

Prologue

Moss glimmers beneath my paws. I'm sprinting on instinct alone, using my heightened senses to quickly dodge branches that have bowed from age and decay. I can't find it in myself to stop running, even while winter's chill holds a burning grip on my muzzle.

One deep inhale catches a scent that is different from the flora and fauna of this forest. Another wolf, one that has been following me for a while now with seemingly no intention of stopping. In truth, I would prefer it not. I want this aroma around me always, grounding me effortlessly to the present.

A yip reverberates to the left of me, pulling me back to the forest by bouncing from each individual tree then soaking into the green earth below. I yip back instinctually. My human nature is now a bystander, watching my lack of alarm with growing interest. I dig my dark front paws into the soft earth, stopping my sprint and using the momentum in my haunches to turn around fully. A light brown wolf skids to a stop in front of me. Our black, cracked snouts touch as we pant in unison. My eyes focus, catching theirs, a deep hue of purple. Suddenly, I cannot breathe.

I've heard stories of wolves whose eyes glow purple on full-moon nights, but have never seen it myself.

The other Were licks the underside of my muzzle up to my nose, a calming gesture that ends up being anything but. Their eyes dance with anticipation, playing a game in which I have yet to learn the rules, but before I can think of my next move, they run. My stiff paws flex against the wet earth before I am turning by all the power in my thick back legs and pursuing their renewed scent with haste. Control is in the favor of my human mind, but all instincts are being driven by the wolf within.

Every stride helps to make out more of the wolf in front of me. Their bushy brown tail, tipped white, heavily bounces every time their large, earth-drenched paws make impact with the forest floor. I could go for a playful bite, tackling them in a mess of light and dark brown fur that would fit beautifully with the long-dead foliage of winter. I pass the lean haunches of my chase and use the advantage to observe their vulnerable midsection. One especially hard bump from my shoulder to their white underbelly and they would be stumbling to the ground. An easy show of dominance, yet my human mind knows I'm not one to show off. I'd rather use my speed and wit to outsmart my opponent. Once I reach the broad head of the wolf, I risk a glance so I can challenge them to a more intense hunt—one that may involve bringing a kill back to the pack—but as our eyes lock, my heart stutters painfully. The excitement I saw only moments before has been replaced by intense fear. We're both halted from the sudden change in their demeanor.

A thick dark mist snakes out from deep within the forest and winds its way around the wolf, enveloping them fully and granting them no room for escape. I am unable to howl or fight off my companions' attacker—I don't even know what I would be fighting against—as the mist pulls the helpless animal towards its blackened origins. The smell of panic is so thick I can taste it. Bitter, sour, burnt. The now vanished wolf is whimpering, barking, and making aborted attempts to howl, begging me to save them, but I can not figure out how. I don't even know where they've gone.

A shadowed figure reveals itself from the opaque line of trees in front of me. It stands tall with broad shoulders, and the dark mist, reeking of danger, brushes along its legs like a pet rubbing against its master. The figure watches me, even as its face is cast in shadows, and it happily radiates the overwhelming stench of death.

A far away howl pierces my ears, activating a primal gear beyond my crafted restraint. My joints lock, I am unable to run, hide, or race to the howl of need. Somehow I know the figure is enjoying this, even with no smirk to give it away. I am forced to watch as the darkened mist searches for me across the forest floor. It reaches my legs first, weaving dark-brown fur with tendrils of cloudy black that create no room for escape. The tendrils then branch higher, moving like poisonous vines to form a vice grip around my midsection. I ready my throat for a warning howl, opening my mouth wide on a deep inhale, but before I can let it out the cold darkness around me gives an unyielding squeeze. My breath is lost as my vision is overcome with a darkened void like death.