

Honorable Mention, Fiction

Footsteps

by Michael Espinoza

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"It's amazing, really." Alec said to his companion as they moved between the densely overgrown foliage.

"Hardly amazing," responded Johan, "it's a skill one cultivates out of need."

"But that you entered into the profession at all--"

"Come on now," Johan urged, "we all have our skills. I'm nowhere near as sharp with a bow as you are."

"That's understandable." Alec chortled, holding aside a branch for his sightless comrade.

"There's a clearing ahead." Johan informed his partner. "Just through the trees."

"I can see that, good ears though." Alec responded.

"Not my ears this time," Johan explained, "I can feel the shift in the sun."

The two men, clad in leather armor, with short-swords at their sides, moved into the sun-lit clearing, ringed by the all-consuming foliage of Darkenfell forest. The footprints they'd been tracking, following through this dismal forest, were clear upon the earth. Blades of grass were stomped down flat, crushed under heavy boots. Alec pointed these out to his blind ally.

"Do you hear him, Johan?" he asked. "Do you hear anything of him? His breathing, maybe?"

"Breathing is easy to quiet," Johan explained, "easy to mask, to change. I listen for footsteps. Work all you want at hiding it, but a human footstep still sounds human to me. And if he's left these boot prints, the wolf isn't too concerned about us finding him."

"I'd wager you're right," Alec agreed, "he'd have covered his tracks if he weren't trying to lead us into a fight. But he doesn't expect us to be nearly the threat we are."

The comrades exchanged praise of their werewolf-hunting prowess for a while, gloating over the grim fate they would level on their current mark. The man was a confirmed werewolf, spotted feeding numerous times in Malpria's western border towns. Armed with short-swords to wound him and expensive silver daggers to finish the job, the hunters were well equipped for their task.

Alec was not overstating Johan's skill. Blind since birth, the young man had accumulated almost superhuman senses of hearing and smell. He could always recognize Alec by his footsteps alone, though Johan joked that it was Alec's bathing habits that gave him away. The men had been friends, neighbors since their school days, and were as close as brothers. Alec held the utmost confidence in Johan's skills in combat, just as Johan trusted Alec to lead him safely through obstacles that his refined auditory and olfactory senses could not surmount. They were truly brothers in arms, bent on slaughtering the foul lycanthropic abominations wherever they could be found.

The sun moved across the sky's dome and still the battle-brothers trekked onward, tracing a path through the enchanted forest; a path marked by smashed undergrowth, snapped tree limbs, and footprints so clear Johan could practically hear the steps of their maker. Every so often, he'd cock his head to listen and then put on a burst of speed in a new direction, and Alec would do his best to keep alongside him and help to clear a more thorough path. Neither warrior wanted to be in Darkenfell when the sun went down, plunging the wooded land into near-total darkness, with nothing but their blades to ward them from the brutish trolls and beautiful but carnivorous nymphs that dwelt in the forest and stalked its nighted realm.

At last, their rambling path led them into yet another clearing. But this particular space was not so unadorned as the other. Four stout branches were laid in a wide square at the clearing's center. The invitation was clear, harkening to a northern custom of old: the challengers were to enter the space and do battle therein with their foe, either to the death or until they or their adversary were cast from the ring. In this circumstance, death was the only outcome, the square of branches was unnecessary, but the challenge, the mockery, was clear. "I can face you both," silently spoke the gesture, "I am ready to end this little game."

Johan approached the battle ring, sword in hand, listening intently. He heard the chirping of birds, the babble of a stream in the distance, and the familiar sound of Alec's light-footed gait as his friend moved up beside Johan to inspect the ring.

"I think it's a trap." Johan mused.

"And I think we're in a forest," quipped his battle-brother playfully, "any other observations you would care to get off your chest?"

"Funny." Johan scoffed. "If we enter that ring together, he'll seal some ward around us, or unleash a deadly assault from above."

"Anything is likely, so long as it kills us both." Alec agreed. "But he's set this trap to contend with us both at once, he doesn't truly want to fight either of us."

Johan mused on this. In human form, the man was strong and invulnerable to all but silver, but unlike his wolf shape, he was not overcome by a berserker's bloodlust and the strength of ten men. Killing him now would be much more feasible, and the wolf knew that, so he hoped to rid himself of them in one fell swoop.

"I'll stand in the ring." offered the blind hunter.

"What?!" Alec demanded.

"Hush," Johan encouraged, "the only thing louder than his footsteps is your voice."

Alec was silent.

"I'll stand in the ring," Johan went on, "if he comes at me, I can hear him and fight on open ground, or hear a trap before it descends. You would be better off circling close by to see where he's hidden."

"You're sure you can hear him?" Alec asked, uncertainty weighing heavy on his words. "What if you hear me and attack me by mistake?!"

