



The Scent of Innocence

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“Noaptea este a demonilor

The night belongs to demons.”

-Danae Saying

Leyja took a deep, savoring breath.

She could smell him from here—threaded through the forest like a ribbon of light in dark water. A tang of dirt clung to his skin, that particular loam of the Tanglewood's edge where his people roamed in their peaceful caravans. Beneath it, the pungent reek of haze flower, thick and cloying, the smoke of it drifting through the trees like a veil. But underneath all of that, pure and unmistakable, was the thing that made her wings tremble against her back.

His innocence.

It smelled *spiky*. That was the only word for it—a chaos of sharp peaks and sudden valleys that matched the rhythm of emotion in an uncorrupted soul. Up and down, up and down, like a heartbeat made visible. Joy spiking high. Fear plunging low. Wonder. Uncertainty. Hope. All of it raw and unguarded, untouched by the knowledge that would eventually flatten it into something ordinary.

Leyja closed her eyes and let the smell wash over her. She had hunted for three moons without finding anything worth taking. The Tanglewood was vast, and the Danae were careful people—they knew what lived in the deep places, even if they didn't speak of it. They kept their children close. They didn't wander.



But young men were foolish creatures, weren't they? Especially young men with haze flower and friends and the reckless certainty that nothing bad could happen to them. Not tonight. Not here. Not when the stars were bright and the smoke was sweet and the world felt infinite.

She opened her eyes.

Through the trees, she could see the glow of their small fire. Four of them—two men, a woman, and a boy, really, none of them older than twenty summers. They passed a pipe between them, laughing at something she couldn't hear, their voices carrying through the night like an invitation.

But only one of them mattered.

He sat slightly apart from the others, his back against a fallen log, his face tilted toward the canopy. Dark hair fell across his forehead. His hands were calloused—a craftsman's hands, perhaps. There was something soft in the line of his jaw, something unfinished. He wasn't beautiful, not in any way the poets would sing about. But when Leyja breathed him in, she felt her whole body tighten with want.

Pure.

That was the word. Pure in a way that had nothing to do with virtue and everything to do with *potential*. He hadn't yet learned that the world was cruel. Hadn't yet discovered that love could wound, that trust could shatter, that hope was just another word for the thing you lost. His innocence wasn't ignorance—it was the genuine, terrible openness of someone who still believed that tomorrow might be better than today.

And when that belief broke, when the spiky chaos of his soul finally collapsed into the flat gray line of knowing—



Leyja shuddered.

That was what she fed on. Not the innocence itself, but the *corruption* of it. The moment when light curdled into shadow. The exquisite, irreversible instant when a soul learned something it could never unlearn.

She had watched it happen a thousand times. Had caused it a thousand more. The methods varied—seduction, betrayal, violence, loss—but the taste was always the same. Sweet at first, almost unbearably so, then sharp, then bitter, then *nothing*. Just the hollow satisfaction of a hunger temporarily sated.

And then the prey became useless to her. Mundane. Uninteresting. Another broken thing stumbling through a world full of broken things.

But this one—*this* one—

Leyja spread her wings and let the night air cool the heat building in her chest. She could take him now. It would be easy. Slip down from the branches, let him see her, let the seeing alone begin the unraveling. Tangle Nymphs were beautiful in the way that fire was beautiful—you couldn't look away even as it burned you. She could walk into their little camp and every one of them would be frozen, helpless, their minds drowning in her presence while she chose which one to ruin first.

But that wasn't how she wanted it.

The pungent smoke of haze flower drifted past her again, and she wrinkled her nose. When she finally took him, she wanted him *clear*. Wanted him to feel every moment of it. Wanted to watch his eyes as she fed—as she leaned close and whispered the truths that would crack him open like a shell.



Your mother died cursing your name.

The girl you love has already given herself to your brother.

You are going to die alone in a place no one will ever find.

It didn't matter if the truths were real. What mattered was that he *believed* them, even for an instant. That single moment of belief was enough. The corruption would spread from there on its own, like rot through fruit, and she would drink the sweetness of its flowering.

Leyja licked her lips.

Patience.

