair and I would fight over who could have the last piece." She chuckles, and I smile, picturing the scene.

"Right, time to get going." She says, dusting off her paws and scanning the kitchen to ensure everything's in order. "I'll get those to the Nursery, while you go ahead to the Feasting Grounds."

"Good idea, better they don't see us arriving together." I nod and she laughs.

"Ever the conspirator."

When I step outside, I devour the rest of the pastry and notice how red the sky has gotten. The evening is fast approaching, with the Evenstar already shining bright on the firmament. I consider returning to the cottage for a moment, but considering how heavy my eyes are, I worry I might drift off and fall asleep, so instead, I venture towards the Feasting Grounds, as suggested by Cora, following an ever-growing stream of wolves emerging from their domiciles. Many smile and wink at me, some patting me on the back and even embracing me in a moment of jubilation and glee. It's satisfying and flattering at first, but with each successive set of piercing eyes, a feeling of unease joins the mix. Some of the wolves pay doubled attention to me, looking me over, their ears honed in on me like radars, and their nostrils twitching. Crap.

That's when a fuzzy paw grabs my arm and I'm yanked out from the encirclement much to the amusement of the onlookers, as Tryst's coarse voice echoes between them.

"Human not wolf! Walk side!"

A bout of laughter erupts behind us.

"Oh… seems like the Boss-Bunny doesn't like our little celebrity."

"Ha ha! Tryst is gonna set that one straight!"

"Good." A less pleasant wolf concurs. "Wouldn't want the git forgetting he's just a ward… even if a prized one."

Once we're out of the congestion, the belligerent bunny pulls me between two huts, and shoves me hard against the wall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" he demands, anger rocking his fuzzy chest, and again it's hard to treat his adorable outbursts seriously. "You're drawing – way – too much attention to yourself… strutting the streets like you own them! It's a sure way to ruffle some fur and entice one of those brutes to sniff you out."

"Ranok told me to act like I belong here." I respond, allowing myself some defiance into my voice and Tryst sighs in exasperation.

"Gods, you're as gullible as that wolf of yours! Belonging here for you means THIS, you idiot!" he pulls my collar sharply, and I have to rub my neck to ease the discomfort. "You're a *ward*. No matter what Ranok tells you… what he – sees – you as, that's all you'll ever be to them."

Despite his harsh words, I feel quite warm inside knowing he just saved me.

"Awww, you're looking out for me." I teas, tugging his cheek in jest, but he only crosses his arms and looks at me with pity.

"I look out for myself first and foremost…" he says in a cold tone. "Step out of the line, and we're all toast, because Vul has you right. You *are* a Piglet, and you - will -*squeal*!"

"Be damned if you do, be damned if you don't" I grumble in slight annoyance.

I'm not really angry with him, I understand his reasoning, but it seems that no matter what I do, it'll always be the wrong thing. You can't win here… and I begin to suspect that this is by design. The more the wards infringe, the more debt you can pile up on them…

"I need to go to the Feasting Grounds." I state, trying to push past the bunny, but Tryst stops me with a steady pressure to my chest.

"Ranok's not here to protect you." He says calmly, and although it almost sounds like a threat, I know it's anything but.

"Cora told me as much."

"Did she also tell you it was her dad who sent him away?" Tryst continues in a much harsher tone and I raise my brow in surprise. "He claimed Ranok has neglected his pack ever since his Coming of Age. I doubt he'll be back before sunrise."

"Why do you say that?"

"Ranok's ever eager to prove himself, is he not?" he looks at me expectantly and I nod. "He'll do the muster, sort out the rota and cover the night patrol just to be safe."

"If that's the case, it's even more reason for me to be out and about. I cannot hide under Ranok's skirt for ever."

"Gambeson." Tryst corrects me. "Ranok does not wear skirts. Neither does Vulgor, in case you were wondering. His garment is called a-"

"Kilt, I know." I cut him off in mild annoyance. "I'm not stupid. It's just a manner of speech."

"Which brings me neatly to my last point. No matter what manner you assume, your speech is not welcome here. So, I'd suggest you skip the Feasting Ground and lay low."

I can see he means well, however, something inside me opposes to be talked down to like a subordinate. We're equals, Tryst and I, and I should not hide anymore like a dirty secret. I'm no longer a taboo, and it would be seen as odd that the Tribute went missing along with the Champion. It's better that we're seen together as often as we're seen apart. To keep the appearances, if nothing else.

"I'll be fine." I say, brushing his paw away. "I understand your concern and I'll do my best to keep on down low, but I have to be seen. I'll be more suspicious if I won't."

He drills his angered gaze into me for a moment, but then simply sighs, splaying his paws in defeat.

"Be it on your head." The bunny grumbles and simply strides off.

I stand there, watching his spirited departure, allowing some doubt to stir inside my mind, but I don't let it linger. Ranok cannot be tarnished by my secrecy. I'm a ward, and quite a competent one, judging by the Strandbard affair. I must be seen playing the part.

I enter the Feasting Grounds with as confident a stride, as I mustered upon our return from beyond the forest. It's much easier this time around, as every now and then I'm cheered on by someone at a table I pass by. When I approach the central pit, I notice that the Pavilion is emptier than usual. It's just Vul and Regara engaged in mildly enthused conversation, and Kieran, leisurely splayed against the bench, observing the grounds as a lord would scrutinise his domain. His assertive gaze quickly lands on me, but he does not do much else, other than taking a shallow sip of ale. I nod respectfully to Regara, and then Vul, passing around the table, and despite my innards churning at the act, I also nod towards Kieran, seeing as he's still an Alpha, and wanting to observe proper decorum, though my manners are quickly ill-rewarded.

