

*He ran. Felix could see the end of the street, could see the buildings passing by on either side of him, yet whenever he looked forward again, the expanse of sunlit grasses surrounding the city remained just as far away as the last time he'd looked. His throat burned, his side throbbed, his legs ached, and yet he ran, wounded wrist clutched to his chest, fingers of his other paw slick with sweat.*

*Just as he ran could he hear them behind him, first the rhythmic, steady pattering of feral steps along the mulch and leaves burying the road, the hungry growling and breathy snarls of predators in hot pursuit. Something, a root twisting across the road or an ancient piece of machinery or piping jutting out from years of plants, caught his foot and pitched him forward onto that already-wounded wrist – but still he yanked himself back up, intense throbbing echoing up into his shoulder and chest, and continued running.*

*The growling and snarling had changed, and yet he so, so wished it hadn't. Now what came behind him was the fast, steady, too-quiet pace of the darker things that prowled the streets, the things that stole the voices of their victims. Children's laughter intermingled with screams, pleas for help, cries of terror, never quite matching the original words but coming close. That was the important distinction: these beasts could cry and shout and scream like the people whose throats they'd dug out, whose chests they had caved, whose fur and skin they had melted from their blood and drool, and yet they couldn't match the letters, the syllables, the words. Even so, it tugged at his heart, pulled at his muscles to slow and stop so he could try to help the wounded. The victims who were not there. That was how the beasts hunted. Empathy.*

*Sometimes they made him think that he recognized the voices, too. Amid the overlapping peals and grating screams, one voice, two voices, caught his ears and seized his attention like no others. The rest seemed to fade out: he could remember when he'd first heard those screams, when they'd shocked him awake in the middle of the night. They'd carried words, then, words that remained etched into his heart and memory. What came from the beasts behind him was a vicious mockery of those words, and yet if he... beneath his own panting and whimpering, beneath the crunching of leaves and twigs beneath his feet and through the fog of exhaustion, they almost, almost sounded like the real thing. Maybe they were. Maybe they... he had run away that night, had gathered his closest things and fled until the screams lingered only in his memory, and then had kept on running. Just like tonight. He never actually saw the bodies. Maybe...*

*Felix swallowed, gritted his teeth, turned – then stumbled on another root and felt himself lurch backwards, the awful familiarity of the beasts filling his vision. Soon he would add his own voice to that litany. A sharp spear of pain shot up his back, then another across his arm, and a spray of acid-hot burning across his chest and the side of his face, and-*

*-and he shot upright, chest heaving with panic. The opossum took little time to look around himself, the appearance of the room slowly coming back to memory: there was the dead fire that the wild dog had lit, the small bag of supplies, his own weapons still off to the side. Through the windows, shattered and broken by massive twists of thick branches, and between half-crumbled buildings across the street, the light of morning hadn't even begun to spread across the sky.*

*And here he was, totally vulnerable, at the mercy of this... stranger who had just happened to be there in his time of need, who just happened to decide to "rescue" him and take him back. As if. Without even waiting for his pounding heart to calm, Felix leapt to his feet, pulled his shirt down over his head with only a little sharp complaint from his wounded wrist, gathered the things he could, and sped for what he*

imagined to be the doorway that would lead to the exit. After all, he hadn't been conscious for the way up here: if he had to navigate the night-darkened and empty halls, so be it. They were on an upper floor, and any sort of creature that made their den in the ruins usually stuck to the lower levels.

So he ran. Askia was a wild dog, a *predator*. Most of the beasts out there paled in comparison to what other people could and would do, especially to a smaller type like himself. He kept his good paw clenched tight around the haft of his short knife, eyes dancing wildly every time he turned a corner or entered a new hallway, ignoring the loud drumbeats of his paws on the floor. Finally he found the ground floor – this building had had its front almost filled with wide display windows, long empty now. A lone shadow sat in one of those sills, one leg pulled up towards his chest and the other hanging down the side, tall radar-dish ears perked and eyes watching the street outside.