They both laughed at that prospect.

"I can tell you apart, brother." Johan urged. "You know my ears are sharp as my blade."

Alec nodded and nudged him toward the ring. Yet, before he stepped within, Johan turned and, in an uncharacteristic show of emotion, embraced his brother.

"Stay safe, brother," he said loudly, then quietly he added, "I've heard him trying to be quiet just beyond the tree-line to the north."

"I will be safe!" Alec answered loudly, embracing his brother and not verbally acknowledging the hint.

Johan took his place in the square of branches, facing westward, ready at a moment to turn and strike down an attacker, or to dive clear of a falling rock, burst of flame, or any other such trickery. Meanwhile, Alec moved off to the east, prowling about loudly and beating up the bush, making a good show of trying to scare the wolf-man from his concealment.

Gradually, he moved northwestward, hoping to keep up his oblivious charade as he neared the northern edge of the clearing, staying well within the trees, so he might get behind the wolf-man and end this ordeal with a quick, covert plunging of the silver dagger. He was at the north edge of the clearing now, moving westward along its perimeter, looking around, eyes desperately trying to pick out the shape of a human hiding amongst the ever darkening forest. There were footprints, large ones, made by the boots of their prey. The impressions were clear in the bed of grass and fallen leaves. Footprints extending from the clearing, and continuing northward.

Alec wheeled sharply to the right, sword raised at a defensive angle, and there was his foe. The man was tall, with a mane of jet-black hair and a wildly overgrown beard. He held a knife in his hand, but the knife was not angled toward Alec.

"Strike me and he dies." the wolf man mouthed.

Alec looked closer and, with horror, realized that the trap was a massive, dead tree, cut horizontally through its base but propped upright and held steady by a long wire twisted about it and secured to another tree. It was a shaky trap, it could fall at a moment's notice, but if the wolf-man cut the wire, it would fall straight toward Johan. Alec gulped involuntarily. Trees fell hard, but made considerable noise, surely Johan would hear it and evade it. He had to trust his sword-brother as Johan trusted him.

Without a warning, a battle-cry, or a smart retort, he plunged at the wolf-man, who made good his threat to slice the wire, perhaps hoping the threat to Johan would slow Alec down. "I must trust my brother!" Alec mentally screamed at himself as he leapt on his foe smashed the pommel of his sword into the side of the wolf-man's head. The were-beast faltered and sank to

his knees, his hands coming up to defend himself, his long, uncleaned nails raking at Alec's armor.

It was a pure whim of ill-luck that allowed one of those clawing nails to find a perfect spot in Alec's armor where leather and padding did not cover flesh. The injured wolf-man's desperate effort yielded a trickle of blood from a tiny wound on Alec's hip. But even as he finished off the werewolf with a heart-piercing stab of the silver dagger, Alec knew his fate was sealed. He'd been clawed by a werewolf, the curse was imparted unto him. He would, by this night's moon, become one of the very beasts he and his brother so ruthlessly hunted.

Alec knew he lacked the will to take his own life. He trusted Johan dearly, but his brother would not kill him, even in this case. He'd be kind, make an excuse, defend Alec even as the change took its toll and Alec became a blood-mad demon. Was there no way out? Was he doomed to transform and slay his brother who surely would not strike him down even in his own defense?

"No." Alec firmly asserted. "I won't bring that doom upon him. I am sorry brother, I have failed you, and now I must betray your trust so my life may end."

Johan heard the falling tree long before it hit and was well clear of the square. The ground shook, dirt flew, and the birds were momentarily silent. He heard the scuffle in the woods, but could not easily track his brother down without further noises, of which he heard none. Surely Alec had slain the beast, and was now returning to his brother.

Then Johan heard the footsteps. Heavy, boot-clad feet, crunching through leaves and fallen branches, resonating clearly in his ears. Not the sound of Alec's shoes. Johan deliberately turned his back on the noise, playing the fool. He waited as long as he dared before springing around with his dagger and, with the aid of the sounds of footsteps and breathing, plunged the blade into where the heart should be. There was a sharp cry, an intake of breath, and then silence.

Johan knew exactly what had happened. His brother had not fallen. He had won, but become injured and wanted to spare Johan the mental trauma of slaying his lifelong friend. It wasn't hard to decipher, not when he could smell Alec's familiar scent, or hear the creaking of the leather armor.

"You should have trusted me with this, brother." he said quietly, but not with anger as he knelt beside his fallen brother. "I'd have done right by you. A commendable effort though, but what really gave you away, even in those pilfered boots, was your damnably light footsteps."

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This story came about as a result of an amusing prompt. In exchange for transportation, a friend of mine suggested I repay her with a story. Her only prompt was, "It must involve shoes." Thus I conceived this tale. It was not what she'd expected, but it seemed to satisfy her expectations.