

The voice in the back of my head starts counting at sunset. I know when sunset is, and I know when my appointment is; ergo, I can count from one to the other. Seventy-six minutes. Not such a long time.

Every time is a long time when you're counting the seconds. Even if it isn't *me* doing the counting, per se.

I get a glance at someone's phone, when they don't know I am looking, and use it to calibrate myself. The voice in the back of my head adjusts his count by nearly a minute. Not such a bad job, to lose a minute over the course of half an hour.

You learn things, living without a clock. Making sure to know what time sunset is in advance. Keeping accurate counts. Watching for any chance to confirm those counts.

Not the most useful things. But I take what I can get.

With seven minutes left on the count, I stand, shake myself. *I need to get some air*, I think, putting that little bit *extra* behind the thought. Making it carry.

Winter doesn't react, doesn't look at me, but I hear his thoughts in my mind, interrupting the voice in the back of my head. *I don't blame you*, he thinks. His thoughts are crisp, cold, and as always, very clear. I can feel his boredom, his distaste for the person droning on and on in front of him. *Going to kill some rabbits?*

Something like that, I think, moving towards the door. People move out of my way without thinking, without even quite noticing me there. As always I feel a certain happiness upon feeling his mind brush against mine. He is, after all, my...well, my *Winter*. What else could I say, what word could I use that would encapsulate the emotion? "Father," in addition to being technically inaccurate, fails to grasp the magnitude. "God" has all the wrong connotations. "Maker" doesn't include the relationship *after* the making. "Friend" is entirely inadequate.

He is my *everything*. Which, really, is all that need be said to explain why there is a current of bitter anger mixed into that happiness, as always.

I cannot have a conversation with anyone else, not really. I read books, but I can't write them. I learn languages, but there's no one to *speak* them with.

How much of life am I missing? I have pack, sort of, but I don't have friends, and I don't have any expectation of making them in the future. I have only an academic understanding of romance, and no reason to think that will change. How is someone like me supposed to have a relationship? Even if I could find someone willing to overlook the body I'm in, and the scars I've added to it, there's that damnable issue of communication again. I could look for a dog instead, but that's a waste of my time; we exist on such different levels that there's no possibility for meaningful interaction.

How much am I missing? How much of what I have is broken?

You can't blame someone for making you. The gift of life, the chance to *be*, is literally priceless; even a sorry life is infinitely more valuable than to never live at all. You can't even blame them for not asking permission, because you weren't there to ask. That's the whole *point*.

But to be made *broken*...well, there's a reason not everyone who believes in God worships him.

Don't think about it. Don't look back, because you can't *go* back. Don't look forward, because it doesn't get better. Don't think about it.

It isn't easy to lie with your mind. You have to lie, and then *forget* that you're lying, so that not even the faintest trace of the deception shows up in your thoughts. Not easy, but I've had practice.

It helps if what you're saying is true. *Going to kill some rabbits*, he thought.

Something like that. You only had to change one word.

Forty-seven minutes. That's how long I have to myself, before Winter starts to wonder where I am. Before he thinks to look for me. Seven minutes travel each way leaves thirty-three minutes in between. Not long.

Long enough.

I enjoy the run, glorying in the night, the wind, the snow. It is a beautiful thing to run, meaning without word, thought without meaning, motion without thought, everything given over to the running. I so seldom get to truly *run*, without being held back by one thing or another.

The voice in the back of my head keeps counting, calm and steady.

I reach the rendezvous point with two minutes left before my appointment. I crawl under a car to wait, watching.

The voice in the back of my head takes a break from counting to inform me that there are four joggers approaching from the west, none of whom appear to be a threat; that there are three exits from the building in front of me, one of which is concealed; that there are noises coming from within, suggesting that the evening's activities have already begun; and, last but not least, that the wind from the east bears the scent of the person I am here to meet.

Then he goes back to counting.

Ninety-three seconds later, a woman approaches the front door, her stride brisk and jaunty. The count must have been slightly slow; she would not have come early. Too much chance for complication. I would wonder whether it were coincidence and this not the person I was waiting for, but I can smell her, odors of steel although her armor is hidden under clothing and magic, the subtler scents of perfume and spice and sweat which tell me that this is Aiko before she is even within sight.

