

A Fighting Chance

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Venata hunched over, scooping water from the small stream to wash the dark, matted blood from her tawny fur, taking care to keep any of the tainted fluid away from her own wounds. She didn't think that their blood could spread the corruption that had warped the minds and bodies of so many of her kind, but she hadn't survived as long as she had by taking perilous chances. She hated thinking like that, like she was only surviving. It had happened so quickly, and there hadn't been any time to react, let alone adapt.

The forest had gone to hell, and it was spreading. Near the glade where she had been reborn, the air was dense and cloying, thick enough that she could taste the taint in the back of her throat. It had crept outward, and she, Ulric, and the others had retreated deeper into the wood where the trees were older, thicker, and slower to surrender to the corruption that was infusing itself into the forest. But what came before the strangling roots of the corruption were the others, those of her kind that had been taken and changed. They were mindless animals now, filled with the blind need to spread whatever had taken their freedom from them.

She snarled, digging into the muscle of her thigh to pull out a shard of wood as long as her finger. Her kind healed with supernatural quickness, and pain was almost laughable to her, but it was still hardly pleasant. Venata had never had to fight anyone before, and had certainly never considered killing anything, apart from the occasional insect and, more recently, animals to eat. She thought that she may have actually killed him, the lean wolf that had jumped her as she and Ulric were out looking for something to eat. Two more had pounced on her hulking friend, and things had quickly devolved.

She had run like a coward, and had been chased. Eventually he had caught her, grabbing her ankle and flinging her into a tree, splintering the wood with her body. He leapt on her, and it was only his efforts to stick something where it wasn't welcome that had let her get an advantage. She reacted, tearing open the wolf's throat with her claws and kicking him off of her. His blood was suddenly everywhere and he had spluttered through the hole in his neck. She could have probably gotten away, but she hadn't tried. Instead she had followed him down, clamping her teeth around his spine and twisting until she felt it break.

And then she had continued to run until she had found the stream, collapsing down into a small clearing and praying that Ulric had fared better. She couldn't get the taste of the wolf's blood off of her tongue no matter how much she tried, and as she watched her wounds slowly closing she wondered numbly what she was supposed to do now. Her instincts had become a powerful guide, but she knew that there was no natural reaction to what was happening and she just felt empty more than afraid.

She laughed weakly at herself as she found herself wishing that they had at least been able to find something substantial to eat before they had been attacked. The game in the forest had all but disappeared, having either fled what was happening or being eaten by her tainted, mindless kin, perhaps worse; she didn't know. All she knew was that she hadn't eaten anything bigger than an unlucky squirrel in more than a week and she was ravenous. Her statuesque, muscular body, while dainty compared to Ulric bulk, still demanded sustenance, and now that the rush from her encounter was wearing off, she was only reminded of how utterly empty her stomach was.

And then she froze. The almost imperceptible breeze blowing through the canopy had shifted, and she caught the scent of something foreign in the air. A host of possibilities rushed through her mind in a blur. She tried to reconcile the unfamiliar scent with everything she had ever smelled in an instant. Perhaps something edible had wandered to close? Maybe the wolf had managed to heal from his broken neck and had followed the trail she must have left through the forest? She hoped against hope that it was the former. She desperately needed something to eat. Hopefully it was big. She would need to save most of it for Ulric. He must have been more hungry than she, having nearly two feet on her and who knew how many more pounds of muscle.

Her pointed, lupine ears stiffened when she heard soft rustling behind her. It was close; it must have only been a few paces into the trees. That it was behind her screamed danger into Venata's mind. Either it was the wolf trying to get behind her, or something heedless of Venata's presence that was too stupid for its own good. She wanted to run, but she just sat at the edge of the stream, trying not to appear stiff and aware of the danger. The wolf would jump at her and she needed to react quickly.

What happened instead took her completely by surprise. Her ears twitched at a sharp twanging sound, and something hit her back with enough force to knock her forward, nearly pitching her into the stream. She let out a shocked yelp at the sudden pain, and she stared down at something sharp and shiny protruding from the front of her shoulder. She growled angrily, reaching up and tearing the object the rest of the way forward, pulling it out of her. She held in her hand a short, thick arrow, the tip wickedly barbed, drenched in her own blood.

Continuing her growl, she hurled herself to her feet, the initial pain already fading as the hole through her shoulder gradually closed itself. She spun, glaring at the forest for her assailant. The shadows were no barrier to her sharp eyes, and she spied a figure hidden halfway behind a tree, fiddling with some contraption in its hands. She managed to take a threatening step forward before the figure stepped out into the open and swing the device up. With another report, Venata hissed in pain as another of the arrows embedded itself into the hard muscle of her thigh, tearing easily through fur, hide, and sinew.

