

The sun rose red, as it had the last several days. It was an ill omen, especially considering the old advice to warn of storms approaching. Yet no storm had manifested itself. No grumbling thunderhead had rolled over the horizon, nor had the sea suddenly retreated. Even the winds had been fair and favourable, bringing with them the salty brine of ocean air, and the cool chill of the winter from the North, out across the dark, glittering waves.

Theo drew his net back again, pleased to find a trio of flopping salmon caught within the ropes.

"Good fishing Northlander?" Came the call of one villager.

"Good haul today Northlander?"

"Northlander, could you see my boy again?"

"What would you recommend for aches Northlander?"

Truthfully, Theo didn't mind the attention. The massive white polar bear had travelled south on the seas and settled himself happily here in the small fishing town on what seemed the edge of the world. Thick forests of spruce and pine stretched in all directions but north, and it was a half a day riding to the nearest other settlements... or two days' walk for him, at least. Rare was a steed that could carry a nearly ten-foot polar bear.

News of the war ravaging the rest of the continent was slow to arrive, as were traders or caravaners making their way along the coast. Occasionally, they had refugees from the feline lands, seeking passage away from the continent, but since the Canine Coalition had moved a permanent garrison to a camp on the edge of the village, those were fewer and fewer.

He had come wandering in one day and simply decided that life here was as good as any. The locals were kind and good people, a mix of mostly canine and prey descended species, and when he'd offered his skills as a chef, fisher, and alchemist all, he'd been welcomed with open arms.

"How's the weather up there Theo?"

A gentle tug on his arm drew the big bear's gaze down, and he smiled at the source of the interruption, kneeling so that he came level with the small jackal girl. She couldn't have been more than barely a full adult, but she was quick and clever and had been a friend to him since they arrived. Even if she was short by his standards. Everyone seemed to look up to him, in one way or another.

"Same as it is down here, you might be surprised to know! How's your mother Liz?" He rumbled like an avalanche, and she quickly threw her arms about him in a hug that didn't even let her hands reach his back.

"Much better thanks to your medicine!" Her golden eyes sparkled as she spoke, sandy furred tail batting noisily against the planks of the small fishing pier. "I was hoping to buy a fish since you were here actually. Mama wanted some broth, and I figured if we made enough, perhaps you'd-" she babbled, but he cut her off with a genuine laugh, reaching over to pluck one of his catches from his bucket nearby.

"Take it. It's half thanks to her that I have clothes that even fit me!"

Her eyes widened in delight, holding the slippery prize against her blouse.

"Thank you! We'll save you a bowl!"

One great fluffy white paw reached out and ruffled her dark hair fondly.

Her ears suddenly perked at a commotion coming from the direction of the main road of the town, and both of their heads turned to follow the sound of raised voices.

"Wonder what all the commotion is about..." Theo mused quietly, leaving his net to investigate.

Hopefully, the canine soldiers hadn't wandered back into town looking to cause trouble again, as they often did. Forcing them to be idle on the edge of the world didn't make for good discipline.

The little wolfess was already up and moving before he could protest.

"Come on! Who knows, maybe they're leaving!" She laughed as if reading his grim look, turning and poking her tongue out at him.

As it happened, the commotion was caused by a band of soldiers going door to door, their shining armour and blue-trimmed uniforms resplendent in the morning light. Had they not have acted like a band of thugs, they might have even passed for respectable.

"Listen up, all of you! There is a fugitive loose in the area. Anybody who sees an arctic fox with a crossbow bolt in his shoulder is to report him at once. Consider him armed and dangerous, and likely hiding. We search for your safety. Cooperate with my men, and don't cause further trouble." A Doberman officer called from atop a cart in the street, addressing the crowd of locals that had gathered.

"Fugitive? Refugee more like. The only folks who come through are doing exactly that. And here is far north for the fox clans. I didn't think their lands had been annexed by the canines?"

Theo let out a gruff sort of laugh, turning to walk back to his shop. He was done fishing for the morning anyway.

