

The trees could be seen from miles off and cities over, rising into the sky and nearly piercing the clouds, thick tendrils of rampant verdancy solid and permanent as the ground from which they sprouted, and more so than the buildings that they had crushed in their climb towards the sun. Fat, heavy boils of burrowing root and billowing trunk spilled out of broken windows, their panes long since lost to wind and rain and time, grasping strands and veins of the conquering plantlife curling in through empty rooms, punching through dusty ceilings, reclaiming the city for its own. Just as it had always been.

The buildings no more stood as they did lean, caught forever in falling, halfway fallen, never hitting the ground. Sometimes the sounds of broken and breaking foundations could be heard ringing out in the still nights, strange chittering creaks that felt to travel through the ground more than in the air, heavy thumps that sounded at once too low to hear and at the same time too high, even to the feral creatures pawing through the underbrush that had dominated the streets, and the survivors who looked out from the same shattered windows.

The ground level of the city, the roads, had always been bathed in permanent shifting night beneath the wind-twisted boughs of near-impenetrable stretches of rich green up above. The only sign of day came from thin shafts of glittering light, now and then fading back out of existence almost before they splashed their warmth across the thick grasses spewing from pulverized cement and asphalt, or from a pool of water, a pond, a lake threading its way through the lower floors of what was once a bank or an office tower, sudden sweet blue-green among black and brown and grey.

During the true depth of night, though, when what little warmth and light that managed to snake its way in through the small breaks between branches and down alleys between buildings finally faded, foul things roamed the streets. An opossum strode along one of these streets, fully aware of the bright glimmer of the soon-to-set sun to the west yet not letting it distract him from his task; still, though, he shifted his backpack on his shoulders and adjusted his hood with his free paw, other clutched firmly though freely around the haft of the spear that had gotten him through so much before. Some of the creatures out here he'd encountered, knee-high things whose screams sounded more like people than the vaguely reptilian mistake they looked like, had something in their blood that easily ate through steel and melted flesh; he'd spent the last two days trying to find a suitable replacement for the head of this spear, made more difficult by the numbness in his wrapped paw. He had to continually keep his fingers moving or else risk that numbness spreading back towards his claws again.

Again and again he glanced to his sides, peering into the tight spaces of alleys left between twisting roots and climbing foliage as best he could, eyes jumping from spark of light to stir of wind lost in the city to flash of the deepening sky visible for a fraction of a fraction of a second in the distance; his small ears, poking through hooded holes in the cowl of his cloak, tried to pick out any noise other than the steady wet crunching of his own footpaws through countless years of dropped rotting leaves and dry evergreen needles.

Even at the peak of day the city remained deathly silent, apart from the occasional cascading whisper of wind in the branches above and the creaking of solid wood on crumbling stone and steel. Sometimes at night, sometimes with the sun falling beneath the distant horizon or the moon taking its places, the wild feral wolves would tilt their muzzles to the black-velvet sky illuminated by innumerable stars and who knows what else, and give voice to a carrying howl that echoed back and forth in the space between the ground and the ceiling of the trees, high above. Sometimes the other things would gather and do the same, harsh chafing shrieks drowning out the musical notes of the wolves, terrible sounds that dug into

the stone and wood and died where they hit, though never seemed to end. When the opossum heard those, sometimes he could almost pick out words on their voices.

Something rustled in a thick patch of fruit-bearing bush off to his right, instantly snapping him back to the present. Couldn't lose his focus even for a second. He *would* have gone off on this mission earlier in the day, if not for getting trapped a bit too high up in a building where the stairwell crumbled beneath his feet; though he *was* an opossum, he tried to avoid travelling in the branches snaking in and out of the higher floors as much as he could. Where the ground belonged to things with four legs, the branches belonged to things with two, and it always seemed one was trying to outdo the other for deadliness.

And the thing was, the opossum wouldn't have even been in this situation if he hadn't remembered what happened the last time he'd seen those creatures feed. They were just as eager to devour one of their own as they were something else; he'd watched, horrified, as they bumped and jostled each other to dig into the fallen one's ribs, spilled blood burning the grass where it touched and pocketing the earth below with thick, dark tendrils of smoke snaking up. He'd been able to smell it from where he hid four floors up.