Venata looked down at her leg only for a second before she reached down and ripped the arrow free of her thigh, the barbs taking a sizeable chunk of her flesh with it. She tossed it aside with the other and launched herself at the figure, clearing the intervening space in only a few long strides. She impacted the cloaked form, knocking the crossbow aside even as it struggled to pull back the heavy string and fit in another bolt. She kept going, shoving the figure in front of her until she hit a tree. The figure's hood fell back, and Venata's ire dulled what she saw the face of an attractive young woman staring angrily up at her. She briefly relaxed her grip and the woman struggled, getting her arm free and pulling a short-bladed sword from a sheath at her hip to slam it into Venata's abdomen.

The steel parted Venata's flesh reluctantly, and she could feel the tip sinking into her innards, cold and rigid. She hissed in sudden agony, but she kept her grip on the youthful woman. Intent on making a point, Venata pressed forward slowly, pushing the sword a couple more inches into her own body, satisfied at the terrified look that washed over the girl's face. Then Venata spun, hurling the girl bodily behind her to sail through the air before landing in the clearing in an awkward heap. She let out a quick, pained cry before she looked up at Venata approaching her where she lay. Venata slowly pulled the length of steel from her stomach, staring disdainfully at the pathetic weapon before she swung it up viciously, stabbing it hilt-deep into a tree at the edge of the clearing. She certainly had no use for it.

The girl tried meekly to push herself backward away from the closing wolf, but wasn't able to make it far before Venata planted the pad of a clawed foot down on the girl's tiny frame. Unconcealed anger rumbled in Venata's metallic, two-toned voice as she growled harshly, "I don't know what made you think that was a good idea, girl, but I suggest you explain yourself before I decide I'm hungry enough to eat you." She leaned down, putting a bit more weight on her foot. "I'm very, very hungry."

The girl blinked up at her, watching in horror as the hole in Venata's torso closed over. "You... Y-you can talk... The others didn't talk." Her voice was light and had an almost musical tone to it, and sounded not nearly as frightened as the girl looked. "O-or fix themselves." She added with a wheeze. "What... What are you? Why are you doing this?! Tell me!" She squirmed beneath Venata's toes, rage and hatred overtaking the terror on her face. "Why them?! They never did anything to you, or this stupid forest! WHY THEM!"

Venata felt the fire leave her, and she slumped. "What?" she said, confused. "I think I'm-wait. How... How did you even get here? There are more than a hundred miles of wood between here and the end of the forest. You would have had to get past... the others. What others? What do you mean they didn't heal? How did you get past them?!"

Her assailant briefly stopped struggling, taking the time to grit her teeth defiantly. "They were easy!" she spat venomously, "Too worried about fucking themselves to notice me lining up a shot on them! Dumb brutes died easily enough. I shot them where it hurts and watched them bleed out. Some didn't even notice I'd hit them! They just kept rutting until they died! Why? Does that make you angry, that I killed your friends? Let me up and I'll give you the same, beast! I'll let you join them in hell where you all belong!"

Venata cocked her head thoughtfully. The girl looked young, early twenties at the oldest, and was dressed in plain, simple clothing that had clearly seen better days, including a voluminous, dark grey cloak that would conceal her well in the shadowy forest. She was short, lucky if she was more than a few inches over five feet tall, and was slim, almost painfully so, with meager curves that gave her a thin, girlish figure. Her face was likewise narrow, with soft, delicate features, and was framed by short, reddish-brown hair the color of cinnamon that complimented her dark green eyes.

She huffed out a small breath, cautiously removing her foot from the girl's body. "Stand up." she growled. The girl's eyes glittered hatefully, but she slowly staggered to her feet to stand before Venata, her arms stiff at her sides. She held herself awkwardly, nearly all of her weight resting on only one foot. Slowly, Venata lifted her arm and nudged the girl's shoulder, to her vocal displeasure. She had to shift her footing, and the young woman gasped in pain as her weight went to her other foot, nearly collapsing. Venata caught her easily, the girl's slender frame nearly weightless in her strong arms. She struggled angrily, but Venata just held on as she dragged the woman bodily over to the stream, depositing her at the water's edge before kneeling over the girl's now supine form.

The girl seemed unable to stop whining about how much Venata deserved to burn for some crime or another, how much they all deserved to die. She ignored it as she pulled the leg of the girl's pants up her seemingly wounded foot, brushing away the girl's hands as she did so. When she did, she sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth. The girl's ankle was red and swollen horrifically, a wound too old to have been caused by Venata's earlier roughness, and she put her fingers to the feverish skin as gently as she could. The girl whined as she poked and prodded, but it was necessary. "It looks like it's just a sprain." Venata mumbled, which, miraculously, shut the girl up, if just for a moment. Venata stood slowly, and stepped a few feet

into the stream, looking for something appropriate. Spying it, she reached down into the water and lifted out a smooth stone the size of her head, hefting it easily.