"They live with the prey species and share those lands. The Vulpines have always been more interested in staying in their dens than the goings-on of the world anyway. The land could be ablaze but as long as the smoke didn't bother them, you wouldn't hear a peep of complaint."

The small bell on the door jingled as he stepped inside. The store was still dark, curtains drawn over the front windows. Despite the gloomy appearance, the store itself was kept immaculately tidy, a fact that was revealed as the polar bear stuck sparks on the hanging glass lantern over the counter.

Light flooded in as Liz drew the curtains back.

"Hmmm. Not where I left that." Theo noted cautiously. A roll of fabric bandage had been pulled from one of the cupboards and laid out on the counter. Quietly, he ushered the small wolfess back, stepping around the corner of the front counter, one paw bundled into a fist. Being nine-foot-tall and a few hundred pounds gave the bear a right hook that would put even a lion out like a light.

The comparatively tiny, white-furred fox was laying tucked against the far end of the counter, his breathing coming in rapid, shallow pants. His dark clothes were stained red from the blood leaking around the bolt firmly embedded in his left shoulder. Held in one quivering paw was a small hand crossbow, trembling from the effort of keeping it pointed at the bear's chest. Small, but painful, that small weapon might not have been a good choice for slaying him, but he didn't doubt its ability to harm him severely.

Theo held his paws out, palms open and knelt, showing that he was no threat. His eyes were firmly locked on the steady leak that pulsed around the wad of bandage the fox was trying to hold around the haft of the bolt.

"Hey there friend. That looks bad. Why don't you put the crossbow down, and I can treat it properly?"

The fox stared, wide-eyed for a few moments before his eyes rolled backwards and he slumped against the counter, fainting.

"S-...should we report him?"

Theo stepped forward, massive paws taking the tiny crossbow and setting it down behind the counter. He looked the fox over with a concerned frown. That was a lot of blood...

"Why, so the canines can tear him apart? Help me move him into the back. We'll put him on the spare bed for now."

Liz didn't argue. Between the two of them, they were able to keep him relatively flat as they shuffled through the back rooms of Theo's home and store, a small oil lantern lighting up the fox's pale, sunken features as they lay him down on the bed.

"Bandage, alcohol, and the Silverweed, Yarrow, and Shepard's purse. Do you know which they are in the garden?" Theo didn't look at her as he listed what he would need off quickly, taking the clumped bandage from around the still embedded crossbow bolt and tossing it aside. The wound started bleeding again quickly.

Liz nodded, her tail disappearing around the doorframe. Her footsteps echoed through the building as she rummaged through his cupboards. A door smacked open, and then again quickly a few moments later as she returned from his herb plot in the backyard.

"Here!" The young wolfess set the supplies on the bedside table, and Theo nodded gratefully. She would make a fine medicine woman one day if she kept helping him like she had been the last months.

His massive paws worked with a surprising amount of dexterity and delicacy, peeling the fox's shirt back.

"Soiled clothes." He said dryly and passed it back to Liz, who took the garment without complaint.

Up close, it was a nasty wound. The bolt was a broad-head, evidenced by the almost clean hole wider than the shaft itself. Holding the unconscious male down with one hand, he set his other around the handle and looked to Liz.

"Bandage, and pressure as soon as I pull it."

The young wolfess, nodded determinedly, set on not letting her mentor down.

One, two, three!

The bolt pulled free with minimal tearing, and for that, he was grateful. Liz quickly pushed the strips of bandage into the wound.

"Alright, good work. Hold that steady for a moment, then-"

Thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.

A worried glance shot between them.

"Carefully lift, clean, Yarrow to stop the bleeding, Shepard's purse, then-"

Thumpthumpthump. Louder knocking this time. More demanding. Muffled voices were shouting from outside, and the door handle was rattling.

"Silverweed and tightly bound. I've got it!" She finished for him, jerking her chin towards the front of the store. "I helped with Thale after he stepped in a bear trap, remember."

Of course, he remembered. It was almost cruel that the canines had set them up knowing full well that he was here...

Theo nodded again, and ducked under the small doorframe, making his way towards the commotion. Smartly, he closed and locked the door that led back into his dwelling parts of the building.