*No – no. Have to focus.* It had been hunger that finally drove him out, hunger after the realization that he hadn't hunted for the three days he'd been trying to fix his spear. He hadn't been able to. With the back and palm of his left paw bearing the same shallow, molten divots as the earth that night, he couldn't draw his bow to shoot an arrow further than he could spit, and his knife... well, he *could* have used his knife, but that would bring him close. Too close. Water was in no short supply in this place where the rain continued falling for days after the clouds dropped all they had and faded, hundreds of feet of branches constantly shifting and shaking and letting go of the rainfall they had gathered in their leaves, but food... his eyes lingered on that bush for half a second longer before he tore his gaze away. Almost nothing that fruited without the grace of the sun could be trusted.

Always had to balance the coin between the one face of quickening his pace and risking a trip, and the other of slowing down and letting whatever might be following him just do it more easily. Trying to lean more to one side often resulted in that coin inevitably falling flat, and it was just his luck that he'd kept his gaze on the bush for a second too long. A second rustling, this time from behind him, perked his ears and made his tail flick like a needle; the opossum gripped his spear a little tighter and picked up his feet, the crunching of his steps sounding out louder and faster.

To his dismay, though, this also led to that rustling, the crunching of fallen branches, the rattling of loose stones knocked out of a wall and across one another, coming more often and even closer as well. The opossum swallowed and bunched his coat around his chest, further increasing his pace: right beyond the edge of the urban zone of the city, right where the smaller buildings crumbled to ash and the impossibly tall trees gave reign to those slightly less so, was a spot where he knew – he *knew* – he could find a good source of reliable food. He'd seen it before, he'd taken from it before. He just had to get there before-

This time it was a sharp snarl that caught his attention, forcing his legs into an awkward stumble halfway between breaking into a run and jerking to a stop. Instinct used that momentum to swivel him around, grip as tight around the haft of his spear as he could get it with his injury and his other paw swiftly diving beneath his coat to unsheathe his knife. Surviving in this world demanded a familiarity with combat, and injury, and looking danger in the face and daring it to make the first step.

Sometimes that turned out in his favor. The opossum actually breathed a small sigh of relief when a feral wolf, shoulders maybe coming up to his waist, padded through a thick tangle of roots and brush nestled up at the foot of the building he'd passed: just a wolf. *Just* a wolf, thank fate. He could handle just a wolf. Sure, that handling would be made easier could he use the bow slung over his shoulder, but even if he *weren't* wounded, he hadn't bothered stringing it tonight. He stared straight into those golden eyes, gold like the moon when it rose up beyond the canopy, and licked his lips. They said the wolves could smell fear, sure, but at least they weren't the *others*. Those instilled fear, bred it, nurtured it like a spreading virus. They said that it made the blood taste sweeter. At least it wasn't one of those. All he had to do was wait for it to lunge – he could stick it on the spear, hold it at bay, see if he could bleed it with the knife. That had worked countless times before.

Then, though, another wolf appeared as though from the dying sunlight weaving together into its form, stark white fur against deep brown and verdant green and dead grey. Then another from the opposite alley, this one bigger; and another beyond that, sniffing at the fallen leaves along the ground first. They all slowly stalked forward, closing in that circle around the opossum, driving him steadily back. Footfall after footfall; he swung his spear from one to the other, never letting up on the pressure, keeping as tight a hold on himself too.

One wolf was nothing to fear, but four? A fifth, a sixth... the opossum swallowed, rolled his fingers over the handle of his knife, then spun right back around and ran. He could butt the back of his spear down into the rich earth to give himself a little extra boost, to vault over the unseen knots of crawling roots and fallen boulders that would trip him up. There was no way he could outrun feral wolves, but if he could get into a building, if he could find a way up, he might be able to. *Might*. That familiar dull ache started to ripple up through his fingers again, signaling for him to loosen his grip a bit, and then he missed slipping his knife back into his sheath and nearly tore a gash open in his hip, and then-

-and *then* his footpaw caught a looping knot of steel-hard root, pitching him forward and down. The opossum couldn't even let out a noise of surprise before the ground came up to meet him, and this time, only part of his body hit against the half-cushion of fallen leaves and growing grass; his spear jerked out of his paw and fell somewhere to his side, while that paw instead bumped against the lower trunk of a tree... and then refused to move while the rest of his body still went. That dull ache sharpened into intense pain, culminating with a solid *crack* that he could feel echoing up the rest of his arm and shoulder.

