

fortune favors the bold

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by [pine_storm_season](#)

Summary

Red makes a deal with the devil (or, in this case, a fae). Surprisingly, he might just come out on top.

Ash is decidedly unhappy about this fact.

Notes

yeah, manipulation's gonna be a big thing here. so yknow, heads up.
enjoy :]

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Red was pretty sure that he did not, in fact, need to wear a suit to a deal with one of the fae. Aside from the fact that it was entirely impractical for trekking through what might as well be untouched woods, it probably didn't even have the same impact as though he were dealing with a human. But all the same, he had an *image* to project, and goddamnit he was going to stick to it.

Beyond a massive lightning-burned tree, a rough circle of rocks lay. In it was his business partner, sitting cross-legged and idly sharpening his claws on a wooden stump.

“You've arrived,” he said, not looking up. His voice was strange, hissing and crackling, and his words rasped low.

“That I have,” Red answered. “Greetings.”

“No iron in the circle,” his business partner said, seeming unconcerned. “I smell it on you. You know the terms of our negotiation; you draw iron on me, and I get an hour to do whatever I like to you. The land will hold you to it, you know.”

At this, he looked up, meeting Red's eyes. His own were purple-black and slit-pupiled, and he grinned, showing a row of needle-sharp teeth.

“Try me, human,” he rasped softly, looking like he would like nothing more than to cut Red open with those glittering black claws. “I'd love to see you bleed.”

“It goes both ways,” Red returned, lightly. “You cause me physical pain, and I get to introduce you to a fun thing called a *cold iron blade*. Stalemate, mm?”

The fae snorted, a soft rumble in his chest. Red wanted to feel it vibrate under his hand, and he pressed his tongue into his teeth to avoid letting it show.

“Stalemate,” he said softly, “until human greed gets the best of you.”

Red flashed him a grin, removing the dagger and its sheath from his hip and setting it lightly on the ground. No iron in the circle, and the land would not take lightly to broken truths.

“You may call me Ash,” the fae said, looking Red in the eyes. And this maybe was not the best time to focus on it, but he was beautiful. Sharp features, a delicate tilt to his head, even the smudge of what was probably dried blood on his cheek added to it.

“You can call me Red,” he answered, forcing his brain to refocus. He stepped into the circle. “Shall we deal?”

Ash laughed, staticky and soft. “Would be a shame for you to come all this way for nothing. Yes.”

Red moved to settle across the stump from Ash, drumming his fingers on the dry wood. Ash looked at him, expectant.

“May I ask you, Ash,” Red began, words careful and smooth. “*What*, exactly, you would like out of this deal?”

“Power,” Ash answered. The word came easily. “I’m what they call...a lesser fae.” He tapped one black-clawed hand against his own wrist, movement graceful. “If I could *shift the ranks*, a little bit...I would like that. Take a bit of their power for my own, you know?”

“Yeah,” Red answered, “I see what you mean. Me? I’d like riches. Humans will pay oh so much for things from your kind, and doubly so if it can be verified.”

“I see how I can help you, *Red*. But I don’t see what *you* can do to help *me*.”

Ash stood as he said this, towering over Red. He rolled his shoulders, a rumble just barely audible deep in his chest. Red held still as Ash took his chin oh-so-carefully in one hand, claws pricking gently at the soft underside of his jaw. He tilted Red’s face this way and that, and Red shivered. Then he

was released, and it took all his self-control not to touch where Ash's hand had been.

“Done posturing?” Red asked, softly.

Ash growled, just as soft. He took one of Red's hands, so incredibly gently, and pulled him carefully to his feet. Red was nearly a head shorter, and he stepped back to look Ash in the eyes without craning his neck.

“I can help you,” Red told him, projecting confidence and unruffled calm, “because I'm a professional. A conman, if you will. My *specialty* is tricking people without them realizing they've been tricked. And Ash, I am *very* good at my job.”

“Pretty words,” Ash said, light. “How about this, Red? If you can manage to trick me out of something, without me realizing? I'll supply your trinkets, and you'll help me get power. Deal?”

“Deal,” Red answered. “I swear it.”

His mind spun. How to...distraction. Distraction was the way to do it.

“For the purposes of this demonstration,” Red began, “anything you hand or give to me, I own.”

Ash gave him an intrigued look. “Alright,” he said.

And then a switch was flipped, and Red was in conman mode. He sat down on one side of the stump, and Ash sat on the other. He began.

“You know,” he said, drumming his fingers against his leg, “you might be the first fae I've dealt with. The first one I've done business with, anyway. Not a bad start.”

He touched Ash's hand, reading the stifled flinch in the way his shoulders stiffened.

“I'm honored, you know,” Red continued, “that you've not just killed me. That would be simpler, wouldn't it?”

“It would,” Ash said stiffly, “but then I’d have a body on my hands and nothing to do with it.”

“Mmm,” Red answered, “true. True. Say, how *does* a fae steal another’s power?”

Ash shifted, claws tapping the wood. Red moved his hand ever so slightly closer; put him off balance, let him fumble.

“Their blood,” he said slowly. “The power is in their blood.”

“Does it work with humans, I wonder?”

Red allowed his eyes to flick to a ring that looked made of bone, settled on Ash’s right middle finger. That was what he wanted to get.

Ash shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. Maybe it’ll extend your lifespans by a fraction, but nothing as it would of another fae took it.”