"Why the fuck is he here?!" the nasty wolf hollers with boiling spite. "Ranok's not present; there's no Moon Damned way his ward is going to sit-"

"Shut the fuck up." Vul's words cut the air like a ice-borne scythe. "I'm in no mood for your hysterics."

"Me neither." Regara adds sternly, and seeing as there is no Chief about to intervene in any impending brawl, Kieran simply tsked and sat down in silence.

This, however, did not prevent him from sending me daggers with his infuriated eyes as I take my usual seat. I reach for a cup, intent on taking a drink, when a bunny attendant rushes to my side and gestures towards the table with a question painted on her muzzle.

"Wi-" I cut off, realising I will inevitably speak in Old Sylvan, or whatever, and simply indicate a bottle that I fancy.

Having the wine poured for me feels both nice and a bit odd. I'm not sure where this attentiveness comes from… is it because of me being a Tribute, or something else? I glance over the bunny female, trying to see if I can discern if she has any affinity to Leaf. Perhaps that grouch is trying to sniff me out? Who knows? I sigh, and simply take a deep chug, but I get no satisfaction of the deliciously refreshing vintage, as I keep being ogled by that murderous brute. 'Fucking bastard.' I curse him in my mind, while he does not have to hide his thoughts.

"Fucking rat… I know you were aided." He growls silently under his breath.

"Leave him be." Vul warns in a chilling voice, joined by Regara crunching her fist.

"Relax. As I said, he's just a rat… vermin can't help who they are." Kieran continues, causing Vul to now fully turn around to face him. "And I'll even concede Ranok had nothing to do with what happened last night. But I know – who - had."

"Do tell…" Vul's rumbling growl sends shivers down my spine.

"It was Andalt, and I'll repay that *fucking* moron his 'kindness'."

"You think Andalt meddled yesterday?" Regara scoffs in bemusement. "Even if that was the case, what you're gonna do?"

"I'll find the bastard and force him to confess!" Kieran clangs his mug against the table, spilling some of his ale, but his outburst is only met with rambunctious laughter from the other two wolves.

"You think… you will find… Andalt?!" Regara continues to wheeze, rubbing a stray tear from her eye. "You couldn't find the fucking human, and you think you'll find that loon?"

"He's as good as a spirit-walker at this point." Vul chimes in, equally amused. "Had we not grown up together, I'd assume he's just a tale elders use to scare the pups with."

"If you find Andalt, I'll give you my token mate. Hell, I'll even let you throw a punch in as a compensation for our earlier spat." The brawny female continues, much to Kieran's annoyance.

"Laugh all you want, but this is serious. Our sacred rite was tampered with by a wolf no one seems to have control over for nearly a year!"

But the two Alphas simply exchange disinterested looks, shrug and turn back to their prior engagement.

"Do as you must. Just leave the Piglet out of it." Vul issues a warning, and clearly unhappy with our company, Kieran departs, heading for one of the side tables, where he's welcomed by a much friendlier throng.

I grab some nibbles between sips of ale, watching as the Feasting Ground swell with arrivals. With the sun now fully set, the place gets rowdier. First arrivals to our table are the Chief and Vithyr, walking out from behind the bushes, clearly returning from an enjoyable evening stroll, pipes still in paws. They chat lively about some feasts of old, but despite their shared mirth, Vithyr still manages to send me few nasty glances, filled with disapproval and scorn. Verissa rushes in shortly after, tired, but much happier than before. She relays to Regara and the Chief our earlier success and again, despite the general approval and joy, the brown male seems to dislike the outcome.

"I think it was rash and irresponsible." He quips, muzzle scowling as if he bit on a lemon. "We could've lost one of our best."

"We would've, anyway, had we not acted." Verissa insists, much to the Chief's approval.

"I want you to get better acquainted with the merchant. He strikes me as an honest fool."

"Why do you say that?" the white female blinks and echoes my own surprise at the assessment, to which the Chief only shrugs.

"There's no sign of deceit about him… and only a fool would walk here willingly without any assurances."

"A fool he might be… I wouldn't be so sure about the 'honest' part." Vithyr grumbles, pouring himself another round of frothy ale. "I'm telling you something about that duo doesn't add up."

"I agree. The bitchling is not what she seems." The Chief nods, however, the levity in his tone does not match his cautious words. "She's skilled and clever. A dangerous person to be sure."

"And you're fine with that?" Vithyr nearly barks out in annoyance, to which the Chief raises a paw.

"I've been to the Broken Isles." He states in a hushed tone. "I know how things are there… and who she actually might be. In due time, you'll be glad I let her stay."

"Stop being fucking cryptic about this!" Vithyr's voice finally rises beyond our table, drawing attention from some of the onlookers.

Seeing this, he calms down a bit and takes a deep chug, trying to dismiss the situation with a bout of random laughter. I guess he's intent on passing it off as a joke, and it seems to work. When others resume ignoring our table, the brown male continues in a hushed voice.

"You've never hid things from me before."

"I'm not hiding things; I simply don't speculate." The Chief levels his friend a telling gaze, pointing his claw at me. "You've all gone cuckoo around this little twerp, so rumourmongering around the newcomers is hardly conducive to collective calm. So, when I'm telling you that the bitchling is no threat, trust me on it!" he says it demandingly, and Vithyr lowers his gaze, in mix of shame and something else I can't discern.

He quickly raises his head up high and meets his friend with a weak smile, nodding as if in agreement.

