

The Wolf from the Woods

(Sinners Fanfic)

Chapter 1:

The ceiling planks were outlined by the moonlight crawling from the window. The faint chirr of the crickets singing their monotone rhythm was accompanied by the willow tree that swung with the night breeze.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I sighed at the lack of sleep. My breathing filled the small room sunken in darkness as my eyes made their way around: A side table by the head of the bed with nothing but a stubbed candle on it, the entrance door to my right, and on the left wall behind me, a tacked on wardrobe that contained three or four garments, all of them visible—the knob that hung from it's door had given up long ago, allowing the darkness in it to seep out. I laid down again, breathed in, out, and waited for my lids to fall. Table...wardrobe...ceiling...wardrobe...ceiling...table...ceiling...wardrobe...*I should put a wooden plank over that door so it closes.*

I finally gave up and pulled away the bed sheets. The door closed behind me as I stepped out, leaving the space frozen and lifeless.

Even though the rosemary hadn't worked for a few nights already, I lit the fireplace in the living room and brewed the tea again, adding twice as much of the plant than usual. The orange flames gave the gray walls around it a flickering warmth. I dragged out the wooden chair from the kitchen table and sat, letting the waves of heat caress my face. Soon, my fingers began tracing the lines and bumps of the praying Guadalupe that hung from my neck.

I glanced absentmindedly at the dark corridor next to me, and caught a glimpse of my reflection: a dull gaze stared back, one that morphed into disappointment and disgust with every second, all framed by the intricate patterns of flowers and vines carved into cheaply painted wood. I never covered up that mirror like I intended to, I don't know why.

The rattling metal over the fire pulled me back to reality. I poured the steaming water on my clay mug, blew on it, and took a tentative sip. I can almost recall the earthy taste in my mouth. I wondered away from the fire and ended up in front of the side window, the one at the other end of the living room.

The orange tint on the walls met with the blue of the outside when I pulled open the curtains.

I rested my temple on the window frame and scanned the familiar landscape, expecting nothing. But I was taken aback when I spotted something in the distance, almost hidden by the hanging branches of the dancing tree: A pair of red dots stood out from the dark. *Is that a wolf? Maybe a coyote?* I wondered. And then my eyes widened with panic. *Shit, the chickens!* I looked away for an instant, just an instant to grab the shotgun that was resting at arm's length in that corner of the room, but when I looked out again, they were gone. I thought that maybe I'd imagined it, maybe the lack of sleep had finally caught up to me. I scrutinized every silhouette that was within the window's reach, but there was just the willow tree, a few other loners behind, and the edge of the forest at the very back. My forehead pressed against the frame to try and see beyond its blind spots on each side. Thinking that maybe the wolf had already started going around the house to get to my hens, I jumped away from the window with the intent of going out the back door, until loud knocks came from the entrance. My mind went blank as I just froze in place, dumbfounded. *What kind of person would be out at this time?* I thought. *A drunk, maybe? The bars are far down the road in town, what would they be doing all the way out here?* Another set of knocks reminded me how to breathe again. My grip around the barrel tightened, and I walked forward.

Through the hazy glaze of the curtains, I could make out his blurred features: Pale skin with dark, modest hair, a stout nose and slender figure, not as tall as a lot of the men I'd gotten used to seeing around there. His hands were tucked in the pockets of his pants as he looked around my porch in a languid, patient manner. I still find it strange to think how unremarkable he seemed to me in that moment, an average white guy, no different from the ones I exchanged furtive glances with in my daily commute to town. I guess that's just the nature of people: Blurry faces, until one day they walk into the foreground of your life, and suddenly every detail is ingrained in your mind, sharp and different from the rest. Back then he wasn't Remmick, he was just a strange man at my door past decent hours of the night. So naturally, I placed the comb of the weapon in my underarm, stepped forward and turned the door handle.

Chapter 2:

I heard a click, and suddenly my vision was invaded by the nuzzle of a gun right between my eyes. "Woah, careful now—"

“What do you want?” *This one’s gonna be a tough one* I thought. So I put on the most innocent expression I could muster and got started.

“I’m sorry to wake you m’am, my name’s Remmick. I just move to town a couple of weeks ago and uh...” I looked around in the dark, just to sell it a bit more, “I seem to have gotten lost.” The nuzzle was now lowered at my chest, in spite of her distrustful stare. *Good, we’re getting somewhere. My sheepish smile turned apologetic.* “I mean no harm, darling, I was just hopin’ you could point me in the right direction, and maybe share a meal, if that ain’t too much trouble.” I knew I couldn’t ask her to lower the gun, she had to do that herself.

She eyed me up and down one last time before reluctantly lowering the rifle. And that’s when I saw it: A praying saint depicted on a small, silver pendant that hung from her neck. There was nothing else attached to the chain, just that woman front and center. A dark fist hid the woman from my sight. I ignored the protective gesture and smiled while pointing at her chest.

“You Catholic?” Panic flashed through her eyes.

“Yeah, why?” I reached inside the pocket of my pants and grabbed the braided leather chain that was always there. At the end of that noose, a cross carved in gold weighed it down. The grip on the weapon loosened slightly as her brows furrowed in confusion. It wasn’t like the crosses she was used to seeing; this one was placed on top of a circle with a knotted pattern ingrained on it. The cross’s center was squared, an arm coming out of each of the left-side corners of it.

It dangled in front of her eyes before I let it fall on her open palm. The rifle barrel was finally pointed at the floorboards instead of myself. It was hard to hide my smile, so instead I slid next to her and talked over her shoulder.