It was either the sudden sickening lurch of pain from that or the impact of the side of his skull on another protruding root that made him black out for a moment, but the next he realized he was awake, all he could do was try to pull himself forward, then breathe a sharp curse, then attempt to roll himself over to at least face his face. The opossum managed to half-lift himself up, then reached back to prop himself up on his paws, and immediately regretted it. The image of six wolves in front of him, slowly closing in after watching their prey fall, briefly split into twelve spinning around each other in pairs... and then suddenly they all lifted their heads, ears perked, and turned to face towards the first alley from which the opossum had heard something. Then, though, the world tilted beneath him again, and his view shifted up to the canopy high, high above his head with the feeling of warm, wet leaves seeping slowly through the back of his hood.

It felt as though – as though there were someone repeatedly pounding his upturned wrist with a hammer. With the claw end of the hammer, and though he knew – he *thought* – that he'd stopped moving, his view of the world still slowly spun, then shocked back into place, then continued spinning

again. Footsteps, heavier than the wolves', came towards him; though his mouth felt dry, he managed to swallow and tilt his head down, just barely catching someone silhouetted above him before they turned back to face the wolves, something clutched in one paw. Something small, something metal. The opossum didn't even jump when a fierce blast sounded from that little thing, an immensely loud *pop* that seemed to shake the trees and echo across the faces of the buildings. Snarling turned to whining turned to silence, accompanied by the sound of the wolves fleeing back into the trees.

That was great. That was fine. It all happened in the background, though: the opossum could hardly open his eyes now, each throb of that pain shooting up past his shoulder and into his neck, darkening his vision and reverberating back with the pounding that originated in his head as well. A moment later and this person entered his restricted view again, crouching down over him. All he could see before the world faded before him again was a black leather nose, a strong muzzle, and mismatched eyes glittering in the dying light of the evening.

~ ~ ~

*Swirling colors, soft, gentle, sweet... he didn't really have much of an idea where he was, but he didn't feel too uncomfortable. Here he was only vaguely aware of the thrumming in his head, and the pain in his wrist. Where had those come from, anyway...? Maybe he'd slept on them funny. The opossum stirred a bit and rolled his head on his shoulders, then stopped: he could hear a noise, too, something like... like a door on a squeaky hinge. Only, more musical. Sweeter. As if... as if they... no, he didn't recognize them. Things he hadn't ever heard before. Chirping and chittering, tweeting and whistling. Sounding like they came from nearby, though he couldn't see them. Didn't recognize them. Rhythmic yet not, melodic without following a clear pattern. Musical. That was really the best word. Musical. Soft clicking, quiet whirring... humming, singing, cheeping. He could almost-*

The opossum awoke with a bit of a start, eyes shocking open to stare up at a dark ceiling several feet above his head. That... made his head hurt a little more than it already did, powerful rhythmic throbs that nearly forced his eyes shut again. After a moment he managed to pull himself up and put a paw to his temple, then tried for the other – and instead found it bound against his chest, hanging in a sling that looked to be made from an old curtain.

Then, his little ears flicked and focused on that same musical chirping that had poked into his dream. He raised his head, frowned, looked to the right – a small fire burned in a pit in the middle of the floor, casting thin dancing shadows out of the wide broken window and across the twisting branches outside – and then to the left, trying to avoid the bright flickering light from there. Vision still hazy from the unexpected nap and whatever else had happened to him, it took a moment, but... there against the other wall, along the divider between two more windows, sat the same cloaked figure that he had caught in the last seconds before the pain had claimed him.

Something about... wolves, and the clinging chill of approaching night, and a frighteningly loud sound. Similar to the noise of a car's engine unexpectedly firing, which was *always* unexpected, since he'd only seen one in his life that hadn't been completely overgrown and overtaken by plants. Paws with the end knuckles and short, sharp claws protruding from gloves with the ends of the fingers torn off held a small, glittering... *contraption*, it had to be, in his lap. Small dials and smaller gears turned, little bellows inflated and exhaled, stopwise; that was what gave voice to the rhythmic chirping, and an arm spinning along the center of a disc added another layer beneath that.

