

Read on for a

RAVENSONG

short story

The wolf mother tilts her head back, looking up at a funny little cloud, and she thinks about her art. The colors. The way a blank canvas looks, the brush in her hand, usually in the left, but sometimes in the right if she's feeling daring. Art is life, art is pain, art is suffering, and even then, there's beauty in it, if only one knows where to look.

It comes in stages, her art. Sometimes she stands in front of her easel for hours, head cocked, studying, watching, waiting. Her Blue Period—desperate slashes of aquamarine, cobalt, navy, midnight—had consumed her, grief an extension of her hand, smears of paint meant to feel like healing. A lie, this, but one she did not let herself believe, not completely.

She's not the artist she once was: gone is the temerity of youth, the vibrant violence sometimes found in art. She is softer, now. More contained. Age, experience, *life*, all amassing into a desire to build, to lift, to encourage. She has known death. She has known pain. She has been blue for so much of her life that the green of relief feels like a dark temptation, one that she can only reach for with trembling hands.

But she knows that there are some things more important than slashes of paint across a canvas. Her audience, for one. Three boys, heads close together as they whisper about the black rot, and the woman chosen to seek out the God of the Forest.

They are here, in this place, the clearing: the power of the territory thrums through the wolf mother's veins. It knows her, and she it, perhaps better than anyone. *At least for now*, she thinks in amusement as the children wonder aloud if Sen will reach her goal, or if she will be eaten by some creature. They seem

fixated on the God of the Forest. She doesn't blame them. It was always her favorite part, too.

"I bet he's a timber wolf," the youngest says excitedly. "Just like Dad."

"No, he's going to be all black," the middle boy says with stars in his eyes. "Like how Alpha is. He's the strongest wolf."

"He's probably going to be pink," the oldest boy says. "Like the inside of a hot dog." Like father, like son, and it makes the wolf mother's breath catch in her chest.

They all look to her to see which of them is right.

She chuckles. "All good guesses, those. But the point of the story *isn't* necessarily about the God of the Forest. It's about the lengths people go to in order to protect what they consider theirs."

The children lean closer together in anticipation.

She says, "Sen knew the dangers she faced."

She says, "She knew the chances of success were slim."

She says—

Sen left early in the morning, the sun a distant promise, a heavy mist swirling around her feet. She carried only a small satchel filled with dried fruits and meats and a flask of water. On her hip, the dagger of black stone, a gift from the mountain.

She knew the heart of the forest lay hidden deep within a vast expanse of wood, and there, the territory of the god. The people of the village had told stories to the younglings, stories about men who had traveled to commune with the god, only to be never heard from again—though rumors abounded that they had been changed. "It is an old thing," they always cautioned. "Older than the lands, the oceans, the rocks. If it deems your heart impure, it will cast judgment upon you, and you will see its true might."

"Has anyone seen the God of the Forest and lived to tell the tale?" one boy had asked, eyes glittering in the light of the fire.

"Perhaps," came the reply, "though no one has ever returned."

With this thought ringing in her ears, Sen moved through the woods. She was careful; though they kept out of sight, she could hear animals moving around her. Low growls filled the air as thin tendrils of rot spread along the trees, the limbs, the shrubbery. It wasn't as invasive here, not yet, but she did have to course correct every now and then as she avoided the infection.

Soon it would be, though. Sen watched as a butterfly landed on the leaf of a bush. Shortly, its legs became stuck in black viscous liquid. It struggled, wings fluttering. It took only moments before the rot had stuck to the wings. The butterfly's antennae twitched before stopping.

The first night, she was still in familiar territory. A bubbling creek was her guide, runoff from the black mountain causing cold water to chuckle over smooth rocks. She drank deeply before washing the sweat off her face and arms.

A small fire, the smoke curling upward. As the blue above faded into black, ice chips appeared in the vast nothing, and she called out to them, the stars, asking for their guidance, their trust. The stars did not reply, but then they never really did. She slept fitfully, awakened again and again by beasts who wailed and snarled. Once, in the darkest part of the night, she sat up and saw violet eyes watching her from near the top of a tree. They blinked once, twice before disappearing.

She did not sleep for the rest of the night.

The first three days passed by in a haze of sunlight and rot. She ate from her pouch, just enough to keep the hunger at bay. The further she moved into the wood, the older the trees became, ancient things with cracked, gray bark and wilted leaves. At night, she lit her fires, hoping it would be enough. If she dozed, she dozed lightly, jerking awake at the smallest of sounds.

