

# **The Mark of a Coward**

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*My side character, and how he bacame a part of the Army of Litus. Beware, it's pretty long.*

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**Chapter 1 - The Mark of a Coward**

**2**

# 1 - The Mark of a Coward

Kelchan and Tekla made a very good team. The two ferrets made their living as thieves, and very accomplished thieves, too, stealing food and treasures all across Mossflower.

The pair of them were deep in the woods in hiding, counting the day's worth of treasures, eating the fresh food they had stolen. Kelchan was reclining against a tree with his eyes closed, enjoying some berries. Tekla was reclining against a tree opposite him, inspecting a silver goblet she had just swiped.

"Gahh...", she said, frustrated. Tossing the goblet behind her.

"Was th' matter?" Kelchan responded lazily, tossing the last of the berries into his mouth.

"This is," she said, picking the goblet back up and holding it in front of her face so Kelchan could see. Tekla was a ferret with white fur and wore a purple vest, a green beaded necklace, and a headband. She was beautiful from head to tail, with a kind yet clever face, her green eyes standing out the most, making her even more charming.

Kelchan looked and raised a paw in the air. Tekla tossed the goblet to him, and the black-footed ferret caught it. He wore a red jacket and a gold ring was pierced into his right ear. He had icy blue eyes and the black fur around his eyes looked like he were wearing a mask. He inspected the goblet closely and noticed a blemish in the silver. Curiously, he flicked the goblet with his index claw, and instead of a clinking sound, he heard a thumping noise, as if the goblet were made up of--

--Wood," Tekla said, noticing Kelchan's interest.

"And apparently dunked in molten silver. Not crafted of it."

"That would explain why it's so thick for a would-be silver goblet, eh?"

Kelchan nodded. "What do you think? You think the owner was ripped off or expected us?"

The two looked at each other for a moment before saying in unison, "Ripped off."

Kelchan reclined again, somewhat disappointed. Perhaps they could make a profit off of it by selling it somewhere.

"Kelch?"

"Hm?"

Tekla crawled over next to him and reclined next to his left side, leaning on his shoulder. "Don't worry about that cheap cup." She grasped his arm tenderly and snuggled next to him. Kelchan laid his head

next to hers as Tekla slowly and secretly slipped her paw into his jacket pocket.

"Looking for this?" said Kelchan, startling her. In his right paw, he held up a purple charm bracelet. Her bracelet. "Took you long long enough to notice I had it."

"That was only five hours this time," she said innocently, smiling. "Trust me, I'm getting better."

"But you still haven't taken it back from me yet. All of the other times, I gave it back."

"Oh, fine then," she said, impatiently, reaching for the bracelet. But Kelchan moved his paw further from her, waving the bracelet, as if teasing her. Tekla stretched over him, reaching for it. Without warning, Kelchan let his arm fall, catching her off guard, and before she knew it, he had her in an embrace. "Wh-- You little sneak!" she said angrily, though still smiling, and kissed him.

Not only were they partners, they were also in love with each other. Kelchan already had asked if Tekla would be his mate, and her response was, "Kelchan, I'm shocked.... You couldn't have asked me when we were in the middle of a mission? During a getaway? Some kind of setting where that question would make you seem more dashing? You couldn't have asked me then? Ugh, the nerve of you!" She had started to walk away before she stopped, looked over her shoulder and added, "Oh, by the way, the answer is yes." He loved when Tekla made light of any situation. Her quick wit also came in handy during negotiations.

He started to drift off to sleep with her still in his embrace when he was suddenly interrupted.

"All right, you two. Up on yer footpaws!"

Both of them looked to see a rat to their right, pointing a spear in their direction.

"Do you mind?" Tekla replied indignantly. "We're having a quiet moment, here!"

"Yeah, well that's good," answered a weasel to their left, brandishing a rapier. "You keep quiet, and we don't have to kill you."

The two ferrets looked at each other and released each other. "Hey, if this is about the goblet, you can have it back for all we care," said Kelchan.

"This ain't about no goblet," replied the rat. "And I thought we told you to keep quiet!"

Kelchan sprang up, grabbing his staff beside him. "Then I guess you'll have to kill us."

The two vermin seemed ready to strike when someone called, "That won't be necessary!" The vermin stopped in their tracks.

A large, grey fox walked around in front of them. He was tall and had a splash of white fur between his eyes and donned a brown cloak. From behind the cloak, Kelchan noticed a sword.

"Can we help you?" asked Tekla, standing up and eyeing him.

The fox looked at her slyly and answered, "Yes. I believe you can help me. The both of you."

"Sorry," said Kelchan; he could tell where this was going. "We don't offer services. We work by ourselves, for ourselves."

