

## The Shadowlight Trilogy- Book 1

# Assassin in the Forest

### Prologue

*18 years ago*

Light flickered from the ever-burning torch above Raquele Pastrana. Pain coursed through her body for what felt like the millionth time. She breathed deep, trying to work through the pain. But she was tired, and she saw no end in sight. The nurses said she was still only dilated to a five. She turned onto her side in the hospital bed, facing the smooth stone of the cave walls. She closed her eyes, trying to relax despite her body trying to push a human body through a much too narrow opening.

*Raquele.*

She heard a familiar voice in her head. A voice that stirred up a conflicted blend of rage and love. She shut her eyes tight, ignoring the voice.

*Raquele, can you hear me? We need to talk.*

“I told you I don’t want to talk to you ever again,” she responded aloud.

*I know, but I still don’t understand why! I said I can’t be there but that doesn’t mean we can’t talk.*

“I’m not explaining myself again, and talking to you only makes it hurt more,” she groaned as another wave of pain stiffened every muscle in her body at once. “And the last thing I need right now is more pain!”

*I’m sorry Raquele, but this can’t wait. It’s about the boy.*

“Oh now you’re concerned about him?”

*Of course I am, he's my son. But that makes him special. He will be different from others, even other shaga.*

"I know that, but he still doesn't need you."

*This isn't about me!*

Raquele smiled. She'd finally gotten a rise out of him. Ether could be frustratingly difficult to antagonize.

*A prophecy showed up on the shrine wall today. I... I think it might refer to our son.*

Raquele tried to sit up, but had to prop herself up in the bed on her arms. "What makes you think that?"

*The wording refers to the son of an angel. There aren't many of those, and some of the rest of the wording points towards him as well. Raquele, this will make him a target. We need to protect him...*

"We won't be doing anything. I will protect him. You will stay away."

*He will be safer if I help-*

"You mean like I was safer with you around?" Raquele was nearly shouting now. "He will grow up without you, and without magic, and he will be much safer for it."

*I will be there when he needs me.*

"He needs you now!" Raquele shouted, pounding her fist on the blankets and blinking away tears.

"Raquele?" A voice sounded from the hallway, and the door pushed open. "Are you okay?"

Raquele looked over to see a handsome blond man in a wheelchair steer himself towards her bedside. She laid back on the bed, breathing hard.

"Well no, Alfred, I'm not."

Ether mercifully left her in peace.

Alfred chuckled. "Yes, I suppose you wouldn't be. I heard you shouting, do you need a nurse?"

Raquele shook her head. "They've been checking on me periodically. They should be back

soon.” Just then another wave of pain hit. Alfred’s eyes widened as her face contorted in pain. Raquele waved her hand towards him, and he held out his hesitantly. She grabbed his hand in a death grip for another few seconds until the pain passed.

She let go and he shook his hand out.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

Alfred shook his head, “it’s okay.” He glanced towards the door, but didn’t leave.

“If you have somewhere to be, don’t let me keep you.”

He shook his head again. “Actually I don’t think I do have anywhere to be.”

“What are you doing in the hospital?” Raquele asked, trying to occupy her mind with something else.

He shrugged. “I just went to see the Naga wizards about my injury.” He rubbed his hands up and down his legs. He had lost all feeling in them a few days ago after being struck in the back during the last battle.

“Oh good!” said Raquele, smiling. “Were they able to help you?”

Alfred looked down. “No, I... they said the injury was too complex for their magic to reach.”

Raquele looked at her fellow soldier with pity. “I’m sorry Alfred. I thought... I thought the Naga could fix just about anything.”

“Apparently not.” Silence fell for a moment, then Alfred looked up again. “But that’s alright, I don’t mind the wheelchair. Besides, it means I get an early retirement.”

Raquele held out her hand to him again off the side of the bed. He took it and smiled at her.

He stayed with her the rest of the night. Contractions started an hour later, and after another few painful hours, out came her baby boy. Bloody, swollen, and crying, but healthy.

As Raquele held her little boy in her arms, the nurse asked if she had a name picked out yet.

“His name is Coryther,” she responded. She looked over at Alfred who still sat in his chair nearby, one hand swollen and red. He smiled at her. “But I will call him Cory.”

## Chapter 1

### Coryther Thomas

Cory walked briskly down the forest trail, hands on his backpack straps. He breathed deeply in the clean, humid air. The woods always seemed to invigorate him, make him stronger. Around him and his two friends, Annie and Rail, the trees stood vigilant, reaching leafy fingers towards the sky. Their leaves caught the light rain and deposited droplets into the stream next to the trail. The light blue of Cory's eyes reflected the light of the stream, shifting and flowing with speckles of light, despite the gray skies above.

"See anything yet Annie?" Cory asked.

"Not yet," she responded. Her large, dark green eyes focused on the stream, an umbrella held in one hand. Despite the umbrella, her reddish-brown hair was flecked with moisture. Her full name was Bethany, but heaven help anyone who called her that. To Cory and Rail, she had always been Annie.

Rail shuffled through the mud, shoulders hunched, eyes on the water-proof smartphone in his hand.

"I still don't see why we had to come out in the rain. We could have done this another day," he complained again.

"It's always rainy, Rail," Cory responded. "If you stay inside because of rain you'll never get out at all. Besides, my project is due this week."

"That's why I always stay inside," Rail muttered. Rail hadn't brought an umbrella, so his dark hair was soaked, strands of it sticking to his forehead. He was only a little shorter than Cory, still several inches taller than Annie. He wasn't always this grumpy, this just happened to be a particularly gloomy day, like most Mondays. Or any weekday, really, they were all the same. Saturdays were alright, sometimes.

“I think I see one!” whispered Annie excitedly, throwing her arm out to stop Rail. She nearly knocked the phone from his hand, and Rail glared at her.

Cory stopped, stooping down to look towards where Annie was now pointing. On the far side of the stream sat a strange frog, sitting half-submerged in the water. On the frog’s back, its spots shifted colors with every splash of water, through various colors of the rainbow.

Cory smiled. “Annie, you’re the best!” He gave her a quick side hug and started searching through his backpack. “Rail, start filming!”

Rail switched to the camera on his phone, focusing it on the frog.

Cory’s teacher hadn’t believed him when he’d told her about the rainbow-colored frog he’d seen in the woods. But now he would have proof. Maybe he’d discovered something new, a new species or some kind of mutation. Thanks to Annie’s magik eyes, she could easily spot such a frog by the aura it gave off.

Out of his backpack, he pulled a small terrarium with a handle on top, and various sticks and mud inside. Then he stooped down, setting the terrarium on the ground and engaged his own magik powers.

*Hello there*, Cory communicated telepathically to the frog. The frog immediately turned towards him and cocked its head. Cory could sense its confusion at being spoken to, so he tried to calm it.

*I am a friend*. He had to remember to dumb down what he said so it could be understood. Frogs didn’t have as complex thoughts as people. *I have a nice home for you*. He gestured to the terrarium.

*You talk*. The frog seemed to respond in his mind.

Cory smiled. *Yes, I talk. We can talk more. I have food*. He gestured towards the terrarium, sitting open on the ground. Inside sat a couple of insects Cory had collected earlier.

*Food*, the frog thought eagerly. *Danger?* The frog scanned the environment around, searching for possible predators.

*No danger*, Cory reassured it. *Only food*.

The frog hesitantly began hopping towards the terrarium.

Annie tapped Cory's shoulder. "Cory..."

Cory ignored her, focusing on the frog as it hopped closer. "Just a sec..."

"Cory," Annie repeated, louder. "I think there's a bear."

That got his attention.

He looked up, and Annie pointed. He thought he could see movement, but Annie's magically enhanced eyes could see far better than he ever would. Cory's heartbeat quickened. His first instinct was to bolt, but Cory tried to breathe. He knew what to do, he'd read about bear attacks. Cory stood upright and said, very loudly, "Is that where the bear is? I think I can see it!"

Rail raised his camera to point towards where Cory and Annie were looking. Annie gave Cory a sharp, panicked look. "What's wrong with you? It'll hear us!"

"I know!" Cory said again, still talking much louder than he needed to. "It's better if a bear sees and knows where you are, so you don't surprise them. If we stay quiet and hide or run, then we're acting just like prey the bear would want to eat!"

"Oh," Annie nodded, also speaking loudly. "I get it! So if we talk loudly, it should go away, right?"

Rail turned his camera onto the two of them practically shouting to each other and grinned. They sounded ridiculous.

Cory ignored him. "Hopefully! Do either of you have bear spray?"

Annie glanced at Rail, and they both shook their heads.

Cory started packing the terrarium into his backpack. "I knew I should have bought some. Well, bears don't usually attack groups of people, so we should be fine—"

Suddenly they heard the crunching of branches as the figure started moving their way, very quickly.

Annie and Rail of course did the instinctual thing, though it was probably not the best

choice. They bolted, Rail skidding in the mud.

“Wait!” Cory shouted. But they were already gone. Cory tried to stand his ground, but when a massive brown-furred creature burst through the underbrush, something in his psyche snapped.

Cory dodged to the side and the bear rushed past him, barely missing him with a swipe of its paw. Leaving his backpack, Cory ran past the bear after Annie and Rail as it redirected itself on the muddy trail.

There was something odd about the way the bear looked. Something about its face and back, but Cory didn't have time for a good look. Cory sprinted down the trail. His long legs carried him quickly, but he knew he couldn't outrun a bear.

He could hear the bear closing in behind him, growling. When he thought the bear was just about to reach him, he leaped to the side of the trail, vaulting over the stream and into the wet forest.

He could hear the bear roaring behind him. His mind reeled. Why had the bear charged them? Everything he'd read suggested that bears didn't normally attack groups of people. Leave it to him to be the exception to the rule.

Cory knew climbing a tree might not protect him, but he had to try something. Noticing a tree with low branches, he leaped to grab a branch, but his hands passed right through it. He only had time for a moment of confusion before his feet found the ground. He tripped, falling flat on his face. He was dead, he knew it. He imagined the bear's claws ripping into his back, its teeth clamping down on his neck. He rolled over, hands held in front of his face.

But then he lowered his hands. It was no longer raining. The ground wasn't wet. Instead, sunlight shone on his face, illuminating dust particles in the air. He stood up slowly and turned, taking in the scene around him.

The trees were similar to the forest he was in before. But it couldn't be the same place, could it? He touched the ground. It was dry. He touched his clothes. They were still wet.

“Hello, Cory,” said a voice nearby.

Cory spun around, eyes wide. Between two trees stood—no, floated a man in a pitch-black robe. His skin was pale, his hair colorless. His eyes were a bright, captivating violet.

“Who are you?” Cory asked, backing away from the strange man.

“My name is Peter, but you need to listen to me. We don't have much time.”

Peter floated several inches off the ground. His cloak was not only pitch black, but it shifted and swirled like it was made of darkness itself. When the man moved his arms, faint shadows followed his arms, like there were spirits inside him who couldn't quite keep up with his movements.

Cory was too dumbfounded to respond properly. “What are you? Where am I?”

Peter sighed. “I'm a phantom. You're in a harmless demi-plane. I needed to speak to you, and protect you from the bugbear. But it's going to wear off soon, so you need to listen.”

Cory didn't respond. Did he say bugbear? Phantom? Oh, his parents would hate this. He knew such things existed of course, but he'd never interacted with them before. His parents had worked very hard to keep him away from most magical things.

Peter continued. “You are in more danger than you know. If the bugbear does not get you, others will come. Stay out of the woods for now, at least until you find a safe place. Tell your parents you saw me, they will know what to do. You need to find the Shadow! They can protect you, and help you learn to use your abilities. Do you understand?”

Cory was about to respond, ‘no, I have no idea what you're talking about’, but he didn't get the chance. The sun-dappled forest flickered, and a moment later he stood in the rain again.

He immediately scanned the trees for the bear, but couldn't see anything. Curious, he reached towards the tree he had tried to climb earlier. His hands stopped on the rough bark. It was as solid as ever. Had he imagined the whole thing? He'd heard that bears would sometimes leave you alone if they thought you were dead. Maybe he'd hit his head and hallucinated the whole thing.

He heard someone calling his name. Annie! He rushed towards the sound, careful not to slip on the wet ground cover.

A moment later he emerged onto the narrow trail, and continued towards Annie's voice. As he rounded the bend, he saw Annie standing on the trail, scanning the woods, presumably looking for Cory. When she saw him she called his name and ran to him, wrapping her arms around his ribs.

"We thought you were lost, or dead!"

That's when Cory noticed the bear.

It lay lifeless on the trail, its fur matted and wet. Rail crouched in the mud next to it.

"What happened?" Cory asked.

Annie walked with him over to the carcass. "Rail killed it! It was amazing, he somehow hit just the right spot," Annie explained.

Cory could see blood on the bear's neck. Part of him felt a real sadness for the creature, but he reminded himself that they had acted in self-defense. "Rail, you killed the thing with one stab from your pocket knife? That's crazy!" He held up a fist to Rail.

Rail pounded Cory's outstretched fist and held his cell phone in his hand, which was now bent and cracked.

"Thanks. But the stupid thing broke my phone!" he complained.

Cory, looking down at the bear's face, said "I think that's the least of our problems right now."

The bear's face was not that of a normal grizzly. Two enormous red eyes, compound, like those of an insect, took up most of the bear's face. Two feathery antennae stuck out from the top of its head, and an enormous battleax was strapped to its back.

"What do you mean?" Annie asked. "It's dead isn't it? What's the problem?" Her voice was on edge, she looked like she was ready to run again.

Cory looked over at her. He reached over and squeezed her wrist. "You're right, it's dead.

The danger is over.”

Annie looked over at him and smiled, taking deeper breaths. “You’re right. I’m just still on edge. It nearly got me.”

Cory could see a tear in her shirt, but she didn’t appear to be bleeding. Rail was trying to bend his phone straight again against a rock. The whole thing snapped in half. Rail groaned.

“It’s alright Rail,” Cory reassured. “You can get a new phone.”

“Not likely!” Rail retorted. “I had to pay for that myself, it’ll take months to save enough to get a new one.” He tossed the two halves of his phone into the bushes.

Cory looked at him indignantly. “Come on man, don’t litter.”

Rail looked at him. Cory stared right back. Rail threw up his arms. “Fine! I’ll go get it. Stupid tree hugging—”

As Rail walked over to the bushes to pick the pieces of his phone back out, Cory leaned down to look at the body of the bear—or whatever it was. It seemed to look mostly like a bear, except its face of course. Cory also looked at its front paws. They had longer fingers than a normal bear paw, more like hands with claws. That would explain why it was carrying an ax. A normal bear wouldn’t have been able to use something like that.

Cory still had a hard time believing what had happened. A simple walk in the woods had turned into the most near-death experience Cory had ever had. He tried to focus on the facts, gather information rather than focus on the scariness of the situation. He turned to Annie.

“Annie, you know more about magik than either of us, do you know what this is?”

Annie’s parents claimed to have been warriors in a magikal army before retiring and settling down. They were much more open and knowledgeable about magik than either Cory or Rail’s families.

Annie didn’t respond. Cory couldn’t tell if she was staring at the bear’s body, or at nothing.

“Annie!” Cory said, louder this time.

She jerked back into reality. "Hm? What?"

"Do you know what kind of creature this is?" Cory repeated.

Annie nodded. "Oh yeah, it's a bugbear."

"Oh," Cory responded. "That makes sense. Bear body, bug face."

"Found it!" Rail shouted, holding up the pieces of his phone triumphantly. He walked back over to join the other two. "So what do we do with it?"

Cory shrugged. "It's way too big for us to move, what can we do but leave it here?"

Rail pulled out his pocket knife and flicked the blade out. "Fine, but I want to take one of its claws."

"No, don't!" Cory said.

Rail froze, knife still held out over the creature's paw. "What? Why not?"

"If you do that it would look like we poached it for its claws. We could go to jail."

Rail's shoulders slumped as he stuck his knife back in his pocket. "Fine. Can I at least take the ax? It looks cool."

Cory shrugged again. "I don't see why not. Annie? What do you think?"

She still looked a little out of it. "I don't care."

"Yes!" Rail exclaimed, fist-pumping the air. He began removing the straps that held the ax to the bugbear's back. After unsuccessfully trying to pull the strap out from underneath the body, he simply removed the ax, hefting it with both hands.

"What are you going to do with that thing?" Annie asked. "Chop wood?"

Rail swung the ax dramatically, causing him to stumble from the weight. "I don't know. Probably just put it up on my dresser. Then maybe my brothers will stay out of my room."

Cory looked around. "Should we get going? I don't want to have to explain this to somebody walking by."

They nodded and started walking back along the trail towards the parking lot.

"Have you ever seen a bugbear, Annie?" Cory asked.

Annie shook her head. “No. I’ve heard of them, but I really haven’t seen much of anything in terms of magik and magikal creatures. My parents retired while they were still pregnant with me.”

“So what do you know about bugbears?” Cory asked. “Why would one attack us?”

Annie sighed. “You know your parents don’t like it when I tell you stuff like that.”

Cory shrugged. “Oh come on. You can’t tell me anything?”

Annie looked at him. “How about you ask your parents first, and if they won’t tell you anything, I will. Unless they give a good reason for you not to know, I guess.” They reached the gravel parking area where they’d left Annie’s black SUV.

Cory walked over to the passenger seat door. “It’s just so awkward! I practically have to pry any info out of them with a crowbar. Then they always seem so disappointed that I’m asking.”

“Rail, put that thing in the back please?” Annie said, pointing at the ax. But then she paused, cocking her head. “Actually, could I see it for a second?”

They both walked to the back of the car and Rail handed it over to her, then opened the trunk. Annie strained to lift it up to her face, examining the side of the double blade.

“What is it?” Cory asked, walking over to take a look.

“There’s a symbol engraved here,” Annie said, plopping the ax down into her trunk so they could all look. “It looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it.”

The symbol was a circle with a three-pointed flame in the middle.

“Maybe we should ask your parents about that too?” suggested Cory.

Annie nodded and shut the trunk.

—

As they made their way down the muddy road, out of the park and back into town, Cory

recounted what had happened with the strange man called Peter.

“He said you need to find the shadow?” Rail asked. “How’s that supposed to help?” He waved his arm, causing the shadow of his hand to move across the back of Annie’s seat.

“I think he means the Shadowcasters,” Annie interjected. “They’re... the army Cory’s parents used to be part of.”

Cory pressed his palms into his eyes. “I’m going to have to tell them about this... aren’t I?”

“You don’t *have* to do anything,” Rail clarified.

Cory rolled his eyes. “If I want to understand anything I’m going to have to ask them, is what I meant. They have answers, and maybe they’ll tell me something.”

Annie looked over at him sympathetically. “I’m sorry, I know it’s awkward.”

Cory really wanted to ask his parents about everything, but any time he brought up magik or their past, they became very uncomfortable and ended the conversation as quickly as possible. Or worse, they lectured him about safety and about not making the mistakes they had.

Cory knew they had both been in some sort of magik army, like Annie’s parents. Something had happened around the time Cory was born that caused both of them to leave, and since then they had lived among regular people and tried to shun and avoid the magikal world as much as they could.

Sometimes strange people showed up who they turned away as quickly as they could, trying to keep Cory from even seeing them. When Cory had first met Annie, back in middle school, they’d heard that her parents were retired magik soldiers too, and his parents had tried to keep them from being friends at all. It hadn’t worked though. Rail had moved in around that same time, having just moved into a new foster home. Cory helped him accustom to a new place, and the three had been fast friends since then.

They pulled up to Cory’s house, a small, suburban home. Cory and Rail both got out, waving to Annie as they jogged through the rain to Cory’s front door.

“See you Monday!” they called.

They both ran inside and shook the water from their clothes onto the tiles in front of the door.

“Goodness!” cried Cory’s mother as she saw them. “Wait there! I’ll get some towels.”

She came back a moment later with two towels in hand. She walked back over to the pot on the stove as they dried themselves. “Your father just got home a few minutes ago. Why don’t you go wash up, then you can eat. Rail, you can use the shower in our room. You can borrow some dry clothes from Cory or... something. Would it kill you to bring an umbrella next time?”

“Thank you Mrs. Thomas,” Rail replied. “Is it alright if I stay for dinner again?”

Raquele Thomas waved a hand dismissively. “Of course! You know you’re always welcome here. Let me know what you need, alright? Or maybe tell Alfred, I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

Cory’s father, Alfred, emerged from his bedroom, pushing his wheelchair into the room. “Hello boys! How was your little excursion?”

“Wet,” replied Cory. “Could we um, have dinner together tonight? I want to tell you more about it.”

Cory’s parents looked at each other, surprised. “Of course,” said Raquele. “We’d love to eat dinner together.”

Cory smiled. “Great. I’m going to go shower.”

Twenty minutes later Rail, Cory, and his parents sat around the dinner table, digging into pinto beans and rice.

“So Cory,” asked his father from the head of the table. “What happened out there that you’d like to tell us about, besides you almost contracting hypothermia?”

Rail now wore a shirt that was slightly too big for him, but at least it was dry. He raised up the two separate pieces of his smartphone. “My phone broke.”

Alfred’s eyes widened, and Mrs. Thomas put a hand to her chest. “How on earth did you manage to do that?”

“Well,” Cory said, glancing at Rail. “We were actually attacked. At first I thought it was a

bear, but..."

Mrs. Thomas gasped. "I knew those woods were too dangerous! If you want to see frogs or whatever, go to a pet store or something..."

"Mom, come on," Cory said. "Let me finish. It wasn't a regular bear. It had huge bug-like eyes and antennae, and it was carrying a battleax."

Rail slapped a hand on the table. "Dang it! I left it in the back of Annie's car. I wanted to show Caleb, he would freak."

For once, Mrs. Thomas was stunned silent. Mr. Thomas spoke up instead, "Son, are you sure that's what you saw? What happened, how did you get away?"

Cory continued, recounting how he had run and fallen into some sort of alternate dimension, and the strange man who had talked to him. Rail inserted his own tale of how he bravely confronted the creature and ended its life with a single stab. Cory tried to gauge his parents' reactions, to see if he could tell what they were thinking. All he saw was worry.

When he finished, Mrs. Thomas had her eyes on her food, but wasn't eating. Mr. Thomas looked at her. "You know what this means, Raquele. We have to tell him."

Mrs. Thomas burst into tears, then got up and ran into her bedroom. They could hear her sobbing. Rail continued eating uncomfortably.

Mr. Thomas looked over at the two boys. "Thank you for telling us what happened. I need to discuss this with your mother, alright?"

He started to wheel his chair over to the bedroom, but Cory spoke up. "Dad, will you please just tell me what's going on?"

Mr. Thomas turned back to him. "I'm going to talk it over with your mother first. I want to tell you, son, but... the magikal world is a very dangerous place, especially for someone with your... abilities. We have to be very careful with what we tell you. The more you know, the more dangerous it could be. For now, you are forbidden from going to that park again. There could be others."

—

Cory and Rail sat in the basement, a video game controller held in each of their hands.

“I wish I had super hearing so I could know what they’re saying.” Cory said.

Rail kept his eyes on the big screen as his character crept through an overgrown forest.

“Couldn’t you like... channel the abilities of some animal that hears really well?”

Cory shrugged. “You know it doesn’t work like that. There has to be an animal nearby who can give me their abilities.”

“There aren’t any cats or something around? Or... I don’t know, bugs? What animals can hear well?”

“Birds can hear pretty well, so can bats I think. But it’s raining, they aren’t going to be out in this.”

Rail nodded. “Hopefully your parents will tell you. I can’t imagine you knowing things would actually be more dangerous than you being ignorant. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Cory shook his head. He made his own character raise a bazooka and fire at the alien base. “My parents never, ever talk about magik. At least not without mom crying.”

Rail’s character started sniping at alien guards as they ran towards Cory’s position.

“Yeah I know. Maybe you’ll just have to find out for yourself.”

—

Cory’s parents didn’t tell him anything that night. Cory dropped Rail off at his own small house a few hours later, his clothes now dried. Was Rail right? Maybe Cory could find out for himself.

Everything he’d seen from the magikal world had seemed incredibly beautiful. Granted

he hadn't seen much. Annie's abilities, some magik objects her parents had shown him, multi-colored frogs, and that incredible forest where he'd met that strange man, Peter.

Of course, his parents were also right. That bugbear they'd met in the forest would have killed him. He'd been lucky, and he'd had help. Did he really want to go into a world like that? One that made his mother cry every time she talked about it? The one that had taken his father's legs?

He pulled back into his home garage and went down the stairs to his room. His mind continued to race as he got ready for bed. Maybe he just needed training, then he would be alright in the magikal world. Both his own parents and Annie's parents had been soldiers. Could he maybe get some training from other magikal soldiers? Maybe they could even teach him to use his abilities better. Cory remembered the phantom dude had said something about using his abilities, but he couldn't remember what.

If he were trained, knew how to survive, maybe he could explore the magik world and see incredible creatures like ghost people and bugbears all the time, maybe even study them. Could he one day even see dragons?

Cory smiled as he lay in bed. It sounded incredible. The problem was he knew nothing about magik. His parents expected him to go to college, probably meet some girl and settle down to raise a family. Nice and simple. Safe.

But how could he ever be satisfied with that when an entire magikal world was out there, ready to be explored? Cory thought back to the forest where he had talked to the phantom. Very little was remarkable about what he had seen, besides Peter himself. The forest had no other magik creatures, just a regular old forest. But something about that place fascinated him.

He had to find more places like that. He was still afraid of what his parents would say and think, but he decided then and there that he wouldn't let his fear or their disapproval stop him. It was his life, he would find some way to experience more magik. Then if he didn't like it, if it was too dangerous, he'd come back. Problem was, he had no idea where to start.

He'd ask Annie about it tomorrow. She would know what to do. He drifted off to sleep, his dreams filled with incredible creatures and light-dappled forests.

## Chapter 2

### Graduates

That Monday, the three friends sat together at a table by the tall windows on one side of the lunchroom. Rain pounded against the glass, heavier than the day before. Other students milled about between tables, food trays in hand.

“So here’s my idea,” Cory began. “Neither of you have applied to college yet, right?”

Annie and Rail glanced at each other. “Not me,” Annie replied. “Deadlines aren’t for another month.”

“Great,” Cory continued. “I haven’t even figured out where I want to go yet, or exactly what I want to study. So why not take some time after graduation, and we can explore options in the magikal world? I’m fascinated by the few things that I’ve seen, and I want to see more.”

Rail glanced up from his new phone. Both he and Annie sat for a moment, considering the possibility.

“How would your parents feel about that?” Rail asked.

Cory waved a hand. “I’m done trying to keep from upsetting them. I’m an adult now, I need to figure things out myself.”

Annie raised an eyebrow at him. That was unusual coming from Cory. He had always cared about what his parents thought.

“I can ask my parents,” suggested Annie. “They were members of the Veiled, which I think is stationed in northern California, so not too far from here. I don’t think the magikal world has, like, job postings or anything, but I can see if my parents know something.”

Cory smiled. “What kinds of possibilities are there? I know both of our parents were soldiers of some kind...”

Annie nodded. “There’s a lot of soldiers and fighting in the magikal world from what I

understand. Which I'm okay with, so long as I can use a bow."

Annie was on the school archery team, and she was good. Last year she came in second in the state competition.

Rail smiled. "You mean I could actually kill things? For a job?"

"It's a little different from a video game," said Annie. "At least I'd assume so. I know they don't use guns in the magikal world."

Rail gave her a startled look. "What? Why not?"

"Magik interferes with technology," Annie explained. "The more complex it is, the more likely it is to malfunction around magic. They use magik weapons, but it's mostly medieval type stuff. Bows and swords."

"I guess that could be cool," Rail admitted. "Maybe I could get a crossbow that shoots lightning." He mimed firing an invisible crossbow at one of the football players down the hallway.

Cory shrugged. "I just want to see more magikal creatures. I mean, preferably not the ones that want to try and kill me, but..."

Annie nodded. "I think you'll be able to. The Veiled headquarters are in a forest, so there should be plenty of magikal animals and stuff."

Cory smiled, trying to imagine it. What sort of creatures would be in a magikal forest run by an army of assassins?

"Wait," Cory said, thinking back to his conversation with the phantom. "Peter told me to stay out of the forest, that it was dangerous."

"Have you asked your parents about that yet?" asked Rail, shoving a spoonful of rice in his mouth.

Cory shook his head. "I haven't talked to them about it since that dinner when you were there."

Annie gave him an exasperated look. "If you're worried about it, then ask them. I would

think a forest protected by magikal assassins would be one of the safest places you could go.”

Cory nodded. That did make sense. He tried to distract himself from the conversation he'd have to have with his parents by thinking about magikal creatures like fighting fairies, and battle-trained unicorns. He imagined himself riding a war elephant, no, a war dragon through the trees, releasing arrows at his enemies.

—

The next day Annie reported back what she learned.

“My parents said the Veiled are always looking for new recruits, so there shouldn't be a problem with us trying to join.”

“Okay,” said Cory. “What else did they say?”

“Well,” she continued. “When someone first joins up, they have to commit to staying for a full year. During that year they can't quit, and the Veiled will evaluate whether they actually want us as part of their army.”

Rail looked up. “A full year? I feel like it doesn't take that long to figure out if I like something.”

Annie shrugged. “That's the way they do it. My parents know the current commander of the Veiled, so they can let him know we're wanting to join up,” she explained.

“Did you ask them about other potential jobs?” Cory asked. “Ones that aren't military?”

Annie looked at him sympathetically. “I did. So far as they know, most magikal communities are pretty self-sustaining, so they don't really hire outside help. Except for armies and such, who are always looking for extra muscle.”

Cory thought about that. Did he really want to be a soldier? She did say it was in a cool magik forest, but it sounded... dangerous. Though it did have a trial period, hopefully he wouldn't see too much action as a new member, and after that he could decide.

Annie looked concerned. "Is that okay Cory? We can try and see if there are other options."

Cory shook his head. "No, that's fine. We can try it for a year, anyway, see if we like it. I'm just... worried about what to tell my parents."

—

He still hadn't told them a month later.

"You have to tell them!" Annie insisted as they walked out to her car after school. "We graduate next month. What have you been telling them your plans are for afterwards?"

Cory shrugged. "I've mostly been avoiding the subject..."

Rail laughed. "You should just not ever tell them. We'll take off to a secret magikal army, and you can tell your parents you're off to college. See you in a year! Sorry I can't call you, my phone doesn't work in a magikal forest!"

Cory rolled his eyes. "I'll tell them, alright? I just... haven't figured out how to broach the topic yet."

"Well I'm going to call you tonight," Annie insisted. "And if you haven't told them I'm going to tell them myself."

"What about you, Rail?" Cory asked, trying to draw the attention away from himself. "Have you told your parents?"

Rail smiled. "Yeah, I told them. But they don't have any idea that magik exists, so they didn't believe me."

Cory leaned forward to look at him. "You actually told them you're joining a magikal army of assassins? What did they say?"

"I told you," Rail responded. "They didn't believe me. They gave me that 'Rail quit messing around, this is serious' look. So I told them I'm going off with you guys, and not to worry about

it.”

Annie shook her head. “It blows my mind that you can get away with stuff like that.”

“Yeah, well,” Rail shrugged. “I’ve worked very hard to cultivate my relationship with my parents. That way they know they can trust me to not tell them anything, and I can trust them to leave me to my insanity.”

They soon pulled up in front of Annie’s house. Most days they spent some time after school together. Cory’s parents would still be working for another couple hours, and Rail avoided going home when he could. He liked his foster parents, but they’d never been close, and he’d found that things were easier if he kept his distance. That way he couldn’t hurt them, and they couldn’t yell at him.

Cory and Annie had long since stopped trying to convince Rail to form a closer relationship with his parents. Rail didn’t want to. Though that didn’t stop them from worrying.

Annie lived near the outer edges of town, in one of the rich neighborhoods. They drove down her long driveway to her parents’ enormous brick house. Sometimes Cory still looked up at it in amazement. Annie had two siblings, both younger than her. Her house had more bathrooms in it than people.

“Dad, we’re here!” Annie called as they entered the kitchen. Cory and Rail sat on the barstools at the counter as Mr. Stone emerged from his office.

Annie’s dad wasn’t tall, but he had a commanding presence all the same. Despite years of knowing him, Cory still felt intimidated by him sometimes. He walked over to Annie and she kissed his cheek.

“How’re you doing, boys?” he boomed at them.

“Good,” Cory responded. Rail gave a thumbs-up.

“Well,” Mr Stone said. “I still have some work to do. Help yourself to anything in the fridge. Are you staying for dinner?”

Rail nodded, but Cory shook his head. “I should go home for dinner. I have... things to

talk about with my parents.”

The big man nodded. “Are you going to tell them your plans to join the Veiled then?”

Cory nodded.

“Good man!” he boomed. “If they have concerns about it, tell them to talk to me. You’ll be much closer than if you were to join the Shadow, like they did, so they should be glad you aren’t following in their footsteps.”

The Shadow? That sounded familiar for some reason. But Mr. Stone was already walking back to his office. He ran a conglomerate of farms east of the city, so he was usually either out there, or running things from home.

“Cory, they have leftover pizza!” Rail called.

Cory smiled and hurried over to the fridge.

