**[h5][center][b]The Fading Light[/b][/center][/h5]**

Waves. It was dead silent except for the way they gently cradled the hull of the ship as it drifted through the water. There wasn't even wind to make a sound on this most serene of nights, to blow between the railings and sing a song or to ruffle the open sails. The horizon was infinite and stretched with emptiness. Lonely. The sky was cloudless... Perhaps it was not completely lonely after all. Thousands of stars dotted the sky so if they could be accounted for company then it could even be called crowded without ever inducing a sense of claustrophobia. But there was the cold of loneliness out here on the open seas; ever so cold in the dead of night. There was not another soul for countless miles around, no other body to keep warm by. This didn't bother Remnant so much. He was a vampire; the cold was normal! And yet... yet he found himself longing.

Remnant leaned on the edge of the railing of his ship, gazing down into the water with a near vacant stare. Where was he going? He wasn't going anywhere. Tonight the destination was of no import... It was all in the journey. But why was he aimlessly sailing about these waters? He sighed. He wanted to clear his head out here but it wasn't really working. Moonlight trickled down the ocean to a singular point where his eyes stared and he soon found himself following its thickening trail up towards the horizon until it stopped. But onward he was drawn until he no longer looked down but up; up at the full moon in the sky. He furrowed his brow and weakly smiled at the futility of his escape, a small singular laugh quietly escaping his lips. Of course, the moon would follow him wherever he went until a new dawn began. And still he tried to run away.

"Hazel..." He softly whispered her name. He could still see her white and brown fur so vividly when he thought of her; her deep brown eyes. How long had it been since he'd seen her? Time was a blur and it did not matter... All that mattered was that he missed her. He'd give anything to see her again. He sighed at the aching in his heart; the sinking feeling in his gut. His wishes were just that... Seeing her again was not an option.

Remnant looked down from the moon, at the wine bottle in his hand. It was empty now and he didn't even notice when he'd emptied it. His furrowed brow turned to scowl and he looked up at the moon once again, angrily throwing the bottle towards it. Another futile act of his on this night as he failed to throw it even a fraction of the distance before the bottle plummeted and splashed into the ocean. He took a few steps back before falling down and sitting against the mast, eyes all the while fixated on the moon. Of course he could never escape. He shut his eyes and drifted away into a memory, finally deciding to embrace the thoughts that were following him.

Warm. It was Summer and the sun had been bearing down upon the land all day but it was setting now, giving way to a pleasant reprieve. Remnant strolled through the town, wiping sweat from his brow which he whipped onto the pavement with an exhausted sigh. What a long day it had been. But a smile began to creep onto his face as he forgot about it at the sight of the sign up ahead. The local alchemist. He wondered what was in the bargain bin today... but more importantly he wondered if Hazel was in right now. She was the real reason he was coming along to the shop so it'd be a shame if she was running an errand for the owner.

But there she was. The brown and white wolfess seemed to have spotted him first because she was already giving him a cheery wave through the window. He chuckled to himself and went on in. "Were you expecting me?" he asked, jokingly. Of course she was, he usually came around this time, after all. And yet he asked her the same question almost every time.

The alchemist assistant simply giggled without answering the question as she waved him over. "Heya Remmy, came to take a look?" Of course he did. He always did. But that was his excuse.

Remnant confirmed with a nod and Hazel dug her hand into... that basket was looking pretty empty today; because it was. She pulled out a single potion. "I'm afraid this is all we've got on discount this afternoon."

The vampire wrinkled his nose as he read the tag. "Swamp smell? Who'd want to smell like a swamp?" He laughed. "What's your boss thinking with this one? No wonder it didn't sell."

Hazel widely smiled, obviously having a perfectly good explanation for him. She always did. "I never use it myself but sometimes hunters want it for a bit of camouflage." She shot him a little smirk. "I don't imagine you'll be wanting this one."

Remnant sheepishly grinned. "Oh, no I would but uh... seem to have misplaced my coin pouch somewhere. Crazy."