The youth panicked, perhaps thinking Venata meant to crush her, which was ridiculous. If Venata wanted the girl dead, she would have been dead minutes ago. Instead, she knelt back down, gingerly lifting the girl's leg and sliding the cool stone under her swollen ankle. The elevation and temperature would combat the swelling. She stood again, eyeing the girl, who just watched her carefully, confusion dominating the other emotions still fighting for control over her face. Venata stepped slowly back into the water and carefully washed her blood from her fur once again, erasing any evidence that the girl had attempted to kill her. She was getting tired of the smell of her own blood anyway.

She went back to the girl, stepping around her and sitting herself down by her head, crossing her legs and resting her arms on her knees. "Alright then." she said slowly, reigning in the remnants of her indignant anger. "I don't know what or who you think I am, but my name is Venata. What's yours?"

"Why are you helping me?" the young woman squeaked.

Venata sighed. "Because whatever you think you know is clearly not the whole truth, because you have piqued my curiosity enough to let me forget that I'm hungry enough to eat a horse, because I don't like seeing people in pain, and because I think that we have started off on the wrong foot. Now, if you would be so kind, please give me something to call you besides "girl", or "dinner."

"M-my name is Lily."

She forced a smile onto her wolf-like muzzle, careful not to show too many teeth. "Lily, a lovely name. Thank you. Now, Lily, what exactly are you doing out here fighting a one woman war against creatures you clearly don't understand?"

Lily blinked slowly, taken aback, before a sheen of defiance once more crossed her features. "I understand enough! They all died like anything else when I shot them... I mean... you're the first that... t-that talked, or didn't try to... to do things to me if they saw me."

Venata steepled her fingers thoughtfully. "So they didn't heal like I did?"

"N-no. They just died. Some took more effort than others, but they all died."

"How many have you run into?"

"You're the seventh."

"Six? You've killed six of them, all while wandering this forest for what has got to be weeks." She let out a low, breathy laugh. "I'm impressed, Lily. It sounds like you've been doing better for yourself than I have. I wish I had your strength." Lily recoiled like Venata had just struck her, but she ignored it. She instead gestured to Lily's elevated leg. "Did one of them get to you, or did you just trip over a root?"

Lily let out a harsh laugh of her own. "A little bit of both, I suppose. Number six didn't go down as quickly as I had hoped, and I had to book it. I, uh... my foot caught in a rut and I fell. He jumped on me, but I had managed to pull my sword, and he landed on it." She shuddered. "He... was heavy, and my ankle twisted before I could roll him off of me. It was a little close for comfort. I thought it was broken, so... thanks, I guess."

Venata nodded graciously, but frowned down at the injured woman. Lily was either stupid or suicidal, going after her with what she thought was a broken ankle. Even walking at a slow pace would have been agony; it looked like a rather bad sprain. Having made it as far as she had, Venata didn't think the tiny woman was stupid. Questions burned in Venata's mind, and she

didn't know which to ask first. She didn't get the opportunity to, however, as she heard something suddenly approaching from the forest.

It was loud, and whatever it was, it was big, seemingly with little regard to the amount of noise it was making as it rustled through the light undergrowth. Both women sat bolt upright, Lily wincing at the abrupt movement. Venata jumped to her feet, taking a stand between the injured woman and whatever was coming. There was no way whatever it was had gotten so close with as much noise as it was making, which meant that it had approached stealthily. She caught a glimpse of it, and suddenly relaxed, the tension going out of her shoulders. "Ulric! Just say something next time! You nearly scared the- Ulric?"

Broad-shouldered and black-furred, Ulric stumbled into the clearing, relief visible on his hard features. Venata felt her heart sink into her stomach. His sleek fur was matted with dark blood and numerous still-open wounds oozed crimson onto the grass beneath him. "Venata... you didn't... you didn't hide your tracks." His words came sluggishly, and he wobbled dangerously on his feet. She ran to him, and was barely able to catch him as he toppled forward into her arms. Unlike Lily, Ulric's thick frame was heavy, and it took no small amount of effort to drag his bulk over to the stream.

Lily squirmed away, but Venata ignored her. "Ulric? Come on; talk to me. Tell me what happened." The wolf's shining yellow eyes were unfocused, and she held him still so she could inspect his wounds. He was covered with small cuts and scrapes, but there were a number of long, deep cuts in the muscle of his chest, clearly caused by claws, and while they were closing, they were doing so with agonizing slowness. Fatigue and hunger must have weakened him more than she had thought.

He struggled tiredly, trying to sit up, and Venata pushed him back down. "Relax, Ulric. I've got you. Rest; just rest." His eyes were bleary and unseeing, and she pushed herself down on him, nestling his nose into her neck, letting him smell her. The familiar scent calmed him down and he slumped against the ground, closing his eyes with a sigh of exhaustion. "That's right." she purred, scooping water from the stream and rinsing the grime from his wounds. "I'm here for you. I'll keep you safe. Just get some sleep. You're safe here. I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise."

