



## **EXCERPT: (First chapter)**

“Why do I only break the rules when I’m with you idiots?”

“Or friends,” Falcon offered with a shrug, “you c’ld call us friends.”

Wolf rolled his ocean eyes. He sat across from me, still and sure like the moon above us, dressed in a cotton tunic and black pants. Falcon, no more than a foot to my right, wore an elaborately embroidered top with caramel thread that matched the color of his eyes. Sparks were escaping the fire, up to the diamond-studded sky, as another midnight breeze tickled the exposed skin of my shoulders. I could hear the gentle, rolling waves just beyond the trees. Silent, I shifted my weight onto my heels, watching the crackle of red-orange flames move like the stormy waves of an ocean: passionate, powerful.

“You ready?” I murmured to them both.

Dazzling me with an affirming smile, Falcon nodded—but honestly, this was his plan to travel to the beach tonight. Still hesitant, I didn’t move from where I was, my belted, linen dress waving only slightly in the wind. Wolf encouraged me with a single flick of his eyes.

“Relax, Fox,” Falcon assured me with a wink. “If somethin’ jumps out the bushes, I’ll kill it ‘fore it e’er gets near you.”

Wolf lifted an eyebrow and let out a gruff laugh. He brushed his hand over the head of his water drum. “What’re you gonna do—charm it t’ death?”

Falcon passed him a bold, yet subtly icy, look. “Oi, don’t tempt me!”

“C’n we do what we came t’ do?” I begged them, elbowing Falcon in the side for good measure. As if in reply, the beating of Wolf’s steady drumming filled the air, and Falcon’s pan pipe accompanied the rhythm. I listened intently. This was the best Wolf and Falcon had ever played; both instruments were synchronized to perfection. I let my lips bend into a smile, and my feet spun my body around the flames of the fire, tambourine in hand. My mind began to drift, my arms bent gracefully, and I twirled in dizzying circles. I slowed and finished in a beautiful stance.

Standing up straight, tying my small tambourine to my waist, I breathlessly asked, “How’d I do? Scale o’ one t’ ten?”

Falcon cheered, throwing his pan pipe to the ground to applaud me. “Ten!”

“Eight,” Wolf stated.

Falcon glared. “She was fantastic!”

“She stumbled on her prep for her turn,” Wolf shrugged. I blushed furiously as he added, “Least I’m honest.”

I swung around to glower at Falcon, “You ’eren’t bein’ honest?”

“I was tryin’ t’ be nice,” Falcon offered halfheartedly as he doused the fire.

Suddenly, a foreign gurgling noise, encompassed us like it had escaped from the mouth of a foul beast. Our bickering ceased in one fearful instant.

“What was that?” I whispered.

We turned our heads to the noise, alert and frozen like statues.

We waited.

Altogether, the forest went silent, save for a breeze that dampened us to the bone as it passed. Nothing happened. Nothing moved. I held my breath, my heart pulsing against my ribcage. I watched as Wolf turned to look me in the eyes.

A piercing screech split the night.

“Run!” Wolf commanded us.

Stumbling from our bonfire, we shot off in one direction and didn’t stop. All of us ran with the stride of our spirits: Wolf covered ground so quickly, he was a blur, Falcon looked as if he were about to take off into the air, and I sprinted under, over, and sideways through the trees, as cunning as a fox.

“What in Elorah’re those?” Falcon hollered, glancing behind him. I preferred not to look. I knew wild game roamed these areas but never predators.

“Knew we sh’ldn’t’ve snuck out!” Wolf shouted across me to Falcon. As we ran, flashes of moonlight flickered on his exasperated expression.

“Oi, so it’s my fault?” Falcon exclaimed. It had been Falcon’s idea. But then again, I had nagged Wolf for his reluctance.

“We’re talkin’ ‘bout this now?” I yelled. I panted as the sweat collected on my forehead. “C’n it wait ‘til our lives aren’t at stake?”

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I knew something was close on my heels. I risked a good glance at one and witnessed a disgusting, hulking, two-legged thing that had the advantage of both size and mass over my toned frame. It had black, coarse skin with patches of uneven hair. Their hideous layers of teeth and sharp, finger-like claws glinted beneath the moon’s light. There were two of them behind me. My eyes drifted to my blind side, and the creature nearest my path drove me farther and farther away from both Wolf and Falcon, singling me out.

Realization hit me hard. They were after me.