On the fourth day, something changed.

She realized she was being hunted.

It started as a prickle along the back of her neck, the hair standing on end. She paused, turning her head left, then right.

Trees. The wind. Rocks and fallen whitened branches that looked like bleached bones. The rot, spreading as if alive, twitching, reaching. Rustling of bushes, branches, sticks breaking, leaves shuffling.

Sen unsheathed her knife, gripping the handle deftly. The present from the elder, her grandfather, on her fourteenth birthday. Too young for such a gift, but then her parents had died months before, and her grandfather said she needed something to help keep the fires of grief from cracking her flesh. That night, as tears streamed down her face, she'd looked at her reflection in the black stone. Wiping her eyes, she'd decided then and there that she would do whatever it took to be worthy of such a weapon.

It had served its purpose well: an animal downed with an arrow, bleating in pain and fear, and she would descend with words of calm and thankfulness, telling the creature its death served a purpose. Once the animal had calmed under her touch, she'd sink the knife in between the ribs and into the heart with a fierce gentleness, her words a soothing balm as the animal gave its life so that others might live.

And now, alone in the forest, days from the only home she'd ever known, she gripped that blade tightly, willing whatever was stalking her to show itself.

Nothing did.

Raising her knife above her head, she shouted, "I seek the God of the Forest! I will have my counsel with it, and should anything try and stop me, I will do what I must to survive. I am Sen, and I fear nothing!"

The wind whipped through the trees. Movement, off to the right. Branches breaking. Leaves shuffling. A low, groaning rumble followed by a high-pitched whine that grew louder and louder until Sen could only cover her ears, the blade of the knife flat against her cheek.

She did not light a fire that night. Nor did she sleep, blade at the ready.

It was on the sixth day that she passed from the lands she knew

into the lands she did not. As far as she knew, no one who had come this far had ever returned. The trees here were older by hundreds—if not thousands—of years, towering above endlessly. Plants grew that she'd never seen before: flowers with yellow petals and blue centers, wooden spikes that grew along the bases of trees, vines that seemed to move of their own volition.

All infected with rot.

It was worse here, the black disease thicker, more insistent. It latched onto trees, hung down from branches in thick, gelatinous curtains. It speckled the flowers, the bushes, the shrubs, the grass.

In the branch of a tree above her, a small animal: thin and lengthy, it had white fur and a short, stubby tail. It bared tiny fangs at her, eyes flashing violet.

She kept her distance, moving around it carefully, its eyes never leaving her. She glanced away for only a second—if that—and when she looked back, it was gone.

“Where did you—”

It came then, not from above, but from behind her. Hearing crashing limbs and swift steps, she spun around, moving into a crouch, her knife in front of her, horizontal to the ground.

But she did not move fast enough.

A tawny big cat leapt toward her, talons extended, eyes flashing violet, black rot leaking from their corners and coating its cheeks. Before she could move, the cat slammed into her, knocking her flat on her back, the knife at its throat. It mewed at her, a lowly thing that stank of death and decay, eyes alight as its paws on either side of her head dug into the earth.

She kned it in the stomach with all her might, the cat snapping at her, eyes narrowed. Screaming, she pulled the knife across its throat.

Blood spilled down onto her as the cat jerked its head . . . and sank its teeth into her wrist. She barely felt it, blood coating her face, her neck, the bitter metallic taste causing her to gag as it slipped down her throat.

The cat whined, low, pitiful, as it stumbled off her, the wound

in its throat gurgling. It slumped over on its side, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling . . . and then it was still.

Standing on shaky legs, Sen rose above the cat, its teeth still dripping with her blood. She stared down at it with pity that soon turned into revulsion. As she looked on, the lips of the ragged wound across its neck began to twitch. For a horrifying moment, Sen thought the cat had been pregnant, and somehow the fetus was trying to push its way out of the body. But then a small, black lump fell from the cat's throat, landing on the ground. It twitched once, twice . . .

. . . and then began to crawl toward her.

With a furious scream, Sen slammed her foot down on the mass. It exploded under her foot, a wet squelch that she knew would haunt her dreams for the rest of her days, however long that might be.

Wincing, she turned and left the cat behind. She had only made it ten feet when she heard movement behind her yet again, wet and slippery. Turning to look back over her shoulder, she watched as rot descended from the trees above, lines of black, three in total, like tentacles. They fell upon the corpse of the cat, sliding underneath it, its head lolling to the side. As she looked on, the tentacles pulled the body up into the dark shadows of the trees.

