Wills of the Wolves

**Chapter Eight**

As the group continued onwards, now at a full jog, Ezekiel floated up alongside David, his wings allowing him to take long casual strides and still keep up. “That was rather clever of you, David. How did you manage to use your magic so easily here?”

“The pistol Vira got me is more or less a focus for the energy alone, rather than any concrete spell.” David replied. “At least, that’s my interpretation.”

Ezekiel nodded slowly. “Ahhh. Very much like a wand. What would have you done if they weren’t going to keep their promises?

David shrugged. “It would have had little difference between lying to them about playing the game, I think. I’d rather get the first shot in than have them attack us when they realize we weren’t going to play along.”

“How much-” Vira huffed. “longer?” Wolfwood didn’t reply as a cold wind blew in from behind them, instead immediately picking up the pace.

“I don’t like that answer!” Freya exclaimed.

David looked around. “Those foxes are gone now!”

“Hush!” Wolfwood hissed.

The group fell silent as the call of the kodama once again echoed across the forest, the sharp and frantic clattering further unnerving everyone. In the distance, a faint light began to fade into view. Wolfwood further increased his pace when he saw it.

The group was nearly out of breath as they stepped out into a large clearing, the safety of the glowing firelight on the far side. Near the center of the clearing was a large stone statue of a nine-tailed fox, a number of twisted ropes circled around it with white tassels dangling from them. David felt like his every step was counted by the looming statue.

As the group passed the statue, the frantic clattering of the kodama increased just before the horned head of a large serpent crashed through the trees at the left side of the clearing, its dragon-like head hissing as it quickly cut off the group from their destination, its large body winding around and easily encircling them.

“A wurm!?” Wolfwood exclaimed quizzically, quickly sliding to a halt. “Why is it all the way out here?”

“More importantly,” Freya huffed. “How dead are we?”

“It doesn’t look like it wants to come closer.” Vira replied, watching the creature’s head as it circled around them.

“You could probably thank the statue for that.” Ezekiel replied, gently placing a hand at the base of the large statue. “It’s thrumming with power.”

“But I don’t expect the wurm will be waiting for long.” Wolfwood replied, their eyes locked on the serpent’s head.

“So where does that leave us?” Freya asked, dismayed. “Is this shelter you keep speaking of even safe?”

“It has protections far stronger than a single creature can break.” Wolfwood replied. “I’d even go as far as to say David would have trouble doing it without preparation.”

“Not to say I would even try…” David replied, a hand on his chin. He looked over to Ezekiel. “Would flying us out of here be unreasonable?”

Ezekiel immediately shook his head. “It is difficult enough to carry myself. I have no magic to assist my flight, merely what my wings can lift on their own.”

“Damn it!” David cursed, his brow furrowing.

“Could you lure it away from here?” Vira asked Ezekiel.

“That would only work if he had some kind of bait besides himself.” Wolfwood replied. “It’s intelligent enough to know not to chase after one when it can have many more.”

“So we know Ezekiel at least can get away…” David was deep in thought. “Wolfwood, can you use any kind of magic?”

The wolf glanced up to David. “I have limited control of plants.”

“Does that include vines?” David asked, turning towards the wolf.

Wolfwood nodded slowly. “Yes, but I don’t have the power to hold down a wurm.”

David nodded, looking to Freya and Vira. “Would you two be able to help Wolfwood with that?”

Freya shook her head. “As I’ve mentioned before, I’m not much of a caster.”

“And I can’t use magic just yet.” Vira replied. “So unless we can pump Wolfwood up with our magic indirectly, we can’t do anything.”

“Ah!” Ezekiel exclaimed, raising a finger. “You two might not be able to, but David can.”

“How?” David asked immediately.

“It would normally require being able to cast, but with your pistol, Wolfwood can just directly absorb your magic.” Ezekiel replied. “However, since Wolfwood is intimately connected to your very being, only *you* can give them energy.”

David nodded, looking to the circling wurm. “Ezekiel, I have one last question. How long do you think you can distract that thing?”

Ezekiel glanced over to the wurm, which had shrunken its circle since the last time he looked. “As I am now, I do not believe I could escape with my own life after attempting it, let alone allow for you four to escape.”

David nodded again. “So that leaves little option.” David’s stare at him caught Ezekiel’s attention. “A power locked away within you has come up a number of times, Ezekiel. A spirit of some kind, if I recall correctly. Could you control it if I…” David lifted a hand and twisted it like he was holding a key.

Ezekiel thought for a moment before nodding. “I believe I can. However, if I fail, I will be just as dangerous as the wurm.”

“It’s not like we have much choice at this point.” Freya said with a sigh.

