

CHAPTER 38

Winter POV

I'm running in wolf form, as fast as my little legs can carry me, grateful for the speed that I possess. The trees pass by in a blur and I easily jump over broken twigs and branches. I have to keep going, I can't afford to stop. Not now.

Keep running Winter Sabriel tells me urgently and I continue to do so, my nose picking up a horrid scent of rotten eggs and meat, wrinkling my nose in disgust. The scent is overwhelmingly familiar and I begin to feel slightly panicked as I start to run even faster.

How close is the rogue?

He's gaining on us fast Winter. I don't think we're going to outrun it. We're going to have to turn and fight.

But I haven't practiced much, Sabriel, I don't know if we can take them. I don't know how to fight!

We have no choice, Winter, now turn around before he tackles you!

I turned and jumped neatly to the side in time to avoid the rogue which had jumped to tackle me from behind. I stare. It's thin, mangy looking, and malnourished, as though it's been a long time since they last ate. Its eyes are a crimson blood color and it's a dark gray color, much like a normal wolf. It's drooling as it snarls at me and I flinch, staring into its eyes, my whole body tensed as I wait for the inevitable attack. I feel slightly sorry for it, which annoys Sabriel.

Jump. Attack first Winter.

I jump, landing on it and surprising it for a moment as I rake my claws against its back. They howl and then I feel them nipping at me as I fall off and roll over. It leaps at me and I howl as I feel its jaws clench down on my leg, effectively breaking it. I know they're trying to make me helpless and I get to all fours, whimpering slightly as I'm forced to keep one off the ground. I'm a goner. There's no way I can take them out now. But Sabriel refuses to let me give up. Urging me to continue to fight.

Fight through the pain. I'm not dying today and neither are you. Run and tackle it into the tree.

I almost scream at the pain as I do what she says but the rogue isn't expecting me to attack and I easily thrust it back into the tree, snapping and biting at it in desperation. It bites back and we roll over and over, both of us scratching and clawing at each other. Without knowing it, I rip through his stomach and dig my claws in as hard as I can as I drag them through, rolling over and away as they lie there, not moving. I can see their chest heaving up and down and know they aren't dead yet.

Finish it, Winter. We can't afford for them to keep tracking us, Sabriel tells me, and I hesitate. I can't bear to think of taking another life, even a rogue. After all, once upon a time, they used to be a shifter like me. How could I blame them for doing what their nature demanded of them? It wasn't fair or very sportsmanlike. Plus, I hate the idea of killing something that is so defenseless right now. They clearly aren't going anywhere.

That compassion is going to get you killed, Sabriel grumbled at me.

I pushed her aside and concentrated on the rogue who was staring at me, not moving. It's in a great deal of pain and, from the looks of it, it would live but take hours to heal. Hours I could use to get away.

I can't kill them, Sabriel, rogue or not, I can't. They are in no condition to continue fighting. Let's just leave them alone and get away.

They'll kill someone else.

Why are their lives forfeited just because they are rogues? Everyone deserves a chance to live. I refuse to end another's life when I can avoid it.

Fine. Do what you want, Winter, but don't say I didn't warn you.

I shifted and limped, biting my lip against the pain of my leg, searching for the small backpack I flung into the trees earlier before turning around. Another item I've stolen from an unsuspecting household. I open it and grab what I'm looking for, a shirt that I tear into long strips as the rogue watches me, clearly confused. I approach it slowly, hands open, uncaring that I'm naked and vulnerable. There's such sadness in its eyes that it tugs at my heart. It doesn't seem like an ordinary run-of-the-mill rogue; at least not like I'd imagined them to be.

I try holding my arms out as it gives me a low growl, its head staring at me as I show them the makeshift bandages I've created out of the shirt.

Just let me help you, I think to myself, praying they will, and it seems to eye me for a moment and then lowers its head as I place one against the wound, wiping up what blood I can. It whimpers but doesn't try and do anything. I start to wrap up the wound, being as quick and as gentle as I can. Then I gave the wolf a gentle pat and stood up, moving back into its eye line. Every step is excruciating and I know I'm going to have to take care of myself shortly as well, but a broken leg heals incredibly fast.

Staring directly into its startled eyes. I also grab some food that I have stolen and place it next to them. They give it a wary sniff.

I hope they eat the food. They looked hungry. I then grab some clothes for myself and hastily get dressed, keeping an eye on the wolf the whole time. It would make sense for me to shift, but not with a broken leg. I want to walk normally for a bit as my leg is already beginning to heal and reserve my strength. I grab a large branch to use as a walking stick, cursing vehemently in my mind with each step as the wolf whines slightly behind me. I swear Sabriel rolled her eyes.

See what you've started. Now the rogue is acting like a big baby and it's your fault for caring for it like a pet!

Leave it alone Sabriel, what's done is done. Let's just focus on getting out of here and you can continue to yell at me later, I tell her tiredly.

She goes quiet as though realizing how fed up I sound. I wince as I begin to limp, the backpack securely on my back, pain shooting up my leg with every step. I glance over at my shoulder and see the rogue digging into the food and give a small smile. Perhaps I had treated it like a pet, but I've never been able to see an animal in pain and not help. Besides, who knew, maybe they would be grateful for me saving it and leave me alone. It can't hurt to be optimistic, right? But I can't help remembering its eyes and frown. Now that I think about it, they also seemed quite tall, not just for a rogue but for a shifter in general. I shrug it off but still feel uneasy. Never mind, right now, my main focus needs to be putting as much distance away from the rogue and myself before it starts to move again.