

The Were-ling

The earth was soft beneath my feet. Swirly scents of fresh soil, decaying plants, and wet grass tickled my nose. The early morning mist clung to my fur. I crouched behind a sage bush, both to stay out of the light rain, and so that the vole I was stalking didn't see or smell me behind the wall of herbs. Even though the leaves blocked my view, I could still see its aura through my mind-sight. I didn't know where this sight had come from, but it had always been a gift of mine.

I had just lifted a massive paw to move in closer when a loud click and an even louder bang, followed by human voices, echoed through the trees, ringing in my ears. My vole ran off, startled.

"Wolves!" a man yelled. More shots followed the first.

Turning from the enticing scent trail of the now-hidden vole and the emptiness its aura left in my head, I crept over to the metal-link fence that surrounded the human's farmstead and a piece of the forest, separating them from the rest of the world. No other animal had made it past the fence. Well, almost no animal. My father was said to have gotten past, but he disappeared right after I was born. I had only faint memories of his black fur.

Through the metal I could make out the large red barn and the white house. These sat in the middle of a sea of green and beyond that rose the forbidden woods, different from the ones where we lived. A wide path led away from the house, where things called cars came and went. The fence kept me from getting a closer look and from finding out the secrets hidden in their trees. Secrets my father never got the opportunity to share.

Past the fence, I could see plump sheep, an angry man holding a rifle, and a pair of wolves dancing in and out of the trees, skirting outside the fence, opposite from where I stood. It had been a while since I had seen those wolves. They killed my mother and banished me from the clan, all because of my black and white fur, blue streaks in my pelt, and my father's status as a half-blood, what the humans call a werewolf. I resented those wolves, malice coursing through my veins, but I also envied them.

I watched silently as the man shouted curses and fired again and again. The wolves weren't going after the sheep. They were taunting the man. They ran back to the deep

forest, away from the fence, and disappeared into the misty rain. Satisfied, the wet man fired a shot to the air and walked into the house.

I eyed the bleating sheep, the effects of hunger gripping me. I padded along the fence until I reached the place where the wolves had been just moments before. There was an opening in the metal, leading strait to the pasture. I smacked my chops at the thought of a whole sheep instead of the voles I'd had to survive on since banishment.

Then something squished beneath my paw pad. It was one of their footprints, but mine misshaped and ruined it. My paw was much bigger and had five long toes and claws instead of four. My pelt was black and white splotched with those cursed blue markings running down my back. The white had been discolored, either because of a lack of grooming, or because the rain had begun to wash out the blue. My tail and fangs were twice as long as that of any normal wolf's, so was my build. But that didn't do much good, seeing as how weakened I was.

I roared in anger. I was ugly, a half-blood, not a real wolf.

I put my lips together and tried to howl, but all that escaped was a quiet, pitiful whine. I moved toward the hole in the fence, desperate to get away from the prints. My stomach rumbled insistently, and the pain of raw hunger in my chest was enough to make me forget my grief, if only for a moment. I ducked under the fence and struggled to get past. The hole was big enough for a wolf, but much too small for me.

I had just gotten my front paws under me when I felt sharp pain in my lower back. At first I panicked, thinking it was the gunman, but there was no sound. I felt the heat of breath and sting of teeth, not of rifle and bullet.

Wolves, here to torment me more, I thought

I scrabbled under their grasp, but they had me in a kill hold and my self-defenses were on the other side of the fence. "Quiet, devil!" the grey wolf growled behind a mask of my fur. "You will stand before royalty."

Adrenaline pumped through my body. The Wolf King. He had already banished me. What more could he want? It didn't matter. I would shred him! I roared and lashed out with my back legs, kicking my captors off me. My back stung with pain; anger seared through me. I pulled myself back into the forest but the wolves were on me again, making my wounds worse. I may have been bigger, but they had experience that I lacked. I hated them.

“His Majesty knew you would fall for our trap,” a gruffer voice hissed inside my ear. “His Majesty knew the hunger would take over your body. “

I thrashed against them, but it only deepened the punctures on my back. Eventually I gave up and let them guide me back to their leader. Blood darkened my footprints in the mud.

By the time we made it to the wolf camp, my wounds had stopped bleeding, though they still hurt, and the light rain had transformed into a torrent. I was exhausted. The rain pounded hard, but I could make out some of the camp. There were seven different dens, one for each caste of wolf in the pack. In the center was a densely protected den where the king and the prince lived, and where the queen would live, if she were alive.

The two wolves threw me to the forest floor so that the whole camp could look upon my shame. Wolves crowded around me so I could not escape. “*Half-blood!*” “*Were-ling!*” “*Demon!*” I could hear echoes from the crowd, quiet and taunting. I could see mothers shooing their pups away as they begged to see the monster.