She takes her phone out as I emerge from my hiding place, holding it at such an angle that I can see the screen, see the time. Not a coincidence, not an accident. She knows I am present, knows that my time is tightly limited.

The voice in the back of my head takes note of the time, remembers it, and then stops counting. Our attention cannot be split at this time.

"Hi, Snowflake," she says to me as I walk up behind her. "How's it going?" She does not turn towards us.

She is wearing an illusory mask of some sort, concealing herself behind another face. I seldom see her do such things. Generally speaking we do not leave witnesses behind, so it matters little if someone sees her true appearance. Perhaps this has left her out of practice, because this mask is less than perfectly crafted. The expressions of the face are awkward, as though it has undergone recent plastic surgery. Then again, perhaps the flaws are the result of wearing an illusion over a helmet. It cannot be easy to do so.

It does not matter. We will not be here long, and if anyone notices, no one will believe.

Going okay, I think. Better soon. I likely shouldn't have bothered with that little bit *extra*, but there is no reason not to use it. It costs me nothing

She does not hear me but can likely guess what I have said. She kneels beside me and scratches my ears. I do not permit many people to touch me but Aiko is an exception. She is safe, insofar as safety is a meaningful concept, and as such we can enjoy the touch.

Then she reaches into the small pack that she is carrying and pulls out a leash. The buckle looks like silver but is actually highly polished steel. I am not susceptible to silver but I would hardly *wear* it. Silver is a weapon, and one best used with great care.

I do not want to be leashed, not by anyone other than Winter and even that is a thing done out of necessity and not pleasure. But I know that the plan, the aim of this evening's activities, requires it, and I can set aside my desires when necessary.

But still. To be leashed rankles. I was not made to serve, the voice in the back of my head less so.

I stifle a growl as I approach, forcing my thoughts to remain calm as well. I am meek and subservient as she attaches the leash to the heavy leather collar I am wearing. The leash is leather as well, and very thin. I could snap it easily. I do not anticipate that I will need to do so but it is comforting to know that I can.

Do not think about the leash. Do not think about what it means to be leashed. Life is easier when you don't think too much.

"Are you sure you don't want armor?" Aiko asks, standing.

I shake my head and look pointedly at the door. *No*, I think, putting even more behind it than before. *It would be suspicious. They might run when they see me coming.*

This time she hears me, or at any rate she gets enough of the thought to understand the gist of my meaning. "Right," she says, looking at the door. "We don't want that."

I am frustrated as we proceed. I do not despise my nature but there are times, and there are aspects, which are frustrating. My inability to communicate is perhaps the most ubiquitous of them, never truly terrible but every day I turn around and there it is again, making everything just a little harder.

Winter is the only one I can *talk* to, the only person I can ever really have a conversation with. Well, there is also the voice in the back of my head but he is...he....

Keep moving. Movement without thought, everything focused on what will happen in the next few minutes. Don't think. Don't think about the voice in the back of your head, because you've thought those thoughts ten thousand times and one more will not make anything better.

Life is easier when you don't think too much.

We walk down a long hallway, moving briskly. The leash hangs slack, not pulling at me. It doesn't make it any better.

I smell blood in the air, smell fear, smell pain, smell alcohol and smoke, hear snarls and whines and laughter, keep moving. My heart begins to beat faster, something just a shade darker than excitement making the world come *alive*. I feel like I'm waking up from a waking dream, every shadow standing out in sharp contrast, every movement just a little bit quicker, every moment stretching out into a languid blur. I am *alive*.

And I am *hungry*.

Continuing, I move quicker, lighter on my feet. I am panting slightly, with eagerness and the anticipation of exertion, bringing the odors in stronger, heady and intoxicating. I am tugging at the leash now, rather than the other way around, but Aiko is as eager as I am, as hungry. I think that she would be skipping if it would not make the wrong impression.

We reach the end of the hall, step into a large, open room. A large man with skin made dark by ink laughs and says something. I do not bother to listen, do not care to hear. The voice in the back of my head tells me that he is complimenting me, complimenting Aiko for my excitement. Most dogs, he says, have to be dragged, snarling and angry. It is a welcome surprise to see one come gladly.