—

Two hours later he walked through his own front door. His dad sat at the table, phone in hand. His mother was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey dad,” Cory said as he walked in. He felt a lump in his throat as he thought about telling his parents what he had been avoiding for a month. He gave his dad a weird, sitting-down hug.

“Hello Cory,” his dad said. “How was your day?”

“It was... alright. Where’s mom?”

“She’s out getting food. We decided to eat out tonight.”

“What’s the occasion?” Cory asked.

His dad shrugged. “She didn’t feel like cooking, and wanted something that reminded her of home.”

Cory smiled. That meant Costa Rican food, probably plantains and something with rice.

By the time Cory had put away his backpack and shoes, his mother had walked back through the door, grocery sacs in hand.

As they all grabbed a styrofoam clamshell of food, Cory knew this was his best chance, before his parents started watching TV.

“I figured out what I’m doing after I graduate,” he said, half mumbling.

There was an astonished pause before his mother smiled. “That’s great honey! Which college did you decide on? I hope it isn’t one of those California schools.”

Cory hesitated again, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Raquele put her food back on the table. “Is it one of the California schools? I’m sorry I said anything, it’s okay if it is, I was only joking—”

“I’m not going to college,” he said. “At least, not right away.”

“Are you going to take a gap year then? Or trade school? I’ve heard they have some great programs in those schools too. Or did you find a job already? That would be wonderful—”

Cory’s dad took his wife’s hand. “He’s nervous honey, let him speak.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Right, right. I’m sorry. Go ahead. We support you whatever you have decided.”

Cory doubted that. “Well... Rail, Annie, and I all decided to go for a year and experience some of the magikal world.”

Alfred’s lips pursed. Raquele’s eyes started to water. But miraculously, she didn’t say anything, so Cory continued.

“We decided to join the Veiled, at least for a year.”

His mother couldn’t hold it in. “What! Why the Veiled? There’s got to be other options available, but you want to join a group of cutthroat assassins? Dios mio!”

She couldn’t take it anymore and sat down hard, hands over her eyes.

Cory’s father placed a hand on her shoulder and looked over at Cory. “You know how we feel about this son, it’s dangerous. Your mother and I... we both left too late. I haven’t been able

to walk my whole life because that world is unforgiving, and brutal. We can't let you do this."

Cory felt his temper begin to flare. "But there are also beautiful things! I know it's dangerous, but I want to see it and make a decision for myself, alright? Mr. Stone said first-year recruits don't usually see much fighting anyway."

Alfred shook his head, and Raquele continued sobbing. "You don't understand, Cory, you need to learn from our mistakes. You don't have to make them yourself."

Cory's mother looked up at him, her eyes red and wet. "You can't do this. You can go to college and get a good job. You'll be safe and happy like we are—"

"I'm not like you, mom!" Cory took a deep breath. "Look, I know you're worried about me, but I promise I'll be careful. Annie and Rail will be there, and it's just for a year. If I don't like it, or it's too dangerous I'll leave."

Cory's father seemed to hesitate, but his mother continued shaking her head. He placed a hand on his wife's shoulder and looked over at his son. "We are worried, son, you're right about that. We want you to be safe because we love you. We'll talk about it, but for now the answer is no."

Cory pursed his lips. He hadn't really been asking permission, but at least they were considering it. He played the one other card he had. "Mr. and Mrs. Stone were in the Veiled, they said if you're concerned you could talk to them."

His dad nodded. The conversation seemed to be over, so Cory grabbed his food and walked away, down the stairs to his room. He plopped into the corner on his bed and began stuffing his feelings with rice and beans.

What were they so afraid of? If there were reasons he was in danger, why didn't they just tell him? What were they hiding from him? He couldn't wait to get out of there, to leave their stupid, judgemental faces behind and never look back.

He shook himself. He loved his parents, but they could be real pills sometimes. What would he do if they talked about it and still said no? Could he really go directly against them and

basically run away? He was technically an adult, so it wouldn't really be running away from home, but his insides still roiled at the thought.

But he still felt such a strong desire, no, a *need* to see more. He had always loved animals, and seeing more magikal creatures was part of it, but this was more. Something inside was pushing him to find more. It reminded him of when he had first met Annie and Rail. Back then he'd felt a similar push, telling him to go talk to them.

Before long his phone rang. It was Annie. He didn't really feel like talking, but he answered anyway.

"Hey Annie."

"Hey Cory! How'd it go? Rail is here too, by the way. Have you talked to them yet?"

He nodded, then remembered he was on the phone. "Yeah, I talked to them."

"Oh good! What'd they say?"

Cory felt a lump in his throat. "Well, I made my mom cry again. They said no of course, but they're going to talk about it."

"Well that's good, right?"

Rail spoke up. "Hey, at least your parents care. Mine don't give a crap what I do."

Cory shook his head. "I don't know what I'll do if they say no. I just... I wish they'd tell me things! If it's dangerous, tell me why. They won't even tell me what happened to mom, why she left."

Annie waited before responding. "I know. I'm sorry."

Cory cleared his throat. "It's okay."

"It doesn't sound okay," she responded unhelpfully.

"No, I guess it's not okay," Cory agreed ruefully.

"What are you going to do then?" Rail asked. "Is the trip off?"

Cory shook his head. "They said they'd talk about it, I'm still hoping they'll come around."

“And if they don’t?” Rail asked.

“Oh I’m going,” Cory said, putting forth more confidence than he really felt. “I want them to support me, but I can’t vie for their approval forever.”

“Are you sure?” Annie asked. “We can figure something else out.”

Cory shook his head again. “No. I want to do this, no matter what they think.”

He felt confident about this. For so long he’d been worried about what his parents would think, afraid to make his mother cry, afraid of that look his father gave. It felt good, but also scary, to finally decide to do something he wanted to do, just for himself.

Cory sat up, a wicked little idea popping into his head. “In fact, why wait until we graduate? We could leave now. Tonight.”

He could almost see the astonished look Annie gave the phone. “Tonight? That’s a terrible idea.”

“Why?” Cory asked. “Nobody in the magikal world cares if we have a high school diploma, do they? We’d just be wasting time taking end-of-year tests and waiting until we can go out on our own.”

“Cory...” Annie said, almost scolding.

“What?” he responded, almost angry. “Let’s go now! I’m ready.”

“Well I’m not!” responded Annie. “I know you’re excited, but...”

Rail interrupted her. “I know you don’t want to face your parents again man, but take it from me, running away isn’t the answer. You’ll face them again later and it’ll only be worse. You can make it through a few more weeks.”

Cory closed his eyes. If Rail was telling him to be reasonable, he was definitely out of line.

“We can keep going for another couple months,” Annie said. “Then we graduate and we have no obligations left here. Is that okay?”

Cory sighed. “You’re right. Sorry, I’m just... kind of freaked out right now.”

“Go shoot some zombies,” Rail suggested. “That always helps me.”

Cory nodded. That wasn’t a bad idea. “Do you want to come over?”

“Nah,” Rail responded. “It’s a little late for that.”

“Okay,” Cory responded. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow then?”

“Yup! See you tomorrow,” they responded.

Before Cory hung up, Annie spoke again. “Cory, are you sure you’ll be okay?”

He nodded, trying to sound more confident than he was. “Yeah. Yeah I’ll be fine.”

—

For the next week, Cory wearied Annie’s parents with all the questions he could think of about the Veiled, and about magik. The Veiled headquarters was located somewhere in Redwood national park. Their main purpose was to protect that area, since it was a haven for magikal creatures. That made some sense to Cory, the mundane world had hundreds of nature preserves and parks. It did seem a bit strange that they’d need an entire army to protect it though. So he asked.

“Why would they need an entire army to protect the place? Are there poachers or something?”

Annie’s mom was there in the kitchen chopping lettuce, though Annie was working on homework. Her twin 12-year-old brothers, Calvin and Bobby, were playing cards with Rail over on the couches nearby. “There are some factions who think the entire preserve should be disbanded, and who try to force their way in sometimes.”

“Why would they want to do that?” Cory asked.

Mrs. Stone shrugged. She was shorter than her husband, about the same height as Annie, with the same reddish-brown hair. “The Outcasters are the biggest threat. They think all magik is evil and want to destroy it all.”

Cory was astounded. "So are they from the mundane world? Like, regular people?"

She shook her head. "No. Their leader is a goblin, I think. They do use guns though, which is odd."

"I thought guns don't work very well around magik, just like most technology. The magik interferes with the systems."

She shrugged. "I don't know how they do it. Maybe they found some way to negate that, or maybe it's part of their rebellion against magik in general."

Cory sat for a moment, then recalled something he had meant to ask the Stones about for a while. "Oh! Did you get a chance to look at that ax we found in the woods?"

Mrs. Stone gave Cory a scolding look. "From what I heard, 'found' is a generous way of putting it. But yeah, I looked at it."

"And?" Cory asked excitedly. "What do you think?"

Rail perked up, hearing what they were discussing.

Mrs. Stone shrugged. "There wasn't much to see. It's not a magik ax, but it did have the symbol of the Moonlighters displayed pretty prominently on the front."

"Who are the Moonlighters?" Rail asked, coming over to join Cory at the counter.

"They are another magikal faction," Mrs. Stone explained. "The Shadowcasters, who your parents were part of," she pointed at Cory with the knife in her hand. "Were actually formed to fight against the Moonlighters. They have been trying to establish an empire for decades, led by Adumas, their King."

"Do the Veiled fight against them too?" Cory asked.

She shook her head. "Not really. The Moonlighters mostly operate in central america. The Veiled hardly interact with them at all."

Cory was confused. "If the Moonlighters are way down there, how come one of them was in the forest nearby here?"

"There's no way to know now I guess," Mrs. Stone said, putting away her knife and

wiping her hands. “The bugbear you killed might not have even been a Moonlighter, it could have just had an ax made by them.”

“Should we warn someone?” Cory suggested. “Just in case?”

She thought about that for a moment, then shook her head. “There was only one, if you had seen more of them I might be concerned. But as it is I don’t think we need to worry.”

Rail counted on his fingers. “So the Outcasters fight the Veiled around California, and the Moonlighters fight the Shadowcasters in Central America, right? Is there anyone else we should know about?”

Mrs. Stone shook her head. “Not really. Most other fighting factions in the magikal world are separated out by race, those are the biggest four.”

Cory was about to keep asking questions, but Mr. Stone put a hand on his shoulder. “Give it a break, son. You’ll learn all these things yourself soon enough. Dinner’s here.”

Cory nodded. The whole reason for going to join the Veiled was to experience magik for himself, he couldn’t learn everything by asking questions.

—

When Cory came home, he quickly grabbed some food and headed to his room. He had homework to do. He was also afraid that his parents would finally decide that they would try and stop him from joining the Veiled.

Sure enough, as soon as he was settled in at his desk, a knock came at the door.

Cory took a deep breath. “What is it?”

His mother opened the door just a crack. Cory put down the book he had been reading and looked at her. “Can we talk?” she asked. “Your father and I have something to say.”

Cory turned towards her. “Sure. What’s up?”

She smiled at him. A worried, concerned sort of smile. “I’m sorry for the way we reacted

before. If you want to explore the magikal world, we will support you. We're just... worried that something will happen to you, like it did to us. But you need to find your own path, so—

Cory got up, walked over, and gave her a big hug. "Thanks mom! I know you don't like it, but I'll try to be careful."

"I know," she nodded. Then she put a finger in his face. "You better write every week, alright? Your phone won't work while you're there, so you have to write letters. I know they have a postal service thing there..."

Cory grabbed her shoulders reassuringly. "I'll be fine, okay? I'll write to you every week I can."

His mother was about to leave, but Cory stopped her. "If you don't mind me asking, what changed your mind?"

She turned towards him in the doorway. "We spoke to Mr. Stone. He said that for the first year it's mostly training and you don't actually see much combat. And..." she stopped herself for a moment.

Cory narrowed his eyes. Was she still hiding something? But then she continued.

"And Annie and Rail will be there to help and protect you. I will still worry and pray for you every day. But at least the Veiled are close by. There are far more dangerous places you could be going."

Cory nodded. "Thanks Mom. I love you."

She smiled, and this time it was genuine. "I love you too, Coryther."

—

Cory sat in a hard chair, an oversized blue robe draped over his body, and a strange, flat hat on his head. An old man continued reading through the names, stumbling over half of them as he tried to keep up with the students walking across the stage.

Ordinarily this would have been a very uncomfortable and boring situation, but not today. Today he was done. He was graduating. He continued to smile, chatting with Bradley Thorston next to him. Rail had already walked. Rail had said he was going to flip off the whole student body when he walked off stage, but fortunately he'd decided against it.

Cory's thoughts were full of plans, questions, and fantasy. In just one short week, they would be going to a magik forest and Cory would see incredible creatures, and learn to fight with magik weapons. Between now and then, graduation parties, packing, and no responsibilities.

Bradley and other graduates excitedly chatted about their own plans for college, or whatever else they were moving on to. Cory tried not to tell too many details about what he was doing. Most people accepted his response that he was joining the army.

Magik wasn't necessarily a secret, but it wasn't something talked about openly either. The magik world and the mundane world didn't mix well. Several times in history it had been attempted, and magik had a strange effect on regular people if they were exposed to it for a long time. Sort of like how too much x-ray radiation can cause cancer and things like that. So in small doses, magikal beings integrated frequently with the mundane. But they also felt a distinct pull towards each other.

'Magik brings things together', is what his mom had told him. 'Sometimes things that weren't meant to be together'. Cory saw it sort of like the opposite of entropy, which he'd learned about in physics. While most of the universe was continuously being broken down and divided into chaos (entropy), magik brought things together, somewhat balancing the scales. Or at least it slowed the breaking down into chaos.

It occurred to him that Rail wasn't magikal, as far as he knew. Would he experience harmful effects from being among the Veiled? He would have to ask about that. But the idea that Rail might not come along gave him a sinking feeling in his stomach.

The old man called out Annie Stone. Cory smiled. She'd even gotten them to change the

name they read to Annie, rather than Bethany.

Before he knew it, Cory was standing and walking towards the stage. For a moment it seemed almost as if he were watching someone else's life through his own eyes. This moment symbolically turned him loose into the world. He no longer had a set schedule, no longer had teachers telling him where to be, when to be there, and how to act. He felt free.

He placed his foot on the steps up to the stage. 'Coryther Thomas' they called. By some miracle, they said his first name correctly.

No more living with his parents, no more living under their watchful gaze. He could live the way he wanted.

The assistant principal handed him a folder. He continued across the stage.

He was like a real adult now. He had to decide the course of his life; no one else would do it for him anymore. He'd lay his own path. Cory smiled as he walked back to his seat, the surreal moment fading.

They were really done. Now the real adventure could begin.

—

Cory shut the trunk of the Stones' blue SUV. The week had passed in a flash. Cory had actually gotten drunk for the first time. His parents were furious, but he didn't care. It was his life now. Though the headache in the morning really made him question his life choices.

But now they were ready to leave. Annie's parents, and her little brothers were coming along for the road trip, which Cory found a little disappointing. Not that he minded spending time with them, but he had been looking forward to a road trip with just him and his two friends.

The Stones had warned him to pack light, so he'd only brought a single suitcase. It felt weird to leave so much of his stuff at home for a full year, but there wasn't much of a place for

such things in an army of assassins. Cory turned to his parents who stood on the sidewalk in front of their house. His mother was already crying.

As he hugged his mother, she spoke into his ear, "I love you Coryther. I always will."

Cory pulled back and nodded. "I know. I love you too."

He bent down and hugged his father. "You're a great man, Cory. Do good. I love you."

Cory smiled at them both. "I will. I'll miss you."

"Not as much as we miss you!" said his mother as he got into the car next to Rail.

Then they drove away, and Cory left his family behind. For a year, anyway. Annie, Cory, and Rail sat in the middle seats, Annie's parents in the front, Calvin and Bobby in the back seat. They already had headphones in and a tablet each.

For most of the trip, Rail slouched in the middle seat, playing games on his phone. Cory and Annie played against him a couple times in digital card games, billiards, or checkers. Cory hadn't been on many long trips like this, and boredom set in very quickly.

Mr. Stone played audiobooks, which helped a little. But they were mostly non-fiction business type books. Cory downloaded some extra games on his own phone just for the trip, but even those got old quickly.

He started watching the trees go by, imagining fantastical creatures like scaly tigers, or giant ostriches weaving through the forest alongside the car.

The trip was supposed to be eight hours, turned into nine by potty breaks and fast food pit stops. At one rest area, Cory raced Annie's brothers up an enormous tree.

Rail was fine with his games. He had taken long road trips before, traveling between different foster homes.

Annie was always a little weird with her parents around. A little more reserved, a little more proper. It was fine, just different. Her brothers took turns trying to annoy her when they got bored of watching tv, though when she twisted an arm they hurriedly went back to their screens.

After a quick pit stop for dinner, they finally arrived at the Park and paid the entrance fee. They drove for another half hour at least before they turned down a gravel road with a sign labeled 'Veiled Overlook'. The sign had a symbol on it that looked like a tree, but instead of roots the trunk narrowed into the shape of an icicle.

Cory gaped up at the enormous trees on either side of the car. Some were as wide as the car was long, stretching so high he couldn't see the tops no matter how he pressed his face to the window.

After another few minutes they stopped in a cul-de-sac among the trees. An odd assortment of people stood waiting for them. They wore mottled gray cloaks with the hoods up. The same symbol, the tree that turned into an icicle, was emblazoned on the front of what looked like leather armor on their chests. One of them was very short, even shorter than Annie. Another was tall and broad, not a look Cory would have expected from an assassin. The other two were also short, though not as much as the first man, and appeared to be women.

Cory saw a couple vans parked on the gravel, and Mr. Stone pulled up alongside one of them.

They all got out of the car and stretched. Mr. and Mrs. Stone walked right up to the group of people and saluted. The short man jerked his head towards the forest.

"Come," he said in a commanding tone. "Let's get out of earshot."

Rail, Annie, and Cory grabbed their suitcases. Annie's parents had made sure they knew to only take one suitcase, and a small one at that, though Rail also carried his violin case over one shoulder. The entire company proceeded into the woods, including Annie's little brothers.

Once they'd walked until Cory couldn't see the cars anymore, stepping over ferns and shrubs, they stopped. Cory continued to gaze up at the enormous trees around them. He'd seen redwoods before on family trips, but it was still breathtaking.

Mr. Stone proceeded to introduce everyone. "Kids, this is Commander Toros, leader of the entire Veiled army. It's good to see you again sir."

The short man removed his hood, and Cory's eyes widened. The man had pointed ears with hairy tufts that poked through shoulder-length straight blond hair.

This had to be an elf.

Cory knew they existed, but he'd never seen one before. The two women were also revealed to be elves. As Cory looked at them, he realized they were exactly the same height, also with long blond hair and nearly the exact same features. He concluded they must be twins.

"This," Mr. Stone continued. "Is Tahitoa, your second-in-command." He placed a hand on the big man's shoulder. With his hood off, Cory could see that the man had a mop of dark black hair, and a polynesian complexion.

"And these," Mr. Stone said, gesturing now to the two twin elves. "Are Toros' cousins, Maritia, and Jescia. We all fought together years ago, though I think Tahitoa was a new recruit then."

The old people bantered a little about old times, and Mrs. Stone introduced their children, as well as Cory and Rail. Rail sat down on his suitcase as they talked, and tried to get in a few final moments on his phone before it stopped working.

Toros' smile dropped as he looked up at them. "So, you want to join the Veiled?" he looked directly up at Cory. "You are Coryther Thomas, correct? What power do you possess? You are a shaga, are you not?"

"Um, yes," Cory stuttered. "I can communicate telepathically with animals, and use their abilities if they let me."

Cory saw Tahitoa cock his head. But Toros barreled on. "Hm. That could be useful. Maybe you could help Captain Shepherd care for the forest. What about you, Bethany? What is your power?"

She flinched when he said her full name, but didn't correct him. "I have enhanced eyesight, sir," she said confidently. "I can see perfectly in the dark, and I can see magik as well."

Toros nodded appreciatively. "That can be very useful. I might have to give you some

extra shifts on guard duty.” He turned towards Rail. Even sitting down on his suitcase, he was still about the same height as Commander Toros.

“What about you boy? Your name is Rail? What is your power?”

Rail shrugged. “Don’t have any. Not magik powers anyway.”

Toros narrowed his eyes. “You are not shaga? What are you then?”

“Human, I guess?” Rail said.

Toros pursed his lips and turned towards Mr. Stone. “I thought you said these were eligible recruits? We cannot accept mundane into the Forest of Life.”

For the first time Cory had ever seen, Mr. Stone seemed to be at a loss for words. Rail spoke up, a little angry.

“Why? What’s the problem with me?”

Toros didn’t turn to look at him, but Tahitoa answered. “Normal humans don’t do well if they’re around a lot of magik. It starts to do things to their bodies. Not good things.”

Rail’s anger increased. “I’ve spent years around these two freaks, what’s the difference?”

Mrs. Stone winced. Toros looked angrily right at Rail, but Annie interrupted before he could say anything. “If I may, sir, can I talk to you in private?”

Toros looked at her, his eyes still narrowed. “Fine. If you have something to say, I will hear it.”

What the heck was that about? Cory thought. The two walked a few paces away until they were out of earshot. Cory could still see them through the trees. Annie spoke animatedly while Toros stood with arms folded.

What the big polynesian, Tahitoa had said worried Cory. He turned to Annie’s dad. “So, if regular people don’t do well in magik places, why didn’t you mention that before? Will Rail be okay if he goes in?”

Rail was listening as well. Mr. Stone hesitated. “Sometimes I forget how much you boys don’t know about magik. Cory, you and Annie are both shaga, as am I. Shaga can be born

randomly into any human being, as well as some other races, but it can also be passed down genetically.”

Rail shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t have any powers, I’m not a shaga.”

Mr. Stone nodded. “Right, but we think that you might have some magikal ancestry, maybe even one of your parents, even though you didn’t inherit the shaga gene. If that’s true the amount of magik in the Forest shouldn’t affect you.”

“And if it does affect me?” Rail asked.

Mr. Stone shrugged. “Well, then it should be pretty evident early on, and we can come get you. But I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

Annie and Toros returned and Toros addressed the group. “Though it is unusual, I will permit Rail Miles to join the Veiled.”

Tahitua looked at him sharply, but made no objection. Cory breathed a sigh of relief.

He turned back to Mr. and Mrs. Stone. “I hope we will meet again. The Veiled thank you for your valiant service.”

Toros turned to go, but Mrs. Stone spoke up. “With your permission sir, we’d like to come back tomorrow and see the Forest of Life again. For old times sake? It has been a long time.”

Toros pursed his lips, but consented. “Very well. If you return tomorrow morning I can arrange an escort for you. Your boys will not be permitted to enter, however.”

Mr. Stone nodded. “We know, we’ve made other arrangements.”

“We’re going to Six Flags!” one of the boys whispered to Annie. She gave him a look of fierce jealousy.

Maritia (or Jescia, no idea which) smiled and waved at the Stones as they walked back towards the cars. “See you tomorrow!”

The Veiled warriors then all looked at Cory, Rail, and Annie. Despite being at least a foot taller than all three of the elves, Cory suddenly felt very small. Tahitua addressed them this time.

“Have you all been informed of the way this works? You will be given a trial period of one

year, during which you must stay and participate as a Veiled soldier. After your trial period is over, you may leave or stay based on your own choice,” he glanced over at Toros. “And ours.”

The three nodded. They’d been told.

He nodded and pulled out several strips of cloth, handing one to each of the twin elves. They then walked behind Cory, Annie, and Rail, and tied the cloth around their eyes. “For security reasons,” Tahitoa explained. “If you need to enter or leave the Forest of Life during that time, you will be blindfolded.”

This made Cory more than a little uncomfortable. He was now blindfolded, being directed into a deserted forest by a complete stranger, who also happened to be a trained assassin. But he reasoned that Annie’s parents knew and trusted these people, so hopefully he could as well.

The three friends were marched through the woods blind for at least twenty minutes in silence. Cory’s fingers ached a little from carrying his suitcase. At one point, Cory felt a change. The temperature and environment were the same, but the forest was louder. More birds singing, more rustling among the leaves. He also felt invigorated. He always felt stronger and faster when in the woods, but this was more than he’d ever felt before. He felt even stronger, faster, more energetic.

Several more minutes passed before they removed the blindfold from his eyes.

“Welcome to the Forest of Life,” Tahitoa said.

## Chapter 3

### Forest of Life

Cory watched with wide eyes as they continued to march through the woods. Physically, it wasn't that different from the redwood forest they'd been in before. But the colors seemed brighter, the reddish bark was deeper, the greens of ferns and leaves more intense.

And animals! Butterflies flitted around everywhere. Dozens of diverse animals leapt from tree to tree above them, even some that Cory knew were not native to the Redwoods, like monkeys. He saw a sloth hanging upside-down from a branch suddenly drop. As Cory watched, the sloth spread its legs, showing flaps of skin that caught the air, carrying the sloth to an adjacent tree like a flying squirrel.

Multi-colored plants, flowers and fruits surrounded them on every side. Cory recognized orchids in white, red, and pink, vines dangling from hundreds of feet above. The air smelled gloriously clean and rich. A symphony of sounds from hundreds of birds and insects filled their ears. A butterfly flapped past him, propelling a supernaturally strong gust of wind that flattened the ferns below.

After a few more minutes of walking through the trees, they came upon a clearing occupied by a cluster of more than a dozen large wooden buildings. Dozens of similarly cloaked warriors milled about. Each cloak was a mottled gray/brown/green, which camouflaged splendidly with the surrounding woodland. Cory noticed some of the warriors sparred with pointed bows, jabbing at one another with the ends and blocking with the middle. Others fired arrows at a line of targets. The warriors were all shapes and sizes. It had never occurred to Coryther that there could be so many other intelligent species in the world. He saw one that was barely a foot tall and covered in green fur with large, pointed ears.

Rail and Cory were led to a long building on one side of the compound.

They were led into the building, which turned out to be a barracks. Despite being lined with nearly a hundred bunks, the residents were absent.

“Find an empty bunk.” Tahitoa instructed. “Your captain will provide you with equipment before the day is out. You will wear it to your training tomorrow, which begins at sunrise. Until then, get acquainted with your new home. Welcome to the Veiled.” He and the other assassin left.

“Hold up,” Rail said, having a million questions to ask.