At first, at least. Felix did not let himself slow or stop: with a snarl on his face he barreled forward, hardly noticing that Askia made no move to intercept him even as he prepared himself to tackle the dog in preemptive self-defense. *Predators expect you to turn tail and flee. They expect you to cower and give in, to uphold the hierarchy... so if you're the one to attack, if you're the one to hunt...*

A good, solid swing of the knife, point angled inwards in attempts to catch and shred whatever part of the dog it bit into – suddenly turned into a pendulum of momentum as Askia's arm came up inside the bend of Felix's elbow, tossing the opossum to the side. He let his growl grow into a yell as he tried to swing one of his legs in to set the wild dog off balance and hopefully free himself before those sharp carnivore's teeth dug into the side of his throat, but just when he thought he'd feel an impact, his kick kept on going to hit Askia's next leg, his first raised at just the right moment; with the unexpected shift of balance Felix found himself to be the one going down, teetering on an unsteady foot and swinging his wounded arm in its sling into the air.

This would be it, then. His ears barely registered the clatter of his knife hitting the floor a short distance away, and all he could see was the wild dog's calm expression as he lunged in over him, mismatched eyes flicking back and forth, memorizing the face of his prey and victim. *This is it*. Next Askia would bare those so-sharp teeth of his, and he'd yank Felix's head to the side and dig into his throat; or he'd plant that large paw in the middle of his chest and forcefully push him down so he'd knock his head against the floor and shattered cement and stone lying around, and use his moment of shock to end him. Here it was. Felix couldn't even find the energy or determination to resist; he squeezed his eyes shut, swallowed for the last time in his life, gritted his teeth-

"What are you doing? You know you'll die out there."

-and then jerked them back open when his back met the floor, not fast and hard but rather... rather as the wild dog lowered him down, careful to not let his wounded arm bump against anything. Swiftly the opossum scrambled back, though Askia did not pursue. He just sat there, settled in a squat with his head half-tilted. No anger or aggression showed on his face, even as Felix intentionally tried to find it there.

"And I will not be responsible for another needless death." The wild dog breathed slowly, carefully. If anything, that just made Felix feel worse: *he didn't even think of me as a threat. Not even as an instinct.*

Felix swallowed yet again, then half-extended his good paw – but then just as quickly snatched it back. For that second and a half it had been out, he'd noticed it shaking after the adrenaline started to drain out of him. "What are you..."

"I'm just telling you." Askia nodded out the empty windows, into the violet-black shadows of the forest canopy that seemed to swirl and morph every second. Sometimes a breeze whispered through these lower levels, and sometimes everything seemed to move on its own. "I don't know what got into your head since I came down here to watch, but if you *really* want to leave, I am not going to stop you."

Heavy panting; Felix had to pull one of his legs up and rest his arm against it to balance himself. How had he tired himself out so much? "You just – you just *did*..."

Askia gave a nonchalant shrug, then scooted around so he could look out the window again. "You tried to attack me." For a second his whiskers twitched and his ears perked... but then they lowered back down. "If you do go, though, I will not help you again – and you may want to get a hold on yourself first. I could smell the fear on you as soon as you entered the room, but there are other things out there that could smell it from across the street, or a full block or two away." Mismatched eyes shone on the opossum again, seeming to send an electric jolt through his exhausted body. "You know that."

"I... I just..." This time, swallowing took effort. Felix closed his eyes for a moment; when he opened them again, though he looked at floor, it all seemed to twist and swirl as though he'd just spun himself around in a circle. It was not rare for exhaustion to hit like a hammer, especially with the world as it was, but that combined with his injuries and his rush of panic and adrenaline meant that when he closed his eyes next, he opened them and found himself looking up at the ceiling instead of the floor. "Want to be..."

"I know."

Then he was in Askia's arms, one beneath his head and the other under his legs, as the wild dog hoisted him gently up off the ground.

"There's something we all want to be."

~ ~ ~

It was the sound of a low fire crackling and wafting over the aroma of cooked meat that roused him awake, this time with pale midmorning light filtering into the dusty air in shafts between the hanging branches and thick canopy outside. No dreams – nightmares – this time, just darkness and silence: Felix pulled himself upright, injured arm straining in its splint with the effort, and gave voice to a wide yawn before wiping at his eyes and mouth.

Catching sight of Askia lounging back on the other side of the fire stopped him in that motion, though. Brown-and-blue eyes appraised him from over the fire, kept just high enough to sear the thin slabs of greyish flesh arranged in the flat pan. Not an appetizing smell, yet it still made his stomach rumble. He swallowed.

"Um." The opossum looked around himself: he'd been kept in whatever clothing he'd thrown on the previous night in his panic, and Askia had had the generosity to return his knife to its place among his other things on the floor. "Askia..."

The wild dog reached forward with a short-bladed knife of his own to check underneath each of the steaks, then flipped both of them. "You must be exhausted. Running yesterday, getting injured, that rush last night... I came up and checked on you throughout the night. Are you feeling okay?"

