

WOLF'S HOUR



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"There are monsters in the woods."

Yozarf opened his eyes at the sound of the unfamiliar male voice. The light of late afternoon spilled through the tenement window, blinding him where he lay on the hard floor. The smell of blood wafted to him; old blood, soaked into the wooden boards where no amount of scrubbing could reach.

"And what is that to me?" Cool voice, indifferent to anything anyone might ever say. His mother.

"I know what you are, Londah," said the man. They were talking on the stair outside, Yozarf decided, but the walls were thin enough that they might as well have been in the room with him. A fly buzzed around his head for a moment, then landed on his wrist, its bloated body black against white skin and row upon row of angry, red scars.

Londah didn't rise to the bait. "Then you know that I do not have time for the tales of drunken fools."

"Damn you--I'm not drunk! We went into the swamp for the Hallows Night celebration last night, thinking that the humans wouldn't find us there. They didn't--but there was worse. We heard wolves howling--*wolves*, so close to the city! And Disera swears that she saw eyes reflecting in the light."

"And what do these things have to do with your monsters?" Londah asked. Yozarf could hear the amused contempt in her voice, although he doubted anyone else would.

"Don't you see? They were Wolfkin! Demons! Monsters. It isn't safe to go outside the city walls."

"It is nothing to me."

"They will devour anyone who crosses their path!"

"Let them."

The fool cursed her. When she failed to give him the satisfaction of caring, he left, tromping loudly away down the stair.

She moved more quietly, a soundless shadow sliding into the room, but he could smell her familiar scent. Just like he could smell the blood. Just as he always seemed to smell and feel things that no one else around him did.

Mad, some called him. He didn't argue.

"Who was that?" he asked, not bothering to stir in any other way.

Silence answered him, followed by the hiss of a blade sliding clear of a sheath. The *thock* of a throwing knife hitting the wood of the window frame was loud. Slowly, evenly, five more followed, all of them neatly grouped around a tiny knothole that Londah had chosen as her target.

"A fool," she said at last, going to retrieve her knives so that she could throw them again. Over and over, she practiced, every day, every night, for more years than he cared to remember. Londah's dedication to killing was the same dedication that others felt for alcohol, or lovers, or family.

"You love your knives more than you love me," he had said, childishly, during one of their few arguments. Few, not because neither of them had any anger, but because they both held it to themselves in silence, aging the bitter poison of grievances like wine.

"Bevin is his name, I think," Londah went on. *Thock*. "Disera's mate." The words were a condemnation from her; Londah had no use for love.

Once, she must have. After all, she must have loved Yozarf's father. His human father, who simply disappeared almost twenty years ago, shortly before Yozarf was born. Whether the man had died or

simply lost interest, only the gods knew. At least he had left little human taint in his half-breed son; Yozerf's pale skin, large eyes, and crimson hair were purely Aclytese.

Yozerf sighed and pushed himself up. A twinge of pain ran from wrist to elbow as the healing skin pulled. He had slit both wrists a dozen times four months ago, and it was only luck that had led to Londah finding him before death did.

As with their anger, it was something that he and Londah did not discuss.

The sun was finally setting. Yozerf wiped tangled hair back from his face, and for a moment he thought about going to the *Wyvern*, before remembering that Ginny wouldn't be there. Five months since she had died, and he still expected to see her on every street corner.

Bevin was a fool to fear monsters in the woods, when there were more than enough to be found in the very streets of the city.

* * *

Yozerf wandered through the market. He had no money, no purpose, no plan for his evening save to somehow pass the empty time. The days and nights of his life felt like chains around his neck, dragging the ground behind him as he forged blindly ahead, moving from nothing into nothing.

Another day of buying and selling had ended in the market, and he watched the vendors putting away their wares. The faint smell of blood came to him as he walked, and he turned, finding himself in front of a stall still piled high with furs. Their scents seemed to hold a secret language for him, but the one on top...