"Then I'll explain myself. I am Kaze, a captain of the army of Lithus. We plan to take over this land and I have been assigned to find and recruit any and all experienced beasts who can be of use to our army."

"Take over this land? Wow, that sounds familiar..." Tekla said sarcastically. "Haven't all of the other vermin armies said the same thing and wound up with the same fate?"

"That may be true," Kaze answered, snapping his fingers, and five more vermin emerged from the woods around them, "but we have an edge that others wish they had."

"Actual brains?" Tekla said. Kelchan managed to keep a straight face, but he realized that he and Tekla were surrounded.

Kaze looked at Tekla as his right eye twitched. "A master strategist. One who knows how the enemy thinks, how they act. And he only picks the best to aid him. It's rumored that he has enlisted the aid of a wolf."

That got the two ferrets' attention. A wolf? Wolves were never known to appear around Mossflower and its surrounding areas. Rumored to have short, violent tempers, they had heard that a single wolf could wipe out a battalion. To actually face one head-on would be suicide.

Kaze continued. "I have come to you because I have observed your actions across this part of the country--," ("--Great, a stalker," Tekla muttered) "and saw what accomplished thieves you are. You could be useful to us as spies and thieves in our army."

"Spies, eh?" Kelchan cut off Tekla from speaking her mind again, fearing she may cross the line at any moment. "And what exactly do your sipes do? What's in it for us?"

"You will get ten percent of everything you steal that may be of value to us--"

"Sixty," Kelchan interrupted. "We won't give up so much if we do the dirty work."

Kaze frowned. "The percentage will be negotiated some other time, ferret. As for what you do, it's quite simple: Infiltrate an enemy encampment, gather information, and kill anybeast who may catch on to you."

The two ferrets looked at each other, disappointedly. Of all the things they could do as thieves, killing was out of the question. They needn't take a life for the sake of a small treasure. If somebeast had caught them in the act, and they had no other options, they would just abandon the stolen object and make a quick getaway. They leaned close to each other and whispered a conversation for a moment. When they finished, Tekla nodded to Kelchan and turned to the group.

"Ya know what?" Tekla said, calmly walking up to the fox, "It looks like we will accept your proposal. On

one condition--" She took another step and leaned close to Kaze so she was right in his face. "You go chop off your head and bury it in the mud where it belongs, and feed the rest of your body to maggots who particularly enjoy the taste of rotten, filthy foxes--" She smiled pleasantly. "Then you've got a deal."

Kelchan felt proud of her, standing up to Kaze, putting him down in front of his faction. But then he suddenly realized that that may have been a big mistake, as Kaze had seven vermin at his disposal, and could easily outnumber them. Also, he noticed, Tekla was getting cocky, focusing on only the fox in front of her, and not the stoat to her left side, who handled a spear.

Kaze glared at the ferretmaid, his anger clearly rising, but when he spoke, it was calm and relaxed, but showed a hint of triumph. "Fine, then. Don't join our cause. But you will clearly see how I treat those who downsize me." With that, he snapped his fingers.

"Tekla!! Move--!!!"

Too late. The stoat, with a flash, had already used the spearshaft to strike Tekla behind the knees, causing her to lose her balance. Kelchan immediately lunged forward, but didn't get far, as four vermin tackled the black-footed ferret and wrestled him to the ground.

Tekla cursed to herself as the stoat pounced on her. Why did she pick the worst time to smart off to someone? To the stoat's surprise, Tekla, with her amazing flexibility, grabbed him and flung him to the ground next to her. The other two vermin came to the stoat's aid, rushing her. Kelchan managed to grab hold of his knife and cut a rat's leg. The rat stumbled into the stoat next to him, giving Kelchan free room to turn over quickly and kick the weasel trying to hold him down.

Tekla gracefully swepted the rushing vermin to the floor and rolled backwards to her footpaws, ready to jump in to help her mate. She was denied the chance to leap into the fray by a leather whip which looped around her neck. She was immediately pulled backwards and ran into Kaze, who pointed his sword at her.

Kelchan flipped forwards to his footpaws and looked to see his mate held hostage by the fox and was momentarily distracted, which was all the vermin needed to tackle him again, this time making sure his paws were held behind his back.

"Since verbal negotiations are now pointless," Kaze said, "I will give you one last chance to join our cause. Refuse, and you both die, starting with you," he went on, looking at his hostage.