“This is St. Brigid’s cross, it’s been passed down in my family for generations.” She studied the design, running her fingers through the nooks and crannies of the precious metal.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Yes it is.” She raised her head, and began scanning my face with furrowed brows: My eyes, lips, hair, nose, and then back to my eyes. I could feel her search for something behind them, I don’t know what, and I don’t think she knew either. I ain’t used to people looking at me so closely, and soon the air around me started feeling uncomfortably warm. My chest flared as I took a breath and stepped away from her, back to my side of the porch. “So how ‘bout you, huh? Was that also a gift or,” I asked while shifting my attention down to her neck.

“Oh! Uh,” she stammered as she grazed her fingertips over her own pendant, “yeah, it was my mother’s.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. God bless her.”

“No, no, it’s not like that. She...they um...”

The silence lingered between us. I watched her get lost in her memories, somewhere I couldn’t see yet. When she planted herself back to reality, she mumbled for me to ‘wait here’ while shoving my cross back into my hand—all before slamming the door shut.

I was left outside with the cool air of the night and the crickets to keep me company.

The floorboards croaked as I slid between the porch swing and her window, peeking through a gap in the curtains that cut through my pupil with an orange glow.

She was fumbling around in the small kitchenette, opening and closing cabinets, grabbin’ things here and there. The inside of the cottage was nothing extraordinary: A bare wooden table, walls covered with dull turquoise paint that was peeling off already, a mirror and a few cupboards and stands. It was all impersonal, foreign. There wasn’t a single picture frame or trinket in sight. Her back and forth stopped, and I was able to retreat my head an instant before she turned to look at the window.

When I heard the handle turn, I jumped up from the swing and received a place placed on top of a hand towel, to avoid me burning my hands I presume. The steam that rose from the burritos brought with it the smell of chili beans and pulled meat. I bet it tasted wonderful...

“What is it? Not a fan of Mexican food?”

“Oh no! It’s not that, I promise. This looks delicious, thank you.” I could tell my excuse was unconvincing, but she nodded anyways.

“You can sit there while you finish the plate if you want.” I thanked her, but my smile dropped the instant her door clicked against the frame. *No invite in, huh? Shame.* I sat alone while my mind pivoted between persistence and practicality. They always let me in eventually, folks will do anything for a bit of gold, but getting that silver necklace off her neck would be a challenge, one that I wasn’t sure was worth it. But she was far from the town, alone. No one would bat an eye if she went missing. I kept going back and forth, ignoring the bitter taste of nothing as the food turned to ash in my mouth.

Chapter 3:

The warm porch light outlined his staunch nose and brows as he chewed absentmindedly. I thought of the cross that he'd taken out of his pocket; I'd never seen one like it. *Passed down for generations, huh?* My fingers graced the silver woman resting on my chest. It wasn't generations old, that's for sure. My mom had bought it one day when she took me to town and we went into Mr. Mincho's store. From then on it was always there, glinting on her chest until the day I wore it for the first time, when she moved my hair aside and wrapped her arms around me to clasp the chain on my nape. When I think of my mom, her smell—the smell of soap, sweat and cheap perfume—graces my nose, still. My dad spun her around and called her *chula* when he saw us walking to the house that day.

I remember one night, I'd gone out into the living room way past my bedtime. I couldn't sleep, so I climbed onto the sofa and rested my head on my forearms as I watched my dad playing domino out on the porch. The naked tungsten bulb highlighted his smile while he laughed along to something one of my uncles had said. His eyes met mine, and he waved for me to come over. That was the first time I played domino, with my tiny bare feet dangling from his lap as he explained to me rules that I didn't understand or care about. I was smiling nonetheless.

A knock on the door made my father's smile vanish, replaced by the trembling chimney fire. When I opened the door, Remmick handed me back the empty plate, the kitchen cloth neatly folded underneath. "That was delicious, darlin', and very filling," he said while patting his stomach. "Muchas gracias." I was taken aback by how naturally that 'R' tumbled out of his mouth.

"You know, your Spanish is not bad!" His brows lifted in surprise, and his hands buried into the pockets of his pants.

"Oh, you're just sayin' that," he stammered.

"No no, I mean it. You say the 'R' pretty good."

"Ah, well..."

Months later, when I heard his native tongue for the first time, I understood why his pronunciation felt so natural. I caught a glimpse of Remmick sitting on a tree trunk, a dead rabbit clutched between his hands. He brought it up to his mouth, and with chin covered in blood, began humming a tune under his breath that echoed in my own mind, a song in Gailge:

*“...The darkness descends
From the wings of the night,
And the mist is encircling
The steep mountain height
The friends of my childhood
Have from me been torn
Alone in the valley,
They’ve left me to mourn...”*

I still hear it from time to time. It’s never just Remmick though, there’s always a woman’s voice that intertwines with his own. It’s sweet, caring and ethereal, a contrast to his detached cadence. Sometimes I just hear her, and for some reason it always makes me want to get on my knees and weep.

We said our goodbyes, and I watched him stroll down the hill, on his way to town just like I’d pointed him to. Our encounter stayed in my mind, replacing the usual thoughts of my family as I drifted off into sleep.

Chapter 4:

I stayed away for a couple nights looking for other targets, because I’d decided that pendant around Elena’s neck was too much trouble. There’s plenty of folks who walk around at night without a care in the world, plenty of folks willing to take in a helpless stranger.

But on the third night, I went back. There was no plan in my mind, no clue what to say, but I knocked on her door anyways. I was greeted with surprise in her eyes, surprise that quickly turned into a pleased expression. *She’d missed me*, I thought with a grin.

“Hi there.”