"Alright. I won't break a habit of twenty years because of some pervasive thoughts."

"I know you mean well, Vithyr, but second-guessing me is Aldris' job, not yours." The Chief quips and they clink their tankards in strained merriment, tension lifted from the table.

Without Ranok at my side I feel incredibly out of place. Although no one is outright hostile, I'm ignored for the most part. Even when Tano arrives, the attention shifts to another recount of the events at the Den of Vigil. The white wolf seems very pleased to hear his tribesmate is on a path to recovery, and the group simply drinks and makes small talk, bereft of any prior worries and troubles. They talk of hunting, of patrols, or spars and training… things that are engaging to them, and might even be interesting to me, but things ultimately far removed from my experience and competence. At least I get a glimpse of what their life looked like before I set it all on fire.

As the night goes on, I feel more and more lonesome, and seeing the notorious humans seated at the far-off table, I wish I could be with them. And that's when a thought occurs to me – I *can* be with them. There's nothing in the wolven rules that prevents mingling, in fact, Kieran is not even seated with us since I've arrived. Emptying my goblet, I decide to be bold, like Ranok suggested earlier, and act as if I truly belong here. I wipe my moistened lips and simply get up, walking off into the Feasting Grounds. Aside from curious looks, no one stops me and when I arrive at Mr Abelard's table, no one seems to care. I plop myself down, smiling at Elin, who's toying with a carving knife still stuck in a chunk of meat.

"Bit old for that, aren't you?" I ask toothily, to which she rolls her eyes.

"I've lost my appetite. Amputating a limb does that to you." she grabs a fork and impales the slab, lifting it up with marbling and crust glistening in the glow of the bonfire. "That's literally what it looks like once you cauterise it. Smells the same too."

I shudder at the thought, and she spares me further demonstration, plopping the meat back on the plate.

"You've saved a life though…" I mutter encouragingly. "And with the help of you two, such gruesome spectacles will be a thing of the past."

"Dear, oh dear. Their medicinal needs far outweigh anything my humble person can provide." Mr Abelard shakes his head, taking spirited swigs of the wine. "I'm no miracle worker… gruesome spectacles are still very much in the wolven repertoire."

Seeing his downcast expression, Elin places a comforting hand on the man's shoulder, giving him an encouraging smile.

"You've already done enough…"

"She might have done the patching up… but it was your tincture that ensured the success." I add, eliciting a smile of approval from the girl, but the merchant seems not moved by our collective pep-talk.

"It's but a start, dear lad, akin to putting a grass dressing on a gaping wound." He sighs with the burden of the world on his shoulders. "We need instruments here, precise ones at that, not just herbs and tinctures. We need potions from the Tigerii apothecaries, such as the ones I here cannot reproduce. It's an insurmountable task!"

"And yet, something tells me you're about to surmount it." Elin quips, letting go of the man, and taking a chug of her poison.

"Well, I can't walk away *now*, not after I saw in what dire straits those people are!" he protests, much to her satisfaction, and I finally realise that she's baiting him.

"That's all good and well, but if the situation is as bad as you say, what is there you can do on your very lonesome?"

"We'll pen letters to my contacts across the treeline. We'll use your pigeons if we have to!" he responds steadfastly, and Elin laughs.

"It's kind of you to volunteer my services, Mr Abelard."

"I'll make it worth your while… I'll deduce the cost from your debt to me."

"How generous." She flashes her brows and I wonder, if it's truly altruism that guides her, or self-gain?

In fact, I recall that Mr Abelard has shown his generosity on more than one occasion, and I begin to wonder what his deal is. An honest fool he might be, but how is a merchant as selfless as him able to stay in business.

"Speaking of money… I don't think the wolves will be able, or willing for that matter, to compensate all this effort at the market value." I state coldly, drawing their curious gazes. "They're not exactly worldly."

"Acts of charity start with abandoning the notion of remuneration." Mr Abelard's whiskers bristle with mild offence, much to Elin's amusement.

"Spoken like a person that can afford to be charitable."

"I never hid that fact, Miss Stern." He retorts, and it makes me wonder; perhaps Vithyr is right?

"I know it might be rude of me to ask… but how deep is your pocket, exactly?" I boldly venture, but the man's expression doesn't shift an inch from a friendly discourse.

"Well, I'm no Grakhii, that's for sure… but I have more money than I could spend in a lifetime."

"All of it tied in Euron, I assume?" Elin chimes in, and the merchant shrugs uncertainly.

"Not quite. My three sons manage my affairs. Eberhard, my eldest, resides in Felineas, Reinhard overlooks our offices in Lion's Landing, and Bernard, my youngest, luxuriates in comforts of Ja'cal-Canis."

"In Khemet?" the girl raises her head above the mug, clearly having her curiosity piqued.

"Indeed. Spices, dyes and such. That's where most of my wealth originates from. That, and sandal wood."

"You'd have to move vast quantities of either in order to come even close to such riches. How many ships have you?" she asks, clearly intrigued herself in the matter.

"None. Money making tricks, dear Miss, lie in taking no risks yourself. I have a very neat arrangement with a crafty creature called Le Miau."

"Charleen?" Elin looks at him as if he spoke of the One-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. "*The* Charleen Le Miau? You know her?"

"Indeed. Do you?"

"Not personally, but I've been made acquainted with the name. She's a shifty character." Elin says with an odd caution I've yet not experienced from her.

Mr Abelard, however, only laughs at the reaction and gives her a pitiful gaze.