“I see,” Red told him, allowing his fingers to rest so they touched Ash’s. “Clever of you, really.”

Honeyed words, honeyed voice. Ash looked a strange mix of uncomfortable and transfixed.

“Not telling me what the way is,” he added. “You never know when someone might turn on you, yeah?”

Ash nodded slowly.

“I wonder,” Red started, “how many times it’s happened to you. You don’t need to tell me, oh, no, I wouldn’t ask that. I’m simply...curious how long you survived.”

Ash breathed in, breathed out. He hadn’t pulled his hand away, and Red moved so that his fingers were over Ash’s. A miniscule shudder ran through him, and Red hummed in satisfaction. It was working.

“You’re a survivor,” he continued. “Clever, wild, quick. How many trophies have you won, Ash, hm? How many signs of your kills have you brought home?”

“Many,” Ash breathed. He looked nearly in a trance.

“Well done,” Red told him, “well done.”

He brushed a fingertip over a scar that lay jagged and silver on Ash’s jaw. He delighted in the shiver that ran through him.

“What was this from?”

Ash shook his head, like a wolf coming up from underwater. “I don’t—I’m not going to say.”

“Fair, fair,” Red answered. He shifted to point, instead, at the bone ring. “May I ask what this is from instead, then?”

“A kelpie got on my bad side,” Ash told him. He grinned, showing sharp teeth. “Suffice to say, it is no longer living.”

“Impressive,” Red murmured. “Can I see it?”

Ash took off the ring and put it in Red’s open, waiting hand. He turned it over, inspecting it, and then closed his hand. He grinned at Ash.

“I win,” he said simply.

Ash startled, shaking his whole body out like a wet dog. “How the fuck did you do that?”

Red laughed. “Like I said, Ash, I am *very* good at my job.”

He offered the ring back, and Ash took it carefully. He seemed reluctant to touch Red, now, unsettled and for good reason.

“We’ve got a deal then, I assume?”

Slowly, Ash nodded. “We've got a deal.”

“Alright,” Red answered, standing. Ash followed him up. “See you here....when?”

“Three days' time,” he answered. He grinned. “I've got my sights set on a target, but...it may take a while to get to them.”

“Perfect.” Red matched his grin, cruel and predatory. “If you need me, leave a note outside the faewoods. I'll come here.”

Ash nodded, eyes glinting in the dusky light. “Three days from now, same time?”

“I'll see you then,” Red answered, and turned his back to the fae. He retrieved his iron dagger, giving Ash a grin over his shoulder as he began the trek back.

He could feel the weight of eyes between his shoulders for long after he was out of sight.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

this chapter really fought me, and in the end i gave up and let you see ash's pov as well. a little bit of fae worldbuilding. as a treat

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was probably a bad sign, if Red thought about it, that he was thinking about Ash just as much—if possibly more—than what he would get out of this deal. The beautiful creature had captivated him, just as Red had hypnotized him during their deal. He found himself wanting to go back to the circle of rocks, wanting to push him further. He *could*. If he wanted, he could probably get Ash under his control without having to resort to the ugly force that was true names.

He wanted to touch Ash’s face, trace his fingers over the scars, feel Ash’s claws gentle on his wrist or throat. That...was not his intention, upon starting the negotiations.

Red tried to banish the thought from his mind. He flopped down on his bed without bothering to change out of the suit, attempting to avoid the thought of Ash.

It failed miserably, but still. He tried.

Maybe Red just had a thing for danger. He’d certainly not been nearly as scared as he was supposed to be when Ash had held his face, and not just because he knew Ash wouldn’t dare hurt him and face the consequences. He shivered at the thought of how Ash had gone still and frozen under his touch.

“Okay,” he said aloud, “this *clearly* isn't working.”

He moved to sit at the window, trying to figure out ways to trick a high fae. They tended to lower their guard a little when faced with unarmed humans, trusting in their inhuman reflexes to take care of any threat the human might

pose. He could work with that, probably; get them focused on him while Ash sprung the trap. Shouldn't be too hard.

He wondered who the target would be. Was it too much to hope Ash would go for fae nobility? If a kill was made, then Red could probably have his pick of anything the fae owned.

Of course, that assumed there would be a kill. *It's in their blood*, Ash had said, and there were a significant number of ways to steal it if that were the case. But Ash read like a predator, to him, and he had a feeling that he wouldn't pass up a chance to get blood on his hands.

Red probably should not *want* to see Ash with blood on his hands. But oh, what a sight that would be.

-

Red woke, and immediately wondered if Ash had left summons for him. That...hm. Red wasn't sure how he felt about that being his first thought.

He decided that it was his eagerness to get the spoils of their plans, and put the thought out of his head. It wasn't denial, exactly; just purposeful ignorance. Red did not need to be distracted when dealing with fae; that's a recipe for getting killed, and he didn't really feel like doing that today.

He got dressed, grabbing an apple from a bowl on the table and heading outside. His little cabin was surrounded by an iron fence, and it was the only reason he felt safe so close to the faewoods; you'd need fine motor control and a tolerance for iron to get to him.

At the edge of the woods, sitting with his back to a tree, was Ash. Red did a double take, then walked over. Ash waved as he approached, standing.

"I thought the idea was that you'd leave a *note*," he said by way of greeting.