She cooed soothingly to him, unsure if he could even hear her voice as she washed the blood from his fur and cleaned the rents torn in his flesh. It must have hurt, digging at his injuries, but he didn't even stir as she scrubbed the dirt from his cuts. She likely didn't even need to, but she didn't know what else to do. Lily scooted cautiously closer, her voice almost reverently low. "Gods' Blood, he's huge... All the others were runts compared to him. Is he... like you? I-I mean... you seem pretty level headed, for a whatever you are. Is he going to be okay? Is he... Is he your... I mean, are you his-"

"Friend?" she finished, a tired, if wry, smile gracing her features, "Mate? Lover? I don't know about the latter two, but yes, I care for him. He's been nothing but kind to me and seeing him hurt... hurts. He deserves better than this." She gestured widely to the forest around them. "This place has been his home far longer than it's been mine. The space between the trees has become vile and..." she glanced at Lily, "dangerous of late." She returned her eyes to Ulric and rested her hands on him. Even unconscious, his strength was evident in the slow rise and fall of his chest. He had stopped bleeding, which was good, and his cuts were looking better.

"It makes me angry, having to run and hide like this from those who you used to call kin. I killed one of them today, just before you... found me. They ambushed Ulric and me while we were looking for something, anything, to eat. I ran from him like I've been doing since all this

started, but he caught me. And then he was on top of me, and I was afraid. I cut his throat open and bit him until I could feel his spine breaking between my teeth. It felt good, killing him like that, cutting and crushing."

"I should have done it sooner. I shouldn't have run. I left Ulric alone with two of them, a- and they hurt him. I could have helped, but I abandoned him because I was afraid. He got hurt because I was afraid." She brushed her hand along his cheek and into the mane of shaggy, black hair that covered his head. "I'm not afraid anymore Ulric. I'll never be afraid again, I promise. I'll never run away ever again. I won't let anyone else hurt you. Just... just wake up and be okay and smile at me and scratch my ears and let me make fun of your big, stupid muscles. Please be okay..."

She trailed off, not sure what else to say, and she twitched when she felt a tiny hand on her arm. She blinked over at Lily, wiping the tears from her eyes. "S-sorry." she mumbled, "I'm not really thinking very clearly. I'm tired, and hungry... and I'm confiding in someone who not half an hour ago was trying to kill me. It's been... one of those days."

"Yeah..." the smaller woman replied in an intimate murmur, "Sorry about that. I didn't know. I didn't even consider the possibility that you might not have been a mindless animal. I'm glad I didn't... hurt you permanently, and thanks for not just killing me." Venata smiled at her soft touch. "Wait here. My pack's back in the trees."

Lily winced as she staggered to her feet and hopped, more than walked, into the trees. Venata watched her go. She was hardly about to leave Ulric lying unconscious. Only a couple minutes later, the girl returned with a heavy leather pack hiked onto her back and her crossbow in her arms. The sturdy weapon seemed almost as big as she was, and she leaned on it, almost using it as a crutch as she plopped herself down next to Venata, sticking her painfully swollen leg in the cool water of the stream.

She rooted in her pack for a moment before pulling out a smaller parcel wrapped and tied off with twine. She pulled it open and pushed a handful of something into Venata's fingers. "Here." she said, "It's not much, especially for something like you, but it's all I've got left." Venata took it, and lifted it to her nose. It smelled smoky, but edible, thin strips of some nameless, dried meat. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes. Lily spoke up at her hesitation. "I've still got some dried fruit left, so don't worry about me. I brought a lot in with me, but I had hoped to supplement it with game. I haven't had any such luck, not even a squirrel."

"Lily..." Venata whispered, "I could kiss you."

The young woman blushed. "You tease. At least buy me a drink first."

Venata waved vaguely at the stream as she bent back down over Ulric, waving a strip of jerky under his nose. He groaned, but let her slip the meat between his teeth. She purred quiet encouragements to him, helping him chew slowly before swallowing. She fed him almost all of it, saving only a tiny nibble for herself, which she quickly wolfed down. It was dry and tough, but after so long without even a bite it was ambrosia from the gods, and it mercifully took the edge off of her ravenous hunger. "Th-thank you Lily." she stammered, licking her lips and trying not to drool like some mutt.

"Yeah, well, I figured I owed you a little, what with shooting you and all. I'm going to have to re-think my strategy now that I know that there are at least some of you worth talking to." She smiled warmly. "I guess seven really is my lucky number... Listen. I'm not really sleepy at the moment. Why don't you close your eyes and get some rest. You look like you're about to pass out with him."

Her eyebrow quirked upward dubiously. "And leave you alone to do Gods know what? After you tried to kill us?"

She raised her arms defensively. "Hey, I only tried to kill you. And I'm sure we both remember how well that worked. My sword is still stuck through that tree, and I don't think I'm strong enough to pull it out. I really don't think you have to worry about some cripple whose ass you thoroughly kicked earlier. Good on you, by the way, picking on some hobbled little girl."

"You shot me!" cried Venata, "Twice!"

"All I hear are excuses." Lily quipped in retort.