She settled deeper into the shadows and watched. The fire crackled. The young men smiled, and the woman laughed. The one she wanted tilted his head back and blew smoke at the stars, and something in her chest ached with anticipation.

She could wait.

An hour passed. Maybe two.

The haze flower had done its work. One of the mwna md the woman were asleep now, curled together near the fire's embers like puppies. The other man was mumbling to himself, drawing shapes in the dirt with a stick, too far gone to notice anything.

And the one she wanted—her *prey*—stood up.

"I'll be right back," he said to no one in particular, and walked into the dark.



Leyja smiled.

Her wings unfolding from her back, membrane-thin and dark as old blood, as she dropped from the branch without a sound. The forest floor was soft with years of fallen leaves; her bare feet made no impression as she followed him through the trees.

He stopped in a small clearing, his back to her, and began to unlace his trousers.

She could smell him so clearly now. His innocence was a physical presence, wrapping around her like arms, like the embrace of something warm and alive. She wanted to press her face into it. Wanted to open her mouth and *taste*—

A sound.

Leyja went still.

Crunching. Heavy. Boots on dead wood, and more than one pair of them. Then voices—rough, low, speaking in the mercenary common tongue that traders used along the roads. And beneath the voices, the unmistakable whisper of steel leaving leather.

No.

She turned her head toward the camp. Through the trees, she could see movement—dark shapes converging on the dying fire, on the sleeping pair, on the one still drawing in the dirt. She heard a shout, cut short. A scream. The wet thud of something heavy hitting something soft.

And the smell—



The smell of *his* innocence spiked wildly, fear and confusion flooding through it, and Leyja felt her whole body clench with something that might have been rage.

Not like this.

If he saw what was happening—if he ran back to find his friends bleeding in the dark—the corruption would happen without her. His innocence would shatter on the rocks of simple, brutal violence, and she would get *nothing*. No taste. No sweetness. Just the hollow aftermath of a meal someone else had eaten.

Leyja moved.

She crossed the space between them in three wingbeats, silent as falling snow, and placed a hex around him before he could turn. The magic settled over his mind like a hood, muffling his senses, trapping him in a bubble of false silence. He blinked, swaying slightly, and reached for a tree to steady himself. The haze flower was still thick in his blood; he would think he'd simply lost track of time. That the sounds he almost heard were just the forest settling into sleep.

Leyja inhaled one last time—one long, desperate breath of that pure, spiky smell—and then turned back toward the camp.

The mercenaries had made quick work of it.

Three of them, armed with short swords and cruelty. The sleeping pair were dead already, their throats opened to the night, her dress torn and bloody. The third—the one who'd been drawing in the dirt—was still alive, pinned beneath a boot, whimpering.



But they weren't interested in him.

There were two other girls hiding at the edge of the firelight, younger than the woman, Leyja hadn't even noticed them. Sisters, maybe, or friends. Danae girls with dark hair and darker eyes, now held by rough hands, their mouths covered, their bodies rigid with terror.

One of the mercenaries laughed.

"Told you," he said to his companions. "Danae boys and women are useless, but the girls sell well in The Sprawl. Younger ones especially."

Leyja felt something cold settle in her chest.

She didn't care about these children. The fates could have them—that was the way of the world, and she had never pretended otherwise. But if those girls screamed, if the boy she wanted somehow heard despite her hex, if he came running back to find *this*—

Her meal would be ruined.

And she was *hungry*.

Leyja stepped out of the shadows.

The closest mercenary saw her first. His eyes went wide—not with fear, not yet, but with the simple animal confusion of a man seeing something his mind couldn't process. She was naked, she realized distantly. She usually was. Clothes felt wrong against her skin, like wearing someone else's touch. Her body was pale in the firelight, pale and perfect, every curve designed to draw the eye, to hold it, to *trap* it—



"What the f—"

She moved.

No one ever thought of Tangle Nymphs as dangerous. The stories all spoke of their beauty, their languorous seductive nature, their dark desires. Creatures of corruption, not violence. Monsters who killed with pleasure, not with pain.

The stories were told by survivors.