Then he appeared. But he didn’t come out as I had expected him: in the absence of his queen, the heir stood beside him. His once magnificent pelt was spattered with grey streaks, but he still stood tall. It even made him shimmer in the rain. But what hadn’t changed were his eyes. It seemed that you could peel layers from his eyes like big, golden onions. On top was the fake wisdom he always wore, but underneath was faux generosity, hatred, anger, and finally, a black heart.

I growled, bared my teeth, and lunged for his throat, but the prince deflected my blow with a simple strike across my muzzle. “Demon!” he snarled.

“Stand down, son. This demon will soon be punished for its crimes,” the king said curtly. “Now, Twila-“

I roared, “How *dare* you call me by that name? It was the name my mother gave me. I prefer were-ling!” I hadn’t said so many words at once in a while.

The prince was quick. He grabbed me by the neck, making me yelp. “Now *were-ling*,” the king continued. “The deer are gone, half the forest lies demolished, and yet you prosper. Why is this, dear?”

“I would hardly call meals of mouse and vole prospering,” I choked. The prince tightened his grip on me. He was almost as big as I was.

"Oh, sweetie, I thought you would perish! I was so worried about you." his voice rose up in that mask of his, and then was gone. "But even after two years, you live on. For two years, the forest has slowly depleted. Therefore... *you must die!*"

The prince greedily sank his teeth into my thin neck fur, but then everything happened in slow motion. I could feel the prince's teeth rip through every layer of me, both skin and soul alike. The surrounding wolves bared their own fangs and joined in. The weight of the entire clan, pups as well, literally rested on my shoulders. Only the king stood above me, his mock kindness completely gone. His shiny, onion eyes glowed with malice.

The pain of what felt like a thousand fangs and claws was unbearable, the feeling of my life being slowly ripped away from my body even worse. But this wasn't the first time they had hurt me. They had pried me from my mother's jaws and killed her. No physical pain could hurt that much.

New anger laced with adrenaline pumped through me. Knowledge of my size came over me. I snapped at a wolf's muzzle and raked my back claws at a chest. I fought until I broke from the death lock of the prince and lunged with all my strength at the king's neck.

I had only one thrilling moment of power before my prize was wrenched out of my grasp. The wolf prince stood over his father protectively. The king sucked in air, one breath at a time. I was doing the same.

I growled, "I must kill the one who destroyed everything important to me. Get out of the way."

The prince met my anger with his. "And I'll not let you kill *my* parent." I felt the wind stir around my face as his maw snapped shut a breath's distance from my face.

"No, my son!" the king yelled. "Run! Hide! She has demon energy. She will use it to kill my only heir." Without any question at all the prince bolted away from the camp like a bird in flight.

I didn't even hesitate before my teeth tore into the king's grey pelt. Before I bit him, I hadn't realized how frail he was. I knew he was old, but I didn't think he was this old. I quickly pushed him down, easy because of my white-hot anger.

"I have to hear you say it. I saw you kill my mother. Admit it, now."

"It... wasn't... me. It was... the Wolf Prince," his gold eyes were intense and frightened, nothing else. It dawned on me. It had been the prince who killed her. I had been too young to remember the face. He was no real prince; he was a coward.

Old fool, unmasking his son.

I only had a moment of shock before I took off in hot pursuit, the frail king hobbling along behind me. The prince was healthy and strong. I was not. But I held demon energy, fueled by anger. And I was invincible.

I could feel the prince's aura in the forest, just like the vole, and I could see it in my mind like a map. He was heading to the gorge. The rain was a pounding beat like a drum, but I barely acknowledged it. Desperation boiled in my heart when the king's aura also entered my mind-sight so that it mixed with the prince's.

"NO!" I howled, and for the first time it sounded good. My lungs burned inside my chest, my empty stomach ached. But I would have my revenge. I listened to the king's protests and insults, but they just invigorated me, making me stronger. I forced myself faster until the king's screams were swept away into the rain. I urged myself on.

Go a mile a minute, a mile a minute.

I burst out of the forest and onto the rocky, sandy soil around the gorge where no plants could grow. As swift as any animal could move, I threw all of my weight against the Wolf Prince's body. Then I watched him fall.

Once again every wolf in the clan surrounded me, this time at the bottom of the gorge. The crazed pride and energy I had felt were gone. Only grey confusion remained. I looked down at the former prince. I had not killed him, but I had done worse. His wounds were too great for him to run, let alone be king. Without pity, I jogged away from the crowd. The prince had given me wounds as great when my mother was killed, now I had given them back. I did not feel any better though.