He lifted the blinds on the door and opened it to the trio of Canine soldiers standing on his porch.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" He asked, voice stern. Upon seeing the polar bear, they immediately took a step back, looking startled at his sudden appearance. If the dire-wolf commander who camped with their soldiers was big, Theo towered over him by another foot fully. They looked up to the polar bear by necessity.

"We're searching for a fugitive. We've orders to check every building. For your safety." The mutt nodded, attempting to appear assertive.

Theo chuckled, deep and rumbling before he spoke, keeping his bulk blocking the door.

"I think I'm perfectly safe from one little fox, don't you?"

"Regardless, orders are orders. We'll be but a moment, Ursine. Your cooperation is mandatory."

The two thugs eyed him with subtly shifting gestures, flashing the pommels of broadswords at their waists, fingers wrapped about the hilts. Size only took one so far, it seemed.

Sighing, he stepped back and moved behind the counter, the thick fur on his legs covering the bloodstain on the back of the bar as he positioned himself in the corner where the fox had been hiding.

"Careful rifling about. He's not on those shelves you know." The canines searched anyway, like somehow the fox might have shrunk himself to hide behind the bottles. They prowled about, till one tested the door into the back, and found it locked.

"That's just to my kitchen and rooms. There's no one back there."

"Open it."

Theo felt his heart jump, but fate, it seemed, had other plans. One of the careless canines knocked a vial from its shelf and fumbling, dropped it to the floor with a shattering of glass.

"Damn fool! I told you to be careful! Out! That's rotwart! The spores will turn your skin black if they get on you! Out! Now!" He shouted, waving his paws for dramatic effect.

None of them being alchemists, they simply scattered for the door and darted outside as Theo slammed it behind them, roaring at them on the porch until they bolted into the street, tails tucked.

"Idiots! This will take me all day to clean! I'll be letting your commander know about this!" He snarled, holding that fierce pose until they were out of earshot. A sly grin cracked his expression, and laughter followed a moment later.

He returned inside and locked the door behind him once again. The vial they broke was harmless and cleaned up quick enough.

He returned to the fox's bedside, just as Liz was finishing tying off the bandage in a loop beneath his armpit.

He studied her handiwork for a few moments and nodded his approval.

"Good work. Why don't you take that fish and run along to your mother now? She'll be wondering what took you."

"What about him?" She asked. Looking at the fox again, he didn't appear to be that old, barely a full adult, but he couldn't say for sure. He clearly had strength, but it was a lean sort, built like a sprinter rather than a fighter. Theo checked him over for other wounds and found nothing. He carefully slipped a small leather travelling pouch from the vulpine's waist, and set it on the bedside table as well.

"Let him rest for now. I'll keep an eye on him until he wakes, and then..." *and what then?*

Taking in a fugitive hadn't exactly been on Theo's books for today, though he'd helped several others passing through find passage elsewhere. Just, none of them had the entire local garrison looking for them either.

He shook his head with a chuckle.

"I'll figure something out. Run along Liz, and give your mom my thanks for your help. You did well today."

"I'll stop by with some soup later!" Her young smile warmed his heart, and he ruffled her hair fondly with a paw as large as her head.

Once she was gone, he turned back to the fox with a curious expression, lifting the messenger pack between his paws.

"Now... what's your story, little fox, and why are the dogs so intent on ending it?" He asked the quiet room, but no answer spoke back to him.

It was over a full day later when the white-furred vulpine finally regained consciousness, just as Theo had been changing his bandages. His eyes were suddenly wide and alert, staring wide up at Theo who's paws simply engulfed his entire shoulder while he worked. The fox jerked and Theo firmly, but carefully pushed him back down into the bed.

"Uh-uh. Wait until I'm done, else you'll ruin all the work I did yesterday and be back to bleeding on my floor. What's your name, fox? I'm Theo. You blacked out in my storefront."