Leyja's teeth found his throat before he could finish speaking. She bit down—*hard*—and felt the hot rush of his blood flood her mouth, copper and salt and the sour tang of his fear. He made a sound, something between a gurgle and a scream, and then she *pulled*, learning nothing but a ragged hole.

His body hit the ground.

The other two were screaming now—the mercenaries, not the girls—and Leyja smiled with bloody teeth as she turned toward them. The silent dark of her hexes was spreading out from her in waves, swallowing sound, swallowing light, wrapping the clearing in a cocoon of shadow that only she could see through.

The second man dropped the girl he'd been holding and ran.

Leyja let him.

The third was frozen, his sword half-raised, his face slack with a terror so pure she could almost taste it. Almost. Fear wasn't what she fed on—it was too simple, too animal, too *easy*. But there was a certain pleasure in seeing it, all the same.



"Please," he whispered.

She crossed the distance between them in a single wingbeat and put her hand on his chest. His heart was hammering beneath her palm, wild and desperate, and she leaned close enough to smell the sour wine on his breath.

"You were going to sell them," she said softly. "The girls. You were going to put them in chains and sell them to men who would use them until there was nothing left to use."

"I—I was just—"

"I don't care."

She pushed, and her fingers went *through* him—through skin and muscle and bone, into the hot wet cavity of his chest. He made a sound she had never heard a human make before, and she watched his eyes as the light went out of them.

Then she dropped him and turned toward the runner.

Fourteen heartbeats. A few footsteps and fewer wingbeats. That was all it took to catch him. He was fast for a human, but humans were slow, and she was something older and darker and infinitely more patient.

He screamed when she landed on his back, driving him face-first into the leaves. She could smell his fear now, virulent and sharp, flooding the air like smoke from a fire—

But it wasn't what she wanted.



Leyja broke his neck with a single twist, quick and clean.

Waste.

All of it, waste. The fear, the violence, the blood cooling on her skin—none of it fed her. None of it even came close. She was still hungry, still *aching*, and these men had nearly stolen the only thing that might have sated her.

She turned back toward the camp.

The girls were gone.

Smart. They'd run the moment the shadows fell, disappeared into the Tanglewood like the Danae they were. The boy who'd been pinned was gone too—crawled away, probably, while she was hunting. They would find their way home. They would tell their people what had happened, and the Danae would whisper about the demon in the forest, the beautiful monster who killed without reason or mercy. Or maybe who'd saved them?

They wouldn't understand.

No one ever did.

Leyja stood in the ruined camp, her body painted with blood, her wings folded against her back like a cloak. The fire had gone out. The dead lay where they'd fallen. And somewhere in the forest, wrapped in a hex of false silence, the boy she wanted was still waiting.

Still *pure*.



She lifted her face to the wind and breathed deep.

There he was. Faint now, distant, but unmistakable—that spiky, chaotic smell of innocence untouched. He was walking back toward the camp, probably. Confused. Wondering where his friends had gone. The hex would be fading soon, and he would see—

No.

He wouldn't see. Not tonight. The girls would have reached him by now, pulled him away, told him they needed to run. He would be frightened and confused, but he wouldn't *know*. Not really. The haze flower would blur his memories, and in the morning he would wake up safe in his wagon, wondering if any of it had been real.

His innocence would still be intact.

Bent, perhaps. Shaken. But not broken.

Leyja smiled.

She could hear them now—voices in the distance, urgent and afraid but not screaming. Not grieving. They hadn't found the bodies. They were simply running, the way Danae always ran, slipping through the trees like smoke until the forest swallowed them whole.

She could follow. Could find him in the dark and finish what she'd started.

But the night was old, and she was tired, and there was something almost *sweeter* in the waiting. In knowing that he was out there, untouched, his innocence still ripening toward the moment when she would finally harvest it.



There would be other nights.

Leyja spread her wings and rose into the darkness, the blood on her skin already drying to rust. Below her, the dead lay silent, and somewhere in the forest, a boy who didn't know how close he'd come to ruin was running toward a dawn he didn't deserve.

She licked her lips.

There would be other chances.

She could still have what she wanted.