"I'd expect that through your own experience, Miss Stern, you've learned by now that I do not discern my company based on gossip."

"That's no gossip; she's a cut-throat." The girl persists, but Mr Abelard simply shakes his head in dismissal.

"And owns one of the largest private trading fleets in the world. Our interests align."

"Well… seems not only – us - were not exactly what we seemed." I decide to break their tension with a little jest, but Elin does not take the bait.

She levels the merchant a determined gaze, and it strikes me, that this might be perhaps the first time they even had such an intimate conversation.

"For someone so well connected and rich… why are you travelling some backwaters with barely an escort?" she asks, and he hesitates to answer for a short while.

However, not withstanding our collective penetrative gazes, he takes a deep gulp of wine, and sighs.

"I'm not a noble, Miss Stern." he splays his hands in playful surrender. "I wasn't born into riches. I'm a common man who made his fortune through grit and wit. I've lived a life which over years fell into monotony of appointments, balls and meetings." He says with a meek smile. "Things that used to be exciting and new lost their lustre, and soon any spark of joy has been completely snuffed. Money ruined my blissful family life, with relatives grovelling and fighting for scraps from my table. After my wife passed away, any anchor that tied me down has cut lose, and I was set adrift." Mr Abelard sighs heavily, pinching the ridge of his nose. "If left alone to my vices, I'd probably end up dead or murdered by one of my kin chasing after their share of my success. That would've truly been an unmitigated tragedy, so I headed my sweet Lilibet's last words. 'Go, Abe… go into the world, and live. Be the man I used to know. Don't let them finish you off, as they finished me.'"

"Wait? They murdered your wife?!" I blurt out, not even allowing him to finish and the man only shrugs.

"Someone did… the physician claimed it was melancholy, but we both had our suspicions. She was poisoned, most likely with a concoction meant for me. That's when I became obsessed with alchemy, you see."

"That is *beastly*!" Elin calls out in genuine revulsion.

"It was." Mr Abelard nods solemnly. "I wept, for her, for *me*… and for my detestable kin."

"Why did you not seek revenge?" she demands, and he looks at her in bewilderment.

"On whom? Our own children?" he scoffs at the absurdity of the proposition. "Would you have a bereft husband destroy the very fruit of his undying love? No… they wanted the money, so they can choke on it!" Mr Abelard sneers in contempt, only to regain his composure and letting kindness return onto his features. "Besides, Lilibet was right. She knew me like no other - she knew I only stayed because of *her*. I just wanted to return to that sweet simplicity… to die not a boring old man in his silken gown, surrounded by quarrelsome sons and marbled walls. My life became a boring nightmare. My death, I want to be anything alike."

"You seek out adventure..." I mumble out, instantly reminded of the farmer's scathing words.

Mr Abelard, however, navigates masterfully out of that reductive box.

"I seek out *life*, young master. The adventure seems to simply find me wherever I go." He smiles meekly and I reciprocate.

He's a genuinely good man simply trying to live out his days in the best of manners. If only there were more people like him in this world.

"What about you, Miss Stern?" he throws to her casually, and the girl flinches. "Care to elaborate on your part in this play? Since we’re sharing stories…"

"Now, it would be unimaginably disrespectful, had I not." She chuckles awkwardly, and Mr Abelard gestures with his hand towards the table.

"Well, then… entertain us with *your* tale."

"I’m afraid there’s not much to it." She shrugs unenthusedly. "I was born on an islet off the coast of Balder's Keep. We were poor sheep herders, on a forgotten lump of land of absolutely no note."

"Yet you were raided anyway." The merchant recants her prior tale and the girl nods.

"We were… all so that one lord could make a point to another."

"You were orphaned?" he prods, and Elin takes a deep breath.

"Not at first. The third raid was the most brutal. I suppose our liege needed more persuading, and that was that."

"How old were you?" I ask reluctantly.

"Seven."

"Dear Light. How did you survive?" Mr Abelard frets, but the girl seems unphased and relates her tale without much emotion.

"Luck and some quick thinking." She shrugs indifferently. "I played dead in a pile of corpses. As I was coming down with something, visible pustules covering my face, none dared to disturb me for fear of the plague." She finally allows herself a shallow chuckle, only to quickly harden her expression. "Still, I had to endure my silent vigil over the atrocities taking place all around me."

"I’m terribly sorry…" Mr Abelard mumbles under breath, trying to embrace the girl, but she pulls away in slight confusion.

"How did you get away?" I ask, as she swaths the merchant persistent hands.

"As is customary for all raiders, once you murder everyone and everything in sight, you throw a binger." She states, finally slapping the man on the hand and shoving a goblet in it, to occupy his pesky fingers. "Once everyone was drunk and asleep, I found the group that killed my family and claimed my vengeance. I slit their throats… all four of them. Then I burned the boats in which they came, all but one."

"You used it to escape." I conclude and she shrugs like a mischievous child admitting to some trickery.

"Not before I set fire to everything that was left of my village. Food stores, sheep pens. Everything."

"Why?" I gasp and she looks at me as if I just asked the dumbest of questions.

"So that they would all die a slow and painful death, turning on each other as the hunger takes over." Elin scoffs in satisfaction. "As I said – we were an insignificant islet miles off the coast. With no boats, they weren’t going anywhere… and neither was anyone coming for them. Last I heard, all forty-five warriors never made it back to the mainland." She shrugs, ripping a piece of bread and smearing it in some gravy with satisfaction.

"You avenged your people." Mr Abelard concludes, but there's more hesitation than praise in his voice.