Am I here gladly? Yes, I suppose that I am. There is something...*lacking*...but it is still something, more than I have had in too many days. I *am* looking forward to this, even if it isn't what it might have been.

I am an addict, a junkie. I cannot go long without my fix, and when I get it the world feels so *real* that I cannot see why I should want to. I am aware of this, aware of my dependency.

But I am in control. I made my choices, knowing what they meant, knowing what the consequences would be. I choose when and how I indulge my needs, not the other way around. A small but very meaningful point of pride.

We step up to the edge of the pit. It is shallow, perhaps ten feet, but it is deep enough to serve its purpose. The walls are concrete, sloped steeply enough to be a deterrent, slick enough to be an obstacle. The arena floor is sand, pale gold where it isn't touched with scarlet. Men and dogs and a very few women stand by the edges, drinking and smoking and talking. Down below one dog seizes another by the throat, biting down and spilling more blood onto the sand. The smaller dog whines and pisses itself, admitting defeat and submission. The dogs' handlers move into the arena, pulling them apart. Above money changes hands, people laugh.

I do not react to the suffering of the animals, beyond a sharpening of my hunger, a quickening of my lust. They are alien creatures to me, in many ways more alien than those observing them. From the humans, I am cut off only by an inability to communicate, a sort of aphasia. From the dogs I am separated by a vaster gulf, very near to them and yet so very far away. On a fundamental level we are the same, sharing the same anatomy and general physiology, many of the same instincts and urges, many of the same needs. On another level we are nothing alike.

I am not a dog. A dog does not think in words, does not plan, does not count the seconds. A dog does not read, or discuss philosophy, or complain about aphasia.

Dogs do not have voices in the backs of their heads.

I am not a dog. I am something else, something far more difficult to define or classify. Winter would say that I am unique, that I am special.

Unique. Special. Very pretty words for alone.

I am not here out of any particular sympathy or solidarity with the dogs below, or because I feel a need to end their suffering. I am here because of...well, other reasons. Because Aiko offered, and because the voice in the back of my head has no taste for life which is a mockery of living, and because I hadn't tasted blood on my teeth for a week and it was driving me out of my skull with boredom.

And because it would break Winter's heart to know that this place existed, that these people existed, and I would rather have my eye burnt out again than see that happen.

"Well," Aiko says, watching the men below drag the dogs apart, bleeding and snarling and whimpering in agony. "Let's get this party started."

The man standing behind us, the one who greeted us, says something that is lost in the pounding of my heart and the rush of my blood. The voice in the back of my head informs me that it was a comment on there being a schedule, and the next opening not being for several hours.

Aiko grins. I cannot see it, but I can hear it in her voice as she says, "Oh, that won't be a problem."

And then she leans over and unhooks the leash from my collar.

I do not hesitate for a moment, leaping at the man who spoke. I have nothing against him, but he is close and he is easy and he is as good a place to start as any.

He flinches away, too late, and his hands come up, *much* too late, and I am already on him. My weight hits him in the chest, knocking him backward, and I worm through his arms easily, lunging forward. My teeth—teeth made of steel, teeth far different from those I was born with, but still *teeth*—close on his throat. I clamp tight and then jerk away, steel edges sliding easily through flesh, and a large chunk of meat comes away with me, blood pouring out of the hole, running over my teeth and down my chin and across my tongue. I shiver at the taste, only for a moment, before standing up. He hits the ground, blood flowing out across the concrete, taking his life with it. He looks at me, confused, and then ceases to look at anything.

The voice in the back of my head warns me that people are reacting, a practiced and surprisingly calm reaction. I lunge for the next nearest human, a female of middle age with darkish skin. She steps away, more adroit than I had expected, and rather than her abdomen I get a mouthful of her arm. I close my jaws anyway, crushing the bones easily and drawing forth another rush of blood, and she screams.

The voice in the back of my head tells me to dodge and I do, not questioning or hesitating, and as a result the bullet hits her in the chest, cutting off the scream abruptly. I turn in the direction the voice indicates, and see that one of the bouncers by the door has a pistol trained on me, and is already lining up the next shot. Before he can take it Aiko pulls the trigger and his head disappears in a red haze. I dismiss that group. Keeping people from reaching the doors is her responsibility here.