Vira nodded. “Do what you have to, David.”

David reached a hand out towards Ezekiel’s chest, centered on the circle of runes on his abdomen. With a simple push into Ezekiel, the runes dissolved, and the results were immediate. Ezekiel’s body grew hot to the touch, making David immediately pull back his hand. Ezekiel grunted as the energy cascaded through him, erupting as small flames in his palms, and igniting his halo with a burst of red and gold fire.

After a moment, Ezekiel let out a huff and looked up, giving David a smirk and a nod. “I have it under control.”

David nodded in reply. “Good. Now let me lay down the plan; I’m going to feed Wolfwood as much energy as I can, and they’ll tie down the beast when the head is on the side away from the shelter. Ezekiel, you’ll then go in to keep it distracted. Try to keep it from moving too much, so the rest of us can get over the vines. Freya, Vira, you’re on wolf duty.” He nodded towards Wolfwood. “Wolfwood can’t exactly climb on their own, unless they have thumbs I don’t know about.”

“You made it up that ladder when we first started chasing Spectra.” Vira commented, looking towards Wolfwood.

“I was able to take a more ethereal form.” Wolfwood replied with a shake of their head. “I cannot do that here.”

Ezekiel nodded. “Spirits are more powerful here, but limited to solid forms.”

“So we have a plan then.” Freya said, her eyes trailing the wurm once more. “I vote we do it ASAP.”

“Agreed.” David replied, pulling out his pistol. He hesitated for a moment, looking to Wolfwood. “Where do I, uh, stick it?” Wolfwood opened their mouth a little and raised their head. With a shrug, David rested the tip of the pistol into Wolfwood’s mouth before closing his eyes. He focused the best he could on a gentle continuous stream, rather than a solid blast.

Minutes passed as David continued to pour himself through his weapon, until his own legs giving out forced him to stop. Jittering, he looked up to Wolfwood.

The wolf’s aura had doubled in size, and the leaves on their body moved without wind as energy billowed around them. Wolfwood gave David a nod. “I’m ready.”

David nodded, looking up to Ezekiel. “Let’s go then.”

Freya cast a worried look towards David, but Wolfwood dashed away before she could say anything. As Vira followed close behind her, Ezekiel shot off in the other direction, fire following his gold-tipped feathers as he flew at the wurm’s head.

A dozen yards from the sliding body of the wurm, Wolfwood planted their feet in the ground, and let out a loud howl, calling forth a burst of leaven vines from the ground around them, covering the large body of the wurm as much as they could. Vira and Freya wasted no time in climbing onto the vines, the roars of the wurm and the shake of its body the only evidence they need of a short timeframe.

Freya stopped halfway, looking down to Wolfwood and Vira. “Where’s David!?”

They looked back towards the statue, where David was still on the ground, his legs refusing to move. “Vira, Freya!” Wolfwood barked. “Stay still! I can jump from your backs!”

Vira locked his arms as best he could around the vines before nodding to Wolfwood. He was surprised at how light the spirit was as they leapt from the ground and landed on his hunched back, before leaping again to land on Freya’s.

Wolfwood lowered their head to Freya’s ear before they jumped further. “Go get him.” With the final bound, Wolfwood was now atop the body of the wurm, concentrating as they focused their magic, this time to keep the vines from breaking.

Vira said little as Freya slid down the vines on his way up, not even looking back as the wolfish lady dashed towards David. David was watching Ezekiel dance around the head of the wurm, the angel flitting back and forth right in front of its monstrous jaws, not even blinking an eye as teeth gnashed merely inches from his body. An occasional blast of fire and light kept the beast engaged.

“David!” Freya exclaimed as she crouched next to him. “Can you stand at all?”

“Freya? No, I can barely sit up.” David replied, still jittery. He glanced up when he heard a sharp snap from behind Freya. The first of many vines had begun to break.

“Come on then!” Freya reached to pick David up, but David stopped her with a hand.

“Freya, go. You can’t carry me up there and get us both out of here.” David quickly gestured behind her.

“I can’t just leave you here to die!” Freya replied, gesturing wildly. “What would I tell your sister!?”

Freya grew still as David leaned forward and kissed her. “You tell her everything, and she’ll understand. That is if I’m not there to tell her myself. She knows how much I’ve longed for an adventure. Now go. Even Ezekiel won’t be able to keep going for much longer.”

Freya drooped before slowly getting to her feet. “I won’t ever forget this, David…” She replied quietly, before quickly turning away as tears poured from her face. David watched her dash back towards the vines on all fours, leaping to grab at what remained of the vines before she, Wolfwood, and Vira vanished on the other side of the wurm.