Without pausing to allow them to be asked, Tahitoa interrupted, “The other soldiers will respond to any questions you have. I have business to attend to.” And he left without another word.

~~~

Annie sat on her own bunk, trying to take deep breaths. After talking with Toros he had handed her over to the care of his cousin, who hadn't said much as she led Annie to the women's barracks.

She didn't know what she had expected, but it wasn't this. Her parents had never really explained what being a Veiled was like. She wasn't a soldier. She could hardly trust herself using a knife to cut vegetables, let alone using it to kill people. She felt way out of place, and out of her league.

Annie heard a clapping sound on the floorboards behind her. “I hear you've just joined up,” said a female voice.

“Yeah.” She responded, as she turned to look at the speaker. She nearly jumped up off the bed, but her head collided with the underside of the top bunk. She continued to stare at the newcomer as she rubbed her scalp.

The speaker chuckled. “I take it you weren't raised in the magikal world?”

The woman was enormous. Her antlers nearly brushed the tall ceiling. She must have been eleven feet tall. Her face and torso were that of a normal human, only twice the size. Straight, coarse black hair fell down the sides of her bark-brown face and past her shoulders. She had a warm smile, a soft, friendly face and bright brown eyes. Despite this, she was downright intimidating.

At her hips, her similarity to a normal human being ceased. Much like a centaur, her body turned into the body of an animal, but rather than a horse, she was part moose. She wore a similar cloak to the other warriors, but hers was closed in the front, had sleeves and was long, draping back over the chocolate brown fur of her back. From her scalp sprouted two huge, light-brown moose antlers, spreading out like great, many-fingered hands. Annie could see a bright green aura of magik surrounding her entire person, indicating magik associated with nature.

Annie stumbled to answer. "No, I... what are you?"

The moose-woman smiled endearingly. "I'm an alcetaur. My name is Jazan. I'm the captain of the women's barracks."

She held out her hand.

Annie reached up to take it. Jazan's hand wrapped around her own like it was a baseball. "I'm Annie."

"Pleased to meet you Annie. I hope you feel welcome here. It takes some getting used to. If you ever feel the need to talk to someone, just let me know and I'd be happy to listen."

Annie smiled back at her. "Thank you."

"So Annie, tell me about yourself. What made you want to join the Veiled?"

"My parents were actually Veiled before me," Annie replied.

Jazan nodded. "Okay. So you wanted to follow in their footsteps?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I also came with two of my friends, though they're in the men's barracks."

Jazan raised her eyebrows. "You three must be very close. That's a big step to take together."

Annie smiled. "Yeah, we've been best friends for years. I'd do pretty much anything for them."

"I'll keep a lookout for them. Do you have any personal experience with what we do here at the Veiled?"

Jazan had kept standing, and Annie felt awkward talking up to her, so she stood. It didn't really help, but at least she felt a little more formal. "I'm very good with a bow."

Jazan nodded in appreciation. "That will be very useful. You're a shaga, correct? What are your powers?"

"I have enhanced vision. I can see pretty much anything, including magik."

"That's a powerful gift. At some point we'll talk a little more about that, and see exactly how we can best utilize it." Jazan pulled a small notebook out of the pocket of her robe and took a few quick notes. "Most shaga go through some sort of training with their gift, to make sure they're using it to its full potential. Do you have any questions, Annie?"

"I was curious to know how the missions work. My parents didn't really give much detail."

Jazan folded up her notebook and pocketed it. "You won't have to worry about that much at first. Year one is mostly reserved for training, though you might be assigned one or two excursions."

"And what happens on an excursion?"

"They're mostly assassinations," Jazan explained. "We also do a fair bit of reconnaissance, which your abilities might be very useful for. Though your first one will probably be an assassination so you can get the full experience."

Annie cringed. "Who are the people the Veiled assassinate? Is it just people who stumble on the entrance to the Forest of Life?"

Jazan laughed. “No, no, of course not. We have people stationed to guard the entrance dressed as park rangers. If anyone gets too close we can just order them to leave. These days it’s mostly Outcaster members or sympathizers, people actively working to undermine our own safety.”

About then, two other Veiled walked up. Both were elves, one of them short and skinny with tan-colored skin and dark hair, the other pale with bright green hair and several piercings in her ears and nose.

“Unfortunately I have to cut this conversation short,” Jazan explained. “I have other things I need to get to, but it was nice to meet you Annie.” She smiled and gestured to the two elves beside her. “This is Cara and Rachele. They joined up just a couple months ago, but they should be able to answer any other questions you have.”

With that Jazan excused herself, and Annie shook hands with the two other women.

Rachele, the dark-haired one, gestured towards the adjacent beds. “Mind if we sit? Where are you from?”

They sat and conversed for a while, and Annie felt her anxieties melt away as she laughed with her newfound friends.

—

Back in the boy’s barracks, Rail and Cory were fortunate enough to find adjacent bunks. Both were on the bottom though, which made it difficult for Cory not to hit his head every time he tried to sit up, but they were glad to be near each other. They laid down talking to one another, tired after their long journey.

“Man, I’m sorry. I don’t know how I expected it to be, but not like this.” Cory said.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s only the first day.” Rail responded.

“I guess I figured it would be more like Harry Potter.”

“Well, this is an army, not a school. And we’re not eleven years old.”

Cory turned to face his friend. “You have to admit though that this place is cool. That forest out there had so many cool animals.”

“It was beautiful. What do you think the entrance actually looks like? Is it just a sectioned off bit of the woods?”

“No idea. I bet it’s protected by some kind of magic to keep people from stumbling on it.” He paused. “I hope Annie’s okay.”

Rail reassured him. “She’ll be fine. She can take care of herself.”

“We should go look for her.”

“She could be anywhere though. And I’m really tired. We can find her after I take a nap.”

Cory nodded, “Alright.” Both of them drifted into subconsciousness.

—

Cory was awakened by a sharp pain in his ear. He reached up groggily to see what it was. His hand came back with a rubber band. “What the...?”

“Rise and shine maggots!” Said a high voice from somewhere near the foot of their cots. Cory and Rail both looked up, squinting. At the foot of their beds on the floor stood the same kind of creature Cory had seen earlier. It was extremely skinny, and stood only a foot tall. It wore a miniature version of the standard Veiled cloak with the hood down. It had a large triangular head with two enormous fox-like ears, and was lime green in color with short fur. It twirled a rubber band in its thin fingers.

“Up, up, up! It’s time to get your equipment.”

They sat up grudgingly and began putting on their shoes. “What are you?” Rail asked.

The creature looked slightly annoyed. “I would’ve preferred you to ask *who*, but I’m going to pardon your rudeness, assuming it is due to ignorance. I am Captain Drake. I am a fletcher.

What are your names?”

They told him.

“And what are your powers?”

“I can talk to animals.” Cory said.

“I’m human. I don’t have any powers.” Rail said.

It was extremely strange for Cory to hear Rail to refer to himself as ‘human’, as if Cory were not. But he shrugged it off.

“Human? You’re not a shaga?”

Rail shook his head. “Nope.”

Captain Drake furrowed his brow. “You must leave immediately. Mundanes are not permitted within the Forest of Life, for your own health.”

Cory interrupted. “Toros let us in.”

The little green man looked even more confused. “Toros let you in? Are you sure?”

“If that’s the short blond dude with pointy ears, then yeah.” Cory said impudently.

A rubber band struck him on the cheek. Captain Drake raised a warning finger. “Your impertinence will get you into trouble. Respect your commanding officers. And you’d best get used to pointy ears, they’re pretty common around here.” He started to walk away toward the door. “Come on piles! I haven’t got all day.”

Rail and Cory hurried after him out the door and into the encampment. Despite his size, Captain Drake sure set a pace. The two had to step quickly to keep up. Cory couldn’t help looking around at the various activities the warriors around him were participating in. They all appeared to be busy, bustling from one thing to another. Some sparred, some carried bundles of wood back and forth. They passed an archery range, the targets impossibly far. All wore the mottled green, gray, and brown cloak with the Veiled ice-tree on their shirt. The warriors came in all shapes and sizes, short, tall, broad, skinny, four-legged, furry, feathered. Just about whatever you could imagine. Cory could identify some of the well-known ones, centaurs, fauns,

and lots of elves, but many races were utterly unfamiliar to him.

They reached a large, one-story building towards the middle of the encampment. Captain Drake led them inside.

It looked almost like a large clothing store from the entrance. Deeper in it contained racks of weapons: quivers, knives, bows of various sizes and styles, and a few swords and axes. Captain Drake took them to the racks of camouflage cloaks.

He gestured to a rack on their left. "These are a good human size. Find one that fits. It should reach about mid-calf, you don't want it dragging along the ground."

They were also given an armored brown vest with the Veiled symbol on the front and ties on the shoulders to attach the cloak. Armored pants, boots, and then they got to the cool stuff. The same metal-plated bows with blades on the end that had been pointed at them earlier, a quiver full of arrows that looked like sharp, thin icicles. The most curious item was a knife, about four inches long. It was unlike any knife Cory had seen before. Its blade was wide, rounded, and bright crimson red. Looking at it, Cory realized that only the tip was sharp, its edges were not. The handle was wooden and carved with designs of vines and leaves. Captain Drake took it from his hand.

"This you will only receive on your first assignment, kid. The tip is infused with a gnarl spine. The poison from that spine knocks you out in ten minutes, you're dead within twenty-four hours, and there's only one cure."

"When do we get an assignment?" Asked Rail.

Drake eyed him suspiciously. "Not for a while if you're lucky. First-years usually only get one or two assignments during their trial period, and not until you've been training for several months."

Cory was still curious about the strange daggers. "So what's the cure to the dagger? Do you make some kind of anti-venom?"

"A gnarl itself has to decide that the one who got poisoned is worthy to continue living

and lick the wound.”

“What’s a gnarl?” Cory asked.

Captain Drake explained, “They look like hedgehogs except for two extra pairs of legs. They’re highly magikal. We keep a few of them here and they allow us to use their spines to make these knives.”

Cory turned towards the icicle-shaped arrows, pulling one out to look at it. “So what do these do?”

“We grow those arrows in caves here in the Forest,” Captain Drake explained. “They’re hard as steel and when they hit, they freeze the area around the wound so the victim doesn’t bleed out. They can be very lethal, depending on where you hit, since they can freeze the victim’s internals. But you won’t need those now. Grab a quiver of the wooden arrows and follow me. Let’s see how good your aim is, boy scouts.”

When they arrived at the archery range Annie and several others were there practicing with one of the strangest creatures they’d seen yet. She looked like a moose-a-aur. As they drew close, Cory shouted Annie’s name. She turned, smiling at them. “Rail! Cory!” They ran up and hugged her. “How are you guys doing? This is Jazan by the way, she’s the women’s captain.” Jazan nodded in acknowledgment.

“Nice to meet you both.” She chuckled as Rail and Cory stared up at her incredulously.

“Alright thumbtacks!” Captain Drake interrupted, “Let’s get a move on, you can catch up later.” He led them a little further down the range.

Cory stared at the targets at the end of the field. The bulls-eye was barely big enough to see. Cory just hoped the arrow would go far enough, let alone hit the target. He glanced back ruefully at Annie, who consistently hit the target, but even she missed a few times, despite her extensive experience with bows already. He couldn’t imagine he would do anywhere near as well as her. He imagined taking the spiked bow, running up and stabbing the target instead.

“Draw your bows and show me what you’ve got, boys.” Drake instructed. The two glanced

nervously at each other and complied. Rail's hands shook as he drew the string back, releasing it as quickly as he could. Cory held the arrow back for a second, trying to look down the arrow towards the tiny target. Neither of their arrows made it within 20. Cory's string snapped against his forearm, making him very grateful for the guards built into the leather gloves of their outfits.

Drake didn't look too surprised but the look on his face indicated that he was less than excited to teach them. "Draw another arrow, pigs." he told them. "Rail, you first this time." Drake watched critically. "Slowly now, hold it taut. You're right handed, right? Turn ninety degrees to the right but keep your face and arrow down-range."

He noticed Rail was struggling to hold the position. His breathing was tight and his arms shook. Drake prodded him with a long stick to move Rail's arms into the right position, raising the forward arm and placing his right hand at the corner of his mouth. "Hold that position for a moment, twig." He turned away from Rail to face Cory. Rail's mouth tightened in anger.

Drake then made the same adjustments with Cory, putting his frame in the correct position. "You'll have to aim a little higher in order to get the right distance. Arms up Rail! Take your aim and fire." Neither of their arrows hit the target, but they went the right distance.

"Retrieve arrows!" Jazan shouted.

"Alright maggots go get your arrows. I have things to attend to. Keep practicing until sundown, that's when dinner is served in the mess hall. I don't want to see your faces until then."

Cory's stomach was rumbling already, but it was only forty-five minutes or so until the sun disappeared. Rail complained quite a bit about Captain Drake's unsympathetic manner, but both of them continued practicing. Jazan came over and gave them a demonstration and a few more tips. She was much more kind and patient with them.

The rest of the day was very relaxed. They ate dinner at the mess hall, saying goodbye to

Jazan and Annie.

“Get to bed early!” Jazan called after them. “We have a morning run at sunrise.”

## Chapter 4

### Monsters

“Rise and shine butterflies! Let’s start running!”

Captain Drake’s unwelcome voice broke the darkness in the barracks. Cory and Rail moaned, burying their faces in their pillows. Captain Drake pegged Cory in the ear with a rubber band and jumped on Rail’s head, dodging his groggily swiping hand.

“Come on rosebuds, you don’t run, you don’t eat. Now get your gear on!”

That was enough to get them up. Cory’s stomach was already growling, and no one kept him from his morning meal. As fast as their sleepy eyes let them, they donned their newly acquired gear. By the time they were ready, the rest of the assassins had already headed out the door. They stumbled out as quick as they could. Emerging into the dim light of dawn, they quickly ascertained the direction they were going. Dozens of warriors were jogging off into the forest in a wide line.

“I think it’s a crime to have to run on an empty stomach.” Cory complained, but started jogging after the others.

“But if your stomach is full you get cramps and could throw up.” Rail’s logic ever shutting down Cory’s nonsense.

“Well I don’t mean right after eating, I mean maybe an hour or so afterward. There’s a balance. It reduces the pain.”

“Yeah whatever man.” Normally Rail might have continued the argument, if only to talk about something, but he was definitely not a runner. He was stiff and bony. His legs were strong enough, but his endurance was lacking. He wanted to conserve his energy, not knowing how long this run would be.

Cory dropped the conversation as well, since it was only making him hungrier. He took

the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the woods as the sun's light began to cut through the darkness. Majestic pines formed matrices of green splinters above their heads. Ferns and fungus crowded the roots, pushing for space. But the best part was the critters that skittered among the leaves. Tiny mammals weaved between stalks, most of which Cory did not recognize. Rainbow-spotted frogs crouched among the fungus, their chords joined by a myriad of birdsong and boisterous insects. A family of deer with leaf-covered antlers bounded away from the procession.

He could feel his body being strengthened, and his heart swelled. It was a difficult feeling to describe, but he felt it every time he was in the forest. He felt energized, like he could run faster, jump higher, lift more. Despite the forced run, the hunger, the equipment weighing him down, and the abusive leadership, he felt at peace. The life all around him and within him gave him that. Cory saw a squirrel-like monkey with a bright orange coat shuffle across a branch overhead.

Cory stumbled. He muttered a curse, as Rail laughed at him.

“Watch your step, light bulb!”

Cory raised an eyebrow. “Light bulb? Really?”

“I was trying to pull a Drake.”

“Don't. I have the feeling we won't need any more of that than we already get. You got the voice pretty close though.”

They emerged onto a plain of tall brown grass, the sun finally striking their exposed necks. It looked as if it went on forever, but so had the forest. The stream of cloaked assassins jogging across it wove on until it disappeared among the hills. Once again, animals were everywhere. Pheasant-like birds flapped away, and Cory could have sworn he saw a lion-sized dragon with black scales watching them from the grass.

Cory noticed that Rail's breathing was getting heavy. He placed a hand on his shoulder, “Hey, you doing okay man?”

“This...would be a lot...easier,...if we didn't have to wear...these dumb cloaks!”

Cory smiled. He noticed some antlers bobbing up ahead in the line. “Hey, isn't that our moose-lady friend from yesterday?”

Rail looked up. “It looks like Annie is next to her.”

Cory started to speed up. “Come on, let's go run with her!”

Rail groaned, but followed.

Weaving between the line of cloaked assassins, they pulled up behind Jazan and Annie. Cory jogged up behind her, but she noticed, looking back at them just before Cory tapped her shoulder.

Annie brightened. “Oh Hey! Long time no see.”

Jazan looked back at them as well and flashed a smile. “Good morning.”

Rail steeled himself to ask a question through his labored breathing. “Do you know how long this run goes?”

Jazan answered. “It varies day to day. Usually Toros has a destination in mind.”

Railed groaned again.

Annie changed the subject. “How'd you guys sleep?”

“Not long enough,” Cory said.

Annie raised an eyebrow, “Really? I think we got more sleep than we're usually going to.”

Cory shrugged. “I guess it was more the rude awakening followed by a long run.”

Jazan chuckled. “Yeah, Captain Drake isn't exactly known for his subtleties.”

Up ahead the forest began abruptly again, but now it more closely resembled a northern forest. Deciduous trees were rare, interspersed among pines and small-leafed shrubs. Standing on a low branch next to the trail stood Toros. He seemed to be calling out commands. As they drew closer his words became clear.

“You are not knights, you are not heroes, you are not brothers and sisters. You are hunters, you are shadows, you are the monsters in the nightmares of your enemies...”

The trees blocked the low light again as they continued. Cory furrowed his brow in disapproval. "Who does he think he is?"

"What do you mean?" Jazan asked.

"Well... who is he to tell us who we are and who we're not? I'm not a monster, and I don't ever want to be."

Jazan's tone was that of warning. "He's our superior commander, you'll do better if you don't question his authority. I'm going to check on some of the others, are you good for now, Annie?"

Annie nodded, "Of course."

Jazan jogged ahead. Cory waited until she was out of earshot before speaking again.

"Is it just me, or are all the leaders here afraid of Toros?"

Annie disagreed. "They're not afraid of him, Cory, they respect him as their leader."

"So it's alright for him to turn us into monsters? That doesn't raise any alarm bells for anyone but me?"

"It's just a training exercise. Of course he doesn't expect us to act like monsters, but we are assassins. Our enemies may well see us as monsters."

That settled better in Cory's mind. A little anyway. "Alright. But still, what gives Toros the right to do whatever he wants? I don't like him."

"You don't have to like him, you just have to do what he says. He's done a lot for the Veiled, including leading them through several key victories against the Outcasters."

Cory eyed her sideways. "How do you know all this? Did your parents teach you that much?"

Annie hesitated. "A little, and Jazan was telling me some things last night."

"Where are your parents, by the way?" Cory asked. "I thought they were going to be here today."

Annie chuckled. "There's no way they woke up as early as we did, not on vacation. They'll

probably be there when we get back.”

“Hey, you never told us what you talked to Toros about that made him decide to let us in.”

Annie opened her mouth to respond, but then Rail tripped, catching himself on the ground. Cory and Annie stopped to help. They’d been talking enough that they hadn’t noticed how much Rail was struggling to keep up. All three stopped, nearly causing them to be run over by a hairy minotaur and an elf.

“Do you need a break, man?” Cory asked, his hand on Rail’s shoulder.

Rail struggled to respond between breaths, “I’ll be fine. How much further do we have to go?”

Annie and Cory looked ahead, but they couldn’t see beyond the next bend in the path. The line of assassins stretched beyond their vision in both directions.

“What do you think they’d do to us if we just turned back?” Cory asked.

Annie shook her head, “They said if we don’t run we don’t eat.” She looked around again. “Plus, I don’t know where we are. We might go in a circle, and turning back would just take longer.”

“Ow!” Rail reached up to his ear and found a rubber band. Cory felt one hit his ear as well, just as they spotted Captain Drake, not running on the ground, but jumping from tree to tree.

“Hurry up, loafers! You’re almost there.”

They watched him run off along the branches. “Well that answers that question. Are you good to go, Rail?”

Rail nodded, and they began to jog again, this time in silence. It was less than five minutes before the trees opened up again, and they found themselves standing in a crowd of hundreds of Veiled assassins, some standing, but most sitting among the grass. Cory saw a giant sitting along the edge of the crowd. Toros stood at the front, watching the last of the army coming in, his hands clasped behind his back. The big polynesian, Tahitoa, sat nearby.

The three of them sat near the back catching their breath. Toros stood on the edge of a cliff, a waterfall roaring in the background. The sun was on their left, just reaching above the trees.

Before long Toros pulled out what looked like a tree root in the shape of a megaphone and put it to his lips. His voice came ringing through the clearing, magikally enhanced by his tree-phone.

“Good morning hooded defenders! I hope your run was refreshing, and you are ready for the day. Today we have two new excursion assignments planned, your captains will approach you at breakfast if you have been selected. As for the rest of you, train hard. There isn’t much cleanup to be done, I expect it to be finished before noon. Captain Shepherd has some thoughts before we dismiss for breakfast.”

A tree stepped up next to Toros. Cory shook his head. It wasn’t a tree, but a man. He was broad and muscular, much taller than Toros. His face and skin were the color and texture of bark. He wore the same armor and cloak of the Veiled, but his hair was made up of red-orange leaves which fluttered in the wind.

Cory heard Annie breathe in next to him and say “wow.”

Cory looked at her strangely.

“What?” she said defensively. “I can’t appreciate a beautiful dryad?”

Cory was about to respond, but the dryad started speaking through Toros’ megaphone.

“Good morning soldiers.” Cory could see it now. This Captain Shepherd was strange-looking, but he had an incredible figure and a face that was somehow strong but also inviting. Even his voice was beautiful, reminding Cory of wind flowing through trees.

“Behind me is the largest waterfall in the Forest of Life. I know you can’t see it from there, but look at the mist. Look over the desert rocks behind me.”

He stepped aside and extended a hand, as if unveiling his own masterpiece. Because of the angle they couldn’t see much, but they could see mist flowing up over the cliffside, and Cory

thought he could even see the glare of the sun on the ocean.

“I hope you never become too focused on your goals and training that you forget to look around you. This is the reason we fight. Some will tell you it's for survival, but I disagree. We fight to preserve this beautiful world we live in. This is real beauty, the truest art. So, if you are wondering why push yourself so hard, remember it is this beauty that we are protecting. This is why we fight.

He handed the mega-root back to Toros, who again raised it to his mouth. “Breakfast is first come, first served! Godspeed and fly true!”

Toros hooked his magik cone to his belt and back-flipped off the edge of the cliff. A second later a pair of massive wings ascended into the sky, Toros between them. A griffin, with a massive eagle's beak and the golden hindquarters of a lion let out an eagle cry with the rumble of a roar. The griffin ascended into the sky and flew off the way they had come, Toros bent over its back.

Several others took off across the grass back in the direction of camp. A whole herd of minotaurs stampeded toward the woods. What appeared to be a cheetah running on its hind legs was the only one to outstrip them. Cory saw Captain Shepherd run straight into a tree and disappear into the bark. Most of the others started a little slower, taking the same path as the way they came. Many went to the cliff's edge to get a better look at the waterfall.

“Come on”, said Jazan. “You need to see this.”

Together the four of them approached the cliff's edge. Where the river found the cliffside the ledge formed a right angle with the waterfall tucked into the corner. As they came closer they discovered the reason they had come. At the edge of the cliff the waterfall spanned about twenty feet across, but the height dwarfed the breadth. The water dropped an impossibly long distance, the bottom of it unseeable through the mist which floated in a great triangular sail to the valley below, catching the wind which battered it against the rocks below. This caused torrents of wet air to buffet their faces and their cloaks to billow violently behind them. As the

morning sun continued to rise, the light caught the watery sail, forming fiery rainbows across the red-rocked cliff.

Suddenly, hundreds of birds launched from the face below them, diving, swooping, fighting their way through the burning water. The wind and mist had saturated the face of the rock beneath their feet, causing a unique ecosystem to take root. Blankets upon blankets of bright-green algae clung to the wet rocks, weaving in and out of holes and nooks filled with even brighter clusters of ferns. Behind these ferns dozens of birds took refuge. Puffins, cliff swallows, seagulls, and shearwaters, birds generally found only near the sea, all nested together on the vast green below their feet. Cory could see many of them diving down towards the wide river below, plucking fish from the flowing waters.

Beyond the falls in the valley below stood a myriad of towers, plateaus, and buttes of brick-red rock. Looking further towards the horizon the towers of rock transitioned into sea stacks and arches surrounded by the pounding surf of the ocean. Or was it a lake? It was hard to tell at that distance, but it was a large body of water, glistening brilliantly in the sun.

Cory looked on in wonder. Weren't they supposedly still within Redwoods National park? How was this possible? Maybe this was a micro-world, shrinking down any who entered to fit within its limited space. Or maybe it was a portal to another planet, or a separate dimension. The power of magik seemed to be nearly limitless, allowing for otherwise impossible land formations, combinations of ecosystems all in close proximity, fantastic creatures with incredible abilities, and defying the laws of nature and physics. Cory felt resentment growing in his chest.

At first he wondered why. Why would such an incredible, beautiful experience cause him to feel anger? He quickly realized it was because of his parents. For so long they had kept this all from him. Told him he was special, and unique. But any ability he could dream up paled in comparison to what he saw at that moment. His eyes watered, and not from the spray of the mist. Why? Why would they keep this from him? Whatever danger they had claimed to be

protecting him from was certainly worth risking for experiences like this.

“Cory, are you crying?” Annie asked curiously. All three of the other’s heads turned to stare. Rail raised an eyebrow.

Cory wiped his cheek with his sleeve and took a breath. “Yeah. But I’m alright. Let’s head back before all the food is gone.” He smiled at them.

There proved to be more than enough food left, the Veiled weren’t insane enough to starve any of their soldiers, but there may have been a fault of appetite. The run had been long, and none of the three friends were cross-country runners. Rail nearly puked on the way back, falling to his hands and knees in the woods. But there wasn’t much in his stomach anyway. The three of them staggered into the mess hall to grab some breakfast. It was nothing extravagant, a cafeteria style line with a few different selections.

Some of the options were completely unfamiliar, coming in a myriad of colors and shapes. But they were gratefully able to recognize eggs and sausage. Cory and Rail both tried some of the unknown vegetable-looking things, though Annie turned up her nose.

After they had dished up, Annie noticed her parents walk through the door. They waved to the three friends, and they all sat down at a table together near a corner.

Annie’s father leaned forward. “So, how was the run this morning?”

Annie grimaced. Rail chuckled darkly.

Mrs. Stone laughed. “You’ll be conditioned soon enough. It comes faster than you’d think. Where did you run to?”

Cory responded around a mouthful of chicken. “A really cool, huge waterfall with a bunch of birds on the cliffs.”

Mr. Stone nodded, and Mrs. Stone put a hand to her chest. “That’s one of my favorite places!” then she leaned forward conspiratorially. “We actually made out there once.”

Rail laughed aloud. Annie’s eyes bugged out. “Is that allowed?” she asked.

“Relationships aren’t against the rules, though they are discouraged.” Mrs. Stone puffed

out her chest and imitated a stuffy, authoritative voice. “Romantic entanglements must never distract from your duties or your training!’ But what are they going to do? Forbid kissing?”

Mr. Stone pointed a finger at Annie. “Don’t think that’s an excuse for you though, young lady. I don’t want any shenanigans. You listen well to your leaders and obey what they tell you.”

Annie nodded. “Yes, of course I will Daddy, come on. Who do you think I am?”

Cory caught her mother wink at her behind a sip of water. Annie blushed.

“What are your plans for the day?” Cory asked.

Mr. Stone leaned back. “We’re mostly here to see some old friends, so you won’t have to see too much of us. But we’ll check up on you guys throughout the day. Do you know what they have planned for you?”

Cory glanced at the other two, who shook their heads. “They haven’t told us anything.”

Mr. Stone nodded. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Toros likes to keep people in the dark. But you’ll find out soon enough.”

They continued to chat as they finished their lunch. Rail finished first and laid his head down on the table with a groan. That was when Jazan walked up, her antlers nearly brushing the ceiling.

“No naps!” She said cheerfully. “Put your trays away and meet in the east field. You guys have hand-to-hand combat with me today. See you there in four minutes!”

That woke Cory up a little. Hand-to-hand could be fun. They said goodbye to Annie’s parents and he arose to put away his tray. The other two groggily followed suit.

—

At the east field they found Jazan standing with a spiked bow in her hands, and about ten others standing in front of her. As soon as they arrived she began.

“It seems that everyone is here! Let’s get started.” She lifted the bow in her hands,

showing it to them. “Everyone say hello to our newest additions: Rail, Annie, and Cory.” Several of the others turned to look at them. They smiled politely at the others. The group was a motley crew, made up mostly of elves and humans, a satyr, and one that looked like a bipedal tiger.

Jazan continued. “Now that you know who your targets are, let me explain the rules to them.” The three looked up in alarm. Did she say targets? “The way of the Veiled is assassination. We work in the shadows and strike when the enemy doesn’t expect it. This bow is a weapon designed specifically for this purpose. It is modified with metal plating and blades on the ends for close combat, which makes carrying larger blades such as swords unnecessary. Today we’ll be training with modified wooden versions.” She pointed toward a pile of wooden bows. They appeared to have the ends wrapped in animal skin for a little padding. But still, Cory hoped they wouldn’t be actually hitting each other with them.

“Go get one!” Jazan was smiling once again. Cory was looking at the bow in his hands, thinking about how inconvenient it would be to fight with it strung when Jazan shouted, “Begin!”

He felt a sharp jab in his lower back. He rubbed it, and glanced back, irritated. A broad-shouldered man who stood behind him shrugged, looking highly unapologetic. “D-dead,” he stuttered, and ran after Annie, who seemed to be the only one not “dead” out of the three. She was backing away, parrying stabs from two of the other trainees. Pretty soon, a couple of them got behind her and she had no chance to block them. He expected them to let up and Jazan to say something, but as soon as Annie had been hit they ran back at Cory and Rail. This time, Jazan shouted instructions to them.

“Keep your bows up! Hands apart for stability. Guard your head and torso!”

Cory tried it. This time he was able to block a few blows, but they quickly got on both sides of him.

“You’ll lose every time if you get cornered.” Jazan counseled. “Move around so that doesn’t happen, run if you have to. We do it every morning for a reason.”

Frustrated, Rail shouted at Jazan, “How long are you going to let them hit us?”

“Until you hit them first.”

“Shouldn’t you teach us something first?”

“I believe in learning on the job.”

Rail groaned loudly as he was hit once again.

—

Forty-five minutes later sweat rolled down Cory’s bruises. He’d lost count of how many times he had been “killed”. Annie managed to keep them at bay for several minutes, dodging, and swinging her bow in a way Cory had never imagined could be done with a bow. But none of them had managed to place a hit without getting blocked. And these were the newest of the Veiled!

Finally Jazan called for a water break. A spigot was nearby, and they took turns sticking their mouths underneath. After the three had drank they huddled together.

“I swear, if she makes us do that again I’ll throw my bow at her.” Rail complained.

“She’s just trying to keep us from getting killed.” reasoned Annie. “I’ve learned quite a bit by observing the others.”

Cory looked at the ground thoughtfully. “I think I have an idea. It’s simple, but it might work.”

He hurriedly explained his plan as Jazan shouted for them to regroup.

They gathered into a semi-circle facing Jazan. She scanned all of them once. “Go”.

Cory barely avoided getting hit in the neck as the assassin next to him swung his bow. “Forget this!” He shouted, and took off running towards the forest. Annie and Rail weren’t far behind, but Rail was still exhausted from the morning run, and from fighting all morning. He was caught before they even reached the trees. As soon as they entered the woods Cory felt

energized. His legs began to pound faster, and he laughed out loud. He didn't look back, concentrating instead on not tripping over tree roots..

Quickly as he could he ducked to one side behind a wide sycamore. After several seconds Annie rushed past, not even glancing to her right as she passed Cory's hiding spot. He heard leaves crunching under the feet of someone not far behind her. Waiting for just the right moment, he stuck out his bow. The hooves of the satyr they'd been fighting were tangled in the string, nearly tearing it from Cory's grip. The sure-footed creature stumbled, recovering quickly. But by that point Cory had already delivered a blow to its back, knocking it to the ground. It rolled over, raising its hands in surrender.

"Alright, you got me." Its voice rumbled from deep in its throat, but was higher than Cory would have expected. Annie halted at the same time as the three other soldiers still making chase all staring at the downed satyr.

"Are you going to help me up or not?"

Cory looked down, trying to swallow the resentment he felt toward the other recruits. It was hard to help someone up after they had been beating on you for an hour. But he extended his arm anyway, taking the furry hand of the satyr he had knocked down, who nodded in thanks.

When they reached the clearing again, the remaining four who had given up the chase were arguing with Jazan, as Rail sat on the ground, gingerly holding his shoulder. All of them went silent as the six others stepped out of the woods.

"He got me Jazan, the tall one. He pulled a pretty smart move, going for me while I was concentrating on the girl. I should have been more aware of my surroundings."

Jazan smiled at Cory brightly, but as soon as it was there it was gone and her commanding voice was back. "Rhuftog, you know what that means."

The satyr nodded grudgingly and dropped to the ground, starting to do push-ups. "How many?"

“Until I stop you. The rest of you have earned two hours of free time, I’m going to talk to the greenies.” The others, except for Rhuftog, yelped in excitement and trotted off towards the barracks, slapping each other’s shoulders. Jazan approached the other three, that bright smile once again on her face. “So? What did you guys think?”

Annie, Cory, and Rail glanced around at each other.

Rail spoke up first. “It was annoying. And painful.”

Jazan nodded. “Okay. What was annoying about it?”

“It was frustrating. I kept getting hit with sticks.”

“Okay,” Jazan said again, “But why? Why did you keep getting hit? What was it that made it frustrating?”

“I didn’t know what I was doing.” Cory said. “I think I’ve used a bow twice ever, and it wasn’t like this.”

Annie piped in. “We were outmatched. They had the advantage of skill and numbers, and they’ve done this exercise before.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“We didn’t get a rest”, Cory suggested. “Even though we were ‘dead’ they kept coming at us.”

“And how were you able to get out of that situation?”

“We finally got a break, and made a plan”, said Rail.

“We ran away”, Cory said.

Jazan pointed at them. “Right, so how does this equate to a real battle scenario? What did you learn?”

Rail looked at the ground, rolling his eyes. “I’m nowhere near ready.”

Jazan nodded excitedly, which seemed rather an inappropriate way to respond to Rail’s concerns. “Yes, you’re right, you’re not ready. But you were able to win anyway.”

“Well I didn’t do anything, I just got killed again.” Rail said angrily.

“Yes, but your team won, and that’s what’s important. What else?”

“We don’t need experience, we just need to trick our opponents?” suggested Cory.

Annie rolled her eyes. “The advantage goes to the one who plans, not necessarily who has more numbers, skill, or experience.”

Jazan nodded. “Yes, Annie’s right. Even the newest recruit could beat the best warrior in the world if they are able to plan ahead and be smart. The way of the assassin grants the advantage to the one who plans ahead, no matter what the weapons are, or how big the army. What we do here in the Forest of Life is make those plans, as well as become better soldiers to give us every advantage we can get in every fight.”

—

Cory swirled his drink absent-mindedly.

“Cory you don’t have to swirl it, it’s not a scotch.” Rail said through a mouth full of mashed potatoes.

Cory grunted, shook himself out of his thoughts and downed his cup of lukewarm water.

“Are you alright?” Annie said. “You seem kind of out of it.”

After the others left, Jazan had continued drilling them on how to use the bow properly in hand-to-hand for two more hours. Cory appreciated what Jazan had been teaching them, it was helpful. But Cory still couldn’t help but think about the things she’d said. These people supposedly protected this beautiful forest, but the way they did it was by tricking and murdering people. It was only their second day, so hopefully it would get better.

He figured he knew Annie’s thoughts on the matter, so he shrugged. “Just thinking. I—”

“Mind if we join you?” It was Rhuftog, the satyr from earlier, accompanied by two of the other trainees. Both were elves, a guy with reddish hair, and a girl with black hair. Rail raised an eyebrow, but Annie scooted over to make room for them at the table.

After a moment's silence Cory muttered an apology. "Hey, sorry I tripped you earlier."

Rhuftog waved his fork in the air, somehow managing to keep a piece of spinach attached to the end. "Don't apologize, you should be celebrating your victory!"

"All I did was trip you. You beat me every time on even ground."

The satyr leaned his snout over the table. "But it wasn't even ground. I have more experience and skill than you. Faced with one of the other soldiers with more experience I would have lost just as easily. Don't beat yourself up, you'll learn. All of us are still learning." He noisily slurped down his own cup of water. He then got up from the table. They were astounded to see that he had already finished his meal, even while talking with them. He leaned down to them once again and whispered, "You'll find that the faster you eat, the more time you have to yourself. We're headed to the Ice Cave."

Rail furrowed his brow. "What's the Ice Cave?"

Rhuftog smiled and patted Rail's shoulder. "When you get some free time I'll show you. See you around!"

Cory, Annie, and Rail looked at each other as Rhuftog and the two elves walked away.

"What do you think he meant?" Cory asked. "Do they go hang out in a cave?"

"Well let's go see what he's up to," Annie said excitedly, downing her last bit of beef.

They hurriedly put away their trays and followed after Rhuftog. Before they had gone ten steps they heard a familiar voice calling after them.

"Where do you think you're going, cadets?"

They groaned and turned, looking down to see Captain Drake standing with his hands on his hips.

"We were just-"

"Oh I don't actually care," He interrupted. "You're late for archery practice, fuzzballs! And you know what that means!"

The three looked at each other, shrugging. They had no idea what that meant, but the

captain was already jogging away.

It meant push-ups. Lots of push-ups, followed by hours of archery practice.

By evening. Cory's fingers had been rubbed raw by his bowstring.

The three friends had finally been given a break for dinnertime. Captain Drake had given them an ointment to spread on their fingertips to help them heal. Annie's parents walked in soon afterwards and sat with them.

"How did the day go?" asked Mr. Stone.

Rail held up his hands, showing the rubbed-red marks on his fingertips.

Mr. Stone nodded. "I remember those days. You'll build up calluses pretty quick. Plus they make you practice more at the beginning."

"That's comforting I suppose," Cory mumbled.

"What did they have you do for exercise?" asked Annie's mother.

Rail responded. "You mean besides running in the morning, being beaten by other recruits for several hours—"

"What I mean is," interrupted Mrs. Stone. "When we were here they gave us an hour or two after lunch for exercise. At least, that's what we were supposed to use it for."

"Captain Drake had us do push-ups," Annie responded. "And some other exercises after lunch. But he said it was because we were late for archery practice."

Mrs. Stone rolled her eyes. "He's just messing with you. Nobody can practice archery for five hours straight."

Mr. Stone nodded in agreement. "In the future they'll give you about two hours before that to exercise how you want. I usually went to their outdoor gym, but there are other options."

"So what did a normal day look like for you?" Rail asked.

"Well," Mr. Stone thought. "There was nearly always a run in the morning, then breakfast. At the beginning we spent quite a bit of the day training in hand-to-hand and the like. Later that changed to team trainings."

Mrs. Stone continued. "Then we had lunch, an hour or two of exercise time, then target practice until dinner. After that we had a few hours until it got dark, which was normally free."

"What sort of things did you do during free time?" Annie asked.

Mr Stone glanced up at a clock on the wall. "We should really get going, make sure the boys are still alive. Do you want to walk with us back towards the exit?"

The three friends nodded, hurriedly shoving down a few more bites and putting away their trays. They emerged into the compound and started walking towards Commander Toros' cabin.

"In answer to your question," Mr Stone continued. "I usually took the opportunity to nap since stealth training and night games happened during the night."

Mrs Stone shook her head ruefully. "And you missed out on so much because of that." She turned towards them. "Free time in the evening was when the fun happened. The soldiers got together and we'd dance and play games every night. They'll give you extra time for sleeping occasionally."

Cory's interest was piqued. "Where did you do stuff like that? I haven't seen anyone doing anything but training and eating."

They passed a bell set in an iron arch in the middle of a ring of buildings. Cory could see inscriptions in a language he didn't understand carved into the metal of the arch.

Mrs. Stone shrugged. "I'm sure the customs have changed over the last eighteen years. But ask the other soldiers, if they're nice they'll let you know."

"Of course," interjected Mr. Stone. "This was a normal day. Any of it could change if you're assigned guard duty, an assassination excursion, or something like that."

"Or during the Olympics," said Mrs. Stone excitedly.

"They stop training for the Olympics?" Rail asked, confused.

Mrs. Stone shook her head. "Not the worldwide, mundane Olympics. The Veiled Olympics."

“They hold a special event every summer,” Mr. Stone explained. “Where soldiers compete in a myriad of athletic events. It’s quite exciting. I think we just missed it actually, it probably would have been about a month ago.”

Mrs. Stone continued excitedly. “It was accompanied by dancing, parties, and all sorts of festivities which hardly ever happen otherwise.”

“I got a silver medal in one of the events one year,” Mr. Stone said proudly. “Arm wrestling. Only got beat out by a minotaur.”

Mrs. Stone smiled and wrapped her hands around her husband’s arm. “That was when I realized how sexy your father really is.”

Thankfully that was when they reached the commander’s cabin, where one of Toros’ cousins was waiting, blindfolds in hand.

Mrs. Stone turned towards the three friends, beaming. “Be sure to take some time to write us letters. They have a mail office, you know, just over there behind the barracks.” She then hugged her daughter in a tight embrace. “You’re going to do great here.”

“Thanks mom,” Annie responded. “I love you.”

Cory and Rail stood awkwardly for a moment, until Mr. Stone opened his arms wide to Cory. “Well, good luck boys.”

Cory looked at him strangely, but accepted the hug. He couldn’t remember Mr. Stone ever hugging him before. As they embraced, Cory felt a flow of warm energy. He suddenly felt invigorated and safe. Cory looked at Mr. Stone strangely, but the shorter man didn’t acknowledge that anything strange had happened.

They did an awkward shuffle as both the Stone parents hugged each of them in turn. Rail raised his eyebrows at Cory overtop of Mr. Stone’s head, and Cory shrugged. Cory couldn’t tell if Rail felt anything strange. Maybe it was just in his head, or it was something from the magik forest.

The elf then blindfolded Annie’s parents and started marching them off into the woods.

The three friends watched them go for a moment.

“Well I don’t know about you,” Annie said. “But I’m exhausted. I think I’ll go to bed early.”

Rail and Cory both nodded, and they returned to their separate barracks.

—

A few days later, Cory spent a good portion of a day with Captain Shepherd, the handsome dryad. A dozen other soldiers accompanied them, including Rhuftog the satyr, and John Joseph, a human shaga from their same training group. They’d be helping the captain with some of his duties to care for the forest.

They carried with them axes, saws, and ropes for cutting and hauling wood. They made their way off into the forest, hiking for about an hour before the Captain stopped them. He then pointed out several trees which he wanted cut down, marking them with orange spray paint. Cory had no idea why he’d chosen these trees, it seemed completely random.

Cory paired up with Rhuftog and grabbed a saw. The two began sawing at one of the trees Captain Shepherd had pointed out. The captain came over and gave them a few pointers, making sure they sawed on the side they wanted the tree to fall (away from the group) first, then finish on the other side.

As they began pulling the saw back and forth, Cory saw their dryad captain walk over to John Joseph and gesture for him to follow. The bulky shaga followed him off into the woods.

“What’s Captain Shepherd doing with John Joseph?” Cory asked.

Rhuftog glanced over towards them. “Oh John Joseph is a shaga. Captain is going to get to know his gift, and try to help him learn to use it better.”

Cory nodded. “Oh okay. Is he going to do that with me?”

“That’s probably why he brought you along today in the first place,” Rhuftog said. “Most shaga have some kind of training with their captain, if only to figure out how they can put your

gift to best use.”

“What about you?” Cory asked. “Did you do any magik training?”

Rhuftog looked at him strangely. “Well no, I’m just a satyr. I can’t be a shaga. How do you not know this?”

“I told you before, my parents didn’t tell me anything about magik. This is all new to me.”

Rhuftog nodded. “Oh, right. Your parents are scared of magik, so they tried to hide it from you, right?”

