



Wayfare:
Abandon

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Chapter 1

It was a soft, calm night. The forest was asleep and alive with the sounds of the night. Crickets chirped and owls hooted, and the stars twinkled overhead. A thin sliver of moon hung between the glittering pinpricks of light, shining brightly enough to light the world below. All was quiet and peaceful.

Suddenly, a brilliant beam of light struck down in the center of an open glade with a mighty explosion! Startled birds and animals of the night fled from the commotion. Brush and foliage too close to the light set afire.

But as quickly as this light arrived, it vanished. The brilliant beam was gone and the explosion was abruptly muffled, eerily so. The woods were deathly silent, punctuated by the crackle of smouldering branches and grass. Where the great light struck, it left behind a crater.

A shadow inside the upheaved earth began to move. With the scorched earth and burned plants, nothing should have been alive there. Nevertheless, the small shadow crawled out, groggily. After a few minutes, it traversed over the rubble. The shadow shook itself off and looked around before wandering into the forest, lost.

Seven Years Later

Magus Carter was late. This was not the first time the nineteen-year-old had been late, and he knew it. Ducking and dodging between various travelers, vendors, and passersby, Magus made his way to the shop.

He stopped at the door to Barclay's Printing Shoppe. The young man took a moment to breathe and compose himself, straightening his shirt and standing up. Knowing what he had to face inside, Magus took one final breath and strode on in.

"Mr. Barclay," Magus said, surprised. The proprietor stood behind the front counter with an almost expectant look on his face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Barclay," Magus continued, "it won't happen again. I'll stay behind a few extra hours and clean up, close shop for you."

"That won't be necessary, Carter," the burly owner spoke and shook his head slowly. He reached up a hand and brushed his beard, "you won't need to stay extra hours. And I know this won't happen again."

Confused, Magus glanced past Barclay to see the people working in the back. One, two, three, four five people were working. There were only five aprons Barclay kept for his workers. And there was a new face Magus did not recognize. His shoulders fell as realization set in.

"That's the third time this month," Barclay continued. "You don't work here anymore. I've no need for you. So unless you're here to buy, get out." The burly shop owner turned and left the counter, heading for the back.

Dejected, Magus departed the shop and sullenly wandered back home. The sun beat down overhead as noontime slipped on by. It was sometime in the afternoon, almost evening, when he made it back home.

He looked up at the wood timbers and ceramic tiles that made up his home. Somehow, it all looked bigger, looming over him as he dreaded to tell the news to his parents. Stepping up to the door, Magus eased it open. He peeked around and listened before breathing a sigh of relief. No one was home.

No one except a little fox that came scampering up to him in excitement. "Aeya," a smile broke out on his face at the sight of his cream-colored pet. She leapt clean off the floor and into his arms to lick his face.

"Hey, hey, easy girl," Magus grinned, "did you really miss me that much? I was only gone for a few hours." The fox responded with a small whine and wagged her tail happily.

With a scoff and a smirk, he nuzzled the back of Aeya's neck, "Want to go outside? To the stream?" She gave an enthusiastic yip and leapt out of his arms, bounding out the open door and only pausing to make sure he was coming. It was uncanny how that fox always seemed to understand him and those around.

They went down the road a ways before turning off and wandering off into the woods that surrounded the town of Wygram. Some way into the forest, Magus and his pet came to a small stream that wound its way around the town and connected to the river. Magus settled down under an old oak and watched as Aeya went to the bank. He couldn't help but smile as she splashed the water, trying to catch one of the many small fish that swam there.

After a few minutes of futile splashing in the stream, the fox gingerly shook her paws dry. She eyed the fish swimming by before trotting up and lying on the ground next to Magus.

He reached over and gently stroked her back. "What am I going to do?" the young man sighed, "I'm almost twenty and I haven't been able to hold a job in three years. The longest I've had a work was four months."

Magus stared at the water and listened as it softly trickled by. "I have only a few months left to make a name for myself. Right now, they'll call me unreliable. Lazy."

His eyelids started to feel heavy and he was drifting off. "No one will... think I can... do anything," his eyes closed and he fell asleep on the bank, under the old oak, hand on his pet.

Chapter 2

"Magus? Magus, wake up," a soft voice spoke. In his slumber, Magus felt something press and rub against the side of his chest. The voice spoke again, "It's getting late."

Groggily, Magus lifted his heavy eyelids. Lying there by his side was a beautiful woman. Dazed and confused, he rubbed his eyes and looked again. The figure of the lady was gone. There was only Aeya, rubbing her head against his side.

The young man stretched and gave a moan. "For a second there, I thought you were some lady," he rubbed behind the fox's ears and she wagged her tail. Magus looked around and saw the shadows, "It's getting late. We should head home."

The fox got up from her spot with her master and they headed for home. A gloom came over Magus's face on the way. *What am I going to tell them?* he thought. Before he could think anything else, Aeya leapt up into his arms.

The fox licked his face before clambering onto his shoulders to loaf. Magus couldn't help but smile and rub her head. In the six years he had her, she always seemed to know when and how to cheer him up.

The lamplighter was making his rounds by the time Magus got to the front door. He irresistibly glanced across the street. There, sitting and staring out the window was the old tailor, Mr. Tines.

At his age, Mr. Tines had few customers. Most of his time was spent staring out the windows of his shop and home, in addition to frequenting the taverns and pubs in Wygram. With all the extra time on his hands, Tines had taken up nosing for a hobby. He proved quite proficient as a noser, many folk in town knew to come to him if they wanted to hear the latest gossip.

Mr. Tines watched down his long pointed nose as Magus walked up to the door of his house. The droll expression on his gaunt face unnerved the young man whenever he saw it. His dark eyes bored holes into wherever his gaze fell.

It was only after Magus was inside that he breathed a sigh of relief, shaking off the creepiness of the old tailor. *Why does he always do that?* he asked himself. The smell of dinner filled his nose. The old coot didn't matter now, Magus was safe at home. Or, at least he was relatively safe. He only hoped no one had stopped by Barclay's shop today.

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Magus slept well that night. He was relieved his new status of unemployment had not been brought up over the evening meal. The sound of the front door slamming shut woke him. He yawned and stretched, pulling himself out of bed and to the window. He was just in time to catch sight of his younger brothers going up the road, into town. A few blinks later, and Magus realized it was mid-morning and he had the place to himself.

Giving a smile, he turned around from the window... only to find a strange woman lying on his bed!

Magus stifled a gasp of shock, clamping his hand over his mouth as he stared. She was a strange creature. Although she had the figure of a woman about his age, she was coated in soft, cream-colored fur. Triangular ears poked out from her hair on the top of her head, and a muzzle protruded from her face. Though she had human hands, the feet were more like paws. And, most surprisingly of all, from the base of the strange woman's spine flowered a luscious mattress of tails, eleven by Magus's count, each tipped white.

The young man took a step back as her eyelids slowly opened. He watched her stretch and rub her eyes as she awoke. She gave a wide, toothy yawn and spoke, "Good morning, Magus." Her voice was soft and light.

Magus blinked a couple times before he responded. "W-who are you? And what are you doing here?" he asked in a hushed voice. "How do you know my name?"

The woman sat up, tilting her head to one side as her ears perked toward him. "Don't you recognize me, master?" she replied. "It's me... Aeya."

Chapter 3

"Aeya?" Magus said incredulously.

The strange fox of a woman nodded. "Don't you recognize me, master?" she repeated.

His eyes moved down from her own and came to a stop at her neck. Sitting there was a black, leather collar. Magus stared at the accessory, the only thing the being was actually wearing. "Aeya? Is it really you?" he asked.

She gave a small nod. Magus took a step closer to her, "But... how? Why do you look like this? How are you talking?"

Aeya shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she answered, "I just learned how to do it yesterday."

Magus took another step closer and reached out a hand to the woman that claimed to be his pet. He touched her collar, then let his fingers drift up her neck to rub behind her ear. It felt exactly like the fox he knew and cared for. She smiled at his touch and leaned into his hand, the mass of tails swayed gracefully.

Finally, Magus was convinced, "Aeya?"

"Yes?" he eyes looked to him even as she pressed into his hand.

"It really is you."

"Mmhmm," she nodded as he took his hand off. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah," he said, more relaxed, "I just never imagined such a thing to be possible."

"I didn't know this was possible, either," Aeya swung her legs over the side of Magus's bed. Placing her padded feet on the ground, she stood up. She wobbled for a second before falling forward into Magus. The young man caught her in his arms and she gave him a sheepish smile, "I didn't think I could walk on two legs, too."

A smile started to come over Magus's face. "Come on, girl," he helped her up, keeping a hand on to help her balance. "Let's get breakfast."

Chapter 4

They made their way downstairs and to the larder. The young man took a couple of hard rolls baked yesterday and two helping of jerked meat. He then peaked out the front window, "We ought to go in the woods. No telling when someone will be back. But I can't let anyone see you."

As he turned back from the glass, Magus saw Aeya sitting beside him, back in her fox form. She wagged her lone tail, ready to go outside again. "Well that helps," Magus said flatly before opening the door.

The two slipped outside and made for the woods, like the day before. Once they were out of sight from the last building, Aeya changed into her human form and started to practice walking on two legs. With Magus's help, the fox-woman was walking on her own by the time they made it to the stream.

As they sat down on the bank to eat, Magus couldn't help but notice the white tips of her tails had turned to a hue of light green. "Aeya," he asked between bites, "why are your tails green?"

The fox-woman turned to look behind her, seeing the multitude of green-tipped tails swaying calmly behind her. "I don't know, I just feel happy, I guess," Aeya answered with a smile.

They spent the next couple hours talking. Magus was fascinated by his pet. She stretched out on the grass as they talked. For the most part, Aeya only remembered being Magus's pet for almost six years now. She also admitted to understanding the human language for some time. That explained her uncanny manner.

Magus could see that she hardly had a care in the world. Aeya was content to be his pet, caring for his wellbeing just as much as he had cared for hers over the years. Rolling over, she looked to Magus, "Master? What was bothering you yesterday?"

The young man sighed and didn't return her gaze, looking down, "I lost my job at the printing shop."

"Oooh." A confused look then came over her face, "Are you going to go find it?"

Magus's brow furrowed, confused by her question. Aeya saw this and continued, "You said you lost your job at the printing shop. Why don't you go and find it?"

"I... can't," the young man answered solemnly, "someone else took it."

"That's rude," said the fox-woman. "He shouldn't have taken it."

Magus gave a heavy sigh, "Not his fault, I shouldn't have been late. Now I am jobless and Barclay has given it to someone else."

Another look of confusion came over Aeya's face, "I don't understand. Barclay took your job and gave it to someone else but you can't take it back even though it belongs to you." She blinked a few times, trying to understand. Finally, she asked, "Magus? What is a job?"

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After a while of talking, the young man finally managed to get his pet to understand the concept of a job. Although she had a better idea now, she still didn't entirely like it. "Why don't you get a job you enjoy, master?" she asked.

"I want to, Aeya," he responded, "but no one will want to hire me after all the times I've been late." The pair got up from their places and started to head home. It was nearly noontime and someone was bound to be home by now.

Aeya stayed silent for most of the walk back. They were nearing the very edge of Wygram and the fox-woman had not morphed back, yet. Magus could see that she had a deep, pensive look. "Something wrong?" he inquired.

"You need a job, master," she replied, not looking at him. "If you can't find a job, then I'll find one for you." With that, she shifted back into her fox form and bolted into town!

Chapter 5

"Aeya!" Magus called out. "Come back!" He gave chase and pursued her into town. She was fast on four feet, though, and her size let her duck and weave where Magus couldn't. In moments, she lost him.

After another minute of running, the fox looked behind her to see if her master was behind her. She smiled in delight, *Now to find a job for master. How hard can it be?*

As she walked along, a smell drifted across her path, catching her nose and caused her head to turn. *Mmm, Aeya closed her eyes and relished the scent, Maybe I can find a job for Magus where it smells good.* She began to trot along, following her nose. It led the fox to a bakery. All sorts of sweet and delicious smells emanated from it.

Slipping in as a customer walked out, Aeya was astounded by how busy the pastry shop was. Customers were milling around the front area, picking out what they wanted. While in the back, behind the counter, several workers were busily making their goods. Flour was everywhere and the ovens were hot with the blazing fires inside them.

With a quick wind-up, Aeya sprung up onto the front counter and began to look around. Unfortunately, her presence had not gone unnoticed, "Get that cat out of my shop!" Aeya instantly turned to the source of the voice, seeing an overweight and very irate man in the far back of the kitchen pointing directly at her.

Between him and the front counter, a dozen young apprentices and workers dropped what they were doing and looked at the fox. At that moment, time seemed to slow down for Aeya. The hoard began to move to her and her tail curled under her, eyes going wide, *Oops.*

Many hands were reaching and grabbing for the fox as she leapt off the counter and onto a shelf filled with baked goods, ready to sell. "Stop that animal!" the head baker yelled. The hired help was hot on her heels as she leapt and darted across the shelves, accidentally knocking food off in the process.

As Aeya looked around in a panic, she noticed three things. One, the front door was closed, and the frenzied and jostled customers were unable to properly get out that way. Two, in the far back of the kitchen, the fox saw a dutch door with the top half open. And three, the head baker stood between her and the way out, not to mention the mob of workers already after her.

With a quick breath, Aeya turned straight around and dashed at the young bakers. Caught by surprise, she managed to slip between their legs and make it to the kitchen. One apprentice recovered his wits fast enough and made a desperate lunge. But his attempt was no match for Aeya's reflexes. She jumped almost straight up and landed on the counters filled with dough and baking supplies.

The plump head baker gave a yell of rage and agony as the fox ran around him and all over his creations. With amazing speed, he picked up a knife and hurled it as she leapt for the open dutch door.

The blade whizzed by her, missing by several inches and embedding in the wall as she made it out. Aeya didn't stop there, she kept running down the street at full tilt. "I'll get you for this, you cat!!" she heard the head baker scream after her.

Chapter 6

With some distance put between her and the bakery, Aeya stopped to rest and regain her composure. Glancing around, she saw that she had made it to the outskirts of Wygram. Shaking herself, the fox started to wander around the district. *Well, they weren't very nice,* Aeya thought to herself. *They didn't even let me say 'hello'.*

A sound broke her train of thought, a dull, loud 'thok' repeating itself. Following the noise, Aeya found herself in front of a meat shop. She looked up at the front window where many different meats were on display. A sign hung inside. The strange symbols on it swam before the fox's eyes. *H-hel... help wan-wanted,* she thought hard, *'help wanted'!* *Wait, how'd I read that?*

She quickly shook off the question and followed the chopping noise around the side. Poking her head around the back corner, she saw a man chopping up huge slabs of meat. He picked up a finished stack and went inside. Aeya took the chance to move closer and was able to watch the man inside. He seemed to be working all on his lonesome as he wrapped up and packaged the meat before bringing another huge slab out.