Venata groaned, but couldn't help but smile. "Fine, fine... But if you shoot me again I will be less inclined to take it in stride." And then her smile faded as a snarl bared the twin rows of razor sharp fangs that filled her lupine muzzle and she growled, "And if you harm so much as a hair on his head, I will cut you open and make you watch me eat your intestines before you bleed to death."

Lily's cocky smile faltered and she swallowed noisily, but she nodded her understanding, nervously waving away Venata's concerns. She returned the nod and lowered herself to straddle Ulric's waist. She kept her weight on her legs and arms as she lowered herself to lie atop his broad chest, pressing herself into his body. She made sure his nose was tucked against her such that he could smell her with every breath he took, and promptly did the same for herself, burying her muzzle into his fur and breathing deeply. It took only seconds before she was out, her awareness quickly fading to the black of deep, dreamless slumber.

Venata awoke with Ulric's arm around her back, pressing her tight against his frame. She groaned and blinked her eyes open groggily. She was still alive, and by the steady rise and fall of the wolf's broad, muscular chest, so was he. That was good; at least Lily hadn't somehow succeeded where she had failed before. Ulric was still out, but his sleep seemed less comatose and more just fatigued than it had before. He was warm, and strong, and his heart beat regularly beneath her. He resisted for a moment, but a soft, calming whisper let her peel his arm from around her and roll off of him and onto her back.

She stared into the canopy for a moment, regaining her faculties. She groaned again when a knot of hunger twisted up her stomach. That was nothing new, however, and she grunted as she sat up, yawning powerfully enough to pop her jaw. She heard movement behind her, and her heart jumped into her throat before she could choke it down with the realization that it was likely just Lily moving around. She twisted her head, peering over her shoulder at the source of the noise and gaped at what she saw.

Lily had kept herself very busy while the two wolves had slept. The clearing had been turned into a small campsite, complete with a low-burning fire whose glow was shielded from view by a pit surrounded by a ring of smooth river rocks. Lily grinned over at as she stoked the fire with the end of what looked like a tree branch she had fashioned into a makeshift crutch. "Rise and shine, Seven!" cried Lily excitedly, "Today's your lucky day!" As if to provide evidence, she gestured to the fish she had roasting on a spit over the fire. She swung her head behind her, and Venata thought her heart would burst at the sight of the pile of fish that sat on the banks of the small stream that bordered the clearing. "I hadn't seen anything edible in this forest until last night, when I spotted this huge school of fish swimming upstream. I couldn't pull them in fast enough. I wish I had a net. I could have just scooped them out of the water. Eat up! I didn't know if you cooked your food so I left them raw, but if you want to we can build the fire up a bit and give them a good roasting."

Venata couldn't keep the saliva in her mouth. "N-no... That's fine." There must have been more than a hundred pounds of meat spread across a dozen of the most delicious looking fish she had ever seen. She scurried over and grabbed one, tearing its head off and swallowing it without bothering to chew. She moaned in sudden, rapturous bliss as it hit her stomach. The fish was gone in another two bites, and she tore into the next one with even greater gusto. Fins, scales, and bones all disappeared between her snapping, ivory teeth, and she only just managed to stop herself after she had eaten nearly a third of what was sitting on the ground, forcing herself to save the majority for Ulric for when he woke.

Lily stared at her, her eyes wide. "Holy shit." breathed the awed woman, "I guess I'll try to get some more. You must need a lot of protein, huh?"

Nodding, Venata shook with the effort of keeping her teeth from the next fish. She wanted more, she needed more, and her claws tore ruts in the soil as she balled her hands into fists. She was puny compared to Ulric, but her body was still long, broad, and muscular. She swallowed hard, licking the blood from her muzzle as she shoved herself away from Ulric's breakfast with great effort. Instead, she prowled over to Lily, plopping herself down and scooping up the young woman into a full-body hug. "Thank you." she whispered, "You didn't have to help us, so... thank you."

Lily squeaked and briefly squirmed in her arms, but awkwardly returned Venata's embrace soon enough. Venata took the opportunity to inhale deeply, familiarizing herself with Lily's scent. The young woman had been filthy, but she had clearly taken the opportunity to clean herself up in the stream while Venata had slept, and she smelled sweet and faintly floral. Lily was thin, but her body was lined with tough, wiry muscle, and she was more shapely than her rough, baggy clothing and concealing cloak implied.

When Venata pulled away, Lily was blushing furiously. "Y-you're, um... You're soft." she said quietly, "S-softer than you look." Her dainty fingers lingered on Venata's tawny fur, sliding her dexterous digits along her arms and stroking the powerful muscle almost affectionately.

Venata grinned. "Yeah..." she admitted, "we're not as intimidating as we appear, although I admit I've never seen Ulric angry. I'd probably wet myself if I saw that."

Lily laughed, a light, tittering sound. "I nearly did when you ran at me after tearing that bolt out of your leg. I was lucky I was too tense to move, otherwise I likely would have."