“Hey. What happened, got lost again?”

“No, no. Was just passin’ by, thought I’d say hello, see how you’ve been and all.”

“Really?” she asked with a coy smile and crossed arms. I glanced down for an instant: That damned pendant was there again.

“Yeah, well...I was also a ‘lil hungry and remembered those beans you made me the other night.”

“Does your wife not feed ya well enough or what?” she asked with crossed arms.

I took one, two, three steps forward, until she had to lift her chin slightly to look me in the eyes as I said:

“Don’t have a wife.” The scent of blood rushing to her face was intoxicating. Her big almond eyes locked into mine almost made me forget to slip the golden ring off my finger. She stepped back and dropped her arms. For an instant I thought I’d been caught, until she smiled and told me to:

“Wait here,” before closing the door.

I was left outside again, a stray dog waiting for its master to come back. Swinging back and forth on the wooden bench, I lost myself in the lingering sensation of Elena’s shining gaze, the rosemary smell she carried with her, her meek smile...

I was startled out of my daydream when I heard her clear her throat. She’d been standing there—for a while I presume—with the door open, holding a steaming plate on a dishcloth, just like last time.

“Oh sorry” I stood up to take the plate from her, but instead of handing it to me, she sat on the porch swing and waited for me to follow. And I did.

“Careful, it’s hot.” I nodded at the warning and began eating.

I bulldozed through the gray taste each bite left behind, finishing the meal as fast as possible. I thought about saying my usual niceties and compliments so that maybe she would let me in, but instead I lounged my head back and allowed myself the silence for a change. I was too comfortable, being out in plain sight like that is something I rarely get. The crickets and croaks of a frog from a nearby lake harmonized with the weeping willow’s sway, the cool breeze that passed through her foliage carried a fresh, earthly scent straight to me. It’s a night I think about often, even now.

I heard an intake of breath right before she leaned into me and asked, “So, you’re not married.”

“No, m’am.”

“Elena, the name’s Elena.” She smiled playfully. “Well, *María Elena*, but you can just call me Elena.”

“What, you don’t think I can pronounce the whole thing?” She shook her head, her eyes brightening up with contained laughter as I feigned offense at her assumption. “*María Elena*. Pretty name for a pretty lass.” She smiled timidly at those words just as a gust of wind loosened strands of black hair into her

face, delicately framing her lowered gaze. She pushed them behind her ears and resumed picking at the skin around her fingers.

"You said you moved to the town, no?"

"Yes, found a job workin' in the mines." A twinge of fear passed through her eyes. "It ain't so bad, you know?" I reassured her.

"Well it's dangerous work." I crossed my arms and shook off her concern with a smile.

"Is your family here with you?"

Oh yeah, me and my brothers take good care of our mom and pop, don't know what we would do without them.

I had the usual speech ready at the tip of my tongue, but that's not what I said. She kept staring at me expectantly. I opened my mouth again and allowed myself to slip, just that one time.

"No...no, they ain't around no more."

"None of them? Aunts, uncles?...oh." The realization morphed her face as I shook my head.

"Well at least not that I know of, maybe some of 'em are still kicking 'round somewhere, though I doubt it." I tried to sound casual, but she just stared in silence. I began to feel that uncomfortable warmth coming back.

"No brothers or sisters, huh?"

"Nope."

"I'm sorry."

I shrugged, trying to smile through her sympathies. "So am I."

I looked around through the darkness in front of me in an attempt to avoid her stare breathing down my neck. I knew what she was feelin' in that moment: Pity. I didn't need it, didn't want her to force it upon me.

The chains of the swing rattled as I sprang up from my seat. "I better get going."

"O-oh, okay um...okay, sure." I was already walking down the steps. "If you ever need anythin', you can always..."

"Yeah, thanks." I called out without looking back, halfway between her house and the forest already.

I don't know where that anger came from, but I spent the rest of the night hunting aimlessly, with half the prey ending up as a rotting corpse on the forest floor for the crows to gorge on.

Chapter 5:

I was deflated with his unexpected departure. Honestly, I didn't think he'd come back after the little hissy fit he threw out of the blue...but he did, with a small bouquet of flowers and a dashing smile. I didn't wanna make it too easy for him, that's something my mama had taught me: You gotta make 'em work for it. But after a few dirty looks from me and a little convincing from him, we sat on the swing once again.

The tension in the air was palpable—I was busy picking at my skin and he was just staring out into the dark. But after a while, he turned to me and spoke.

"I'm sorry... 'bout the other night. That wasn't very nice of me. Don't know why I did it, I just—"

"It's alright," I interrupted, glancing at him briefly, "I understand." When no anger or sarcasm came out of me, he reclined back into the bench. I was hoping he'd say something, anything, but he was just looking at me intently. Between me and my fingers, the silver pendant dangled from my neck. "She's not dead, you know?" I disrupted the silence with a voice that felt foreign. "At least I hope she's not..." The tears pooling around my eyes turned everything blurry, and for the first time in a while they rolled down my cheeks freely, with Remmick alongside me watching it happen.

"What happened to them?"

I relived those days, days that felt eternal, in just a few hours that night.

I recalled our adobe home getting smaller and smaller with every step we took through the desert, the tall men with bayonets just staring through my mother as she tried to get them to explain what was happening. Shuffling footsteps, quiet and confused murmurs floating around, the clanging trinkets and piercing cries of a child mingling with each other while I suffocated under the stench of sweat.

We'd been walking for five days straight, a huge line herded along the fringes of a spruce forest.

Everyone was exhausted, malnourished and thirsty. We had water, but my parents were very careful with how they rationed it between me and my brothers.

