

SLEEP
LIKE
DEATH

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CHAPTER 1

It is easier to track an animal—or a person—if it is bleeding.

Drops of crimson in the snow are easy to follow. Blood on fallen autumn leaves or the earth tones of a harvest forest floor is harder to spot but still easier than relying on footprints alone. The method works for tracking people, too. An arrow through the thigh or the flank is sure to leave a trail I can follow.

Tracking is an art. Huntress can spot a leaf bent ever so slightly out of place from a distance. She can tell the weight and age of a bear, a wolf, or a wild boar by leaning close to its tracks and measuring the impression with her fingertips. Her tactics don't work as well on people, which is why I am mostly disinterested. The things I put my mind to must be in service to my true purpose. If the lesson is not shortening the path between myself and my enemy, what is the point? Huntress

has assured me that I will eventually learn to savor the hunt. In my mind, the only way that happens is when I have *him* in my sights.

“Eve,” says Huntress. “I need you to focus.”

Focus.

Easier said than done when I’m lying under a darkening sky, across a scattering of jagged rocks and damp earth, trying to press myself flat so the gathering of deer in the clearing ahead of us can’t see me or the arrow I have trained on them. I prefer the blade, but Huntress insists that I improve upon my skills with the bow. A part of me believes it is because she would prefer not to feel her blade scraping the bones beneath the wounded flesh. She likes the distance a bow provides. I have no such reservations.

Huntress is happy I’ve managed to track the deer to the clearing, but I haven’t been honest with her. I’ve had help. I can still hear him, my gentle helper, as I lie still—the sound is less like a voice and more like a low hum that works its way up my back and settles at the nape of my neck. Each delicate intonation contains a meaning—fear, curiosity, happiness—I know them all. I’ve been listening to the sounds of the forest my entire life.

My helper is pacing on the other side of the meadow, just beyond the tree line. He has brought me here. We have always had an understanding, he and I.

“Draw back the bow and bag us a deer to take back to your mother,” Huntress whispers. “I’m tired of lying in the dirt.”

I notch my arrow and feel the muscles across my back

tense as I pull the bowstring toward my shoulder. I breathe in, listening to the beat of my own heart. My arrow will hit its target if I let it fly between breaths, between beats.

The deer's slender neck is fully exposed. It has wandered just away from the others, but that is enough.

One.

Two.

Three.

I let go and my arrow hits its mark with a soft, wet thud. The animal stumbles and then falls on its side. I stand, shaking off the dirt and damp, and walk into the clearing. The other deer scatter, leaving their fallen friend behind. I kneel at the animal's side and put her out of her misery with my freshly sharpened dagger.

"Good," says Huntress. "We cannot allow them to suffer, and we do not take more than we can use."

"There are some who should suffer," I say.

Huntress pushes a few errant strands of her graying hair away from her face. "That thinking will do you no good." She strides up to me and puts her finger in my shoulder. "Your head should be clear. Revenge, bitterness—arrogance. They'll rot you from the inside."

I sheath my knife and sling my bow across my back.

"You think I'm arrogant?" I ask.

She huffs and slaps me hard on the shoulder. "*I know you are.*"

Huntress pulls a length of twine from her bag and ties the deer's legs together so we can transport it back to Castle Veil.

As she busies herself, I spot my helpful friend as he emerges from the underbrush.

His fur is shining and black as the evening sky, as are his wide curious eyes. His tail and each of his four paws are tipped with red. The hum in my head grows louder as he approaches. He is curious. I breathe deep, steadying the beat of my heart.

I mean you no harm.

The fox's ears lay flat as he angles his head down in a sort of bow. I tap the ground with the sole of my boot, and he scurries off.

Huntress watches him leave and then glances at me with a look of utter disappointment in her eyes.

"Please tell me you didn't," she sighs, rubbing her temple. "You used the fox to lead us here? Were you even trying to track the deer at all?"

"I tried," I say. "It's harder than it looks."

Huntress straightens up and faces me, her expression pinched. "You have to learn to do it on your own. You must be the one to do the work. You can't cheat every time, Eve."

I don't see why not. I can hear the unique signature of any animal. The hum from the fox is like a twinge behind my neck. Birds are like melodic whistling. Horses are low and resonant. Each animal has a voice that I can hear and understand, each and every one of them. I don't see it as cheating in the way Huntress does. If she had this ability, I know she would use it just as I do.