Not that Elin cares. She simply takes a bite of her food and flashes her brows.

"I did."

"I knew you weren’t born a killer but rather made into one." He continues to speak softly, but his reasoning seems to not sit well with her, and Elin gives him a harsh look.

"In our world, Mr Abelard, girls have little choice in who they are or what they become, however, killing those bastards was one fate presented me with and which I gladly made." She says it with a dreadful sense of glee and the man's brows falter in sorrow. "I also became who I am of my own volition. I’m not as innocent as you make me out to be, nor you are as naïve as you present yourself."

Hearing that, and seeing her combatant expression, he sighs heavily and turns to his wine for solace.

"Very well. Since we speak candidly now… what were you doing on that road?"

He gives her a curious glance and I struggle not to lean in closer in anticipation. At first, she just sits there, looking at the bonfire and the wolves making merry around it, but she quickly hangs her head and runs her hands through her chestnut hair.

"I’m asking myself the same question, actually." She grumbles in defeat. "I was sent on a mission, which I have failed spectacularly. A lot of my friends were endangered by my… indiscretion."

"Indiscretion?" I pipe in, and she raises her gaze to meet mine.

She looks defeated and almost flustered.

"I allowed myself to be made a fool by a pair of blue eyes set in a square jaw adorned by raven-dark curls. Folies of youth, I suppose." Elin makes a feigned toast and I blink.

"You? Seduced?" I try to keep mockery out of my voice, but I fail, and she scoffs at me.

"Yes, [mc]. I'm the same age as you… lust and romance are no strangers to me!"

"I'm sorry, didn't mean it like that." I flinch awkwardly, when a solemn thought occurs to me. "Did he take advantage of you?"

"Yes… although at the time I thought it was the other way around." she scoffs, pouring herself another generous round of booze to sooth the sting of that memory. "I was seduced and robbed, with the cur skurrying in the night with a list of people whose names were meant to be kept secret and safe by none other than me."

"What happened to them?" Mr Abelard asks quietly, still locking his gaze with his cup.

The girl takes a while to answer, needing a sizable sip to muster the courage. When she finally speaks, her voice is dripping with regret.

"Some paid the *ultimate* price for my mistake. But most, thankfully, managed to disappear only to emerge elsewhere under different identity." She musters a weak smile. "My mistress was furious… she was never particularly happy with me, but this time, she had ample reason to retaliate. Usually, one pays with their own life for a death of another agent."

"So, you - are - a spy." I conclude, realising that Vithyr was right all along.

However, as startling as this revelation is, Mr Abelard seems cool as a cucumber, which somehow aids me in keeping my composure.

"Not the best one, as you can hear." Elin teases, but I cannot take this lightly just yet.

"Are you on the lam?" I ask, and she laughs.

"Ha… that would be ironic, wouldn’t it? Sheepherder’s daughter on the lam. But no… I’m not on the run." She shakes her head, taking another deep sip of her poison. "If my Mistress desired my death, it would’ve happened a long time ago. I just… failed to return to face the consequences of my ineptitude, not out of fear, but rather shame." She hangs her head again, locking her gaze with the slab of meat getting colder on the plate. "I was on the road, trying to find anything that could help me regain my honour. I want to prove myself as someone worthy another chance, before I’m even given one."

"By spying here?" I propose, to which she snorts an ungainly laugh and levels me a sarcastic gaze.

"You really need to get off that pedestal you’ve erected for your wolven friends. No one cares one bit about what they’re up to in this isolated forest." She scoffs, nodding towards the dancing taking place around the central pit. "I had helped Mr Abelard out of genuine concern… I wouldn’t let bandits dispatch him, like they dispatched my family."

"I thought you said he saved you." I mutter, eyes narrowed and suspicion rising, but she simply waves me off nonchalantly.

"In the first encounter, yes… but there were others. Mr Abelard isn't exactly a cautious traveller."

"But you haven’t stayed at my side out of goodness of your heart, have you, Miss Stern?" the merchant asks with a cold tone, looking at her expectantly.

I did not witness such distance between them since we met.

"Well… not at first." Elin shrugs awkwardly. "A merchant such as yourself can open many doors. Once you started prattling on about the people you know and have access to, I thought that perhaps I could-"

"No need to elaborate, dear child." Mr Abelard finally sighs, emptying his cup and looking at her with his usual, kinder expression. "As a merchant, I understand looking to one’s self-interests first and foremost. I’d be a hypocrite to hold that against you."

"But I’m no longer here because of *that*." She insists, much to his growing humour. "I genuinely grew to enjoy your company… even though you do seek trouble a tad too much for my taste."

"And you’re not interested in any goings on in the forest?" I ask cautiously, and she tsks in annoyance.

"My people are only interested in their *own* kin. I have no use for some quarrelsome wolven politics. My only chance at redemption was attaching myself to that party at Strandbard."

"So, Jarl Yorik was right about you." I narrow my eyes and she shrug uncommittedly.

"I guess I was a bit too obvious. Desperation blinded me."

"It does unsettle me a bit, knowing my friends were at risk of being surveilled." The merchant bristles with discomfort, but the girl quickly places a hand on his shoulder.

"I’m sorry, Mr Abelard. I did not mean to deceive you like that." She says with an apologetic tone, but the man continues to pout.

"And to what end?"

"I promise you, that what I do… what *we* do, is just gathering information." She squeezes his shoulder reassuringly. "And rarely if ever is it used to harm anyone."

"I find that hard to believe." The man grumbles uncomfortably, and she sighs heavily, her face marred with sorrow and regret.

