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“You didn’t need to come, you know.” Para sent Henry a glance. The Sylvan seemed as content as could be while sitting on the wagon seat whittling away at a piece of myrtle wood for his ocarina. “What with a bunch of lycanthropes running around, I wouldn’t blame you one bit for hiding under the nearest table with your fingers in your ears.”

Of course, Henry laughed and shook his head, his small form rocking with the motion of the wagon.

“I think you’re coming along with me so that you don’t have to tell me all your secrets. You’re a miser with those tidbits of knowledge, you little shrub.” Henry scowled but didn’t cease his work on the ocarina. “Can you tell me anything more about these lycans? Where are they coming from? You said they were in the town and the woods. Is that where they’re coming from? The woods?”

“No one knows,” Henry said with an accompanying shrug. “Some say that the things started coming soon after an arcanist arrived in town.”

“Ah-hah! I knew it!”

“He isn’t the only arcanist in the world, you know.”

“Of course I know that! But who else do we know that escaped and made off with a sword that we think creates these things?”

The Sylvan only shrugged. Then he cast Para a sidelong glance. “You know, it’s not your fault that he got away.”

“Bah.” She didn’t know any such thing, but she didn’t mind that he said the fact.

“I think he had help getting out, and how could you know about that?”

“You know me, Henry. I try and keep everything in mind when I plan things.”

“You’re funny.”

“Gads. Not this again. Go take a nap or something.”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Fine. Then don’t accuse me of being funny.”

“But you are.”

“Gah!” Henry laughed. “I swear, if you say that again I’m going to dump you off right now and you can fend for yourself against lycanthropes, sadistic arcanists, or dark devils that suck the blood from children.” The Sylvan only grinned at her. “You could at least look frightened.” Para grumbled under her breath and coaxed the gelding into a faster walk.

“Nefa’s ass....”

It was late morning on the second day of their journey when Para drew the cart up at the foreboding entrance of an old growth forest. The shadows lengthened until the road disappeared within. She stood and fisted her hands on her hips. “The gods have had a sour disposition against me since I took this blasted job. Henry, please tell me there is a way to Winset that doesn’t involve a creepy wood.”

The Sylvan pondered the question for a minute or two, his brow drawing together in an admirable showing of concentration. It raised Para’s hopes that the little shrub may actually save her the heartache of—

“There’s the path through the bog of Eternal Stench. It can’t smell all the time, right?”

He blinked up at her, his expression the picture of innocence.

“I should chuck you off right here.” Henry laughed so hard that he nearly tumbled from the wagon. “Aye. Laugh while you can. Your day is coming, shrub.”

The laughter quieted and a frown replaced his bright smile. “Don’t call me that. I’m not a shrub! I’m a Sylvan!”

“And I’m a crank and not a whit funny, so take your own advice.”

For the first time since meeting him, Henry actually appeared annoyed. He turned back to his sandpaper and the ocarina. “This is the fastest way.”

“But it’s soon to be mid-day, and I can bet you this purse of coin we won’t make it to Winset before nightfall. Meaning we will have the cursed fortune of having to camp in that blasted wood. At the moment, I think I would rather risk the burning of my nostrils to the stench of a bog than what could be in there.”

“It’s just a wood.”

“Oh yes. It’s ‘just a wood’ all right, with spooks and creeps and all sorts of wicked horrible things that I am so happy to be able to fight with!” Para sent the Sylvan a murderous glare and plopped back onto the wagon seat. “Bah. I’m putting in for hazard pay after this is all said and done.” She urged the gelding forward. It balked, snorted, and then treaded dutifully forward. “I don’t blame you one bit for your hesitation, boy. Not one bit.”

“Tell me something, Henry. How do you come to know so much about so many things? Sylvans generally keep to their woods and glens, don’t they? Why are you out and about?”

“I know all their stories and songs. They don’t have anything left to sing about, at least not that anyone cares for.”

“You and that flute of yours.” Para shook her head. “Bored of their songs are you? What a shame. Your life must have ended so many times before you ventured forth.”

He tilted his chin in the air. “You don’t need to be snide. You asked and I told you.”

“No offense, Henry.” She scratched at her scalp to try and keep back the laughter. “How many new songs have you put together on your own?”

“Three-hundred and sixty-two.”

“What?”

“Three-hun—”

“I heard you! For the love of coin and gem. How could you have put together that many songs since leaving?”

“Psh. I left before you were born.” Henry sanded a last portion of the ocarina and then tried it out, trilling several runs before settling into a spooky melody that fit a bit too well with the trees that loomed over them.

“Gads, Henry, couldn’t you pick a melody a bit more light?”

He laughed, but when he opened his mouth to speak he frowned and turned away. The next tune he chose sounded more cheerful. Unfortunately, Para still couldn’t relax and found herself holding the reins in a white-knuckled grip. It was going to be a long trip.

“Why are you afraid of the woods?”

Para looked at the Sylvan with a start. “What?”

“Why are you afraid of woods? You didn’t want to follow Alicia Pomeroy’s ghost into the woods either.”

“I am not afraid. How ridiculous would it be for a ranger to fear a glen or some such? Bah!” She urged the gelding to a faster trot, and he obliged with a reluctant quickening of his step.