The opossum winced beneath another burst of the headache, then wetted his lips and swallowed. "Hey, um – what's-"

Then both of them gasped, the other from realizing he'd woken up, and the opossum himself from realizing just who – *what* – his savior was. Now that night had fallen and he'd brought them indoors, probably up a few stories by looking out the broken windows, the light flickering across his muzzle came purely from the fire a short distance away. And it showed a canine muzzle, sharp white teeth visible between parted lips as he gathered his thoughts; splashes of dark color across his fur, like haphazard splotches of paint, and large dinner-plate ears that flopped up as his loose hood fell back from his head and to his shoulders... and, sure enough, there were those mismatched eyes. Couldn't see the color from here and in this light, but they each reflected the fire differently.

There was a reason the opossum tried to stay out of the trees and away from other people. Predator species – dogs, cats, wolves... bats, sometimes – could not be trusted. They made up the majority of the raiders, and they used their inborn speed and strength, their natural ability, to establish themselves above the rest. He'd seen families separated around a pair of wolves, mates, who gloried in what they were doing; he knew of a neighboring family, back when he lived elsewhere, who had returned from gathering water one morning without the cub that they had brought with them, lost to a group of panthers. For them, a wandering traveler provided a much easier and much faster meal than time spent hunting the feral, or gathering fruit. The dead could be remarkably generous with their belongings and their flesh.

And here he was, one moment trapped between solid ground and four-legged death, only to wake up who knows how much later to find the identity of his savior to be that same death, only on two legs. That explained why the wild dog had done it: he'd set his eyes on his meal for the night, and wasn't about to let a pack of wolves take it from him.

As if sensing the opossum's sudden bloom of fear – no, he could see it; there was no way he couldn't – the stranger, the wild dog, swiftly and a bit awkwardly tucked the contraption into a little wooden box and set that aside, the chirping continuing muted for another few seconds before dropping off into silence, and extended one paw out towards him. "Wait. *Wait.*"

There was no way he would listen to that. The opossum squirmed, a thin blanket falling away from his chest, and tried to turn and get to his feet – though only succeeded in painfully twisting his shoulder and falling back down to his back. In that moment he covered his eyes with his uninjured arm and gritted his teeth, fully prepared to feel the weight of the dog bear down on him, and the stab and crunch of teeth around his throat...

...which... never came. In fact, ears perked, the wild dog never even moved. It took some effort to pull himself back up, but sure enough there the canine sat, one arm resting across his knee and the other gently holding that little wooden box. The two just... stared at each other for a moment.

Then the dog licked his chops and nodded out towards one of the windows beside him. "You got hurt pretty badly down there. I wouldn't try going anywhere with that broken wrist and possible concussion."

"Why'd you save me?" The words came on their own, spilling out as though from a fresh, deep wound. The opossum could feel his mind trying to head in a hundred directions at once, none of them making it

more than a couple steps before fizzing into panicked nothing. "What're – what are you going to do to me? You're just going to... to eat me, aren't you?"

The wild dog raised his eyebrows, then licked his lips again. *Oh God. He hesitated. That means he is.* "If I was going to do *that*..." he began, voice deliberately low, "then I would've taken the ample and easy opportunity provided between when you knocked out, and when I brought you up here." He paused a moment. "Your weapons are right beside you, you know. I thought you'd be uncomfortable without them. Well, I guess you're uncomfortable *with* them, but..."

A glance down beside himself showed that those words at least *were* the truth. Spear, long knife, other knife, unstrung bow, makeshift quiver with a handful of arrows... a third knife hardly the length of his finger, half-moon hatchet. Pocket knife. Firestarter, definitely a weapon in this place where he couldn't look anywhere without half his vision being obscured by trees and plants and flowers. Another short distance away sat his backpack and cloak, and a small, neat stack of clothing; in that moment the opossum realized he was naked from the waist up, and swiftly gathered the thin sheet around himself. It did little to stave off the cold that the fire missed, but it *did* help with the feeling of those mismatched eyes on him.

After a moment he turned back to the wild dog. His heart had slowed somewhat, but... still. Where *his* weapons lay on the floor, within reach but not on him, he couldn't help but notice the wild dog still had a heavy knife hanging at his waist and something else in a leather holster at his other hip.

The opossum frowned again. "Why?"