Its smell made the hair of his neck stand on end, brought an involuntary growl into his throat. He swallowed the growl, knowing that it would only draw attention. *Look at the mad Aclyte, wandering the streets and growling like an animal.*

Even so, he couldn't seem to move away. Trying to understand the source of his unease, he reached out and touched the soft fur with his fingertips.

"That's wolf," said a deep voice.

Yozerf jumped and swore silently. A coarse-looking human man stood on the other side of the counter, watching intently. He stank of sweat and grime, and his clothes looked as if they had been worn into the swamp and back. One hand rested lightly on a necklace around his throat; looking closer, Yozerf saw that it was nothing more than a fragment of bone strung on leather.

"Trapped it myself in the North, up near the Shalai border," the man went on. His dark eyes bored into Yozerf's, as if he looked for some sort of reaction.

But what? It made no sense. Yozerf shrugged and glanced away.

"I could use some help packing things up for the evening," the trapper added.

The prospect of money caught Yozerf's attention immediately. "How much?"

"Six octarrii."

Six copper coins just for a bit of lifting and carrying...he'd been paid less well to go down on his knees in an alley.

At the trapper's instruction, he piled the loose furs into a crate, ignoring all the things their scents said to him. *Mad.* The crate was bulky, but not terribly heavy, and he lifted it onto his shoulder and followed the trapper to a small tent set up behind the stall. The man lifted the cloth door for him, and Yozerf stepped inside. There was no light within, and he paused a moment to let his eyes adjust.

The trapper's foot scuffed the floor behind him. Yozerf started to turn, and caught a glimpse of an arm descending towards him.

Then something connected with the side of his head. Stars exploded in his vision, and he knew no more.

* * *

Gradually, Yozerf became aware of pain. His head felt as if someone had buried an axe in his skull, and his belly rolled with nausea.

What happened?

There had been a human...a trapper...the disturbing scent of the wolf fur...Yozerf had been carrying things...and then...nothing.

He lay very still, not daring to open his eyes. His skin pressed against rough wood that stank of old fear and piss, and he realized that someone had stripped away his clothing while he was unconscious. But, although his head pounded enough to make him ill, he could feel no other aches that would suggest he had been violated. It surprised him...and, in an odd way, frightened him as well. Rape was at least a familiar violence, and he was left wondering what unknown horrors his attacker might have in store.

The air against him was damp and cool; no doubt the sun had set. The strident cries of an owl sounded nearby, and he could smell the thick miasma of the swamp more strongly than he ever had before. *Did the trapper take me outside the city, then?*

"Are you sure he's one of them?" said a rough, male voice, and Yozerf's heart sank. It seemed that his captors numbered more than one.

"Aye." The trapper spoke this time, sounding impatient. "The amulet all but jumped off my neck when he came up to the stall."

His companion seemed unconvinced. "Maybe it was reacting to someone else? He's an Aclyte, isn't he?"

"Don't be stupid, Karteth. Even if I had been wrong about him at first, do you think it would have kept vibrating the whole time I was bringing him back here, even hidden under the furs of the cart as he was? He's one of them, all right."

One of what? He was an Aclyte, but clearly his captors were already aware of that, as if there had been any way to miss it. *What else am I? A thief? A whore?* Neither possibility seemed to fit the conversation he had overheard.

"Come on," said the trapper. "The bait is all set--let's see what walks into our snare."

Yozerf heard the sound of boots against the floor, then the creak of a door opening and closing. The men, it seemed, had left.

"I know you're awake."

A woman's voice. A human woman, speaking in a human tongue.

Yozerf opened his eyes, then shut them again as light stabbed his vision like daggers. His head ached fiercely, and he wondered if he might vomit.

He waited for his stomach to settle, then cautiously opened his eyes again, slitting them against the light. Gradually, the details of his surroundings penetrated the fog still shrouding his thoughts. The light came from a single, horn-paned lantern that hung from the center beam of a rough ceiling. The room was small, and its only windows were open to the night. The smell of the swamp drifted in on the

breeze, so strong it almost covered over the reek of terror and despair that tainted the air of the little shack.