It took him all but a moment to notice the fox standing there after he set the slab on the cutting table. "Well hello there, little one," he gave a lopsided smile. "What are you doing here?"

Aeya liked the sound of this man. She let her tail wag and sat down attentively. Her head cocked to one side as the man continued to speak, "Didja come for some of my meat?" The fox perked her ears up at the offer of food. She had to admit, this butcher's meat looked tasty.

She got up from her spot, but before the fox could finish taking one step closer, a deep, low growl filled the air. Both Aeya and the butcher turned to see a mangy, black and brown dog step out from a makeshift doghouse. The creature was easily twice the size of the fox and was tethered by a chain around its neck. It continued to growl and bristle at Aeya. "Otto!" the butcher exclaimed incredulously. "What's the matter?"

The dog suddenly lunged for Aeya, only to be jerked to a stop by the chain. Still, the attempt startled her, and Otto's barking did nothing to calm her. "Otto!" the butcher shouted. "Stop that! Hush!" But that did not do anything to deter the large animal.

Slowly, the fox backed away from the dog. Otto kept up his incessant barking and continued to yank the chain. Aeya only had half a moment to notice the tether was about to break. Once more, she turned tail and bolted... just as the weak link in the chain snapped.

"Otto!" the butcher cried out uselessly as the dog aggressively pursued the fox.

Aeya yipped in panic as the monster chased. This wasn't like the bakery, where all the humans had slower reflexes. This was a single animal almost as fast as her, and they were

in an open space. The fox could tell that if she stay out in the open like this, she'd be unable to outrun the dog. Thinking fast, she made a tight turn around the corner of the butcher's building. Just as she hoped, the animal couldn't take the turn as well as she could. Aeya desperately looked for more corners to lose the dog on.

She ducked around the other corner on the shop front. Down the side she went and curved to the back of the adjacent building. She thought to zigzag around the shops and eventually lose the dog. But as she turned down and committed to the next alley, she saw a pile of crates blocking her path.

It was too late to turn around. Aeya had only one chance of escaping the biting jaws now. Just before meeting the crates, Aeya jumped. She landed on top of one of the wooden boxes and wasted no time jumping higher and higher. The dog behind Aeya lacked her agility. He wasn't even able to stop himself, slamming into the pile of crates.

The wood destabilized under Aeya's paws. With a final, great lunge, she soared off and aimed for the roof. The fox just managed to land on the edge and scramble to safety.

Panting and worn out from the exertion, the fox peeked over the side in time to see Otto pull himself from the mess and leave for home. *Finding a job is hard*, she thought. *No wonder Magus is unhappy.*

Chapter 7

Once Aeya had caught her breath, she started to look for a way down. The pile of crates she used was knocked down and scattered all along the ground of the alleyway. Looking around, she got an idea. She took a running start and leapt onto the roof of the butcher, but the fox didn't stop. She bounded along and jumped to the next roof, and the next, and the next, heading further into town.

The sun was halfway through it's afternoon decent when Aeya found a way down and out to the square. Someone had coincidentally stopped a cart full of barrels below her path. Nimble, the fox landed on them and made short work of getting to the ground. The streets were busier closer in the center one went. A few more two story structures rose up around here, compared to the baker of the butcher's districts.

As she padded along, looking all around at the sights, Aeya heard a bellowing cry from behind. Glancing over her shoulder, there was a large ox barreling in her direction, out of control and dragging a capsized cart!

Aeya gave a yipe of terror and fled down the nearest alleyway. The ox continued to charge down the street while the fox clambered into the nearest open window.

She tumbled in and landed on her tail, raising a poof of dust. The window above swung shut with a 'clunk', locking her in. The fox gave a low whine and flipped herself upright. *Oh, this is not fun at all*, Aeya thought. *I shouldn't have run off from Magus*. The dust clouded around her and she gave a tiny sneeze, shaking her head in irritation.

"Huh?! Who's there?" a creaky voice called out. Footsteps soon could be heard getting louder and closer.

Not again, Aeya thought as she tried to hide. It wasn't much use, though. The fox only manage to kick up more dust and sneeze again. The footsteps got closer still and Aeya was left cringing and trying to look as small as possible when she was discovered.

The creaky voice spoke again, "How'd you get in here?" Aeya looked up cautiously and saw an old face looking at her. The man had kind, tired eyes. He stared at the pet with a sense of piqued curiosity. Slowly, Aeya un-cringed, she could sense a pleasantness around the frail man. He meant her no harm, and she would be safe around him.

He beckoned for her to come closer, "Are you lost?" She was going to nod, but the sound of a tinkling bell distracted the old man. He began walking to the front end and the source of the sound. "Hello? Who is it?" he called out, nearly forgetting the fox entirely.

Aeya gave a shake and apprehensively followed the old man, not knowing what to expect in this place. Finally, able to look around, the fox was able to see the place was filled with shelves. And on those shelves were many, many books packed in. Where there were no books, the empty space was filled with tiny models or displays. The sight piqued Aeya's interest, making her lag behind while the old man went to the front.

"Mr. Holland," Aeya heard the old man speak as she wandered closer, "to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I'm here for my book," another voice answered. The second voice was considerably more solid than the old man's, presumably, it had to belong to this 'Mr. Holland'. He continued, "You said it would have it in three days time. That was five days ago, Mr. MacLit."

"Oh! Oh yes," MacLit, the owner of the bookshop responded in his creaky voice. The sounds of searching, scuffling feet and shifting papers, could be heard, "What was it again?" Aeya could sense a tone of worry in his voice and that he was buying time.

Holland gave a loud sigh. "*The Shaken Spear*," he answered with a hint of disdain, "part of those writings by that new author from the First Country."

"Ah. Yes, yes. Of course," MacLit continued to mill around in the front.

Aeya looked to the left as a book caught her eye. She couldn't understand the letters, but the symbols started to swim before her. The fox stared and tilted her head for a moment before she could read the title, *The Shaken Spear*.

Peeking around the edge of the bookcase, the fox caught a glimpse of MacLit's customer. Mr. Holland was a tall, well-built individual. He was definitely taller than Magus but a few inches, and loomed over the shopkeeper by at least a foot. Thick, sandy hair hung down like a mop head and barely brushed his broad shoulders.

With a quick thought, Aeya pawed the book, loosening and pulling it out. When it had come out far enough, she gently bit it with her mouth and carried it. Trotting to the front, she timidly went up to Mr. Holland and pawed his foot.

He glanced down and a look of surprise and curiosity came over him. Holland bent down and retrieved the book from her jaws, "Nevermind, Mr. MacLit, it seems you have an assistant." The shopkeeper turned to see Aeya standing there as the customer examined the book. "And a good job, too," Holland praised. She had been so careful with her bite that there was not a single mark or sign of damage on it.

Holland got out a coin purse and doled out a sum onto the counter. "About time you got some help," he commented. "You could use the help." With that, he left.

Chapter 8

The bell of the front door tinkled softly as Holland exited. As soon as the door closed, Mr. MacLit turned to look at the little fox, "Now, you're a clever one, aren'tcha?" He breathed a sigh of relief, "He's right, Holland is. I need help around here. I'm getting old and starting to forget."

The old man counted the money and pocketed the coins. He looked at her again, "If you hadn't found it, I'd still be looking for that book, and had an angry customer on my hands. I don't know where you came from, but I'm glad you did." MacLit moved around and sat in a dusty, old chair with a groan, "Not as spry as I used to be."

He tilted his head and made a motion with his hand, beckoning the fox to come over, "You wouldn't happen to have a home, now would you?" As she got closer, MacLit took note of the collar. He unfolded a pair of glasses and took a closer gander at it. "'Magus Carter', huh?" he read out loud. "Don't recall that name. But whoever he is, he is lucky to have a smart creature like yourself."

Aeya wagged her tail happily when the old man said her master's name. She watched him as his eyelids blinked heavily. Slowly, his head started to dip and nod. And before she knew it, the old man had fallen asleep. Aeya tilted her head, waiting a moment before pawing his foot and nudging his hand with her nose.

Convinced he was sound asleep, Aeya took a few steps back, looked around, and morphed into her humanish form. She stretched her arms to the ceiling, humming to herself and relishing the sensation. The fox-woman finished stretching and opened her eyes, *It all looks so different from up here.*

Now that she stood a slender five feet seven inches tall, Aeya was able to take in the store better. Although curious, a frown came over her face. The bookshop was a shade of dull grey throughout. Dust covered every surface in sight, and only a minimal amount of light came through the half-covered front windows. With the silent, gently step of a ghost, Aeya made her way between the shelves of the store.

The fox-woman reached out with her delicate fingers and wiped some dust from the sides of some books. The letters no longer swam before her eyes, but she could read the titles clearly. She remembered how Magus would read to her while she curled up in his lap or by his side. Most of the words, she understood. There were only a few that left her confused.

A smile came across her face as she saw something familiar. Aeya pulled out a book titled *Tales From Far & Near*. Her tails swayed gently in happiness, causing some dust to get pushed into the air. The fox-woman gently opened the book and looked at the first story. She smiled as she read and idly wandered around the store. She remembered clearly when her master read this to her. It was the first story he read to her when she was very young.

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Aeya had quickly gotten enthralled with the stories and subsequently lost track of the time. She had also lost track of where she was walking. It was fortunate for her that the windows were half-closed and no one was looking. Except...

The sound of pounding on the front window broke Aeya from her trance. Fearing she had been caught, she looked up, startled. But her terror turned to glee as she recognized the face. *Master!* she thought excitedly. Changing forms, she dropped her book and ran to the front door, jumping into his arms just as he came in.

"Where have you been, Aeya? I was so worried about you," Magus exclaimed as he hugged the fox. Her tail wagged wildly, ecstatic to be back with him.

A long yawn could be heard from around the counter. Carrying his pet, Magus ventured a little further into the store to the source of the yawn. MacLit rose slowly from his seat. "So, you must be the owner of this fine creature," he commented, seeing the fox in Magus's arms. "I couldn't interest you in a book or three, could I?"

Magus shrugged and glanced down, "Sorry, I would love to, but I'm broke. I'm looking for a job."

"Oh? Is that so?" the old man perked up. He glanced around his dusty shop, "I could do with some extra help around here." Magus's eyes brightened up at the old man's words, "I can't pay you, but I do have a spare room you can have."

"What do I have to do?" Magus asked, a light of excitement in his voice. Aeya wagged her tail and grinned to herself.

The old man looked around again, "Well, the shelves could stand a dusting. And if a customer comes in, help them find their book." He motioned to the fox, "She actually brought a book for a customer, earlier. You have a smart pet."

Aeya looked up at her master with a twinkle in her eyes. The young man couldn't help but give a smile and lightly scoff, "She is a special, little fox. And she's mine."

Chapter 9

Magus accepted the job offer and went home to tell his family that very evening. Of course, he left out a few details, such as getting fired and Aeya running away. But everyone was still happy for him.

Having a place to crash in the store itself, Magus wouldn't have a problem with ever being late. Thankful for this, the young man worked extra hard and long. On sleepless nights, he would continue to clean the shelves by lantern-light. Within a week's time, Magus had greatly cleaned out the dirt and went to work organizing the texts. MacLit had a system, but over the years, he had forgotten to stick to it.

Aeya stayed with her master during the move to the store. She took to the new living space very well. Whenever no one else was around, she could change her more human-like form and get a book to read. But it wasn't all fun and games for the fox. She would often hurry off and find titles for customers, much to their surprise and delight. By the end of the month, sales were on the rise at 'the bookshop with the fox', as people called it.

By the end of two months, Magus was receiving pay on a regular basis. MacLit had acknowledged how old he was and let the young man practically run the entire store by himself. Magus had never felt more proud of himself. He had a lot of responsibility, but he was managing it and loving it.

One evening, after the shop had been closed up, Aeya heard Magus come in through the back door. The fox trotted to see her master carrying a small package, piquing her curiosity. She followed him into the back room where MacLit let them sleep.

The shutters were closed for the night and a lit lantern was hanging from the wall. The fox shifted her form and sat on the bed while Magus took a chair next to a small table. "What's that?" the fox-woman asked, tilting her head as he unwrapped the package. "It is a new toy?"

"Kinda," Magus answered absentmindedly. Once the wrappings were off, Aeya could see there was a leather bracer with some kind of smooth stone set in the center on top. Circling the band were a half a dozen impressions. Following the accessory were about a couple tiny pieces of amber. From where she sat, Aeya could just make out tiny, patterned scratches on the faces.

Her curiosity was incited further, "What are those?" The fox-woman rose from the bed and stood over her master's shoulder. She slowly reached down and picked up a stone of amber.

"Amber," Magus answered as he tightened the leather bracer around his left wrist, the stone facing outward. "Now I can start aura training." The pale stone started to glow and came to life. Magus picked up a nodule of amber and started to socket the pieces into the

impressions on the bracer. Aeya watched as Magus repeated the process, mesmerized by the light of the centerpiece.

Magus reached over and pulled a book off his nightstand. It was *The Art & Study of Sigilism*, a guide to understanding and accomplishing aura magic. In the front, there was an intrinsic image of a hand and four 'branches' extending from the center. The young man flipped the book open and ran his finger down the table of contents, muttering, "History of sigilism'... 'Theory'... Ah, 'Elements: Lightning'."

Aeya turned away from the lights and looked at the book's illustrations as her master read outloud, "Lightning is the most dangerous of the elements. It is wild, difficult to control, and highly destructive. Those born with an affinity to Lightning must exercise extreme caution. In cases of those suffering Aura Sickness, this element is a curse."

"A curse?" Aeya interrupted with a hint of alarm. The tips of the fox-woman's tails turned a pale shade of orange.

"I'm not going to get Aura Sickness, Aeya," Magus reassured his pet. "I'm perfectly healthy. Besides, only people that overuse their aura get sick like that." Magus flipped to another section and continued to read outloud, "Aura Sickness is a condition when one's element uncontrollably leaks out from their body. The symptoms can range from mild to severe and can be potentially dangerous, depending on the affinity." He skipped a few lines and picked up again, "The illness affects randomly, but risk increases with overuse of one's aura. Chronic Aura Sickness is often passed along bloodlines."

Magus stopped and turned to face his pet. "Everyone in my family is perfectly healthy, Aeya," he said in a confident voice. "And if it makes you feel better, I'll let you tell me when to stop practicing. Fair?"

The fox-woman paused for a moment. Her tails began to wag and the orange drained away from the tips. She nodded in agreement, "Alright. That seems fair."



Chapter 10

Whenever Magus had free time away from the bookshop, he would go off to practice. The end of Spring was upon the world and that made for a pleasant atmosphere to practice in. Aeya and Magus went out along the streets, heading for the woods so he could train more. The fox trotted after her master's heels.

As they passed a bakery, Aeya noticed it was the same one she came across before and slowed down a little, looking at it. As she gazed up at the front window, another face looked down at her... and glared. It was the head baker, and he had certainly not forgotten about what the fox had done not too long ago. The vicious scowl intensified as he bared down on her, almost pressing his face against the glass. Aeya cowered for a moment before scampering off after her master.

