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stop and breathe a second

Fenric is not hyperventilating.

Yet.

Or maybe that's already gone through his system. He doesn't remember.

Anyways.

It's cold. Bitterly so. Even his fur isn't doing much to protect him. It's probably because of how coarse it is-- numbly, he lifts his arm to stare at it for a few long moments. The wind has picked up enough so that he can see the little strands dancing. It takes his whole focus for a long few moments, and then he flips his arm over and gets a whole fucking eyeful of that *one fucking tattoo*—

and he puts his arm down again.

It might not be just the fur. Or the fact that he lost his coat somewhere in the scuffle. It's likely largely the blood loss-- as he turns his head over so slightly and loses the strength to lift it back up, Fenric spends a few moments processing the way scarlet has rolled out over the frozen snow like that one ball of yarn Mamma was always so fond of.

For once, his head is eerily quiet.

Fenric hates it. So he wills himself to think.

*What happened, Fenric?*

Well. It was a job. A job meant to be like any other he's done so far. He should be getting the hang of this. He's spent long enough practicing in lessons with Zinnan that he's learned to

lean heavy on distraction-- if the person he's stealing from has that absent, far away look in their eye, nab what they've got in their pockets and then make *yourself* absent and far away.

*But now you're dying, Fenric. Stay on topic.*

Fenric takes a deep breath. Ah. Yeah. That part.

He lifts his hands to his stomach and presses them to the wound, setting his jaw. His fingers are starting to tingle at the ends, and that's the only real sensation he's getting right now. Even his own blood doesn't feel warm. He's gotten hurt before and those were easy to fix-- just a gash in his side that Cecelia nonchalantly tossed a potion at him for, or a scrape on his hands that left enough blood for Soups to glare at him about.

But no. This time it's different.

His breath picks up into his throat.

There is no one here to tell him that he's not going to die.

He is out in the cold, alone, and now he *is* starting to hyperventilate.

*Focus, Fenric. What the fuck happened?*

The distraction must have not been distracting enough. The sorcerer thinks the guy must have been buying something but keeping an eye on his surroundings enough to the point that when Fenric brushed past him and grabbed the coin purse poking out of his back pocket he noticed. That was where the plan failed-- his "victim" had a better eye than he did, because Fenric *certainly* didn't notice the knife they had at their belt until it was in his stomach.

The people of Kolkax and their short tempers.

Zinnan had warned him plenty of times.

Fenric was lucky that his wild-ass magic decided to work in his favor that time.

*So? How did you get here?*

He doesn't know. Why should he care?

His breath is getting fast, too fast now. It's coming up in little plumes in front of his face. He turns his head enough and it hurts to do that but he looks down at the gash that's oozing in his stomach and breathes a little faster. His body is trying to tell him that maybe if he takes in enough air he can stay alive. It doesn't feel like there could ever be enough air. It's too cold.

It feels like snowball fights with Pa in the winter. It feels like dancing outside just before a blizzard rolls in. It feels like running through the forest with

It hurts. And it's not in the fun, pleasant way. It just hurts. It's taking breathfuls of frozen water that doesn't *feel* like water, and it's making his lungs rasp.

Or it might be the blood loss.

Or the fact that he's dying.

*Oh, God, you're dying.*

Fenric wants his coat. Ma made it for him. His name is sewn into the collar. She did that. There's a star next to it. He remembers that because of how many times he's traced it with his thumbs. He fucked that up too, though. Now it's probably being trampled by all kinds of people, or even worse it's being picked up and sold, and she won't even get to know what happened to him out here. He'll end up buried by snow and eventually his blood will freeze and it'll be gone too and then he'll

"Fenric?"

The voice is deep. The closest thing to familiar without being able to put his finger on it. He takes gasps, the first deep breath he's had in a long time, and it sends spasms of pain all the rest of the way through him, enough to inspire adrenaline. He rockets upright and draws his dagger, pointing it *whoever* the fuck said his name and decided to have the *balls* enough to come up behind him while he was dying.

There stands Dari. Hair as white as the snow, eyes huge, holding his coat.

Fenric starts hyperventilating again.

It might not be Dari. It could be someone disguised as Dari. It could be that Zorrakir sent him here to kill him for good. He wouldn't know. All he knows is that Jandari the *Mad Dog* is fucking brutal, and that he doesn't just say no to an order from the boss man.

He shifts his grip on the bloody hilt of the knife and chokes back a sob through grit teeth.

The half-elf starts to move towards him, and Fenric *snarls*.

"Don't. Don't fucking touch me."