Cory shrugged. “More or less. They never really tried to hide it, they just acted like it’s evil. But why can’t a satyr be a shaga?”

“Only the five blessed races can be shaga,” Rhuftog explained. “Elves, humans, dwarves, sei, and nymphoids. Other races can’t.”

“How come?” Cory asked.

Rhuftog raised his furry brow at Cory. “I don’t know, that’s just how it works. It has something to do with the Earth Angels, they’re the ones who blessed them in the first place.”

“Sorry,” Cory apologized. “I know I’m asking a lot of questions.”

Rhuftog shook his head. “It’s alright, I don’t mind. It’s just... odd to me that your parents would have kept so much from you. They sound almost like Outcaster sympathizers.”

The two paused in their sawing to take a water break, and sat down on the leafy ground.

Cory shrugged. “They were actually Shadowcasters I think, not Outcasters. But they got hurt. My dad was paralyzed from the waist down in a battle, and my mom... She never told me what happened to her, but they blame magik for it. They think it’s dangerous, and they’re probably right. But... normal people get paralyzed too. They were soldiers for crying out loud, why do they blame it on magik?”

Rhuftog took a swig of water and stood up. “I don’t know Cory. It seems like strange reasoning to me. But the magikal world is dangerous, especially now and in the Americas. Four warring factions, assassins... there’s a lot of conflict. Has been for years.”

Cory nodded and the two began sawing at the tree again. “Yeah, but there are so many beautiful things too. On the way here I saw the wind blow through a tree, and it created thousands of bubbles.”

Rhuftog smiled. “Ah yes, bubble trees. They are quite beautiful. Well, if you have any questions, feel free to ask. I will answer with whatever I know.”

“Thank you,” Cory said. “Actually there were two things you mentioned, like the earth angels? What are those?”

“Earth angels are extremely powerful magikal beings that are associated with specific things, like emotions, or elements. There’s an angel of love, an angel of death, of time, and lots of others.”

“Huh. And you said they’re the ones who blessed humans, elves, dwarves... and what were the other two?”

“Sei and nymphoids,” Rhuftog repeated. “You probably haven’t seen any of those here, have you?”

Cory shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. What do they look like?”

“Sei are bird-like people. They have bright colors, wings, and feathers, and they live on clouds. Nymphoids are amphibious, they can breathe underwater and have bluish, slimy skin.”

Cory nodded. That was so cool! “So Sei are bird-people, and nymphoids are frog-people?”

Rhuftog shook his head. “They don’t look quite like frogs, but—”

Just then John Joseph approached and tapped Cory on the shoulder, pointing off into the trees.

“C-Cory? Captain wants to s-see you.”

Cory stepped away and John Joseph took his place at the saw.

The tall shaga walked off into the trees in the direction John Joseph had pointed. He breathed in the clean forest air, feeling the energy of magik empower him.

It didn’t take long to find Captain Shepherd. The handsome dryad stood among the

leaves with a clipboard in hand. He looked up as Cory approached.

“Ah, Coryther Thomas. Do you know why I’ve called you away?”

Cory nodded. “I assume we’re going to do some kind of training with my shaga abilities.”

“Ability,” the Captain corrected, holding up a finger. “All shaga only have one ability.”

Cory wasn’t sure about that, though he didn’t say anything. After all, he was telepathic, and he could use the abilities of other creatures. He would have called that two abilities, though they were connected. Cory also felt stronger when he was in magikal areas, particularly forests. Other shaga he’d talked to didn’t seem to experience anything similar, so he’d assumed that must be something unique to him.

“So,” began the captain again in his smooth voice. “Tell me about your shaga ability.”

“Well, I can communicate telepathically with creatures near me, and if they give me permission, I can use their abilities.”

Captain Shepherd took notes on his clipboard. “When you say ‘near you’ what do you mean? How close do they have to be?”

Cory shrugged. “I haven’t nailed it down to a certain distance, but it’s about a stone’s throw.”

Captain Shepherd raised an eyebrow. “Okay. Can you communicate with me telepathically now?”

Cory shrugged and obliged, reaching out to the captain’s mind. He stood only a few feet away, so it wasn’t hard to find him. *Can you hear me?*

Yes, came the reply. *That is rather unsettling. Can you hear me in return?*

Cory nodded. That didn’t translate through their telepathy, but the dryad stood just a few feet away and could clearly see him.

*Good,* replied the captain. *I’m going to start walking away. Close your eyes and continue communicating with me until we cannot hear each other in our minds.*

*Okay,* Cory replied, closing his eyes. *Start walking I guess. What do you want to talk about?*

Cory heard the ground crunch as the dryad started to walk away. *Are there any other limits to your telepathy besides distance?*

*Like what kind of limits?*

*It's your gift, you tell me. Can you communicate with any creature?*

Cory shook his head. *Well no, I guess not. They have to have some kind of brain waves or nerve impulses. I can't talk to plants or microbes. I tried talking to some jellyfish at an aquarium one time and I couldn't hear a thing.*

*Okay. Any other limits?*

Cory thought for a moment. *Well, people often don't let me telepath with them. They have to let me in in order to communicate. Kind of like I have to have permission to use their abilities.*

Cory heard some kind of reply in his mind, but it came through jumbled and quiet. Cory opened his eyes and saw that the captain had already stopped walking away. He stood a ways off. Because of his tree-like appearance, he would have been nearly impossible to find if Cory hadn't known about where he was from communicating with him.

The dryad was walking back to him. Cory started approaching as well, but Captain Shepherd held up a hand to stop him.

"About fifty paces by my count," Captain Shepherd said as they came back together.

"One other thing," Cory said. "I could tell more or less where you were while I was communicating with you."

The dryad made some more notes on his clipboard and nodded. "That could actually be very useful. Even in the dark or inside a room, you could potentially become aware of someone even without seeing them, is that correct?"

Cory nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Great. Tell me about how you are able to use the abilities of other creatures. You say they have to give you permission?"

Cory nodded. "Yeah, usually I reach out to them with my telepathy and ask if I can use

their abilities. Some creatures will just let me use them right off the bat, some don't let me at all. People usually don't even let me communicate with them in the first place."

"What do you mean 'let you?' Do they have to give verbal permission?"

Cory shook his head. "Not really. So long as I ask, they can just sort of... let me in? Like they're opening a gate."

The captain cocked his head. "Okay. Do you just get one of their abilities, or do you gain multiple of the creature's abilities?"

"I can do either," Cory explained. "I can use just one ability, like flight or something like that, or I can gain several like strength, speed, eyesight, hearing, whatever."

"You can fly? Why do you not use that more often?"

Cory shrugged sheepishly. "Flying is hard. I've tried it a couple times and I've always hurt myself."

The captain laughed aloud. "Okay. So you gain their abilities, but not necessarily the knowledge of how to use them? Well I want you to work on that, alright? Flight can be very useful. How long can you keep a creature's abilities for? Is there a limit?"

"Sort of," Cory explained. "I can keep it up pretty much all day, though it starts to get tiring. I lose any abilities I was using if I fall asleep, or if I start channeling abilities from a different creature."

"Alright. Could you give me a demonstration?"

They continued like this for another half hour. Cory reached out to creatures in the area, describing everything aloud and answering questions. He channeled the climbing ability of a nearby squirrel and scaled a tree in seconds. At the end, even Cory had a much better understanding of how his abilities worked.

"I think that's all I have time for," said the captain. "But I have two assignments for you, alright?"

Cory nodded. "Okay."

The dryad held up a bark-colored finger. "One, I want you to use your telepathy constantly. At all times reach out to the area around you, if only so you are aware of what creatures are nearby. This may save your life, and the lives of others."

Cory took a deep breath, but nodded. That would take a lot of mental exercise.

"Two," continued the captain. "I want you to channel the abilities of other creatures whenever you can, especially in training exercises or on excursions. Use whatever advantage you can get from the creatures around you, and practice using them like we have done today. I will check on your progress, but I probably won't have time to train you directly again. Alright?"

Cory nodded.

Captain Shepherd looked at him sideways. "You know people usually salute me. That would be a good habit to get into."

"Right, sorry sir," Cory said, giving a half-hearted salute.

Captain Shepherd sighed and dismissed him.

## Chapter 5

### Flagboys

Two weeks later, Cory and Rail crouched in the dark.

They kept their eyes on the surrounding forest, though there was nothing to see. A glowing flag sat on a pole between them. Each had their bow in hand, an arrow knocked with a bulbous tip covered in glowing paint.

“This is stupid,” said Rail.

“Agreed,” said Cory.

“We’ve done this same thing the past three nights, and all we do is stand here and get shot by arrows. We’re nothing more than body alarms.”

“I said I agreed with you,” said Cory. “You don’t have to explain it to me.”

“And how come Annie gets to go out and help get the other teams’ flag while we have to sit here? We’re just as experienced as she is.”

“Not with a bow we’re not,” Cory countered. “She’s a million times better at that than either of us.”

“Well sure, but they could at least give us a chance. I bet I could sneak up close to their flag without getting shot.”

Cory had to concede that point. They spent most nights practicing stealth, sometimes in different terrains throughout the area. Rail had proven very gifted at it.

“Maybe,” Cory responded. “But could you make it back with a glowing flag?”

“I could just hide the thing under my cloak.”

“Is that allowed? I thought the point was for the flag carrier to be super visible so their teammates have to defend them.”

Rail shrugged. “If it wasn’t explicitly forbidden, then it’s not cheating, its strategy.”

“Somebody has to stay here by the flag.”

“Well we could at least stay hidden and watch, rather than sitting out in the open. I thought you said you agreed with me?”

“I do!” exclaimed Cory. “I just... I’m trying to be better about not complaining.”

Rail nodded, though Cory could hardly see it in the dark. “I suppose complaining about it doesn’t do any good. It makes me feel better though.”

“Yeah, I know. I feel like a lot of the more experienced soldiers purposefully treat newer ones like we’re dirt. Which doesn’t make any sense if they want us to stay.”

“It doesn’t even feel like it’s just the new guys!” Rail exclaimed. “I swear they target me specifically.”

“I don’t think it’s just you, man.” Though part of Cory wondered. By now it was pretty common knowledge to the soldiers they interacted with on a regular basis that Rail had no powers, no magik at all. Were they prejudiced against him specifically? They claimed that when a mundane person spent too much time with magikal creatures or in magikal areas, it started to mess with their mind, to make them sick. But Cory hadn’t noticed Rail getting sick at all. Except for throwing up from running of course, but that was happening less and less now. Mr. Stone had said that Rail might have magikal ancestry somewhere, but was it possible that the cancer thing just an excuse, that the real reason people from the mundane world didn’t spend time in the magikal was because they treated them like dirt, and purposefully pushed them away?

“Cory? You alright?”

Cory shook himself out of his thoughts and started watching the forest again. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“Well I’m bored, could you think later?” Rail said, sitting on the ground with a thump.

Cory chuckled. “Sure. I’ll try not to think so you don’t get bored?”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

They fell silent again.

Suddenly Rail started jamming one end of his bow into the ground.

“What are you doing?” Cory asked.

After a few tries, Rail got the bow to stand up on its own, and he balanced a glowing arrow on the notch.

“You can stay here if you want. I’m going to do something.” Without another word, Rail slinked off into the darkness.

“Rail!” Cory whispered harshly. “Rail, get back here!”

But Cory couldn’t see him anymore. So he sat down, grumpily continuing to scan the woods for movement.

\*\*\*

Rail walked carefully, avoiding divots in the ground where piles of leaves or sticks would gather.

They would hate him for this. He was explicitly told to stay by the flag. They needed at least two to guard it, so that if one of them was shot the other one could hopefully cry out for help before also getting hit.

He repeated in his mind the tips and tricks he had learned over the last two weeks to remain silent and unseen. Stick to the darkest shadows. Stay above or below eye level. Shape your body like an object or animal. Know your surroundings and be them.

Cory seemed to have a hard time with it. He was just so big and bulky. But Rail found it came surprisingly easy. With a little concentration he blended with the shadows and remained aware of movement around him, despite the darkness.

He’d crossed over into enemy territory by now, but hadn’t encountered another person yet.

He heard voices. He avoided the instinct to suddenly jump behind a tree. Sudden movements drew attention. Instead he kept perfectly still, lowering his head to break up the

outline of his body.

Two Veiled soldiers walked through the trees, conversing loudly. Rail noticed glowing paint splattered on their fronts. They were already out. He sank to the ground and crawled forward. If there were casualties nearby, maybe he was getting near the flag.

Rail spotted a glow up ahead. Was it an arrow from the other team? But no, it wasn't moving. Rail grinned. The other team's flag gleamed in the darkness, two soldiers standing on either side of it.

—

Cory heard something snap and whipped around, drawing back his arrow. But he saw nothing. Rail had been gone a while now, and Cory was jumpy. Despite knowing that the arrows were cushioned and he was under no real threat, it was still unnerving to have to sit and wait there in the darkness. Every rustle of branches made him jump.

He had started asking different animals for the ability to see in the dark ever since they started training at night, and tonight was no exception. He could see reasonably well in the darkness by the light of the moon, but it was still difficult to distinguish the shifting shadows from possible Veiled from the other team.

A glowing streak flew towards him. Cory flinched instinctively, but the arrow missed, thudding into the ground where Rail's bow was standing upright. Cory dropped to the ground, moving to the other side of the mound where the flag stood to get some cover from the direction the arrow came. Then he started yelling.

"They're attacking! Help! Protect the flag!"

He saw a Veiled soldier sprinting towards the flag directly in front of him. Cory got up on his knees and trained an arrow on them.

Another glowing arrow streaked out of the darkness and struck the attacker right in the

shoulder. The attacker groaned, their shoulders slumping as they walked away. Soldiers who had been hit had to go back to the barracks, removed until another game began.

Cory relaxed a little and took up his position again.

“Where’s the other one?” said a nearby voice.

Cory jumped. He hadn’t heard them approaching. An elf with their hood up stood near him, looking at Rail’s discarded bow and arrow.

“You don’t need to sneak up on me! I’m on your team.” Cory recognized the voice as one of the designated captains, though he’d forgotten the elf’s name.

“Where’s the other one?” the elf repeated, pointing at the place where Rail was supposed to be.

Cory shrugged. “I’m not sure,” he said.

The elf looked at him sideways. “He just left? Without telling you where he was going? How long has he been gone?”

Cory shrugged again. “Dunno, I left my watch on my bunk.”

The elf stuck a pointy end of his bow in front of Cory’s nose. “You really could learn to be a little more respectful, boy.”

Cory put his hands up in resignation and laughed. “Okay, sorry. It was a joke. He really didn’t tell me where he was going, he said he was going to do something and left.”

The elf relaxed. “So... did he go to take a wiz or something?”

“No, it’s been longer than that.”

The elf looked down at Rail’s bow again. “He could have at least said something so I knew he was gone. You’re lucky that guy missed you, and that he was alone.”

“Rail’s decoy worked then.”

The elf took up a third position, forming a triad around the flag with Cory and Rail’s decoy bow. “It happened to draw a shot, but we still need eyes. I’ll have a word with Rail when he gets back.”

“Don’t be too hard on him. He was just bored,” Cory explained.

“Bored? Keeping watch is part of being an assassin! You compatriots need backup. If he left his post during a mission he could get people killed.”

Cory wanted to defend Rail, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. So he returned his eyes to the forest, scanning for movement.

He lost track of how long he sat there, trying to keep in mind that what he was doing was important training. But his mind was free to wander, so he tried to follow Captain Shepherd’s instructions. He reached out to the forest with his telepathy, searching for life.

He could sense the base impulses of many insects, but he had long ago learned to ignore those. There were so many, and their thoughts so basic that he couldn’t effectively communicate with them. He heard the steady stream of nonsense that came from sleeping animals in nests or burrows. A monkey perked up curiously at the touch of his mind.

His telepathy was difficult to describe. He could extend part of his consciousness to and feel around. Like he was searching blindly in water for something. When he reached the mind of a creature, he could feel their thoughts with his own mind, like his brain was directly interpreting the electrical signals from their mind into his. Except people’s thoughts were a little different—

*Bam.*

He ran into a mind like a wall, which refused to let him in. That was what most people did when he reached out to them. They were aware of their own thoughts, and did not want him hearing them. The mind he felt was too far away to be the elf next to him.

Cory stood and pointed in the direction he felt the presence. “There’s someone over there.”

The elf wisely crouched lower and pointed an arrow, rather than standing like Cory had. “Are you sure? I don’t see anything.”

Then Cory felt several other walled-off minds, at least half a dozen, close to the first.

“There’s more than one! Guard the flag!” he shouted as he moved behind the mound.

Glowing arrows started to fly. One struck the elf who had been helping Cory guard the flag, and he groaned. Arrows from the surrounding forest flew in the direction Cory had pointed. Cory didn’t see if they hit their intended targets.

Three people emerged from the woods, sprinting towards the flag. Cory fired an arrow at them, but it went wide.

As he ducked behind the mound to avoid return fire, he heard the sound of cheering coming from the direction of the barracks.

The arrows stopped flying, and the three runners stopped. The game was over. They had won. Cory smiled.

When he got close to the barracks, Cory heard voices, people yelling. He noticed Rail’s voice first.

“I got the flag! Isn’t that what matters?”

He could see Rail facing off with another Veiled soldier. Rail held the other team’s glowing flag and waved in the other soldier’s face. That lucky son of a gun. He’d actually gotten the flag.

“You ignored orders and protocol, idiot! You weren’t even supposed to be over enemy lines, you should have been guarding the flag like you were ordered to!”

Rail rolled his whole head in exasperation. “Oh, like I was ordered to. I should have just stayed sitting by the flag, waiting to be shot while the rest of you kept trying to do what I did by myself? I don’t think so.”

Cory noticed Annie standing close by the altercation. He walked up next to her, putting his hand on her shoulder.

“What do we do?” she said anxiously. She had glowing paint splattered on her front.

Cory shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not sure who’s right.”

“Well Rail’s in the wrong,” she said, gesturing with her hands. “He disobeyed a direct

order. But it doesn't matter, they shouldn't be fighting like this."

"They're just arguing, hopefully they'll calm down in a minute."

But Cory was worried they wouldn't calm down. Rail and his accuser were steadily moving closer to one another, their voices growing louder.

"If my disobedience makes up for your incompetence, then—" Rail cut off as the other man shoved him back in the chest.

"Shut up! You don't even belong here, you stupid, ignorant—"

Rail started forward as if to shove back, but Cory hurriedly stepped in, hands out between the two.

"Woah, it's alright, everybody calm down."

"Get out of the way, Thomas."

The sudden, commanding voice parted the crowd and Toros stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back. Cory looked directly at him.

"Get out of the way, Cory," he repeated. "These men want to fight, let them settle their differences."

Cory hesitantly stepped back. Rail's opponent lifted a hand and gestured towards Rail. "Come on little boy. Let's do this."

Cory looked at Rail. What would he do? Cory had never seen Rail get in an actual fight. Plenty of arguments, which he usually won, but... this was different.

Rail put up both his hands and backed away. "No. No, I don't want to do this."

The other man spread his arms wide. "Come on! You don't think you can win, coward?"

Rail turned away, shaking his head and ran off through the crowd.

Cory followed him. The other man continued yelling at Rail's back. "You don't belong here! Go back home to your mama!"

## Chapter 6

### The Ice Cave

Cory sat at a table, an array of cards held in his hand. He played down a Jack of spades. Fortunately they still used the same cards here as in the mundane world. Cory felt he at least knew what he was doing in that way, but the game they played was new to him. He was pretty sure he was losing, but it didn't matter.

Shuah, a reddish-haired elf with freckles raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you sure that's what you want to play?"

Cory chuckled. "Nope, but that's what I'm going with anyway."

Shuah smiled and played a red ace on top. "You owe me three cards."

Cory selected his least valuable cards and passed them over. It took him a moment before realizing what had happened.

Cory sat with several other new recruits in what they called the Ice Cave. Lively music echoed from a music trio on the other end. The cave had been furnished with rugs, tables and chairs, and even a full bar. Though Toros only allowed very mild drinks on special occasions, so most of what they served were chilled fruit drinks, though Cory didn't recognize the names of many of the fruits.

Around the entrance to the cave grew what looked like hundreds upon hundreds of icicles. These caves were where the Veiled grew their specialized arrows that froze on impact. But deeper in the cave was the only place Cory knew of where the Veiled specifically had fun.

"Say, where's your friend Rail?" asked Cara, flicking her bright green hair out of her eyes.

Cory shrugged. "I think he wanted to take his free time to practice his violin." Cory glanced over at Annie, who was dancing with some of the other soldiers. He wished she were over here, but no one wanted to play cards with her because of her powers.

“Oh, I didn’t know he played,” Cara exclaimed. “He should come play for us sometime, it’d be fun.” she jerked her thumb over at the band in the corner.

Cory nodded and played down another card. “Yeah. He might actually enjoy that.”

“He seems like he doesn’t enjoy much, that man,” said Leigh as he leaned back in his chair, cards perched on his stomach.

Cory hesitated. “He’s... still having a hard time adjusting I think.”

John Joseph, the broad-shouldered human shaga with curly hair drew a card. “D-do you think it would help if we invited him to play cards with us?”

Cory nodded. “Yeah, actually, that would be great. He’s felt pretty bad ever since the capture the flag incident.”

Rhuftog played down a pair triumphantly. “I invited him along a couple days ago, but he said he had lookout duty.”

Cara smiled mischievously. “Well we better get him here soon, I’ve been wanting to ask him to dance.” Leigh raised an eyebrow at her. “What? He’s cute,” she said defensively.

Leigh rolled his eyes and played down a pair of threes. “You would, he seems like just your type.” Leigh was an elf with dark brown hair, the only elf Cory had yet seen who had a bit of a gut.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Cara indignantly.

Leigh glanced over at Cory. “Dark and brooding is what I meant, but he’s a mundane. You don’t want to get mixed up in that.”

Cory looked back over at the elf, eyes narrowed. “Well now what’s that supposed to mean? Just because he doesn’t have powers doesn’t mean—”

Leigh raised a hand to stop him. “Look, I just meant that getting into a relationship with a mundane is complicated. Rail seems to be able to tolerate magik, but... just being from such different backgrounds...”

Cory let the matter drop as Annie stepped over behind him and the entire table pressed their cards against their chests or onto the table.

Annie rolled her eyes. "I can still see your cards even if you cover them up. And I told you not to worry, I'm not a cheater. I don't even know how to play, since you guys won't let me."

The group nodded and pulled their cards back out, though they still eyed Annie suspiciously.

"So who's winning?" Annie asked, leaning down to Cory's ear and looking over his hand. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek.

"I'm not sure," Cory whispered back. "Though John Joseph did win the last three hands."

Cory played down his last card.

"Dang it Cory!" said Rhuftog, handing over two of his cards. Cory wasn't quite sure how he'd won that, but he didn't question it.

A dark-skinned elf about Annie's height approached her, his hand out. "May I have this dance, m'lady?"

Annie accepted with a smile and the two started twirling around the dance floor, weaving between other couples and dance circles.

Cory watched her leave. Part of him wanted to be out there dancing, but he didn't know any of the dances they did here. Annie knew enough to get by, since her parents had taught her a little. Judging by the number of men who asked her to dance, she was picking the rest up quickly. Dancing with Annie was a little awkward anyway because of the height difference, Cory reasoned.

When Cory returned his attention to his cards, most of the table was staring at him.

"Oh, sorry," he said, and played his card.

Shuah looked at him as he played his next card. "You know Cory, she's not going to know if you don't tell her."

Startled, Cory looked up at him. "Tell her what?"

Shuah looked at him sideways. Leigh rolled his eyes. “Oh come on, we can all tell you like her.”

“We’re just close friends,” Cory said, shaking his head. “I’ve known Annie for years, there’s never been any romantic... stuff between us.”

“Doesn’t mean there can’t be,” said Leigh.

“I win,” said John Joseph, playing down a triple set.

The rest of the table groaned, throwing down their cards.

Rhuftog stood and leaned over towards Cory, his horns nearly brushing Cory’s hair.

“Well, I’m going to go get a drink for that satyr in the corner. I’d suggest you either quit staring, or talk to her.”

Rachele, a petite elf friend of Annie’s with dark hair, took Rhuftog’s spot. “I want in this round!”

Cory stayed where he sat as they dealt the next hand. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Annie laughing at the bar.

## Chapter 7

### Flowers

Winter was in full swing when Toros summoned Annie and Cory to his office. Many of the forests they ran through in the mornings held branches drooping with piles of snow. Fortunately the area where basecamp was set up had relatively mild winters, and the chill didn't penetrate their leather armor most days.

The two left Rail at the cafeteria and walked over to Toros' private cabin, which also had an office in the front.

"You don't think he's got a mission for us do you?" Cory speculated as they walked between the cabins.

She shook her head, "I doubt he would put both of us on a mission together, but maybe. He's usually not that nice."

Cory grunted, "Yeah I guess you're right. What else would it be though?"

"I mean, I hope it's an excursion. I've been looking forward to doing one. It might be logistically easier just to put both of us on the same mission. Or maybe found some regulation we broke, and wants to lecture us."

"Oh good," Cory chuckled. "I was worried I'd only get lectured on the archery range."

Annie didn't respond. She always seemed a little odd in regards to Toros. Part of that was her obsession with pleasing authority, but it seemed like something more with Toros. He had told her and Rail everything that happened in their private training sessions. Cory knew she had at least two private conversations with Toros, including the one when they had first arrived, but she refused to share any details. Cory thought he knew this girl, but he was only starting to realize how secretive she could be.

They arrived at Toros' cabin and Cory rapped on the door with his knuckles. It was

opened by a tan-skinned elf Cory didn't recognize. Inside, Toros stood behind his desk. A gray-haired minotaur with huge curved horns stood in the corner.

Toros got right to business, waving them inside. "Come in. I have a job for the four of you."

Annie shut the door behind them as Toros continued.

"Two weeks ago, a man was discovered examining the entrance to the Veiled hideout. Tahitoa and one other guard were on duty at the time. Tahitoa accosted him, asking him his business, but the man didn't respond, instead he fled. As Tahitoa pursued, a tree root rose and wrapped itself around his foot. By the time he freed himself the man was gone. The other guard that was on duty is still missing, and we suspect he is dead."

Toros turned towards Annie and Cory. "I believe you two know Rhuftog, the satyr? He started a little before you did."

Annie and Cory glanced at each other, then back at Toros, nodding. They knew Rhuftog, he had been kind to them.

"Rhuftog is the guard that went missing. This leak needs to be plugged, and if we can locate Rhuftog, all the better. The other guard did set a trace on the man, so we were able to track him as he returned to his home, which is fortunately only a few hours away. We've been observing him for the past two weeks and have determined his place of residence, as well as his work. He is employed as the manager of a large flower distributor, and we suspect that he is a shaga with some sort of plant-related ability. It is your job to silence him. As far as we have been able to observe, he has not passed information to any known Outcaster sources, but your duty is to question him and make sure, then eliminate him. You leave immediately. You three," he pointed to the minotaur, Cory, and Annie. "Will be blindfolded for security reasons, and Aron will guide you. Any questions?"

---

Cory was excited to leave the Forest for the first time in months. Being with Annie was always a plus, and being alone with her for several hours was better than he dared ask for. But before that, they had to spend several awkward minutes driving towards Trinidad, California with the other two Veiled. They were friendly enough, but going off to kill someone with two strangers was undoubtedly an interesting way to spend an afternoon.

They arrived around dusk and found their way through the streets towards the flower place. After observing from the parking lot, the last few workers headed home and locked the place up. The four Veiled warriors moved in. The elf, whose name was Aron, picked the lock.

Annie and Cory left the other two Veiled warriors in the street and entered the distribution center. It was huge, full of aisles and aisles of flowers. Apparently this flower distribution center was the largest in the state. Sparse lights illuminated the high ceiling. It was also freezing. Fortunately the Veiled outfits were quite warm. They found a corner in which to hide with a good view of the entrance and hunkered down to wait.

The plan was simple. The other two would set off an alarm, making sure that their target came to investigate. Cory and Annie would be waiting inside, and would capture him alive so they could question him. But after half an hour had passed, Cory and Annie started to get antsy.

“Why is it so cold in here?” Cory complained, rubbing his arms. “My nose is starting to run.”

“They keep the flowers cold to help preserve them,” Annie replied. “Same reason you keep produce in the fridge.”

Cory nodded. “I guess that makes sense. But what’s taking them so long?”

“I don’t know. Do you think we should check?” Annie asked.

“No, I think we should probably wait a little longer, we don’t know how long it should take, maybe even two hours.”

Silence fell between them again. Annie looked around at the flowers nearest them. Most

of the flowers were in boxes, but some were set apart in blue square buckets. Annie pulled one out and smelled it. "Do you know what kind of flower this is?"

"I have no idea," Cory responded.

"These are carnations," She responded. "Do you know flowers at all?"

"Nope." He wasn't even looking. He had gotten his knife out and was carving his name into a box.

She swatted his shoulder playfully with the flower. "Hey, you're not even listening. And you probably shouldn't leave your name at a potential crime scene."

Cory paused. "Oh, right." He started scratching his name out, leaving a gouge in the cardboard.

Annie continued perusing the various flowers around them.

He glanced at her. "Why do you care about the names of flowers anyway?"

"Because I like them." She plucked a blush pink flower with a large head made of layers upon layers of petals and raised it to her nose.

Cory watched her. "What's that one called?"

"Ranunculus."

He moved toward another bucket of smaller flowers, with brown dashes on their petals and pulled two of them out. "What about these?"

"Aspidistra."

The next bucket was full of yellow, cup-shaped blossoms with red edged petals. "Ha! I know these, everybody knows roses." He jumped and sucked his thumb as he tried to pluck a few of them out.

Annie chuckled. "Careful, roses have thorns you know."

Cory chuckled. "Oh yeah, you've taught me that quite well."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Without answering he kept moving down the line, asking about each flower he pulled

out. She knew the name of nearly all of them.

As he came back towards her, a bundle of flowers in his hand she suddenly realized what he was doing and blinked, her smile dropping. He took the flower from her hand and added it to the bouquet. He then dropped to one knee, proffering the bouquet up to her. "I picked these flowers for you, I hope you like them."

She couldn't help but smile again, "You're ranunculus." She took the bundle of stems from him and smelled deeply. "I love it. Thank you."

"Hey!" Cory and Annie froze in place as a man rounded the corner and began yelling at them in a Mexican accent, "What the heck are you doing? You can't be in-," As he saw them he stopped dead, his eyes widening. He'd recognized their cloaks.

Annie drew an arrow as the man ran back the way he'd come. She fired at his back, but a flower flew out of a bucket, intercepting the arrow and knocking it off target. Just before the man reached the exit, Annie fired an ice arrow right next to the doorknob, freezing the door shut. The man turned away, bolting down an aisle. It was a dead end. Annie had an arrow drawn back as they moved toward him. The man backed against the shelves, his eyes wide. He was cornered.

But he was far from defenseless. He swung his arm and a box on their right exploded.

Dozens of roses burst out, flying towards Annie and Cory. Cory pulled out his bow, cutting the roses that drew near out of the air, but still some of them reached him, wrapping around his arms and legs, the thorns drawing blood.

Annie spun her bow as well, defending against what flowers she could, but was having little more success than Cory was. "This is useless! We have to get him!" She shouted.

Then suddenly the flowers fell to the ground. They kicked a few off their legs and glanced around. Their target was no longer in front of them. They turned around, searching. The minotaur had the target in a chokehold, with a curved shortsword held against his abdomen. Aron stood beside them, bow in hand. The minotaur jerked his head towards the door and spoke

in a gruff voice, "Come on. Let's get him away from the plants."

They proceeded to the side of the building into the shadows. The minotaur threw the man down on the ground by the warehouse wall. They made sure the alleyway was far enough away from the lawn, nowhere near any plants. Aron placed the point of his bow on the man's chest.

"Two weeks ago you were discovered snooping around in Redwood National Park. What were you doing there?"

The man rubbed his neck. "Why should I tell you?"

The minotaur spoke. "Let's just say it's the easier path."

The man didn't look nearly as afraid as he should have been, but he examined the situation, looking over each warrior, their weapons, and the one held to his chest. "I was on vacation there. I like to go hiking."

"You were at Redwoods visiting, walking alone in the woods?" Aron said in disbelief. "You're lying. Who sent you to find us?"

"You're going to kill me anyway!" the prisoner yelled. "Why should I betray anyone?"

Aron lowered the tip of his bow. "Like we said. It's the easier path." Then he kicked him hard in the ribs. He rolled onto his side, coughing.

Cory stepped forward and grabbed Aron's arm. "Aron don't. This isn't necessary."

"He won't talk otherwise. We need information."

"It isn't right."

Now Aron was angry. "Go and keep lookout if you don't have the stomach for it." He shook Cory off. Cory stormed away to the parking lot and sat on the curb in the darkest corner, arms folded. Annie sat down next to him soon after. The lights that shone over the parking lot illuminated the edge of her face. She said nothing, only sat there.

They heard muffled screams behind them. Cory's hands clenched into fists. Annie noticed. She reached over slowly and uncurled his fingers, placing hers between them. Cory

relaxed a little. Her hands were nice. They weren't soft, they both led much too rugged a life for that. But her hands were warm and tender.

Why had he even joined the Veiled! Cory had imagined the world of magik would be something wondrous and spectacular, but so far the people seemed to be in constant fighting. Cory loved the Forest of Life. So many exotic and beautiful animals together in one place where they could be safe and live in harmony. The Forest was such a wondrous, beautiful place.

But the Veiled were killers. Cory agreed with what they stood for and fought for but... torture didn't sit well with him, and neither did execution.

Cory and Annie jumped and their hands burst apart as the minotaur appeared just behind them. They turned their eyes up to him from their seat on the curb.

"Well?" Annie asked. "Did he talk?"

"Of course," he replied. "Come on. It's time to go."

—

Cory dozed off on the ride back. Aron and the minotaur said nothing about what the target had revealed, but Cory expected he would hear when they made their report to Toros. He wasn't worried.

It was early morning when they arrived back at headquarters. Aron insisted on blindfolding them again as they entered, despite the darkness. Annie parted with the other three as they made their way back to the barracks. They would make their report first thing in the morning.

—

Cory was awakened suddenly as the minotaur from the night before shook him roughly. "Come

on, banana. Let's go make our report."

"Banana?" Cory asked drowsily. But the beast didn't answer. Cory grabbed his cloak and donned his boots hurriedly as he followed out the door. Aron was there waiting outside as well. Annie was already at Toros' office when they arrived. As she saw them she turned and knocked on the door. Cory came up and stood next to her.

"Sleep well? No bed bugs?" She asked, a little smile curling the corners of her mouth.

"You're funny." Cory said sarcastically, but also with a small smile.

The door opened and Toros stood beneath the wooden frame. "Come in."

The four of them entered and sat in chairs around the room.

Toros sat at his desk and pushed aside a letter he had been reading. "You may make your report. Aron?"

Aron stood in front of Toros' desk and gave a small bow, then launched into his report.

"Our intel turned out to be reliable. We lured the leak out to his place of work and were able to apprehend him, despite certain... distractions." Aron glanced behind him towards Annie and Cory.

Toros raised an eyebrow. "Distractions? If you have a complaint to make, please speak plainly. I don't have time for subtle hints and allegations."

Aron cleared his throat. "Sir, these two," he gestured towards Annie and Cory. "Were distracted by each other and nearly let the target escape. If Kuofa and I had not acted quickly, he would have slipped past us, and been alerted that we are on to him."

Toros nodded. "I see. Anything else?"

"They also refused to participate in the interrogation, or the elimination of the threat. Cory actively tried to stop me from obtaining the information we needed."

Toros nodded. "Understood. And what information did you obtain?"

Aron looked a little flustered that Toros had moved on from the subject so quickly. "Well, the target was a shaga, with plant-based powers. Which is how he was able to find the location

of the entrance to the Forest, he indicated that he could communicate somehow with plants. Under interrogation he revealed that he has passed on the location to at least two others, whom we now know the names and locations of.”

Toros nodded. “Very good. We will act quickly to eliminate these threats as well. Who and where are they?”

“One is a shaga that resides in San Francisco. His name is Val Anderson. The other is a cave demon that lives in Lassen National Park. He goes by the name of Booton.”

Toros made a note of the names. “Did you get what they look like? Where in San Francisco Val Anderson is? What his powers are?”

Aron shifted uncomfortably. “I’m afraid not sir, I thought what I had obtained was sufficient.”

“We’ll work with what we’ve got, but in the future it’s generally a good idea to get as much information as you can.”

Toros now looked over at Cory and Annie. “As for you two, I’m no longer assigning you on missions together. If your infatuation with one another is a detriment to the completion of a mission, you will remain separate.”

Cory opened his mouth to protest, or at least correct him. They were not infatuated. But Toros didn’t let him speak. “Coryther, if you disagree with the Veiled’s methods, you can sit out but please save your moral philosophy for appropriate times and do not let your personal feelings interfere with the completion of a mission ever again. Understood?”

Cory wanted to protest. He wanted to rage about how cruel it was. Instead he nodded his head.

Toros gave a patronizing smile. “Good. You will hear if we have further need of you.” He held a pair of envelopes out to them. “Your families have sent letters for you. You are dismissed.”

Annie and Cory took the letters gratefully. Cory felt guilty. With everything going on, he had forgotten completely to write to his parents. They stowed the letters as they left to get ready

for the morning run. Cory took a moment to stick his tongue out at Aron's back as they parted. It was childish, but it made him feel a little better.

## Chapter 8

### Favorites

Cory woke early, even earlier than their normal wake-up call. The night was still black and dark as a shadow. Unable to go back to sleep, he went over to the bathroom to wash up. The Veiled tended to be overwhelmingly primitive. Cory knew that technology didn't work very well in the forest, but couldn't they at least have put a lightbulb in the bathroom? The only light was a faintly glowing stone.

Cory splashed water in his face, looking at his reflection in the mirror. He had changed a lot in the past few months. His chin now bore a permanent bit of scruff, since he didn't have time to shave every day. His hair had gone nearly blond from the summer sun. His skin was still tanned, with lines circling his wrists and neck from his cloak and leather armor. He was much more fit than he had ever been in his life, his upper body toned to broad shoulders that tapered to his waist. His clothing was now tight over his chest and arms. He suddenly realized he was flexing at himself in the mirror, and dropped his arms.

He looked down at his hand and clenched his fingers. The strength and power he felt from being in the forest had become a natural part of what he was now, his new normal, but he still did not know what caused it. He could now outpace just about everyone but the Minotaurs and Gatataurs. He could heft logs as big around as he was. As he moved his fingers, for a moment he thought he saw blue sparks fly from his fingertips.

The sound of Captain Drake's voice calling them turtles muffled through the bathroom door, and Cory hurried to don his gear.

After the morning run and a bit of breakfast, Cory and the others gathered for training

with Jazan. They had finally moved past basic forms and Jazan was instructing them on group formations and tactics. After a few minutes, a Veiled soldier came up to Jazan to speak with her. He and Jazan seemed to both look directly over at Cory.

Cory did not know the soldier, but he looked to be human, probably a shaga. He was a couple inches shorter than Cory, and fidgeted with his hands. Jazan nodded to him, and the man walked directly over to Cory.

“Um, pardon me, but Commander Toros wants to see you in the secondary archery fields.”

Annie and Rail looked over towards him. Cory hesitantly asked, “...Right now?”

The other soldier nodded vigorously. “Yes, he wishes to see you immediately.”

Cory nodded hesitantly, waving to his friends, “I’ll see you guys later I guess?”

As he made his way to the secondary archery fields, a million thoughts ran through his head. Why would Toros, the leader of all the Veiled, want to talk to him specifically? Was he in trouble? Cory couldn’t help but think maybe Toros had heard of his talents, and had a special assignment, or... some sort of promotion? At this thought he suddenly realized that he knew next to nothing about the organization of the Veiled army, let alone if there were opportunities for promotion. He noticed that while they had been very well trained in fighting, and conditioning, their training in magik knowledge and the like was sparse.

As Cory approached he saw Toros standing alone on the field. Cory walked up a few feet behind him and waited. After a moment with no response, he cleared his throat.

Without turning around, Toros said, “I have been watching your training for a while now, and I am... disappointed with your progress.”

Cory was confused. He felt like he had been making lots of progress. He also had not noticed Toros watching his training. Either the Veiled commander was just as stealthy as he claimed, or he had someone reporting to him about Cory specifically.

Toros then turned towards Cory. “Take your bow stance”, he barked.

Cory, rather flustered by the moment, moved forward and pointed himself towards the targets. As he reached back for an arrow out of his quiver, Toros stopped him.

“Don’t nock an arrow yet, just take your stance.”

Cory took his stance, his left side facing the target at the end of the field and held his bow up.

Without missing a beat, Toros began adjusting his stance. He lifted Cory’s arm, pushed back his shoulders to stop him slouching, and continued walking around Cory, observing him. Cory tried to turn his head to watch Toros, but the small elf stuck up two fingers and pushed his chin back towards the target. Cory pursed his lips in frustration.

“Keep your arms raised, almost parallel to the ground, your chin pointed forward, your other arm should be pulled back to your mouth. Keep your shoulders up, don’t slouch. The rest of your stance is fine I guess...”

Cory rolled his eyes, especially frustrated because he had heard many of these things before from Captain Drake.

Unfortunately, Toros noticed. He punched Cory in the gut.

Surprised, Cory doubled over, putting one hand on his stomach and the bow at his side. “What was that for?” he yelled.

Without responding, Toros put a hand on his face, pushing him backward. Cory stumbled back, nearly tripping to the ground. Toros pursued him, bringing up a roundhouse kick towards the side of Cory’s head. This time, Cory dropped the bow, blocking the foot with one hand. Toros kept up the assault, making swift kicks and jabs at the larger man. Cory tried to grab Toros’ hand, to use his strength and size to his advantage, but Toros slapped his hands away every time. It was over in a heartbeat. Toros pulled a knife from his belt, stopping it just short of Cory’s abdomen. Cory tried to jump backwards, but was soon facedown on the ground with Toros’ knife pressed against his neck.

Toros leaned down and spoke in his ear. “You cannot rely on your strength to save you. I

may be smaller than you, but you will face opponents who are much bigger and stronger than you.”

He got off, and let Cory get up. “Why did you drop your bow?”

Cory furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Because you were attacking me, unarmed.”

“Never give up an advantage you have over an opponent. They will exploit it, and you will end up dead.”

Toros seemed so intense, he was almost angry.

Cory tried to listen to what Toros told him. Why was he angry? Why was he taking time to train Cory, especially if he didn't seem to enjoy it, or even like Cory? He looked around at the trees surrounding their small clearing. Forests had always been one of Cory's favorite places. The trees here almost seemed to shake. He thought he could hear something whispering, like the trees resonated with his soul. Maybe he could hear them as he could sometimes communicate with animals. But maybe it was just the shaking of their leaves.

Soon Toros made Cory try to hit the targets while he was walking. He horribly missed the first couple shots. “Why do I need to use a bow anyway? It's like you guys are obsessed with them”.

Now Toros rolled his eyes. He pulled out his own bow, and an arrow. “Because you can't do this with a sword.” He barely glanced over as he loosed an arrow toward a tree on the other side of the clearing. A single leaf stopped midair on its way to the ground, impaled on the arrow as it struck the bark of the tree.

“Bows can be used at a distance, with much less danger to our soldiers. If your opponent doesn't see you coming, he can't kill you.”

“Well what about a crossbow? Could I use one of those?” Cory asked.

“If you aren't good with a bow, why would you think you'd be good with a crossbow?”

Cory shrugged. “I don't know. It could be worth a shot, right?”

“A bow is good enough for the rest of our soldiers, it should be good enough for you. Take

your stance again.”