The woman crouched on the other side of the room, her hands wrapped around the iron bars of a cage too small for her to stretch out in. She was naked, and reeked of fear. And of...something else, something he couldn't quite identify but which didn't entirely match the scent of any other woman he'd ever met.

Even so, her smell seemed oddly familiar, as if some deep, instinctive part of him recognized it. What it could mean, though...that he didn't know and couldn't begin to guess.

"What's happening?" Yozerf asked groggily, struggling to sit up.

"You heard what those men said?" the woman asked, her eyes darting fearfully between Yozerf and the door. "They hunt our kind--the trapper possesses an amulet made from the bone of one of us, enchanted and hung on a string. It vibrates whenever it draws near one of us, no matter what face we wear. They brought me here as bait--and now you, too, it would seem. If your pack comes looking for you, they will all be in deadly danger." Her knuckles went white as she gripped the bars. "We have to get out of here."

Yozerf frowned. His thinking still might not be entirely straight after the blow to his head, but he was fairly certain the woman's words didn't make any sense. "What are you talking about?"

She hissed in annoyance. "Aren't you listening? Our lives are in danger, and those of our packs. These men--they killed my sister, my parents, everyone except for my mate and myself! They caught them on four feet, took their skins, and left their bodies to rot, and they will do the same to your pack.

"My mate and I followed them here, hoping for vengeance, but one of them took me unaware. And now you." Some of the panic receded from her eyes. "Are there many in your pack? I've never seen one of our kind with Aclytese blood--are there more?"

Clearly, the woman's captivity had driven her mad. Yozerf could sympathize, although it would have been nice if at least one of them were entirely sane. "I'm none of your kind, human," he pointed out with what he thought was remarkable tact. There was a crude lock on his cage; Yozerf tugged experimentally on it, wondering how long he had until the men came back.

The woman stared at him, a puzzled frown on her face. "Our kind," she said again. "Wolfkin."

Yozerf froze. Bevin's words came back to him, fearful whispers of the monsters in the woods. *He was right. Oh gods.*

The woman--creature--thing--tilted her head to one side. "Your fear-scent sharpened--what is wrong?"

Yozerf swallowed hard. "A madman has locked me in a cage, and left me with a demon!" He jerked wildly on the door of his cage in the futile hope that the lock would give way. It didn't.

Trapped. Trapped here with a thing that will rend me to bits if it gets loose. Gods, please let the lock on her cage be as strong as the one on mine!

"You don't know?" The woman's eyes widened in disbelief. "How could you not know? Didn't your parents ever tell you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" He yanked harder on the cage, feeling fear pool in his gut.

"One of your parents was Wolfkin."

The ravings of a madwoman. "My mother is Aclytese, as you should be able to tell simply by looking at me."

"And your father?"

Yozerf slumped back, defeated by the lock. "Human," he forced himself to say, although he'd never imagined a day when that would have seemed the preferable alternative. "I never knew him."

"Listen to me." The woman glanced again at the door, then reached out towards him as far as her cage would allow. "There's no reason to be afraid. I don't know about your father, but you *are* Wolfkin. Believe me. Our children can't shape-shift until an adult takes them through their first change. That must be why you don't know, why you've never taken your other shape. As soon as my mate comes and lets us out, I'll help you through it. And then--then we'll run. All right?"

Yozerf pressed his fingers to his eyes. *There's nothing lurking in my blood. Nothing. My father was human, that's all. Gods, isn't that bad enough? I'm not this thing she says I am.* "You're mad. Those men are going to come back and do gods-know-what to us, and then kill us, and no one will rescue us. No one."

He'd wanted to die, but not like this. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering from far more than the chill night air. *Gods, is this my punishment? I left Ginny alone to die, so now I have to suffer as she did before I can find release? Is that it?*

Something moved outside one of the open windows. Yozerf and the woman both looked up at the same moment, just as a lithe figure slid through the opening.