If she's acting, she's pulling off a class show.

"I wish I could elaborate more… but indiscretion is what has gotten me into this mess." She shakes him a little, to force the man to meet her gaze. "Know this; all we seek is balance and stability within the Remnant Kingdoms. Humanity is at the precipice, keeping a watchful eye on those in power is vital to ensure we won’t all hurtle towards oblivion."

Hearing this, the mans eyes glisten with sudden realisation and an odd, comforting smile appears on his face, as he refills his cup and takes a celebratory sip.

"So… you are an *Archivist*." He concludes ominously. "That would explain the pendant."

Elin's eyes shoot wide in surprise, but she quickly chuckles it off.

"Heh… my indiscretion betrays me once again. Although I'm surprised that you've heard of us."

"As you yourself concluded; I have bountiful connections." The merchant quips, raising a cup to her. "The Secret Archive came up on few occasions."

"What's that?" I finally interrupt their clandestine exchange.

I don't feel like being left out of a conversation, especially with my suspicions mounting.

"The Secret Archive of Sophia." Mr Abelard explains, as if it was to mean anything to me.

Seeing my mounting confusion, he laughs and continues.

"It's an organisation of humanity's finest scholars, loremasters and undercover agents spanning both Avalan and Euron."

"Whatever for?" I ask in bewilderment, to which Elin provides a casual response.

"To gather, preserve and foster what remains of our civilization. We work behind the scenes to avert our extinction."

"A lofty cause, that's for sure." Mr Abelard nods approvingly. "We all must do what we believe is right."

"That’s all I strive for… I wish I could tell you more-"

"No need to elaborate." He cuts her off gently. "You are a good person, Miss Stern… even if misguided. This I know for a fact."

Although still feeling left in the twilight, I decide not to press the issue. My feelings regarding her are soothed by his testimonial. Elin herself might be shifty, but for some reason I trust the merchant's judgement.

"You’re also in good company." I say, mustering a weak smile. "If Mr Abelard puts his trust in you, so shall I."

"Thank you." she then places her hand on top of mine in genuine gratitude, and I chuckle.

"I’m sure you’ll redeem yourself sooner than you think."

"Not if this detour protracts indefinitely, which seems more likely with each passing day." She rolls her eyes playfully.

Perhaps this really is to her an unwanted distraction, but that's when Mr Abelard leans over and clink her cup with his.

"Everything happens for a reason, dear Miss. Perhaps you have no use for Tirnan, but it definitely has a use for you. If we see through this little misadventure, I’ll make sure to help you regain your standing as best as I can. With no detriment to my friends and affiliates."

As much as heartwarming this exchange is, I'm forced to hush our conversation, as I notice Aldris enter the grounds, waddling with great purpose and stopping only when she needs to nudge and pull Enelle to match her stride. Fat bitch; she constantly manhandles that poor she-wolf! They come to halt at our table, drawing attention from the nearby onlookers.

"Ha! Ranok's gone but a moment and his little shaved rat is already conspiring with the rest of the mischief! I told you it was a bad idea to have them out and about!" She sneers, elbowing the venerable female.

"O-oh… I see no harm in socialising. Rats, after all, are social creatures; separate them and you're asking for trouble."

"I wish you were this lucid when I actually need your input!" Aldris grumbles, giving us one final disapproving glare, before strutting off towards the central pavilion.

"I think I better return to the main table; I don't want her to escalate things unnecessarily." I mutter to them and slowly raise to my feet.

"The fat hag doesn't seem to like you either. There's a lot of animosity in here." Elin states with her eyes drilled in me for answers and I shudder.

"Yeah, well… I'm not supposed to be here. And neither are you. We're now seen as a deal package, and the heat is on me."

"So… *our* screwups inevitably become *your* burden to bear?" she muses playfully, causing the merchant to intervene in parental manner.

"Miss Stern!"

"I'm only joking, Mr Abelard." She responds, raising her hands in surrender and giving me a wink. "Relax, Tweak. I don't intend to cause any trouble."

"Much obliged." I nod to her in gratitude and rush off, zipping by the two elders and beating them to the mark.

"Gah! It even scampers like a rat!" Aldris calls out in resentment, much to the Chief's bemusement.

"Is he a rat, or a naked monkey? It's hard to keep track of your metaphors."

"Rat? I'm confused… I thought he was a human." Enelle blinks in her usual bafflement, and the nasty hag growls in annoyance.

"Was he now?"

"Well, that's what you claimed." Enelle continues, her voice laced with uncertainty. "I initially thought he was a sickly bunny."

"Oh, shut up, you old bat!" Aldris swishes her paw commandingly, and it's clear she's about to address the Chief, when another voice echoes from behind.

"Manners, dear sister." Valris purrs cautiously, as she approaches on Enelle's left side. "One should respect their elders."

"I AM an elder!"

"Yet Enelle was already an adult, when you were born. Keep handling her like that and I'll teach you what arthritis can feel like." Valris picks up and shakes her cane in clear warning, causing her sibling to stammer.

"W-what?! Threats-"

"Simmer down!" the Chief instructs. "For once, I thought we'd have a pleasant feast without interruptions."

"It has come to my attention, that the human outsiders were taken to the Den of Vigil… and an obscene procedure was performed on our dying tribsewolf!" Aldris snaps back furiously, and the nearby tables hush down.

"Was this your doing?" the Chief looks to his friend, who bristles at the accusation.

"N-no… why would I snitch to *her* of all wolves?!"

"Great…" the Chief grumbles, but before he can say anything else, Aldris is already booming with indignation.