Another pause, then a shrug. The wild dog ran his fingers over the lid of that box. "You know the worst of them come out at night. I couldn't just – couldn't leave you there." He swallowed. "That wrist will take a while to heal."

The opossum gave it a small shake, then winced at the echo of pain that brought back. At least it had decreased from hammer-strokes into something more like... like being wedged in a door, while someone repeatedly tried to force it shut. It wouldn't be the *worst* hurt he'd had, at least. "Then... why were you following me?"

Those huge ears perked again, and for a moment, the predator actually looked surprised. He held the opossum's gaze for a second, then turned to look out the window at the street below; the one eye he could see from this angle slowly trailed in following something down there. "Following?"

"I'm not going to believe you just *happened* to be there when – when they..." *God. Wolves.* It *could* have been much worse, though. "I won't believe that. You had to have been following me."

"I..." This time the dog glanced down at the box again, taking a moment to open the lid and look down at the contraption inside. Such a strange object, not quite a music box, not quite a noise maker. If the opossum hadn't known better, he might have thought that those sounds, that tweeting and chirping and singing, belonged to an animal. No animal he'd seen or heard sounded like that, though. "Mistook you for someone else."

Silence settled, and stretched – broken a second later by a gust of wind pushing its way through the trees, at first sounding from far off and then closing in, passing by, disappearing in the other direction.

The opossum shifted again, lost his grip on the sheet, tried to hold it between his arm in the sling and his chest, and reached over for his knife. Even when he picked it up, when he rested it in his palm and peered down at the blade, out of the corner of his vision he couldn't pick up any tensing in the wild dog, or any movement at all.

Not like he'd planned to do anything with it, of course. He couldn't throw a knife, and the dog sat too far away besides. The opossum sighed and set it right back down where he'd gotten it, then nearly grabbed it again when the canine rose to his feet, sweeping his cloak behind him. Yet again the two looked at each other; then, the wild dog put his hood up and pushed one side of his cloak back to slide the box into his pocket, allowing the opossum a brief yet full look at what he had holstered at his hip.

That in itself nearly gave enough for him to find out if he *still* couldn't throw a knife since the last time he'd tried. Anyone who had a gun, even a small one that fit in the palm of his paw like *that*, had to either be exceedingly lucky, really know what he was doing, or... brutal enough to have taken it by force. The sound that he'd heard just before blacking out, then, had to have been that.

The opossum swallowed and tightened the sheet around himself. "What are you doing?"

"Going to watch the street." The wild dog tied the waist of his cloak and adjusted its fit on his shoulders, then slid his paws into the pockets. "When I do something, I like to make sure it *stays* done – especially when it involves a life. We're five floors up, but at night you never know what might try to crawl up." Then he started for the door, taking a wide arc around the opossum on the floor. "Hoping something *does* try. That'll give us a meal for the next day or two..."

"Wait."

This time he was close enough to see the difference in those eyes. One warm blue, the other cool amber; not the rich, wet brown of the trees' bark, nor the bright orange of sunlit sap, but somewhere in between. By the way the cloak shifted as he walked, it seemed that he had a few more weapons than just the two that could be seen when he'd sat down.

The opossum swallowed again. It *did* make him a bit uncomfortable to be this close to him, and yet there was some manner of... not *comfort*. Not precisely. "Um... what's – what's your name?"

Those eyes flicked down over him, almost palpably so. Enough to give him a shiver. "Askia." Then another lick of the lips, which just made it worse. "Yours?"

This time it came out less like blood from a wound, and more... more the wind that had just passed through the trees. Slow, inevitable, and sure.

"Felix."

Those big ears flicked, either in recognition of his answer or in picking something else up, but another moment and the wild dog had turned back around towards the doorway... and then was gone, footsteps eerily quiet in the still night. It was one thing to feel reasonable concern at staying with a stranger, especially a *predator* species, but... he *had* offered hospitality, safety, warmth, and protection, even if he had never explicitly said any of that. Felix wrapped his arms around himself, then winced and adjusted a bit. Might as well get used to it, if this would take a while to heal.

Still, though, he wasn't sure he'd be able to get to sleep. Not yet. *Askia...* He rolled that name around on his tongue, twisted around to look through the door, chewed on his lip. *I... mistook you for someone else.* Twittering, chirping, cheeping.

It would certainly take some time.