Still smirking, Hazel rolled her eyes. "Oh no! How awful. I hope you find it."

"It'll turn up." Remnant chuckled. "I can never say it's a wasted trip to come here though. Your boss around?"

"Nope," said Hazel. "They went home for the day, told me to lock up."

"Perfect," said the vampire. "I thought I'd take you to watch the sunset."

"I... suppose I could lock up slightly early," said Hazel. "But we'll have to run... It's getting late."

"I got no problem with that," said Remnant.

Hazel went around the counter and tugged him along by the hand out the front door where she locked it. "Carry me?" She looked at him with those deep brown begging eyes.

"Heh, I got no problem with that," answered the vampire. He crouched down a little for her and she jumped on his back, arms wrapped around him. It was a little ritual, a very basic thing, but he did so love it.

Remnant couldn't run now, not without creating a very bumpy experience for the girl at his back, so he opted for walking and used long, swift strides. They'd get to the spot with time to spare. He smiled at the feeling of Hazel's warmth. The open sunlight didn't have anything on that... but he valued it for the time it would bring him with the wolfess.

It wasn't long before they were out of town and Remnant carried Hazel down a long windy dirt road. She giggled but didn't say anything, provoking the vampire to it instead. "What's funny?" His smile grew into a grin, already knowing what she'd tell him.

"You're going so slow," she said. "We'll miss the sunset."

"No, we won't," assured the vampire.

Hazel nuzzled against his shoulder and neck. "It wouldn't be a problem if we did..."

"There are always the stars," he added.

There it was. Their spot was just up this hill on the roadside, beneath the boughs of the old oak at the peak. Grass flourished all the way up, as if no one else ever made their way up and trampled it to a climbing path. Remnant tilted forward as he began to trudge his way up, ensuring that he'd not lose balance and tumble backwards as he carried Hazel the last of the way. And, of course, he tried his hardest to control his breath just to impress her.

At the top. The vampire let the wolfess down and marched to the trunk of the tree where he leaned against it and looked out over the vale. The sun was very low, just above the lower ridge of that distant mountain but they'd made it just like he said they would. He smiled at Hazel, watching her move around in front of him where she went to take a seat at the foot of the tree, touching down upon the soft grass. The breeze was cool up here and she'd soon complain about being cold. She always did... But of everything familiar, this was something that Remnant intended to change this time... But then, perhaps he just wanted to hear it one last time, so he waited.

Hazel stroked her arms. "It's chilly."

There it was. Remnant reached back into his satchel and pulled out a blanket, red in hue. "Got you something."

Hazel's ears perked up and she looked back up at him, seeing him holding it out. "What's this? A blanket?"

"Yeah, you always say it's cold up here so I got it for you."

The wolfess took it, a wide smile on her face. "Wow! Thank you, Remmy! I love it."

The vampire grinned, seeing that she was already half wrapped up. But she stopped, painting a small measure of confusion on his face.

"Well?" Hazel patted the ground next to her, holding the blanket up to create a space. "I know you never feel cold but you have to warm up now anyway."

Remnant took a moment to respond as he collected himself. But then he chuckled, crouching down to join her in sitting. How could he ever say no to an order like that? While he didn't feel much of the cold, he certainly felt the warmth.

The sun was already vanishing behind the mountain, the gold it cast upon the side of another mountain the only trace of it left behind. But this quickly faded too, evening falling over the land. But the time was not over. It was a cloudless sky, perfect to gaze at the stars.

"Got a story for you again," said the vampire.

Hazel leaned against him, cosying up beneath the blanket, with her ears fully attentive. She didn't have to say a word for him to know that she was very happy that he did, a big smile on her face.

Remnant reached up and played with those attentive ears, making them twitch a little and chuckling as they did. She playfully whined at him, so he settled into patting her head, fingers running through her hair.

"A whale almost sank my ship." He put it as bluntly as he could, aiming for the shock value. True bewilderment could come later.