*No danger whatsoever.* "I'm... sorry. I..." The opossum reached up and ran his paw back along the fur of his muzzle. "I panicked. I didn't mean to..."

"Did you come to a decision?"

"What?"

Askia remained silent for a moment, during which he flipped the steaks again, then reached to the side of the fire to slide one each onto a pair of plates, one whole and the other missing a chunk about the size of Felix's eye. He only had to lean forward a little bit to be able to hand it to the opossum.

"About whether you're staying or leaving. It's nothing to *me*, of course, but..." He jabbed his with his knife and picked it up, eyeing the way the thick yellow-black grease dripped off and down the blade. The dog's muzzle curled into a brief expression of distaste. "You don't trust me. I understand that. You have no reason to. So I understand."

That was *just* last night, and as far as mental capacity was concerned, Felix had been totally useless and unconscious since the last time he'd asked. The opossum looked down at his own plate – Askia had given him the intact one – then sniffed suspiciously at the meat, touched it with a claw, and finally reached over for his own knife. "What is this?"

Askia looked down at his own again, then back up to Felix. "If I told you it was wolf, would you believe me?"

"I..."

"It's not – *someone*, if that's what you're asking."

"Oh." He looked around, grabbed another knife, and held the meat in place with that one so he could begin hacking at it with the other. "Is it... edible?"

"Everything's edible at least once."

Well, the dog *was* eating it, and it didn't seem to melt his teeth or burn his tongue. Felix lifted his first bite to his own mouth and chewed. "As for your... question... um, can I think about it?"

Silence again. The wild dog's large ears flicked towards the window – and a second later Felix heard it too, a distant, sonorous sound. Felix had been near one of the ancient storm sirens when it had suddenly burst back to life once in the past, though countless years of age and weather had warped it into something that returned in his dreams nearly every night for the next two months. This felt similar to that, though the first lick of it that crawled into his ears gave the unmistakable impression: a living creature was the source of this one.

After it faded, Askia swallowed his bite, then went for another. His eyes returned to the opossum across from him. "It's not safe to stay in the same place longer than a couple of nights. I've been here for four, so if you're feeling up to it, we'll be heading out when we finish here."

Sure, the meat didn't *burn*, but it did put an odd tingling in his throat that he could feel until the sun had risen up to the best approximation of "overhead" he could make in the deep shadows of the forest floor. It had taken time to get all of his things together instead of just what he'd grabbed in his rush earlier in the morning, and before long Askia had rolled his eyes, heaved a sigh, and leaned over to help him out – which naturally put a nervous shock vibrating through the opossum's chest, since no matter what words came out of his mouth, the dog still smelled like *dog*. Hot, dry, hungry predator's scent.

Still, though, he led Felix slowly through the city, their progress halted and twisted back and forth by the massive trunks blocking entire streets, by the roots curling through doors and windows and blocking off any alternate routes, by the wild dog suddenly half-crouching with his ears perked and eyes focused, picking up some noise or scent that Felix couldn't. Askia had his own bow, nearly always kept ready in his free paw; sometimes he'd use his other to motion to the opossum, or to reach up to get a better vantage point on the way ahead, or any number of other things.

That night he picked out the ruins of a bank to make camp, with the entire first floor having crumbled into an unmanageable mess. Askia used that free paw to reach down to Felix and hoist him up, surprising strength from that angle yanking the opossum almost fully up without him having to do anything himself.

"Here," the wild dog said a while later, handing Felix yet another of those odd steaks. "I cooked this before you woke up. One for you and one for me."

"Is it still good?"

"I wouldn't call it *good*-" Was that the ghost of a smirk? In the short time Felix had known him, he couldn't recall ever seeing Askia smile. "-but it doesn't really spoil unless water gets on it. Which is why you shouldn't spend too long chewing."

Maybe it was the lingering exhaustion from everything that had happened the past few days, or maybe Felix found himself feeling somewhat – *somewhat* – more comfortable in the wild dog's presence, but he remained awake only long enough that night to hear the beginnings of the wolves' howls in the maze of streets below, and nothing worse.

And so it went for the next few days. An early start, sometimes to Askia already cooking what would have to pass for breakfast, sometimes to a cold, empty room – yet every time, the wild dog always returned, deliberately keeping quiet until he knew Felix was awake. After eating they would exchange a few words, Felix asking about the area or the food and Askia giving his answers in a handful of sentences in that, and then they started back on their trek.