“Then why—”

“Woods and ghost stories seem to go hand-in-hand more often than we would like. There is much more to track in a wood than in a clearing. This beast hiding in that burrow, or that beast hunkering in this hollow log.... It’s chaos that can change at a moment’s hesitation; cause everything else to cascade every which way but the one you want. I am leery, but not afraid.”

Henry regarded Para long enough to set her squirming in her seat. Then he faced forward and began another merry tune quite different than the first. The melody did nothing to settle the hairs on the back of her neck though. Nor the impression that the trees continued to press in on the small horse and cart the further they traveled. She continued to shake it off, but it was like shaking off a cobweb—it didn’t happen with any sort of ease.

Para and Henry didn’t stop for lunch. Instead, they munched on trail rations and kept onward. It gave her the creeps how no animals bounded into their path. Not a single bird or beast was heard to call from the tree canopy above either. There was only the sound of the rustling leaves, the creaking branches, and the occasional loud thump of something falling in the distance. The whole place set her instincts into a tizzy and gave her a pounding headache.

The cart came to a widening in the road as she pulled some mint leaves from her pouch and tucked them into her cheek. “Let’s camp— what in Nefa’s darkness is that?”

Henry had to stand on the cart seat, on tiptoes, in order to see ahead of them. “It’s a body!” He scrambled down, easily dodging Para’s swipe at a fistful of his shirt.

“Henry!” She leapt from the cart and rushed after the Sylvan, dragging him back from the body with a grip on his arm. “Are you mad? You wouldn’t be much more than a taste, but a monster would be just fine to eat you!”

He scoffed and pulled himself free. Then he knelt and leaned in to examine the corpse. Para grimaced and kept her distance. The body didn’t smell, but it was stiff and pale. When Henry turned it, the man’s face had twisted in a horrific mask of fear... or pain.

“Can you tell what killed him?”

Henry shook his head. “But it’s dark. I could tell better in the morning.”

“And what do you mean by that?” Para asked, wary.

“By what?”

“That you can tell better in the morning. We’re going to burn or bury this body. We aren’t going to keep it handy.”

“Don’t you want to know what he died from?”

“I don’t care, truth be told. Unless it’s a monster that is set to chomp us when we turn our back, let the deed go unknown. He’ll get his burial and that is all.”

The Sylvan sat back on his heels and weighed her determination. Then he shrugged. “I don’t have a shovel.”

“I— Oh for the love of.... Fine. We’ll wrap him up in the canvas for the cart and take him to the mortician in town. Good enough?” The thought already gave her the shivers.

They wrapped up the body and loaded him in the cart, Para required to do most of the heavy lifting. Then they set up their tents far enough from the cart and the forest edge to put her mind at ease, or at least enough that she could get a bit of sleep before her watch. Henry offered to take first shift. A feeling of oppression kept sleep at bay for a long time. In fact, Para couldn’t get her mind to settle until she stepped out of the tent and slept near the fire, and the Sylvan. Much to her chagrin.

She woke to a splitting pain around her side so intense that she cried out. A stone ricocheted off her forehead. She swore, but when she attempted to push away the cause of the pain, she found her hands wrapping around a bark-like appendage. This time Para screamed. “Henry! What in heaven’s fire is this thing? Let me go, you farking—” There sounded a low, grating groan and Para’s eyes widened as she stared at a pseudo face in the bark of the tree that had her by the mid-section. “H-Henry? This tree has a face!”

“It’s a treant!”

Barely had the words been spoken when a rush of hot air singed her eyebrows and made her duck. The treant groaned again, but this time its hold on her loosened enough for her to push herself free. She dropped to the ground and rolled away, leaping to her feet at a run to the cart. Henry had managed to harness the gelding, so once the two were aboard they set off at a gallop, their supplies and the body making a cacophony of jangles and crashes in the cart bed.

“Tell me how the bog could be worse than that, Henry. I’m really curious to know.”

Henry, however, held onto the cart for dear life, his lips pressed together in a thin line and preventing even one sound.

“Next time – I have an idea – next time let’s burn the forest down and then make our way through.” Any more speech was cut off as Para navigated her way through dodging branches and groaning treants to the faint hint of stairs about fifty yards in front of them. She should have known that Henry’s simple statement of ‘They won’t let you in’ pertained to more than just the people of the village. That was her lot in life, to find the most bizarre and dangerous adventure and then do her best to live through it.

What she wouldn’t have given for a nice juicy fireball!

They broke through the forest, the gelding’s pace as frantic as before and his ears laying flat against his head. When Para looked back, the treants closed the opening to the forest and created a veritable wall of greenery and bark. “Isn’t that just the miracle we needed? No way out of this demon and lycan infested place.” She shook a fist toward the heavens. “Did I do something to someone up there to rate this kind of torture?” Henry tugged at her sleeve. “What?”

He pointed ahead of them toward the town and the ten foot wall of tree trunks and mud plaster. In front of the wide gates there stood a tall man in tightly braided leather armor, arms crossed, expression hard and foreboding, and a sword hilt sticking up above his head from a sheath upon his back. Para drew the gelding and the cart to a stop in front of the man, her jaw slack at the sight of Munwar Meek.