A short while later, down another street or two, they made a turn down an alley to cut through and get to the woods quicker. Once again, she got a sense of familiarity from their surroundings. They came out of the alley, behind the buildings, and Magus walked on while Aeya paused and took a look to her left.

Laying there, in his makeshift doghouse, was the canine that chased her. He was chained back to the doghouse, raising his head at the sight of the fox again. He growled low and loud as his hackles bristled, but he didn't bolt for her like before. The dog remembered what happened last time and stayed in place. His growls did not go unnoticed, however, as the butcher stepped outside and peered around. Spotting the fox, he tilted his head and a confused look came over his face. Aeya didn't stick around for the butcher to look at her for long. She scampered and kept close to Magus for the rest of the walk out of Wygram.

Once in the relative safety of the woods, Aeya wandered further from Magus. Keeping pace with him, she went around and between the trees, exploring what new scents there were. Arriving at the old stream, Aeya changed her form and they began going downstream. The small waterway joined up with the main river and they headed upstream, getting to a further tributary and heading up it as well. Finally, Magus spotted an open glade right off from the banks. "There's a good spot," Magus pointed to the glade.

A ring of upheaved dirt stood in several inches high near the center of the open area. Lush grass grew all over, the blades reaching for the shining sun above. Magus stepped over the ringed berm and surveyed the area. He gave a thoughtful nod, "Yeah, this'll be a good spot to practice. Plenty of open space." He took a few breaths and raised his hands, starting to create a lightshow with his crackling and buzzing element.

Aeya hung out around the edge of the glade, watching her master throw small sparks of lightning into the air. Her head tilted, there was a strange air to this place for her. Something about this place teased the furthest reaches in the back of her mind. The fox-woman did her best to ignore the feeling and sat down under a tree.

Noontime rolled around and Magus took a pause from practice to eat lunch. He had brought a small lunch for them both. They ate in the shade and had a drink from the cool stream waters. Afterwards, Magus went back to practice and Aeya fell asleep.

The young man was starting to tire from the training. He found it two-fold exhausting, one was born from physical exertion. The second exhaustion came from something much deeper, a fatigue from a part of him he never felt before using magic. He could only conclude that this invisible part of him was his aura.

Pausing a moment, Magus caught his second wind. He closed his eyes and let his imagination take over. Evil bandits began to crawl out from the shadows of the trees. Dressed all in dark garb, they wore masks of all kinds, half-face, full-face, eyes only, hooded, and even animal masks. Despite the different masks and weapons the bandits wore and wielded, one thing was the same through them all. Each and every one had a sinister and vile sneer painted on their visages.

Magus had no fear, he gave a lopsided smirk at the impossible odds. The young man raised his hands, arcs of electricity crawling and crackling across his exposed skin. The rogues charged and the fight commenced. Powerful bolts of lightning shot from his hands as he electrocuted the villains, one after another. A few of them dodged his bolt, but Magus caught them with chained lightning bouncing between them.

The distraction had been enough, though, and a multitude of the thieves got near enough to close in from all sides. Magus didn't flinch or hesitate for a second. He unleashed a shocking blast all around him, striking the nearby foes and leaving them stunned. Not wasting the opportunity, he threw his hands in the air and called down strikes of lightning from the sky, ending the imminent threat.

But there was no time to celebrate. The bandits started to realize they have to bring out the the heavy hitters. They looked among each other and nodded. A second later, the entire forest began to shake. A towering figure, head in the treetops, strode into the clearing. It was a giant! He stood an easy twenty feet tall with large, rippling knots of muscle across his sleeveless arms. In his hands was a club as big as the trunks of any tree around. The giant gave a wide grin, showing off more than one empty space left by a knocked out tooth.

Magus scoffed, ready to take on the new enemy. He brought his hands together and electrical energy began to spark and arc between them as his power charged up. The giant responded, raising his great club in the air and swinging it around, building up his own strength. The two attacked in the same instant. The giant stepped forward to land the blow while Magus unleashed his power. He pointed both hands at the giant and unleashed a massive charge of lightning.

There was a great cracking sound as the energy struck the giant. Unable to handle the potency of the charge, the giant lost his grip on the club. It fell to the ground with a mighty thud. The giant soon followed, keeling over and crashing face-first into the hard, knotted roots of a nearby tree. Terrified, the remaining bandits started to flee into the woods.

Magus grinned and raised a fist in triumph. But before the young man could congratulate himself, a whimper from behind interrupted him.

Chapter 11

The bodies of the bandits and the giant vanished as Magus snapped back into reality. He turned around and saw his pet lying on the ground, resting. She had stretched out in her sleep and her foot had climbed up the side of the berm. The fox-woman twitched and whined again. "Aeya?" Magus stepped over to see her closed eyelids flutter in her sleep. Whatever was going on behind those closed eyes, the young man could tell it was not a pleasant dream. He grabbed Aeya's shoulder and gently shook her awake, "Wake up Aeya. It's just a dream."

The fox-woman woke with a start, gasping and looking around in a wide-eyed panic. She bolted up into a sitting position, taking short, rapid breaths. Magus wrapped his arms around his pet and sushed softly into her ear, "Just a bad dream."

Slowly, Aeya regained control of her breathing. She calmed down and tried to speak, but her words only came out in a blubber. Whatever she saw in her dreams, it jarred her.

"Come on, let's go home," Magus tried to calm the fox-woman as he helped her to her feet. Taking one arm over his shoulders, he began to carry her back home. Sometime during the walk, the sound of a snapping twig had startled her, but Magus quickly assured her it was nothing.

By the time they made it to the outskirts of Wygram, Aeya had managed to calm down enough to walk on her own. With a little coaxing, she shifted into her fox form and curled up into his arms. Magus didn't mind carrying her the rest of the way as she compressed into a tight ball. He looked around and got his bearings, easily recognizing the street his family lived on for the past twenty years.

The sun was getting near to setting for the day as Magus walked down the street. He didn't notice or pay heed to the old tailor's house as he passed by. If he had, the young man would have seen Mr. Tines staring back with a mixed look of intrigue and fear.

XXX

Magus took a less direct route home to the bookshop, going around the back ways to give the fox more time to calm down. She slowly started to lull into another sleep. Her pounding heart was slowing and her eyelids were half-closed with fatigue as Magus came to a stop in front of a home. In her half-asleep state, Aeya couldn't tell what exactly was so special about it. A red board was nailed across each window, and on the door was pinned a paper. A big, bright-red symbol dominated the upper portion, while under it they could just make out a few squiggly lines but not read them. Magus didn't need to come closer to know what it said. He had seen it year after year around this time, the peak of summer.

The young man shook his head in pity, "That's the fifth home to get closed for fever. And summer is not even half-over." Aeya did not fully register what her master said. She just curled tightly in his arms, giving a tiny yawn and letting comforting sleep overtake her.

Magus looked down at the cream-colored fox starting to snooze in his arms and gave a soft sigh. Stretching his neck, he nuzzled the top of her head before continuing his walk. Eventually, they got to more familiar streets and found the bookshop as the street lamps were being lit. In the upstairs window, a wavering light flickered and danced around. MacLit was awake for now, but would soon be asleep.

The young man quietly slipped in through the back door, locking it and hanging the key over a secretary desk. He headed for his shuttered room, next, and lit the lantern on the wall, setting it to a low glow. *Oil's getting low*, he made a mental note to get some tomorrow as he set the fox down on the bed. He gently stroke her back as she began to wake up again, "What happened out there, girl?"

The fox looked up at her master. After a sleepy groan and stretch, she shifted forms. She pulled her many tails around to her front and hugged them to her chest. Each end was a shade of orange. "I've been there before," she said softly, just loud enough for Magus to hear.

"We've been all through those woods together," Magus answered. "I'm sure we've been there before."

She shook her head, "No, I've been there... without you. But it's all fuzzy, unclear." The orange on her tails grew darker and more vibrant.

Magus put his arm around her back and rubbed her soothingly, "It's alright, Aeya. You're safe now." Slowly, the color faded from her tips. Her eyelids started to droop once more. The fox-woman changed forms and crawled over to lay beside her master's pillow. Magus thoughtfully watched his pet as she breathed peacefully in her spot. For the first time since Aeya started talking, he had an unfamiliar thought, *She is an intelligent being. She can speak fluently, read, show emotion... I shouldn't treat her like a pet.*

He stared at her for a while longer. The young man started to wonder what she really was. She was clearly something more than a simple fox. But he had never heard of anything like her, nor did she know what she was or where she came from. *I wonder where her home is*, he idly thought.

Finally, Magus doused the light, lowering the lantern wick and putting it out before lying down in bed to join Aeya in the land of dreams.

Chapter 12

Waking up the next morning, Magus took care of his usual business. He went up the stairs to the second story of the shop. Quietly, the young man poked into the pantry, pulling out some food for himself and his pet. He slunk back downstairs and put a share of the food in a bowl on the floor and got dressed. The leather bracer was still on his left wrist. He pondered a moment before deciding to leave it on.

Aeya was still asleep as Magus left the store. He had no scruples about leaving her now, the fox had a slight smile on her face as she lay there. The young man picked up a small, bloated, leather coin-purse and pocketed it before exiting out the backdoor. Munching on his breakfast, Magus took in a breathfuls of the morning air. A slight breeze through Wygram carried the warm scents from bakeries that woke before the dawn.

The sun was almost to the point of midmorning and the majority of the shops had already opened their doors. Magus wasn't worried about the bookshop, though. MacLit would normally open up after the others. He said it gave his customers time to finish their business before wandering in.

Magus headed south, into the trade district. A quick stop into a general store and he left with a jar of oil and a few coins lighter. Looking around, the young man took in the sight of the bustling streets. Saturdays were one of the busiest days of the week as goods were imported from other villages and towns in the area.

Suddenly, something grabbed Magus round the collar of his shirt and dragged him into an alley. A second later, he was slammed back-first against one of the walls. "Ey now!" a voice called out. "You can't just go walking around the market like that. You were about to get run over."

Magus shook his head, getting the daze out in time to see two figures. Both were younger than him, wearing ragged clothes, and had a little bit of a stink on them. A second voice, the shorter of the two, spoke in a lighter tone, "Yeah, or worse. They're some bad people around, people'll rob ya blind."

"Now, I think some thanks are in order," the taller one said. "That jar would be nice." He held out his hand expectantly. Magus got a clearer look at his face now, a large nose and a sneer dominated his facial features.

"And maybe that little pouch, too," the shorter one sneered as well, with beady eyes going to Magus's pockets. A second later, her hand followed, reaching for his property.

Magus panicked. He wasn't going to let himself get taken advantage of so easily by these young urchins. He grabbed her wrist and discharged some sparks into her. Giving a yell of pain, she broke Magus's grip and jumped backwards. Her wrist was red from the shock and she rubbed her arm in pain.

"Tay!" the taller one cried out defensively. His open, waiting hand swiftly curled into a fist and he punched Magus in the eye. The blow was double, hitting him in the face and the force smacking the back of his head against the alley wall.

"Just get the schmuck, Tohm," the girl called back, still rubbing her shocked arm. Tohm wound up again and threw another punch, this one to Magus's gut.

The young man was ready this time and he quickly sidestepped the urchin. His fist connected with the wall. It wasn't enough to break any bones in his hand, but it stung enough to make him cry out in pain, nevertheless.

Magus honestly didn't want a fight. It was fun to pretend to combat impossible odds. But, in reality, there was no assurance or guarantee of victory in a scuffle. Magus turned and began to run for the alley's exit, the way he was brought in. He hardly made it a few steps when a grip fell on his shirt collar, again.

The girl, Tay, still had her left arm functional. She grabbed Magus from behind and by surprise, stopping him in his tracks and briefly choking him. "Knife him!" Tay yelled.

Magus looked over his shoulder just in time to see the urchin named 'Tohm' pull a small, cheap cutting knife. With a twist, the young man broke out of the girl's grip and turned around. He pointed a hand at the weapon and quickly conjuring a spell. A small bolt shot off with a zap. The shot was only a few inches long and just barely managed to graze the skin of the assailant's hand. But, it was enough to force Tohm to flinch and drop the blade.

Magus did not want to waste a second. He darted for the exit once again, and this time he made it out. Safe in the revealing light of day, Magus darted between heavy-laden and empty carts, working himself away from the urchin muggers as quickly as possible.

Chapter 13

Finally able to take a moment to himself, Magus leaned his back against the side of a wall. The young man found himself panting as he came down from the rush. A moment later, he felt the pain in his eye. He instinctively reached up, left hand to left eye, and gently began to massage the bruise.

Getting his bearings, Magus realized he had made it to the northeast corner of the town square. Looking out, away from the square and trade district, he could see the many fields of Wygram, all freshly planted earlier in the springtime. He could see about two dozen crop-workers out there in the sun, tending to and minding the sprouting plants. The young man remembered how he had once tried to work in the fields. It was only a mere couple years ago that he had been out there, walking barefoot in the dark, moist soil till his feet were black.

He quickly shook off the memories and looked back to the street. Magus knew what was going to come next and he wasn't keen on wanting to remember. Instead, he looked to the shops lined down the street before him. One store in particular caught his eye, a clothing shop. Magus made his way across and up the street and went inside.

The store was clean and well-ordered. Bolts of cloth came in a wide variety of colors, getting more exotic and finely made the further back one looked. A wall cut the store in half with the only passage between them being a thin, semitransparent curtain of rose with small, heavy knots on the bottom edge.

A counter was constructed near the curtain doorway, like a toll booth guarding a bridge. As the door closed behind Magus, a head popped up from behind the counter and looked to him. "Hi," a bright voice greeted him. "Welcome to Pinn and Son's Clothery. How can I help you?"

The sandy-haired, bright-eyed young woman beamed a sunny smile at Magus. She was younger than him by a few years. He guessed that this must be her first job. The young man couldn't help but smile back a little, it was nice to see a friendly face after that scuffle. "Yes," he replied, "I need a shirt. Something long, nothing fancy."

The girl nodded, but then noticed his hand covering part of his face. "Something wrong with your eye?" she asked curiously.

"Oh," Magus put his hand down to reveal the bruised eye. "A little fight," he explained.

She frowned, but understood and nodded. "Here, please sit and rest," the girl implored him, bringing over a stool. "My name's Nell," she introduced herself as he sat down. "I'll get you some colors to pick from. Anything you had in mind? And what's your name?" She was very energetic and eager to please.

"Magus," the young man replied, "Magus Carter." He took a moment to relax on the stool. "Whatever color you have handy is fine," he answered again.

"Carter..." Nell paused for a moment. "You're from that bookshop, aren't you? MacLit's. The one with that clever fox, right?" She poked around the back of the counter, picking up some colors.

Magus nodded, "Yeah. Have you been there? I don't recall ever seeing you."

The girl came back over with a few swatches of colors, "No. I want to go, though. The fox sounds cute." She held out the colors for Magus to see. "We have these colors ready to use, Mr. Carter," she explained. "Any catch your fancy?"