Ash snorted, holding up his hands. "Have you tried writing with these? Much easier to just wait for you here."

Red was painfully aware his lack of iron. Ash's eyes flicked to his hip, to the absence of the blade that had been sitting there before, and it took all of Red's control not to step back.

Don't show fear in front of a predator. Don't *ever* flee.

“What did you need me for?” Red asked, and somehow his voice stayed casual.

“Trap planning,” Ash answered. He idly raked one hand's claws down the tree, sending bark shards flying. “I've got an idea, but—” he shrugged, not bothering to look at Red. “It needs refining, and anyways, I can't touch iron.”

Red raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Ash grinned, looking for all the world like a wild animal with its prey in a corner. “Red? What do you know about *hunting traps*?”

Red matched his grin. “Oh, a little bit. What are you thinking?”

“I'd rather go into the forest, first,” Ash said, voice light. “Your kind doesn't exactly *like* mine.”

Red *hmm*ed. “I'd rather not, though. See, there's quite a lot of things there that would like to kill me.”

Ash narrowed his eyes. “If we were to get in a standoff, Red, I could do this all day.”

“Ah, but you seem awfully impatient for a fae.”

In one smooth, fluid motion, Ash was right in front of him. One hand rested on the back of his neck, the other gripping his shoulder just gently enough that the claws didn't dig in. Red flinched, a strangled gasp dying in his throat.

“I may not be able to cause you pain,” he murmured, his nose barely brushing Red's. “But I've been around a long time, human, and I know *exactly* how to leave you for dead deep in the forest without breaking the deal. Don't *test me*.”

Red struggled to find words, resisting the urge to lean in and kiss him. This was a power play, a very clear one, and Ash read like someone used to control. He read like someone who didn't like to be challenged, but Red? He didn't feel like putting up with that.

He pressed back, into the claws sitting light on the back of his neck, and Ash snatched back his hand like he'd been burned. Red grinned, prying the hand off his shoulder.

“You came to me,” he said, over the low growl Ash was making. “For all *I* care, you could fuck off into the forest and never be seen again. And Ash, *I* say we stay right here.”

The growl rose in volume, but Red didn't budge. He knew this type; Ash was proud, but that was a double-edged sword. His pride would keep him from giving in, but also from leaving. Because as much as he was loathe to admit it, he needed Red.

“Fine,” Ash said, voice low and dangerous. Red grinned at him, sitting down on the grass—and he really should have paid attention to the fact that it rained last night, because the grass was wet—and after a moment, Ash did the same.

“Traps?” Red prompted.

Ash sighed. “You know how high fae have a higher iron tolerance? I was thinking, you know, stabbing someone with an iron blade would hurt no matter what they are. But if it was one of us, it'd add the iron poisoning, too.”

Red gave him a skeptical look. “You want me to walk up and stab them.”

Ash scoffed. “Of course not. They'd kill you, and then where would I be? No, I want you to set up an iron trap, and lead them into it.”

“That doesn't sound hard at *all*,” Red drawled.

Ash bared his teeth at Red. Red grinned back.

“What are those called?” Ash asked. “The, the spiky ones.” He moved his hands like he was opening and closing a book. “You step on them and they grab you.”

“You want to make ones of those out of *iron*? Oh, that's horrible. I love it.”

Ash grinned. “Do you think you could get one of those? By tomorrow?”

“Maybe not tomorrow,” Red answered, “but soon. I'll go into the town.”

“Oh, this'll be fun,” Ash said. He radiated the feel of a predator. “See you tomorrow, Red.”

“See you, Ash.”

-

A five-minute walk wasn't long at all, but when Red's mind kept circling back to the way Ash had threatened him, how close he'd gotten. For a moment, he'd thought Ash was going to kiss him. For a moment, Red had thought he was going to kiss Ash.

Red really did not want to have to deal with *this* on top of everything else that came with dealing with the fae. Wasn't it enough that Ash clearly would enjoy killing him?

Apparently not.

The town's walls were tall and steady, and the guard at the gate—in what looked like leather armor—gave Red an appraising look when he arrived.

“Hand?” they asked, bored voice not quite hiding their wariness.

Red dutifully held out his hand, allowing the guard to press iron against his wrist. After a few moments, they decided he was confirmed human, and waved him through.

He wandered for a little bit, before coming across a blacksmith's shop. He entered, hoping they'd have what he came for so he could go back home.

“Hello!”

Red turned, startled, to see a teenager waving at him. She closed the door behind herself carefully.

“Hi,” Red answered.

“Hi,” they said again, “I’m Moss. What’s going on?”

Red smiled at them. “I’m looking for like, an iron trap? The ones that you step on and they snap shut.”

Moss raised his eyebrows, nodding knowingly. “Fae trouble?”

Red almost laughed. “Of a sort.”

They nodded. “We have a few of those. How many do you need?”

Red paused. “Just one, I think.”

Moss went and got one, bringing it back to Red. She set it on the counter, demonstrating how to set it and how to disarm it, then told him the cost.

“Thank you,” Red told him as he paid. Moss smiled good-naturedly, tapping his fingers on the iron.

“I hope that does the trick,” they said. “Fae are sure something.”

Red laughed. “They sure are.”

-

Ash sharpened his claws idly on the tree he was in, watching the high fae below him come and go. They needed someone alone, someone who was maybe a little desperate, someone who would take a deal with a human no matter how terrifyingly charming they were.

