

Say it easy

I stare the gray-blue-eyed beast down.

It has no remorse and takes without asking. Its bite is poison, its poison kills, its victims are mourned, and the beast does not care.

This beast— this thing— stole everything from me; my happiness, my mom, my life.

This beast is a silver wolf.

"What else do you want from me?" I quietly ask the wolf. Its response is a snarl and a step forward.

"What do you want from me!" I yell.

The silver wolf lunges at me, claws out.

I sit up lightning-fast, awake in a cold sweat.

"Get it together, Metallic," I say to myself. "It has been four years."

Yet, I still let myself grab the photo on my nightstand.

It shows a nine-year-old version of myself from four years ago, with silver-streaked hair in my laughing face. My mom has her arm around me, her smile almost as wide as mine. It was before she got attacked— before my whole world changed. I set the picture down.

"Quit torturing yourself!" I whisper-yell at myself. "It won't help you right now!"

I get out of bed, head to my window, open it to lean out into the night. The cool air helps me as much as I had thought it would. From where the moon is positioned, my best guess for the time is about midnight.

Silver wolves. Sleek silver impenetrable fur, poisonous bite and the sharpest claws.

There I go again, thinking about wolves. To my left I see the lights on in the study. My best friend, Grayson, is up late studying for a test again. That's what I need, to go see Gray.

"Looks like someone is studying while the rest of the kingdom is dreaming." I call from the door of the study, where I am leaning with my arms crossed.

He jumps in surprise but tries to cover it with a smirk and his own arm cross.

"Clearly not the whole kingdom is asleep," he retorts as he leans back in his chair. "You're here." Then he smiles a smile that makes my heart flutter, despite myself.

He has tousled reddish-brown hair, light brown skin, and dark brown eyes. They are like mountain stones. Dark, cold, and hard. But never moving, steady, solid, and grounded. That is part of who Gray is— and, well, he is also quite literally the most stubborn person I have ever met.

He is in a tattered old red hoodie and a pair of clearly well-worn jeans. He refuses to get rid of all his favorite clothes, even after they are clearly trashed.

I go over to where he is sitting.

"What are you studying?" I ask, deciding to ignore his last comment as I lean over his shoulder.

"Finger bones," he says looking back down at his book.

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I lean over his shoulder another second then grabbed a math book, since I suck at math, and sit down next to him.

He looks up from his book to stare at me for a second, then says, "Nightmare?"

"Yeah."

"About wolves?"

"Yeah."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"Yeah."

He sighs the way he always does when I say 'I don't want to talk about it.'

"Ya know," he starts slowly—carefully as if walking on ice. "We used to talk about everything."

"Yeah." That seems to be all I can say right now. The thing is, we really did used to talk about everything. From friends to family, books to school subjects, crushes to who we think is cute. Every. Single. Thing.

He went silent. We are so quiet it feels like I am drowning in it. We used to say *everything easy*. Then I hear a sharp wolf howl. I flinch and grab Gray's hand that is resting on the desk.

"It's okay," he says, sounding scared, which doesn't make me feel better. "They are outside the castle walls."

We both sit there listening so quietly that we jump like, a foot in the air when Marcus barrels through the door, like a bull in a china shop.

His skin is paler than normal, and it looks to be from worry. His pastel blue eyes are wild and his messy blond hair looks like he has been tearing his hand through it, a sort of nervous tick he has. And, wow. He really must have tried to get his armor on quickly. It is a mess. His left shin guard backwards, his shoulder pads twisted. He doesn't even have his helmet on.

"Have you seen Alayla?" he asks, sounding desperate. We shake our heads. Alayla is Gray's stubborn older sister.

Marcus curses and tears his hand through his hair. (Yep! I was right!) "She went on patrol an hour ago... she hasn't come back."

That statement causes me and Gray to unleash our own curses. "If she's not back..." I say hoping he won't say what he does.

"We are sending out a search party."

A lot of things happen fast, Marcus informs the king of the situation and gets together a group of knights for the search party. (And thankfully fixed his armor, so it actually protects him in some way.) Gray goes to talk to his little sisters, Marine and Redacal, about what is happening.