*You're breathing too fast, Fenric. You look weak. He could just kill you here. You're a cornered rabbit with a broken leg and he is the one that's come to finish you off. It might just be pity.*

Dari has stopped a few feet away, and lifts his hands in a sign of surrender. The sorcerer can't tell if it's real or not. Dari is fast enough. He could just

"Don't touch me," he repeats, without thinking about the words. They probably sound feeble and scared. God, this *has* to be pity.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Dari says quietly, in the softest tone Fenric has ever heard him speak in. He squints at him for a few seconds, but then realizes he can't *really* focus because his head is pounding and his breath is *so*, so fast, and he is tired.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know that?” he growls out, trying to make himself sound scary again. He’s not sure that he succeeds. He can’t read the expression on Dari’s face and cannot force himself too. He’s *so* fucking tired.

The last time he felt like this was in that alleyway, when he was holding

and then he woke up and he was alone and

God.

He might die here.

“Well. I think the most hurt’s coming from you, bud. I gotta fix you up. You’re fucked up seven ways to Sunday.”

Fenric nods jerkily. He’s still hyperventilating.

“Stop and breathe a second, yeah? Look at me, starboy. You gotta let me get close to you before I can fix you up.”

Fenric forces himself to focus his eyes at least a little bit, just enough for him to blearily pick up on the icy blues of Dari’s eyes. His silhouette is still blurred, but he can vaguely make out the shape of his coat and the dark color of Dari’s shirt that stands out against everything that is so terribly frozen.

“You’re not going to kill me?”

This time even Fenric can admit it. His voice breaks.

Dari tilts his head, and Fenric recognizes concern. Not pity. Concern.

“Of course not, knucklehead. If I wanted to, I would have done it by now.”

With anyone else, that phrase would have been a mildly concealed threat. With Dari, it's reassurance. He can tell that much-- he's not blind, as hard as it is to see right now.

"You have to breathe, Fenric. And uh-- maybe. *Maybe* put the knife down."

Fenric looks at his hands and they start shaking. He can't tell if it's from the cold or from the panic and adrenaline that is coursing through his veins with every rabbit-paced beat of his heart. He drops the knife, but it's more accidental than it is purposeful, off to the side where his blood-- *the* blood isn't.

His breath comes in little hiccups, and he doesn't have the strength anymore to form words. He starts to topple to one side and Dari moves, but it's with none of that brutal suddenness that Fenric is so used to seeing-- just calm urgency.

Like a knight in shining armor. Fenric remembers it from the story books Ma used to read him when she tucked him into bed. She was always so gentle about it. He doesn't know what he did to deserve her. And then Pa would stand up and he would be the big old ogre that guarded the bridge with it's life and Ma would let Fenric be the knight in shining armor to her damsel in distress and he'd save her just like Dari is saving him. Just like how he couldn't save

"I've only got one potion, but it should be enough to fix up your stomach, okay?" Dari says quietly. He doesn't remember when they've been this close. If they've ever been this close. Right now, Dari is the only chance at a pillar he's got.

He gives a nod and keeps his eyes on Dari's face. The half-elf is reaching into his bag and pulling out the bottle of swirling reddish liquid that he's grown familiar with over the past few years. He's never gotten used to the taste but he's sure that he will. Dari uncorks it and puts it to his lips, and Fenric breathes just enough to not choke while it slides down his throat.

Warmth washes over for him for just a few blissful seconds, and reflexively he tucks into Dari. It's not Dari. It doesn't have to be Dari. His vision is blurred enough right now that he could just close his eyes and imagine Ma, or Pa, or maybe even his sister, or

His breath picks up in his throat again and he lifts his hands up to grab onto the back of the fighter's shirt. Nevermind. Dari is good.

"I've got you. I've got you. You're all good Fenric." He says it quietly. It's not cheeky or cheesy or messy or overconfident or assholish, which is a rare sight to see. Dari isn't even smiling. He's just holding him. "You've still got other cuts so I'm going to need to bandage those up, but they're not as bad so I want you to start calming down first, okay?"

*He's still a brutal murderer. Remember that, Fenric. He might just be doing this to make it all that much slower.*

But Dari is warm.

*You've seen how brutal he can be. You've seen how much he enjoys it. You've seen it you need to get him away from you you need to run.*

But Dari doesn't hesitate. If he wanted to, he would have by now.

*He's called the Mad Dog for a reason. He's going to kill you and nothing is going to stop him from doing it, because you're too fragile, too small, too weak.*

But Fenric likes dogs.

He lets his head fall against the front of Dari's chest and presses his half-frozen ear into his heartbeat. It is steady. Dari is alive.

Eventually, the Mad Dog scoops Fenric up and carries him home, and Fenric is alright.