

## COME AND GET ME

She sits in the tavern, her bright green eyes scanning the room with mild interest. She elegantly picks up her mug with her slender hand and takes a sip. The liquid burns her throat as she drinks it so she holds the cup a little way from her mouth. The dull roar inside the tavern is a welcoming sound, it is a mix of unintelligible chatter, the occasional smashing bottle, and from somewhere deep within the heart of the room, a jumbled mix of guitar and piano notes which refuse to harmonise and become music.

She sets her cup down on the wooden table with a soft thud and watches the small amount of liquid inside it swirl and cloud. In the amber tinted liquid she can see her reflection tremble and blur. Lifting her gaze, the young woman watches intently as the door of the tavern swings open to reveal some sharp looking wood nymphs.

The young woman takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a moment. The smell of the hearty tavern food drifts throughout the room and calms the young woman's senses.

Yet another bar fight breaks out across the room and the woman's eyes snap open. A fierce looking werecat and a dirty looking man, who is probably a werewolf, are tangled together. The barman glances up wearily and after watching the scene unfold for a few moments, presently goes back to cleaning a murky glass with one of his many hands.

As the werecat slashes out with a furry, muscular arm, the werewolf brings his forearm up to take the blow. The young woman focuses her gaze on the two and sees the sharp glint of bared teeth. The noise level inside the room rises to a great roar and the woman becomes a little irritated.

*If they know what's good for them they'll stay far away from me* she thinks to herself. A human-sounding howl pierces through the mass of shouts and the fight is considered over, the crowd quickly dispersing. She shrugs her shoulders and traces the rim of her mug. Mumbling a simple spell under her breath, the young woman closes her eyes and imagines the mug filling up with more tavern brew.

Suddenly two creatures appear on her table, sliding across the polished wood, leaving veins of blood to wind across the table. Biting and snapping at each other, the were-folk brawl on top of her table, kicking out at each other. The woman's mug is propelled off her table and spills its contents on the already stained floor. Her eyes snap open and blaze with something more than hatred.

The noise inside the tavern dies down within a matter of seconds. The fighters notice this and look up at the owner of the table on which they are lying. In the blink of an eye, the were-folk switch from anger to utter fear. A satisfying whimper worms its way from the werecat's throat as the woman slowly and menacingly lifts herself from her seat,

"That wasn't a very smart move now was it?" She questions through gritted teeth.

The door of the deathly silent tavern swings open and the young woman steps out, her boots slapping the wooden deck loudly despite the thin coating of ash on them. She frowns down at them and with a quick thought, her boots are cleaner than the day she bought them. Dismissively checking the rest of her apparel, she flicks a small lump of seared cat fur from the shoulder of her coat,

"I quite liked this coat actually," she mumbles to no one but herself.

The small thump of a bottle being placed delicately on wood alerts the woman to a ragged looking man in the far corner of the walkway. His eyes light up with fear as she strolls towards him. He tries to melt into the corner with every step she takes closer to him. Fumbling blindly for his empty bottle he stumbles desperately for words,

"Please don't hurt me! I won't tell no one you were 'ere! I'll not even ask you fer payment!" He pleads hoarsely, the bottle in his hand shaking uncontrollably. The woman does nothing as she stares down at the quivering drunk and finally decides on something,

"Make sure you give this to Carlo when I'm gone," she says flatly while reaching into a small pocket on the inside of her coat. The man recoils in pre-emptive fear but awkwardly relaxes when the woman hands him a decent sized brown, draw-string bag. He shakes it with curious disbelief and is rewarded with the familiar tinkling of gold coins. He gazes up at her with undisguised shock, his silence a pleasing sound to the woman.

The woman looks the tattered man up and down and settles on staring into his soul through his eyes. When he was younger they would have been a steely blue, but due to age and unfortunate events, his once brilliant eyes have been worn down to a lifeless blue. Like the colour of the sky right before it rains.

Focusing on his eyes and taking a deep breath, the woman chants the words of a few minor spells, combining their effects and consequences. She feels the effect of her words heat her tongue as she speaks them, her veins coursing with the power of her magic. The feeling slowly starts to melt away like a patch of snow in sunlight and she blinks her eyes open,

"Now, if you try to take even one coin from that bag, your skin will melt off your bones and then promptly burst into flames. Your spirit will be forever tortured and never be permitted to move on to another life. Do I make myself clear?" The woman questions firmly, quirking her eyebrow, cocking her head and crossing her arms over her chest. The dirty man nods his head vigorously and holds the bag away from his body.

A sound of approval is all that is given to the stranger as the woman spins on her heel and strides away from the tavern, its grime coloured windows already filling up with warm light and muffled notes of music.

The woman turns her back on her home away from home, although she hasn't got a home to be away from to start with, and strolls down the gravel path leading into the forest. She closes her eyes a few steps in and sucks in a deep breath of the night-time air, the distinct smell of the forest mingling with the faint smell of something rotten left on her clothing. Falling deep inside her own mind, the woman starts walking numbly, not really caring where her instincts will take her.

After approximately an hour of mindlessly walking through the woods, only distantly feeling the scratches and bruises the flora was leaving on her poorly protected legs, the young woman is snapped out of her deep thinking by something rushing out of the corner of her vision.

She decides to keep walking as to not raise any suspicion, but only moments later does another shapeless figure dart out of her peripheral vision. Masked by the shielding trunks of the trees, the figures seem to follow her one moment and run ahead of her the next.

She can feel her heart climbing up her oesophagus and clawing at her lips, while adrenaline is pumped madly around her body. Her eyes dart around; trying desperately to focus on at least one of the shadowy strangers, but her vision tilts and quivers due to her growing fear.

Without warning, the woman's legs start to pump wildly, thrusting her through the thick air. She can remotely feel herself panting laboriously, only adding to the giant weight of dread stuck in her stomach. She feels as if her head is clouded with burning fog.

Suddenly she bursts through a veil of foliage and stumbles a few nauseating steps into a clearing filled with soft grass and the odd small, white flower.

Like someone snapping their fingers, the woman's head clears like walking out of a warm room into a cold one. Her actual thoughts rush back to her head and she shakes some of the corrupt stragglers from her brain.

Pivoting on the spot with newfound precision, she genuinely focuses on the shadows beyond the trees. The previously terrifying figures enter the clearing, moonlight illuminating their hideous features. They vaguely resemble humans, only with terribly disfigured bodies.

Something gurgles from one of their throats, there must be at least twenty of them, and she has to fight her immediate urge to retch. Instead, she positions her body into a fighting stance and lets out the breath she didn't know she was holding.

Lowering her head and blocking everything else in the world out, she lifts her gaze. The fear in her eyes replaced with cocky amusement,

"Come and get me," she smirks.