A man in the back of the line collapsed to his knees, and slowly we all shuffled to a stop. We knew we were supposed to keep going, to leave him behind just like we'd done with the other three people, but this time a small group—I'm guessing his family—hunched down with him, refusing to move on. A middle aged woman stood up from her place beside the man to try to reason with one of the soldiers.

"...water..." and "...slow..." are the only words I heard clearly. It was like watching someone trying to

appease a rabid dog. Said soldier shook his head and harshly pulled the arm of one of the people next to the man, but she didn't budge, none of them did.

That's when he hunched down to scream right in their face while flinging his finger at the line. We all kept looking at each other, waiting for someone to do something, anything. After a few more screams and a slap that echoed through the meadow, my mom's fingers unlocked from my own, and she started cautiously walking forward.

When I try to picture those soldiers in my mind, I can only recall two: The screaming one, with his face so twisted and crumpled that he hardly looked human, and the other one, the one who intercepted my mom. He was skinny, barely taller than her and probably around my age at the time. His brown eyes seemed too big for his elongated face, and his nose and cheekbones were covered in freckles. His gaze kept moving between my mom and the canteen she was holding out in front of her.

He opened his mouth to say something, but another set of screaming threats from his comrade made him shudder. He squeezed his eyes shut as his breath started turning ragged, and before I could pull back my mom, he turned around and put all his strength into pushing the other soldier, who merely stumbled backwards. They all started laughing, mocking him and whatever things he was yelling at them.

Their laughs faded when he drew a pistol from his belt. Everyone froze, even the forest seemed to quiet down. They couldn't get the boy to lower the gun, if one took a step forward, he'd swiftly point it at them. Every move, step, and yell felt like a step closer to a precipice. The illusion of control they'd projected until now was slowly falling apart.

My mom's hand startled me out of my trance, and soon I was aware of the sounds of shuffling grass behind me: Some were breaking away from the line and into the woods.

"Go" she whispered in my ear.

"What?"

"Go!" She pushed me towards the trees, but I just remained frozen halfway between the woods and her.

How could she ask me to do that? How could she...?

A shot rang through the air.

A muted thud.

Everything unraveled.

Between the gun blasts, bullets, and screams from both sides, my dad and I locked eyes, his confusion morphing to desperation in a split second before a bullet rang past my ear and a man behind me collapsed. I ran as fast as I could, my gasps of effort almost concealing the noise of death around me. One...two, three...four. Four bodies fell, but I kept running past the first line of trees and into the forest. I ran, and ran, for what felt like an eternity, with a burning chest begging me to stop. The shots and screams finally began fading away, until all I could hear were my frantic pants and the leaves and twigs crunching under my steps. Then, my run turned into a walk, my heartbeat slowed, and I stopped panting.

My feet slowed until they came to a halt. Behind me, I tried finding the edge of the forest that hid behind all the tree trunks, but it wasn't there anymore—I'd strayed too far away. I thought about going back, back into my mom's embrace. I imagined her welcoming me with open arms and a smile as I walked out into the open to join them in the line. She wouldn't be mad at me for disobeying, she'd understand...but then the limp bodies that fell around me popped into my head, and I knew that going back wasn't possible.

They're gone. I'm alone...I'm alone...

Panic and grief tangled up in my stomach.

I'm never gonna see them again. Mom, dad...

I collapsed on the grass beneath me and wailed.

The tears burned my eyes as anger and sorrow clawed at my chest, trying to tear their way out. I'm sure if I'd stopped crying the pain would've killed me, so I just let the tears flow and the cries shred through the usual calmness of the forest.

I opened my eyes, squinting at the streaks of gold that filtered their way through the tree tops. I picked myself up, wondered how long I'd been laying there, though I couldn't bring myself to care. I trudged forward, one step after another, with my mind floating around between stray thoughts, numb in it's passing. It was like that for a while, until something made me raise my head from my dragging feet: Above me, the birds erupted into their last song, celebrating the end of another day. It was then that I finally landed on one permanent, bitter idea: How little our tragedies matter to the world around us.

The bench lulled back and forth, soothing me in silence.

"I wanted to find them, but..." My voice quivered as I wiped the tears off with the back of my hand. "Why didn't you?" His tone was gentle, but the question felt brutal, like it confirmed what I'd always feared but never said out loud: That I'd abandoned them. "I did at first, you know? But then everything just got so difficult, I was barely scraping by and—" *excuses, lies and excuses*—"I just...couldn't keep movin' around no more." I always intended to keep looking, but the days turned to months and the months to years in a heartbeat, until one day I realized that whatever trail my family left had surely been dried up by time, the time I'd let slip by right in front of my eyes. "Bet you think I'm a terrible daughter" I said with a forced laugh as shame prickled at my chest.

"Now why would I think that?" Our eyes met, but I didn't answer. "If there's anyone who should feel ashamed it's those bastards, not you. That wasn't your fault." He emphasized those last words, chasing my eyes when I tried looking away so that he wouldn't see me cry again.

"Thanks."

"I mean it, you know?" After a moment of thought, I nodded.

"So do I. Thanks." He half-smiled in confusion.

"For what?"

I shrugged. "For being here."

For the next hour or so, we said nothing. My head was resting on the rim of the back rail, my eyes closed as I felt the cool wind dry away the tears from my cheeks. I could feel Remmick glancing at me from time to time, and sometimes stare boldly.

He then got up and we said our goodbyes.

"Gotta get some sleep before work tomorrow" he said with a coy grin. He went down the stairs of the porch, past the willow tree, and down the road that led to town. I stayed there a while longer, with a rested heart and a placid smile on my face.