~~~

Annie pushed her sleeve up her arm for the hundredth time. The darn thing wouldn't stay, and it was starting to get uncomfortably soggy. Piles of dirty dishes still lay in stacks on one side of the counter. The bubbly water in the sink had turned a milky gray color from what she already had washed. Picking up the sponge again, she attacked the next plate. Cory had been gone for over an hour, training with Toros. Why was Toros taking time to train him personally? She had some ideas of course, but she would have loved to get some tips herself. Cory always seemed to get more attention. Of course, that was the main reason they had even met. He caught people's attention, including hers. His aura still fascinated her.

Rail's aura was different than any she had ever seen, difficult to describe. To her eyes he sucked away the light she normally saw around magik creatures, instead leaving something blank and lifeless. He might be a shaga, and not have figured out what his power was, but that was almost unheard of. His aura was strong enough that Annie suspected he was something different. Cory's aura was just as strong, but he put off a bluish light, similar to many auras she'd seen before.

Annie paused. She still felt guilty about keeping secrets from him and Rail. But it was her duty to do so, for everyone's good.

Toros wasn't known for being especially gentle with those he trained. Cory didn't get along with him well in the first place, and was probably having a miserable time. Especially since he couldn't handle a bow worth a... She sighed. It wasn't their fault, and the task at hand was making her irritable.

She picked up an entire batch of plates and plunged them into the water. Fortunately the dish-washing sink had a window right in front of it, so she could look out into the woods. The

trees here were incredible. It was sometimes hard to appreciate the wonder of their location while working her butt off constantly. She couldn't imagine how miserable it would be if they were in some barren compound.

Fifty yards away, the treeline was thick. A few scattered trees lay in the open yard as well, several Veiled soldiers wandering through them on their way from one training exercise or manual labor to another. She noticed one soldier that was half as tall as their companion, with a long black beard to their waist. Huh. A dwarf. There weren't many dwarves among the Veiled, it was much more dominated by elves. Part of this was probably because of the location. Dwarves were more at home in rocks and underground, something that she felt she would never understand. He had a faint brown aura, grainy, like the dirt that was his home.

As she concentrated on that aura, trying to glean if the dwarf was a shaga, she glanced at the line of trees and nearly blinded herself. Bright red waves of light reverberated through the trees, spreading and thinning out as they escaped the closely-packed trees. She shut her eyes tight, reaching up to rub them. Unfortunately her hands were still wet and soapy, and she grunted in frustration. It had been a while since she had blinded herself like that. Because Magik permeated the entirety of the Forest of Life, she had to keep her sight toned down almost constantly.

"You alright?" Rail walked into the room, looking superficially concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Annie responded testily. "What took you so long?"

"I was only gone a few minutes."

It had definitely been more than five minutes since he had headed to the bathroom.

"Whatever. It's your turn." She threw a wet rag at him and it splashed droplets of water across his face.

Rail blinked and glared at her sideways as he took her place at the sink. "What's with you?" he asked as he started scrubbing.

Annie grabbed a dry rag and wiped her hands and face. "I got water in my eyes, that's

all.”

“So you wanted me to share your suffering?”

“No...” Annie sighed and started drying the wet plates. “Sorry. I’m just frustrated I guess.”

“Frustrated with what?”

“Well...” she couldn’t tell him all the things that had her stressed. “I don’t know. It just seems like we’re stuck, you know? I thought we’d actually be doing something, not just shooting at targets.”

“Yeah, I was hoping I could shoot some people by now.”

Annie hesitated and gave Rail a sideways glance. Was he joking? She couldn’t quite tell, since he was facing the other way, putting away a stack of plates.

He turned back towards her to grab some more wet dishes. “Hey, at least you and Cory got to go on an excursion. That’s more than what I’ve done.”

“Yeah, but we mostly just sat in a freezing cold warehouse. We’ve been training for months now, and I don’t even know what the Veiled are doing! Do they just stay in the woods and train? I know they send people out on missions, but what are their bigger goals right now? You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think so. You’d think if they want recruits to stay for more than a year they’d at least tell us why we should be here.”

“Exactly!” It was only a little lie. She knew more or less what was going on, but Toros had not told her much. He couldn’t talk to her or send messengers as often as she would like, or they would get suspicious. “And now Cory is getting special attention. For... some reason.”

Rail turned toward her and brandished his wet rag as he talked. “Hey, at least you’re good at this stuff. I can barely hit the target on a good day.” He turned back to the dishes again, as Annie stood on tip-toes to shove a stack of bowls into a cupboard.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I’ve used a bow before, though.”

“Look, Annie.” Rail turned to face her, drying his hands and throwing the rag over his

shoulder. “You belong here. You don’t see it, despite that you see pretty much everything, but you are dang good with a bow. Not only that but you’ve got amazing superpowers that make you valuable to this whole assassin society thing, and your parents were part of it too. Everybody accepts you here, because you fit. Nobody includes me because I’m ‘mundane’. No special magik abilities, I can’t shoot a bow to save my life, which I may need to do at some point, I’m not strong, I’m not fast. You outclass me in literally everything we do, and the only thing Cory doesn’t beat me at is archery, and that’s because he sucks just as much as I do.”

He turned back to the sink and drained the water, setting the last few bowls in the drying rack. “Maybe you need to not get water in your eyes anymore, because if you can’t see that you fit in here, you’re way more blind than I thought you were.”

Annie was stunned. Partly because they had actually finished all the washing. But mostly because Rail had pointed out so much that she had missed. She really was good at this stuff, and most of the time she really enjoyed it. But Rail... She hadn’t even thought about how disconnected he must have felt. Why hadn’t he said anything?

“You’re not thinking about leaving are you?”

Rail shrugged. “I clearly don’t belong here.”

“Rail, sure you do! It will get better. We’ll start going on missions and things, and then you’ll enjoy it. You are pretty good at sneaking, so you’ve got that going for you.”

He didn’t seem convinced. Funny how he had been comforting her, but now the positions were reversed. She couldn’t let him leave, she still had no idea what his aura meant, and she had a duty to fulfill. Besides, she would miss him. His sarcastic pessimism paradoxically brightened many dreary days. But how could she get him to stay? Her gut wrenched, but she reached forward, taking one of his hands.

“Please don’t go Rail. I’d miss you. You make this whole situation more bearable.” She pulled him into her, her cheek to his narrow chest.

Rail looked surprised, but wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “Um, alright.” He

pulled her back, hands on her shoulders and looked in her eyes. His eyes that were normally so empty, void-like, had a curious sparkle in them. It was so hard to look straight at him. His aura scared her, pulling her in while warning her to run screaming for her life at the same time. But she couldn't let him go.

Rail shrugged. "Okay, I'll stay. I'm not supposed to leave until the year is up anyway. Maybe you're right, and it will get better."

Annie tried to justify her own actions as they left the kitchens and made their way to their own barracks. An enormous knot formed at the base of her sternum, threatening to make her puke. She was doing the right thing. It had to be. Then why did she feel so guilty?

She made her way to Toros' cabin. She had a bone to pick with him.



## Chapter 9

### Francisco

The letters from their families didn't have much in the way of news. Cory's parents' mostly just asked dozens of questions about what was happening, and why he hadn't written them yet. He wrote a long letter back in what spare time he had over the next couple days, explaining what was going on. He tried to gloss over his feelings about Toros, and how difficult it was and focus more on the positive. It wasn't easy, but he wanted his mother to worry as little as possible.

It wasn't long before another assignment came up. This time, Rail was called into the office, alongside Cory. Annie was going on a separate assignment, for which Cory definitely blamed Aron.

"Hopefully we get sent someplace cool." Rail mused as they made their way between the wooden buildings. "I mean, not that we'll have much time for sight-seeing I assume, but..."

He continued to speculate about what their assignment would be. Cory kept mostly silent. What would he do if he had to make the kill this time? What if they had to torture the victim again? He would refuse of course, but could he stand and watch? These people were assassins. The name didn't really lend itself to high moral standards. But they stood for something good, right? They protected people and things that needed protecting, creatures who couldn't really protect themselves. But did it have to be so callously done?

As they entered the room, the same minotaur with shaggy gray fur sat in one corner, beefy arms folded in front. Cory had forgotten his name. He lifted his chin in their direction as they entered. Cory raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement, and Rail gave a small wave. Toros hadn't arrived yet, so they took seats opposite their companion.

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. Then they heard the sounds of voices outside, getting louder. Before they could even register what was being said, the door burst

open and Toros rushed inside, another elf at his side. The newcomer was several inches taller than Toros, but still not tall by human standards. He had shorter, darker hair than Toros, and had a smile on his face as he sat next to the minotaur, nodding to each of the others.

Only then did Cory notice that Toros too, was smiling as he walked around and sat at his desk. It was odd to see Toros with anything but a serious scowl on his face, and even odder to consider that he had friends. He must have, of course, everybody had some kind of friend, it was just... strange to see Toros as anything but a stern, grumpy, commander.

Toros introduced his friend to the rest of the group. "Boys, this here is Hagas, one of our finest soldiers."

Hagas waved off the compliment, but grinned even more.

"He will be leading this mission. Last week we succeeded in pulling this target's name out of another target from last week. Coryther and Kuofa were on that mission."

So that was the minotaur's name!

Toros continued to give details about their target, then passed a set of keys to Hagas, who spun them around in his hand as he stood. "Alright, who's ready for a road trip?"

—

Cory would have thought that the magik that made an entire extra-dimensional space inside the hollow of a tree would have made it so they could travel faster than the speed of a standard van. But it still took more than six hours before they finally arrived at their destination. Darkness had fallen over the city by the time they began to cross the Golden Gate bridge.

"Welcome to San Francisco, boys," said Hagas, who sat at the wheel.

Hundreds of cars whizzed past on the famous bridge. Enormous cables rose on either side, reaching towards the enormous towers that held them up. Cory looked over at Rail. He had

a half-empty bag of chips on his face, and his mouth wide open, leaning against the window. Cory nudged him awake and pointed out the window. Looking out toward the ocean, a few lone lights reflected on the glossy black surface extending out to the invisible horizon.

As they approached the far side of the enormous bridge, huge skyscrapers rose on either side, lights illuminating every inch and reflecting off acres of dark glass.

But that was the tourist section, the commercial area shown to the public. The true color of the city was gray. Gray buildings stood over gray streets trod by gray people in gray coats, collars turned up against the mist. Gray clouds loomed low over the rooftops, reflecting the city lights. Gray-cloaked assassins slinked through the alleyway after their quarry.

They had successfully followed him home from work in the commercial sector. He appeared to be another shaga, but his powers were unknown. Cory and Hagas watched through the windows for the man to retire to bed. Rail and Kuofa watched the exits to make sure he didn't escape.

Cory whispered harshly to Hagas, "This man has a family! How can we just murder him knowing that?"

Hagas no longer looked cheerful. "If all goes to plan, they won't even see him die, he'll just go missing."

"How does that make it better? Then they'll probably worry about him for months, wondering if he's alive or if he just ran out on them!"

Hagas glared at Cory. "I try to avoid thinking about things like that. I follow my orders, alright? This isn't a good man, he's part of the Outcasters."

"So we know what kind of person he is just because he's part of an organization we're enemies with?"

Hagas looked like he was about to argue back again, but he rolled his eyes instead. "Look, if you feel queasy about it, I'll take the shot, alright? Besides, we have to capture him first so we can question him afterwards."

“Well that’s almost worse...”

Just then Hagas raised a finger to his lips, then pointed toward the house. The lights had just turned off. They were finally in bed.

Hagas whispered even quieter. Not that there was anyone to hear them from the alleyway they were crouched in. “Here’s the plan. We’ll break into the house as quietly as possible, then make some small noises downstairs. He’ll come down to investigate, and we’ll jump him, gag him, and drag him out to the car so we can take him away and question him, cool?”

“What if he just calls the cops?”

Hagas looked confused. “...what?”

Cory raised his eyebrows. Right, this guy was an elf. Maybe they don’t have cops? “The cops, the police. What if he calls for help?”

“We’ll make sure we’re listening, if he calls for help we’ll get him out as quick as we can and leave. If he gives us the slip we’ll track him, try again another time.”

“He could have a security system, what if we trigger it?”

“Were you not listening during the briefing? We’ve done reconnaissance on the house already. It doesn’t seem that there’s a security system, magikal or otherwise.”

“Oh... but we don’t know what his powers are?”

“No, he never used them in the open as far as we could tell. So we need to be extra careful.” He touched his ear, activating a magical ear clip which matched those worn by the rest of the team. “Kuofa, Rail! Cory and I are going in, stay alert and keep your eyes on the exits. If he tries to escape, take him down but try not to kill him. We need to question him.”

Rail’s voice sounded back. “You told us that three hours ago, can we get on with it?”

Cory chuckled. No one responded as they made their way towards the small house ahead of them. Rather than go through the front door, they approached one of the windows in the narrow space between this and the next house.

Cory approached the window, pushing it upwards to see if it was unlocked. It didn't budge. Of course, that would have been too easy. There appeared to be a twisting lock in the middle. Cory shrugged at Hagas.

As he turned around, Hagas was bent over, and appeared to be tugging on his wrist downward. What on earth was he doing? After a few moments, the elf's wrist broke, and his hand popped off. Cory gasped and covered his mouth. But there was no blood. Hagas didn't seem to be in pain either. He held up the disembodied hand, which gave a cutesie wiggle of its fingers. Cory nearly puked. He put his hands out to the side, as if to say "What the heck?!"

Hagas pointed up to a vent a few feet above their heads placed into the vinyl siding. It looked like a pipe, about five inches in diameter and covered with a plastic grate. Hagas then tossed his hand up, landing it on top of the pipe. His disembodied hand popped off the plastic cover, which landed in Hagas' hands. Well, his remaining attached hand. His other hand crawled into the pipe and disappeared. Cory longed to ask for an explanation. Was he a shaga? He'd never thought about an elf being a shaga, but it made sense. Why would it be just humans? Or maybe he was some freaky zombie frankenstein monster.

After a few moments Hagas' hand appeared at the window and gave a little wave. It climbed up to the lock and twisted it open. Hagas motioned for Cory to follow. He pushed the window up and crawled through as quietly as they could. Hagas grabbed his disembodied hand and shoved it back onto his wrist. There was a slight cracking sound and the elf held his hand up, wiggling his fingers. It appeared to have reattached just fine.

They made their way toward the stairs, since the master bedroom was on the second floor. Cory still felt very uncomfortable about what they were doing, but he also felt a rush that came with sneaking into the house unwanted. His heart pounded heavily in his chest. He tried not to kick anything, but it was so dark. He stumbled a few times, but fortunately it wasn't far to the stairs. Moonlight from the window at the top poured through, illuminating the wooden staircase. The stairs ascended half the distance first, then turned. Hagas seemed to have no

problem with the darkness. He was waiting at the top of the first set already. Cory hurried after him, stepping lightly. Even so, one of the stairs creaked as he put his weight on it. Cory shut his eyes. Why hadn't it creaked for Hagas? They both stopped for a few moments, listening. Hagas' red knife slipped into his hand. They continued toward their target, even more cautious than before. Cory took the remaining steps two at a time, to decrease his chances of stepping on the creaky ones. One other step creaked as well, but Cory hurried forward, trying to act as if nothing had happened. Hagas widened his eyes at him as if to say *What is wrong with you? Be quiet!*

The master bedroom door was slightly open. Fortunately the rest of the upstairs was carpeted. Hagas peeked in through the door, pushing it slightly further as he stepped inside. Cory followed, glass vial held in his hand. In it was a diluted version of gnarl poison which would paralyze quickly but not kill. They approached the bed in the center of the room, moving slowly. The husband lay sprawled on top of the covers in thin underclothes. Cory approached the other side of the bed, where the wife lay on her side, covers pulled up to her head. Cory unstopped the vial in his hand and looked up at Hagas, who nodded.

Kneeling down, he moved the vial toward the woman's open mouth. Cory looked at her face. That was a mistake. Suddenly his thoughts whirled. He was poisoning an innocent woman while she was sleeping. Then they would kill her husband. They probably had kids, what would they do? This woman's life was about to be torn apart as she was made a widow. He tried to reconcile it in his mind. Killing this one man would save the Forest of Life. Was it alright for them to take one life to save multiple species and ecosystems? Probably, but that was too much philosophy to figure out while on your knees by a stranger's bed.

Hagas glared. Cory swallowed and poured the contents of the vial into the woman's slightly open mouth. It was difficult, but most of the liquid went in. Hagas slashed his knife at the man next to her at the same time. The woman started coughing immediately, propping herself up on one arm. Much of the poison spilled out, but enough of it got into her system.

After only a few seconds her arm went slack and she fell back, her face in her pillow. She tried to scream, but it came out as an indistinct, frightening mumble.

A toilet flushed. Cory looked up. The man that had been in the bed a moment before was completely gone. Hagas looked just as confused as Cory. Then the door to the bathroom opened and the same man stood in the doorway, just finishing pulling up his pants. He looked like he was about to say something, but he saw Cory and Hagas and his eyes widened. He turned and ran through the bathroom. Recalling the floor plan they'd gone over, there was a second staircase that came out more towards the front door.

Hagas bolted after the fleeing man, yelling into the earpiece "He's headed for the front door! Stop him but don't kill him!"

Cory paused one moment to push the woman over onto her back so she could breath. Hopefully his face would be obscured enough by the darkness and his hood. "I'm sorry." Then he turned and ran down the staircase they had come up to try and cut the man off from the other side. He found Hagas by the front door, retrieving his knife.

He looked at Cory. "It was another duplicate. I think the target can make illusions of himself. Search the house, the real one must be in here somewhere since the others haven't seen him leave."

Cory nodded, pulling out his bow, pointed end held in front of him. They were at a severe disadvantage. They had studied the floor plan of the house but this man lived here, and could create fakes to mislead them. Cory felt like he had to keep watching his feet to make sure he didn't kick anything. Fortunately the house was pretty well cleaned up and there wasn't too much to worry about stepping on. It was also a pretty small house though, so there weren't many places to search. He made his way upstairs again, but turned away from the master bedroom, walking warily. One of the doors on the side of the hallway opened towards him. Cory tensed, preparing to strike.

"Dad?" A small girl stood in front of him in a pink sleeping dress, rubbing her eyes. She

couldn't have been more than four. He tried to remain calm. This... shouldn't change anything. But he couldn't detach himself anymore, not from this.