And I am back in my bedroom, staring at myself in the mirror. I am wearing armor and all black. I look at my silver hair with black undertones, my contrasting pale skin; and my bronze eyes with silver and gold flecks. My eyes lingered on my hair.

In my kingdom, Vasileio, it is a tradition among the women with long hair to cut their own hair when they feel they are ready to step into their role. As a symbol for their peers and superiors, that they are ready.

My role is to be Vasileio's metal Elementalist, I am ready for that. The metal Elementalist can control all the metals from the eastern mountains to the western sea. My mom was the metal Elementalist before me, just like her father before that and so on.

Controlling the metal is like controlling water in a way. I could bend metal to my will to do as I please. Melt, shrink, bend, twist, sharpen. All I have to do is step into my role. The position is metal Elementalist, the power is ferrokinesis.

And when I say *like controlling water*, I *am* implying that there is one elementalist for every element, the elements are *water, fire, sky, forest, rock, ice, lightning and metal*.

I know in my heart that I am ready for my place.

I pick up my dagger, gather all my hair into a ponytail, and cut it off. I turn my head left and right. My hair looks pretty good. I sheathe my dagger and strapp It sideways to my back and go to join the search party.

When I join the search party in the courtyard everyone kind of stares at my hair for a second, except Gray. He takes one look at me and asks, "Did you cut it yourself?"

"Yep! How's it look?"

He nodes. "Pretty good."

"Alright then," says Marcus. "Let's go."

It didn't take long to get to the woods. Gray and I are picked to be on foot while everyone else is on horseback. As we walked I think. How stupid is it that Grayson thinks I would share everything, I mean after what happened to my mom...

"Ya know, I don't have to share everything for us to be close."

He stops and turns to me surprised. "I know. Why do you feel the need to tell me that?"

"Well because you seemed hurt that I didn't want to talk about my dream?"

"No." I waited for him to say more, he doesn't and confuses me.

"No?" I say. "You are going to have to say more than that for this conversation to work."

He takes a deep breath "I'm not *hurt* about the dream." he says, raising his voice a little bit. "I am *hurt* about the countless other times where *you* refuse to share anything!"

I am stunned. "That's not fair, everything changed for me!" I can feel myself starting to yell. "It's not like we were going to be close-little-kid best-friends-forever!" The party is getting far away from us, but I don't care. Grayson has to answer me.

"Now that, that, is not fair." he says, sounding genuinely hurt this time. "I sat next to you, through everything and now..." his voice cracks. He clears his throat and continues. "And now you act like it means nothing. You act like you don't need my friendship anymore."

"I never once said that Gray." I feel like we were on the edge of ruining something that can never be repaired. "I lost my mom Grayson, she died. I lost everything!" I am still yelling.

"Yeah, well you *don't* get to play *that* card." He says bitterly. "I lost my mom too, not more than six months later. I have played that card, so I know for a fact how it's not fair." He looks like he is about to cry.

We stand there staring at anything but each other unsure if we could fix the hole we just ripped in our friendship. Then I hear a sharp scream. We lock eyes and whisper the same name.

"Alayla."

Grayson and I both take off running in the direction of the sound.

The rest of the search party is too far ahead to hear the scream, so I pull out my whistle, everyone in the search party has one, And blow as hard as I can. An extremely loud noise comes out. I have to hope the rest of the party hears.

Grayson is jumping over everything in his path, rocks, logs, holes. You name it he's jumping it. I am trying really hard not to read into the way he is ignoring me.

When I was younger, I made a list of all the reasons why Grayson is my best friend. It looked something like.

One: we grew up together. King Solomon is Grayson's uncle and my dad is one of his best friends, so King Solomon said my family could live in the castle.

Two: both our dads travel all the time. Both my dad and Grayson's dad work on King Solomon's royal fleet, so they are always at sea.

Three: we both love fantasy books!

Four: we both have annoying siblings. Grayson has two younger sisters and an older sister. I have a younger brother and sister.