Yozerf's heart leapt. "Mother! Get me out of here!"

Londah cast a quick, assessing glance around the room, taking in the closed door and the woman in the cage. She held herself taut and ready, an explosion of violence barely contained. "I find you in strange company, my son."

"You don't know the half of it," he muttered. She crossed the room in a single stride examined the lock on his cage closely, then pulled out a rolled-up bit of leather containing her lock picks. "How did you find me?"

Londah set to work on the lock. "When you did not return after a few hours...I grew worried," she said, not looking away from her task.

He had spent most of his life roaming the streets of Segg, and if she had ever worried for him, she had never spoken of it before. Nor had she dogged his steps, nor even asked him where he had been when he came home in the odd hours of the morning.

She thought I had tried to kill myself again, he realized. That was the reason for the change.

"I was told that you had been seen aiding a trapper packing his wares," she went on. "None had seen you leave his stall, however. It was not difficult to pick up his trail, especially after he left the city and entered the swamp. I watched him and the other leave, and followed them for a short space; they are setting jaw traps to the south."

"Curse them--they look to catch my mate and your pack," the woman said bitterly from her cage.

Londah cast Yozerf a questioning glance. He leaned closer, breathing it into her ear. "She says she is Wolfkin. Whether this is true or not, I don't know, given that she claims that I am Wolfkin as well."

Surprise showed briefly in Londah's cool gaze. "If there was ought than human blood in your father, I know not of it, my son," she murmured. "Shall I risk setting her free?"

The lock came off in her hand. Heart pounding, Yozerf shoved the cage door open and stood up. His body protested, and the room spun for a moment before settling.

"Let me out," pleaded the woman. "If you have any mercy in you at all, don't leave me here!"

There came a soft hiss, followed by a solid thump as an arrow embedded itself deep into the wall, mere inches from Londah's head. Londah dropped instantly, dragging Yozerf to the floor with her. Even as they went down, Londah twisted and hurled a knife at the lantern hanging from the ceiling; there came the sound of something breaking, and then the little shack was plunged into darkness.

"Get under the table," Londah ordered. She lunged towards the door, perhaps thinking to throw the bolt, but it was too late. There came the sound of running footsteps, and a moment later the door came crashing inwards, letting in a spill of moonlight.

Yozerf got a confused glimpse of the trapper, an axe raised above his head as he charged inside. Londah rose from the floor almost at his feet, grabbing the axe handle with one hand and slamming a knife into his throat with the other. The smell of blood filled the air.

Londah let the dying trapper collapse, keeping hold of the axe. In what seemed a single motion, she spun about, swinging it with all her strength. The edge came down on the lock on the woman's cage, snapping the poorly-tempered iron.

Yozerf's heart jumped into his throat. *Will she turn on us? Tear out our throats? Become a monster?*

"Thank you," gasped the woman. Her legs shook as she crawled out of the cage and stood up, and there were tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

Londah had flattened herself against the wall after breaking the lock, and Yozerf knew that the knives in her hands would be in the woman's throat in an instant if need be. "Get away from the window," she hissed. "The archer is still out there somewhere."

The woman started to drop to the floor, perhaps thinking to take refuge with Yozerf by the table. But it was already too late.

Either the archer had excellent night sight, or else was incredibly lucky. There came the hiss of an arrow, followed by a sickening thud as it imbedded itself in flesh. Yozerf's fellow captive screamed and fell to the ground, clawing frantically at the bolt sticking out of her chest.

Yozerf cried out and lunged towards her, acting on some deeply-buried instinct that urged him to help her if he could. At the same moment, a shadowy figure came through the door, colliding with Londah. There came a clatter and the sound of a struggle, and Yozerf spun, intending to go to Londah's aid. His mother was already rising to her feet, however, her bloodied blades in her hands. The archer did not move again.

"Are there any more of them?" she asked in a low voice that he could barely hear above the moaning of the injured woman.

"I don't think so."

"Then we will risk a light."