Then he realized she was looking past him, not at him. He whirled around, swinging his bow. Cory barely missed the girl's father, who had been sneaking up behind him. The man cursed and bolted again, back down the stairs. Cory sprinted after him. As he followed, his bow got caught on the stair railing, causing him to stumble. He left the bow, not wanting to lose his target again. The man ran for the front door again, but Cory was right behind him. He tried to grab the man's shoulders, but he vanished, and Cory grabbed air. He felt a sting across his hand. Looking up he saw Hagas, his hand in a throwing motion. Haggis' eyes widened in shock. Cory looked down and saw a red knife lying on the ground.

The back door slammed. Hagas yelled into the earpiece again, "He's out the back door!"

"I got him." Came Rail's confident reply. Could Rail get him? Especially without killing the man? Rail was just as bad a shot as Cory, who couldn't hit the widest tree in the forest. Cory started to feel dizzy. His vision blurred, and his hands fell to his sides. The cut on his hand wasn't deep. The knives they used were designed to just nick the skin. But the magikally-enhanced gnarl poison worked quickly. Hagas rushed over and caught him as his legs gave out.

"Man down!" Hagas said into the coms. "I need help carrying him, we need to hurry!"

"Target is also down, coming in to help." The front door burst open, wood splinters flying from the broken lock. Kuofa hurried over and hoisted Cory over his shoulder like a fresh kill. Cory caught a glimpse of the little girl standing on the stairway, watching them with wide eyes. Cory's mind swam with guilt, shame, and the odd pains that came from the poison.

They made their way toward the back door and the street where the van was parked. Rail pulled the van right up behind the house and they loaded Cory into the back next to... Cory shifted his head to the side. Fortunately the gnarl poison only paralyzed from the neck down, so he could still look around, and talk. His vision was blurry, but the man they had chased now lay

face-down next to him in the back of the van with an ice arrow projecting from his back. Cory heard Hagas and Rail arguing from the front seats.

“I told you we wanted him alive!”

Rail shrugged, and the van started moving. “I was actually aiming for the legs. You really should have put someone better with a bow to watch the exits.”

Hagas didn’t sound convinced. “You’re saying that you aimed for the legs, and *accidentally* shot right between the ribs and hit him in the heart? Do you know how difficult it is to make a shot like that? Especially when they’re running? Also, do you know where you’re going?”

“Uhhh no idea, I was hoping you knew where we were going...”

After a few minutes, Cory’s body started to ache. He couldn’t stop himself from sliding around as they took corners. The lights he could see out the windows above him soon disappeared as they left the city. He yelled up to the others.

“Hagas, how long do we have before I go unconscious?”

Hagas’ tone was flat and serious. Cory was curious how guilty he felt for accidentally lethally poisoning him. He didn’t blame Hagas, but it was difficult not to be a little angry. “You probably have another 15 minutes or so before you’re completely out. After that, you have two hours max before you’re dead.”

Cory tried to lean up on his elbow, but quickly remembered his paralysis. Both he and Rail let out exclamations of surprise and horror.

Rail cried out, “But the base is further than that! He’ll be dead before we even reach the Forest!”

Cory leaned his head back onto the floor. He was going to die.

Hagas spoke up, still very serious. “That’s why we’re not driving all the way back to the Forest. There’s a quicker way. But I need all of you to swear to secrecy, and you’ll have to be blindfolded again. No one can know about this.”

Rail tried to clarify, “You mean, that we used it, or that it exists?”

“That it exists. Only high-level Veiled officers know about it. Take the next right”

Kuofa interjected with his own rare comment. “So how come you know about it? You don’t have any real office.”

Hagas smiled. “Being Toros’ friend counts as being a high-level officer I guess.”

Cory called up from the back, “But I thought gnarl poison doesn’t have an antidote?” It took some effort to raise his voice. He was getting weaker by the minute.

“You’re right,” Hagas responded. “No antidote. But gnarls have control over their own poison. They may not look it, but they are intelligent creatures with strong magik that we don’t understand much of. Someone poisoned by a gnarl spine can be placed before a gnarl for judgment. They then decide whether to heal the victim, or if it really was their time.”

“So you’re saying that my best friend’s life is now dependent on a sentient hedgehog deciding if he’s worthy to live or not.” Rail sounded more than a little bitter.

Hagas shrugged. “It’s the only real option. Let’s hope they think he’s worthy to live.”

They kept talking, and arguing, back and forth but to Cory, they’re voices started to blend together and fuzz. The periodic street lights overhead seemed to draw closer and closer. His mind went blank.

## Chapter 10

### Wind in the Caves

Annie sat alone in the back seat of the sedan, her cloak pulled over herself like a blanket. The prick, Aron, was in the passenger seat, flipping through a book. Turns out the Veiled had a library of sorts, mostly about creatures within the forest, potential targets, and other information that could be useful for missions, like maps. He was reading up on cave demons, since their target was one. Every once in a while he made a “hm” sound when he read something

interesting. After a few minutes, Annie spoke up.

“Are you going to tell us what you’re finding out?”

The one in the driver’s seat was a human shaga named Brian. He had headphones in and was bobbing his head to the music.

Aron cleared his throat. “Well, yes, I just figured I’d summarize the important things later.”

Annie pulled her legs up to her chest and stared out the window. “Alright.”

Aron looked back at her. He held the book towards her. “If you’re bored you can read it, I’m almost done anyway.”

Annie reached out to take it. “Thanks. What are you going to do?”

He held up a handful of pamphlets. “I’m going to read up on where we’re going.”

Annie flipped through the book, entitled “The Physiology and Sociology of Black Demons”. Annie grimaced, but started reading.

She had heard of cave demons, of course, they were one of the ten basic races. There were five blessed races, Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Sei, and Nymphoids. There were also five cursed races, goblins, demons, flegar, kobolds, and bugbears. Black demons were the strongest and biggest kind of demon, but that’s about all Annie knew about them.

The book she was reading detailed that cave demons often live in wild tribes most often in caves, only coming out at night. Each demon had a unique combination of... face stuff. Horns, antlers, tusks, etc. The bigger the better, in their eyes. If you have more antlers or whatever then you have a higher status. The ones with the most become elders in a council once they get too old to actually hunt and fight.

Some of the pictures they included looked absolutely ridiculous to Annie. A muscular humanoid with glossy, obsidian-colored skin and a set of three different antlers, two pairs of tusks, and a horn in the middle of its forehead. After that, the book started getting into detail about how horns were passed on, and what the genetics were. Annie snapped the book shut and

looked out the window at the passing trees, obscured with fog. Every once in a while they got a short glimpse of the wide blue Pacific extending out until it met the sky.

Aron looked back at her. "It's a bit of a dry read, I know. Did you find anything useful?"

Annie grunted in acknowledgement and kept looking out the window. She didn't really feel like talking, least of all to Aron.

Aron sighed. "Look, I know you're angry with me for ratting you and Cory out."

Annie raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, still not looking at the elf.

"I'm not going to apologize for saying what I did, but I hope you can understand why I did it. It wasn't because of any sort of grudge, I didn't want to get you in trouble, I did it because I genuinely think your actions were a liability on that mission. Fortunately it ended up alright, but next time if you two don't have your heads in the game it could jeopardize a mission."

Annie didn't want to admit it aloud, but he was right. Her parents had taught her that sometimes we have to give up something we want for the safety of the group, or to accomplish a goal that benefits more than just us. Annie nodded, "That makes sense."

Aron also nodded. "I am sorry that I upset you, and I don't expect you to forgive me, but try not to let your dislike of me compromise this mission as well."

Annie rolled her eyes and finally looked at him. "Look, Aron, it does make sense why you told on us, but the way you did it was really uncool. You could have come to us first and expressed your concerns. Instead you reported us without saying anything to us first, and you did it directly to Toros, with us in the room. It was embarrassing and it felt like a personal attack."

Aron thought for a moment, then took a deep breath. "Okay. I can see that. I definitely could have been less confrontational about it."

"Well, I do forgive you," Annie said. "Soldier to soldier, I won't let my personal feelings get in the way of the mission."

Aron smiled back at her. "Thank you."

After a moment of silence, Brian grunted and took one of his earbuds out. “Well, glad we got that out of the way, but we should really talk about what the actual plan is for this job.”

“Right!” said Aron. “So all we know is that this cave demon is named Booton, and he lives in Lassen National Park. We have to find him, and kill him, discreetly. Hopefully after finding out if he passed on any information to the Outcasters.”

“Okay, so how do we find him?” Annie asked.

“Well... I don't know. We don't have much to go on.”

Annie thought back to what she had read. Black demons rarely lived alone, they lived in organized colonies. “Maybe we could find other cave demons and ask around? They usually live in colonies in caves and stuff, and they have a kind of council of elders. If we can find this council, maybe they could tell us where Booton is.”

Aron nodded excitedly. “Lassen is known for hot springs and cave formations, and that sort of thing, so we have a place to start looking.”

Brian interrupted, “Okay, but why would this council or anyone tell a group of three assassins where they can find one of the other members of the colony? Seems to me like they wouldn't want to tell us anything.”

They sat in silence for a moment, thinking. Aron spoke first, “What if they don't know we're assassins? We could tell them we're there for some other reason, and maybe leave our cloaks behind, so they don't know we're Veiled.”

“That could work,” Brian said. “But we'd still be carrying weapons, leaving those behind would be a very bad idea and make killing someone very difficult. So what kind of visitors would come fully armed, not know where to find who they're looking for, but not mean any harm?”

Annie chuckled to herself. “Tax collectors?”

Aron chuckled as well. “I doubt they pay taxes on their cave.”

“I don't know...” Brian said.

Aron looked at him. “There's no way they pay taxes, they live in caves! In a national park

for crying out loud.”

Brian nodded. “No, I know that, but... what if we were debt collectors. Not for taxes, but maybe we were hired by someone who Booton owes a debt to, and we’ve come to collect.”

Aron nodded slowly. “That just might work... That doesn’t mean that they’ll turn him in though, we would still be meaning him some kind of harm, just not... physical harm.”

Annie shrugged. “That seems like our best option though. It at least makes some suitable excuse as to why we would be carrying weapons.”

“We should figure out details though,” said Brian. “Just to make sure we all have the story straight.”

“We could make up some junk about client confidentiality,” Annie suggested. “Then we wouldn’t necessarily have to give any details at all.”

“Whoever does the talking will have to be on their toes,” Brian said. “And ready to make up some crap, otherwise we’ll end up fighting an entire cave demon colony and likely get killed.”

“Aron’s really good at ratting people out,” Annie said snidely. “Maybe he should do it.”

Aron gave her a pained look. “Come on, I thought we were past that.”

Annie smiled and put her hands up in a gesture of peace. “We are, it was a joke.”

Aron nodded. “Good. Hurtful, but yeah I can do most of the talking.”

Half an hour later they reached the entrance to Lassen National Park. Brian rolled down his window and flashed a card at the ranger in the station. She nodded and waved them through. The Veiled had free access to the national parks, and most state and local parks in the U.S. A lot of the parks were occupied by magik beings. Just another way the two worlds stayed separate.

The face of an enormous, snow-capped mountain loomed in front of them. Aron directed Brian towards the nearest caves listed on the map. Past the windows zoomed scattered stands of pines amid fields of loose gray rock. It wasn’t the most spectacular national park Annie had been to, but it was beautiful.

As they climbed higher up the mountain, Annie began seeing volcanic rock formations on some of the slopes, including caves and bits of lava hardened into globs. She pointed them out to the other two.

“The nearest caves on the map are in another couple switchbacks.” Aron responded.

“The demons are probably more likely to be in the ones tourists don’t visit,” Annie pointed out.

Brian nodded and turned the car around. “We passed a parking lot just a minute ago.”

Fortunately the park wasn’t too busy at the moment. Only two other cars were in the parking lot, which was for some kind of trailhead. But the three assassins stashed their cloaks in the car and headed in the other direction, careful not to be seen as they jumped the guard rail.

The ground was steeply sloped, but mostly barren, just some sparse brown clumps of grass. A chill wind blew down the mountainside, making Annie wish she still had her cloak. The magik here wasn’t nearly as concentrated as within the Forest of Life. The space was too open. But she could see some magik reverberating from the earth in multi-colored waves, particularly as they approached a crack in the mountainside.

Brian, who had been leading the way, looked back at the other two. “Last chance to turn back.”

Aron rolled his eyes and pushed past the shaga into the cave. Brian chuckled and took up the rear behind Annie.

The first part of the cave was steep. They had to turn around and downclimb for a good twenty feet before it leveled out and widened. They started walking deeper. Brian pulled out a flashlight and shined it on the path ahead. Annie had almost forgotten that he wouldn’t be able to see down here. She could see nearly anything, thanks to her shaga ability. It occurred to her that she didn’t know what Brian’s ability was.

“Brian, you’re a shaga right? What power do you have?” she tried to whisper, but it still echoed through the tunnel.

He put his finger harshly to his lips. "Keep your voice down!"

Annie shrugged. "Why? Don't we want them to know we're here?"

He paused. "Yeah, I guess so."

Aron also stopped, looked back at them, and shrugged. Then he started shouting down the tunnel, "Hello? Any demons in here?"

Annie cringed slightly. This was generally not the way the Veiled operated. Their training was in stealth and assassination, not... whatever this was. But it seemed like a logical choice.

There was a long pause as they waited for a response. Aron shrugged again, "Maybe we should go back and try a different cave?"

Suddenly there were at least three black-skinned creatures on either side of them, both up and down the tunnel. How had they gotten behind them? And how had they snuck up on them so easily?

Aron put his hands into the air as the demon directly in front of him held a crude-looking glaive up to the elf's nose. "Who are you? You trespass here, you are not welcome."

The voice was gravelly and deep. A twisted black horn jutted straight from the demon's forehead, like a unicorn's horn. Their bodies were bulky, but they were not stout. The lead one stood at least two feet taller than the elf's small frame. Their skin was a deep glossy black, reflecting the light of Brian's flashlight. A shaggy mat of hair covered most of their heads, extending all the way down their neck. Annie had expected their clothing to be crude, made of furs or something, but most wore pieces of well-made silvery armor overtop of modern, plus-size clothing.

Aron hesitantly spoke, "We're here to collect a debt. We're looking for a demon named Booton."

The demons looked around at each other, and the lead one spoke up again. "What do you want with Booton? You bring weapons."

Aron cleared his throat and slowly lowered his hands as he spoke. "We bring weapons for

protection, we hope Booton will cooperate so that our weapons will not be necessary.”

The demon behind the spokesman, one with two stubbed horns that looked like they'd been cut off, spoke in the lead demon's ear in a language Annie didn't understand. Unicorn horn barked a response back at him and nodded. “You will be taken to the counsel. They will judge whether we will help you, or you will die.”

With that, Stub-horns, Unicorn face, and the others turned and walked briskly down the tunnel. The ones behind the three Veiled all gestured at them with their various weapons, so they had little choice but to follow. Annie really didn't want to get into a fight with these guys, not at close quarters. They were much bigger and stronger than any of the three assassins, and they looked like they knew how to use their weapons. Still, she itched to draw her bow.

The demons moved at a fast pace, completely unbothered by the uneven floor and jutting stalagmites. Annie stumbled several times trying to keep pace with them. Brian had it even worse, able to see only with his flashlight. Annie could see waves of magik bouncing around the walls of the tunnels. It was slightly different from the pattern that emerged inside of a forest like the Forest of Life. Instead of spreading into a rainbow of color, here the magik seemed to cross and merge until the colors deepened and intensified to incredible hues of deep red and darkest purple.

They weren't actually those colors of course, not as most people see them. Annie could see things beyond the visible light spectrum into infrared, ultraviolet and beyond into many 'colors' that most eyes can't even comprehend.

They passed by several offshoot tunnels. Other demons saw them marching by and joined the ranks. They were soon part of a full procession of demons, not all of whom were warriors. Annie noticed several in simpler clothing and no armor. She saw several who she assumed were women, based on the shape of their bodies. Each demon had their own aura as well, though it was difficult to distinguish from the intense hues of magik that already reverberated through the tunnels.

Eventually they emerged into a larger cavern. At the other end were about a dozen older-looking demons who sat interspersed among stalagmites, some of which had their tips broken off for the demons to rest their arms or their horns. Most of the elders had absurdly large and strange arrays of horns and tusks. One had two five foot long mammoth's tusks emerging from their face that curved down and rested on the floor. Another had horns that jutted from their cheeks and curved in front of their face, along with short tusks that stuck up from their bottom jaw, and straight antlers sticking from the back of their skull. This was clearly the council of elders that Annie had read about.

The demon with the unicorn-horn stepped forward and bowed so deep his horn scraped the ground. He then spoke in their language, its harsh sounds echoing around the cavern. Several of the elders appeared to ask him questions, which he answered.

Unicorn-face then turned to the three Veiled. "You are permitted to speak. Answer questions honestly and you may live."

Aron nodded his appreciation and stepped forward. "Thank you for letting us into your home, honorable council. We are grateful for your hospitality and understanding." He also bowed low to the ground as he said it.

Annie noticed Brian scanning the cavern, and she did the same, looking for possible threats and escape routes. Annie counted the number of demons between them and the main exit. The room behind them had filled in with those that had escorted them, as well as dozens of curious onlookers. Most appeared to be unarmed, unless they fought with some of those silly-looking horns and antlers. But there were still too many for them to push through, and that still left the rest of that long tunnel to get through.

The mammoth-faced elder spoke up. It was very difficult to understand them, since it seemed they could barely move their lips right around the enormous tusks. "We know Booton. He lives here. But why should we tell you where he is?"

"Booton owes a debt, your honor," Aron said. "We are merely here to collect that debt,

and if he can pay we will be on our way.”

Another elder spoke up, “And if he cannot pay?”

Aron spread his hands, “Then, unfortunately, we would have to take him in. His debt must be collected now, either by money or by his freedom.”

“What debt does he owe? To whom?”

Aron bowed apologetically. “That is between our client and him, Booton could tell you himself, but the nature of our job here requires that we honor client privacy.”

Annie raised an eyebrow. Aron was good. She was satisfied that he had used her suggestion. She continued to look around, trying to be subtle. Something seemed a little off about the way this was all laid out.

The elders glanced around at one another. A big one in the middle with multi-faceted moose-like antlers spoke up, “Booton! Step forward.”

Annie, Brian, and Aron immediately looked around. The same cave demon they had seen earlier, the one with the two stubbed horns, stepped forward, about 15 feet to their right. Booton bowed low and again spoke in the demon language.

The moose-crown elder in the center spoke again. “Booton, what debt do you owe that would send agents such as these to collect you?”

Uh-oh, Annie thought. They were going to see the holes in their story. Had the Council suspected them all along? She focused on one corner of the room where the magik seemed to be behaving strangely, just to the side of where the elders were sitting.

Booton raised his chin. “I owe no debts, your honor. These three lie. I do not know what they seek from me.”

Moose-head turned towards Aron, a slight smile on their face. “You are adept in your lies, assassin, but your falsehood is revealed. What business do you really have here?”

Annie’s hand twitched toward her bow, but Aron still looked like he wanted to talk his way out. She finally realized what was strange about that corner of the room. It was emitting its

own magik aura, and not reflecting one. The magik that flowed there from other places passed right through, as if the wall wasn't there at all.

"Please," Aron said. "Believe me that this man does owe a great debt, he is merely trying to avoid having to pay what he knows he cannot."

Moose-head shook his antlers back and forth. "Forgive me for trusting the word of one of my own people over that of a Veiled assassin who lied about his identity. Yes, we know who you really are. Your weapons are unique to your group. Now, surrender, or you will be executed."

Aron bowed one more time. "It is unfortunate that our interaction has ended this way."

The elf drew his bow lightning fast and let an arrow fly towards Booton. It was still their mission to kill him, even if they couldn't get information out of him. Aron's shot wasn't quite on the money though, and it impacted Booton in the shoulder. Annie also drew her bow and an arrow. Several demons shot arrows back at them, and the armed guards rushed forwards.

Brian slammed both hands to the ground and a wall of wind, almost to the ceiling, burst in a tight circle around the three Veiled. Arrows that had been directed at them suddenly shot into the ceiling and the demons that had rushed forward were thrown onto their backsides.

The three assassins moved in close to one another, facing out in different directions. "I saw a secret exit," Annie said. "Over in that corner of the cavern."

The demons tried shooting a couple more arrows at them through the wall of wind, but they were deflected easily. A couple guards hesitantly approached the wind wall.

"I can move the wall along with us," Brian said. "But I can't keep it up for too much longer, we need to move."

Unicorn-face, the demon who had escorted them in, began pushing his way through the wall, which was only a foot or two thick. His clothing flowed upward like he was Marilyn Monroe.

"If you drop it for just a second, I think I can get another shot at Booton," Annie said. She could see him on the ground, being tended to by two other demons. They broke the icicle arrow

off his shoulder.

“I’ll get Unicorn-face,” Aron said. “Three, two, one, go.”

Brian dropped the wind wall. Unicorn stumbled forward a step, right onto the sharp end of Aron’s bow. Annie let an ice arrow fly, right between the two tending Booton and striking the target right between the eyes. Brain-freeze.

The three bolted for the corner Annie had indicated. The demons were taken by surprise. Annie let two more arrows fly at demons who rushed at them. One found its mark, but the other was deflected by a shield. As they neared the corner, mammoth-face rose from his seat and with incredible neck strength, swung his massive tusks at them. Brian ducked underneath and slashed across the creature’s torso with his gnarl-poison dagger. He then ushered Aron and Annie forward.

Annie hesitated for just an instant, then strode right through the illusory wall. Aron and Brian were right behind her. Brian still held his flashlight in one hand, which was good because this corridor was much smaller than the one they came in on, the ground uneven and slick. Brian took a moment to create another wind wall behind them, and they proceeded as fast as they dared.

“I can’t keep that wall up for much longer, we’re getting too far-”.

Brian’s voice cut off in a grunt. Annie was at least ten feet ahead of him when she turned back and saw him fall to his knees, a thick arrow protruding from his lower back. She could see the archer rushing down the tunnel. She struck him down with an arrow to the throat. But several more were running towards them, unhindered by the uneven floor.

“Go!” Brian moaned.

Annie started towards him, another arrow ready to fly but suddenly a rushing wind blew in her face and knocked her painfully onto her hip. Aron pulled on her arm. “He’s helping us get away, come on.”

The last she saw of the shaga Brian was him laying on one side, the flashlight held in one

hand as he used the other to create sudden walls of wind, hindering the demon's progress. But after that she couldn't look back any more.

The tunnel emerged further down the mountainside, but fortunately the road wasn't too far. She and Aron made it back to the car and drove off as fast as they could, though they saw no more sign of pursuit. The rest of the drive they sat in silence, all the way back to the Forest of Wisdom, except for a brief pitstop for food.

It was just a few hours later that Annie heard Cory had been poisoned and was nearly dead.

—

The next thing Cory remembered was gasping and blinking. Several people were standing over him, including Annie and Rail, as well as Toros and a few others Cory didn't recognize right away. To his side was a tiny creature that looked like a rabbit-sized hedgehog. But it had too many legs. Cory had seen these creatures before, since the Veiled kept a colony of them. Gnarl's looked like over-sized hedgehogs, but they have eight legs instead of four. This one was watching him intently.

"Cory!" Annie rushed over and knelt by his side, Rail standing behind her. "How do you feel?"

Cory took a moment to check, see if anything felt off. "I feel... fine." He was just as surprised by it as they were.

"You're sure? You don't feel anything wrong?"

"Well there is a bruise on my hip that I don't remember having."

Rail chimed in. "That's my bad. We accidentally dropped you while you were unconscious."

"I think I can forgive you for that one, seeing as I'm alive." He started to sit up, both

Annie and Rail helping him to his feet.

“He should be totally fine.” A voice said by their side. Cory finally recognized her as Mistress Luna, the medic who attended the gnarl colony. She was a short elf, the only one Cory had seen that was shorter than Toros. She wore simple brown clothing that looked like it had moss growing on it. Even her hair was green-tinged. “The poison leaves no side effects that we’re aware of. He should be right as rain, after a good night’s rest.” With that, she knelt in front of the gnarl who had, apparently, healed Coryther. The creature put its front legs up on her proffered hands and gently licked her face. She made a strange clicking grumble, and the gnarl scurried off into the underbrush, shaking its head.

“You can talk to them?” Cory asked.

She shook her head sadly. “Unfortunately we have only been able to decipher a few words of their language. It all sounds so similar. I don’t think I even said ‘thank you’ correctly.” She looked wistfully toward the retreating gnarl. She turned back abruptly as they were turning to leave. “You should be very grateful for his healing. I’ve never seen them make a decision that quickly. They can take hours to choose whether a person is worthy of healing or not. Some have even died while waiting on a verdict.”

“Well,” Cory said. “I can communicate telepathically with most creatures, perhaps I could talk to the gnarls and translate for you.”

Mistress Luna’s eyes lit up. “That would be incredible! Come, let’s...”

She started to walk back towards the underbrush where the gnarl had gone, but Toros stopped her.

“Perhaps Cory should rest, he’s had a long night.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.” She looked up at Cory, “But whenever you’re feeling up to it, please come visit me.”

## Chapter 11

### Rail Miles

It rained all that week. Rather than take that as a signal to stay indoors, the Veiled commanders seemed to take the rain as an opportunity to sodden everyone's cloaks. Stealth training and night missions increased. The rain gave the opportunity to pass "truly unseen". At least, that's what Captain Drake claimed.

Cory was supposed to have sentry duty that night, but he'd convinced Rail to swap him. The two walked back to the barracks early so they could get ready. They strode into the barracks and lowered their hoods, sprinkling rainwater on the floor.

"Hey, thanks again for swapping me," Cory said to Rail. "You didn't have to, you know."

Rail pointed a finger at his face as he swapped into a new cloak. "Don't forget our deal. You're taking my next *two*, and one of them has to be in the rain."

Cory raised his hands in surrender. "I know, I know. I'll keep our agreement."

Rail shook his head. "You're really getting the short stick here. Why you would trade two shifts for one just so you could go dancing, I don't know."

Cory changed out his clothes for a fresh set, removing his leather armor and setting it in the small dresser by his bunk. "I like dancing, you know that. And everyone is going to be there tonight."

Rail gave him a sideways glance.

"Oh come on," Cory said defensively. "You don't even like dancing. I meant everybody else."

Rail shrugged. "I dance sometimes."

"The only time I've seen you dance was when you're playing violin, or when Cara makes you."

Rail smiled. "That's sometimes, isn't it?"

Having finished changing, Cory walked over to Rail and put a hand on his shoulder. “I am going to miss you tonight. But Cara, she’ll be devastated.”

Rail pushed him away with a laugh. “Oh shut up. Nothing has really happened there anyway.”

“Why are you even putting on a fresh cloak? You’re just going back out into the rain.”

Rail shrugged. “It feels good to put on a fresh set.”

Cory looked around, making sure no one else was listening. A few other soldiers stood around the barracks, but none seemed to be paying them any attention. “Hey, are you ever going to tell me how you guys actually got back here quickly enough to heal me? What was that secret way that Hagas talked about?”

Rail looked at him seriously. “I still had to wear a blindfold, same as every time we enter or leave the Forest.”

Cory frowned, disappointed.

Rail looked at him with a sly smile.

Cory noticed, and began to smile as well. “You peeked, didn’t you?”

Rail raised his chin in mock defiance. “You know I can’t say anything. I was sworn to secrecy, not to tell another living soul what we did that night.”

Cory rolled his eyes. “Oh please, like you care what your orders were.”

Rail chuckled, “I guess you do know me. We went through a tree.”

“A tree?”

“Yeah. Apparently there’s an entrance to the Forest of Life in one of the national forests around Francisco. So we went through it, and voilà, we appeared in the Forest nearby.”

Cory nodded. It made some sense for there to be multiple entrances to the Forest of Life, especially since it included nearly every ecosystem imaginable. The way Rail described the entrance reminded Cory of when the bugbear had chased him, and he met that strange man. He’d be willing to bet there was a similar entrance in Redwoods, somewhere near the Veiled

Overlook trail where the vans were parked. The Forest of Life was bigger than the whole Redwood forest, the only way Cory could think that it could exist is if it were actually somewhere else, and they were transported somehow when they entered or exited. Maybe they were in another dimension. “Do you think that’s the only other entrance?”

“I doubt it. Hagas wouldn’t say anything, but if there’s one in a random forest, I bet you there’s some all over the world. Anyways, I gotta go man. I’ll see you later!”

After Rail left, Cory fixed his hair and went to find Annie.

\*\*\*

Rail sat curled up in a cold, wet ball in the sentry tower. It was a small, wooden platform high in a tree, like a deer-hunting platform. Rain drizzled lightly on his already wet cloak. A full moon shone faintly through the rain clouds above. Rail’s eyes were drooping.

He looked through the forest. Another sentry platform stood at the edge of his sight on both sides of him. He wondered why he had to serve sentry duty at all. What kind of attack would come on a night like this? What kind of attack would *ever* come here? That was kind of the point of having a super-secret hidden entrance you would kill to keep a secret. In all the time Rail had been there, the Veiled hadn’t been attacked once. He looked at the large bell above his head and rolled his eyes. It was their alarm system. An identical one stood in the center of the Veiled sleeping quarters. Supposedly, if one were to ring that bell, the other would also ring, as well as every other bell on every sentry platform in the whole Forest. Rail shouldn’t even have been there in the first place. After all, as a mundane he wasn’t “fit for the army”. Why would they trust him to be a sentry? He allowed his eyelids to droop shut, the hood of his cloak keeping the rain from pelting his face.

Rail’s eyes snapped open. He looked around for what had awakened him. The rain was falling harder now. His vision was obscured as he stood to get a closer look. He thought he saw

movement on the ground, he peeked over the edge of the platform and thought he saw a cloaked figure with broad shoulders moving through the trees, trying to remain unseen using the same stealth techniques Rail had been taught. Rail cocked his head. They weren't doing any exercises in this area that he knew of, why was a Veiled soldier out right now?

Rail heard a growl behind him.

Rail whipped around, bow pointed at the intruder. At the other side of the platform crouched a large gray wolf, its teeth bared. How had it gotten up there? Wolves couldn't climb ladders. The wolf pounced. Rail struck out with his bow, stabbing it in the neck. Its body fell to the ground and transformed into the body of a man in ragged clothing, lying on the platform.

Rail's eyes widened. "Werewolves," He whispered.

Another werewolf was climbing up to the edge of the platform. Rail swung his bow at the bell attached to the tree. The bell rang out through the night, joined by other bells all through the forest as the werewolf leaped.

—

Cory was awakened by the sound of the alarm bell. Around him, other Veiled were shouting and rubbing sleep from their eyes. They rushed to put on their cloaks and grab their weapons. Cory pulled on his shoes and cloak and grabbed his bow and quiver. Cory struggled to gather his thoughts. The Veiled were under attack! Who could it be?

He followed the stream of warriors running through the forest. It was interesting to see an entire army sneaking through the forest at once. Everywhere he glanced, Cory saw glimpses of Veiled warriors that then disappeared. By the time Cory got to the fight, it was all over. A crowd of gray-cloaked figures of every size were bunched together around one of the trees with a sentry platform. The warriors near Cory slowed, standing on tip-toe to try and get a look at what had happened. Suddenly over the murmur of noise Cory heard his name being shouted.

He recognized Annie's voice and followed it to see her struggling through the crowd to reach him. The look on her face made him concerned.

He started making his way toward her through the crowd. When they reached each other, she spoke, "Cory! You'd better come quickly." She grabbed his hand and started pulling him through the crowd. They reached the place where the fight had taken place. Seven werewolves. The shapes of men but covered in gray fur with sharp teeth, lay dead on the ground, two with ice arrows in their sides.

Cory's eyes widened as he saw Rail lying on the ground. His cloak was soaked in blood around his shoulder, his breathing short and ragged. One of his legs was bent at a horrible angle. A dwarf with a long beard was tending to his shoulder, murmuring incantations. Cory assumed it must be a Naga. They were much rarer than shaga, but they were much more powerful. They had extended life, and could cast spells. He wiped the blood from Rail's shoulder, and started setting the leg. Toros stood nearby, watching.

Annie asked him tentatively, "Will he be okay?"

The dwarf answered without looking up. "The bite wasn't too bad. It'll leave a scar, but he'll be fine in a few days. He'll have to walk in a splint for a while for that leg to heal properly as well. I can set the bones and accelerate the healing though."

"And is he going to be..."

The Naga looked up at them gravely. "There is no cure for a werewolf bite. So, yes. He will be a werewolf."

Annie gave a sharp intake of breath. The warriors closest to Rail tightened their grip on their bows.

The dwarf continued, "What baffles me is how he was able to kill five werewolves without a bow. His is still in the tree." They glanced up to where the bow was, on the sentry platform.

Suddenly Rail's body began to change. The dwarf backed away quickly, almost supernaturally quick. Rail's head elongated. His whole body turned black and sprouted fur until

a fully-grown wolf lay on the ground. It got up unsteadily, still favoring his injured leg. Several warriors aimed arrows at it. Annie knelt to the ground and spoke soothingly, "Rail?"