I move for the crowd instead, reaching them before most have even begun to realize what is happening. I move in among them, hidden in the crowd, and use the opportunity to lay about myself with my teeth, cracking shinbones and drawing blood, knocking people down. Many of them would have fallen on me, and others try to kick or shoot me, but I am never where they need me to be. With the voice in the back of my head providing directions, I am far too quick, and never surprised.

It isn't anything a normal being can't do. Anyone, especially in a fight, processes a great deal of information subconsciously. The difference is that my subconscious is, as it were, *conscious*.

That can be a powerful thing. Two minds processing the sensory input. Two minds means two chances to notice something, two chances to react in time.

Very little surprises me.

People are screaming now, many of them drawing weapons, many others running for the exits. I do not concern myself with the second group. They run quickly but they cannot outrun a bullet. I doubt any will make it to the doors.

The others are a concern. But they are slow, they are still in a state of shock, and they hesitate to shoot into a crowd. They are still thinking that I am a dog, a creature they are accustomed to tormenting with impunity. It has not occurred to them that they are the prey here.

Not occurred to them *yet*. It will, before they die.

In the time they were foolish enough to give me, I disable nine people. Several of them may bleed out from their wounds; I do not concern myself with that. My focus is on the armed individuals instead. I run towards them, moving more quickly than a dog could, much more quickly than they are prepared for. Their shots go wide and there is more screaming behind me, around me, as people are hit by the stray bullets.

They are on the other side of the pit. Some take the time to reload, or take their time aiming at me, thinking that this obstacle gives them a margin of safety.

They are wrong. The pit is less than thirty feet across and I jump it easily, landing on the other side with reasonable grace. I dart forward, leaping up and grabbing another man by the throat. I bite down, breaking the neck, and then jerk my head to the side, ensuring that the corpse will fall into the rest of this group. They stumble, several of them falling to the ground, one falling into the pit.

I do not like to stay still but this opportunity is too good to let it go to waste. I advance on the downed humans, quick and confident, and begin tearing at flesh. I do not prioritize victims, going after the nearest available vital target. A neck here, an abdomen there, a thigh, a torso. I do not generally waste meat but it is faster to spit it out now than swallow it, allowing me to move quicker, to be more efficient.

And, in any case, there is more meat in this room than I could eat in a week. A little more or less will not be noticed.

I am punished for my greed as I deserve, the blast of a shotgun grazing my side. They are using birdshot, intended to punish rather than kill, and it barely penetrates my fur and skin, it does not go deep enough to even draw much blood. I snarl with anger but there is no pain, it is drowned in blood and bloodlust and the sheer *joy* of the moment.

I would like to count on Aiko to deal with the offender, but the voice in the back of my head informs me that she is reloading. It will take a precious few moments, during which time I might be shot again, with a more dangerous load. I cannot count on her to cover me at the moment.

I look but there are too many humans with guns to pick out the one that shot me, which is in itself an indicator of how dangerous my situation is. The voice in the back of my head says that the only

cover available is the pit itself and I concur, jumping for it. My movements are slowed by the injuries and another shot grazes my fur before I reach it. It does not injure me.

In the pit there are only three humans, one of whom just fell in and is as a result still stunned. I ignore him for the moment, focusing instead on the two dog handlers. Both of them are looking at me in shock, still struggling to adapt to what has just happened. I pick one at random and lunge forward, grabbing his leg and yanking it out from under him. A moment later there is more blood on the sand, and this time it does not come from a dog.

The other handler was maintaining his distance, keeping their respective charges apart, and as a result he has time to react before I can reach him as well. He draws a knife, a cheap, battered thing that has not been maintained properly. Winter would have a fit if he saw it. He gets quite upset by people who don't care for their weapons.

That reminds me of what is *missing* from this fight, and that makes me angry. So, while I could easily have killed the other man in a moment, I dance with him instead, letting him understand what has happened and what is about to happen to him. A small cruelty, to match the small cruelty he has dealt me. Eventually he overextends and I bite his hand off, leaving him to bleed out in the sand.