I frantically searched for my weapon yet felt nothing but the soft leather of my beaded belt. My tambourine clambered against my hip. Why hadn’t I brought my dagger? Stupid! We all knew it wasn’t safe going out of the ravine, but we longed for freedom, for space to do what we pleased. Our leader seldom offered that. Freedom on his terms, we called it: the price of being a Leathen citizen.

My heart started to rise in my throat, and my feet slowed on the rough terrain, catching and stumbling on nearly every tree root. As my vision blurred, my lungs struggled to get oxygen to my limbs. The creatures were within arm’s length of me. I knew I wasn’t going to make it to the ravine. I had never run this hard in my entire life.

I possessed speed but not stamina like Wolf and Falcon.

All of a sudden, the figure of a creature lunged in front of me. I skidded in the soil and planted my feet just in time. Its body was human—somewhat—but oddly deformed and blackened. Its face seem twisted into the form of a short snout, and its breath struggled out its mouth, like sharp rocks lived in its lungs. It made a terrifying, guttural noise, and I gasped, flinching back. I locked onto another pair of dark glowing eyes near the first that drilled deep into my soul. I panicked, trying to find a gap in the huddle of creatures forming.

I backed into the stiff bark of a tree. My body quivered. I think I recognized these creatures. I’d only seen them once before. The memory of my father’s mangled corpse flickered in the back

of my mind, and gooseflesh ran up my spine. I was six years old, shivering in the cold, watching these same creatures crouch over his body.

Promptly, I spun and scoured the knotted bark, up in the branches before the creatures could reach me. My eyes searched the tree frantically. Nearby hung a broken branch as wide as my arm. My fingers seized it, my foot on its base to steady myself, and yanked it free. I weighed it in my hand, trying to find my balance as the creatures began howling at me.

They were scrambling up the tree, finding strange footholds in the trunk that weren't there when I needed them. Lifting my arms above my head, I used all my might to thrust down the branch. It slammed into one of the mutts, sending him hurdling to the ground where I heard a sickening crack.

My breath caught in my throat, and I scrambled up even higher, the creatures merely a branch below me. A sturdy vine tangled around my arm, and I gripped it—maybe it could save my life. I turned to swing off the tree when a clawed hand clutched my ankle. I let out a yelp as I swung from the tree, the creature coming with me. I lost my momentum almost instantly, and I glanced down as the animal thrashed at my other leg. It swiped back and forth until I propelled my leg back and kicked it square in the snout. With a grotesque wail, the creature tumbled to the ground and lay still by his fallen comrade.

My foot seized the fork between two branches in the adjacent tree. Ripping my tambourine from my belt, I covered its cymbals and made my way down the second tree. Something sharp caught my calf, and I hissed out a curse. I darted through the sulking trees and finally grinned through my weariness. I could see the ravine just breaking through the trees.

Suddenly, something jerked my good leg, I lost my grip, and my world flipped upside down. I tried to reach the rope knotted tightly around my ankle, but I just dangled there, spinning helplessly as I watched the silhouettes of the creatures run underneath me and disperse through the trees. I'd fallen into a trap set by our own scouts.

Though it'd saved me from the beasts, Falcon and Wolf would have no hint as to where to find me. My head pounded.

The quiet lingered for a long time.

"Falcon...!" I called into the night.

I received the hoot of an owl in return.

There couldn't have been anyone around for miles. The boys had probably escaped deep into the ravine by now. But I wasn't going to hang here all night either. I was better than this.

Straining to reach my ankle, I found I couldn't grasp the rope. Instead, it spun me around. With a huff of breath, I stretched back up, only to come back down more discouraged. No weapons. No friends. I shook my tambourine defeatedly, yet the quiet of the trees seemed to soak up its resounding clangs. The canopy lay far above me. My options were rather limited.

To my surprise, I heard the snap of a twig, and I swiveled my head toward the ground. My eyes searched the darkened landscape but found nothing.

"Wolf?" I called in a wary voice.

Instead, I saw Falcon step out of the trees and into the moonlight. I let out a sigh of relief at the sight of his round, comforting face. In a flash, he spotted me and scaled up the closest neighboring tree without a second thought. A moment later, we were eye level.

"Swing!" he asserted quietly.

"Already on it," I said, shifting my body weight back and forth. Back and forth, until finally Falcon grasped my waist. He held me to him and helped get my ankle out of the confines of the

rope. When I detached myself, I found that his arms were holding me close to him so I wouldn't fall. I gasped, catching my breath, right-side up at last.

"How'd you know where t' find me?"

"You called, didn't you? Not t' mention your tambourine's a bit clangy..."

With a roll of my eyes, I criticized bitterly, "I didn't realize the scouts'd set traps outside o' the ravine."