Magus was about to answer that he didn't really care too much for the color, but he hesitated. His gaze fell on the greens of the selection he was offered. The young man's thoughts went back to Aeya. He remembered how the tips of her tails would change color, and when they were green, she always said she felt happy. Bearing that in mind, he pointed to the green clothes. "How about a nice green?" he said. "Anything you'd recommend?"

The girl looked at the colors for a moment before the smile on her face grew even brighter, "I know just the one." She went back behind the counter, putting the samples away before ducking through the rose curtain. A minute later, Nell returned with a bolt of beautiful, dark, forest-green cloth. "It's made from shire cotton," she said. "Not as soft as regular cotton, but it's more durable and not as bad as wool or burlap."

He hardly heard exactly what she said about the material. The young man just marveled at how deep and rich the color appeared. He nodded slowly, "Yes. That... that's perfect."

Nell gave a very happy smile and with the bolt under one arm, she led the young man into the back half of the store. In this area, even more bolts of materials were stored against the walls. Curtains hung from many rods that were suspended from the ceiling. These were used for privacy when garments were being hand measured and made.

The girl pointed Magus to a section while she went through some drawers. "Now, I shouldn't cut the cloth on my own. But I can still take your measurements," Nell came back over to him with a measuring tape.

"Wait, wait," Magus stopped her, "this isn't for me."

She stopped, hesitating a second, "Do you know the sizes for who this is for?"

"Not exactly," the young man answered. Nell's shoulders started to slump in disappointment. Magus continued, "I just need something a little smaller than me and it would fit."

Just then, the front door of the shop opened and closed. A loud voice called out, "Nell! I'm back."

The girl poked her head out to the front, "Da-, I mean, Mr. Pinn! I could use some help back here."

"Don't tell me you're trying to cut cloth by yourself," a tall, sandy-haired man came into the back. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Nell had not yet started.

"I know how to make clothes, Daddy," Nell responded defensively, a slight pout coming over her young face. "I can do it on my own."

The father sighed and gave a knowing look. "Pumpkin," Mr. Pinn said lovingly, "you know the rules here. If I am to be responsible for your work, I need to be present." He gave his daughter a hug before turning to Magus, "Kids, can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em. Now, how can we help you?"

Nell repeated the work order and showed her father the bolt of dark green shire cotton. Between the two of them, it took little more than an hour to finish exactly what Magus wanted. He now had a simple, short-sleeved shirt of a lovely forest green. The bottom of the shirt was extended past the waistline, stopping a ways above his kneecaps.

"That'll be twenty-two bits, Mr. Carter," Nell chirped happily.

Magus reached into his pocket, pulled out the coin purse, and emptied the contents onto the counter. Most of the coins were scooted in Nell's direction. The few remaining bits were returned to his small pouch. "There you go. Thank you," the young man thanked the daughter and her father before leaving.

"Come back soon!" the girl called after Magus as the door started to close behind him. There was a pause before she turned to her father, musing, "I wonder who he got that for, Daddy. It's too small for him."

Mr. Pinn reached around and took ahold of Nell's shoulder, gently rubbing it, "Maybe it's for a friend."

"A girlfriend, I bet," she giggled.

Her father gently shook his head, "That's not our business, Nell." The front door opened and a new customer came in, ending the discussion.

Chapter 14

It was almost noontime when Magus arrived back at the bookstore. MacLit sat behind the counter, eating his lunch and watching two customers browse the texts for sale. He beckoned the young man over and whispered, "Magus. I need to run some errands after I eat. Could you keep an eye on things for me?"

The young man nodded and MacLit hurried up and scarfed down the last of his meal. "Thanks," he said and departed.

Magus glanced around the store. The younger of the two customers was sitting in a chair in the corner with a small stack of books to the side. The child had a fiction book open and was clearly drawn deeply into the story. The older customer had a head speckled with several gray hairs. The old man was perusing the pages of some more factual tomes.

The young man took a seat behind the counter and about twenty minutes later, both customers found what they wanted, paid for it, and left, leaving Magus to himself. He picked up the goods he acquired earlier in the day and went to his room in the back. Opening the door, Magus saw Aeya stretched out on his bed. She had a cracked open a shutter to let light in. And in the fox-woman's hands was a book. She looked very content in her position, tails splayed around her and some behind her head like a living pillow. However, her contentment was disturbed the moment Magus entered the room.

Aeya's face lit up like an oil-soaked torch. Her free tails swayed back and forth in happiness. "Master!" She smiled. Putting the book down, the fox-woman got up and bounded over, giving Magus an eager hug. A second later, she released him and looked at the green in his hands, "What's that?"

"I got you something, Aeya," Magus answered. He set the jar of oil down on his desk before handing the gift to his pet. She excitedly accepted it, fumbling with it for a moment before finally managing to unfold and hold up the shirt. "I'd like you to wear that," he added.

The fox-woman stared at the shirt. She was clearly enthralled with the rich, deep color. But then, a look of confusion flittered on her face. After a moment of hesitation, Aeya brought the bottom of the garment to her head, like she had seen her master do. Wriggling inside, the fox-woman finally managed to properly get the shirt on.

"This feels strange," Aeya commented as she tried to get a good look at herself. While she was distracted, Magus reached behind her neck and undid the leather collar he had put on her many years ago. "Huh? What are you doing?" The fox-woman protested.

"You don't need to wear this anymore, Aeya," the young man spoke softly. Inside, he felt like he was almost giving her away. The emotion invaded his thoughts and a terrible sorrow crept towards his heart. It felt like he was giving up his best friend.

The split second of emotion seemed to last an hour for the young man. But he was suddenly brought back into reality as the fox-woman gently wrapped her fingers around

the collar. "But I want to wear it," Aeya said softly as she took the accessory back. Her fingers worked carefully until the collar was snugly where it should be, "It feels right."

Magus was unable to speak. He simply did not have any inkling on how to respond to this reaction. Thankfully, the bell on the front door dinged and he turned his attention away. Aeya changed form and trotted out to the front of the store with Magus right behind. The shirt had utterly vanished with her transformation.

Chapter 15

Later in the day, as things began to slow down and the sun had finally sunk, the nightlife of Wygram started to wake up. Shops closed and lights came on in the street lamps and in homes. Most went home to their families, while a number of men, and a few women, made for the Cat 'n Mallet, the most popular tavern in Wygram. Dozens of patrons took up seats and the smoke and song rose into the air, getting trapped among the exposed rafters.

The brightest part of the tavern was in the front corner, where the fireplace was. Nearly every night, there was a fire burning under the mantle. But even when it wasn't lit, there was a curious and persistent pattern across the lamps. The further into the back corners one went, the more dimly lit the lamps were. The center of the Cat 'n Mallet usually held the most festivities, the fireplace played host to many a storyteller, both young and old, and towards the back and sides were the less sociable folk.

In one of those poorly lit alcoves, a game of cards was going on. A singular candle burned in the wax-clogged center of the wooden table, its light barely illuminating the players' features. A narrow-eyed man with a scowl grumbled, "This just isn't my day." He slapped his hand of cards down on the table.

"You never have a good day, Bradley," a thin-faced, soft-spoken man responded. "Go ahead and gripe, though."

A third fellow scoffed, "We all you know you're good at that."

"Put that tankard to your lips and stop talking, Kieran," Bradley spat at the third fellow.

"Put up or shut up, Kieran. You too, Nathan," an old man barked across the table. "I didn't come all this way to lose."

Kieran tossed a few bits closer to the center, "Happy, Tines?" The coins jangled and clattered on the table. A second later, the change was joined with contributions from Nathan and someone else, the fifth and final member of their game.

Tines nodded, "That's more like it." He pushed his own change into the pot and leaned back into the game.

Bradley rolled his eyes, "You'll never guess what I saw yesterday. That damn cat, again!"

"The same one from last month you talked about?" Nathan asked. "The one that ran through your shop, evading every boy you had working, and ruining every last pastry and bit of dough you had?"

The baker nodded excitedly, "Yes! Yes! That's the one!"

Kieran snorted and broke out in hearty chuckles, "What'd the 'demon-cat' do this time? Burn your buns? Freeze the ovens? Call your mother bad names and made her faint?" The other players barely suppressed their amusement.

"Not like anything it could had said isn't true," the fifth man piped up. The whole table roared with laughter, except Bradley.

The baker grumbled and said flatly, "Knock it off. The cat didn't do anything, this time. But I saw it go by the shop. It was following someone."

"Oh yeah," Nathan piped up. "I thought I saw that same animal following someone. It was a young man, wasn't it?"

Bradley nodded, "Yeah, looked like he was heading for the woods."

"I still think it's a dog," Nathan muttered under his breath. In a louder voice, the butcher continued, "Otto started going crazy yesterday. And when I looked, I saw that dog again. Ran its tan hide after some young kid going to the forest."

The fifth man shrugged, "Wonder who the young man was."

"The Carter kid," Mr. Tine piped up with a wince. "I saw him coming out of the forest with his... pet." He hesitated on the last word, as if something disturbed the ex-tailor.

"The one who works at MacLit's bookstore?" The fifth man asked. "The one with the fox that gets your books?"

Tines nodded, "Yes, that's the one, Alex."

Alex continued, "I just saw him today. He wanted a shirt, but the size he wanted was smaller than what'd fit him. Dunno why he got it."

Nobody had an answer, until Tines spoke again, "I know what it's for. You won't believe me, though." The former tailor shook his head lightly, a hinting tone of fear and worry in his voice.

"Try us," one of the other card players challenged.

Mr. Tines drew in a long, sharp breath and released it. Gathering his composure, the old man spoke, "I bet the young Carter got that shirt for his pet fox."

There was a silence across the table, broken by a snort from Kieran, "Ha! You're right, old man. We don't believe you. I think we need another round of drinks for that." He raised his hand, signaling the tavernkeep for another batch of beverages to come their way.

"I'm serious," Tines insisted. "I was out in the woods around my home when I heard someone moving. When I looked, I saw someone trying to carry something, something big and furred."

The drinks came to their table and the old man continued his story, "I moved closer and was about to offer my help when I stepped on a twig. As soon as it snapped, the thing he was carrying raised its head and looked around. I was scared stiff! I thought the kid was

lugging a pile of fur!" Tines raised his glass to his lips and took a long draught, calming his nerves down, "Next thing I saw, he was talking to the thing, like he was trying to calm it down. I followed Carter as he drug the creature closer to town. I got a good look at it, too."

By this point, the former tailor was leaning in closer to the candlelight. The others scooted in closer. The bustling sounds from the rest of the bar faded as they listened to the old man with rapt attention, "The creature was almost as big as him. It was all covered in tan fur. And I think I counted at least a dozen tails dragging behind. It looked like some giant fox, but it stood up and walked like it was human." There was a pause and a moment of apprehension grew. The tension rose as they strained and waited to hear what Tines was hold back, "It had the body of a woman."

A silence fell over the table. A couple eyebrows raised, giving the old man incredulous stares. Kieran was the one to break the silence, "That... is lunacy, sheer lunacy."

Some nodded at this. Even Tines gave a nod of agreement, "You bet it is. That was crazy. I didn't want to believe it myself. When they got closer to town, right on the bare edge, that creature changed. It turned into an actual fox, his pet." He shook his head, looking at his friends, "I can't explain it, but I know what I saw. And what I saw was not of this world. And if you think I'm losing my mind, that shirt you made, Alex, should be proof that I'm right."

"It would explain my bakery," Bradley offered with a grumble. "That animal didn't act like any normal one I've seen. It was too quick and slipped through the fingers of all my workers."

"We don't need to hear that again," Alex Pinn complained.

"No, he's right," Nathan added, defending the backer. "Otto never barks at other animals, not the way I heard him. I knew there had to be something different about it, but I didn't know what. If that thing isn't natural... that would explain it."

It was Keiran's turn to speak, "I've never seen this 'Carter' or his fox before, but my son was at MacLit's shop today. When he came home, he told me all about the fox there. All he had to do was say the name of a book, or what kind of stories he wanted, and the fox would just go and get it for him."

"My daughter was asking to go there as well," Alex added. "I was thinking about taking her on Monday, but..." His voice trailed off as he hesitated, not liking the idea of his daughter going to see some unnatural monster.

Kieran started to muse and spoke up again, "Do you think... I mean, do any of you think that maybe this is a reason for Summer Fever? A sixth family just got locked in today. That's twice as many as there was this time last year."

"Summer Fever's been going on for years, Kieran," Nathan interrupted. "Why should it be different now?"

"Six years," Tines countered. "And that was just about when the Carter kid got his pet." Nathan, nor any of the others, had a response to that statement.

Kieran continued, "And if this is the first time this monster has been seen, it must be making its move and spreading the Fever to more people. Maybe its testing its limits, and if not this year, then next it'll try and infect everyone in Wygram, overpower us, enslave us!"

"Calm down, Kieran," Bradley said firmly.

"Nothing is taking over Wygram," Alex added with a heavy hint of mirth in his voice. "No sense going into a panic. This is all a load of lunacy." Another round of drinks came to the table and everyone started to calm down. The topic of their conversations changed from supernatural monsters to more mundane matters. However, none of them could shake the thought lurking in the backs of their minds, the thought that here is sleepy, little Wygram, a demon-fox creature had taken up residence.

Chapter 16

Time and the season slowly dragged on. And as it did, the rumors spread and grew. The peak of summer was nearing and already there was an inordinate number of quarantined homes. To make matters worse, problems began to come up in the fields, sections of crops were failing and some were starting to worry about what the harvest would be like. Would there be enough brought in for the winter?

With this formula of events in play, Magus was starting to notice he was receiving strange looks from an increasing number of people. The looks he received varied widely, from intrigue and disbelief, to fear and reproach, to scorn and loathing. Fewer people than usual came to the bookshop, and Magus started to get an uneasy feeling about the town. It felt like his own home was turning against him.

Fortunately, MacLit pulled the young man aside with an assignment. There was a shop in the next town north with parts the old man would use to make the little gizmos and displays he had around the bookstore. He was getting too old to make the journey himself and made a list of things for Carter to retrieve. It wasn't going to be a short trip, it would take at least four days to get there on foot, three if he could cut through the woods safely.

In the few days before Magus planned to leave, there was a low increase in a buzz of activity. Even though the young man did not notice this, he had an uneasy feeling, a sensation that something was not right in Wygram. Without giving much attention to it, he packed his earnings as well, a partly sum of ten bronze marks, the equivalent of two hundred bits.

As Magus packed on the night before his trip, Aeya approached him. The fox jumped up onto the bed and tilted her head, looking at him expectantly. She shifted her form and let her legs hang over the side of the bed. The green shirt materialized on her body during the change, covering her torso. Her mass of tails flowed behind her, a few ends falling over the edges of the bed beside where she sat. "Are you going somewhere, master?" The fox-woman asked.

"Yep. MacLit wants me to head north to Crossroads Spring, the next town up," the young man answered. "And why do you keep calling me 'master'?"