Bright blue eyes filled with lingering panic at waking up somewhere unfamiliar with a stranger looked up at him cautiously, as if trying to gauge the bear's real motivation. Theo held his gaze until the fox finally relaxed backwards with a released sigh, his chin giving a gentle motion at his shoulder.

"Am I supposed to not be able to feel anything?" He asked, letting his eyes drift shut once more, clearly understanding he wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. Despite that, Theo could hear his tail quietly swishing back and forth beneath the thin blankets. More than likely this far exceeded his expectations on where he would wake up.

"With the ointment, I've been treating it with? No. It'll return after a while, and then probably hurt for a few days after, but it's better than bleeding out, which you were on a fast path to doing."

"So then what are you to do with me? Are you working with the coalition? Am I to be handed back over to the dogs and their ilk?" The vulpine's words were not barbed in any way. If anything they seemed nearly resigned to his fate. Theo felt a pang of empathy for his situation.

"Nothing like that, no! I help people, not that..." Theo gave his head a shake, shocked that the fox had even suggested he was capable of such a thing.

"Once you're feeling better, you're free to go if you wish."

"Ha! But where would I? I've been on the run for weeks now. My home is gone, my family, friends, scattered at best... at worst..." he let the words hang for a few moments. The sound of

his tail wagging beneath the sheets came to a stop, and Theo gave a quiet, understanding nod. It was becoming a far too common tale for those few outsiders who passed through their town.

"Jackie. My name is Jack Snowtail, it... everyone just calls me Jackie. Or, they did, at least." He tried to lift his bad arm to extend his paw and instantly winced, instead, reaching out with the other.

Theo chuckled softly and took the fox's much smaller paw on his own like a furry glove that simply engulfed the vulpine's dainty hand.

"Well, I'm glad you're awake. You're welcome here until your shoulder heals. I'm not sure what your plans were afterwards, but-"

"I can help! With your shop, I mean! I... I don't have anywhere else to go, and... I can be discrete, at least until I have a more concrete plan. Just.. not having to run for a change sounds nice. If you'd have me, of course."

Those blue eyes looked up at Theo hopefully, and he could help but smile as the sound of a wagging tail once again filled the room.

And so it was that the fox became something of a temporary work hand for Theo, in exchange for the care the bear had provided, and to give the vulpine something to keep himself out of further trouble while his shoulder healed.

He assisted with the shop, tending to the villages' needs, and the small garden of herbs that grew out back. They chatted often while they worked, and as he healed, Jackie threw himself into it with enthusiasm.

He'd been a lookout for one of the vulpine dens among the foothills near the canine coalition's territory and had fled when an army marched down the hills to begin their war of conquest. Many of his kin had been captured or pressed into service. Others still simply disappeared.

Somewhere among the chaos of the war, he'd gotten involved with a small resistance movement, but that had all ended after their cell had assisted a fleeing band of felines and prey

species. The village they had used as their base of operations had been put to torch soon after when the canine pursuit had caught up, and he'd been on the run north ever since.

"It's not even that it's any of my business, but... This war feels wrong, you know? They're no better than anyone else, but I wouldn't have thought half of them would go through with some of the horrors I've seen..."

Theo nodded in a quiet agreement, plucking weeds from the garden alongside Jackie. The Arctic fox's bushy tail was swishing back and forth as he hummed a quiet tune to himself while he worked.

The garden was warm at least. High walls on three sides kept visitors and prying eyes away, and also helped keep folks from just walking in and picking the herbs and berries clean at every chance.

Still... Glancing over, Theo couldn't help but notice the passing distraction on the vulpine's face, and let out a chuckle.

"What's on your mind, Jackie? You've weeded that same spot three times over."

Jackie looked down and balked as he realised his mistake, and quickly stammered an apology, rushing to smooth the earth back over as Theo laughed.

"It's fine, you just seem a thousand miles away. What's got you?"

The small white fox fell back on his behind, sighing as he sat next to the garden bed.

"It's been nearly a month, and the canines have been visiting the village more and more frequently. It won't be too long before any chance of me escaping is gone for good. I spoke with Marques, and he's offered to take me North with him when he sets sail tomorrow."