"We only 'ave a few," he said, defensive. "Some o' the best pigs're out here in the Wilds."

"'N' you hang 'em?" He shrugged, and I confessed in a more serious tone, "Thought you both went t' the ravine 'n' left me."

"I'd ne'er do that," he murmured.

I frowned—Wolf wouldn't either.

Falcon led me down, our feet barely making a noise when we landed on the forest floor. Falcon studied my expression, holding my face in his sturdy hands. I glanced once into his bright, copper eyes. My heart thumped unevenly, the adrenaline still coursing through my blood. What was he doing?

"How're you, Fox?" I heard Wolf murmur, appearing next to us with a quiet agility I adored.

My startled eyes met his piercing blue irises, and I replied in a small voice, "Fine."

Heart drumming, I prayed that Wolf couldn't distinguish my blushing cheeks, but my light brown skin probably hid it well. Another screech pierced the calm, and we all took off again. Relief flooded through my veins as Wolf ran close to me, taking heed to watch my back. Knowing we had little time to dwell, I thrust my feelings away.

We all could hear the sounds of the creatures re-emerging from the trees and approaching our heels. We dashed out of the Wilds, and, minutes later, the trees began to thin. All three of us were scaling down to the bottom of the ravine. The river near here rushed with a raging sound, but we could hear the creatures screech and spread out along the top of the ravine. We clung to the rock in the dark, holding our breath, until we heard them depart. They weren't climbing down. My heart ringing in my ears, I strained to hear. Their hoarse breathing faded away, and they left.

"Oi, 'ave you e'er seen anythin' like those things?" My voice accompanied the dark, just a breathless whisper. "That was too close for comfort."

"Really, you think?" Falcon asked so sarcastically that I cracked a smile, "I mean, considerin' that you're just hangin' in a tree, I'd say we made it with time t' spare. No risks taken. I'd give the overall experience a six."

I scowled at him, but soon, I laughed and he smiled stupidly. We weren't loud, but I felt better... way better. My heart rate returned back to normal as I turned to Wolf, a lingering grin still on my lips. Wolf didn't smile back. Our laughter died out.

"Oi, Eliot, c'n't you've a good laugh for once?" Falcon icily remarked.

Eliot was Wolf's birth name. His brow lowered. No one ever used our real names anymore.

"There's nothin' I find funny 'bout what just happened..." Wolf stated, his magnetic eyes seeming to flash with fury in the little moonlight that shone down here. He made his way onto the man-made walkway within the canyon's walls, a look of increasing fury on his brow. They'd been quarrelling so much these past few days, and I was beginning to lose my temper over their bickering.

"So?" Falcon exclaimed, following swiftly behind him. "Don't mean you've t' spoil it for everyone else just 'cause you think that."

“I think that ‘cause it’s true!” Wolf said in dry retaliation. “Fox almost got killed by those things, ‘n’ you’re standin’ here laughin’ like it’s a farce. I’m sorry, but do our lives suddenly mean nothin’...?”

“Really, what else do you think ‘bout, Wolf? ‘Cause it seems that all you e’er think ‘bout’s yourself!” Falcon’s eyes were dark and his frame rigid. All joking had faded from sight.

In a swift movement, I placed my hand on Wolf’s shoulder because I knew he would say something he would regret. Then, my other hand restricted Falcon’s arm, his shoulders unbelievably tense.

What was wrong with them? They’d never fought like this before! We had always treated each other well. Feeling the muscles in Wolf’s shoulder relax under my fingers, I demanded, “Oi, c’n you quit tryin’ t’ take the other’s head off?”

“Maybe if he’d—”

“Shh!” I hushed them. I could hear something, but uncertain of where it resonated from. An echo followed.

Something lit up in Falcon’s eyes, and he snapped, “Get d—”

That’s when I heard the distant crunch of leaves and a whiz. Falcon dropped to the ground.

“Falcon...?” I exclaimed, terrified. I lifted his head only to find him unconscious. Wolf withdrew something from Falcon’s neck and twirled it in his fingers, but I barely noticed. I hovered over Falcon’s chest to hear if he was breathing. Very gently, I felt his forehead then his clammy neck.

“Fox,” Wolf murmured, but I didn’t dare look away from Falcon’s flushed cheeks. I maneuvered him into a comfortable position in my lap, brushing his brown locks from his face.

“What?”

Wolf lifted something up to show me. I stared at the red and yellow feathers at the top of a dart, baffled. Struggling for coherence, I stammered, “But... those’re our sleepin’ darts.”