Five: we are both training in elemental powers. Me ferrokinesis, him geokinesis or rocks. Powers are weird, sometimes an Elementalist has to step into their powers, like with me. Other times you could just use your powers and start training as young as possible, like with Grayson.

That was my list of why Grayson and I are friends, but four years ago I added something new. Four years ago we both lost our moms. Mine to silver wolf's, while a devastating loss for my family, the kingdom suffered a bigger one.

Six months later Grayson's mom, King Solomon's sister, and the rightful ruler of Vasíleio, queen Leocadia, went missing and hasn't been seen since.

Six: we both lost our moms.

After much more running we stumble into a clearing. It's one of those that looks like a normal clearing until you realize what's in the middle.

Off to one side, Alayla is leaning up against a tree. She is cradling her left arm, there is a deep gash and a lot of blood. Her bright red hair is plastered to her face from sweat. And her eyes are tinted yellow from pain.

And in the middle, I find myself face to face with a silver wolf.

Its fangs dripping poison, its wild eyes narrowed, it is the largest wolf I have ever seen, its impenetrable fur glistening in the moonlight. I know I am trembling but not of fear, which is surprising. But of pure hate and anger.

Grayson is trying to sneak over to where Alayla is laying and he almost makes it, but then the wolf turns and leaps at him. I scream the only word that comes to mind.

"NO!"

The wolf lands in front of Grayson and turns to stare at me. It snarls and growls several times as it stalks towards me.

Grayson understands the warning so he is able to use his geokinesis to pull some stone out of the ground and make a barrier between him and the wolf. As a rock Elementalist, he can do that sort of thing.

"Don't move any closer!" I yell. The wolf seems to be contemplating that order. Then it steps forward.

When I make a threat I mean it. I gather all the strength in my body. All the anger, resentment, and hatred. And channeled it to the tips of my fingers.

But the power won't stay there. The power rocks through my whole body. The power covers every inch of me.

I plant my feet to brace myself and, well it's not like I sent the power out of my body. More like I pulled it in.

The silver coating of the wolf's fur came off in a sort of thick liquid and went into my outstretched hands.

Into like, into my body. Like how my hair grows out of my head coated in silver. Like how my eyes look like the metals in the ground.

I have never felt more powerful in my life, never have I ever felt more confident, and never ever have I felt more humbled.

I feel aware of all the metal around me. Each of our sets of armor. My knife still strapped sideways to my back. And now I know how small in the world of things I am.

A small smile spreads across my lips. I look and see the way the wolf is trembling being stripped of the silver coating of his fur, he is no longer invincible to weapons. He is just a wolf now.

When I am done, the wolf, Alayla and Grayson are all staring at me.

The smile slips away but the confidence does not. I give my last command to the wolf. "Leave."

He whimpers, lets out a howl, and runs away. I turn and run over to Alayla and Grayson. I drop to my knees in the dirt next to Alayla's bleeding arm.

"Metallic," Grayson says in awe. "That was incredible."

"Yeah, yeah not right now." I say, "Alayla, did the wolf scratch or bite you?"

"Wow, Metallic." Alayla says, completely ignoring me. "I had no idea you-"

"Alayla!" I yell at her. "Bite or scratch?" I can still sense metal, so I can feel the rest of the search party's armor, they are getting close.

I blow my whistle again.

Alayla tries to sit up then winces, "Scratch."

That's a relief, silver wolf's bits are poisonous, not their scratches.

I hear the thunder of horses hooves on the forest floor. I stand upright as Marcus rides into the clearing. He sees Alayla and throws himself off his horse. He runs over and crouches down by where Alayla is still sitting.

Naturally, he has a million questions. "What happened? How bad does it hurt? Can you walk?" It went on like this for a few seconds before Grayson cuts in.

"A silver wolf attacked her. She needs to get to a doctor immediately." Marcus nods then puts an arm under both of Alayla's armpits and helps her to her feet.

"We can ride double home on my horse," says Marcus, with a noticeable amount of worry.

Alayla puts her foot in one of the stirrups, swats Marcus when he tries to help her and pulls herself onto his horse one-handed.