Certainly this is unfair of me. Likely it is unjust as well, although I do not know what crimes he may have committed; perhaps he deserves it. It hardly matters. In my experience justice is a myth, and not a particularly plausible one.

A few moments of work and I am the only living thing in the pit. They cannot shoot at me from this angle, and I am safe until one is foolish enough to approach the edge. I would like to wait for that to happen, ensure that the fight resumes on my terms, but I am not here alone. Aiko is armored but it is not infallible. She is not Winter, but she is still pack; her life is worth protecting.

So, for her sake, I wait only a few moments in the pit. The voice in the back of my head has been tracking my movements, and tells me which side of the pit Aiko is standing on. I go to stand under that point and leap out. A dog could not jump out—that is, after all, the entire point of having a pit—but I am not a dog, and I do so easily.

Standing beside her, I look at the room and am pleased. Most of the enemies have been downed, with less than a quarter still standing and armed. Perhaps fifteen, perhaps less. I do not count. The voice in the back of my head tells me that there are eleven, and another eight who are not armed. There are five dogs left alive and none of them are listening to the humans telling them to attack. Smarter than the humans, although it is unlikely to help them.

Three of those eight make a break for the door as a group. Aiko begins to sight on them but I growl, and she turns her attention back to the armed humans, leaving the runners to me.

I chase them, not truly running. They are human, and slow even by the standards of humans; if I were to *run* they would be in my jaws within a few seconds. I enjoy the chase too much to allow it to end so easily, particularly when it is likely to be the only chase of the night.

But I cannot allow them to get within earshot of the street and so, after only a few moments, I close the distance to them. They are not looking back, and I leap on them from behind, taking the hamstring of one. There is more blood, and there is screaming. The other two turn, eyes wide and white, breathing fast. They smell like fear.

I am concerned that I will be needed back in the main room so I do not take my time about killing them. I break the necks of two and tear the throat out of the third, leaving her to bleed to death behind me. She cannot scream but I hear the labored breathing as I leave.

Back in the other room Aiko has killed almost everyone. The last few have thrown down their weapons and I do not need the voice in the back of my head to tell me that they are begging for mercy.

Mercy. An odd concept, which I have never quite grasped. I wonder why they are asking for it. Do they truly expect that we will spare them when we have killed so many others? Perhaps they have seen the way that one dog will allow another to submit, rather than killing it. If so, they have mistaken the meaning of the action. Every dog is a wolf under the skin, and wolves know nothing of mercy. You leave your enemies alive because they are more useful alive than dead.

When they are not useful? They do not live. So simple. So easy to understand. There is nothing of mercy in it.

Aiko waits for me to return before opening fire again, killing those who had tried to surrender. The dogs, as well, she shoots, before dropping her carbine to hang from its strap and drawing her knife. She proceeds around the room, ensuring that the wounded do not stay in that condition for long.

She would call that mercy. I can at least understand this, although I would do it for pragmatic rather than ethical reasons. Witnesses are problematic. The dead have many faults but talkativeness is not one of them.

I am glad that she is doing it, however, because I have little taste for doing so. That's what Jack London and his ilk never quite seem to grasp. It isn't the kill I need, or even the blood. It's the *fight*, the moment where everything rides on one movement, one perfectly timed action. Life has no thrill quite like dancing on the very edge of death. I would say that it's like a high, but that would be disingenuous; it *is* a high. I know enough physiology to know that it has the same characteristics as any other. Increased production of endorphins, increased release of epinephrine and norepinephrine, increased release of dopamine in the reward centers of the brain; the chemical signals are the same.

It's the same urge that drives any other addict, really. I just happen to get my kicks from a darker place than most.

Aiko finishes her work and stands. The voice in the back of my head confirms that she checked every one of the corpses.

How many people did we kill? Thirty? Fifty? I do not know, do not ask the voice in the back of my head to tell me. I do not want to know. As with any high, when it fades I feel no happier than before

it started. It is worse than usual today, only serving to emphasize how *empty* this fight was. No challenge. No real threat. And, again, that something *lacking*. It was better than nothing, it slaked my thirst for the time being, but it was far, far less than I might have hoped for.

