

Woodmire was a cozy village. The type where people came to get away from the world. Or so said his dad, Arcenian wasn't sure what he meant by that. He didn't really know what the world outside was like. All the world he knew was just the nearby woods, where they weren't allowed to go alone. The creek where they would splash and play during the summer, the grass fields where they would hunt for fireflies at night. To Arcenian, this was his whole world, and it was wonderful.

Of course, he was curious about the lands beyond. The odd caravan or pack of adventurers would sometimes frequent the roads that led to the village were a window to the wider world. Arcenian knew of an old mage who would sometimes pass by and tell stories of heroes and monsters with a show of magic, figures made of water and smoke, detailing epic battles and adventures aplenty.

He and Mira would often play in the field with sticks, pretending to be the knights of the kingdom, fighting dragons and villains of all types.

They laughed as the grass rustled under their feet, the swings of their pretend weapons 'carving' through the taller blades of grass that got caught in the way of their wings. The sticks hit each other with thuds, their laughter carrying into the wind as they played.

The way Mira smirked, showing that little tooth at the corner that was a bit sharper than the rest, a result of her having chipped it earlier this year. It inspired a new favorite nickname from him, 'Little Fang'.

"So you always know you're smaller than me!" He bragged, very proud of the two inches he had over her.

"Not fair!" She cried out, balling her fists next to her skirt. "The old ladies tell me I'm gonna grow up lots!"

"They're just saying that cause they know you'll always be a shorty!"

"Your parents say so, too!"

"That you'll be a shorty?" He teased her with a grin.

"Stop making fun of me!" She stomped her foot petulantly.

He couldn't help but tease her, it was so easy to rile her up. Mom and dad said that now that she was living with them, he had to act as a big brother would. And he always saw older kids tease their siblings like that.

Though Mira wasn't his sister, not really, he was meant to treat her like one. So if he teased her, then that meant he was doing a good job!

Still, he was also meant to encourage her, according to his dad.

"I'm just joking." He patted her head a few times. "I bet you'll grow up in no time and get huge!"

She gasps in wonderment. "Like one of those orc ladies we saw that one time?!"

"Sure!" He said, happily feeding her fantasies. "You'll be so big you'll scare all the beasts!"

"Rawr!" She clawed her hands at him, imitating a fearsome creature.

"Ahhh, she's coming to get me!" He playfully shouted as the two tussled around in the grass, laughing the day away.

The lights of the fireflies dancing over the grass fields caught their attention, and while they would sometimes chase after them, his parents made it clear they were to return home as soon as it started getting dark.

"Come on, we'll be late for dinner!"

They ran toward the village, the sky turning orange as it settled on the horizon.

But... the closer they got to the village, the more they began to smell smoke.

And the glow coming from it... that wasn't the sun.

Smoke, darker and far larger than any chimney, came from the village as their home burned.

Arcenian and Mira watched with horror as the alarm bells rang; the sounds of people running, panicking, were accompanied by the sound of metal and people fighting.

And... the growls, the howls.

The sounds of animals.

They were only youths; they didn't know what to do. All they knew was that they wanted to find his parents. So they got closer and closer, shouting after them, trying to find them among the chaos.

The traveling adventurers were fighting against wolves. Not the wolves that threatened livestock, no, these were tall, hulking things that stood on two legs and swiped their sharp claws at them with long arms. They snapped their fangs at them, seeking to bite into their flesh while their claws threatened to cut them to ribbons.

"Dad!" Arcenian shouted. "Mom!"

A blur barreled past him, so strong and fast it knocked him down.

His world rattled, his vision blurred.

Among the sounds of fighting and flames, he heard Mira crying out in fear.

And he saw the wolf thing, holding her up by the collar of her dress, caught in its sharp fangs.

*Her blue eyes were so afraid, begging for help as her arms futilely reached out for him.
"Arcenian!"*

The wolf turned and ran.

Mira kept screaming.

“Mira!” He shouted, trying to follow them. But the wolf was far too fast. “Mira!”

“No!” He felt his father call out at him, strong arms wrapping around him. “Stay here, please!” He begged, voice breaking. A sound so unnatural for a dad to make. “Can’t lose you, too!”

He dragged him away from all the fire, from all the fighting.

Mira’s screams dimmed until he could no longer hear her anymore.

Arcenian would never see his friend again.

X~X~X~X~X

His mind would often go back to that fateful night, sometimes in the most random moments.

Ten years, and Arcenian still remembered that day like it had been yesterday. The smell of grass in the field, the morning dew, the sound of Mira’s laughter as they played pretend with their wooden swords. When childhood was a dream filled with endless possibilities, when the world seemed so bright and full of wonder.

Now, as an adult with his own responsibilities, Arcenian had a broader grasp of the picture.

In a world of magic and mysteries, the mundane was saddled to the people who had to live day by day. A farm, a bakery, a smithy, a butcher, those were the things regular folk had to pursue if they wanted to subsist.

Now, as his features had matured, his dirty blonde hair having grown longer, his face rugged with the passage of time and hard labor, washing away the roundness and softness of his childhood years, Arcenian understood what his lot in life was.

And he was fine with it, really, he *was*.

Adventures... were better left off to other people. To the brave and the daring, those who actually had the strength to take on the world and all its challenges and dangers.