Chapter 6:

I weaved my way around the tree trunks, aimless. I also hid in a forest when they came to Éire. That night, rising smoke stifled the starry sky with its gray hue. A burning house became the backdrop for a twisted play performed by black silhouettes: A man and a woman down on their knees with hanging heads, and three bulky figures standing around. One of them unsheathes a sword from his belt, grabs it

with both hands, raises it in the air...I didn't need to see the rest, I knew how it ended. The sound of metal cutting through flesh will never leave my mind.

I ran as fast as a twelve year old could. I didn't stop, not even when the screams and crackling flames faded away behind me, not even with burning lungs begging me to stop. I would've kept going, but a root made me trip and tumble down a hill, rolling through grass and dirt, until I laid on my back.

There, breathless and scraped all over, the starry night returned, pure and untouched.

I turned sideways and saw my mom laying there. With a smile, she pointed up at the stars as she talked me through the stories behind every constellation visible. It was something we did every other night in spite of my groans and complains. *Why would she tell me this again? I've heard every story a million times already!* Is what went through my mind every time. The twinkling dots blurred as tears stung at my eyes and left trails down my dirty cheeks.

I outlived every single one of those men, and when I bring my people back, I won't have to hide anymore, we will never fade away again, ever. Our time on this earth will be eternal, and glorious. I just need *him*...

Chapter 7:

This became our routine for a while: Staring out into the field and talking. Once the words ran out, we'd sit in a serene hush. Each night felt easier than the last, the distance between us closing more and more, until we stopped feigning decency and just sat so close that we would rest comfortably on each other.

Still, I wasn't blind. I wasn't blind to the skin around his ring finger being lighter than the rest of it, to the fact that as much as I enjoyed our words and jokes mingling together in the space between our lips, he actually revealed very little about himself. Looking back, I realize that almost everything I know about Remmick I learned afterwards, when he would let me into his mind.

I also suspected that he wasn't even lost the first time we met.

I knew he was lying, and yet each day I'd come home from a day's toll, wait for the sky to turn dark out there in the swing, and put my sights on the road that he emerged from at the end of every day.

On one of those nights, I saw that he was carrying something. I couldn't tell what it was at first, but as he got closer, the swirls of colors between his hands made themselves clearer. He stood right in front of me, a bouquet of flowers between us.

"I wasn't sure which ones you liked, so I just brought a lil' of everything" he explained as he put the bouquet in my hands. "Do you like 'em?" The question made me want to smack that smug grin off his face, because he knew the answer to that.

"I love them, thank you!" I said while raising my gaze from the rainbow between my hands, delight tugging at my lips. His ghostly blue eyes mesmerized me, I'd never had a chance to stare at them so openly.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "Yeah, not a problem darlin'. There's quite a few beauties in there, you just gotta know where to look" he said, referring to the forest behind him. I nodded and looked down at the flowers again. I still remember a few of them: blue chicories, daises ranging from yellow, white, all the way to lavender, some desert roses carefully placed right in the middle of it all, demanding my attention, and scarlet morning glories poking out of the bouquet proudly.

After composing myself, I made the choice.

"Would you like—"

"Do you wanna—oh sorry. Go ahead."

"It's alright. I was just gonna ask if you...maybe wanted to come in?"

A lengthy hush fell between us. He said nothing, just stood still with parted lips and wide eyes as he tried to find the words he wanted to say next. Regret began climbing its way to my chest, and I was ready to take the invitation back until:

"Oh, uh, yeah sure! I'd love to!"

After a breath of relief, I took his wrist and made him cross the entrance with me.

The door closed with a click, casting away the nighttime melodies in exchange for crackling firewood. Remmick looked around with his hands in his pockets, languid as ever, while I stood on my tippy-toes to reach for the terracotta vase that was tucked away on top of the kitchenette cupboard.

I could feel Remmick's lips curve upward in amusement as he watched me puff up the flowers in their new water-filled vase, moving them here and there with gentle hands. I crossed the living room and

stopped in front of a shelf right under the window—the same one through which I first saw the wolf. Just as I was placing the vase on it's newfound place, a cold touch startled me.

“Nu-uh, darling,” he said with his hand on top of mine. “These flowers don’t take too kindly to sunlight, otherwise they’ll end up like that.” He nodded towards an adjacent place on the shelf: His previous gift, in a tall crystal vase, was already withering away into a bunch of dry brown petals that were barely hanging onto the stems. Some of them had already given up, and laid dead on the wood. Shame prickled at my skin; I’m not sure why, they were just flowers, and they would’ve eventually withered away anyways, right? Still, I felt the urge to take the little corpse and hide it somewhere he wouldn’t be able to see them. Remmick slipped his hands between mine and took the vase with him to the center of the room, with me hovering close by. “This place outta make ‘em happy” he said while putting them at the center of the only table available: A small, rounded table that wobbled if one leaned on it, and was sure to give you a splinter too.

We were silent for a while, busy chewing on the warm food I’d started making before nighttime. I was fascinated by the way he ate, like a machine swallowing fuel, never breaking rhythm: Open, close, chew. Open, close chew. I was halfway through my own plate while he was already done with his. On his way to the sink, he brushed my shoulder with his fingers and thanked me for the food, as proper and polite as always.

The running water filled the silence.

My thoughts strayed back to the dead flowers abandoned by the window. The silver rays of the moonlight gave the droopy plant a pale, ghostly appearance.