"So you BOTH knew of this!? This is collusion of the highest degree!"

"They didn't know anything!" Verissa raises up to her paws, drawing a gentle trickle of gasps from the gathered. "I acted on my own, independently. Whatever reached the High Seat, did so through hearsay."

"I knew your anointment was a mistake the very day it was proclaimed!" Aldris growls with spite, shaking her pudgy little finger in the air like a wand. "You broke the sanctity of our inner most shrine, and endangered one of our own, entrusted into your care!"

"First of all, Eneya was *dying*." Verissa sighs heavily, clearly exhausted by the last few days. "She was suffering from neglect, which the humans helped to amend."

"So, you now would admit to your own incompetence?!" Aldris continues to berate, and finally, the white female snaps back in exasperation.

"Of course I admit it! I'm but twenty springs old; I had neither training nor a mentor to guide me down this path!" Her voice echoes with uncharacteristic emotion. "However, committing myself to what little knowledge Carridan left behind… there was nothing we could do to help Eneya on our own."

"Conspiracy! Slander!" the fat bitch squawks like a murdered parrot. "You degrade the name of a great shaman-

"Oh, cut it off Aldie…" Valris sighs, stepping forward and casting an annoyed glance onto her still heaving sibling. "Carridan was a daffy old wolf ever since we were pups. He used to prescribe pinecone suppositories for the red flower. Great he might have been, but a healer he was not."

Her little recant draws a chuckle from the Chief and Vithyr, but Aldris only boils inside. That's when Enelle joins the discussion with her composed and melodic voice.

"I remember that once he thought he was speaking to the spirits at the Tibalt's coming of Age; Pestering passersby with questions of the Great Beyond and distributing mushrooms to the pups." She muses, increasing the merriment among the gathered. "I thought Deidra would kill him when Varok was found frothing at his muzzle, fistful of shrooms in paw."

"I don't remember anything of that day. With good reason!" the Chief laughs, but the nasty female finds no humour in the exchange and cuts it off with a terrified shriek.

"Are you three quite serious?! To say such things-"

"I'm not interested in your hysterics. Maybe you should find yourself a pinecone and shove it…" Valris issues a subdued growl. "All I want to hear is the end result of this experiment." She looks to Verissa demandingly. "Well? Speak up, girl!"

The white female glances around uncertainly, hanging her gaze on Vul for a moment, who nods in support. Taking a deep breath, she exhales and answers in a calm voice.

"Eneya's condition improved. Her forearm had to completely come off, but she's no longer in the death throes. I believe she's on a path to full recovery, but it's too early to say."

"See?" Valris nods in satisfaction. "Results. That’s all that matters."

"But the Den of Vigil is off-limits to everyone but the Shaman and the sick!" Aldris protests, and her sibling simply scoffs.

"The Den of Vigil is a glorified ditch for the terminally ill."

"This is how our people always dealt with injury and disease!"

"And that is a reason for pride?" the old crone gives her sister a bemused look.

"When I was a pup-"

"Past is like a foreign country, they do things differently there." Enelle cuts in, causing the fat hag to discombobulate for a moment.

"Quite right, Nell." Valris nods in agreement. "Aldie, your little outburst seems a bit misplaced. Comical even. Would you have our tribe let ablewolves die at the cusp of a foreign invasion?"

"I… what are you implying?!"

"Nothing, dear sister." The crone shakes her head meekly. "Just… your impassionate queries keep rising their own questions… which I cannot answer."

"How dare you?!"

"Where is Dran?" Enelle breaks up the spat with a seemingly random question. "I haven't seen him since yesterday…"

"I didn't send for him… the fool is hysterical!"

"Hysterical, or finally free from your influence?" Valris proposes tauntingly. "No… I think it is quite clear what's happening here. You try to strongarm your way into the position of power. Missing the times when you stood at the Chief's side?"

"You are obscene! I have never-"

"Enough!" the Chief raises to his paws. "Dear ladies, behave in a manner befitting your station."

"Forgive me, Chief." The old crone gives a shallow bow. "I often get carried away when dealing with family."

"Can I take that this petition is resolved?" the Chief asks and she nods affirmingly.

"From my side, absolutely."

"Mine too…" Enelle adds, leaving the wolf to look at his main adversary with a risen brow.

"Aldris?"

"You are losing control, Varok." She sneers contemptuously. "You were meant to contain this human disease, and now it spreads beyond our Sacrosanct. Eneya's life might have been saved by this gambit, but how long can this luck run? The Howl will have much to discuss…"

"I would remind you, that it wasn't my decision to have the humans involved." He cautions, causing Aldris' fur to bristle with furry. "The Tribe's Shaman works independently from the hierarchy. I bet, that had I interfered with Verissa's decisions, you'd have me charged with trampling her sacred privileges."

"Quite right." Valris chortles amusedly. "What was the Chief to do? Naysay the Soothsayer?"

But with that quip, she redirects her sister's ire, and now it was all hers to face.

"You bailed on this village! You left us and enjoyed your life on the far-off shore of Tremelin, while we had to pick up the pieces of the decades past! The gall, to come here, uninvited and… wave your finger about."

"Come, now… I'm here when I'm needed. I'd say it's your presence here that far exceeds any necessity."

"This won't play out the way either of you thinks!" she shoots her clawed finger between her sibling and the high table, yet for all the hostility, she only elicits a pitiful sigh from the crone.

"If only it were a game, Aldie." She then regards the table and manages a subtle bow. "My Chief."