"Oh, that would have changed everything." Venata intimated, "It's hard to stay in a blind fury when you're being peed on." Lily convulsed in another cute giggling fit and Venata sat back, smiling relaxedly.

After Lily had recovered, she wiped the almost-tears from her eyes. "Does..." she mused, "Does this mean we're friends now?"

Venata shrugged. "I don't see why not. We've checked all the boxes that I can think of. Shared dinner, attempted murder, the classics."

Lily had to reign in more laughter. "Do you need to sniff my butt or something like that?"

"I asked Ulric the same thing the day I met him."

"Did he?"

"Not that night, no." Venata answered with a sly twinkle in her eyes, "Although if you're so inclined I can give you a good sniffing right now. I can be very gentle when I need to."

Lily blushed harder, her fair skin flushing pink as she fiddled with a lock of her hair. "Is that so? Is that a proposition?"

"It seems that way." Venata murmured, "That is, as long as you're... I mean, if you... if you like what you see." She swept her hand down her body as if to show Lily what the smaller

woman couldn't help but see. The only thing that covered Venata's skin was the coat of fine, yellow-brown fur that did painfully little to conceal her voluptuous figure, and Venata had noticed how Lily's warm green eyes struggled to stay on her face. "Living out here has a tendency to give one interesting new perspectives."

Lily stammered. "Y-yes! I mean no, it's not... I mean yes, but I'm... Uh--wow, I--Ah, shit, Seven, look at what you've done. I haven't been this flustered since I don't know when." Venata smiled and let Lily work out her bewilderment, aware that Lily's hand never left her arm. "Yes, I like what I see, Seven. And I'm not really picky when it comes to the shapes that I find... pleasing. And I am suddenly very aware how close you are, and how very naked you are, and I can feel my heartbeat getting faster, and... Can I have another hug? It's been a long time since I've gotten a hug."

"Absolutely." said Venata confidently, pulling her close, "Hugs are free." Careful of Lily's injured ankle, Venata wrapped the delicate woman in a more comfortable embrace, blanketing her in a layer of warm fur and thick muscle. Lily's thin arms twined around her back, and she returned the hug desperately. It started off imperceptibly, but in a moment Lily was sobbing softly into Venata's shoulder. She smiled. Now she was getting somewhere; she had just needed to get Lily off balance.

But that didn't mean Venata wasn't sincere, and she held Lily while she cried, stroking her hair until the soft sounds subsided. "Feel better?" she asked gently. Lily nodded, keeping her face buried in Venata's fur. "They left the forest and hurt people, didn't they?" Another nod. "I'm sorry. Were... were they close?"

"Yeah." Lily mumbled, her voice muffled by Venata's shoulder. "Yeah, you could say they were pretty fucking close." She shivered and pressed herself closer, turning her head up to peer at Venata through watery eyes. "Farm life never really suited me, and I had been away from home for years. Life in a city is more exciting, you know? Sure, money was tight all the time, but I felt alive, and free. My own shitty place to live, my first love, it was great while it lasted. But a... curvier lady took my job, and he left me when he realized I was too much woman for him to handle... Asshole. I tried to join the city guard, like my father, but a short and skinny girl who looks like she can barely lift her own weight isn't exactly what the captain was looking for in a recruit. And there was no way I was going to start selling myself like so many others, so I... I went home, running back to Mom and Pop with my tail between my legs."

Now that she had started it didn't seem like she could stop, and it all poured out of her. "I must have been in the village when it happened. People were terrified of something, but no one would talk to me about what it was that had everyone so scared. I thought it was just the usual "Don't go into the forest at night." bullshit. What a load of manure, right? Who really believes all those stories, anyway? Hungry, violent wolf beasts that come in the dark to take your livestock and terrorize your children? Please. I... I spent the last scrap of money I had for a night at the inn in town. I don't know why. Maybe I was just hoping for a miracle from the gods, maybe I wanted to avoid seeing my parents' disappointment for a few more hours; I don't know."

"I guess it saved my life, because when I got home, the house I was born in, that I grew up in, had been torn apart. There must have been a lot of them, because one of them had died. I guess Pop got to his crossbow with enough time to string it and put a bolt into its face. It was big, and furry, and it made me feel good to see it laying there in the dirt in a pool of its own blood. It was nice to know they hadn't died like sheep. My parents, my two older brothers, my younger sister, they had all been gnawed on a-and... and worse. But Mom had gotten to Pop's sword, and not all the blood was theirs. I was so proud of her. I... I went to the barn and got a shovel. It took

all day to bury them. And then I took what I could, Pop's old crossbow, the sword, burned what was left to the ground and went into the forest."