I ran until I made it to where my half-blood father had supposedly run away, or perhaps died. The fence. The hole. Without further hesitation, I ducked under and kept going.

He must've come through here. That hole is too big for any of the clan wolves.

I fled into the forbidden forest where I could see what the king had been talking about. Trees and plants were sick and dying, smog was thick and heavy in the air.

Did I do this?

I loved the trees. They were my only friends in my life of solitude. I walked on, missing my green home as I coughed on smoke. Then I reached the top of a large hill. I sucked in a choking breath. The land in front of me had been stripped bare. A smog-spitting structure sat in the middle of it all. To my left was the healthy green forest: the barn, the hills, and the gorge. To my right was a human camp, where they milled about, oblivious to what was happening to the world around them.

There was no place for me to go. I stood there for a while. The rain here strung my skin and made my eyes water. It felt like years later when I heard a voice. "You!" it shouted.

I spun around to find the two wolves that had attacked me.

"The prince's injuries are too significant. As the one who inflicted them, you are now the Wolf Princess in his place," one muttered. They bowed. The very ones who had tried to kill me.

How dare they?

"Aren't I a demon? A half-blood? The one who caused this devastation? Or did the king make that up too?" I asked. I tried not to let the hope rise in my voice.

They exchanged a glance and nodded their heads. "You are a half-blood, your Highness," Gruff voice said. "But you did not cause this. The king blamed you because he needed a simple answer for his wolves. You were an easy target. Nothing can change who your father was, and the clan still has its superstitious beliefs." He added, "It will be hard for them to have you as their leader. Forgive them."

"Why should I forgive them for what they did to me and my family? They ruined my life. I do not wish to lead them."

They exchanged another glance. "Why wouldn't you want to lead the ones who ruined your life?"

I was taken aback by their response to my words. Control them? The idea did seem appealing...I could do the same that they did to me. I gazed at the building, tossing the idea of being the Wolf Princess, highest rank before king and queen, around in my head. I also

thought about staying near the humans, learning from them. I could run away from my past, from the wolves. And, if he was still alive, find my father.

I took a deep breath and spoke. "Why can't I turn into a full human or a full wolf? Why this form that is in between?"

"You are still of a juvenile age. Being five years old, you would only be a child in human form, unable to control your power. Humans live longer than wolves," Grey informed.

Gruff nodded. "Your powers will come to you when you reach ten."

I considered this. Humans didn't have a reputation for being kind, then again neither did wolves. If I joined the wolves, I would be part of a tribe again and share real food and shelter, but they would only reluctantly welcome me. And I didn't want to deal with the old Wolf King as my new father. I could destroy them from the inside, but I would still be betraying my mother by spending any time with them.

But then there was the problem of the pollution and human rubbish. Could I help them? Would they even listen to me if I tried? Would someone else help, if I didn't?

I had to face it. I was neither human nor wolf.

But I wasn't a demon.

"What if I could be both?" I wondered out loud. The wolves looked around, confused. I pressed on. "What if humans and wolves could live together again?"

Grey scowled. "You would consider *that*? They would kill us before we got the chance. They're foul."

I gave them both a very wolfish grin. My mind was made up.

From then on I ruled the wolves, but I did it in kindness. I forgave them as best I could. I tried to forget their teeth in my back. And soon, they began to trust me. The king died only three weeks after the former prince was wounded. The prince disappeared about the same time. We still don't know where he went. My rule was lonely, but at least the food was good. I spent every free moment I had exploring the sick woods, trying to figure out a way to help the humans, find my father, and heal the forest. I let my life drag on like that for five more years.

I hadn't realized it was my tenth birthday until I started to feel sick. Before anyone noticed, I slipped away to the sick woods, my private haven. The pain started in my paws, claws morphed into fingertips. My muzzle smoothed into a human nose. I stumbled over to a nearby stream just barely clear enough to see my reflection. I gasped. Instead of an ugly half-blood, I saw a little human girl with crystal blue eyes and equally blue stripes in her black and white hair. I growled at her, but it sounded different. I was astonished. I had finally changed.

"It is hard to get used to, but I will help you," a voice spoke up behind me. Gasping, I turned around. There was a human man there, tall and dark, with a blue mark tattooed on his cheek. He flashed me a wide grin, like that of a wolf's. Then it was gone. "Of course you wouldn't recognize me. You were only a newborn pup when I left." He added softly, "Your mother would be proud of you."

His words were more of a shock to me than the sudden change of my appearance. He had been waiting for me to change, as I had been waiting for him to come home. It had to be him. Everything down to his black fur was the same as this human's hair.

"Dad?" I asked tentatively. My human voice was light and soft, and my heart beat faster when he nodded.