"What?" Hazel asked. "I'm not sure I heard you right."

"No, you heard me right," answered the vampire. "You probably think it was with a splash of its tail smashing against the ocean but that's not even close."

"Well then how'd it happen?" She sounded concerned.

Remnant chuckled. "Hey don't worry, I'm here right now so you know I'm alright."

Hazel blushed slightly. "R-right."

"It was a sunny day on the sea and I was transporting a bit of cargo between two foreign ports," the vampire explained. "The job was... It was a job, not very interesting and certainly not as interesting as the two ports I stopped in at. They were very exotic and I'll tell you about them! I think you'd love to visit. But those are stories for another time. This time I have to talk about the whale out in the waters I'm not familiar with."

The wolfess was settled now, breathing calmly with a hint of excitement. So he continued. "Now where was I? Oh, yes! Sunny day. The sea out there is really beautiful; teal and crystal clear. Normally that just happens in shallower waters so I was surprised knowing that it was about as deep as deep could be. I swear you could see the fish a mile down! So the next part of this story is going to be quite confusing. How could I miss rocks when the water was so clear? You'd have to completely neglect looking out for an hour to miss them but I was making regular checks... Regardless, my realisation that jagged rocks were narrowly missing the hull of this ship was a sudden one. And then I could see more rocks up ahead. I had to take a quick manoeuvre in order to survive but if I'm honest, I shouldn't have escaped even then..."

"Rocks?" asked the wolfess. "I thought you said it was a whale that almost sunk your ship. And how could you be so careless."

"Oh, but I wasn't careless," said Remnant. "It was now that I realised the rocks themselves were moving and there wasn't very much I could do to influence the outcome of this encounter. You see... The ship began to lean quite heavily on one of its sides as the water was greatly disturbed and pushing against the hull with a great force. I feared the ship would capsize but I was fortunate to remain upright as I held onto the railing. Would you believe me if I told you an island was rising up from the depths of the ocean with great speed right before my very eyes? Right next to my ship!"

Memory now gave way to reality even as Remnant found himself drifting off to sleep. "What...?" He opened his eyes and stood up when he felt white light piercing his eyelids with increasing intensity as if the moon was growing closer by the second. And yet he caught a glimpse of the moon immediately, seeing that it was right where he'd left it in the night sky. But a moment later it was shining as brilliantly as the sun and he was forced to bring his forearm to his forehead to shelter his sight from the blinding vision. What in the hells was going on?! "Show yourself!" He didn't know who he was calling out to. Was he even calling out to someone or was this some celestial event that he witnessed now?

In an instant the light was gone. The moon returned to its original brightness but, for a moment, the vampire's adjusted eyes saw only darkness, recognising neither reflecting water nor ship wood. He glanced around in his darkness, trying to understand what had happened... and then he saw her. Perched on the railing of his ship, sat a wolfess of the goldest golden hair and silverest silver fur. His first thought on any other occasion might have been wariness or curiosity but tonight, confronted by this woman, he only thought perfection, simply standing where he was and staring with captivation for an entire minute. He found himself almost breathless as he met eyes with her, seeing that they were the same gold as her hair. And her dress? It was as white as the moon on this night, pure and snow.

"Aren't you cold?" asked the vampire. It was an odd question to ask an intruder but he'd been bitten by wonder. She may have had fur but even the furred ones felt the chill out on the ocean. Short of being a vampire herself...

"Only in spirit." The voice that answered him was as clear and unblemished as her beauty, pronounced, tone precise.

Remnant found an opportunity to breathe now, feeling tension leave him with a sigh as he dropped back down against the mast to where he sat. "Welcome to the club." He raised his hand, as if raising a bottle... Then gave his empty hand a confused look before he realised he'd thrown the bottle away who knew how long-

"You threw it into the ocean," said the wolfess. She was still sitting there up on the railing, gazing over his way. "Yes, I've watched you a while now."

"I didn't throw it into the ocean, I threw it-" Remnant shut his eyes and laid his head back against the mast, letting it loll off in the direction away from the wolfess. "Ah... doesn't even matter."