"The first couple days were the hardest. I'm not really the woodsy type, but I managed. And then I found one. He was doing something horrific to an unlucky deer, too busy eating and fucking to notice me putting a bolt through his spine. He didn't die right away, but he lost a lot of blood very quickly. He was too weak to stop me from walking up and castrating him before he died. I didn't think he could still scream, but it felt so good to hear it. I cut him up until he finally stopped moving and I left him to rot with his meal. And then I moved on, looking for the next one, and the next one, always wondering if the next would be one of the ones that were at my home that night."

"And then I found you sitting here, my lucky number. I hesitated. You seemed different, not all twitchy and breathing hard, but I got angry and shot you anyway. And then you talked to me and helped me and... and let me cry and held me and... flirted awkwardly with me. Thanks, Seven. It's been a lonely, quiet, bloody couple weeks. I... really needed to talk to someone. Thank you. I hadn't really intended to give you a full biography. Just... thanks for listening to me."

"She is rather good at it, isn't she?"

Venata straightened as Ulric's thunderous voice rumbled through her chest. Lily gasped and peered around Venata's body. "Gods' fucking blood!" she cried, overawed, "Were you talking just now, or did an earthquake just hit my skull?!"

Ulric laughed, a sound just as deep that made Venata's spine tingle, and she craned her neck to watch him push himself slowly to his knees. He winced, rubbing the side of his head as he stretched, his tremendous musculature heaving under his jet black fur. "How long was I out?"

Lily answered as she gently disentangled herself from Venata's arms. "The rest of the night and most of the day. The sun must be about to go down. Or at least that's what I would have said if I wasn't completely sure your voice is below the range of human hearing. Holy shit!"

Venata was freed from her embrace with Lily, and she threw herself bodily into the hulking wolf, wrapping her arms around his chest. He didn't even budge when she hit him, and his own arms went around her without hesitation. His strong limbs were thick and heavy, hard with unyielding muscle, but he squeezed her with gentle care, as if she were a flower. She didn't bother keeping her tail from wagging excitedly. "You're awake." she whispered to him.

"So it seems." he replied with a slow smile. "I'm also hungry beyond belief. Please, by all that is good, tell me some of those fish are for me."

Lily poked at her own fish over the fire. "They're all yours, presuming your lady friend has had her fill. If not, you'll have to fight her for them. Heh. I'd pay my last copper to see that--if I had any copper left."

Ulric sagged with relief and stood, dragging Venata to her own feet as if she was weightless. He held her for a few more wonderful seconds, but let her slip out of his arms so he could saunter over to his waiting meal. Venata closed her eyes as she lowered herself to sit next to Lily. She listened to him eat, the crunching of bone and dripping of blood, wishing she could join him. He quickly finished and she peeled her eyes open to watch him approach and flop heavily to the ground, legs crossed, before the both of them, licking blood from his fingers.

He cleaned himself and fixed Lily with a sincere expression. "I... thank you. I'm sorry that whatever madness is happening didn't stay confined to the forest, and I'm grateful for your help. If there's anything I can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

She snickered, leaning into him, whispering intimately. "Be careful of the offers you make, furball. I just might think something up. But... thank you, for what it's worth." she finished, growing sober.

The things the young woman must have seen seared into Venata's mind, and she threw a supportive arm over Lily's thin shoulders. "What are you going to do now?" she wondered aloud.

Lily heaved a heavy, tired sigh and sagged into Venata's arm. "Well, I suppose my original plan was to wander around the forest in a suicidal rampage until I had either killed all of you or was eaten or ended up... ended up like my sister. But I've done my crying for them, so if you have any suggestions, I'd love to hear them."

Lily's frankness surprised Venata, but she supposed that Lily had plenty of time for introspection during her one-woman war. "I'd like to suggest something a bit more directional than a suicidal rampage." She said with confidence as she pulled Lily closer. Slowly, she explained to Lily what they had seen that night, the terrified woman and her transformation into what had warped the minds and bodies of her kin. Lily paled, but her lips were pressed into a grim, determined line, and she nodded her understanding.

"So we just go back to this place, kick some serious ass, and whatever this is stops spreading?" Lily peeled a strip of meat from her fish and chewed it thoughtfully. Venata certainly hoped so, and told Lily as much. "Yeah, well, it's definitely a better idea than mine. When do we leave?"

"After you get some sleep and give your leg some time to recover." Ulric cut in, "You're in no condition to go into that place, and I'm sure Venata and I could use the opportunity to regain our own strength. The past few weeks have been sparse for us as well, although the fish were an excellent start. Thank you again, miss...?"

"Call me Lily, Furball, and I just might take you up on that. I haven't really slept well in a while. Could you... Could you watch me? I would feel a lot better if you stayed with me."

Ulric nodded with a smile, laying a gentle, if heavy hand on Lily's shoulder. It was comically oversized; Ulric could have palmed the smaller woman's head, and she leaned into it as she placed her hand on the back of Ulric's. Fatigue crept into her expression, and Ulric said softly, "The least we could do is return the favor after you watched over us. So take a load off and get some rest. We'll take care of you."