David turned around as the wurm’s body crashed forwards, now free to snap at Ezekiel however it pleased. The angel quickly shot into the sky, his labored breathing evident even from where David laid prone on the ground. The angel’s eyes scanned the clearing, quickly spotting David on his own. David reached for his headband, still tied around his forehead, and held it up. Ezekiel watched David for nearly a minute before ultimately turning away, flying towards the shelter everyone else had escaped to.

The wurm hissed as it started circling again, quickly becoming aware only David was left within its grasp. As the large serpent continued to tighten its circle, David managed to pull himself to his feet with the help of the statue behind him. His back now against the statue, he could feel the thrum of power Ezekiel had mentioned. He watched the wurm slowly coil one last time, raising its head to face him, preparing to strike.

David reached a hand to touch the base of the statue behind him. “I hope this isn’t suicide…” He murmured to himself, before willing for whatever power within the statue to be released from whatever bound it.

The energy vanished in an instant, and nothing seemed to happen, besides the wurm briefly hesitating. David let out a long breath, standing as straight as he could to prepare for the unavoidable strike from the wurm. His heart stopped as a large white form landed in front of him. From within the swarm of pure-white tails, David could pick out the silhouette of a giant fox. He had little further time to interpret what he saw before it swept him up, bounding away with his body in its mouth.

As the fox trotted with David still in its mouth, David could see the wurm uncoil and swiftly retreat. He let out a relieved sigh and relaxed. “Narrowly escaping death once again…” The fox’s ears twitched when it heard him spoke, the tails behind it shifting as well. Without the strength to lift his body up, David took a moment to try and count the fox’s tails as it carried him towards the shelter. He frowned a little when he counted ten, before looking the other way as he heard the voices of his friends, namely Freya’s mournful sobbing.

“I can’t believe we’ve just left him to die!” Freya bawled, with no intention for controlling her emotions.

“Freya,” Wolfwood began sternly. “He’s not dead yet. We just need to think of a way to get him out of there.”

“If I had more control, I could have carried him off.” Ezekiel said, the regret heavy in his voice. “But as it stands, I am useless. I couldn’t even hurt the beast.” Ezekiel glanced to Vira as the scholar let out a quiet squeak, staring out into the woods. Ezekiel turned suddenly with a twinge of hope, freezing as he saw the fox carrying David. David simply gave him a meek wave.

Freya didn’t wait for anyone to say anything, quickly rushing forward the moment she saw David. The fox quietly placed David on the ground before bounding away, gone into the dark forest before Freya could reach David.

David smiled softly as Freya immediately pulled him into her embrace. “Don’t *ever* do that again…” She murmured into his shoulder.

David hugged her back, nestling his own face against her shoulder. “Next time I’ll make sure I’m strong enough to fight, don’t you worry.”

Vira raised a finger. “Okay, I’m going to want answers.”

“I let out the power within that statue?” David replied, looking up with his chin on Freya’s shoulder. “I was expecting it to either explode, or outright kill me, before doing anything to the wurm. But hey, a ten-tailed fox that carries me off is good enough for me.”

“So I didn’t miscount.” Ezekiel said quietly, a hand over his mouth.

Wolfwood let out a quiet chuckle as they shook their head. “Leave it to you David to summon Inari…”

Vira’s head snapped to the wolf, then to Ezekiel, then back to David. “Then that fox was…”

“Goddess of all kitsune, Inari Okami.” A woman said from behind Wolfwood. She had a number of white tails behind her, and two fluffy ears at full attention. Unlike the nogitsune in the woods, she was wearing mundane white and red robes, the cloth running all the way to the ground.

David took a moment to look around the ‘shelter’ they had been traveling towards. It was another clearing, however a large tree draped in the same ropes as on the fox statue sat at the center, and a few small wood buildings were interwoven with the trees just before the edge, where a ring of identical, rope-wrapped trees ran outside the entirety of the area. David could also see a number of other kitsune watching from within their homes.

“So I was just rescued by a Goddess?” David asked nonchalantly.

The kitsune nodded. “I know not what power of yours ‘summoned’ her as it were, but it is her power that protects this village from creatures like the wurm, and the nogitsune that prowl these woods.” She looked over the group. “But now I must ask how you four came to be here, as this village hasn’t seen many visitors since the pylons became inactive.”

“I’m afraid we aren’t here for pleasure.” Wolfwood replied. “A man named Spectra plans to summon A-God-of-Cataclysm.”