Honestly? The way Red had gotten him into a sort of trance scared him. He’d gotten Ash focused on his voice, focused on the brush of fingers against his

own, talking smooth and steady. Ash had just—*forgotten* to watch out for tricks. His whole world had narrowed to the bright point of contact of Red's fingers on his jaw, touching the scar almost reverently, and he hadn't even thought about handing over the ring when asked.

He didn't like it. He really didn't like it.

But they'd get a fae caught in an iron trap, and Ash would kill them easily and take their power for his own, and then he could be done with this human. He would be strong enough to fight a high fae on his own without having to slink away after and lick his wounds like a wild thing, strong enough that the smudge of iron-blood on his face wouldn't bother him.

And then he could kill Red, and be done with him, and not have to think about his honeyed voice or light touch or horrible cleverness ever again.

He shook himself, refocusing on the fae below him. That one had a limp; a possible target. But they also had another with them, so probably not. Much harder to trap two at once, and despite Red's silver tongue, if it came to a straight-out fight? He'd be dead within a minute. Human reflexes simply weren't fast enough, especially compared to some of the high fae.

Maybe he should have added to the terms that Red wasn't allowed to hypnotize him like that. But then he would have to figure out how to word it, and he didn't know how Red had done it. Besides, it was a risk to even admit that it had worked.

(Red probably knew that it worked. He was clever like that, clever and perceptive and as good with people as Ash was with his own claws.)

Ash dug his claws into the wood into his fingers ached, staring at the fae below without actually seeing them. The sooner this partnership could be over, the better. Then he could put thoughts of Red out of his mind and be done with it.

Chapter End Notes

ash, touch-starved as all hell: why do i keep thinking about red touching
me what fuckery is this

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

things go very, very badly.

Chapter Notes

this chapter contains a panic attack (as mentioned in the newly updated tags), the sort of grounding-overload self-harm that often happens in the midst of a panic attack and something that kind of counts as manipulation? even though it's manipulation that helps? but still, heads up that that happens.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ash sat in the circle of rocks, waiting with seemingly endless patience as Red stayed just outside the edges. *No iron in the circle*, their deal said, and it would be stupid to get himself hurt like that.

“I’ve got it,” Red told him, answering the unasked question. “Ready for action, and all.”

“Good, good.”

Red could see the eagerness, hiding under the way he tried to look unconcerned. Hiding under the way he idly scratched at the stump, the way he didn’t bother to look at Red.

“You’ve got the target picked out, Ash? Wouldn’t do to be slacking.”

Ash scoffed, getting up. He looked Red in the eyes, and the wild-animal intent would scare Red if he didn’t know how bad an iron blade would hurt Ash. Instead, Red just grinned at him.

“Show me the ropes, wildcat.” Red nearly laughed at the way Ash bristled at the nickname. “C’mon, it’s getting dark, and I’m getting impatient.”

Ash left the circle, and Red followed him. Their shadows stretched long in the dusky light, and Red found that he didn't mind being a step behind.

"You better lead me out again," Red told him, but it was mock-threatening.

Ash just laughed, turning over his shoulder to grin at Red. The smile would be unnerving, all sharp teeth and feral amusement, if not for their deal. If Ash wanted help with his fae target, he'd need Red alive. That, or burn his hands trying to set up the trap, and Ash didn't seem like someone able to handle the sort of pain that would cause.

He'd seen a fae try to get through the gates of his town, once, when he was a child. The iron had covered the poor creature in blisters and burns, and that hadn't been the worst of it.

Ash came to a stop at the bottom of a hill, beside a great oak. It littered the ground with dead leaves, and Red had to admit it was a good place for a trap.

"Clever," he said.

The half of Ash's face that he could see made a weird expression, like a blend of scorn and pride. Within a moment, he had schooled it back to something neutral, and so Red didn't say anything.

"If you set the trap at the base of the tree," Ash said, "and then get them to come to it?" He grinned, and it sent a thrill down Red's spine. "*Snap.*"

"Shall we set it, then? So you know the range of the thing." Red returned the grin. "It wouldn't do for you to get caught, now would it?"

"Is that a threat, human?" Ash's voice was light.

Red snorted. "I have a name, y'know. And calling me *human* is not nearly as intimidating as you think it is."

Ash huffed. "Fine. Set the trap. For all I know, you don't know how to do it."

Red laughed. “Learn to pick your battles, Ash. Not everything is a challenge.”

He crouched to set the bag on the ground. He grabbed the trap by its closed blades, pulling it out of the bag.

And the land *rumbled*.

It shuddered beneath them, the sound making its home deep in Red’s chest, and he dropped it and spun to face Ash. Ash, who was looking at him like he’d suddenly discovered Red was prey, and given that he could only assume he’d broken the terms of their deal? That statement was probably not too far off.

“Hey, Red,” Ash purred. His pupils had turned huge, drinking in the light and the sight of him.

“Hey, Ash,” Red answered. He masked his fear with an easy smile. *No sudden movements...*

“What were our terms again, Red? I get an hour with you, to do what I want?” Ash grinned, teeth glinting sharp in the light. “Sounds good to me.”

“Easy, Ash,” Red said softly, “easy. No guarantee that I’ll help you, if you hurt me now.”

“Oh, but Red,” Ash answered, just as soft. “If you swear to help me, I’ll not kill you. If you don’t?”

