

<== Nika

"So, anyway, we better take the lower route, a lot of Ziguranth patrol the path past the old forest, but they don't come near the way to Elvala. I mean, imagine if they tried to kill someone outside of Elvala, they'd have another three mages on their ass within five seconds." Wren laughed, speaking back to a very confused young human, who nodded unsurely.

"Right. Um. Elvala is... the elven city?"

"The shaloren city!" Wren said brightly.

"Okay, and the shaloren are the elves who like magic?"

"Mhm!"

"And... they started the spellblaze. Right?"

Wren span in place, delighted - and kept walking, backwards.

"Yes! You're remembering things?"

"Um. I suppose so, yes?" she said, weakly.

"Have you remembered how you break the rules yet?" asked Wren hopefully.

Lazara shook her head.

"No. Sorry."

Wren pouted, spinning back around.

"Fine, fine, be that way. As long as you tell me when you work it out. So anyway, did I tell you about the time I met the Paragon?"

"Um. Who?"

"The Paragon of Zigur, Azira, queen of slimes! Only like one of the most famous people on Eyal."

"Oh. No...?"

"Aw, you're in for a real treat. See, she attacked me when I was coming down from Shatur."

"...the thaloren town?!"

"Yes!" Wren said, delighted. "And she came at me from the mountains, throwing slime at me!"

"Why were you in Shatur?"

"And... huh?" Wren blinked, not expecting to be interrupted.

"What were you doing in Shatur?" the girl repeated. "They don't much like mages there..."

"Oh. That's not important! The important part is how I caught the slime on one staff, throwing lightning with the other, before leaping at her while she was distracted. She caught my first blow on her sword, but-" Wren was halfway through miming her attack when she was interrupted again.

"Don't high wilders use mindstars?"

"Why should I know? Anyway, she-"

"I'm pretty sure they do..." the green-haired girl frowned.

"Who calls them high wilders anyway?" Wren huffed, stopping to look at her.

"...doesn't everyone?" Lazara blinked.

"No, only ziguranth call them that, and only to their faces." the mage paused. "You are a mage, right?" she asked, suspicious suddenly.

The girl looked at the staff she held.

"I think so?" she said, uncertainly.

"Then blow something up." said Wren, distrustfully.

"Um."

"Go on!"

Lazara frowned, and raised the staff, pointing it at a nearby rock. It glowed gently, then shone - and a bolt of venomous acid struck the stone.

"...acid? Really? You're proving you're a mage with acid?" Wren said, unimpressed as the unfortunate rock melted to a viscous goo.

"Shouldn't I?"

"Acid is a wilder thing." Wren scowled. "...or a cultist thing. And you are so not the type for a cultist."

"...but I'm using a staff." she pointed out, very reasonably.

Wren pouted.

"I know, and it *doesn't make sense!*"

"I know, right?" comes a casual voice from the left. The voice's owner was a thaloren, all long, graceful, but muscular limbs, and a (relatively) tanned face framed with messy black hair.

Emily had at least removed the twig from her hair, though.

"Wren, isn't it?" she said, stifling a yawn as she ambled closer. While her sling was still hidden upon her belt, Wren was fairly sure it could come out faster than she could attack.

The mage sidled into a position between the ziguranth and the strange young girl.

"That's me!" she said brightly. "You're the spectre, aren't you? Whatcha doin down near Elvala?"

"Visiting a cousin." she shrugged. "She gave me a good tip a week or so back, so we went out for lunch. And don't worry, I'm not gonna kill either of you."

"I've heard that before." said Wren.

"And you're not dead." the thaloren said, relaxed, with a smile. "You're not in Zigur. You haven't done anything stupidly wrong. I mean, you're about as wanted as you can be without actually being on the hit-list, what with killing everyone who comes after you, but-"

"But they came after me first!" Wren said, grinning, gripping her shortstaffs tighter.

"Yeah, that. Can't fault you for enjoying defending yourself. Well. We can, but not enough to kill you." Emily said to the rhaloren casually. "As for you... you're Bell. Rose's sister."

The girl breathed in suddenly.

"I have a sister?"

"Back in Zigur." she said, unruffled. "You snuck into the forest to meet each other all the time. It's cute. I'm getting the idea something weird's going on if you don't remember her."

"Um. Maybe. I woke up smashed into a rock, and... I didn't remember my name until you said it." she said slowly.

“Oh? Did Wren give you one? I expect it was insulting.”

“No, I said my name was Lazara... I’m not sure why.”

“It probably means something.” said the thaloren cheerfully. “You’ll find it out eventually.”

“You’re being very helpful.” said Wren, with naked hostility.

“No, I’m being completely unhelpful, but in a nice way.” said Emily. “If I were being helpful, I’d point out the other Ziguranth hiding behind the rock, but as she’s not here for you two I didn’t see the point.”

Wren turned on the spot, panicking.

A shadow blinked from one spot to another. A small girl frowned, and stopped hiding behind her rock.

“I was enjoying that.” she said, bitterly. This time Wren couldn’t hold back, and she swore, jumping backwards from the approaching psion.

“Oh, get over yourself.” Calliope spat. “I’m not here for you. Sadly.”

“Yeah, well you can’t have Lazara either. Or Bell. Whatever. You can’t have her cause she hasn’t done anything.” the rhaloren said, belligerent. Her hands shook, knuckles white where they gripped her weapons.

“Fairly sure she wants me to come back.” Emily said, walking over.

“Mhm.” the young Ziguranth nodded. “An’ we want you to tell us where Azira is.”

“Why do you think I know?” she grinned.

“You know where everyone is.”

“Fair. I’m still not going to tell you.” she said cheerfully.

Calliope gave a drawn out sigh.

“I know. But I gotta keep asking. She’s important.”

“You’ll find her when she wants to be found.” she said again, beginning to walk past the two mages.

“Ugh. I dunno why Miss Tori’ listens to you.” Calliope scowled yet again, and gave Wren a venomous glare. “And you! One day you’ll go too far.”

Wren blinked, and shrugged.

“Probably, yeah.”

“And then I’ll kill you.”

“It’s a date.” the rhaloren grinned. Calliope threw up her hands in frustration, and turned to leave. Emily grinned, and turned to the confused girl.

“You better hurry home. If anyone can work out what’s going on, it’s Linaniil. I’ll send Rose your way, if I see her.”

“Oh. Thank you?” the girl - Bell, apparently - really didn’t know what to think anymore.

“It’s nothing. Family matters.” the elf smiled. “Anyway. The Protector wants to see me, so I better leave before she has me dragged there.”

==> Nora