The male simply sighs, dismissing them with a wave of a paw. Although, begrudgingly, Aldris takes her leave, followed by the other two elders. As they depart, I notice Val sneak a paw under Enelle's arm and the two walk at a slower pace, smiling and chatting like good old friends.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Vithyr's annoyed grumble pulls me back to their exchange. "You're practically handing her ammunition for the Howl."

"So what?" the Chief shrugs amusedly, rummaging in a leather pouch. "Ultimately it's a match between you and me. You think you can do better than I did? Have at it. I'm sick and tired of being berated for over twenty years no matter what I do. You can have the damn wreath if you want it."

"I - don't - want it." Vithyr responds with a surprising conviction in his voice. "That's the point. You do everything to sabotage your position."

"That's your view."

"And as your Advisor, my view should be the one you take most seriously."

But the Chief doesn't respond. He simply closes his eyes, putting a pipe into his muzzle and stuffing it with fresh leaf. Taking this lull as an opportunity to leave, Regara asks Vee to take her to the Den, and with a quick dismissal from the old male, they rush off. Finally, alone, the Chief then lights off a wick from a candle and brings his pipe to life.

"Enelle…" he begins slowly, between puffs of tobacco. "…once told me that wisdom often comes from most unexpected of places. Rat?" He throws a commanding gaze at me, and I shudder. "What say you?"

"I… I?" my voice stammers in my throat and he snorts.

"You - you."

"You're the Chief." I finally manage with a hushed voice, eyeing out the surrounding to ensure no one can make out our exchange. "You should do the right, as you see the right. But also, you shouldn't force others to step into your paws."

"A none answer if I've ever heard one." The male grumbles dismissively, and oddly it's Vithyr who approves of my sentiment.

"And yet, more prudent than whatever fucking chagrin you're playing at!" he sneers, but the Chief simply laughs him off.

"Relax… let's take a walk and talk." He then glances over to me. "You can head home now… Ranok won't be joining us. He's catching up to his duties, and I requested a morning report straight at the villa. He won't be coming home tonight."

I nod discreetly and watch the males take their leave.

Although the Feasting Ground is still quite lively, with echoes of laughter and ripples of music filling the air, I feel like it's high time to make myself scarce. The wolves are usually at it until the early hours anyway, and I'm feeling exhaustion catching up to me. I think it's simply the excitement and adrenaline that keeps me from collapsing. I finish up my modest meal, and wash it down with some wine, taking a large, group dance taking place at the bonfire as a cover to make my exit.

I manage to leave the noise of the merrymaking behind me with no misadventures, only to stop at the main square for but a moment. I cast my reluctant gaze towards the stockades, knowing full well that beneath it is a murderous foreigner held in unenviable conditions… conditions that I might get to wholly enjoy myself, if I slip up more than I already do. Shaking my head, I banish the thought and simply follow down the path, and soon enough I'm at the cottage.

I stop frozen, noticing a smoke bellowing from the chimney and lights glistening in the windows. It can't be Ranok… could it be that damn crazy wolf again?! For a moment, I consider getting Cora involved, but I quickly shake off that notion. I've gotten her into trouble too many times already. I must face this house intrusion myself… after all, I'm Ranok's ward. Sanctity of his lair is now my responsibility.

I approach the cottage slowly, stopping by the shed to pick up a large log to defend myself with, should the need arise, although I hope it won't come to that. I scamper over the uneven step and simply rush the door, bursting in as if to bust a gang midst their shady dealings, but all I'm met with is the belligerent bunny at the oven, looking me over with a bemused expression, as he was just about to taste a stew he's been brewing.

"A log?" he scoffs. "What's that for? The fire?"

"S-self defence." I mutter, slightly embarrassed and he laughs.

"From what? Surely not the wolves… and even I could disarm you and shove that thing so far up your backside, that you'd consider it magic!"

I chuckle involuntarily and lay down the piece of wood, closing the door behind me, yet my confusion keeps mounting.

"Why are you here?"

"I volunteered to keep Ranok's cottage safe and ready for his return tomorrow."

"Ranok *has* a ward." I grumble defensively and he flashes me his choppers.

"And what a ward you are. Your incompetence is quite easy to sell… a trophy ward, nothing more." He winks and glances around the chamber with a risen brow. "This place is a greater dump than when I lived here."

"Alright… what are you *really* doing here?" I insist, stepping to him with a determined gaze and he regards me for a moment, only to reward me with a cheeky grin.

"I wanted to spend the night together."

"I'm not interested." I smirk teasingly and he shrugs, returning to his… damn, deliciously smelling hot pot.

"Neither am I. I don't swing that way." He laughs, stirring the contents vigorously. "But… if you want that letter of yours delivered, we'll have to get to know each-other." He gives me a more serious look, narrowing his brows slightly. "A friendly chit-chat… and if all goes well, a tit for tat."

"You mean I'll have to do something in turn."

"You can't have others putting their neck on the line without endangering yours." He shrugs indifferently and I scoff.

"My neck is plenty on the line, thank you very much."

"Good. Then one more for the team won't make a lick-bit of difference, eh?" he sneers, pulling the spoon out of the caldron and presenting me with its luscious contents.

It's beef in some sort of vegetable pottage, and it smells divine. The bunny puffs his cheeks and blows on it, giving me an inviting look.

"Go one, try it. Plenty for us now and for Ranok when he returns. I've also got a flagon of booze to keep us going."

"Heh…" I sigh, and simply take a nib of the food, my eyes widening with approval. "'tis good." I nod, and simply pull up a chair. Seems like this will be another long night.