He tapped his claws against the curve of his own throat, and grinned.

“Ash, no.” Red kept his voice light, soft. If he could get out of here without turning everything on its head, he would. “You’re not a wild animal, Ash.”

Ash narrowed his eyes, a soft growl beginning low in his throat. “I may not be,” he murmured, “but I am still a predator, and I still can make you writhe and scream under my claws.”

Slowly, Ash began to prowl towards him.

“Ash, stop. Ash, *stop*.”

Ash did not stop.

“*Ash*.”

Red sighed. Well, shit.

He spoke Ash’s true name, the one the—*being* deep in the faewoods had given him. Ash froze, eyes widening in what could only be horror.

“I command you to *stay still*.”

“How,” Ash breathed. “How did you—why do you *have that*—”

“Do not move,” Red commanded, keeping his voice low. “Do not move until I release you from that command.”

Ash’s whole body was trembling as he strained against the order. His breath shuddered, loud enough for Red to hear it.

“Ash,” he said, softer. “Easy. It’s okay.”

“How is it *okay*—”

“I order you not to do anything that would cause me physical harm,” Red told him firmly, “until I release you from that command. This includes purposefully putting me in situations where I am in danger.”

Ash stared at him, face slack with fear.

“I release you from the command to stay still.”

And Ash stumbled backwards, horror etched in every line of his face. His breaths came quick and shallow, and Red felt a pang of pity for the fae. True names were nothing to mess around with.

“Ash,” Red said softly. He crouched down, making himself smaller. “Ash. It’s okay. Breathe.”

“You *know my name*—”

“I won’t use it to hurt you,” he answered. “I swear. I won’t use it to hurt you.”

Ash shuddered, eyes closing for a moment. “*Red.*”

“I wasn’t going to use it if I didn’t have to, Ash. I promise.”

“You have my *name.*”

“I do,” Red agreed, his voice as gentle as he could make it. “And that’s probably really fucking scary. But it’s gonna be okay, Ash. It’s gonna be okay.”

“*Red.*” His voice was thin and breathy with panic. “You know my name. You know my *name.*”

“I do. I know. Look at me, Ash, okay? Just look at me.”

Ash kept his gaze settled somewhere over Red’s left shoulder, as if just to prove he could.

“I won’t hurt you, okay?” Red kept his voice low and soft. “You’re gonna be alright. You’re gonna be okay, Ash.”

Ash crumpled to the ground, shaking. His body heaved with huge, panicky breaths, and he wasn't looking at Red.

“Can I touch you?”

Ash shrugged, a sharp, jerky motion. Something that might have been a sob caught in his throat.

“I don't know if that's a yes or a no, Ash.”

One short, stiff nod.

Red moved closer, reaching out to touch Ash. His hand brushed against the back of Ash's shoulder, and he flinched.

"It's alright," Red murmured, "it's alright. Focus on me, Ash, okay?"

Ash shuddered under his hand, twisting to look at Red. His face was wet with tears.

"That's good," Red told him, voice still a murmur. "That's good. Listen to my voice, wildcat, it's okay. Am I hurting you?"

Ash shook his head. His breath shook, claws digging into his own hands.

Carefully, slowly, Red reached for them. Ash allowed him to take his hands and gently pry them open, setting them on the ground so the claws would dig into dirt instead of his own palms.

"If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it now, wouldn't I?"

Ash shuddered, eyes closing. He answered in a whisper. "Yes."

"That's right. I don't want to hurt you, Ash. You're okay. You're gonna be okay."

One long, trembling breath. Ash opened his eyes again, looking at Red, something fragile in his expression.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Ash. I swear it."

He resisted the urge to stroke the tangled mess of hair on the back of Ash's head. It would just spook him more.

"Right," Ash managed. His voice was just a breathy rasp. "Right."

"Here, okay. I'll show you how the trap works, and you can sit behind me and watch, alright?"

Red didn't say *you can sit where I can't see you to calm down*. Ash wouldn't have appreciated it.

He moved to sit by the base of the oak tree, facing away from Ash. He heard rustling behind him as he picked up the trap, holding it by the closed blades.

“This is the closed version, yeah? And you reset it like this—” Red demonstrated. “—and it's good to go again. And then, disarming it is like this.” He grabbed a stick and poked at the trigger plate, and it snapped shut.

Ash breathed in sharply. “That’s—really fast.”

“It really is, yeah.”

He reset the trap again.

“I'm going to cover it in leaves, so you know how much it blends in. Okay?”

“Are you going to trigger it again?” Ash’s voice was quiet but steady.

“Yeah, I am. Don't want anyone stepping in it other than our target.”

Red cleared a space in the leaves with his hands, and set the trap there. A bug crawled out from the leaves and onto his hand, and Red yelped and shook it off.

Ash laughed at him, a rough, mocking sound. Even though Ash couldn't see his face, he grinned sheepishly.

“You got scared by a *bug*, Red. That's a new level of pathetic.”

Red made a mock-offended sound. “It startled me, okay!”

Ash laughed quietly as he gathered the leaves up again, letting them fall over the trap to obscure it from sight. It left a small lump where it was hidden.

“See, if I were really setting it, I'd dig out a hollow in the ground so that it didn't look so suspicious. But I'm just going to trigger it again, so there's no point.”