He heard her opening her pouches, smelled the faintest whiff of scorching cotton as she lit a small candle with her tinderbox. The light flared; shielding the flame with her hand, Londah moved it closer to the injured woman so that they could see her wound.

She lay where she had fallen, her mouth gaping open with the effort to breathe. Blood bubbled out of her nostrils and coated the corners of her lips. Yozerf had seen enough death in his two decades to know that there was no saving her. The arrow had punctured something vital, leaving her to drown as her own blood filled her lungs.

When she saw him kneeling over her, she reached towards him. "Don't move," he murmured, although

in truth it would make little difference, save perhaps in pain.

The woman shook her head, and he saw determination in her eyes. Her mouth worked, and he realized that she was trying to impart some last word to him. Wondering what final, mad thing she might have to say, he leaned closer to hear.

He felt her hand come to rest on the back of his neck an instant before she pulled him to her with the last of her strength. Her lips met his, and he tasted blood as she slid her tongue into his mouth. He tried to pull away, but some force seemed to keep him locked in place. Something was happened to her, to the skin he could feel against his own, her flesh blurring, dissolving, changing...

It seemed for an instant that he stood on the edge of a precipice, every muscle contracting wildly in an instinctive attempt to keep him from sliding over the edge. But the woman was locked with him, pulling him down, down, down...

The wolf blinked and stepped back. The smell of blood was even more intense than it had been, and the air was rancid with terror and death. The she-wolf lay on the floor, her tongue lolling out; he saw her twitch one final time, then fall into stillness. Dead.

Frightened, he backed away, felt the roughness of the wooden planks through his thick pads. Dimly, he was aware that his ears were flat against his skull, and his tail was tucked firmly between his legs.

A tail.

It seemed that the she-wolf hadn't been mad, after all.

The wolf looked to the only other person there, hoping for any explanation, but his mother looked even more surprised than he, if it were possible. Her knives were in her hands, he saw, and all the blood had drained from her face. With a sudden surge of fear, he wondered if she might kill him, kill the thing he had become, and he flattened his belly to the floor.

Very slowly, Londah laid her weapons aside and reached out to him.

He ran to her, and she grasped his head, her fingers buried in the thick fur of his ruff. For a long, long moment she simply stared at him...and then, a fierce look of exultation filled her eyes.

"Yes," she whispered softly. "It is a miracle from the gods."

He tilted his head to the side, uncertain what she could mean.

"Do you not see, my son? You now have no need of cities, of humans, of Aclytes, of anything other than yourself. You can leave Segg, leave behind the filth and the depravity, and never walk upon a street again. Go--leave Jenel and go to the Eastern Forests, where there are no humans, no Aclytes, no one to trouble you. Live free."

Free.

A sense of joy exploded in him, stronger than anything he had ever known. Londah saw it and laughed her fierce laugh. "Go, my darling. Go. Be happy."

The wolf ran from the squalid shack, feeling as though he left behind all pain and all fear as he did so. A dead wolf lay outside--the she-wolf's mate, no doubt--but he didn't pause to investigate. His long legs carried him swiftly away, from shack and city both.

The moonlit night was bright in his sight, and he ran for a long time, exulting in the stretch of muscle over bone. Smells assaulted his nose, all of them intense and full of meaning. Gradually, the ground beneath his feet became drier and firmer as swamp gave way to simple forest. A young rabbit flushed as he ran, and he snatched it up in his jaws, killing it quickly and eating it whole. Its blood was warm

and good, and he felt no revulsion, only the joy of filling his belly.

As the sun began to rise, the wolf at last came to a halt, even though he felt as though he could have run forever. He was strong and tireless, and his teeth were sharp. Never again would he cower in fear. Instead, others would fear him.

There were indeed monsters in the wood.

And now he was one of them.

The further adventures of Yozerf and Londah are chronicled in the Lord of Wind and Fire series from Mundania Press, LLC. Book one, WOLFkin, is available here:

<http://www.mundania.com/books-wolfkin.html>