As time passed, though, he realized he could read the dog a little better, day after day. He started learning the positioning of his ears and whiskers, the looks in his mismatched eyes, the faint, subtle changes in his scent – only when he was close enough to tell, that was. Usually this last remained restricted to when the two had settled for camp, with no fire burning between them: sometimes Askia

would bring out that strange little clockwork device of his, and though he wouldn't make it speak, it was obvious the thing still had an effect on him.

Usually the dog maintained a sort of... *flat* scent. Though it was hard to put words to it, to Felix it seemed stiff and steady, determination overlaid with duty. The will to keep on going during the day, and to make it to the next night. That much he understood. Those times when Askia knelt down or readied an arrow on his bow, or when his ears flattened back and his paw hovered over one of his other weapons, that scent turned sharp and prickly, anxious and attentive. When he held that box, however, and turned it back and forth in his paws, running his fingerpads gently over the intricate workings...

This one wasn't a scent he'd picked up before, or at least not under any other circumstances. Words came even harder for it, and if anything, feeling it on the air like the heavy weight of cool humidity that hung down before a long rainstorm made Felix feel... forlorn, almost. Part of him wanted to scoot over to Askia's side and offer what comfort he could, and then part of him wanted to keep his distance and let the dog feel his feelings, whatever they might be. An odd feeling. An unpleasant feeling. Almost as if-

"Askia?"

The wild dog perked his ears, pulled in a short gasp, and then relaxed. "Felix."

"Um, I'm sorry to intrude, but ar-"

"Hey." He reached over towards the box to put the device away. "Your arm still isn't well, is it? How about... how about you and I move over there," he nodded his head towards the center of the room, "and I'll show you how to properly use a knife? Since you're not gonna be drawing a bow or using your spear with that arm."

Felix never found the chance to ask his question. Each morning started with food – another three days and Askia asked if he'd be willing to come out on his hunts with him – and then packing; each day held travelling, sneaking, sometimes scurrying, always on the lookout for dangers such as creatures and, worse, other people; each evening led to another meal, usually small, then some amount of talk, some training, more talk, and then sleep. Askia certainly knew what he was talking about with the knife: the first couple of nights it felt more like the wild dog were dancing with him than teaching him how to defend himself, smooth movements of the legs and easy swaying of the body, Askia keeping one arm behind his back to emulate the opossum's wound and Felix trying, struggling, to follow. Slowly, though, he could feel himself start to develop a feel for the patterns and movements, and the first time he managed to disarm Askia, the wild dog barked a proud laugh that nearly startled Felix into a panic.

That was the closest he'd yet seen the dog come to a smile, or at least until one night later when Felix found an intact reserve of whiskey, one and a half bottles' worth. He stuck the half into his pack and let Askia have the other, which led to a stumbling, giggly training session, ending in the wild dog slumping forward over Felix with the opossum struggling to keep him upright.

His arm had recovered enough to where he no longer needed the splint yet still had to be careful with it, and his first *real* challenge with that lay in resting Askia down onto his makeshift bed in a comfortable position without causing too much pain to himself. This required him kneeling down with half his chest pressed against the wild dog, trying to work him into position, and beneath the cool sting of alcohol the

only thing that swirled around in his nose was just that: was Askia, and nothing else. And it actually brought him something like... something like comfort.

Felix rested back on his knees for a moment, watching the sleeping wild dog as he rolled over onto his back and flung an arm across his muzzle, then let a soft smile touch his lips. A two or three weeks ago – three, more likely; though had it *really* been that long already? – the opossum would have seized an opportunity such as this and run with it, and yet here, now, he knelt there looking down at Askia, reached forward, stopped... then continued to place his paw lightly against the wild dog's chest. Only for a moment though, with the faintest hint of a comforting squeeze, before he stood up and made his way over to his own customary place across the fire.

That had been by far the strongest taste of the wild dog's scent that he'd gotten, and it lingered into his sleep and ended up pulling Askia into his dreams that night. Only fleeting, flickering memories wafted before his eyes once the sparse early morning light came in through the window and eased him awake, and an instant later, even those were gone. Unusual for Askia to let him sleep this late, although... the opossum rolled over, yawned, stretched his arms over his head, winced a bit at the familiar tweak of pain in his wrist, and straightened up. There was the wild dog across the dead fire, facing away from him on his knees, rummaging around with his own pack.