Red grabbed the stick he'd used last time, and poked for the center of the trap. It took a couple tries, but then it snapped shut, turning the rest of the

stick into splintered pieces. Ash breathed in sharply.

“D’you wanna lead me back? It’s dark and I don’t know where I’m going.”

“I can do that,” Ash said, and Red didn’t comment on how his voice was still thin and fragile.

-

Red really did not like how things had turned out. Not only had their deal been broken—and of all the ways to violate it, too, it had to be something that they both wanted Red to do—but he’d had to use Ash’s true name, scaring the shit out of the poor fae in the process. There was something deeply *wrong* about Ash panicking like that, and guilt pooled in his gut about being the reason it happened.

Ash had clearly expected worse than happened, too. Although, most humans that used a fae’s true name did more than purely prevent the fae from hurting them, so it’s not like his fear wasn’t justified.

Red didn’t like how viscerally he reacted to the thought of hurting Ash.

He liked having power over Ash, but not like *this*. Not—not while scaring him that badly. That wasn’t *right* in a way that Red wasn’t sure he could put into words.

He kept thinking of the way Ash had flinched under his touch, the way Ash’s hands had trembled in his. He’d done his best to calm Ash down, but it clearly hadn’t worked all the way.

He’d wanted to kiss Ash’s tears away. Was that weird? It probably was. It definitely wasn’t the normal thing to think, when faced with a terrified and crying fae. Most people tended more towards *triumph* than guilt and an urge to protect.

Add it to the pile of weird interactions with the fae, he supposed. Along with *making a deal with the fae and coming out on top*, he could also add *having a crush on the fae he’s dealing with*.

Lovely.

-

Ash, admittedly, was kind of freaking out.

Red had known his name. *The whole time*. Any time, Red could have ordered him to do anything and he would have been forced to obey and he hadn't even *known it*. It was fucking terrifying.

It scared him almost *worse* that, after he'd used it the first time, he'd been *kind*. He'd spoken softly, he hadn't used it except to protect himself, he'd let Ash sit behind him! None of those were how it normally went when a human knew your true name!

Ash paced in a circle around his den, claws digging into his hands.

And that was another thing, really. Red had been so *gentle* when he touched him, taken his hands and kept him from drawing blood, steady and *comforting*.

It wasn't supposed to be comforting. Nothing was supposed to be comforting when sitting right across from someone who knows your true name. *He* wasn't supposed to be comforting.

It scared him.

How did he even *get* that? He hadn't gotten it from Ash, that was for sure. He didn't *understand*.

I order you not to hurt me, Red had said, and then had talked so soothingly that Ash's breathing had smoothed out. Had turned his back to Ash to let him breathe.

Ash hissed as blood welled up on his palms, his claws breaking skin. Some part of him wanted to feel Red touch him again, like something precious, something to handle gently. He wanted Red to take his hands again.

And that was fucking *terrifying*. Red *knew his name*. Red knew his *name*, and still Ash wanted to be around him! Even though he was scared!

He didn't understand. He didn't understand and it scared the shit out of him.

Chapter End Notes

red 100% played up the bug spook to allow ash to mock him. and you couldn't see it, but he did that all the way back as well

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

not dead i swear. just disabled

warning: contains nightmare that features death and dehumanization

Red put in a lot of thought about whether he should bring his iron dagger or not. Leaving it behind could make Ash feel safer, with the presence of less iron, but the change also might send him into a panicky spiral like the day before. Guilt washed through him, and he bit his tongue.

It had been in self-defense, and he'd soothed Ash's panic as quickly and cleanly as he could, but it still didn't sit right.

In the end, he decided to bring it. Change was bad for humans, and the same would probably hold true of fae, especially wild ones. He didn't want to send Ash into another spiral.

Ash was waiting in their usual meeting place, although he seemed much warier. He was sharpening his claws again, and when he looked up and met Red's eyes, something that might have been fear flickered in them.

He did his best to give Ash a reassuring smile.

"Hi, Red," Ash said slowly. He stood, clawed hands held close to his chest as though ready to lash out.

"Hey," Red answered.

Ash didn't leave the circle. Red wasn't really expecting him to.

He set down the bag with the trap, and laid his iron dagger on top of it. Then he stepped into the circle, holding their deal even though it was all but void now that Ash's true name was out in the open. *An hour at Ash's mercy* wasn't much of a threat if Red could simply command him to not move.

“You ready to go hunting?” he asked lightly.

Ash let his claws tap against each other. He held himself differently, now, shoulders high and hands at the ready. It reminded Red of a cornered animal, and he wanted nothing more than to coax Ash out.

Patience, though. Red couldn't rush him.

“Ready enough,” Ash said. His tone was guarded, wary.

He didn't move.

“Would you rather I leave my dagger here, or in the bag with the trap?”

Hesitation.

“Let's go,” Ash said, in a tone that meant *yes*. He crossed out of the circle, and Red reattached his dagger to his hip and followed.

-

“We're going in circles,” Red remarked casually, gesturing at a fallen tree they had just passed for the third time.

Ash frowned at him. “You don't even know this forest.”

“Ash, we've passed that tree three times.”

Ash wrinkled his nose, and turned away to continue walking.

“Ash, when are you going to admit that we're not trapping them today?”

A frustrated huff. Ash spun to face him. “There are too many possibilities,” he said, instead of answering the question.

Red had a guess that that meant *I don't want to when you know my name*.