“It ain’t your fault, you know?” Remmick was on his seat again, laid back and looking at me with crossed arms resting comfortably under his chest. He continued, casual and unbothered. “These flowers didn’t come from no shop, they came straight from the forest floor. They weren’t made for places like these” he said as his eyes moved through the house walls. “Is normal that they die faster than others, it wasn’t just the sun that killed ‘em.” His words eased my heart a little bit. And then, a question appeared in my mind:

“But then...why do it?” He tilted his head in confusion. “I mean, why did you cut them if you knew they’d dry out so fast?” He straightened up, brows furrowed as he pondered my question. Finally, his eyes came back to mine, and he leaned into me. It wasn’t until I followed suit that he spoke.

“Well I just couldn’t resist takin’ something so pretty, now could I.” His gaze and cheeky smile didn’t falter when I pulled back with wide eyes.

I diverted my attention to the bouquet between us and asked casually, “Do you think these will make it?” He leaned back into his chair, back into normality.

“I guess time will tell, but keepin’ em away from the sun will surely help.”

“Good, good. I hope they do.”

I didn’t mention to him that for an instant, I thought I saw a red glow flicker in his eyes.

Chapter 8:

The wooden planks of the roof were turning gray with rot, moaning loudly from the humidity. I followed the patterns up and down over and over while tapping a nail against my nape. The room was blue with darkness, the air completely still. Little critters scurried around under the floorboards of the room, but even that was getting stale. So, I closed my eyes and reached further. The cricket’s songs mixed with the wind sweeping through tall grass, and the willow tree dancing loudly. Jittery steps moved between the grass blades, fast and inconsistent. A field mouse—no—two, three of them.

All that was left behind as I reached for something further, more welcoming. Leafs crackled with quiet consistency. An owl cooed above, and flew away with long, powerful flaps. Something else caught my ear, something slipping through the forest debris, nimble, elegant. A snake. A contrast to the creature that plowed it’s way around the forest, a baby? A four legged baby, probably a fawn accompanied by the graceful steps of it’s mama.

That entire landscape I was building in my head was overtaken by a slow, rhythmic thump. I’d been trying to silence it since I laid in bed, but I couldn’t anymore. My eyes opened and pierced the door to my right. The beating of her heart, the soft breaths, came from the other side. The rise and fall of her chest, closed eyes, tender lips...

What are you doing here? What do you hope will happen? I didn’t know. That pendant never left her chest, not even while she slept on the other side of the room. I knew getting her to take it off wasn’t worth the hassle, and yet I didn’t leave. It felt so awkward to pretend to be asleep, gettin’ bored to death in this room that reeked of mold. *Just leave, leave and don’t come back. Easy.* I opened the window and slid past, floating down without so much as a whisper as my feet graced the uneven ground. I walked away,

enjoying the cool night breeze on my face. I made it past the willow tree, past the road. For a few seconds, it really did feel that easy. I was an arm's length away from the trees...and then I stopped. I turned, looking at the feeble shell where she was sound asleep.

Her beating heart came back, soft and reassuring. I closed my eyes and imagined myself laying my head on her chest, the muscles of my back relaxing into the touch. When I opened them again, a thought formed in my mind:

I got time. I got nothing but time.

Chapter 9:

A cold breeze prickled at my skin. The first thing I saw through my half-lidded eyes were thin drapes swaying like ghosts. *The window is open. Why is it open?* When I looked away, my heart froze: Someone was standing at the edge of the bed, unmoving. Gray pants with suspenders, a baby blue shirt, and a face. A face clouded by darkness, it's features unrecognizable except for his sharp and drooling grin, and two ardent dots staring at me. *The wolf.* I opened my mouth to scream into a panic...

I sat up, sweaty and panting. My heart gradually slowed down to it's normal rhythm as I looked around. The entire space was grayed out apart from the single slit of clarity that split the room in two every morning, because no matter how much I toyed with them, those damned curtains never closed all the way. The window was shut, I could tell because the relentless chirps of the birds could barely reach my ears.

When relief finally settled in, I was able to drag myself out of bed—like I did every morning back then—and begin the day with the morning haze of the horizon.

But leaving the dream behind was proving more difficult than I thought. I saw the grin as I went into the bathroom and scrubbed my body from head to toe, trying not to close my eyes. I saw it while putting on my undergarments at the edge of the bed, and as I slid my dress right on top. *Don't be foolish, it was just a dream,* I scolded myself while walking towards the door that gave way to the spare room, the one Remmick had supposedly slept in that night. The door made a creak when I opened it, and the shadowy face in my mind was replaced by reality: A neat, empty bed.

It would've been easy to believe that no one had been there at all, that is if a note hadn't been placed at the foot of the pillow, almost blending into the hazel covers. When I went to pick it up, the first thing I saw was my name written with elegant cursive.

Elena,

I didn't want to wake you this morning, but I ought'a go to work or I won't hear the end of it from my boss. I left you a small gift in the kitchen as a thank you for letting me stay last night.

I'll be thinking of you all day, darling.

Remmick.

"*I'll be thinking of you all day, darling.*" I read that part at least three times over on my way to the living room, giddy with joy. I scanned the space from right to left. Everything looked the same as it always did, until my eyes reached the wooden counter: There, a big lump of soft fur—no, two lumps—were stacked on top of one another. Brown and cloudy gray, with long ears resting down along their backs. Rabbits. Remmick had gotten some rabbits for me. *Well, it ain't somethin' you typically give a girl, but it's a nice gesture*, I thought.

I picked up the brown one from the ears, inspecting it's body up and down. It was quite plumb, which really surprised me. You don't usually see rabbits that big around the prairies. The other one was about the same size. I had more than enough meat to work with. So, after having myself a nice breakfast with the eggs my sweet hens laid for me, I grabbed my butcher knife and got to work.