Theo nodded thoughtfully. The old fisherman was a sea lion, and a trustworthy and just man. He'd see the fox to safety more surely than any he could think of.

"Hmm. A good plan. Any idea where you'll go after that?" He spoke up after a few moments of silence between them.

"Not yet, but... I imagine anywhere is better than here right now... no offence, of course. There's a whole world not at war out there, and I'd like to see some of it I think. Maybe across the far seas, or to the snowy Northlands." The little white fox's smile was as sincere as any Theo had seen in his life, and he couldn't help but smile right back as they knelt there among the garden beds.

"It's beautiful around this time of year. I think you'd fit in there."

Jackie's cheeks reddened, and he glanced away for a moment, laughing nervously.

"Well, probably have you to thank for all that. I figure I owe you a little something in return, and..." Now it was Theo's turn to blush. The fox had whipped around and all but crawled up into his lap, and laid a soft kiss on the soft fuzz that coated his chin. The fox pulled back, looking at Theo's face.

"Oh. Those are new." He commented with a sly little grin, and Theo reached a paw up, patting his face. A speckling of lighter teal dots had begun to appear on his fur.

"Oh, uh... Long story, alchemist mishap when I was young. They uh, tend to pop up when I'm flustered or embarrassed or-" The fox silenced his explanation with another kiss, this time to the lips. Since he hadn't objected, Jackie had clearly taken it as an invitation to carry on.

"I like them. Like you, and you deserve some thanks too. Just- Here, let me..." The fox shuffled about in his lap for a moment, before giving Theo a gentle push on his chest. The polar bear fell backwards slowly, letting the Vulpine take the lead as he straddled the bear, deft paws making short work of the buttons of his top, and quickly moving on to his belt, peeling the clothes back like he was unwrapping a gift.

His maleness sprung free at the first pop of a button being undone, and the fox set upon it like some fine morsel of flesh, paws pinning Theo's thighs apart before he could think of some reason not to carry on.

His muzzle was warm, and Theo felt his eyes drift closed as he groaned softly. The fox had some very skilled paws and lips, and put both to good use, smoothly gliding across his flesh and sac. His tongue made looping sweeps of his maleness, and at once, Theo was far, far from the cozy little village, transported to a world of bliss and ecstasy. His own massive hands found the fox's ears and gripped them, claw tips rubbing along their fuzzy bases.

Jackie just gave a pleased huff through his nostrils. The vulpine's bushy white tail flicked back and forth in a rapid wag, betraying his enthusiasm for going down on the bear. Wet suckles and messy sounding slurps filled the air, but damn if he wasn't good at what he was doing. Theo was certain he wasn't the first to receive such an intimate thanks.

All too soon, he could feel his loins tensing up, pressure building as he struggled to not just grab the fox's ears and thrust wantonly into his muzzle. He released one of the furry triangles and stroked his finger's down across Jackie's cheek in a warning, and with a gasp, he pulled back, new, naughty energy filling the much smaller vulpine. Jackie rubbed the edges of his lips with the back of his paw, cleaning up spit and precum in equal measure from his light fur.

"Ahh~ Good thing too... My jaw was starting to hurt. I've got something better anyway."

Deft paws undid the clasp on his trousers tail loop, and with what seemed almost far too elegant a movement, those two were gone, leaving the vulpine with his dappled red shaft pressing against Theo's ursine one. A tight paw clenched around both, stroking fervently and using the bear's leaking arousal as a lubricant.

Too soon, Theo was panting again, but so too was Jackie, the fox just as aroused and eager to please as the partner he was so enthusiastically thanking. His paw quickly grew slick, and pleasure lanced through Theo like lightning as the much smaller fox pulled him up to a sitting position and quickly into another kiss.

There was an awkward shuffle as Jackie's paws pulled himself up with Theo's broad shoulders, whining softly as he positioned himself over the polar bear's erection.

"You uh... You know you don't-" Jackie shushed him with another kiss, his face set and determined as he nestled the twitching length beneath his tail, pressing against his star for just a few moments, enough to get a good drizzle of preseed to ease the bear's entry.