“Alright,” he said easily, and he noted how Ash relaxed ever so slightly.

“What should we do instead, then?”

Ash's lips peeled back from his teeth in an unconscious threat display. Red smiled at him.

"I don't understand you," he said finally. "There's something wrong with you."

Red sat down on the ground, and Ash followed him. "You could put it like that," he said neutrally. Unconcerned.

"There—*is*," Ash insisted. He seemed determined to prove this to Red. "You're not how you're supposed to be."

Red raised an eyebrow.

Ash's voice was quieter, when he spoke again. "You're not like humans are in stories."

"You're not exactly an average fae, either," Red countered lazily. "Much more straight to the point than people say. I like it."

Ash blinked at him. "...Okay."

"C'mon, wildcat," Red told him, light and coaxing. "Don't go all quiet on me now."

Ash narrowed his eyes at Red. "You don't *know me*."

Red gave him an easy smile. "I'd like to, though."

"You're *really* not how you're supposed to be."

"What else is new?"

Ash frowned at him. "I don't understand that."

"What—oh, what else is new? Basically it means, I already knew that."

Ash shook his head, and Red nearly laughed at the expression on his face. "There's something wrong with all of you, I'm certain."

“You love me anyway,” Red teased.

Ash went very still.

“What do you mean?” he asked, very quietly. Red’s stomach did an uncomfortable swoop.

“I was joking,” he explained, and he couldn't quite get the subdued tone out of his voice. “That's all.”

“Oh,” Ash said. “Okay.”

Red didn't know what to make of that, so he grinned at Ash, turning his voice light. “Unless you want to propose your undying love for me?” he joked.

Ash wrinkled his nose, making a derisive noise at Red’s words. “You'd hope so, wouldn't you.”

“A man can dream!”

Ash laughed. “Dream away, Red. You know my *name*. You think I'd love someone like that?”

Red laughed, softly, storing the pang of hurt deep down in his chest. “No, that's reasonable. Safer like this, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ash answered. He reached out and poked Red, light and careful. “Bad news for you, though, loverboy.”

A laugh burst from Red, surprised and a strange painful sort of delighted. Ash was getting more comfortable around him, that was sure.

But as though the thought had jinxed it, Ash’s smile faded.

“I think you should go,” Ash told him firmly. There was an odd glint in his eye, as though he expected Red to insist upon staying.

“Alright,” he said instead, “see you tomorrow?”

Ash hesitated, fingers tapping away against his own leg. “See you tomorrow,” he said finally, and Red could feel Ash’s gaze on his back long after he’d left.

-

Ash’s voice, thick and raw with pain, rang out through the trees.

“Red!”

A shriek.

Red followed the sound, horror thrumming through him with every step. No. No. Fury burned hot under his skin.

Ash was in the clearing, the same clearing that they’d negotiated in, their clearing. He wasn’t alone, though; there were maybe three or four humans surrounding him, and his hands were bound behind his back. He threw himself back and forth, struggling to break free.

“Ash!”

Ash looked up at Red, and there were tears streaming down his face. There was a muzzle on his face, like he was some sort of animal, and he made a sound when he saw Red that broke Red’s heart. There were burns on his face, one terrifyingly near his eye, and the skin had blistered.

Red fumbled for the dagger on his hip and crashed into one of the humans, knocking them away from Ash. He landed on top of them, but nearly dropped his blade when he saw that they had no face, only smooth, untouched skin.

He recovered, pressing the tip of his knife into their throat until the skin went white under the pressure.

“Let the fae go, or he dies.”

A scoff. “You wouldn’t, not for this creature.”

Ash cried out.

“Try me,” Red snarled, and pressed harder until it drew blood. Red beads welled up around the tip, and despite the lack of mouth, the person beneath him made a sound of fear and pain.

The sickening sound of a weapon sinking into flesh, and a horrible choked cry. Red twisted around to see a blade deep in Ash’s chest, and someone screamed.

He realized moments later that it was him.

Ash met Red’s gaze, wide-eyed and making horrible little pained sounds with every breath. Red lunged for him, mind flicking frantically through ways to fix this—

And something sharp and heavy came down on his head.

Red woke, breathing hard and shaking, tears on his face, and for a moment he couldn't think of anything but *Ash*. The sight of Ash so scared, so hurt, filled his mind and for a moment it was all he could see.

“It was a dream,” he managed breathlessly, “just a dream. He's fine. He's fine.”

Ash’s cry rang through his head.

“He’s *fine*.”

(All the same, he didn’t get back to sleep for hours that night.)

-

“Humans aren't supposed to eat fae food, yeah,” Red told Ash casually, “but no one said that goes the other way around, do they? So! I brought you a sandwich.”

Ash tilted his head to the side, frowning. “You brought me a...what?”

“A sandwich,” Red repeated, fishing the slightly crumpled food out of a pocket. He held it out to Ash, who stared at it intently for a few seconds before reaching out to take it.

Ash brought it up to his face and sniffed it. He frowned even more, before cautiously taking a bite. He immediately let go of it, where it fell into his lap and slowly lost its top piece of bread.

“Why is it *dry*?”

Red couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing, ignoring how Ash glared at him.

“You asshole! Red! Your food is fucked up!”

Red laughed harder.

Ash threw the sandwich back at him, glare ruined by the smile that was pulling at the edges of his mouth. Red tried very hard not to find it attractive, and failed.