At the time, I wasn't very familiar with the proper way to handle and prepare rabbit meat, but it wasn't too hard to figure out. I'm convinced they would've made a mean stew.

After removing the pelt, I went out the back door that gave way to my yard—a fenced area that my chickens called home—with one rabbit on each hand, and hung them on the clothesline. After placing one metal bucket under each rabbit, I walked towards the brown one and positioned myself away from the throat, clutching the knife with one hand and the nape of the animal with the other. After a deep breath, I looked away and slashed.

The spill, the metallic and nauseating odor that I expected to invade my nostrils, never came. Both my hands were still dry, and only a few miserable drops of blood echoed against the metal bucket. My head turned back to the rabbit, perplexed. *Maybe I didn't cut deep enough*, I thought, so I repeated the same motion, making sure I felt the ligaments of the throat at the edge of the blade.

Nothing.

I placed my face inches away from the incision, but it just confused me more, because it was a perfectly clean cut. That's when I noticed something just beneath the open skin on the animal's throat: Two small, crimson dots, one right next to the other. When I spread the skin around the area with my fingers, I realized that the wounds went in much deeper than they appeared at first.

I broke away from the first rabbit and repeated the process on the other one with the exact same result: Measly drops of blood, and the same pair of red dots imprinted on it's skin, the ones that stared back at me from behind the tree, and from the edge of my bed. When the grinning face invaded my mind again, I resisted the urge to cower away. Instead, I closed my eyes and chased after the memory. The shadows dispersed the longer I stared at him, and soon the lines of his face began taking shape. It didn't take long for me to realize that the grin—so alien before—now seemed familiar.

How did I not recognize that smile before? The weight of knowledge hit me with full force, and the more I raced through everything that had happened since I saw the wolf, the more sense it made, and I despised it.

I grabbed the animal by the ears and began slashing my way through the neck, back and forth back and forth, begging, with each slice, that the dark liquid would pour out. The full weight of the head dangled from my fists, and not one more drop came out, not a single one. Soft fur slid between my fingers, and the head fell onto the grass with a silent thud. I stumbled back, distancing myself from the decapitated meat sack as I tried to push down the bile that rose in my throat when I saw one of my hens pecking at the gummy black pearl of the fluffy head that laid at it's feet.

The kitchenette was snuffed into somber grays when my full weight fell on the door. The musky air hung still as that stupid house looked down at me with pity, pity for thinking that things could be different for me. The stinging tears raced down my cheeks one after the other while I sobbed in silence. Later, Remmick promised me I would never cry again, but now I miss my tears more than ever.

Hours passed, and when all my tears were spent and dried out, I composed myself, grabbed my egg basket, my money and made my way to town like I did every day. The only thing I did differently was walk into the hardware store and spend all my savings on a box of silver bullets. The shop owner eyed me up and down with disdain when I thanked him. He later became my first victim.

I scurried back home, a tiny figure passing by a colossal wall of trees that watched my every move in silence. My eyes darted back and forth, examining every shadowy crevice in the forest, afraid that I'd see the red glow a second too late.

The roof of my house peeked out of the mound to my left just as the sun began to elongate the shadows around me, warning me of what was to come. The door lock clicked loudly. I lounged back in the chair with the loaded rifle resting across my lap, and my undivided attention nailed to the door in front of me.

Chapter 10:

The sun rays that filtered through the canopy finally began to move, scanning the forest floor one last time before fading away. They seemed to be taking their sweet time while I watched with a tight jaw, my nails gnawing at the bark of the tree behind me until I left that spot bare.

I was keenly aware of the extra weight in my pocket that jingled a charming melody when I moved. You see, the night before, I'd managed to get myself a hold of something quite special, just for her: A three-layered gold necklace embed with red gems all over, and a ruby right at the center of it. I knew the moment I saw it there, hidden at the bottom of that drawer, that it was meant for her. Ms. Davis would've been so pleased to see that ruby resting right on her chest.

The rays had finally vanished, leaving the forest to the stars above me.

It was time.

I emerged out into the open. The gravel path beneath that I'd come to enjoy walking through slithered away and up a small hill. Soon the willow tree, waving happily at me, revealed itself, and so did the house next to it.

As I strolled up the hill effortlessly, I got high off all the scenarios playing in my head: Elena smiling at the entrance to welcome me with a steaming plate of food in her hands. Now, I just find it funny to think about how I was excited for food that tasted like nothing. I would finally taste her, not just her blood, but her lips, her neck, the gap between her breasts. I pictured those big doe eyes looking up at me with adoration, head resting at the crook of my neck as we sat under the refuge of the trees. I wouldn't have to wait alone anymore, just watching those damned rays stroll around. No, we would have fun, taste each other all over, and she could be as loud as she wanted.

Knock, knock, knock!

All those beautiful images shattered when, once again, my vision was invaded by the black pit of a rifle barrel.

My hands went up as I stepped back on instinct. "Woah, hey. What's goin' on? ...Elena?" I asked while trying to find her face hidden behind the weapon. It broke my heart to see her eyes puffy and filled with fury, all of it pinned on me. "Elena, what..."

"Don't come any closer now, or I will shoot" she snarled while re-centering the barrel to my face. I had to pull back a mocking smile as my confusion and heartbreak turned to defiance. *Go ahead sugar, pull that trigger and see what happens.* She eyed me up and down, and in that gesture I saw the anger transform into something else: A serene sadness, one that you'd see in an elder's eyes when you'd done something they predicted, but still hoped you wouldn't. It stirred within me something strange, an urge to explain myself, to make her understand.