I smell guilt on Aiko and wonder whether she feels similarly, dismiss the thought. I know why she feels guilty and it has nothing to do with what happened today. She knew about this place somehow, and considering her history it isn't hard to guess the how. I am confident that this is not the first dogfight she saw, and that the others did not end this way.

I wonder, in an abstract way, whether I should be offended or angry at her for that, but I am not. I am not a dog, and I am hardly in a position to criticize anyone for taking pleasure in bloodshed. In any case, she is clearly bothered by the memory more than I am.

Mercy would be to say nothing, which is easier for me than most. Justice likely demands punishment, for crimes I know about and crimes I don't. Maybe one day she'll face that justice, but I really and truly hope not, because if justice is real, then almost by definition it has to come to *everyone* and if justice comes for me then damnation is the least of what I am due.

The voice in the back of my head interrupts this line of thought, thankfully, and draws my attention to the time. He has not been keeping count but he has a reasonable idea of how much time has passed, and I am coming up against my deadline. If I allow ten minutes rather than seven to run back, accounting for my full stomach, then I have less than ten minutes remaining before I need to move.

I thank him for reminding me and look at what Aiko is doing. She has taken a large plastic jug out of her pack and is pouring it out on the floor, making sure to pour some on each and every corpse. It looks like gasoline and most people would think that it was, but they would be wrong. Certainly there is a hydrocarbon base, but I can smell something *extra* that turns it into something entirely different, something that will burn hot enough that not even the bones will survive intact. Removal of evidence.

She finishes covering the room and we leave, pouring out a trail of accelerant behind us to the door. I expect her to throw away the empty jug but she puts back into her pack instead. Avoiding leaving evidence, which is smart. I wouldn't have bothered, knowing that there was no information which could link this to us, but now they will be less likely to suspect arson. That was good, because if they called it arson then Winter might hear about it and the whole point of this was that there are some things Winter is happier not knowing.

Aiko kneels down beside me and ruffles my ears again. "Good job," she says. "Let's clean off the blood."

As I expected, the injuries are shallow. She cleans them with water and a little isopropanol from her pack; I am not generally susceptible to infection but it is best to take care. She then rinses most of the blood out of my fur and pats me dry. She leaves some of the blood around my muzzle; it would be suspicious if I were to return entirely unbloodied.

"Okay," she says, turning back toward the building. "I'll get it from here. You get back before anyone starts asking questions." I cannot detect the magic, but I recognize the distinctive posture she adopts when opening Otherside portals. She will light the fire we have set and disappear immediately afterward, ensuring that she is not found here by the fire response team.

She hums to herself, very quietly, as she works. I do not recognize the song immediately but the voice in the back of my head does. There is no longer any reason to count and I do not need his attention now, so he is free to sing along to himself as we begin to run.

Warum ist die Sonne rund? he sings softly in the back of my head as I turn my feet south. Behind me I hear the fire start to catch, smell the smoke. *Warum werd ich nicht gesund?*

I do not answer the questions. I know the answers and they are not good ones. You cannot make something healthy which is, on a fundamental and intrinsic level, broken.

Don't think about it. There is no point in thinking about it, dwelling on it. Live your life one day to the next, always chasing the next high; that is how we get by, that is how we cope.

Life is just so much *easier* if you don't think too much.

There you are, Winter says in my mind about nine minutes later, when I am a block away. *Did you get lucky?*

Yep, I think smugly. Both the thrill and the post-violence depression have faded, leaving a sort of sated languor in their wake. I trot into the building, not making any attempt to hide the blood around my mouth as I move through the crowd of supplicants and past the housecarls. Bizarre, that they are still here. Even more bizarre, that Winter continues listening to their requests, when I know full well that he hates his position as jarl.

I walk up and sit at his side. He scratches my ears absently as the human standing before him drones on endlessly about something. I don't care enough to pay attention, and neither does the voice in the back of my head. Neither of us cares what happens to these people.

While I cannot deny my bitterness at his having made me what I am, I also cannot deny the happiness and the pleasure I feel when Winter touches me. He is my everything, so integral to my life that a fight without him is hollow, a day without him unimaginable.

I would do almost anything to make him happy, up to and including lying about what I've done for him.

He is, after all, my everything. Good and bad and everything in between.