“You bastard,” he scolded, unable to keep the grin off his face, and tossed it back at Ash. “That was some perfectly good food!”

“Like hell it was,” Ash retorted, something open and happy on his face, and easily leaned to the side to dodge it. “You trying to poison me?”

Red twisted his face into a mimicry of offense, and Ash laughed.

And then something shifted, and Ash's expression lost its glow. His shoulders dropped, just a little. Something in Red's chest hurt at the sight.

“Let's do something else,” Ash said quietly. He didn't look at Red.

Red wanted, with a force that scared him, to ask Ash what had gone wrong. He wanted to touch Ash's hand, ask him if he was alright, to go back to when everything was easy and no one was upset.

“What do you want to do?” he asked instead.

-

Ash didn't know how to answer that question. He wanted to show Red his territory. He wanted to touch Red, to lean against him without care. He wanted to get as far away from Red as he could. He wanted Red to *not know his name*.

He kind of wanted to cry.

"I don't know," he said, instead of any of those things. "I don't know."

Red didn't say anything for a moment. Ash wanted him to say—something. Say anything at all. He needed Red to say something with an intensity that scared him.

"Do you want me to go home?"

He did, and he didn't at the same time, and he wanted both of those things so badly that for a moment he thought he might split down the middle from it. He shook his head.

"Do you want to just...walk around?"

Yeah. Yeah, Ash could do that. Maybe then he'd feel less like a prey creature in the skin of a hunter, less like Red was playing with him, less like he was a tiny bird that had fallen in love with a thing full of teeth and a gentle touch.

There was something quietly ironic, about that.

"Yeah," he said, making his voice strong and steady. "Let's do that."

Red got up in a fluid motion, broken a little bit by the way he stumbled as one foot got stuck on a clump of grassroots. Ash stifled an amused sound at that, and followed him up.

"Where do you want to go?"

Ash tilted his head, considering. "Let's go to the river."

So they did.

-

Red stayed in Ash's line of sight the whole time, as they walked, and by the time they made it to the river the tension in his limbs had dissolved somewhat. Tiny silver and crimson fish swam in the shallows, weaving between yellow-green river plants and smooth stones, and it was—more beautiful than he'd been expecting for a faewood river.

The faewoods had produced Ash, with his pale grey skin and matted lavender hair and black eyes and claws and constant glare, but the same things that made him inhuman were also beautiful, in some strange way. His eyes glittered in the light, and his wild-thing grin did strange things to Red's stomach, and he moved with such grace that Red half expected him to not touch the ground.

“Those,” Ash said as he pointed into the river, “are—...actually, I'm not sure what they'd be called for you. Direct translation is probably *fire fish*, but that's not quite right. Anyway, their scales sting your hand if you grab them carelessly.”

He grinned at Red, and Red was suddenly sure he knew what Ash was about to do.

“But not if you know how to do it,” he finished, and flashed out a hand. He held up a wriggling fish triumphantly, pinned between his claws. A tiny bit of blood oozed out from where he'd accidentally pierced its sides.

“Damn.” Red was sure he was staring, but he couldn't quite get himself to stop.

Ash tossed the fish back into the river. “They're not good to eat. Learned *that* the hard way.”

Red winced in sympathy. “Didn't your parents teach you?”

Ash tilted his head. “What do you mean? As soon as I knew how to hunt, I was on my own. It’s impractical for them to keep you after that, you’re just another mouth to feed.”

That sounded...very lonely.

“Don’t you get lonely?” Red blurted, then wished he could take it back as Ash tensed.

“High fae keep their young longer, I think,” Ash said, ignoring the question. “Until they’re properly adults. But then again, they’re not wild. They probably don’t see it as a poor survival choice.”

“Huh,” Red muttered. “That’s—for some reason I never thought about that.”

“I’m not surprised,” Ash said. “Humans are like high fae, aren’t they? They keep their young long after they could survive on their own. What is it, like, five extra years? Ten?”

“They’d *die*,” Red protested. A ten- or thirteen-year-old kid on their own? It would be all but a death sentence.

“They don’t even know how to *hunt* then?”

Red shook his head, and Ash made a disbelieving noise. Then he fixed Red with the full force of his pitch-dark gaze, and Red froze.

“You don’t know how to hunt either, do you?”

“...No,” Red admitted. For some reason, he felt exposed under Ash’s questioning stare. “I mean—I don’t need to?”

Ash scoffed. “Everyone needs to know how to hunt. I don’t know how you’re still alive. C’mon,” he said, and grabbed Red’s hand. “I’ll teach you.”

Red saw no way out of this, and let himself be dragged along.

The human was *hopeless*. Ash had thought he'd just been making that much noise when he walked so that he wouldn't startle Ash, and then get a dozen tiny cuts from Ash's claws, but no! He was *just that bad at it*.

"Red," he groaned, putting his head in his hands for a moment. "*How* are you not dead yet."

Red grinned sheepishly at him. "Good question?"

Ash fixed Red with a sharp glare. "*You*," he said, "are going to come with me until we find something to hunt. And then when we find it, you are going to *stay put* while I deal with it. Okay?"

Red sighed, but he didn't seem unhappy. "Okay."

And then Ash was pulling him along again.

End Notes

as always, here's [the lifesteal discord server](#) that i have, come join :]

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!