Later, as she knelt next to the ever-expanding creek, she washed her wound in the cold waters. Four punctures, two slightly bigger than the others. Her blood tinted the water red, her skin numb. She didn't know how long she sat by the creek, her mind slipping between thoughts. It was pleasant enough; she didn't have to think about what lay ahead, or what she had left behind. How long had she been gone? A day? A week? A month? No, that didn't feel right. She tried to count back. One day. Two. Four. Five . . . six? Six days. She thought she had been gone for six days.

She stood and continued on.

That night, she slept, but she did not rest. Her dreams were surreal, vivid things. She returned to the village. Everyone cheered, touched her hands, her shoulders, her face, her hair. Except they weren't people, not as she'd left them. Instead, they

were creatures with eyes that glowed in orange, in red, in violet. Creatures with gaping maws and fangs and paws where their hands should have been. They slobbered and snarled and howled as a bloodred moon rose high above them, and she felt it, felt the urge, the desire to tear into them, to rend flesh until it hung in tatters, to feast, to eat.

Her grandfather sat upon his stump, but he was not as she remembered: his skin had been replaced by thick white hair, his face elongating into a furred snout, teeth snapping as a line of drool fell from his jaw.

Wolves, *Sen* thought in her dream, as her people began to shift, their muscles and bones groaning, falling to their hands and knees as the change overtook them. They're all wolves.

She was frozen in place, unable to move, her feet rooted in the soil. The people screamed and begged for her to save them. *Tek*, nude from the waist up, glared at her with murderous violet, taking a step toward her. And another. And another.

Still she could not move.

Tek fell to his knees, his hands digging into the ground. Back arched, he made strange yipping noises, guttural exhalations that grew deeper, stronger. The skin of his back began to quiver as he changed, the sound of bones breaking as loud as anything she'd ever heard, like a knot exploding in a fire. Black hair sprouted along every inch of his body, and when he lifted his head, *Tek* the man was gone, replaced by a massive wolf.

Wolves, all. All changed. All shifted. She was the only one left. And, as the wolves howled at the blood moon, she felt something in her, something slick and oily that felt alive. She grunted as it ate through her chest: her lungs, her heart, her rib cage. Through her eyes, the world changed, becoming clearer, sharper. Human thoughts faded as she stood no longer on two feet, but four.

And she was hungry.

She feasted, then. Feasted on all of them. They tried to run, tried to fight her off, but she was bigger than they were, stronger. She chased them down, her claws and fangs finding their target

again and again. Some distant part of herself knew this was wrong, knew she had to stop, but a bigger part of herself didn't want to.

This was the part that she listened to.

The men. The women. The old. The young. All fell before her.

She saved her grandfather for last.

He didn't try and run.

Instead, he crouched before her, a white wolf with orange eyes. Tail and ears trembling, he made a low sound at her, a plea without words.

She didn't listen. As his blood soaked the hair on her body, her head snapped down again and again, and by the time she finished, the elder was no more.

With the remains of her people around her, the Sen-wolf tilted her head back and sang a feral song of rage toward the red moon and black sky.

In the forest where she lay sleeping, the wind rattled the trees, and around her on all sides, eyes of violet. She muttered in her sleep, twisting this way and that. Every now and then, one of the things watching her would startle at her movement, low growls crawling toward her, filling her dreams.

When she awoke, she blinked up at the morning sky, clouds against blue. Alone, aside from the birds in the trees.

Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she could taste blood in her throat, metallic, thick. She swallowed and, for a moment, wondered if she'd ever tasted anything so sweet.

Pushing the muddled thoughts away, she rose in the cool early air. The wound on her wrist was red, the skin around it lined with red streaks. Touching the biggest hole, a flash of memory: Tek before her, gurgling, the light in his eyes fading as he died.

"No," she whispered to no one. "That's not what happened. First blood. That's all it was."

For a brief moment, she thought about turning back. About finding her way home. To make sure that her people were alive, well, just as she'd left them. That she hadn't returned in the cover

of night. That she hadn't really known what it felt like to have their blood on her tongue.

She did not.

Knowing that her people and the forest itself were counting on her, she made the decision to continue. She had come this far. She would see it through to the end.

But what Sen did not know was that time was running out. For she was now infected, the rot spreading within her. It had already begun to work its darkness upon her, and soon, there would be nothing she could do to stop it.