"Cause you are, Magus, and always will be," Aeya smiled, speaking sweetly. "You're not going to leave without me, are you?"

Magus nodded as he folded and put another shirt in his pack, "You'll be fine here while I'm gone. MacLit will feed you. And you just need to stay out of trouble."

The fox woman gave a pout, "But I want to come with you. It'll be an adventure, like in the books!"

Magus couldn't keep a straight face, "It's just going to be a lot of walking, girl. You'll get tired and I'll end up carrying you."

"You won't have to carry me," Aeya insisted, eagerly wanting to come along. "I'll walk the whole way, I promise." Magus sighed and looked at his pet. "Please," she emphasized.

The young man took a breath and spoke, "Only if you help carry your share."

"Yes! Yes!" she barely let him finish before smiling widely and wagging her tails in a frenzy. With the matter decided, Aeya helped her master add some extra provisions and slept soundly with the biggest grin on her face.

XXX

Morning came and it was a dismal one. Dark clouds hung heavy and low in the sky above Wygram. A brisk breeze blew through, the wind winding its way around the buildings and making for the North. This blustery and stormy weather had come up out of nowhere, a right freak of nature no one had predicted.

Magus had his pack beside him as he looked out the window of his bedroom. Aeya had joined him with her paws on the sill. "Not how I want to start this," the young man said to himself. One hand went down and rubbed the back of his pet's head.

The fox murred softly and leaned into the rub. After a moment of enjoyment, she adjusted her head to stare up at Magus with a meaningful look. "Yeah, we still need to go out there," he said solemnly, almost as if he was trying to convince himself of departing. Finally, he put his free hand on the sack of supplies and hoisted it over his shoulder.

Locking his room, Magus gave the keys to MacLit and they bid each other a goodbye. The young man and his pet left through the back door and began to make their way towards the northern end of town. The crisp, clean wind bit at his back and he pulled his cloak around him more tightly. What Magus didn't notice as he pulled the hood was a couple of people following at a distance. By the time Magus made it to the north end of Wygram, a group of five people were following him, spread out thinly and all wary of their movements and their quarry's.

Finally, Magus reached the last building on the way out of town. He passed it by and continued on the northward-winding road. As far as he could see, it was deserted today and he could not blame any prospective travelers. On such a dreary day, he couldn't imagine anyone being out in this dismal weather unless they had to, like him.

As he rounded a bend in the road and Wygram was lost from sight, the young man saw something he hadn't expected. Ahead of Magus and his fox, a short ways up, two mysterious figures stepped out of the woods from opposite sides of the trodden, dirt road. He didn't recognize either of the strangers, nor could he see anything too distinct about them at the current distance. Still, from the way the pair held themselves, they did not look too friendly.

The situation did not bode well and Magus felt a little uneasy. Glancing behind him, the young man didn't feel any better. Two more strangers were heading towards him. This new pair walked and carried themselves in the same manner as the first pair. Fearing for his life, Magus turned right and walked into the woods as calmly as possible. The fox that had been walking beside him so far paused when her master suddenly changed direction.

But when she looked ahead and behind, she got the same uneasy feeling Magus did and didn't hesitate to turn and follow the new path.

A few steps into the trees and Magus loudly whispered to his pet, "Run." With that, the young man bolted and Aeya took off at his heels, tearing off east through the trees.

Chapter 17

As the young man and the fox ran, the sounds of their escape were joined by the sounds of the strangers, coming from beside and behind. The two were forced to run forward, and up ahead was a large clearing. Bursting out from the treeline, Magus faltered and came to a sudden stop. They had arrived at Wygram's graveyard.

The branches of the few, aged oaks in the cemetery shook against the dark, clouded sky. The roar of the rustling leaves was the only sound present in this otherwise still and solemn place. But it was not the trees or the many tombstones that had Magus's attention, instead, it was the dozen or so people gathered that had his gaze.

The people that were present all looked at him. There was no coffin or freshly dug grave to be seen, and the people were spread out amongst the headstones, they had been waiting for him to arrive. To the left and right, a few more figures appeared, the ones he had seen on the road just minutes ago.

"There it is," someone grumbled loudly, pointing towards Magus. Despite trying to hide their identities under hoods, the young man could see looks of scorn grow on their faces.

For a moment, Magus was confused. He couldn't understand what he could have possibly done to incite the rage and fury of a mob. And then, another of them spoke, "Get that fox!"

Magus instinctively scooped up his pet, fearing for her safety. "She hasn't done anything," he yelled out defensively. He looked around as the crowd started to move and close in around him.

"The demon-fox must have him under a spell of some sort," one voice called out.

"Trickery!"

"Wicked-craft!"

"Vile-works!" other voices joined in, supporting the first.

The mob inched their way closer and closer, and with each step, Magus's fear and terror grew. Suddenly, seeing a gap in the circle, the young man charged with the fox clutched close to his chest. Those closest rushed to fill the hole, but Magus was lucky and he burst past them into the more-or-less open graveyard.

Member of the mob shouted in protest as Magus broke free. Some broke off from the rest and began to give chase, others drew weapons from the folds of their cloaks, and still more unleashed aura-powered attacks. The young man dodged and ran the best he could to escape the assailants. But it wasn't enough.

A chunk of aura-guided rock hit him squarely in the back, knocking the breath out of him. The young man fell forward onto his face as he lost grip of his pet. Aeya sailed a short arc through the air and landed about two meters away, hitting her side with a sharp yipe.

This had gone on quite enough. Aeya did not want to be a part of this scene anymore. She wanted to run away and leave these horrid people behind. But she could not. The fox simply could not leave her beloved master and closest friend behind at the mercy of the hooligans.

Steeling her nerves, Aeya took a daring breath and ran to the young man's side. He looked alright, just knocked down and slightly dazed from the attack. The mob was moving closer, holding their weapons threateningly. The fox positioned herself between Magus's body and the advancing people, bared her teeth, and growled, trying to look fierce.

Had the situation not been so unpleasant, the fox would have looked almost comical, perhaps. Her hackles raised and her tail poofed out when the mob didn't stop. They were coming for her.

Panic overtook Aeya, and without thinking she shifted form. The crowd gasped at the sight of the elven-tailed fox-woman standing in front of them. "I knew it!" some shouted.

"Demon!"

"Kill it!"

"Burn!" other voices joined in.

Aeya's breathing escalated in terror for her life. Without warning, a sensation overtook the fox-woman. She suddenly felt detached from the entire environment around her, as if she was having an out-of-body experience. A blank look came over her face, followed up with a slight scowl.

The peasants gasped in further shock as Aeya's eyes started to glow a brilliant shade of blue. Her normally golden eyes were replaced with the bright, blue glow. The tips of her tails followed suit. Each and every one changed to the same azure color of her eyes. The tails started to glow and writhe like a boiling sea of white and blue, fueled by an unbridled and terrible rage.

This time, when the pet bared her teeth, she truly did look frightening. The villagers had not prepared themselves for anything of the likes of this. The scowls of rage melted away into visages of fear. A few in the mob shuddered, then they began to run. The mob dispersed in panic, screaming for their own lives.

Magus picked himself up in time to look back and see the last of the mob fleeing out the graveyard's exit, back to Wygram. His gaze traveled upward to find the backside of Aeya's mass of writhing tails. He had never seen the tips change to that shade before. After a moment, when every member of the mob had vanished, the glow stopped. The color drained from the tips, and her tails slowed in their movement. She turned around and helped her master to his feet, looking at him with her normal, golden-iris eyes, "Magus, we need to go. Please." There was a clear tone of worry and fear in her voice.

The young man brushed himself off and looked again to where the mob had fled. They wouldn't be gone for long, and with them around, Wygram was no longer safe. He nodded to her pet and took her hand, "Let's go."

Chapter 18

The next three days were spent running. Aeya and Magus fled the graveyard, gaining as much of a head start as they could afford on the villagers of Wygram. They started off by heading north, moving parallel to the main road from a distance. After a while, though, the two of them had a thought. The people who assaulted them must've known when they were leaving. And if that was so, they would have to know where the two of them were originally bound to go. With this in mind, they began to deviate from the path and take a more north-westerly direction, away from the north-northeastern town of Crossroads Spring.

Thankfully, they planned ahead and rationed out the food originally brought along. Of course, three days of food is hard enough to stretch out. It was on their fifth day out, while wandering through the woods, that their hunger was starting to get to them. "Magus, my stomach hurts," Aeya whimpered as they walked on. For a relatively pampered pet, she had managed to soldier on fairly well. But now, with their supply of sustenance gone, she started to give low whines. Her ears folded back and the ends of her tails moved to a shade of red, getting darker with each day.

Magus took a pause in their walk to put an arm across her shoulders. "It's alright girl," he tried to reassure her. "Sooner or later, we'll find a new village. And we can get supplies there." Truth was, the young man was just as worried as his pet. He didn't know how to navigate the strange woods beyond the bounds of home in Wygram. Nor did he know how to survive off the forest without aid.

Despite Magus's attempt to put on a brave facade for the two of them, Aeya was still able to see past it. "It's okay, master," she spoke softly. "I'm scared, too. You don't need to pretend."

The end of the fifth day came and it was time to hunker down for the night. The young man reached into the pack and pulled out the last meager scraps of food that remained for them. Aeya had shifted to her fox form and proceeded to eat her final share while Magus unrolled a sheet for them to sleep on. It was going to be a warm summer night, so cover would not be an issue. Although, the young man did not dare to contemplate what they would do when winter came rolling around, if they made it that long. Once they were ready, the two of them retired for the night, Magus laid on his side, the pack being used for a pillow, while Aeya curled up against his chest.

XXX

The warm, soft rays of late morning sunshine pierced the forest canopy and shone gently across the runaways in patches and blotches. The soothing warmth started to rouse the pair of sound sleepers. The two had been so tired, they hadn't heard the creeping footsteps of a stranger who now leaned against the trunk of the tree they had slept under. Seeing they were on the verge of waking, he took a deep breath and shouted, "Ey now! What we got here?!"

Magus and the fox bolted awake with a terrified start. The stranger roared out in laughter at the expressions on them. Getting a good look, the young man saw the intruder was another young man, around his age, but perhaps older. There was a look of youthfulness on his face and in the movements of his body. But by his darkly colored garb, he held an air of a bandit. The stranger saw the worry coming into Magus's eyes and raised a hand, palm down, beckoning him to stay seated on the ground. "Stay, stay," his voice was light, but there was an undertone of seriousness that he should not be crossed. "Now, fooling aside, my question still stands. Who are you? And what are you doing out here?"

"I, uh," Magus had been caught off guard two-fold. First was the wake-up call, second was the desire for conversation. Magus thought he could see a blade hidden in the liberal folds of the stranger's clothing. What thief would treat a victim like this? Why not just rob him and run? Or maybe he wasn't a bandit at all.

"Come on, speak up, now," the stranger insisted after hearing the young man stutter a response and fail.

Magus quickly composed himself to speak to the stranger, "I'm traveling. Just heading for the next town."

The stranger nodded almost knowingly, as if he had heard that excuse a fair number of times before. "I see," he replied with a bit of a swagger to his voice, "And you must know the name of the nearest town, right?"

"Crossroads Spring?" the young man hazarded, a tenseness of uncertainty was clear in his words.

The other man slowly shook his head. "You've overshot yourself," he informed. "You're west of it, now. Too far west. You're closer to another town, now."

Magus hesitated, he didn't remember the name of any village nearby. The stranger took advantage of the pause and continued, "You don't know where you are, not where you are going. You're poorly packed and I saw you ran out of food." He waited moment to let his statements sink in, "If I had to guess, I'd say that you are running away from something. Am I right?" The young man didn't need to answer the question. This stranger had figured the gist of the situation out rightly and they both knew it.

He continued, "You're running away, lost, and with no food." The stranger moved into a crouch as Magus got in a sitting position, hugging his pet to his chest to keep her safe. The stranger gave an assessing look over Magus and spoke some more, "I know what it's like to run. And I didn't have anyone to help me. Whatever you're running from, it must be worth it, or you wouldn't have made it this far." He jerked his head in a direction, "Come, let's get you and your fox some breakfast."

Chapter 19

Having few other options, Magus gathered up his blanket and pack before following the stranger. Aeya looked up at him with an unease in her eyes. The young man didn't say a word but reached down and rubbed behind the fox's ears in attempt to silently reassure her without making the stranger suspicious about her.

He didn't actually say anything after they started walking. The stranger just led Magus and his fox on a winding path through the woods. The young man could have sworn they were being led in elaborate circles, never really going anywhere. After half an hour of walking, they finally stopped. "Can you climb?" the stranger turned back to ask as he stopped at a particular tree.

Magus almost thought they were back where they started. The tree that the stranger approached looked almost exactly like the one Magus had slept under. He couldn't be sure, though, given the disorienting walk the young man had been led on. Magus watched as the stranger grabbed a seemingly random vine and pulled. The vine came down and attached to the end was a rope, knotted at regular intervals. The stranger took the rope in one hand and extended his free one to Magus. "Anything I can carry for you?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," Magus replied as he handed his pack over. "I never got your name, though." The stranger slung the bag over his shoulder and began to climb, not bothering to answer Magus in return.

By the time the stranger was halfway up, Magus stepped to the rope and took a hold of it for himself. There was a low whine at his feet. Looking down, Aeya had a paw on his foot and gave a face of worry. "We'll be okay," he assured her before crouching. "Come on. Up, girl."

The fox bent her legs and sprang up. She clambered up his arm and clung tightly to her master's shoulder. Making sure she was secure, Magus slowly began to climb up the rope. The stranger had already made it the rest of the way and vanished. A moment later, the young man felt a tug and realized the stranger was pulling the rope back up, and him with it. "That's some fox you got there," the stranger commented as she came into his view and noticed what she was doing. "Never seen anyone train an animal to do that."

"Thanks," Magus replied as he was helped off the rope and into the tree. "She's a smart girl." Relaxing, he was able to get a look around. Beautifully hidden about five meters off the ground and among the branches was an enclosed structure, a tree fort of sorts. Peering beneath, the natural branches continued to grow and camouflage the underside from any possible passersby.

The stranger saw the look on Magus's face, "This is one of my hideaways." He pushed a drab curtain of a door aside and went in, leaving it hung open to the side.

Magus took his fox off his shoulder and went in, setting her on the floor of the tree fort. "Hideaway?" he said with a little confusion.

The stranger nodded as he took a seat on a crude mattress. There was a pair of crates against the wall, a table in the center, and a simple, wooden chair, not to mention the mattress the stranger sat on. Magus took a seat in the chair and Aeya hopped into his lap. As the two settled in, the stranger spoke up and properly answered Magus, "Yes, this is a hideaway. What self-respecting thief doesn't have a hideaway?"

Chapter 20

"Th-thief?" Magus stammered. The thought had crossed his mind, but it was been dismissed in favor of the more comforting notion that this person was a hunter, a friendly ranger, or some sort of wanderer.