Tekla knew exactly what he meant, and now was not the time for smart remarks. She looked at the pinned Kelchan mellowly and mouthed out the words, "I love you". She was answered by Kelchan whispering, "I love you, too." She looked at him, as if were to be the last time she ever would do so, and found herself on the verge of tears. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and shouted, "We'll never join you or your cause, you--!! (she used some very colorful language directed at the fox.) This land has been our home since we were born and it won't be taken by the likes of you or a mangy wolf with out a bloody fight!!!"

Kaze hesitated for a moment, taken by surprise at the ferretmaid's stubbornness. He snapped out of it, and said with ferocity, "Then off to the Dark Forest with you, ferret!!!"

To Kelchan, it happened slowly, as if time had refused to run at its normal pace. He saw Tekla's eyes widen as Kaze's sword went through her beautiful white fur and through her body. He heard her gasp in pain, which was ultimately her last breath. He saw her as she looked at him, helplessly, as if begging him to do something. He saw her fall to her knees as the evil fox withdrew his sword from her with her blood stained to it and removed the whip from around her neck. And then... Her body fell face first to the ground, robbed of its life. Robbed of its purpose.

And all Kelchan could do was stare. Stare at the carcass of what was once a beautiful and clever ferretmaid. Stare at what remained of his partner, his motivation. His lover.

Kaze ordered the vermin on top of Kelchan to let him stand. Rather than argue, the vermin agreed and got off of Kelchan, who, slowly and shaking and still in shock, stood upright.

The fox walked to him, treating the body of Tekla as if it were never there, and grinned, noticing the ferret's dagger. He observed the way Kelchan looked between Tekla and himself with disbelief.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he said, still grinning. "Go ahead. Attack me with your dagger, thief."

Kelchan was shaking. He would have wanted nothing better than to kill the fox, to get his revenge right then and there. He reached for his dagger, which he only used during dire situations and slowly drew it. But... something had suddenly risen inside of him. All of his life he had taken risks and didn't fear the consequences, even death, but... It seemed after all that time ignoring it, Fear had finally caught up with him. He hesitated, drawing ragged breaths, as he stared at Kaze.

"Well?" Kaze said impatiently. "Are you going to join me in our conquest, or are you going to attack me, and suffer the same fate as her?"

Kelchan's paw began to tremble. He was outnumbered eight to one. He was afraid of being killed. He didn't want to die. But he was so close to avenging his lover's death... But the fear...

His paw began to relax, and slowly the dagger slipped from his paw and landed on the ground. He slowly lowered his head. Fear had finally overwhelmed him.

Kaze looked at the ferret and chuckled. "I'll take that as an 'I surrender'. Am I right? Ha. I'm not really surprised that you would fear for your own life. Though this was easier than I expected." He nodded to the surrounding vermin and just like before, Kelchan was hit in the back of the knees and was forced to the ground by the vermin, who started beating him into near submission.

He heard Kaze tell a rat to lift his head and a paw grabbed his headfur and forced his face a few inches off the ground. He saw Kaze holding a whip in his paws, grinning at the helpless figure.

"Consider this to be a sign of your allegiance to us," Kaze said, letting the whip uncoil and fall to the floor.

Panic suddenly took Kelchan as he tried to squirm free from the vermin pinning him, but it was clearly hopeless to shake off five vermin off of him. He saw Kaze raise the whip and he closed his eyes.

The fox thrust down on the whip hard. There was a loud \*CRACK\* followed by a shout of pain from Kelchan as the ferret felt the stinging impact across his face, from his forehead down past his left eye down to his left cheekbone. He writhed on the ground, groaning and biting on blades of grass, ripping them from the ground, thrashing his head like a madbeast, trying to rid himself of the terrible pain.

Kaze watched the scene for a few moments, taking in the black-footed ferret's suffering. When the groaning had died down a bit, a rat took some rope from his sack and bound Kelchan's paws behind his back. The vermin got off of him as he started panting, gasping for air because of a weasel's knee was against his side to hold him still. They stood him up for Kaze to talk to him, though it was difficult to keep him standing because he was recovering from the lack of air and the previous beating.

"You are now part of the army of Lithus," Kaze said coldly, and spat on him. From now on you will follow every order that I or my superiors give you, or you will be tortured." He observed more of Kelchan's wincing from the pain and he ran his paw along the bleeding gash across his face. He looked at the blood on his paw, then at Kelchan. "Let's move out," he ordered his troops, and they started back to their camp.

As they passed by Tekla's lifeless body, Kelchan stared at it once more in disbelief. He had the chance to save her, and to avenge her death, but he had to give into the fear... He had failed her... Another wave of pain shot across the new scar on his face. He closed his eyes, and a tear fell from them.

Tekla would undoubtedly be claimed by the insects now. That was her fate...

And that scar was all he had to show for his cowardice.