Lily giggled. "Do you have any idea how terrifying you look... and sound? But I suppose that's a good thing, as long as we stay on the same side, right?" She grunted with the effort of playfully shoving away his arm. "Let me eat before I let you live out some voyeuristic fantasy. Some of us like to chew our food, you know."

In spite of these assertions, Lily practically inhaled the fish she had set aside for herself, until there was nothing but bones left on the spit. Then, with a wordless, but appreciative glance, she curled up in her bedroll, using her pack as a lumpy pillow, and was snoring peacefully in just a few seconds. In the time that took, Ulric had moved his seat to the edge of the stream to dip pawlike feet in the cool water. Venata sashayed over and flopped down next to him, snuggling in close and sliding herself under his arm.

Venata's fur kept her from ever truly feeling cold, but the thick limb draped over her oozed comforting warmth that soaked into her core. She leaned her head into his chest, speaking softly, "You had me worried there for a little bit, passing out on me like that. Don't do it again."

He huffed a short laugh. "I shall make it my mission, milady. No more sleeping on the job, I promise." She elbowed him in the ribs, pulling a grunt from his chest. He smiled down at her. "Do you think it will work?"

"It has to," she answered. "But even if it doesn't, I'm done running from this. It's only gotten you hurt. So if pain or death is the only thing that waits at the end of both paths, I'd rather fight than run. It's a chance, at least. We aren't designed to run and cower. We should be free to run under the moon. It's been too long since we ran somewhere, not from something, but to something. Can't you feel it?"

"Yes, I can feel it. I just wanted to keep you safe. It would kill me to see you hurt." He sighed heavily. "But you're right, and if you think we should fight, I'll be with you all the way." Venata smiled dreamily. She had never even suspected he wouldn't be with her, but it was nice to hear him say it. He smiled back at her, reaching across himself to cup her cheek, brushing a thumb along her muzzle before he moved his hand up to scratch tenderly at the base of her ears. "What about our new friend? It will take days for her ankle to heal."

Venata pressed into his strong fingers, her tail wagging giddily against his. "Yes, but she's more than proven herself. We can find something constructive to do with the time. What we should do is find the others, anyone who still has their minds. We could use every last bit of help that we can muster. Even if the tainted ones can't heal themselves like us doesn't mean that they're going to die easily, especially the big one." Ulric nodded, and she let him stroke her long, golden hair for a moment. "Ulric," she murmured eventually, "is it strange that I'm not afraid anymore?"

His touch lightened, and he whispered into her ear. "Not at all. As long as you still feel something. It's when you feel nothing that you know something is wrong with you." He leaned into her, shadowing her with his bulk. "What do you feel?"

"Angry," she answered, leaning right back, "Angry at what's happened to us, angry at what's happened to our home, angry at what's happened to that innocent girl, I'm just so angry... I just don't know what to do about it."

"It sounds to me like you know exactly what you're going to do about it. And you don't have to do it alone. You'll have me, and Lily, and everyone else that we can find. So why should you be afraid?" He dropped his arm, hooking it around her waist, and she yelped as he hauled her up onto his lap to face him. He held her close, cradling her to his powerful chest and wrapping her in his massive arms. "I missed you like this, fiery and impassioned. It's rather infectious."

She could feel his heartbeat against her, mirroring the slow throbbing of his loins against hers. She smiled coyly up at him. "Easy there, big boy. Our guest is asleep. She'd be very grumpy if we were to wake her."

He inhaled deeply, burying his muzzle into her hair and nibbling the tip of her ear delicately. "I know, I know," he breathed, "But I've had a lovely nap, and a decent meal, and we've got a plan, and I'm in such a wonderful mood. This is what you do to me, Venata. And you weren't the only one worried about her friend. I've got you right here, safe and secure after all this craziness, and it's almost as if I'd forgotten how good you smell."

He gave her his best puppy dog eyes and she giggled softly. "You don't smell too bad yourself, Ulric. Sniff away." He took her up on the offer, running his hands up and down her back as he gulped down air that he pulled along her fur. She did the same to him, basking in his warmth. "You know..." she said after a long minute, humming into his chest, "I think I saw some silver in the water. Care to go fishing?"

A strong, delicate claw tickled at her ear, and he grinned down at her. "I'll admit; I never really was the biggest fan of fish, but I think I'm developing an appetite for the slimy little things." Keeping her in his arms, he rose to his feet and padded slowly out into the stream. She slid down his body until her own paws met the smooth stones that lined the stream's bed, the

water cool against her toes. "How about this? Whichever of us pulls more fish out of the water gets first pick."

With a wolfish grin, Venata pushed him away. "You're on, big man. Get over there and keep an ear out for anything sneaking up on us while you watch the mistress work. I'll show you hand fishing." Ulric dutifully stepped back and out of the stream, moving to a nearby tree and leaning heavily against its trunk as he folded his arms across his chest. His ears were up and out, listening to the forest around him, but his eyes were on her, shining brightly.