“Ya know, I went to town this morning. Bought myself some silver bullets from that cranky gringo at the convenience store.” A cold rock dropped on my stomach so suddenly that it almost knocked me to the floor. “Yeah, they more expensive than I’d hoped, but I think it was a good investment,” she cocked her head to the side, “don’t ya think?”

I’d forgotten what it was like to have my existence in someone else’s hands. Death was breathing down my neck, and brutal panic began growing in my mind and extending out into my body.

“Go, and never come back here, ya hear me?” And I almost did, the wood croaked under my boot when I took that first step back. But I couldn’t take another. I couldn’t go back to my routine of hiding from everyone, from everything. I couldn’t ignore that awful, hollow quiet anymore, not after her. So I gambled with death, and took a step forward that made Elena’s eyes widen with surprise.

“Go ahead then, shoot me.” *She won’t, she won’t, she won’t, she...*

“Don’t be stupid now, just...leave.” The grip on her weapon tightened, but her eyes faltered.

“I ain’t leavin’ without you.”

“You’re crazy.” *She won’t shoot.*

“I know how much you hate this place, Elena.” I forced a step forward, and she moved back in response. “These people...” one after the other, “I know how lonely it is, how empty.” I was shocked to hear my voice falter. For the first time in a while, it had no script to follow, no show to hide behind. The rifle ended up nuzzled between us, its head under my chin, but to me it didn’t exist. There was just Elena, and the smell of her hair, her lips, her eyes...

She was the answer, she could fill that silence. I had to win the game, I had to. “Come with me. You won’t have to be alone anymore.”

Conflict took place in her eyes—sadness, anger, fear, indecision—all fighting for control while I watched everything happen with iron restraint. I knew speaking again could ruin everything. Her mouth opened, then closed. Her gaze dropped to the floor and made its way to the mirror hanging behind her. I tried to follow with my own eyes, but I saw nothing. Maybe she saw memories, a feeling, I wasn’t sure. In that moment, she was somewhere I couldn’t follow. *Just wait*, a voice inside appeased me. And so I did.

Chapter 11:

Remmick wasn't in the frame, I was alone with my bloated eyes, underlined by deep purple bags. Ever since I'd stepped into that house I avoided looking at the mirror. I'd clean the kitchen, the tables, the shelves, wash the few dishes in the sink—and then wash them again for good measure. I'd walk past my own dulled gaze every night before locking myself in the bedroom with a bleeding heart and the hopes that tomorrow I'd feel different.

“Elena?” When I turned back, Remmick was staring down at me the same way he'd done in my dreams: Drool on his chin, a hungry crimson gaze—but no grin. His freezing touch brushed against the back of my hand, unsure, asking for permission. Behind the red glow, I saw my own loneliness reflected back at me. His fingers made their way through mine, filling the space in between.

My other hand went up to my chest, fingers gliding over the nooks and crevices of my silver Guadalupe. So many questions ran through my mind as I made a fist around the pendant and began testing the strength of the thin necklace. *Was I falling for a trick? Would it hurt? He could just drain me whole and I would be helpless to stop him, then what? This is a mistake, he's gonna kill me he's gonna--*

The chain snapped against my nape with a muted click, and my mind went blank. I waited for him to pounce and the pain to come...

but it didn't.

Instead, Remmick waited as I placed my mom's gift on the wooden table next to us.

Time stretched out as we stared at each other.

When he finally moved, it was slow, gentle, with his breath hovering over my lips. His kiss was cool and tender, like the petals of the flowers he'd brought me. We pulled each other closer and closer, chaste kisses turning deep, wet, with my frame cradled in his arms, chest to chest, as my fingers slid their way up his back and through the soft hair on his nape. Comfort and safety spread through my chest, a feeling I'd almost forgotten. He kissed the corner of my mouth, my cheek, my jaw. I closed my eyes and melted into his arms, savoring the way he moved down my neck. In my haze, I forgot who this was—and what was about to happen. He grazed the base of my neck.

Sharp pain pierced through my skin.

Panicked, I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. My vision blurred, and with it the pain ebbed away. All sensation was slipping away from me and I couldn't stop it.

The infinite night above me was made smaller by the tree tops. I was back in the forest where I ran from the soldiers. *Maybe if I go back now I can still find the line, there were hundreds, maybe thousands of us, surely they're not all gone yet, right?*

But this was a different forest, a different time, and the dream I'd awaken from wasn't a dream at all. I sat up and felt something watching. There he was, leaning on a tree to my right, his red eyes glinting against the blue of the night. He walked closer and pulled me up to my feet and into his chest with ease. My head laid on his shoulder as we embraced each other. He whispered words of comfort into my ear as he stroked my hair, but all that could fit in my mind was one thought:

The line is gone.

From my place on his shoulder I saw, in the forest floor, a beautiful snake moving through the leaves; her eyes reflected a red shine as she slithered away in search for her next meal.

Chapter 12:

I thought you were it, you know? I thought you were the answer, I really did.

Sorry to disappoint you.

I didn't mean—

I adore those first nights we spent together, you know? But then...

You do?

The Hunger,

It came back, or...

It began.

How could you this to me?

I wanna claw it out of me just as much as you.

I know you hate me. You want to hate me,

But I can't.

Did you find them? No...you didn't even look for them, why didn't you?

And do what? Turn them into this? I couldn't do that to them.

I'm sorry, Elena. I really am.

I know.

I know you are.

You don't hate me...

I'm so glad you don't hate me.

...why is it so warm? Where are you?

Remmick?