He knew for a fact he wasn't that sort of person. He did not have the strength or courage to endure such dangers.

He certainly hadn't had the strength to save Mira that night.

It was okay, he told himself, he was the son of merchants and a merchant he would remain. It was a respectable profession. One where he strived to conduct himself with dignity and fairness. He had met many a swindler and greedy sods who would sell water laced with honey and lemon juice and pretend to be a cure-all for everything. He scoffed at the disgusting practices some men would stoop to just to take the coin out of a less-well-off person for the sake of a bit more weight in their purses.

As he learned the trade from his parents, he opened up his own personal trade store in Woodmire. Odds and ends from multiple corners of the realm. Potions, the odd weapon or two, mostly necessities, and other items people would use in their everyday lives.

The Little Fang, he had called his shop.

A reminder of simpler times, to always keep close the memory of Mira.

That silly nickname was a comfort to him, a constant reminder of the girl who was as family. A reminder of how to live his life, peacefully and quietly, safe in the village. To trade not just for his own sustenance and that of his parents, but also to fairly provide for the villagers as well with all sorts of supplies.

Supplies that he was running low on, actually.

A trip to the city was in order.

He had loaded up his cart and his horses, bidding farewell to his parents and letting them know he'd be back home in a couple of days. The city of Kynath was far from being the kingdom's capital, but it was sizeable enough to be considered a cosmopolitan place, with more people and races than his young childhood mind had been able to comprehend back then when his father first took him there.

He had asked so many questions, stared at so many elves, dwarves, and the lizard-folk. Heh, his father had reprimanded him so many times not to stare like that, but he couldn't help it. Not even when the random group of adventurers passed by Woodmire had he seen so many different people from different backgrounds.

He still fondly remembered those days. The sights, the smells, the stores, the libraries with so many *books*. Books about adventures, of history and legends, of distant lands and magic, windows into the world beyond.

Books that Mira would have loved.

Arcenian had made it a point to hoard as many of them as he could and read them for Mira's memory. It was enough for him to look upon those words and be carried out by the fantasies of his mind to new lands and places. An indulgence, some... remnant desire of his youth.

Heh, more than anything, he liked to imagine it was *Mira* in those fantasies, living out the life she wanted. The life she *deserved* for those wretches, those vile, godless, abominable *monsters-!*

Arcenian took a deep breath, steadying his shaky hands by tightening his grip on the reins of his horses.

He... still had nightmares about werewolves, from time to time.

The image of that *thing* taking Mira away haunted him to this day.

It was okay, he was *okay*.

He was still a day away from reaching home with his goods. He'd make a stop at the inn a few miles outside the forest, rest for the night, and then continue his journey. Arcenian trekked through the woods that lay between Woodmire and Kynath, his cart shaking and shuddering as it marched over the dirt road. Idly, he reached out next to him to the new book he had purchased and began reading to pass the time. At this point, he'd boast that he mastered the art of reading even while the cart shook so much that his eyes were able to follow the sentences perfectly. He didn't need his eyes on the road; it's not like there was anyone here, and his horses knew this route from memory now.

“Ho there, friend!”

Arcenian tore his gaze from the book, looking up to see a man standing in the middle of the road.

“Hoooo!” He yanked the reins and made the horses stop with a neigh, a few feet away from the man.

He gave him a closer look. He appeared to be a decade or two older than him. He was armored in leather and held an axe at his waist. The scars on his face spoke of experience, his nose looked like it had been broken and mended one too many times.

“Are you... lost, my good sir?” He tentatively asked.

He could be an adventurer. But... his smile.

He didn't like that smile.

He'd seen it before in many a greedy merchant he'd been forced to do business with.

The man scratched his stubbled chin. “Oh, I'm not exactly lost, but I am *missing* something.”

Arcenian frowned. “And... that would be?”

The man's grin widened, and he whistled.

Branches broke under feet, bushes shuffled loudly, as multiple figures emerged.

Men in similar patchworks of leather armor, all carrying different weapons of low quality. One carried a crossbow, another a bow.

And *both* were aiming at him.

Arcenian instinctively raised his arms, the horses neighed and kicked the air as the sudden presence of these clearly dangerous men unnerved them. But they could not run as they were still bound to the cart.

“What do you want?” He muttered, trying to keep the fear away from his voice.

“Nothing much,” The bandit leader said with a fake, charming smile. “All your gold will do.”

“I... have little on me, I just came back from buying supplies in the city.” He tried not to give them any reason to kill him.

“That’s fine, then.” He shrugged. “Will just take your horses and your cart. Happy to do business with you!” The bandit suddenly snapped his fingers and ordered one of his men to move. “Get him off.”

The horses kept neighing, even louder than before, reeling back and kicking the air incessantly as they obviously tried to run away.

“Keep your damn beasts calm!”

“Woooah, woooah!” He tried to snap the reins to hold the horses steady. “Heel, heel!” He commanded. But the horses wouldn’t listen.

“I *really* don’t want to put down two perfectly good horses.” The bandit growled at him. “So you better keep them calm or-!”

“I-I can’t!” He shouted, desperation mounting in his voice. “They only get like this when...!”

He cut his words short, as a terrifying realization dawned on him.

“When there are beasts nearby...”

The bandit barely had time to demand an explanation... when they all heard a howl.

A wolf's howl.