The stranger made a motion for Magus to keep calm. "Maybe you've heard of me?" he suggested. "The name's Ren."

Magus perked up, "The Ren? Ren of Wallis Keep? The rogue who stole the prized jewel of the castle under the guard of three hundred? The same one who escaped the fifth deepest, most secure prison in Obrin?"

"The very same," Ren nodded.

"How did you escape?" the young man quickly asked. "I've read and heard some theories, but no one knows."

The thief smirked, "And that's the way I want to keep it. Let them wonder about the prison incident."

A second later, reality came back to Magus. While he may be sitting in the same room with a local legend, he was still in the presence of a thief, someone who took from others to make a living. Worry crept into his voice as he realized he had no idea of what the thief was planning, "W-why did you bring me here? Y-you're not going to hurt me... are you?"

"Just calm down," Ren reassured his guest. "If I was going to rob you, you never would have seen me. Besides, it looks like the only thing you got left is your pet. And it wouldn't be right right to do that to either of you." He paused for a moment, watching a sense of relief come onto Magus's face and replace the melting tension, "I'm a thief, but there are some lengths I will not go to. I will not separate people. And I won't take anything of sentiment."

There was a certain shine in Ren's eyes that Magus saw. Somehow, he could tell that the legendary thief was speaking the truth. But for the life of him, the young man couldn't figure out the reason he was receiving such a kindness. A look of confusion came over him. The question of 'why?' was written all over the young man's face.

Ren easily saw the question on the forefront of his guest's mind. "I was like you, once," he explained. "I was forced to flee. And now, I have to say, my life is better for it."

Aeya laid on Magus's lap, looking and listening to the stranger with her master. She knew it was best to hide, but she did watch their host. Magus started to relax and gently stroke the fox's back as he listened to the thief.

Ren continued, "I was young, and led a decent life." He got up and stepped over to the chest. The thief pulled out rations, handing a decent amount to his guest while he continued his story. Ren told of the sheltered life he had lived in. It was a good life, but he said he felt like there was something nagging him, that there was something always in the

corner of his eye but unable to see. Until finally, one day he managed to slip past watchful eyes and look out at a world he did not know.

What he saw saddened him, then it stoked his anger. Ren became discontent at his sheltered life and rashly ran away. It was an ill-thought-out venture, and the first few weeks were the roughest. But he stuck it out and discovered he had a knack for the more shadowy of professions.

As any career, he started off small, procuring meals from bakeries and evading the local law enforcement. Over time, Ren worked his way up to more ambitious gains, finally culminating in the grand heist of Wallis Keep, for which he was known for.

Magus and his fox finished their food and listened to Ren finish his tale, enthralled. "So, what do you do now?" the young man asked politely.

Ren gave a little smile, "Now? Everything else is just a walk in the woods, after Wallis Keep." He leaned forward in his seat, "I didn't get any help when I started. But... I'd like you to have the chance."

The young man gave a confused look at the thief, clearly not fully understanding. Ren continued, "I'll teach you how to fend for yourself, find food and shelter."

Magus blinked a few times before speaking, "Th-thank you. It is very kind of you. But I don't understand why."

There was a pause, a few moments of silence, before Ren spoke again, "That's something for you to find out. Now, you get some rest. Tonight, I'll start teaching you. Cool evenings are the best time. And you should learn how to move in the dark." He got up from his seat and moved to the entrance of the hideaway, "I will be back later. Help yourself to some more food. But don't leave before I return. I know these woods better than anyone and I'll find you easily."

With that, the kind thief stepped out and disappeared with the sounds of his quiet descent to the forest floor. After a few minutes of silence, Magus finally spoke out loud to Aeya, "What do you think, girl? Do you think Ren is alright? He's offering to help us."

The fox didn't respond. At least, she didn't respond verbally. Instead, Aeya nuzzled her master's hand in a reassuring way, as if agreeing with him.

"Yeah, I guess we'll be fine with him. We can certainly use the help," the young man continued. "I suppose we should rest like he said."

Aeya gave a purr at that and waited while her master laid out his blanket on the floor. With his depleted pack as a pillow, Magus laid down on his side. Once he was comfortable on the floor, Aeya made her way around and curled up against his stomach. As they drifted off to sleep, Magus reached a hand over and slowly, softly stroked her along the the fox's upper back.

Chapter 21

When the evening arrived and Magus awoke, Ren had returned and was ready to take the young man out into the forest. Magus had a little snack and instructed his pet to stay behind. She readily understood and obeyed, and Ren was left intrigued and impressed at how 'well-trained' the fox was, not knowing the truth behind her.

After descending from the hideout, Magus was able to look up and see a few scattered stars between the canopy overhead, waking up to greet the night sky. Ren beckoned the young man to follow behind him and they were off into the darkening woods. After a few minutes of walking, the thief finally spoke, "Tonight, I'm just going to take you for a walk. You should get used to moving around at night, in the dark. This can be the safest time to move around." His voice was carefully controlled to be no more than a whisper only Magus could hear.

A few moment later, there was a loud, sharp 'crack' under Magus's feet! Ren instantly froze, spinning around on his heel to face the young man, who had frozen in place as well. They thief bent down and picked up a stick from under Magus's foot, handing it to him. "First rule," he spoke softly. "Alway mind your surroundings. Watch your feet just as much as what is around you."

Magus solemnly took the thing he snapped and the two of them continued their walk. The sun inched down further until it finally set. Its light ebbed away while the two crept along through the forest trees. And in a while, the young man was unable to see where he was going. His hands groped forward in the darkness while he started to stumble.

"Here, take this," Ren's voice came to the young man's ears. The thief gently took a hold of the end of a cord around his palm. Giving it a tug, Ren led Magus between the columns of trees. "You'll get used to the dark," the thief spoke. "I was blind as a bat on my first nights. Stubbing my toe was the least of my issues."

Ren continued his story softly, "One night, I was making my way down an alley, looking for shelter. I didn't really know where i was, but I certainly found out. Unable to see a thing, I crashed face first into some barrels and made quite a racket. The noise attracted some... unsavory types of people. Apparently, I had stumbled into their territory. And they were not too pleased with my presence among them. THEY made it thoroughly clear to me about my transgression. Needless to say, I made it out of there with more cuts, bruises, and scratches than I had come in with."

The young man listened intently to Ren's tale. "What happened after that?" Magus implored, trying to keep his speech as quiet as the thief. "Did you get back at them? Hit 'em back harder? Show them you weren't to be trifled with?"

There was a long pause. Magus wanted patiently, expectantly, for a response while he continued to be led on. Finally, the thief answered, "Nope." He kept his reply short and simple.

"No?" Magus responded in turn, an inflection of confusion clearly in his voice.

"Correct," Ren affirmed. "I never sought revenge on them after that. They made it clear I should leave town, and so I did. They were bigger than me, stronger, and more of them. What were you expecting? Heroics? Me walking into the face of demise?"

The young man frowned in the dark. "I-I'm sorry," he apologized with a tiny stutter. "I've... I've read stories about your adventures and thought-

"That's all they were: stories," Ren interrupted. "Except for Wallis Keep, the rest are all stories. I wrote them myself. Decent income for my downtime."

He went silent as Magus took a moment to take it all in. He could see the look of the young man's face. Despite the dark, he could see the feeling in Magus's eyes. It was like he was watching someone tear the pages of a book and fling them into a fire. Ren finally spoke once more and continued, "I'm glad you enjoyed the stories, but I am no hero. I'm still a thief."

Disheartened, Magus looked to where Ren's voice came from, "Then... why are you helping me and Aeya?"

Magus could feel the thief shrug, the motion traveling down his arm, across the cord he held, and to the young man, "I don't know. Maybe I've had enough of writing about doing nice things and now I want to do them."

After that, the thief and the young man continued on in relative silence. There wasn't much else for them to discuss. And there had been some hint in Ren's voice implying he did not wish to carry the conversation on any further.

Chapter 22

Magus's life changed rather quickly after the next few nights. Thanks to the thief, Magus wound up sleeping through the day and going out at night to learn new skills. By the end of the week, the young man's eyes had adjusted enough to see and navigate the forest floor without having to be led around. At this point, Ren was satisfied enough that he began showing good sites for trapping and gathering wild food. He showed Magus how to make simple snares and traps, as well as how to hide them. On the side, the thief showed his pupil how to repurpose some trapping methods to use against people, too.

It didn't take much longer before Aeya was coming along with her master for the thief's lessons. Although he was hesitant at first, the fox quickly impressed him. Ren was surprised by just how responsive to Magus the animal was. She followed him closely, stepping right inside his tracks. While Ren was teaching, Aeya would watch the two, as if studying them both. She even learned how to avoid the traps Ren taught about, and even spot the ones that the thief had expertly hidden!

A few weeks in, Magus started to catch a few small critters. Upon reaching this milestone, Ren started to teach him how to treat what he caught. There were some ways to skin animals that were more effective. And cutting at the right angle yielded a thicker cut of meat and less waste on the bone.



Eventually, Ren let his student go out on his own in the night. Little by little, the young man continued to get better at his new skills. By the end of a month's time, Magus was receiving a crash course in turning fresh meat into long-lasting jerky.

Between his lessons of self-sustainability, Magus took time during the early morning hours to exercise his elemental aura. His night-time wanderings had allowed him to discover a small area near a stream where there was enough room to practice. The place had a multitude of willow trees spread along the bank, up and down on both sides. One of these willows stood taller than the rest, its lengthy, swaying branches reached almost to the grassy banks, making a natural curtain of leaves. Looking upstream, there was a nearby bridge, just visible around the bend. That bridge was part of the road leading into Wallis Keep, the local stronghold for this region of the country.

But that was a mere side note for the young man. When he came to the leafy dome early in the morning, while the stars were still out and the sun still slept, his main concern was to practice his magical skill. And, it was in this secluded patch

that Aeya felt comfortable. Only within the shroud of the willow, when she followed Magus there, did she shift to her human-like form to stretch and relax. The fox would find a place to lay down by the base of the great tree and watch as her master focused and manipulated his fingers to unleash small, weak attacks of lightning, honing his prowess over the element.

It was a decent lifestyle for them over the next couple of weeks. Ren was pleased with Magus's progress and continued to teach some survival skills, crafting some basic items and the like. Into the third month, the thief started to teach Magus some basic stealth and how to fight. He showed the young man how to always step lightly, making almost no noise with his footfalls. The thief showed him how to defend himself, and tricks to gain the advantage in a struggle. Albeit, the techniques were simplistic and on a beginner's level, but they were still useful to know. Most combatants, street gangs and highwaymen, never received formal training and the young man would have an edge on them. However, on the other side, Ren assured his students that the methods he taught were unconventional enough that he would at least have a small chance against trained combatants, local law enforcement and the like, "At the very least, you can buy yourself a few seconds to escape."

XXX

Summer hit its peak and the warm months started to wane, the short nights slowly grew longer. While spending the last hours of one night at the willow, Ren came up. The thief watched Magus as he practiced shooting sparks of lightning from his hands. A white-blue circle would light up around Magus's fingertips and, a second later, the circle would flare up with white light, releasing a small bolt of electrical energy. The projectile would fly out and dissipate before reaching the leafy curtain the willow provided.

As the thief watched, he noticed the young man's fox laying by the trunk of the great willow. The fox spotted Ren, as well, and raised her head to him, ears perked and at attention. Ren had gotten used to Aeya's attentiveness and gave her a small nod in her direction. He refocused on Magus and tilted his head, thinking to himself. Reaching behind him, the thief pulled out a knife. He subtly tested the weight of the blade.

"Think fast!" Ren shouted. In one fluid motion, the thief snapped his arm up and sent the throwing knife hurtling towards the practicing mage.

Aeya yiped in a moment of fear as Magus spun around and saw the dagger coming his way. He twisted to avoid the attack. The metal flew wide past the young man's left arm while his right raised in the direction of the blade's origin. The blue-white circle materialized at his fingers, and by the time Magus actually looked at his attacker, the conjured lightning had fire off.

The bolt of energy from the young man tore through the air towards Ren, slamming into the trunk of the willow and missing the thief by just under two meters. Neither Magus nor Aeya saw the thief flinch. "Nice reflexes," Ren commented. He took a few steps over to the point of impact, reaching a hand out and gently touching the slightly-smoldering bark the size of a small plate, "Give it a few years and I don't think I'll want to be on the wrong side of you."

Magus took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down from almost injuring his benefactor. The young man's hand was still raised, frozen in place. "What were you thinking?!" he finally asked in an exasperated voice. "I could have hurt you!"

The thief turned his head to Magus, a smile on his face with a hint of condensation. "Oh, I don't think there was much risk," Ren answered. "Besides, my throw was wide. Just to make you react. Like I said, give it a few years."

Slowly, the young man lowered his arm and got back into a relaxed state. Aeya, who was standing by this point, trotted over to her master, although her gaze stayed on Ren while she moved. The thief could almost feel the burn of her disapproval at his action in her eyes. The fox leapt up and perched herself on Magus's shoulders.

After the fox had settled, Ren spoke again, "You've been around here for some time, now, Carter. I've taught you a lot of things, haven't I? Do you think you would like to come into town with me?" He took a few steps away from the tree and towards Magus.

The young man paused for a moment, watching as Ren stepped closer. The early morning light of the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon in shades of deep purple and magenta between the willow branches. "You want me to come to town with you?" Magus spoke with confusion and surprise. "You really want me with you? To Wallis Keep?"

Ren gave a slow, almost sage, nod, "You could use a change of pace, Carter. We'll just pop in for a night and be out by morning. No muss, no fuss."

Aeya nuzzled her master's neck, begging for some attention. He responded to the fox, raising his hand to rub behind her ear. A smile formed on his face and he asked Ren, "Can Aeya come with us?"

The thief thought briefly, but nodded, "I'm sure she's smart enough to know when to stay out of the way. Sure, your little fox can come along."

By this point, the fox was purring softly. Magus gave a nod. The thief continued, "Good, then. I'll see you in two days." He turned and departed, leaving the shelter of the willow.

Chapter 23

When Aeya could sense the thief had left and was not lurking about nearby, she jumped off her master's shoulder, landing on the ground and shifting her form. Her eleven tails slowed behind and swayed gracefully as the fox-woman turned around to face her master. "Magus?" she said in a soft voice, "are you sure about going with Ren?"

The young man shrugged, "He's helped us a lot over the past few months. You know we wouldn't be here, if not for Ren."

Aeya looked down with a tinge of concern, the tips of her tails turning to the faintest shade of orange, an almost creme hue as it with with her neutral white. "I know," the fox-woman said, almost reluctantly as she looked at the ground. She crossed her hands over the front of the oversized, dark green shirt she wore. Her ears folded back. "I just..." she started, "he's still a thief. You said so yourself, Ren is a legendary thief and there are stories about him, books. I remember seeing them in the shop." She paused a moment, before summing up her feelings, "I don't trust him. He makes me uneasy."