"Kia?" No breakfast today either, it seemed. The wild dog's ears flicked back, then lowered for a moment; then, though, he visibly steeled himself, and turned to look at Felix over his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

A second of silence before Askia turned back. "I need to leave."

"...What?"

The wild dog looked up at the ceiling, sighed, rolled back from his knees onto his rump. Another second later and the sounds of that clockwork box started bouncing around the walls, almost like tiny mice in the room, yet more musical. It *wasn't* music, was the thing: every time he heard those sounds, those little tweets and chirps and cheeps, it tickled at something in Felix's mind and memory, and yet he knew that those weren't sounds he'd ever heard anywhere else.

Then the sounds lowered, muted by the dog's paw. He reached forward with the other and then sat back, likely flipping open the lid of its protective case. "There's somewhere I'm going. I thought I'd be able to spare enough time to make sure you're fully okay and can take care of yourself, but... I need to try to make up the lost time."

Nearly before he knew what he was doing, Felix was on his feet making his way around the fire to kneel next to the dog. Even here Askia's head still stood a good half-foot above his own, ears not included. Felix looked into his eyes, one brown, the other blue, back and forth. "Wait, Askia..."

The wild dog swallowed again and turned away. "Look. I know you have somewhere to go home to." He closed his eyes, sighed... then reached to his other side to unhook the clasp on his revolver's holster. It had a surprisingly dense weight to it when he placed it into Felix's lap, paw lingering there for a moment longer than it needed to. "Since you still can't draw a bow... this should help you get back to that home."

More than just a physical weight hung down off of that gun, lying still in Felix's lap. He let his own paw drop to touch the holster, tooled black leather that had dried and cracked with time, the edges of the revolver showing within slightly worn and rusted, the handle similarly weathered. He'd seen it used once, those couple of weeks ago when the two had first met, and yet... slowly, carefully, he picked it up, popped the button, peered inside. The chamber held four rounds.

"I..." It took more effort to close it than it had to open. "...don't."

Those mismatched eyes flicked to him. He could feel them. "What?"

Felix looked up again, meeting that gaze with one of his own as willing and solid. No longer did seeing that muzzle bring any flash of nervousness or fear, and today, this morning, Askia's scent carried that same clinging weight that it always took on when he played with the box. Something told Felix that this time it started before he'd brought that out, though.

"I don't *have* a home to go back to. I've been alone for—" He swallowed. *Snarling, screaming, the hissing of vile blood and drool... sometimes they made him think that he could recognize-* "...for a while. We're near the border of the city, right? I know where to find food right where the forest turns to grass, so... I'll probably just..." Felix turned the gun back and forth between his paws, still stunned by the weight of such a little thing. "...stay here as long as I can, then move on. That's what I'd been doing 'til you."

Askia's lips briefly twitched as if he were starting to say something, though Felix kept going. He had to get this out.

"And — I can handle myself out there. You know that. You've *seen* me, this past week. I've been able to, thanks to you. I..." The opossum moved to put the gun down beside him, paused, then turned to the other side to place it back into Askia's lap. Then, he pulled his knees up towards his chest. "I never asked you to take care of me. I thought we were still travelling together because w... because we each need someone. It gets lonely out here." He raised his head back up and met those eyes again. "*I need someone.*"

The wind blew outside again. Like a slow, lumbering wave, it pulsed through the streets, pushing along the tall canopies of the trees and swaying through the branches, sometimes strong enough to cause some building further off in the city to creak and crumble a little bit farther. In some parts of the city, or in certain ruins, those winds worked their way through chipped and cracked stone and hummed. During heavy storms the trees and rooftops caught most of rain, leaving the city below to quietly sing to itself.

Askia's ears remained up only as long as the wind continued. "Why do you think I have somewhere I need to go?" he answered, quiet as that humming that still echoed along the streets. "There's someone I'm looking for. Someone... someone *I* need, too. They left, a while back, and... I know where they're going." His other paw remained along the cover of the box, fingerpads idly stroking the surface. "It's a... a shelter, of sorts. Like a community. If you don't have anywhere to go back to, I... I supposed I can bring you there."

This time when Askia turned to him, the smile spreading across his muzzle was full, warm, genuine. Felix could feel it spread into himself, and for a moment, he nearly threw his arms around the wild dog to pull him into a hug. Or, at least, his healthy arm.

Actually, it looked almost as if Askia would be the one to hug him, though of course he didn't. He swallowed again, smile still lingering.

"Hopefully you'll find your someone there, too."