A rumble ripples through the cloud cover, and there is a loud crack in the distance. The air around me is suddenly

alive, and the pitter-patter of rain sounds on the leaves and branches. Within moments, the sky opens up and we are stuck in a torrential downpour.

“We got the deer, didn’t we?” I ask. “That’s all that matters.”

“It is not all that matters,” Huntress says, her tone clipped. “I’m in awe of your gifts, Eve, you know that, but you can’t just—”

A loud crack splits the overcast sky, and the forest is lit up like midday for a brief moment as lightning arcs over the canopy.

“Wonderful,” Huntress grumbles.

She quickly slides her walking stick through the deer’s legs and motions for me to grab the other end so that we can hoist it up and carry it home.

I reach for the stick when something—a distinct rumble—reverberates in my bones. It is not the thunder or the crack of lightning, but another animal’s call. This is only the second time in my life I’ve heard it. A shudder of fear ripples through me, but I deny it and tightly grasp my dagger.

“Get behind me,” I say.

“What is it?” Huntress asks, panic invading her voice. She glances around, then moves just behind my right shoulder without another word.

Only I can hear the animal’s voice. It sounds in my head, getting louder as the seconds pass, and when I finally see it through the sheeting rain, it is too late to run or hide, though I would have done neither.

Huntress inhales sharply as the wolf steps into the clearing

in front of us. Common wolves wander in and out of Queen's Bridge often enough that people know to avoid them or come prepared with a weapon when traveling through the woods. I know their call, but this is something different. It is not a common wolf at all. It is a dire wolf. A giant of its kind, lethal to nearly anyone or anything that has the unfortunate luck of crossing its path.

Its eyes are level with mine as it moves deeper into the clearing. If it were to stand on its hind legs it would be taller than me by an entire length of my own body. In the rain it is a hulking, monstrous shadow, with yellow eyes and long glinting teeth.

We came to the forest to hunt deer and pheasant. Huntress and I are both armed but not heavily enough to defend ourselves against a wolf this size. Huntress takes a step back and the animal crouches low, pinning its ears back, baring its wicked fangs.

"Do not move," I say in a tone so low it is barely a whisper.

The wolf growls and the sound overpowers even the rain. The wolf sniffs at our kill, and once it has the scent of blood in its nose it becomes protective of the carcass. Claiming it as its own, it now turns to me and settles back on its haunches, preparing to launch itself directly at me.

My heart beats like a bird in a cage as I let my gaze drift to the sky. Thunder rumbles in the distance, and I slowly extend my arm above my head. I open my fingers as the wolf snarls. The massive creature launches itself at me as an arc of white-hot lightning slices through the sky and finds its way

to my outstretched hand. There is always pain when I harness lightning, but I've learned to welcome the shock of it. It reminds me that I am alive and possessed of something more powerful than almost anything or anyone in Queen's Bridge.

I grip the bolt, and as it disconnects itself from the sky it becomes a weapon made of heat and light. A nearly weightless sword, conjured from the storm itself. It is a weapon unlike any other in existence, and it will exist for only this moment. A shudder runs through my body as my skin is raised to gooseflesh.

I pull it through the air as the wolf lands just a few paces ahead of me and digs its paws into the muddy ground, skittering to a full stop. The hum of its unique voice falters inside my head. We stare into each other's eyes. It is a magnificent creature, but I need to get home to my mother. I am all she has left, and I will not be separated from her for any reason.

The wolf prepares to lunge again, but as its gaze drifts to the shining blade, it reconsiders. It sniffs at the deer one more time before skulking off into the underbrush. I don't move until its voice is gone from my head.

Huntress rests her hand on my shoulder, and I open my death grip on the sword. It dissolves into the air with a wispy puff of black smoke as the rain continues to sheet down around us.

"I thought we were in trouble," Huntress says.

"We were," I say as I try to catch my breath. "I haven't seen a wolf that big in years and certainly not anywhere near here."

"There has been one lurking near Rotterdam," Huntress

says. "I've heard rumors it is hunting people."

"Gossip," I say. "Let's get the deer home."

Huntress nods, and we begin the long trek through the western forest of Queen's Bridge toward home.