Magus took a step forward and reached his hand to his pet. He gently rubbed behind Aeya's ear, causing a smile to creep onto her face. She couldn't help but lean into his hand and begin to purr. The young man gave a smile and a friendly, amused scoff. "Don't worry about it, Aeya," he reassured her. "You'll be there with me. We'll be fine."

She barely heard what Magus had said, enjoying the ear rub much more.

XXX

The next night passed without incident and eased into the following. Ren showed up as the sun set and climbed into the hideout. Magus was already up and had been waiting on the thief for the past half-hour. Aeya was laying on her master's lap. Her eyes were half-closed as he pet her, but she was actually wide awake and ready to go. Her ears twitched and followed the sounds of the thief as he approached. "All set?" Ren asked, looking over the two. Magus, dressed in dark, animal skin clothing he had made, gave a nod of affirmation. The fox in his lap got up and jumped to the floor.

The troop left the hideout and made their way into town, Ren in the lead, followed by Magus, and Aeya trotting close behind. The thief in front took them to the road, following the trodden dirt path to town. Magus looked to the left as they went over the bridge, he could see the great willow tree towering above its brethren. It was just behind that curtain where the young man had spent so many recent hours practicing his powers.

After thirty minutes of walking, the young man could make out the thinning of the forest and the rise of buildings in the distance. The light of a full, white moon hung overhead, not a cloud to damper its presence. Stars sparkled in their formations, decorating the otherwise barren, dark-blue night with their constellations around the moon.

On their approach to the town, Ren deviated from the packed dirt of the road. He moved into the woods, slipping between the trees once more and moving into town from the backside of the homes. As they moved in, Magus spotted a sign near the road they abandoned, reading 'Wallis Keep' in large letters. *This is really it*, Magus thought to himself as they moved into town.

Wallis Keep was greatly different from the young man's hometown of Wygram. Not only was this town more than triple in size, it was divided into three, concentric sections. Where the three currently were was the outer streets. This area was the poorer side of the town and occupied mostly by the farmers and those who kept livestock. On the roads heading into Wallis Keep were situated various inns, although the ones here were of a low standard, not to mention lower price.

Separating the outer streets from the inner town was a large, stone wall. The dividing structure rose over sixteen meters, easily overlooking the outer buildings. At three meters wide, the tops could hold a multitude of defenders, their method of scaling the wall was thanks to a scaffolded system on the interior.

Egress into the inner town was through one of four large, heavy, oaken doors two and a half times taller than any man. The massive doors stood open in the night. The country had no tensions to worry them and the only night security Wallis Keep had at the time was an occasional, torch-wielding guard patrolling the rampart. Keeping an eye on the light-bearers that roamed along, Ren directed himself and Magus against the walls of the smaller houses and shops. The two men and the fox moved towards one of the gates. The young man glanced up at the lone guard wandering down the way and away from them. In a low whisper, he asked, "Why are we hiding if they're just going to leave the gate open?"

Ren paused for a moment, glancing around a corner to examine the open doors just beyond. He muttered a response, "It's just better if we're not seen. Curfew, yeah, curfew reasons." He didn't look back at the young man behind him.

Before Magus could respond back, Ren motioned him to keep silent. A second later, he made another motion for Magus to follow and the three of them made a dash for the gate. A couple of guards wielding pole-axes stood nearby under a wall-mounted lantern, but they were too engrossed in conversation with each other to notice the two men and the fox slip in past them.

The inner town had a different air, compared to the outer side. The structures here were of a better quality and the roads here were actually paved with a great multitude of flat stones. The shops were painted in lively colors, but in the pale light of the moon, the facades appeared more muted and calm, asleep like everyone else, or so it seemed.

As they moved around the inner streets of Wallis Keep, the three noticed light coming from what appeared to be the town square. Ren led the way, skirting the furthest edge of the festivity while still using its light. Magus glanced down the streets as they moved on, catching glimpses of the revelries. Music played and people were laughing and dancing to the tunes. He hesitated at the sight, a pain of nostalgia went through him as he remembered all the years he spent in Wygram and all the festivals he attended while growing up, festivals in a town he could never return to.

"Hurry up," Ren scolded the young man quietly. Tearing himself away, Magus followed, leaving the cheeriness behind for the darkness ahead.

In the center of Wallis Keep was the keep itself. The castle was a grand structure of dark grey stones. It stood stoutly, disproportionately wider compared to its height. There was only one means of getting in and out that could be seen: the front gate. Like the other gates on the first wall, the one guarding the castle was made of strong oak wood. However, it was evident that this door was, by far, more sturdy. Surrounding the keep was a wide, shallow ditch. In times of a siege, oil was to be dumped in and set alight, to deter attacks from any other side other than the front gate.

A distinct trend was noticeable among the inner city buildings. The closer they were to the keep, the better quality they were in. The half of the inner city that was closest to the castle was granted the benefit of street lamps, not unlike those in Wygram. By the glow they offered, it could be seen that the shops were sporting fresh coats of paint. The streets were cleaner with less debris. And, the ground was better paved.

Despite the luminescence, Ren skillfully led the way across the shadows that were only made deeper by the lamps. The stars above faded, yielding to the radiance closer to the ground. The moon still watched their progress, though now it was not alone. Small clouds formed over the past hour since this night's venture began and not threatened to cast a veil over the watchful moon.

Finally, Ren came to a stop at the back of one of the homes standing in the forefront presence of the castle. Rising three stories tall, its architecture was stout, yet elegant. With light fingers, Ren tested the handle. Finding it locked, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a lockpicking set.

Magus looked with a mix of confusion and incredulosity as the thief deftly worked the lock. "What are you doing?" the young man asked in a worried whisper. "Why are you breaking into someone's home?!"

"We're not breaking in. They just forgot to leave the door unlocked," Ren responded. A second later, there was a solid 'click' and he pushed the door open.

Though Magus couldn't have heard it, Aeya caught the sound of the thief's heart quickening at his answer, in addition to a subtle rise in the tension of his muscles and posture. Despite lacking the acute senses of his pet, Magus carried a cloud of doubt and worry in his mind now. Something about this whole thing was starting to bother him, but he still followed Ren inside.

Once the thief had gone in, and the young man was about to follow, Aeya gave out a low whine. Getting her master's attention, she looked up and gave a weak wag of her white-tipped tail, expressing her dislike of the situation as much as she could, given her form.

Magus glanced from his pet, to Ren, and back to her. He frowned at her. "I'm sorry," he told her softly. "I don't like this, now, either." Finally making up his mind, Magus ducked inside the home going after Ren, and Aeya following close behind on his heels.

Chapter 24

The interior of the house was, needless to say, dimly lit. The clouds obstructing the moon did nothing to help the situation. But, it was not entirely pitch black dark. A lone oil lamp was burning lowly near the doorway leading to the rest of the house. The wick was turned down low and the resulting light was a smoulder, barely enough to define the silhouettes of the room. Ren expertly moved through the room, his feet gliding silently across the wood floor towards the lamp. Before doing anything else, he poked his head out the far door. Satisfied with what he saw, or didn't see, Ren pulled his head back into the room and grabbed the lamp next to him. With a small, measured twist of the knob, the wick rose and brightened up. While it didn't exactly brighten and bathe the room in light, the glow was enough to more clearly discern the shapes and silhouettes around the thief. He glanced back to the young man and beckoned him to follow with a single sweep of his arm before moving on.

Magus opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. Talking was probably not a good idea at the moment. On the other hand, though, he was now left in the dark, in the middle of a strange room. Seeing no other recourse, Magus deftly raised his hand in front of him, palm and fingers up. Drawing his energy together, a small circle of bluish-white light appeared at his fingertips, illuminating his hand. A low hum and second later, a small orb of solid lightning formed and dropped into his hand. The orb crackled lowly, just barely audible despite the silence of the night.

Holding the orb aloft, the blue and white glow of solid lightning was more luminescent than Ren's lamp. It shone enough to reveal some of the closest objects in the room. Shelves and counters were stacked high around him. Without much other thought, Magus moved forward and followed Ren out the same doorway. The thief was creeping down a hallway with the lamp in hand. Magus moved after him, and Aeya came after her master.

Going past a few empty doorways, Magus could tell by the walls just how well-off the family here was. And, indeed, it was a family, hanging on the wall, towards the front door was a quiet, yet beautiful, portrait of a man and woman holding each other close and four children gathered in front and around them, two boys and two girls. Magus didn't have time to examine the work more closely, however.

Opposite the painting was a flight of stairs. Ren hadn't paused for the portrait like the young man had done. He straightaway went up the stairs, all while keeping as quiet as a sleeping breath. Gliding up the steps, he only paused a moment at the top to look behind and see Magus only a quarter of the way up. Ren waited till the young man was on the last quarter before moving on.

Magus watched as the thief stealthily moved from door to door, peering in one and moving on to the next. He didn't like the direction this endeavour was heading. Aeya could sense this, in his face and the way his walk slowed down ever so slightly. The nails of her claws clicked lightly on the wood floor as she padded up behind her master and nudged his leg.

He paused and turned to see his pet. The fox looked up at Magus with a plaintive expression. Her tail didn't even wag as she sat down right there. In the bluish-white light of Magus's solid lightning, her golden eyes pleaded with him to leave the house.

The young man opened his mouth to say something, but he was cut off by a hiss from Ren. Snapping forward to look, Magus saw Ren beckon for him to follow him into a certain room, four doors down on the right. With a sullen look on his face, he obligingly stepped up beside Ren. The thief had gotten out the lockpicking set and began working on the door. Before the young man could get a word out, Ren once again proved his skills and deftly opened the door.

The light from Magus's orb surpassed the smouldering glow from Ren's lamp. The door swung in, and the bluish-white light illuminated the room beyond enough to make out a chest on the far side. It looked heavy, made out of oak and wrought iron wrapped around the outside. Without hesitation, Ren strode over to the chest and began to work the lock.

Finally, Magus built up the courage to speak. "What are you doing?!" he demanded in a harsh whisper. "This isn't right."

Ren turned and eyed the young man, "What do you think I'm doing?" His quiet voice almost dripped with contempt, "I'm making my living."

"You can't just steal from people," Magus replied, aghast. "It's not right."

The thief stopped, stood up, and glared at the young man who questioned him. Gone was the teacher that Magus had known all this time. "You think you can tell me what to do?" he growled, clenching his teeth. The tiny crackles from Magus's orb only added to the menacing appearance, "You think you can come up to me, after twenty-some years of scraping a living, and tell me I am wrong?!" He advanced a step to the young man, "I took you in when you were dead meat, when you were about to starve, and gave you a place to rest. I taught you how to take care of yourself. I didn't question you about why you ran from Wygram." He paused there, looking down at the fox by Magus's leg. Her hackles bristled defensively, but Ren scoffed, "I always thought those folk were crazy. Something in the food, I bet. That little runt following you around looks harmless enough."

Aeya gave an indignant growl at being called a runt, though she stayed glued to her master's side. At that moment, the orb in Magus's hand started to lose its glow. The power was running out. Magus looked into the face of the man he once respected. In the dying light, the shadows across his face grew longer, deeper, and more frightening. "W-why did you bring me here?" the young man said with a momentary stutter.

A grin grew on Ren's face, narrow, yet pronounced and terrifying in the final luminescence of the dying orb of lightning. "Oh, you'll see. Soon enough," he said with a dark tone, so unlike the one normally heard by the young man.

With those words, the light died and the three were left in the near darkness of the shuttered room. Someone moved. A foot pressed heavily on the wrong floorboard and a loud creak and groan emanated. Barely a second later, a voice called out room another

room, "Who's there?!" It was a deep voice to a large man quickly woken from his sleep. No doubt it was the same man Magus had seen in the portrait.

"Run, Aeya!" Magus whispered hurriedly to his fox. He tried to flee as well, but collided with Ren in the dark. They grappled each other in a brief struggle, before the young man felt himself pushed to the side. It wasn't that hard of a shove, but the room was small enough that he couldn't recover before contacting the wall. The impact against the shelved walls hurt, but, more importantly, it resulted in a loud crash.

Ren cursed under his breath and quickly unshuttered the nearest window and scampered off into the dark of night. Magus, who had fallen to the floor, gave a groan of pain. He tried to pick himself up and get on his feet. Footsteps outside the room could be heard, approaching rapidly. All thoughts had returned to escape, here would not be a good place to get caught. In that moment, it dawned on the young man what Ren had intended. The thief was going to let him take the fall! That was why he pretended to be so nice to Magus!

Unfortunately, this revelation distracted the young man too long. A large man bearing a striking resemblance to the one in the portrait stood in the open doorway. He easily towered over the young man by several inches. In one hand, he brandished a stout club as long and thick as his muscled arms. The other hand carried a brightly lit lantern that revealed the rest of his strong largeness and beyond him.

Behind the huge man stood another. The second man was as tall as the first, but definitely thinner. He held his hand up with a ring of white light glowing, ready to unleash a spell at half a moment's notice. In his face, there was a remarkable resemblance to the man in front. Doubtless, he was the son of the gruff, club-holding man.

They both stepped into the small room with their eyes on Magus. They were both armed, bigger, and easily stronger. The father and son had every advantage over Magus. And they didn't look like they wanted to listen to his excuses at this hour of night.

Chapter 25

Aeya had already rushed out of the house and onto the back street before she turned around and realized Magus was not behind her. Looking up, the fox saw light coming out from the open window on the second story. She gave a small whimper to herself, wishing there was something she could do to help.

Just then, her thoughts were interrupted when the fox's sharp ears caught the faint sound of footsteps shuffling. Turning her attention to the right a ways, in the dim light, Aeya could pick out the silhouette of Ren. The traitorous thief worked open a window and slipped inside. She didn't quite understand everything that was going on, but the fox clearly understood her master was in trouble, and Ren got him into that trouble.

While she heard a small commotion in the room with Magus, Aeya watched the window the thief slipped into. A second later, while the noise was still going on, Ren came back out the opening, rucksack in hand. On the ledge, he tied the sack to his belt and scurried off. To the the corner of the house he went, and shimmied down the drainpipe.

The fox's tail drooped and she gave a small whine. *What should I do?* she thought to herself. *What can I do?* She looked after Ren, then back to the fancy house. The front door opened and one of the sisters from the family portrait ran out. Aeya didn't doubt she was only going to return with more trouble for her master. The fox started to get a bit antsy, shifting her stance in place. She couldn't go inside again. And she didn't want to hurt the family, they were only protecting their home.

*Ren, she concluded, Ren can fix this. He **will** fix this.* With a growing determination, Aeya gave one glance back at the house before pursuing the thief.

Though he had a head start, Aeya's nose quickly picked up the trail. She bounded through the dark streets, making turn after turn. The trail continued to grow warmer with each second of her pursuit. That is, until she came to a puddle of water on the street. Ren must have crossed it.

But when she looked up, Aeya found herself at a crossroads. The thief could have gone in any direction, at this point. Concern and fear grew in the fox's mind. Suddenly, a small sound reached her ears. She perked them up, to the right, and caught the sounds of a cart riding away from her, slowly.