The wolfess set paw to the deck now and approached him with graceful motion. She was stood only a couple feet away when she spoke again. "You threw it at the moon."

Remnant gave her attention, looking her in the eyes once more. And now he asked the question he probably should have led with. "Who are you?"

"I am Hati." Not a moment's hesitation in her answer. She lightly placed her fingers of one hand to her collarbone. "And I have come to offer you some comfort from the trouble that plagues your mind."

"Hati, huh?" asked the vampire. Hazel mentioned the name once or twice. Goddess of the moon. He looked between her, that pure white dress, and the moon to match. "And why would you do that? Threw a bottle at you."

The goddess scoffed ever so slightly, accompanying the end with a laugh. "You didn't throw it anywhere close." She offered her hand to him and helped him to stand. "I told you I have watched for a while. Your friendship with Hazel was so pure and I understand the grief inside your heart. You should have the chance to feel the same level of love though she is gone now."

Remnant took a step back, shaking his head a little. "I..." This was a blindside. It hit him fast, out of nowhere. For all the calm tone he'd kept since seeing the wolfess, his mind was racing a million miles an hour with questions and doubts.

"You do not believe me," said the goddess.

"I'm not exactly in the habit of meeting someone of your... nature," said the vampire. "Can you blame me for wondering?"

"Hazel still keeps that piece of red blanket with her and thinks of you often," said Hati. "The piece she saved from the fire."

The vampire's brow trembled as he focused his eyes. Hearing this, he suddenly didn't care about his doubts. He didn't care if this was real or a figment of a coping imagination. He just wanted what he was offered. He'd be a fool to turn it down. So now, rather than stepping back, he threw himself forward and hugged the wolfess tightly, head hung over her shoulder... and here? He caught Hazel's scent upon the goddess. It was kind of weird, a mix of so many of the reagents she worked with day to day. But weird as it was, he loved it very much. "H-how is she?"

Hati smiled, wrapping her arms around the vampire and embracing him. "Hazel is safe and well. And she wants to know that you are the same."

"I've missed her from the moment the plague took her." Remnant laughed, counter to his emotions in the moment. "I'm fine and yet I feel lost, like a part of me went missing. All these things I used to look forward to each time I was in town..." He felt hands softly massaging his back.

"She also misses you dearly," said Hati. "But she wishes for you to move on and live your life. And this... is why I am here. To offer peace that you might reacquire purpose."

One last experience like those good days? He'd cherish it for a lifetime. Thoughts on Hazel, the vampire broke the hug and put a small gap between himself and the goddess. It was odd to think that he was about to try this, to behave so over familiar with a creature of divinity. But he had not a care in the world if there were untold consequences, raising his hand above the wolfess' head and giving a couple of testing pats. Hati remained there looking up at him with a smile. Remnant couldn't help but crack a smile himself, chuckle and transition from those light pats to some playful ruffling of her hair.

Hati reacted just the way he remembered Hazel did. She shut her eyes, lowering her head slightly from the pressure of his hand as her smile widened and raised her forearms just over the height of her elbows. Her tail flicked happily behind her. Encouraging! The vampire felt an enthusiasm within himself that he'd not felt in sometime and he decided to push his luck further. Whenever Hazel raised her arms like that, she exposed a weak point to him; a few really, but there was one in particular that he could strike like no other. And the goddess exposed the same now. Remnant darted his other hand up towards her armpit and quickly motioned with his fingers a few times, causing an outburst of a laughter as her entire body reacted; crouching, recoiling, pulling away as her eyes opened up to give him a look that accused him of mischief, though she grinned as happily as before. Hazel was ticklish and there was nothing quite like that love-hate reaction she gave to him exploiting the knowledge.

The vampire took a couple of steps away now, until he was back against that mast and sliding down to sit. He looked up at the goddess, sideways, and cocked his head in a gesture for her to join him. "Got a story for you."