At the sound of her voice the wolf looked up and opened its eyes. Suddenly it growled and lunged at her, teeth bared. Cory leapt forward before any arrows were released and tackled the wolf, pinning its head to the ground. "Rail!" Cory shouted. "Remember who you are!"

The Naga stepped forward, placing his hand on wolf Rail's side. The wolf went limp. Cory released it and backed away. "What did you do?" Cory asked.

"Just knocked him out", the Naga reassured. "He should stay out until daylight."

There were a few moments of tense silence. Cory was the first to break it, looking directly at Toros. "Well you wanted him to be Magikal."

"This is not what I meant." Toros said. He had watched the whole encounter in silence. "He cannot stay here."

Cory raised his voice angrily. "It's not his fault he was attacked! He was doing his duty, and he's more than proven himself for the Veiled!"

"That's beside the point." Toros argued. "He's a werewolf. He's a threat to our soldiers and our security."

"Werewolves can learn to control their wolf side, right?" Cory asked the Naga dwarf who had attended to Rail's injury.

He nodded, shaking rainwater from his beard. "Yes they can. Though I've heard it's very difficult."

"And until that happens, who's going to keep him under control? You?" Toros asked.

"Yes." Cory responded. Toros laughed forcibly.

Annie spoke up. "If Rail has to go, I go too." Toros looked at her with contempt.

"And so do I." Cory looked down at Toros. Toros looked right back. Cory could tell he was struggling with an internal battle between his stubbornness and fear of werewolves, and his own desire to keep Cory as a Veiled for reasons he refused to reveal.

Finally he rolled his eyes and sighed. “Fine. But you’d better keep him under control. If one person gets bitten he’s going out the gate.”

## Chapter 12

### The Veiled Olympics

That afternoon, Cory made his way to the lumber yard. He'd discovered recently that this was his favorite form of exercise for their free exercise hour.

He selected an ax from a small shed, and walked over to a stump, breathing deeply in the chill autumn air. That morning he and the rest of the team who'd gone with Captain Shepherd had cut up a large fallen tree and hauled the pieces here. Cory picked up a log and placed it on the other. He noticed Jazan walking up and gave her a smile and a wave.

She smiled back. "Mind if I join you?"

Cory shook his head. "Not at all."

She held in her hand an enormous, double-sided ax which she set aside as she selected a log from the stack.

"I don't see you here often," Cory said, swinging his ax head down onto the log. It stuck with a thump.

Jazan swung her own ax down onto her log, splitting the entire thing neatly in half. "I don't usually have time for the free exercise hour. Captains have a lot of administrative work to do, you know."

Cory nodded. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense." He swung the ax again. This time he heard a satisfying crackling as the log began to open down the middle. One more hit ought to do it. "What was different about today?" Cory asked.

Jazan smiled. "Your friend Annie, actually."

"Really?" Cory said. His next swing thudded on one side of the log, missing the mark entirely. Dang.

“Yeah, she helped me with some of the training this morning, and even offered to reach out to some of the other women for me.”

“Annie’s pretty good at stuff like that.”

Jazan looked at him as she adjusted another piece of the first log. “She’s good at what?”

Cory hesitated. “She’s good at... organizing? Taking responsibility for things. She likes to be helpful.” He wanted to say ‘she’s a teacher’s pet’, but he wanted it to sound positive. Besides, he wasn’t sure if Jazan would understand the idiom.

“That’s good to know,” said Jazan as she swung her ax, again effortlessly splitting the log with one swing. “I’m thinking of asking if she could be my assistant.”

“That’s a great idea! She’d love that.” Cory positioned a piece of log to split again.

Jazan looked over at him. “Good. I could use the help. Running an entire battalion of women in an army ruled by men isn’t easy.”

For the first time he’d ever seen, Cory thought Jazan looked tired. He put down his ax, repositioning his log. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Jazan began thoughtfully. “For the most part, I don’t think it’s honestly that different from being a captain of any other battalion.” She split another log. “There’s paperwork to fill out, lots of assignments to fill, disagreements to resolve, training and activities to plan, meetings to attend.”

“That sounds like a lot,” Cory said. He was overwhelmed just thinking about all of that. He hoped he’d never have to be in such a command position.

“But it’s more than that,” Jazan said, sticking her ax in the log and turning towards him. “I feel like I’m not heard as much as the other captains. I know they don’t do it on purpose, but if I have difficulties with something, I usually have to resolve it myself. In meetings the men just sort of... tune out when I’m talking.” She pulled her ax loose again. “It’s very frustrating.”

“I’m sorry,” Cory said. “How many captains are there?”

“There’s six of us, seven with Toros. My battalion is bigger than any of theirs, too.”

Cory wasn't sure how to respond. It seemed that in many ways, the mundane and magikal worlds weren't that different.

Jazan positioned another log. "Plus I have to be available to hear about the women's emotional problems."

"Don't the other captains have to do that too?"

Jazan shook her head. As she did, one of her enormous antlers actually plopped off and fell to the ground. "Ha! I was wondering when that would happen." She reached down and picked it up. "But no, I don't think the other captains have to deal with their soldiers' emotional issues as much as I do. For some reason the men seem to have less problems in that regard."

Cory chuckled. "I don't think that's true at all. Do you shed your antlers every year, like most deer do?"

Jazan nodded, holding her fallen antler in her hand. Antler's palm was nearly as long as Cory's entire torso. "Every year. I usually just leave them somewhere in the woods. Though one year I made one into a spoon. What do you mean you don't think that's true?"

"I mean that I think men have just as many emotional issues as women do. We just don't tell anyone about it."

Jazan looked at him strangely. "But... how do you deal with your emotions then? I swear the only thing that helps me with this kind of stuff is talking about it."

Cory shrugged and laughed grimly. "We don't deal with it, that's the problem. Unless it's with aggression, or sometimes with..." Cory hesitated.

Jazan urged him to continue. "It's okay, go ahead."

Cory shrugged. "Either with aggression or with sex. Hitting something or getting sexually aroused usually does the trick to get rid of whatever the feeling is."

Jazan pondered that and nodded. "Thank you for telling me that. It actually explains a lot about my past relationships."

“No problem. Thanks for being open.” Cory picked up another log and placed it to be cut. “If you’re just going to throw it out, could I actually have that?” he said, pointing towards her fallen antler.

Jazan shrugged, handing it over. “It’s all yours.”

Cory took it, rolling it over in his hands. “If you don’t mind me asking, I know female moose don’t usually have antlers. How come you do?”

Jazan laughed, throwing her head back. “I’m not a moose, Cory. I’m an alcetaur. All adult alcetaur have antlers.”

Cory mulled this over. “Okay. I guess I assumed you’d be similar to moose.”

Jazan shook her head again. “In appearance, yeah, but our anatomy is fundamentally different in many ways. There are a lot of extra pieces.”

Cory repositioned his log and swung down. He smiled as this time it split right down the middle, first try.

“I heard you’ve been helping Captain Shepherd a lot,” said Jazan.

Cory nodded. “Yeah, I like it. We get to explore some of the other parts of the Forest.”

“It’s pretty labor intensive sometimes too though,” Jazan commented.

Cory grunted. “I’d rather do stuff like that than keep training.”

Jazan grabbed another log and placed it on her chopping stump. “That is unusual for a Veiled soldier. They usually join because they want to fight and train, and shoot arrows.”

Cory shrugged. “Yeah, I didn’t really know what I was getting into. I know I don’t really belong here, but...”

Jazan looked at him. She looked a little comical now with just one antler, but her face was serious. “That’s not it at all. We need people like you in the Veiled, we need variety. If everybody was an elven assassin then Captain Shepherd’s work would never get done.”

Cory pondered that for a moment, and Jazan continued. “If after your year is up you still feel you don’t belong, that’s fine, but give it time. Not everyone needs to be the same for them to fit in and help.”

Cory nodded and loaded some of the pieces of firewood he’d cut onto the stack. The Veiled didn’t use a ton of firewood, but they did use it in the kitchens and for occasional bonfires.

As he positioned a new log, he asked Jazan another question. “Why is it that the Veiled are trained as assassins? It seems to me like the stuff Captain Shepherd does is the more important work in taking care of a magikal Forest.”

“You’ll get to it later when you start going on assassination or intelligence excursions,” answered Jazan. “Our main responsibility is to protect the Forest from outside threats, though taking care of it is part of what we do.”

“Protect it from what?” Cory asked. “Are there magikal poachers or something?”

Jazan nodded. “There are, actually. But that doesn’t happen often. Our biggest threat is from the Outcasters.”

That word sparked something in Cory’s memory. “I’ve heard of them. They want to destroy all magik in the world, right?”

Jazan nodded. “Yup. And since this Forest is a refuge of magik and magikal creatures, it’s one of their biggest targets. Fortunately we’ve been able to keep the location a secret from them up until now.”

Cory swung his ax again. “Let’s hope it stays that way then.”

“Agreed.”

Silence fell between them for a few minutes. The only sounds were the thumping of the axes, the cracking of wood, and the rustling of wind among leaves.

A small smile crept onto Jazan’s face. “While you’ve been out with Captain Shepherd, have you met any of his wives?”

"I didn't know he was married," Cory responded. "I did meet a couple dryads."

"Did they try to seduce you?"

Cory nodded, his heart racing at the memory. "Yeah, two of them tried to get me to follow them off into the woods. Captain Shepherd showed up and yelled at them to go back to their trees."

Jazan chuckled. "That would be his wives then. Two of them anyway."

Cory's eyes widened. "Those were his wives? How many does he have?"

Jazan shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's a good thing you didn't follow them anywhere, or Captain Shepherd might have tried to kill you."

Cory nodded. "I'll make a note of that." Not that he would have followed them, but it had sure been tempting. They were incredibly beautiful women, clad in leaves. Cory turned towards Jazan again. "Considering our earlier conversation, does it bother you that he has so many wives?"

Jazan shrugged. "A little I guess. But... I don't know. I don't think it's quite fair to hold the dryads to a standard it's taken humans years to even recognize as a problem. They're different people. It's actually not that different from my own people?"

"Really?" Cory asked. "How so?"

"We don't have harems or anything like the dryads do. And the women definitely don't try to lure unsuspecting men away to their deaths. But men are seen as the aggressive protectors, and they get to sort of 'win' a woman based on their strength and skill." She swung her ax again. "That's actually one of the reasons I left."

"Because you didn't like the system?"

Jazan shook her head. "Because I was betrothed to a man I barely knew, and didn't like."

"Wow," said Cory. "That must have been hard. What did your parents think?"

"They didn't like it of course," she responded. "But my people revere the Veiled as the protectors of our home. So in a way it was a great honor that I joined up."

Cory and Jazan stacked the rest of the wood they had cut, and Jazan held out her massive hand to shake his. Cory took it.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” Cory asked.

“For listening to my problems. And for being good.”

Cory smiled. “You’re welcome. And thank you.”

Jazan smiled one of her characteristic smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners. It wasn’t a ‘I don’t really know you, but hello I guess’ smile, nor was it a ‘I’m not actually happy but I don’t want you to ask about my problems’ kind of smile. It seemed like a genuine expression of happiness, like she was truly grateful and happy to see you. She trotted back towards the compound, and Cory stowed his ax in the shed, then made his way to the archery fields.

Several weeks after Rail was bitten, summer was again full-force in the Forest of Wisdom. The leaves of the trees were bright and green. There were only a few places high enough to see over the treetops, but Rail, Cory, and Annie had managed to claim one. A rocky cliff crested the treetops by just a few feet. Ahead of them lay the carpet of bright-green canopies, spreading towards a set of three mountains on the left, and an enormous lake on the right. The air smelled clean and crisp as they watched the sunset tinge the forest with firelight. It was hard to believe that this was a little pocket-dimension of nature. It seemed so vast, so diverse, and incredibly beautiful. A white-striped chipmunk scampered over the rocks nearby.

The three friends sat with their legs hanging over the edge of the rocky outcrop, their toes brushing the treetops below them. Well, Annie’s feet couldn’t quite reach that far. Cory sat in the middle, Annie close by his side. He wished to hold her hand, but she had been very insistent that they not do that in front of Rail, since he didn’t know they were dating now. Cory was fine with Rail knowing, but Annie was afraid it would ostracize Rail as a third wheel.

“So,” Annie said, breaking the silence. “How are you doing, Rail?”

Over the last few weeks the two had watched Rail closely to make sure he didn't transform, and to protect others in case he did. So far, they'd been able to avoid an incident.

"I can feel the urge to transform," Rail explained. "Like I've said before. But I feel fine. Except for the fact that everyone treats me like I have the plague."

"Nonsense," Cory joked. "It's not the plague, it's a curse. Have we figured out the details for the full moon yet?"

It had been explained to them that Rail could transform, either partially or fully, into a wolf any time he wanted, but that it was difficult for a werewolf to control their mind while transformed. During the full moon however, he would have no choice. Even inside or underground, he would turn into a wolf with a ravenous and insatiable thirst for blood.

Annie nodded. "It should be all ready." The full moon was only a few days away. Unfortunately they couldn't just lock Rail in a room and call it good, because if he couldn't get blood from somewhere else, he'd start harming himself. So they'd gotten a muzzle and chains ready to tie him down. Rail obviously wasn't excited by the idea. He looked down, thoughtful.

"You guys know you don't have to do all of this." He said hesitantly. "Don't get me wrong, I really appreciate it. But maybe it would be better for everyone if I just left."

Annie scoffed. "Where would you go? Back home where you could bite or kill your own family? It's safer here where we know what's going on and can help you."

He shrugged. "I could go anywhere. Out in the wilderness where I couldn't hurt anyone. No one will be safe around me ever again."

Cory placed his hand on Rail's knee. "Look. I don't care what you're cursed with. We're here for you, alright? Whatever it takes, we've got your back. Besides, it won't be like this forever. They said that werewolves can learn to control their powers. This is only temporary."

The clapping of hooves on stone and the shuffling of leaves sounded behind them. Jazan appeared at their backs, hands on hips and a smile on her face. "You really found a good spot. Mind if I join you?"

After a nod of consent, she knelt on the rocks. It was somewhat awkward, her back legs bending first, then her front following. The construction of her body made her somewhat front-heavy. After settling down, she just laid there. It was a little awkward, having someone who wasn't part of their traditional trio just sitting there with them. But with Jazan it was pleasantly awkward.

Something about sunsets lent itself to deep thoughts. Cory sat pondering his future. What would he do once the year was up? Annie was happy here, so maybe he could be happy with her. There was no way he could go back to his old life, get a job, live in an apartment. It sounded simple, but miserable. Cory had only begun to explore and learn about the magik that existed all over the world, how many more extraordinary places were there like the Forest of Life? Especially considering the discussion they just had, what would Rail do? If he left, would Annie come with him? Whatever he explored and learned wouldn't be quite as special without her. But he didn't want to plan his life around a relationship that had just started to get serious.

But he couldn't keep living a lie.

The Veiled did things he was not okay with. Morally it felt so wrong. It's not that the others who stayed were bad people though. How could they stand it?

Turning toward Jazan he asked, "Could I ask you a personal question? Why are you a member of the Veiled? Why did you join, and why do you stay?"

She scrunched her eyebrows, thinking. "Well, part of the reason I joined was actually to get away from my family. They are fairly traditional, and expected me to find a husband, raise a family, and follow a bull wherever he went. I didn't want to, so I left. My ancestors came from the Forest of Wisdom, and when I learned about what the Veiled do to protect this place it felt... right. I have always felt a strong connection to my ancestors, and I want their heritage to be protected. As well as all the animals and other races and species that find sanctuary here. I feel like the guardian of something sacred."

It didn't fully answer his question, but it was enlightening anyway. He was about to ask a

follow-up, but Rail interrupted.

“Forest of Wisdom? I thought this was the Forest of Life.”

Jazan nodded once, her antlers threatening to tip her over. “It is, the Forest of Wisdom is inside the Forest of Life.”

Annie didn't seem confused, but Rail and Cory both looked at Jazan questioningly, and she explained further. “So the Forest of Life is inside a pocket dimension inside of the Redwoods, right? There's another layer called the Forest of Wisdom, an additional pocket dimension with an entrance from the one we're in now. Some claim there's another one inside of that called the Forest of Ages but that seems a bit excessive to me.”

Rail wrinkled his forehead in concentration. “So you're saying inside of Redwoods there's a magik forest inside a tree, and inside that magik forest there's another magik forest, and there might be another magik forest inside that magik forest, which is inside a magik forest, inside of a real forest?”

Jazan shrugged. “Technically they're all real, so that distinction wasn't necessary, but yeah.”

“Cool, can we see it? What's it like?” Cory was excited now. Yes! Another immense forest to explore with more magikal creatures! But Jazan shook her head.

“Unfortunately the entrance is a closely guarded secret. Only a few Veiled know where it is, so that it too remains protected. But that's where the first alcetaurs came from, as well as all the other beastfolk, like fletchers and minotaurs.”

By this time the sun was completely gone over the horizon. The sky blended gradually from a deep blue to an immense black pocketed with stars as they looked up. The rest of the land lay in deep shadow. The bells rang through the woods in a repeating pattern. The sign for the games to begin.

Over the last week the Veiled had prepared for a unique tradition: the Veiled Olympics.

The Veiled didn't celebrate often. Dances were held once in a while, and they celebrated

major holidays in some ways, but the Olympics were one of the few times the soldiers were allowed to really loosen up and enjoy themselves. Tonight was the kick-off event, one of the few that everyone participated in: the Sneak. The object was to grab the trophy from the center of base camp, right underneath the main bell, then take it to the top of the western observation tower. Several of the captains were stationed around base camp with cushioned arrows that left a luminescent stain. If you were hit, you were out of the game.

Cory, Jazan, Annie and Rail were on a team. They had little chance of winning, based on the three newbies' inexperience, but it was fun to try anyway. They began retreating down the back of the hillside they were on. Jazan was surprisingly quiet, despite her large size. Experience made up for her hard hooves and bulk. Annie had a distinct advantage. Since she could see just fine in the dark it was much easier for her to see and avoid obstacles. Rail was surprisingly stealthy as well. Cory had a hard time. He was not sneaky. He caught Jazan glaring at him once or twice as they made their way towards camp.

They reached the bottom of the hill and spread out in a line. Annie kept her eyes out for other competitors. By the time they got to base camp, they could see around a dozen Veiled huddled around the outsides of the surrounding buildings. There were six buildings that surrounded the central courtyard, which was about 150 feet across. They peeked around the corner between the buildings. Three other cloaked warriors stood in front of them, watching the courtyard carefully.

In the center was a twelve-foot archway with a large bronze bell at the top. On a short pedestal beneath it stood a gleaming golden trophy. It was pretty commonplace, the real prizes were medals since this was of course the olympics. All around the courtyard was a maze of boxes of various heights to hide behind. The space directly around the alarm bell, however, was clear. Annie stepped forward, and nodded to the rest of the group. She stayed there by the buildings to watch what was going on while the other three stepped a little ways away, back into the trees.

"You ready Rail?" Cory asked.

“Is he ready?” Jazan asked indignantly. “I’m the one that has to carry him.”

Cory scoffed. “He’s not that heavy. And you volunteered.”

Rail then crawled underneath Jazan’s belly, and reached his arms up on either side of her, just behind the front legs. Cory attached the rope to both his hands. They’d positioned the rope so he could slide off easily, but didn’t have to work too hard to stay hanging there. Then came the feet, also tied up over Jazan’s back. Rail’s clothing was completely blacked out, so hopefully he could slip away without being seen.

“Better hurry up, moose-lady. My wrists are going to get sore quick.”

Jazan looked down at him, his face absurdly poking out from between her front legs.

“Call me moose-lady again and I’ll sit on you.”

Cory felt an unusual presence coming from nearby. The other two started off toward the courtyard. When they looked back he waved them forward. He wanted to figure out what he was sensing.

They trotted off and Cory closed his eyes. It didn’t make much difference, since it was already dark, but it helped him concentrate. He reached out with his mind. He could hear the faint thoughts of the animals around him. Several people were over by the buildings... They pushed him away as he touched their mind. Most people did *not* feel okay letting him in, and he didn’t try. Squirrels... hundreds of insects... several birds resting in their nest... no that’s not it. There! A feral, fierce presence was somewhere near. He glanced around. Two eyes reflected at him a stone’s throw away.

*Hello there.* He thought toward it. Not his best intro, but it was hard not to feel nervous with those fierce eyes staring at him like a piece of meat.

He felt some confusion coming from the... panther? Yes, it must be a panther. It seemed confused at trying to communicate with its thoughts. Perhaps Cory should have been scared, but the beasts of the Forest of Life were magikally bound not to attack any of the Veiled unless they were attacked first.

It was often very strange to communicate with animals. They didn't understand words per se, but ideas, and simple ones at that. It was easier with mammals than insects though. Insects understood next to nothing.

*I need to sneak into the courtyard. Will you help me stay hidden?*

The panther relayed even more confusion, and started to turn away.

Urgently Cory tried again, this time projecting an image of him, sneaking in the dark. He needed to be less abstract. *I sneak, catch prey. Help. You let me?*

He heard a growling sort of voice in his head. *Catch prey. Sneak well.*

As it turned away, Cory felt his senses heightened, especially his sight! Sometimes he only gained one ability from the creatures he sought help from, but sometimes they gave him more. He felt stronger and quicker. His feet didn't make a sound as he dashed back toward the courtyard. He could see so much now! It didn't necessarily look brighter, it was still dark. But he could see in the darkness. Everything was clearer, but in shades of gray.

As he approached the buildings surrounding the courtyard again, he saw several warriors watching from further back, luminescent paint splattered on their cloaks. He approached behind Annie who was watching from behind the corner of a building. A few splatters of paint were now on the walls nearby. Apparently some of the captains had targeted their corner. Annie noticed him and pointed into the yard.

Thanks to his newly-enhanced sight, he could see Jazan approaching the center of the courtyard behind a very tall wooden box. Fortunately the designers had included at least a few that were tall enough to conceal the enormous alcetaur, but she was running out of places to go. It was incredible that someone of her size and shape could sneak anywhere at all.

Suddenly she bolted forward, leaping over a low wall towards the archway in the center of the courtyard. Cory felt sorry for Rail's arms. She didn't get far before three glowing arrows hit her torso and back. She threw her arms down in frustration, but Cory knew it was pretend. It was part of the plan. Because he knew what to look for, he saw Rail drop to the ground and roll

behind another row of low boxes. He only had about fifteen feet to go. The last part would be the hardest though, since the last five or so feet around the archway had no cover at all. Cory lost sight of Rail.

\*\*\*

Rail started to army crawl behind the short barrier. Gosh that fall to the ground hurt. Darn moose-lady was tall. He caught sight of Jazan stalking back out of the courtyard as a darker silhouette against the dark sky, speckled with glowing yellow splats of paint.

Rail tried to stop glancing at the tops of the surrounding buildings, where he knew some of the most talented archers on the planet were crouched with arrows pointed at him. He needed to focus on being quiet and unseen. It was nearly impossible to find cover from four sides at once. The barriers and boxes they'd placed rarely lent him cover from more than one side. The secret was to blend with the surroundings, and move slowly. It was agonizing at times, especially when he thought about those that were trying to reach the trophy before him.

Every moment seemed an eternity as he scooted slowly toward the trophy. Eventually he reached the last amount of cover before the open center of the yard. Glancing around, he noticed two others already there waiting for the opportunity to run in and grab the prize. They looked to be human, but it was hard to tell in the darkness. Especially since, like him, they had their faces painted black to avoid reflections giving them away.

A tense minute or two passed while they all watched each other, wondering who would go for it first.

Then Rail heard a crash from behind. Instinctively he whipped his head around to see what it was. One of the taller cover boxes had been pushed over, and the perpetrator was quickly pummeled with arrows. Turning back, one of the others that had been waiting had bolted for the trophy, the other not far behind. A distraction! Their team must have planned to knock over

one of the boxes.

Rail ran toward the trophy, still crouching low. His two competitors reached the trophy ahead of him, both grabbing for it. As they tussled, streaks of light struck both from above. Rail reached the archway as he heard them curse each other under their breath. Rail pressed himself up against the metal of the arch, hoping his skinniness would help him blend in. It was the wrong angle for two of the buildings, but it would have to do.

As a rule, if you were hit then you had to drop the trophy where you were. His competitors dropped the trophy and stalked off angrily. By some amount of fortune or luck, the trophy ended up right next to Rail's foot. He slid the edge of his cloak over it, covering up the reflective metal surface. He then slid to the ground, trying to stay as pressed up against the archway as he could, while keeping the trophy covered.

Several others had taken the same opportunity as they had to run for the center. Most weren't close, and several were still hit and ejected from the game. He heard exclamations of surprise as the watching crowd turned their attention back toward the middle and realized they couldn't see the trophy. Rail gripped the small trophy in his armpit under his cloak as he crawled toward cover again.

Suddenly he noticed a small splash of paint that had gotten on the front of his clothes. He hadn't been hit, where had it come from? It had probably splashed off the other two while they were wrestling over the trophy. Did that mean he was out?

Rail considered it for a moment. He hadn't been hit, so what did it matter if he had paint on his robes? He shrugged and crawled behind a blessed barrier, finally out of the open. He couldn't believe none of the archers had seen him.

Suddenly a small creature jumped on top of his back, reaching tiny hands into his cloak, apparently searching for the trophy. Rail rolled over, trying to swat the creature's hands away. It turned out to be a fletcher, its green fur stained with sloppy black paint and a hood over its enormous ears. Rail hadn't realized there were other fletchers in the army, the only one he'd seen

was Captain Drake.

This one sounded female, as she muttered under her breath, “Give me the trophy! My fur won’t wash out for a week and I am not losing to you!”

It was increasingly difficult to fight off his competitor and stay hidden. “Get off you freak!” he whispered.

She managed to slip her tiny hands past him and grab the trophy, which she held high, triumphantly. Just then a rubber band, covered in glowing paint thumped into her chest, and she dropped her arms in exasperation.

“You’re out Bria!” Captain Drake’s voice sounded from the nearest rooftop. “Drop the trophy.”

Bria groaned and dropped the trophy onto the grass, then pointed an angry finger at Rail as she climbed over the short barrier and stalked off.

Rail started to reach for the trophy, but instead put his hands up to protect his head as several arrows thumped his back. Dang, they’d said those arrow tips were soft, but that hurt!

Rail groaned as he too got up and stalked off back toward Annie and Cory. He could hear a few others crawling to reach the trophy in the grass. He didn’t look back. He hadn’t even made it halfway back because of that stupid green foxear.

—

Cory saw Rail making his way back towards them, shoulders slumped. He scanned the interior of the courtyard, trying to find the trophy. He spotted several Veiled still trying to sneak around, but the trophy was nowhere in sight.

“Annie, can you see the trophy?”

She scanned the courtyard. Her eyes glowed slightly with a white light as she looked through the objects around the courtyard. “There! They’re making a run for it!”

Annie pointed suddenly out toward the space on the opposite side of the building they were crouching next to. Rail was only about five feet away and whipped around, then groaned, remembering he was out.

“I’ll get them.” Cory turned and bolted out from between the buildings. He stumbled slightly, surprised at his own speed. He was still channeling the powers of that panther. He quickly saw the retreating figure, almost at the edge of the trees, and took off in that direction. Several others, maybe half a dozen, were also giving chase.

As he entered the trees, Cory felt the magik reverberating in the spaces around him, strengthening him. His speed increased even more, and he easily passed three of the chasers.

It was very difficult to keep from tripping while still keeping his eyes on the person he was chasing. But the night vision helped immensely. He saw the trees as simply part of the background as he tore past them. Leaves and roots nearly made him stumble many times, but his catlike reflexes kept him right on track. He let out a low growl.

The next chaser was a minotaur with small curled horns. Minotaurs were large, but their hooves were better designed for this, and they were stronger than humans. Cory used his superior agility to dart around several trees and pull in front. The minotaur glanced over at him, almost tripping, and growling. One down.

The next figure ahead was shorter, probably an elf based on its elegant, leaping gait. They were at the base of the hill where the observation tower was. Going around the elf would lose him ground on the uphill. Cory instead approached right behind the elf ahead of him, and at the right moment swiped at the elf’s back foot with one hand. That sent the elf tumbling into the grass, which Cory hoped would cushion his landing. Without looking back, Cory honed in on the last person ahead of him. Two down.

His muscles strained from the long sprint. But it felt good. This last bit was up a steep hill. The last person ahead of him was cat-like in appearance, a gatataur. As he watched, the gatataur reached the person with the trophy right at the entrance to the tower. They started

grappling as the gatataur tried to grab the trophy. The delay was just enough for Cory to catch up to them.

The trophy dropped to the ground in the struggle and Cory was able to snatch it. But then the attention of the other two turned on him, and they stood directly between him and the entrance to the tower.

The gatataur swiped at him with its paws, trying to grab him or the trophy. Cory backed away, holding the trophy protectively. Cory really hoped its claws were retracted. In the darkness it was hard to tell what color its fur was, but the markings on its face looked similar to a cheetah's. Of course that was who had caught up.

Then the original runner circled around behind him, too fast for Cory to react, inhumanly fast. But now the only one between him and the tower was the gatataur. Cory guessed the other must be a shaga with some sort of quickness powers. As the shaga reached for him, Cory jumped just out of the way, barreling into the gatataur. Caught by surprise, the gatataur stumbled back out of Cory's way but managed to regain its feet just behind as Cory darted for the tower again.

He reached the bottom steps just as a hand grabbed his ankle from behind. He stuck his hands out to stop his face from impacting the wooden floor. One hand still held the small trophy, which actually bent as he crushed it beneath his hand. He released it, leaving it just in reach on the top step of the first flight, and turned to try and fend off his opponent.

As if in slow motion, the gatataur from before ran up the wall behind them, then cartwheeled, one hand placed directly on the trophy, landed on its feet, and bolted up the stairs without slowing. The shaga who had been grappling with Cory cursed and stepped over him, following up the stairs. Cory took a deep breath and finally released his concentration on the panther's abilities.

He sat up and tried to see in the renewed darkness. He saw the minotaur and the elf he had passed on his way emerge from the woods, still sprinting straight towards the tower.

Several others emerged behind them. They must not have realized they were far too late.

Then Cory remembered. This was the olympics! They had silver and bronze medals too! He hurried to his feet and ran up the steps taking three at a time.

He heard the victory bell sound from the top of the tower, once, then twice. It was very dark inside the stairwell, especially without his darkvision. He stumbled several times, misjudging when one set of stairs ended and another began as they spiraled around the inside of the rectangular tower.

He emerged onto the top of the tower, which had posts at each of the corners to hold up the roof, and a half-wall but was otherwise open. He jumped and hit the bell, ignoring the other three people standing in the corners watching. The bell was loud in the small space.

Then he looked out over the vast expanse of forest below. Those that had been in pursuit had stopped, some heading back, some looking up to the top of the tower regretfully. The sky was pitch-dark, filled with innumerable stars. He could even see the cloudy spread of the milky way, and could distinguish the different colors of stars.

The speckled shining array extended right down to the lumps of trees extending in all directions. But he could also see lakes in one direction. A large mountain blocked the starlight in another. The Veiled had their main station in the forest, but there were pieces of every ecosystem in the Forest of Life.

Looking around, he realized Captain Shepherd was also there, along with the elf and the gatataur. Shepherd shook each of their hands, making sure they had all touched the trophy, and there was no paint on them.

They made their way back down the tower and went to bed, anxious for tomorrow's games.

The next day began with the races. They were required to be in full armor for each one because, of course, Toros wanted to pass off every event as some sort of training exercise. By the

time Annie, Cory, and Rail awoke, the marathon had already begun.

Several short sprints followed. Cory had wanted to find a wild cheetah in the savannah area, but it was too far away and there wasn't time. Annie and Rail didn't participate in any of the running events, but Cory thought he had a fighting chance. Unfortunately, biology was against him.

Humans aren't fast. Even with his magikally improved speed, he couldn't even keep up with the elves, let alone the minotaurs, gatataurs, centaurs, and Jazan. A cheetah gatataur ended up claiming the prize for most of the sprints, though they did several species-specific races.

Around then the marathon runners started to trickle in, barely able to stand. Warriors lined both sides of the road to the finish line, applauding and yelling. Most of the first ones to arrive were actually humans, although a satyr came in third. Cory felt a strange sense of pride for his species he'd never felt before. But, he hadn't met any other humanoid species until that year.

The three went to bed early that night after a hardy celebratory meal. All except Annie, who had guard duty that night. The next day was what Cory was most excited, and prepared for. The strength challenges.

—

Cory awoke feeling invigorated. He rolled out of bed and stretched his arms, then twisted his neck to each side.

The last few weeks he'd been training specifically for the events of today. He'd signed up for both the arm wrestling tournament, and the log chopping contest. His hands had become callused from the ax handle, and the muscles on his shoulders were tighter than they'd ever been before. He couldn't help flexing just a little to himself as he dressed for the day.

Rail was still asleep. That was alright. The events wouldn't start for another hour at least, but Cory made his way over to the log yards.

The place was empty. Sunlight gently beamed through the canopy of trees overhead, illuminating the carpet of wood chips that covered the area. The yard was a hundred feet or so across, narrow in the other direction. Logs ready to be chopped or split piled up on one side, split wood under constructed canopies on the other. Cory closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose, taking in the fresh scent of wood and summer.