Hearing nothing else, and having little choice, she started running after the sound. In the dark, she spotted a dimmed lantern, barely glowing from around the front of a carriage. A driver held the reins to a pair of horses, plodding along. As Aeya trotted up to the rear of the vehicle, she heard voices coming from inside. With a short leap, the fox scrambled onto the luggage rack.

Once she steadied herself, the fox put an ear to the backside of the carriage. There were two voices coming from inside. One was strange to Aeya. But, the second she could clearly

tell it belonged to the thief she sought. "How is that not enough?" Ren said in an incredulous tone.

"It's enough when I say it's enough," a second voice spoke with a strange calmness. "I thought you would have learned the rules by now. And besides, that was a wasteful use of a decoy. It's quite a shame, that one looked like he had such promise. If only you had handled him better." There was a ring of disdain in the second voice, the kind one may hear from a noble talking to a lesser person.

The mysterious second person continued, "I think you'll find this next item more to your pace." The fox barely caught a grumble from Ren before the voice spoke again, "And don't waste your resources, this time. You'll be leaving in a few days."

Aeya heard the click of a door being opened on one side. With a stealthy glance, she saw Ren slip out of the carriage. He didn't see her, but she managed to catch a disgruntled look on the man's face. Whoever was in the vehicle, Ren was not pleased with them. The carriage was none of the fox's concern, now. With a short hop off the luggage rack, she landed on the cobblestone street and pursued the thief further.

While the carriage crept away, into the darkness, the thief went in another, down a side street. The fox trotted a distance behind Ren, keeping him in sight and slowly closing the distance. Overhead, the cloud cover began to pass and the moon came out once more to softly light up the town.

Through the town and down sidewalks, they went. The thief slipped outside the first wall and into the poorer district of Wallis Keep. It was only as he was going down an alley on the edge of town that he turned around and saw the fox tailing him. Ren stopped and looked at her with a solemn, depressed gaze. "You miss your friend?" he asked quietly. The moon could not directly shine into the alleyway, but enough light bounced in to faintly illuminate the both of them.

The fox nodded her head at Ren. His shoulders fell slightly and he shook his own head, "You're going to need to find someone else to take care of you." As he turned to walk away, the fox gave a low whine and took a few more steps closer, making the thief pause. He sighed and looked back to her. "I'm sorry," he said, "there's nothing I can do. I'm not going to get myself arrested trying to break him out."

He turned to leave again and Aeya let out a growl. "Did you growl at me?" Ren asked. He paused a moment as if realizing something, "Why am I talking to an animal?"

Aeya narrowed her eyes, and right before the thief, she transformed. The slight moonlight gleamed off her clean, cream-colored fur in an almost ethereal glow. Her sea of twelve tails swayed behind her in a mix of grace and anger. The tips of each tail was deep, seething black. The mass of fluff rose around her, creating a foreboding presence. All through the spectacle, Ren stood transfixed in terror, unable to tear his eyes away.

Chapter 26

Midnight had rolled past and Magus found himself thrown in a cell, a cell inside the keep. For some reason or other, the guards who arrived at the house had deemed he was warranted a place inside the town's castle, more secure than the prison in the town's middle ring. As such, the room was constructed from cold stone and mortar. The only refuge from the chill was a crude mattress of straw in a corner. No window could be afforded, and a thick, wooden door with iron bracing was the finishing touch to the dismal cell.

A small comfort, the guards had left the young man unchained. A small comfort indeed, when he was locked up in the lightless cell. Magus was left to himself, generating a small glow from his spell power to ward off the sullen darkness. There was literally nothing for him to do, besides whittle away the hours thinking.

How could it have come to this? Magus started to ponder as he stared blankly into the glowing matrix of his aura skills. He thought of the books he read about Ren. This wasn't the Ren he knew from the stories. Why was he breaking into people's homes? Why was he still stealing?

As the time ticked by, Magus slowly came around to understanding. The answer was there in front of him the whole time, but he never saw it, or chose not to see it. Ren was a thief. Always ways. And always will. He lied to him.

Ren was not only a thief, he was a con artist. He played on the young man's time of need to garner his trust and build a relationship, one that could be exploited. What was so important in that house that he had to use Magus as a decoy? That was the one thing that confused the young man. Who were those people? And what did that have that was so important? *He seemed to have had it perfectly under control. What did he even need me for?* Magus thought to himself.

He was unaware how many hours ticked by. Alone and in the dark, he continued to think in circles, trying to crack the reason behind Ren's actions. No matter how much he tried to convince himself it was a simple matter, he always became hesitant. Something about everything didn't sit well with the young man.

Magus lost track of the time and fell asleep. Sometime later, when he woke, the young man found there was a small plate of food waiting for him, composed of stale bread and water. At least they weren't going to outright starve him. The hours continued to eke by while Magus was held in their possession.

He wondered how long they would keep him confined. The silence of the cell began to eat at the young man. He pressed his ear to the door in an effort to hear something, anything,

just to know if the world outside still existed or if he had somehow floated away... off the face of reality itself and into the void of beyond.

To be in such a place, what horrors and things might exist in such a place? He caught himself in the middle of the thought, not knowing where such ponderings could have come from. The aloneness must have been getting to him.

After falling asleep for a second time, Magus woke up to the rough touch of a pair of guards. Without so much as a wakeup call, he was shackled again dragged out of the cell. As he gathered his senses on the way out the door, Magus recognized that it was night outside. The three of them went past a number of other cells, each nicer than the one Magus had been confined to.

The guards lugged the young man out past the office, not heading for the front door. Instead, they took him to a side door down a small hall. Upon opening, Magus saw a carriage waiting for him, a solid lock on the only door inside the box on wheels. Regaining his senses, he asked, "Where're you taking me?"

"You're in more trouble than were paid to handle," one guard said gruffly. "It's too bad we couldn't hang on to you a little longer." The other chuckled.

One of them undid the lock and the other tossed Magus inside the vehicle. One slam and click later, the young man was trapped and being carried off to parts unknown. The cart rattled along the cobblestone, causing the carriage to jolt and jerk around. Comfort was not on the mind of the person who designed this thing. And once more, Magus was alone.

The young man looked down at his wrist, shackles clasped around them. There was only a thin sliver of moonlight coming in from a slot on the door. He could hear each clop of hooves as the horse in front plodded along.

Suddenly, Magus heard the sounds of a scuffle. The cart rocked as the driver tangled with someone. A few punches were thrown and the sound of a body collapsing to the ground finished the duel. The victor settled in the front seat and snapped the reins, spurring the horse to move faster.

The whole cart rocked and jostled Magus around for the next five minutes before stopping. The driver shuffled around and there was a click as the door to the prison carriage swung open. A cloaked figure ushered Magus out, "Come on, there is no time to lose."

"Ren?" Magus said in surprise as he stepped out.

The thief pulled the hood off to reveal his face, "You bet it is."

Suddenly, Aeya jumped down from the top of the carriage onto her master's shoulder. "Your little friend convinced me to help you," Ren said. "You should ask her about it, later."

A growing rabble could be heard approaching. Ren's bid for Magus's freedom had not gone unnoticed for long, and now the city guards were on their trail. The thief took a sack off his belt and thrust it to Magus, "Take this, it's your coin you left in the hideout. You'll be needing it. Let's go!"

Tearing off into the night, they hurried down small alleys, avoiding guards on the wider, main roads. But, as they neared the gate out of the inner city, they found the guards beat them to it, and were starting to close them. Ren grit his teeth and grumbled. Turning to Magus, the thief told him his plan, "I'll distract them. Get outside and keep running. Don't look back."

Before the young man could question him, the thief dashed out into the open. Shouting at the guards and antagonizing them, they quickly abandoned their job to pursue the thief. Only one man was left behind with a sword to defend the almost closed gate.

With as much stealth as he could muster, Magus crept up to the gate in the shadows. He was only ten meters from escaping, now. Putting all his learned stealth into action, Magus hugged the great wall and crept up behind the guard. His feet stepped lightly on the cobblestones, barely making a whisper of his footfalls. Aeya followed suit, keeping her claws from clicking on the stones as she stayed on her master's heels.

The guard strayed a few feet forward from his post. Luck seemed to be on Magus's side, now! He sped up slightly, closing the gap between him and the door. With a bated breath, he stepped over the threshold of the small door within the gate. The door wasn't fully open, and as Magus went through, his torso pushed it a few inches to squeeze through.

The few inches were all the door needed. Its hinges let out a whining squeak, and the guard whirled around.

Chapter 27

Magus burst his way through the rest of the door in panic, Aeya jumping after him. The guard wasted no time either. His comrades were too far off to aid him and he pursued the young man alone. He wore a type of chainmail made from a lightweight metal. His legs were covered in leather chaps. Needless to say, his attire was not going to slow him down. The guard picked up a swift pace after Magus.

In his mad dash, the young man put more of his thinking into running, and not enough into where he was going. All he knew was that he had to lose the guard before they came to the woods. But, his only visit to Wallis Keep left him woefully unaware of the design of its streets. Without this critical piece of information, he was left blind as he took turn after turn in hopes of being rid of the guardsman after one of them.

Eventually, Magus rounded the wrong corner. And he found himself barreling face-first into a dead end of wooden fence stretched between two buildings. It was too late to turn around, Magus was far enough inside that by the time he stopped and whirled around, the guard was standing by the entrance. The run didn't seem to tire him out as much, though he did breathe heavily by the entrance.

As his breaths shortened and he regained his stamina, the guard withdrew his short stick of a mace and held it at the ready. "Halt!" he called in a steady tone. "Surrender now and you won't get hurt." His firm gaze easily showed without a faceplate on his helm.

I ain't going back there, again, Magus thought to himself. "Can't you just, uh, let me go?" he asked nervously.

The guard edged closer and replied, "No, you cannot escape. You must answer for your crimes."

The young man gulped loudly, feeling a bit pale. "I didn't want to have to come to this," he murmured. He raised his right hand and a bluish-white circle came into existence.



The guard easily recognized a spell being readied. He took it for an act of aggression and advanced, closing the gap between them.

The young man let off the bolt of lightning and prepared another strike. Backpedaling as he loosed the second bolt in effort to avoid the the hard, metal cap of the guard's rod.

Remembering his lessons from Ren, Magus timed the guards next attack. While he lunged, the young man stepped to the side. The advantage was enough and the guard was briefly disoriented.

The guard was starting to get mildly infuriated with how much more nimble Magus proved to be. He swung wide with the baton, and missed, before lunging once more.

Another spell glowed into existence in Magus's hand. And as he sidestepped the guard for a second time, he raised his hand and let the bolt loose.

The guard screamed in pain at the lightning struck him in the face! It wasn't enough to kill the guard, Magus wasn't that strong, yet. But the pain was enough to cause him to recoil and fall to the ground. His rod was dropped and his hands went to cradle his burned visage.

The young man had not time to waste on apologies. With his fox beside him, Magus sprinted out of the alley and ran for the woods. Not once did he dare to look behind him.

Chapter 28

Magus made his way to the north of Wallis Keep and found a knoll of trees he could bed down in relative safety. It couldn't hold a candle to Ren's hideaway, but it was better than nothing. Together, they slept through the day, with Aeya occasionally waking and checking for possible intruders.

Once night fell, they were both up and on the move again. Through a wonderful stroke of luck, they had not been spotted and caught. From this point on, they were free from pursuit of the guards. Still, that didn't mean they could dally.

The pair kept up a good pace north, gathering some berries and nut along the way for food. Ren's survival lessons were paying off, now. A couple hours after midnight, they made it to a stream and were able to enjoy fresh, flowing water.

Flicking her ear around and deciding they were definitely safe, Aeya shifted into her human-like form and knelt by the water. She tilted her head and watched how Magus cupped his hands to pick up the water and pour it into his mouth. The fox-woman then tried it for herself. Clumsily, she poured the water in, but much of it spilled out the sides. The muzzle on her face made it more difficult to accomplish what her master had done. In the end, she compromised. She filled her hands with water and lapped it up with her tongue.

Once finished, they got up and continued walking, going over the stream and further north. About half an hour later, Magus spoke, "You know, Aeya, there is one thing I don't understand. Why did Ren come back for me? He could have just left me there."

The fox, still in humanoid form, picked up her pace till she was alongside the young man. "I, uh, persuaded him to help you," she answered a little bashfully.

He seemed confused, "How?"

He tails swayed behind her as they walked, the tails turning a curious mix of colors, a sort of reddish-orange hue. A slight blush came through her fur as she clarified, "I... revealed myself. To Ren." She looked away in embarrassment, but continued to speak in her soft voice, "I know I shouldn't have shown myself to another person. But when he wasn't going to help, I got angry and transformed. I must've scared him something awful, but he agreed to help after that."

Magus took a minute to let that sink in. "Ah, I see," he commented. "I'm just glad we're out of that mess and safe."

She turned her head back and the blush faded, along with the color draining from her tail tips. After a minute of silence, she spoke again, "He came up with a plan to rescue you. Even though I wanted him to save you now, he told me it would be better to wait a day or two till they were going to move you. He was so certain that they would. And he was right."

They came to a log and crossed over it. "While we waited, he said he was sorry for getting you caught. He said something about his boss wanted him to steal stuff," the fox-woman shrugged. "He said that if he was going to 'defy the master', he might as well do some good while he was at it. He seemed rather tired, I think." She paused for a moment, mulling over what she said, "So, if that was a job and he was working for someone, why would they have Ren do bad things? I don't see how that helps anyone. Master?"

Magus shrugged, "I don't know, Aeya. Some people just are mean-hearted."

"The people back home chased us away. Where they mean-hearted?" the fox-woman asked innocently.

"... No," the young man shook his head. "They were just frightened. They are good people. They just got scared of you, somehow." Seeing her start to look down, Magus put an arm over her shoulders and held her to him as they walked, "It's not your fault, girl. No one's ever seen anything like you. You're special."

A smile flickered to life on her face, "Thank you, master." Behind her, the tail tips started to fill in with a pale green.

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A few nights pass by as they travel. Along the way, Magus and his pet slowly transitioned their cycle to the daytime, once again. It was just in time, too. The pair happened across a new town, Torchwood. The place was bigger than Wygram, yet not as fortified as Wallis Keep.

By an amazing stroke of luck, Magus happened to find there was a job opening at one of the inns, the Baron and Fool Inn. It was a lowly position involving much cleaning of tables and scrubbing floors. But, at the very least, he was allowed to eat whatever scraps of food were left behind, and was given a small room or his own.

The owner, an older woman with a healthy chub around her belly took a shine to the young man. She beamed at him with a smile and shine of her bright, green eyes, "A pleasure to hire you, mister?..."

Magus suddenly realized that he was finally of age! According to ritual, the past four years determined what his new last name would be. But now, there was no one to bestow his new name upon him. The young man thought a moment, then answered, "Wayfare. Magus Wayfare."