The wolfess took a moment to recompose herself and after a deep breath gave him a smile. "I'd love to hear it," she said. "It sounds like you have one in mind already." She brought herself close, crouching down to the deck before laying her legs out along it by Remnant's side, leaning upon him there.

"It's about the time a whale almost sank my ship..."

There was plenty of distraction as the vampire told his story. Hati would interrupt at those moments where he made a point of how much danger he'd been in, her concern begging all too strongly to be expressed. He'd of course discovered ways to increase the theatrics with retellings over the years, drama and tension reaching great heights at the expense of keeping concise. And the beauty of the night sky itself at times demanded a moment to be admired, small breaks where Remnant found the chance to give the goddess a pat, rub her ears or sneak in a playful tickle. He did not notice it at all, but time was passing and Remnant found himself deep into the story before long, the wolfess now laying down entirely with her head in his lap as he stroked it.

"... Would you believe me if I told you an island was rising up from the depths of the ocean with great speed right before my very eyes? Right next to my ship!"

"Now you must be pulling my leg," said Hati.

The vampire laughed. "Alright, you got me. But I swear to you, I believed it myself in the moment. I could have sworn I was looking at an island as I held on there amidst the chaos! Water poured off of it as it emerged, the rocks miraculously missing my ship, and soon I was pushed far enough away that I was no longer at risk of capsizing. Of course, I didn't feel so steady yet and continued to hold on for dear life. But now I could get a real proper look at the island, collect my thoughts and all. And that's when I realised... what I was looking at was not really an island. All those bushes and greenery I thought were the canopy of some exotic jungle were actually a lot of moss. What I thought was rock face was actually slippery skin. And the rocks that came so close to slicing through my hull were barnacles! Enormous things! You'd only be able to believe it if you were there to see them."

Hati giggled. "I might believe you yet," she said. "But did you say 'skin'?"

"Indeed, I did..." said Remnant. "After all, I did say this is the story of how a whale almost sank my ship. The island turned out to be this colossal whale, dwarfing my ship a million times over. Obviously I was stunned, still standing there with my hands glued to the railing, knuckles white from clenching. I have no idea how long I stayed like that, staring at this beautiful creature, but I do know I spied some shiny things caught in the moss on its back; a shine beyond the glimmering sun that reflected from its wet skin. And I swear that the longer I looked, the more I began to see the island again, pathways becoming clear in my vision that would allow me to traverse the whale's back and keep me safe from slipping."

"Don't tell me you climbed on it," said Hati.

The vampire ruffled her hair and smiled. "No, I didn't. Before I could regain control of my body, the whale began to recede beneath the waves, taking its treasures with it. But I swore, in that moment, that should I ever see this whale again, that I'll take a walk on its back and see what secrets I can find. This majestic creature must be living for many centuries now and the artefacts it may have collected in that time... What could I discover and what could I learn of the world?"

"The opportunity for even more adventures." Hati giggled. "You really are quite the explorer, Remmy."

"Heh, think so?" asked the vampire. "I always thought of myself as more of an experience collector though... 'Explorer' matches up with that, doesn't it?"

"That it does," said the goddess. "It's just about time to part ways."

Remnant noticed how different the sky looked now, the dwindling stars and less brilliant moon. They'd been there a long time but he'd gotten so lost in it all. He gave her a thankful smile. "Where will I go? After everything, in the end."

"Should I spoil the greatest adventure of all?" Hati simply answered him with a question. "What lies beyond your mortal coil?"

It tempted. It tempted and tempted! He wanted to know. But.. "Perhaps not," said the vampire. "I'd rather chance that it will be a story she might tell to me. Will you do me one last favour? When you see her, tell her the story I told you. She's heard it a million times but I know she'll love to hear it again."

The goddess slowly sat up and placed a kiss on his cheek. He blinked. She was gone. The vampire looked up at the moon, the fading light. Had it all been a hallucination or a dream? It did not matter. What did matter was that he felt better now. "Let's see what stories are left in me."