Marcus gets on the back and puts his arms around Alayla to grab the reins. He kicks his horse and they are off full gallop back to the castle.

The rest of the search party starts our way back much slower. Grayson and I walk behind again, but this time in awkward silence.

I try to think of something, anything to fill the silence. But before I can, I notice something moving in a nearby bush.

I pull out my knife and stalk over to the bush. The bush lets out a yelp then a little baby wolf stumbles out.

No, not a baby wolf. A baby silver wolf.

It looks at me with those blue-gray eyes, those beautiful eyelashes, and its tiny face. I just can't hurt it.

"Awwww," says Grayson behind me. "Look at her! Isn't she just the cutest!" He looks down at her right front paw. It seems to be cut open. "But she's injured."

I sigh. "You're gonna make me take her back to the castle, aren't you." I say with barely any enthusiasm.

"Would you honestly— honestly— leave her here? Alone. Injured," he says, even though he knows the answer. I feel like saying yes just because I know he will convince me. But he fixed me with a glare that said "*if you don't I will.*"

I give a long, annoyed sigh. "Fiiiiine." I relent. "Let's go."

Alayla healed up just fine and was back to ordering everybody around in no time.

The king was happy that we found her so fast and was glad he didn't have to appoint a new member of the royal guard, cause that is a nightmare. Oh, plus, ya know, Alayla's his niece.

It took some time but the whole castle soon fell in love with my wolf which we named *Lupa*. It means wolf in some forgotten language called *Latin*.

We decided *Lupa* was my wolf because one: I found her. Two: Grayson is a wimp who doesn't want to take the blame if something goes wrong. And, three: if I am being honest, I fell in love with her.

The way she barks at squirrels, the way she licks your face to get attention, and how she howls when she is happy.

Grayson and I still need to patch things up though. I ask him to meet me at the bunker because that is the only place we can be alone, if only temporarily. Because well, it's in the woods.

The outside of the bunker is pretty much the bleakest thing you will ever see. It looks like a mound of dirt with a boring wooden door. Literally! But that was kind of the point. Because inside is a sanctuary for kids who need it.

It has stone walls and a dirt floor, but it has paintings and pictures all over the walls and plenty of rainbow cushions and blankets all over the floor that offset the bleakness. Plus a bench off to one side. (I don't know why. One of the kids who hangs out in the bunker must have dragged it out here for who knows what reason. It's still nice though.) There is a bookshelf with everything from history to fantasy. And an array of games to play and notebooks and art supplies for making your own games.

It smells musty, but a good kind of musty, like coming home.

I sit down on the bench and wait. And wait. And wait. As I wait I watch Lupa *destroy* a pillow. Then Grayson finally shows up.

He sits down next to me. Then says, "We really should teach her some manners."

"*Should we though? Should we?*" I say jokingly. He laughs but it sounds forced.

I look at him, he looks at me. I swear we were both thinking the same thing. So I say it, "I wish we could go back."

"Me too." He was so quiet I probably could convince myself I imagined it.

"I know I can't change what's been said and done but..." I look at him hopefully. I just realized what I still need to say, "I'm sorry, I will try to be more open, it's just..."

"It's just not easy. I get it." Grayson says, and I know he means it. "I'm sorry too."

"Maybe we can try again?" I say, determined to get my best friend back.

"I would like that." Gray says with that smile that makes my heart flutter.

He turns back to Lupa laughing as she destroys another pillow.

I make a split-second decision and kiss him on the cheek. He looks at me, blushes, and smiles again then clears his throat.

"Just want to say," he starts in his "*I am about to tease you*" voice. "Let's hope we didn't just screw up the friendship we literally *just* fixed."

I laugh as we sit there smiling and blushing for what seems like forever and then Lupa jumps on my lap barking and howling, annoyed she isn't getting any attention.

Witch makes Gray laugh as he starts petting her. Then Gray's younger sisters and cousins burst into the bunker begging for us to play hide-and-seek with them in the woods. And we say yes, (of course.)

We run out into the woods: Gray is it. I run to my favorite hiding place with Lupa right behind me and I know Gray is always on my side.

I can say *it easy*.