The kitsune’s gentle features contorted with fear and disbelief. “What kind of madman...” She shook her head before turning towards the center of the clearing. “It would seem there is much to discuss.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to sit this one out.” Freya said, now carrying David bridal style. “Anyplace we can rest?”

The Kitsune nodded, gesturing to one of the houses. “That one is vacant. You are welcome to use it as you see fit as long as you stay here.”

Freya nodded before hurrying away with David, who flopped lazily until Freya reached the door. He opened the latch with a simple flick of his finger before Freya pushed it open with a foot. Minding David’s head, Freya carried him over the threshold. David took a chance to look around.

The house was small with no decorations or signs of life. The one window was merely a hole with a curtain that faced the tree at the center of the clearing. The only furniture was a table with a few stools and a bed tucked against the wall. Freya was quick to deposit David into the bed, turning away to shut the door behind them.

“You’re unusually quiet, Freya.” David commented.

Freya sighed as she locked the door. “Today has been a roller coaster of emotions, David.” She grabbed a stool from by the table at sat down next to the bed, her tail brushing against the floor. “Not only have I apparently fallen head over heels for you, but I went from assuming you were dead to having a Goddess drag you home.”

David cocked an eyebrow. “Home?”

Freya huffed. “You know what I mean, David. Just… Could you promise me that you won’t just collapse like that again?”

David lifted the hand he had his headband in and put it over his heart. “I promise next time, despite anything, I’ll be the last one standing.”

Freya laughed, giving him a warm smile. “Well I’d hope the rest of us can stand too, but I’d settle with being alive.”

David looked up to her for a moment before shimmying closer to the wall. He patted the empty space beside him when Freya frowned. “I’m not letting you sleep on the floor. Come on, we should be able to get a few hours in.”

Freya’s tail wagged as a smile returned to her face. She thought for a moment before standing and taking off her cloak. David’s face turned crimson when she continued to undress herself. Freya cocked an eyebrow and put a hand to her hip. “What, did you think I was going to try to relax with this on me?” She shook the slightly ripped shirt in her free hand.

“I suppose not, but I would think the pants would-“ David stopped as Freya slowly unzipped her pants. “O-okay that’s just not fair.”

Freya snorted as she doubled over in laughter, before sitting on the edge of the bed before kicking off her pantslegs. She rolled over, curling up to rest her head on David’s chest. David could feel her warmth immediately. “You’re cute when you get flustered, you know.”

David sighed, draping his arm over her. “That would explain the teasing at least…”

Freya tapped his chest with a playful twinkle in her eye. “Aren’t you going to get comfortable as well?”

“I can’t even stand and you expect me to strip on my own?” David asked with a sardonic look. With a huff he reached down to pull up his shirt over his head. Sitting up a little, he managed to get it off, tossing it to the floor. He gave Freya a smirk. “This is all you’re getting though.”

Freya pushed him back down with a hand. “Shut it, I know that. I just don’t want you to overheat with me right here.”

“With no blanket, we should be fine.” David replied as Freya settled on his chest again. Freya didn’t reply, and David let the silence hold for a moment before he chuckled to himself. “You know, I haven’t told you the rest of that story, have I? The one with me and my sister in the woods.”

Freya raised her head curiously. “There’s more to it?”

David nodded, motioning with a thumb behind him. “And to where all those scars came from; It wasn’t the escape with me carrying you that did all that.”

Freya’s ears drooped a little and she nodded. “I’m listening now if you want to share the rest of it.”

“Well let’s see… I left off with me finding my sister, yeah? Well as she’s chastising me for running out after her, we heard a shuffle in the underbrush. Turns out I had attracted the attention of a big predator when I was trying to track her down; one of the local wolves.”

Freya frowned immediately. “A wolf? On its own?”

David half shrugged. “I don’t think much about why it was there, but I do know the moment we were aware of it is when it lunged at us. I jumped in front of my sister to protect her, and apparently blacked out from the pain. The next thing I remember I was in the hospital. My sister was never the same after that, really. I wonder what happened afterwards, as she has no scars herself. I never asked as it didn’t exactly come up in conversation, you know?”

Freya nodded, setting her head back on David’s chest. “Though I think it’s odd how despite that you don’t have a phobia; Wolfwood outside, and me right here.”

“It might be because Wolfwood is a wolf.” David replied. “And if I recall correctly, I actually became more interested in wolves afterwards…” David thought for a moment before ruffling Freya’s head. “And of course I wouldn’t be afraid of you! You’re too cute.”

Freya snorted in reply, but the excited thump of her tail made David smile. Eventually she sighed and nuzzled closer to David’s chest. “Let’s get some sleep now. I say we’ve both earned it.”

David nodded in reply, laying his head back and closing his eyes.