"No words. I need this too right now, and you deserve a proper thanks. Besides... I can handle it." Jackie gave the bear a sultry wink, before pressing himself down. There were a scant few moments of resistance, before with a quiet pop and a sudden rush, Theo's shaft sunk fully halfway into the much smaller male.

The pleasure was unlike anything, and the fox certainly wasn't new to taking a male beneath his tail. Skilled muscles squeezed and massaged Theo's cock as the fox rode him, taking him a little further each time. The vulpine's slender muzzle hung open in a soundless pant by the time his fuzzy rump finally did press down against the polar bear's lap, fur meshing together until the space between them was nearly indistinguishable.

Jackie's vulpine prick twitched and throbbed, his knot swollen and tip leaking messily onto Theo's chest as he ground himself against the ursine's coarse fur. The mere look on his face was one of bliss and enjoyment, and his head lolled back as he let out a pleased gasp to the sky, grinding against that one spot deep inside that sent sparks flying over his vision.

Goans, moans, and muffled yaps filled the garden, and Theo was at once grateful for the tall log walls he had built around his little sanctuary as he shared at this moment. It was as perfect as one could have hoped, and while neither spoke words, their eyes and bodies sent messages that were as clear and unmistakable as sunlight from the heavens. *More. Faster. Slower. Right there.*

Their tempo grew steadily, starting smoothly at a low waltz as the fox rolled his hips like a dancer, back and forth, up and down. *One two three, one two three. Down squeeze lift.*

It didn't last of course, and once they had adjusted it grew quickly in both strength and pace, as Jackie took absolute charge of their private little tango, tangling his paws in the ursine's chest fur as his breaths came in ragged pants.

"Ah...ah. Ah. God's above Theo..."

The bear tried to reach up and shift, but at once, Jackie pushed him back down, grinning in a pleasure drunk expression. He knew what he was doing, and Theo shifted back, settling for enjoying watching the white-furred fox work those Vulpine charms on his length. *This is my moment*, his eyes spoke. *Let me have it.*

But like all dances, eventually, they had to end, and if the smaller male's whines and soft stammering barks were anything to go by, it wouldn't be long in coming at all, nor was Theo able to contain his own desires.

With a growl, his paws found the fox's hips and held him steady, the bear's hips instinctively bucking upwards as he spilled himself beneath the vulpine's tail, filling his tight rump with a blossoming warmth that slowly dripped back along his shaft to matte the fur of his groin.

That set Jackie off in turn, and with a sharp yap of bliss, his own knotted prick erupted, spraying streaks of silver across Theo's broad chest in messy ribbons trailing from his pecs to his lower abs.

They kissed gently and rolled in the afterglow, letting the sun's warmth seep into their fur, the smaller fox making himself quite comfortable against the polar bear's belly, his tail wagging back and forth in a rapid, happy sort of way.

"So... you leave tomorrow, right?"

Jackie nodded.

"So, did you have any plans for tonight?"

The wry little grin that suited foxes so well stretched over the lithe male's muzzle.

"Hmm... Well, I'd thought about resting, but I think I can manage to squeeze in a proper farewell if you'll keep me warm for a while."

Theo stood on the dock, watching the distant sails of the fishing ships as they left with the tide, bound for open waters and beyond the horizon. A single figure on the deck of one rose up, silhouetted against the bright glow of the rising sun, raising one arm high into the air as he waved goodbye to the shore.

Theo in turn raised his paw. The sun had set red last night, at least according to Liz. He had been a little too preoccupied with Jackie to watch. The seas would be good. Wherever the fox was bound for, he'd reach it safely no doubt.

"You think he'll be back?" Liz asked, the little Jackal girl tugging at his bulky, fluffy paw.

"Perhaps. He'll make his own way I'm sure. Now, come along Liz. You can help me catch some fish for your mother to cook up, and then help me organise the store."

She skipped around him excitedly as he shook his head with a laugh, casting one last glance to the ships as they slowly sailed from sight. At least for him now, the war was but a distant memory, with simply the bright day ahead.