Cory walked over to the rack of axes along the far end of the yard. He selected one, running his hands over the wooden handle. This one had a head that was just the right size to give some weight to your swing, but not enough to be unwieldy. Some of the other axes along the line were smaller, lighter, and some were bigger, and longer. There was even one that was enormous and double-sided, its metal head the size of Cory's torso. Only the biggest people used that one, like Jazan or some of the minotaurs.

Holding the ax in one hand, the handle parallel to the ground, he walked over to the piles of logs. He rubbed his hands along the rough, thick bark. Several small insects crawled along the ruts.

Several people started to trickle into the yard area. Cory stood up, a little irritated. He'd hoped to have a little time to himself to warm up and mentally prepare. Then he noticed that Annie was walking towards him.

A grin split across his face and he approached her. She had a sly smile on her face as she walked, her brown hair swaying forward and back, brushing the tops of her shoulders. She had her hands clasped behind her back as she walked, cloak swishing around her legs.

They came face to face and stopped. Well, chest-to-face would have been more accurate based on her height. "You're up early," she observed.

"I wanted to warm up a little before things got started."

"Well don't let me stop you." She crossed her arms and leaned against one of the logs

behind her.

Cory was a little flustered. Did she really want to just watch him stretch and chop wood? He shook his head. "It's fine. There's plenty of time before we get started."

She stood up again, and started moving through a space between the piles into the woods, then stopped and turned back. "You coming?"

Cory was still confused but followed. They started walking in step with each other, leaves crunching under foot. After a moment Annie reached over and took his hand in hers. Cory smiled. It looked a little awkward to him, since she had to keep her elbow bent to stay at the level of his hand, which he held down by his side. But she didn't seem to mind.

They walked for several minutes, feeling no need to disturb the quiet. They let summer do the talking, birds chirping, leaves rustling in the wind. It was somehow even more beautiful with her by his side.

A thought occurred to him. "Annie, what does this forest look like to you? Since you can see magik."

She thought for a moment. "I can still see the trees and all the colors you do. But I also see waves rebounding between the trees in a rainbow of colors. Magik doesn't really have a single color. Most of it is similar to light blue, but it can reflect any color based on what the magik is doing, what purpose it's directed in. So when the waves impact the trees it sort of... splashes."

"With all those colors how do you see anything else?"

"Well they're... sort of translucent I guess, so I see through it. It's difficult to describe though."

They walked for another minute, and turned to make their way slowly back.

Annie spoke up again. "What about you? I don't think I've ever asked what it's like when you use your powers."

"Well," Cory started. "I sort of reach out with my mind, and I can hear the thoughts of

the creatures around me. They can kind of sense when I do it, though most creatures don't know how to react. People usually don't like it and push me out."

"Wait, you can hear people's thoughts too?" She sounded surprised.

"Well yeah. People are animals too."

"Can you take on their abilities too?"

Cory was taken aback. He'd thought of that, but before magik, other people had never had abilities he didn't. Except Annie and her family, and his parents. "Well, I don't know... People tend to push me out of their heads pretty quickly, it makes them uncomfortable. And they haven't had any abilities that I wanted before... But maybe..." Cory looked at her. "Could I try it with you?"

Annie nodded and smiled. "Of course. I promise I won't push you out."

Cory nodded and closed his eyes, reaching out with his mind. It wasn't hard to find her, since she was so close. He zoned in on her mental signature.

*Can I use your abilities?* He thought at her. He tried not to listen in on her other thoughts. They weren't directed at him. He could feel her discomfort. There was also something she desperately didn't want him to know. She wasn't pushing him out of her mind, not completely, but she had put up a wall to keep him out of... something. He shook himself. If she didn't want him to know, he wouldn't force it.

She responded out loud as though it was a silly question. "Yes."

He pulled back from her mind as he felt his eyes grow bright. He opened his eyes. Immediately his eyes watered as a rainbow of color washed over his eyes, drowning his other senses and blinding him. He immediately shut his eyes again and stopped concentrating on the ability. He fell to his knees, rubbing his eyes as they watered furiously.

He had been able to see the brilliant patterns she talked about. Waves of vibrant blue light flooded through the entire forest, rebounding off the trees in a myriad of colors which in turn crossed each other, forming more color. Unlike when you mixed paint or crayons, the colors

didn't dull into a brown as they mixed. It was more like light, the more they mixed they became brighter, and closer to white. The brilliance had been like staring directly into a welder's torch, if that torch was welding a rainbow to the bright blue sky.

Annie immediately put her hand on his shoulder, asking if he was alright.

Cory continued pressing his hands into his burned eyes. "How on earth can you look at that without going blind?!"

"Sorry, I forgot," she responded. "I can tone down certain things I see so that it's not overwhelming. I'm so used to it, it's just background noise now."

Cory opened his eyes just a tad. It still hurt, even that small amount of light. He hesitantly stood. "We should probably head back. Maybe we could try that again, but next time in a dark room or something."

Annie nodded and threaded her hand into the crook of his elbow, guiding him between the trees. Cory kept his eyes mostly shut.

Just as they came into view of the log yard, Annie stopped them. "Well, here we are. I hope your eyes won't hurt your chances of winning too much."

Cory nodded. "I can see well enough. Don't worry about me."

Annie smiled. "Good. Chop em' dead out there, alright?" She hesitated for a second, then stood on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Good luck! I'll see you afterward."

Cory smiled and watched her walk away, toward where the onlookers stood. He wasn't quite sure what the kiss meant, but it didn't matter. Man, that girl was amazing.

He walked into the lumber yard with a spring in his step. He kept his eyes squinted shut to lessen the burning, and his eyes down to make sure he didn't trip over anything. A leaf-covered branch pegged him in the face.

Fortunately most of the log yard was cleared of low branches to prevent accidents. Cory made his way to the station he had marked earlier with his ax and started stretching his arms while looking at his competition.

Kuofa the minotaur stood two stations over with the massive, double-sided ax, spinning the shaft in one hand. He spotted Jazan in the crowd of onlookers on the other side of the clearing. He was surprised, he'd thought she would be participating. Rail now stood there as well, standing just behind Annie.

He didn't recognize any of the other competitors. There were a few more minotaurs, other humans and a muscular elf or two. There was even one dwarf, with a long brown beard and a bald head.

"Alright lumberjacks!"

Cory looked around, almost expecting Captain Drake because of the odd nickname, but then remembered they were chopping wood. It was Captain Shepherd again. His handsome wooden face scanned the twenty or so competitors.

"The competition will begin when I say. The first competitor to chop all the way through their log wins, but remember that the first three will win medals. Each log has been measured to make sure they are the same width. Are you ready?"

The wood-choppers raised their axes in the air and yelled. Cory tensed, suddenly growing nervous. His vision was still blurry; it probably would be for the rest of the day.

"Ready yourselves!"

Cory positioned his feet, one in front of the other, ax on his shoulder, one hand just below the head, the other at the bottom of the handle.

"Chop!"

A chorus of thumps sounded as axes hit wood. Bark flew all around as they cut through the soft outer layer of the wood.

Cory concentrated on his form, and on the log in front of him. It was impossible to hit the same spot every time, but it was important to try. That formed a notch in the wood, which soon became a wedge.

Cory fell into a rhythm. His upper hand pushing the axehead up, then sliding down next

to his other hand as he pulled the handle down and the sharp edge thumped into the wood. Every few strikes the head would stick and he'd have to maneuver it out, interrupting the rhythm.

He tried not to look at the others. Getting distracted threatened not only to slow him down but to cause him to slip and possibly hurt himself. He did notice the judges watching from behind the trees in front of him, and heard the cheers of those behind him.

The sound of the ax thumping on wood changed slightly as he reached the hard core wood. It sounded hollow, and the impact sometimes jarred his hands. He kept going. He wasn't used to speeding through chopping. Speed wasn't normally a concern. His shoulders started to burn from the exertion. Cory smiled and inhaled the smell of the wood. He knew the wedge he had cut so far would be hot right where the ax was hitting.

He made it past the hard center and into the other side. The log was positioned with two pieces of wood under each side, so that the middle was elevated a few inches above the ground. That way when it cut all the way through the middle, it would collapse to the ground.

The log trembled with every impact. Sweat ran down Cory's face. He was nearing the end now. It looked as though he could jump on it and break the log in two, but the last bit was always stronger than it looked. He remembered the rebounding waves of light he had seen in the woods just before. He thought he could feel it flowing over his skin, energizing him, pushing him on as his muscles complained from the strain.

He realized he hadn't been listening to what was going on around him. Had they announced a winner already?

Just then he felt the ax bite into the wood and sink as the two halves of the log collapsed in on themselves. He looked up and saw a watching judge raise his hand and blow a whistle. Cory wasn't sure what had happened. Had he won?

Another whistle sounded in front of Kuofa, and another just a moment later down the line. The rest of the competitors slumped and set down their axes. He had won! That was the

first three!

The crowd of onlookers rushed forward, swarming him and the other winners, patting them on the back. Annie and Rail were there congratulating him as he wiped sweat from his forehead and smiled. He'd won!

## Chapter 13

### Bullseye

They presented him with a medal and a congratulatory dinner soon afterwards. Alcohol wasn't allowed, Toros claimed it "dulled the senses". He was probably right, darn elitist. But the soda they provided was still a rare treat.

The last day was all about archery and celebration. Annie went to bed the night before full of trepidation. The three friends felt she had a chance with archery, based on her experience. It would be a real challenge though, because *every* Veiled was participating in this one.

Rail and Cory had to fight through the crowd to get their assignments. Both had an early slot, which had been assigned to them several days in advance. Annie's first competition would come later.

The first set was at pretty close range, maybe twenty paces. Cory bid Rail good luck. He was set up at an adjacent range. Each group had five competitors, the one with the best score got to move on.

Cory sighted the target, trying not to be intimidated by the other four next to him. He fully anticipated not making it past this round, but by golly he was going to try. Three arrows stood propped up in a metal stand at his feet. Three shots, highest total score wins. The bullseye was worth ten.

"Nock your first arrow!" Cried the moderator, a bronze-skinned elf standing atop a tree stump.

Cory pulled out one of the arrows at his feet and set the back end to his bowstring.

"Fire when ready!"

Cory breathed in deep and pulled the string back, anchoring the back of the arrow to the corner of his mouth. Still holding his breath, he sighted down the shaft, trying to keep the point on the center of the target. He heard several thumps as the others fired their shots. Cory tried to

feel the magik of the forest, let it strengthen him, but his fingers were straining. He released the bowstring.

He didn't even hit the target. The arrow thudded into the wood of the stand the target was set up on. Cory groaned and rolled his eyes. This was stupid. Why was he even trying?

The moderator walked past each target, collecting the arrows and recording scores from the first shot. Three of the other competitors looked like they'd hit the bullseye dead-on. As the moderator approached his target, Cory saw him look around for the arrow, and shake his head when he saw where it was.

For the next two shots he tried to mentally prepare himself more before pulling back, and compensate a little for gravity. It helped, though he didn't hit anywhere near the bullseye. Two of his other competitors tied, having hit the center for each shot.

Well, that was that. Cory stood on his toes and spotted Rail walking back this way, shoulders slumped.

"You out too?" Cory called to him.

Rail nodded as the two fell in step next to each other. They slowly made their way through the milling crowd back toward the central buildings. "You want to go get some food? I'm hungry."

Cory hesitated. "Don't you think we should go watch Annie, cheer her on?"

Rail scoffed. "The competition has hours to go, and you know she'll make it past the first round. Come on."

Cory nodded, and they walked off toward the cafeteria, discussing how unfair the competition was.

"I mean, come on," Rail said as he held the door open to the cafeteria. "Most of these guys have been using a bow for years. I think I've made one good shot in my life."

"You mean... the one where you killed that guy almost instantly?"

Rail thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess that's the only one I can think of. I was

honestly surprised I hit him at all.”

Cory chuckled. “I don’t know if that really counts as a good shot either, considering we were supposed to keep him alive.”

Rail nodded emphatically. “See! Even when I make a good shot it’s not on purpose.” The two grabbed their lunch trays and piled on spaghetti and meatballs. The food was much better than usual. They made special dishes for the Olympic celebration. It included several dishes made by some of the woodland folk, consisting mostly of weird vegetables and herbs.

“If it’s any consolation,” Cory said as he shrugged, placing what looked like a marinated green mushroom with tiny black seeds on his tray. “I’m no good with a bow either. I kind of wish they’d let me practice with a sword, but Toros says ‘swords are weapons of the dead, honor will get you nowhere but six feet underground. Better to slay your enemies from a distance before they even see you.’” He said that last part in a nasally, stuck-up voice.

Rail hesitated. “You know, he kind of has a point.”

Cory rolled his eyes. “I know, but what’s the point if I can’t hit anything with a bow anyway!”

They sat down across from each other at one of the tables.

“And I guess I know honor of itself doesn’t really mean anything, but I think I’d feel a lot less guilty if the other guy was also trying to kill me. It seems just... cold-hearted and evil to kill someone without them even knowing what’s happening.”

Rail stared at Cory for a moment, half a bite still in his cheek. “You know, sometimes you’re a little too righteous for your own good.”

Cory smiled and turned to his food. He tried some of the weird magik veggies, and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

Rail swallowed his last bite as Cory shoveled in another spool of spaghetti. “So, how are you and Annie doing?”

Cory froze mid-chew. Had Rail seen them? He seemed to be taking it remarkably well,

but they had agreed not to tell him yet. All Cory got out was “hmwat?”

Rail shrugged. “Things seemed a little tense between you two recently. I thought maybe you’d had an argument or something.”

Cory relaxed immediately. He didn’t know. “Haha, no, no, no. We’re just fine, no arguments here.”

Rail nodded and went to dump his tray.

Was it really so bad if Rail knew about their relationship? Annie seemed terrified that Rail would find out. She said she didn’t want to drive the friendship apart, but Cory worried that keeping it a secret would just make it worse when he did find out. They couldn’t seem to come to an agreement. So, they waited.

Cory wanted to collaborate, to work together with Annie. That was part of a relationship, right? But did it have to be at the expense of his best friend?

Rail suddenly thumped him on the shoulder. “Come on man, I thought you wanted to watch Annie compete?”

Cory nodded, shoving two more bites in as he stood up to return his food tray.

~~~

Annie ran her fingers up the fletching of the arrow as she prepared to draw.

Waves of multicolored magik flowed and bounced out from the surrounding trees. As the waves of particles entered the open area of the shooting range they gradually faded into a translucent blue, blending with the sky above.

She positioned her feet, then worked her way up, making sure her knees were slightly bent, hips in the right direction. Torso straight and taut, shoulders, head and neck all precisely positioned. Hair carefully pulled back into a ponytail.

She could also see auras of different colors expanding from the onlookers, some brighter

than others. Most of the elves had greenish auras. Human auras were focused on specific parts of their bodies, and were all different colors. It depended on what their shaga powers were.

People often described the calm before launching a well-shot arrow as some kind of strange, empty emotional state. It was important to be calm, but form was most important. The right body position, hands held in the right way, the breath, the follow-through, then combine all those techniques with a sense of calm awareness. Not nothingness, a warrior had to constantly be aware of what was happening around her. But the bright colors, the shifting people and voices around her all demanded her attention. She knew they were there, what they were doing, and even picked out some of their conversations. But that wasn't what her eyes were on. For her mind that was background noise. A cacophonous symphony that floated behind a single focal point: the bullseye.

She adjusted upwards to compensate for the distance of the target, and released the arrow. Its tip thudded right into the smallest red dot in the middle of the target. She released a breath and a smile broke across her face as applause sounded through the woods. She could hear Cory and Rail letting out enthusiastic whoops.

It wasn't the exact center. That was nearly impossible at this distance and with shifting winds. But it was enough to get her the highest point score possible.

This was the last round of stationary targets. After this things got much more difficult, and more interesting. But she'd made it to the next round.

—

Cory and Rail whooped and applauded as Annie's shot got her into the next round.

"What do they do now?" Cory asked. "I don't think our bows can shoot much farther than that."

They both had to speak loudly to be heard over the noise of the crowd. "I think now

they're going to do moving targets!"

Rail was right. They counted around fifty competitors left, which was astounding considering the difficulty of what they were doing.

The rest of the competition took hours. The set-up team attached the targets to wheels, and pulled them at a steady pace on a string while they hid behind a wooden barrier. The speed increased after each round. When there were only fifteen or so competitors left, they started making the archers move as well as the target.

Annie was still in, and looked as calm as a tree.

Cory saw some of the other new recruits that had started around the time he had and they chatted for a bit. It was strange not to see Rhuftog among them, and Cory was reminded that the satyr had never been found. Annie also came over between some of the longer breaks, but couldn't stay long.

After a few hours, Rail started to look antsy, so Cory asked him what was up.

"I need to go tune my violin. I thought I'd have time before the festival started tonight."

"We've still got an hour and a half until sundown." Cory pointed out. "Besides, they're going to do the fire building competition before the festival starts anyway."

"Also my feet hurt from standing around."

Cory smiled. His feet hurt too, but he wouldn't miss the chance to see Annie in action. It was a bit of a turn-on. "How long does it take to tune your violin?"

Rail folded his arms. "Just a minute or two, but I haven't had a chance to play her in over a month, so I want to clean her, rosin the bow. She needs some love."

That probably still wouldn't take much time, but Cory understood that Rail wanted to spend time with his instrument. That violin was one of the few things Rail still had from his childhood. When he was around ten a kind family had paid for him to take lessons, hoping it would be a 'constructive outlet' for him. But then the family dog had died horribly, and they blamed Rail. At least that was how he put it. They let him keep the violin though. Rail treated it

like it was an infant child.

The sun was glaring at a horrible angle by the time the competition had been narrowed down to five contestants. Annie and Toros were among them, and so was one of Toros' cousins, whom they had met on their first day with the Veiled. He had no idea which one it was, either Maritia or Jescia.

The other two were also elves. Cory recognized the dark-skinned one as another one of the captains. The other was an unfamiliar female.

The competition had gotten pretty ridiculous at this point.

The target moved at an irregular speed through the trees at least 100 feet away. As if that wasn't enough, the archer had a barrier in front of them which lifted for two seconds then dropped again. They had those two seconds to spot the moving target and shoot it as close to the center as possible.

Toros' cousin went first. At this point there were hundreds of Veiled standing around to watch. Rail and Cory had a hard time finding a place to stand with a clear view.

The little green-clad woman gave a nod to the operators. The barrier was close enough to her that she couldn't see it, but most of the onlookers could see the target being pulled through the trees, bouncing over roots and purposefully stopping behind trees.

Elf-cousin drew back her bowstring and the barrier moved away. She took just a moment to sight the target, then released. Unfortunately for her, there was a low-hanging branch that got in the way. The arrow didn't even hit the target.

Cory's eyes widened in surprise as the elf-lady growled in rage and brought her bow down on her thigh. She probably meant to break it, but Veiled bows were reinforced with steel. She instead threw it to the ground and stomped off, limping slightly.

"Looks like it runs in the family." Cory whispered to Rail, who nodded.

Cory then looked over to see how Toros would react. He stood watching, apparently unfazed.

Annie stepped up next. She nocked an arrow to her string, tip still pointed downward. She nodded to the operators, who in turn signaled to the ones pulling the string on the target. For other challenges they had used a crank so the speed of the target would be consistent, but this time they just pulled.

Annie took a calming breath, then raised her bow and drew back the string in one movement. The barrier raised, and Annie sighted the target, following it with the tip of her arrow. She released it, just as the barrier dropped.

Cory didn't even know where the target was at this point, he'd been watching Annie. The arrow stuck! He couldn't tell where it had impacted from this distance, but he was certain it had hit the target.

An operator emerged from behind the wall where they were pulling the strings. Annie had rushed out from behind the barrier to see her score. The operator held up all five fingers on one hand, and one on the other. Six! There were a total of ten rings, so that meant she was four rings from the center.

Annie did a victory fist-pump and moved off to the side. Cory started trying to push through towards where she was standing.

"Hey! Wait up," Rail cried, following after him. They emerged behind Annie just as the next contestant signaled to start moving the target. Cory gave Annie a side hug on the shoulders and she looked up and smiled at him. Then she grabbed his hand tight in anticipation.

The next archer was the female elf Cory didn't know. The barrier lifted and she released the arrow. Again, they couldn't quite see where the arrow impacted at first, so an operator came out to report. He held up eight fingers.

Annie slumped. Cory looked at her, then did a small double-take. Annie had a hold of Rail's hand as well. Had she grabbed his hand, or had Rail taken hers?

"Well there goes my gold medal," Annie said dejectedly.

Cory tried to comfort her. "Hey, silver is still pretty darn good."

The dark-skinned elf captain was up next. Apparently Toros would be going last.

The three watched intensely, but they all slumped when the score came back. He had gotten an eight as well.

Cory shrugged, "Well, bronze isn't too bad either."

Annie looked up at him. "I'm not getting bronze. Toros is last, we all know he's the best there is."

There was nothing else to say. Annie let go of their hands and folded her arms.

Toros stepped up. Cory kept watching, hoping against hope that by some fluke he would mess up.

In his mind he thought he could see the waves of magik flowing and rebounding through the trees. He closed his eyes, focusing on them. For some reason, he felt like maybe he could control them, direct them where he wanted. He tried to push them in the way of the arrow, between Toros and his target.

The crowd erupted into cheers. He was too late. The operator held up ten fingers. A perfect bullseye.

Cory looked over at Toros. The elf's straight blond hair swished as he turned right toward them and looked right at Annie. He puckered his lips in a mocking kiss.

Annie grunted in frustration and immediately turned and stomped away, shoving through the crowd.

Cory wanted to punch that stupid, handsome face. Or at least make some rude gesture at him with his hand. But Toros was looking straight at them with a maddening smile as friends swarmed around, pounding his shoulders in congratulations. It wasn't worth the punishment.

Rail however didn't hesitate. He raised both hands straight towards Toros, middle fingers displayed prominently.

Cory's eyes widened. Toros started toward them, his face twisted in anger, but the crowd had pressed around him too much.

Cory grabbed Rail's shoulder and pulled him away through the crowd, laughing all the way.

Once they had gotten out into more open space, Cory slapped Rail's shoulder. "I can't believe you did that man! That was nuts!"

Rail smiled. "That sucker had it coming."

"You're going to get guard duty every night for a week. If he doesn't just kick you out like he wants to."

"Well before he does that, I'm going to go tune my violin, alright? I'll see you at the dance in an hour."

Cory walked off and Rail made his way back to the barracks.

\*\*\*

Rail pulled his violin case out from under his bed. A little dust coated the outside of the case, so Rail brushed it off with a corner of his cloak. It wouldn't do to get dust on her.

He stood, case in one hand and went in search of a quiet, more private space. He'd recently found a watch stand in one of the trees less than five minutes away. It was close enough to basecamp that it was rarely used.

Rail avoided the sticks and leaves that would make noise as he walked. He didn't need to be quiet, but it had become second nature. Under the canopy of the trees it was already pretty dark. As he walked, he thought about the exchange from earlier.

That prick Toros had it coming. It wasn't enough that he and the others treated Rail like some demon they needed to cast out of their midst, but he also gloated about it.

Rail arrived at his destination and climbed up the ladder to a small wooden platform, about 20 feet up in the tree. About halfway up he glanced into a hole in the side of the tree. There weren't any baby birds in it, but Rail could see the makings of a nest.

He started by applying resin to his bow. He was almost out of the stuff. Would they let him leave to get some supplies? Probably not.

Annie did really well in that contest earlier today. She definitely deserved some kind of a medal. Or at least some kind of 'you almost got a medal' ribbon. Although that did sound really patronizing, it would be better than a participation ribbon.

He started to draw the bow across his strings and winced. That was way off.

Was there anything going on with her and Cory? He thought they had been holding hands just for anticipatory purposes. That was why he had taken her hand as well, for... support. Yeah. He still felt awkward about it.

Annie had shown interest in Rail, right? Lots of men he had talked to claimed that women were confusing, but Annie seemed to be deliberately sending him opposite messages. One day she pushed him away the next she hinted at deep feelings for him she just couldn't live without. Rail's previous experience with women was quite lacking however, so perhaps he was just misunderstanding her. Most women he had tried flirting with gave him straightforward messages, like: "yes please get in my pants", or "get out of my life and kill yourself".

Maybe she was trying to make up her mind about either him or Cory.

If that pretty boy outshined him this time he might just punch him in the face. Probably not though. He couldn't help but love the guy, but he was tired of constantly being the shadow.

He wanted to say it was just because Cory was tall and had blue eyes. But no, it wasn't just that. Cory was likable. He was kind, he was strong, he cared about people.

Rail just wasn't. Why should he care about people? There were a total of two people Rail thought actually cared about him, and even they were pushing him away to spend more time together.

Rail was just a shadow. A shadow that was meant for sneaking and stabbing. That was something he appreciated about the Veiled. Their way was efficient and smart. Rail would be good at it if he could aim a bow right. Even then he would still be a monster.

He could feel that monster inside of him. It was there, just below the skin, yearning to be released. To bite, to kill. That part terrified Rail.

But it felt so *good*. Those brief moments when he had transformed he had felt such power, such strength. He could have ripped apart each and every Veiled soldier that looked down on him with condescending eyes. But it had also been almost mindless. When Cory had first pinned him down it had arisen such *anger*.

Rail suddenly stopped. His violin was playing just right. The actions were so automatic he had stopped tuning and starting playing out a melody for his thoughts. How long had he been there? By this time it was almost too dark to see at all. But he heard the sounds of music and people back towards the barracks.

He climbed back down the ladder.

He glanced towards the bird's nest as he descended, and for a moment he could see inside. Two birds lay among the twigs. As he leaned closer he could see that neither was moving.

Rail turned away and picked his way through the darkness towards the dancing and the lights of the bonfires.

—

Cory wandered around the newly lit bonfires. Each one was at least six feet high, giving off waves of intense heat. It seemed like a terrible idea for a dance when everyone would be moving so much, but the night was getting cold. They also provided just enough light for such an event.

They had just finished a brief ceremony where they awarded medals from the olympics. Cory himself had been given his gold, which now sat in one of his pockets.

It was a very odd thing to see the Veiled being so relaxed. It had rarely happened since Cory had joined the ranks, at least on this scale. Most still wore their leather armor without the

cloak, though some had exchanged it for suits or dresses.

The bonfires had been lit during another competition, where each competitor had to get their flame to a certain height as fast as possible. The fires had then been fed so that they'd last the whole night. They were spaced apart so there was plenty of space for dancing between each fire ring.

The players were coming out and setting up. There were an incredible variety of instruments. Stringed instruments like guitars, cellos, and violins, as well as lots of drums, interspersed with a few brass and woodwinds. There was even a satyr with panpipes and another with what looked like a kazoo. No, it had to be a piccolo or something else small...

Cory wandered about, looking for Annie. He had expected to see her sitting in some of the chairs around the edges of the grassy area, but she wasn't there. Nor was she by the refreshments.

That worried him a little. But it was Annie, she'd be just fine. He ran into Shuah and John Joseph, who cheerfully invited him to join them. Normally he would have waited for Rail and Annie but... Rail would be among the players, and Annie would get there at some point. So he chatted with his friends and enjoyed some punch and little savory leaf-wraps.

The music started to play. There appeared to be someone on one end of the dancing field that was picking and leading the music, though Cory couldn't see them. The music started from that end, then each group of players picked up the tune. With such a variety of instruments and no central leader it should have been a terrible cacophony, but it somehow worked.

Three players surrounded each bonfire, usually a string, a percussion, and a wind instrument, though some had four or five musicians. Each group was far enough from the others that they could have each played their own thing, but they didn't. Each group somehow meshed with the others around it so that if you were spaced evenly between two or three bonfires the experience was totally different from being close to one of them. Then it changed again as you walked just a little further. It was one of the strangest and most impressive displays

of music Cory had ever heard.

Cory had been to dances before where most people just stood off to the side drinking punch and flirting, or just staring at the half dozen people who actually danced.

But this wasn't like that. Nearly everyone danced, and those that didn't were getting refreshments, or at least bobbing to the music by the side. The elves of course danced gracefully with large, flowing movements. Minotaurs mostly looked rather awkward and bulky. Cory saw some humans doing hip hop, and a group of fletchers up dancing on a table to avoid being stepped on.

By far the most fun to watch were the satyrs. They danced with incredibly high leaps, kicking their hooves together and whooping excitedly. Cory saw some of them gathering in the center of the field. They joined hands and started to dance around in a circle, stomping and clicking their hooves in time with the music. Leaf-clad dryads soon emerged from the woods to join them, and couples danced through the center of the circle, crossing the middle and joining back in the rotation without tripping up or slowing down. In fact, they seemed to be speeding up.

As they started to spin faster and faster, Cory thought he saw them start to sink lower into the ground. Their speed increased. Their movements became more frantic, and the music seemed to match their movements. He could hear them singing and chanting in some other language, light and beautiful and incredibly joyous. He had hardly ever heard such a joyful sound.

Their speed increased to an impossible rate, like a recording on fast forward, or a timelapse sequence. Dozens were now standing around watching the incredible display. They became so fast it was nearly impossible to tell what was happening. The entire circle blurred, a tornado of fur, hooves, and leaves.

Then the music stopped. Cory couldn't see any of the dancers. A hole had been pounded out beneath their feet in a perfect circle, nearly ten feet deep.

Other members of the Veiled walked over and started helping the dancers out of the hole, who emerged sweaty and laughing.

Applause sounded through the onlookers, and the music resumed its previous pace. One satyr who Cory knew made his way past him, an enormous smile on his face. Cory had noticed him participating in the dancing circle.

“That was amazing!” Cory told him, clapping him on the back.

The satyr smiled at him. “Thank you! I haven’t participated in a faerie circle that big in years!”

“How do you do it?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “That’s a secret of the satyrs my friend!”

Cory’s own group started to dance again, forming a circle so they could all see one another. Cory looked around, suddenly remembering he still hadn’t seen Annie yet.

He did see Jazan though, newly velveted antlers sticking up above the crowd. She danced a little awkwardly, stepping forward and back and swinging her arms. Cory and her made eye contact and made their way towards each other.

She bent over so that he could hear her over the noise. “Have you talked to Annie yet?” She asked.

Cory shook his head. “I haven’t seen her, I was going to ask if you had.”

Jazan nodded and waved for him to follow her. They made their way between groups of dancers toward the side of the field. Annie sat slumped in a chair by herself, an empty punch cup held loosely in her hand.

Jazan leaned down again. “She didn’t even want to come, but I made her get ready and at least be here. She’s still upset about the archery competition. I tried to talk to her, but I think it would be better coming from you.”

Cory nodded and started off towards Annie, but then turned back. He wrapped his arms around Jazan. He had to reach up over her back, his head just reaching her navel.

Jazan returned the hug, confused. "What was that for?"

"You've been so kind and welcoming to all of us. Thank you for everything you do, it really makes a difference."

Jazan beamed and ruffled his hair. "You're welcome! It's my pleasure."

It had been a very long time since anyone had ruffled his hair like that. Most people couldn't reach high enough to do it. Maybe he should have felt demeaned, but from Jazan it felt endearing.

Cory walked over and sat next to Annie. She looked up at him and gave a tight smile.

After sitting for a moment, Cory put his arm around her shoulders. She hesitated, then leaned over, resting her head on his shoulder.

Annie chuckled.

"What is it?" Cory asked.

She shrugged. "Just laughing at Rail."

"Where is he?"

She pointed toward the nearest bonfire. Cory recognized his gangly silhouette, violin raised under his chin, hair wild. He stomped and swayed, playing his violin with all the energy of a bluegrass fiddler.

Cory smiled as well. "He seems to be enjoying himself."

Cory wasn't sure how long they sat there. After a time the music slowed. They could hear Rail's violin humming out a deep rhythm.

Cory stood, taking Annie's hand, and gently pulling her towards the dance floor. "Come on."

Annie rolled her eyes but smiled and let him pull her onto an open spot in the grass.

Cory placed his hand on her back, and they started to sway back and forth, turning in a circle.

At first, they both let the music fill the silence. Annie rested her head against Cory's

chest, her hand ran over his muscled shoulder.

Cory could feel her warmth pressed against him. She still had her cloak on, and he felt the soft material under his fingers. His other hand held hers loosely. He smiled at the familiar sensation of her calloused hand on his.

Cory bent his neck down and kissed her hair. She didn't react.

"Hey", Cory said. She looked up at him. Her eyes were wet.

Cory was concerned. She didn't usually react this strongly to things. The crying seemed a bit excessive for having lost a contest. "Are you okay?"

Annie looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. She clearly wasn't okay.

Cory shrugged. "Sorry, I know you're not. But you did amazing in that competition. You shouldn't feel so down on yourself about it."

She shook her head. "It's not that. Well... it's not just that."

Cory looked at her questioningly. "What else is going on?"

She hesitated. "Umm I'll tell you later? I just need a day to be angry. Toros is a prick and I hate losing to him."

Cory nodded. "I can certainly agree with that. That's fine."

She nestled into his chest again. "Thank you."

He smiled and squeezed her in a hug. After a moment the current song ended, and the music sped up to a jig again. Cory and Annie stood there for a moment, looking up at each other. He had her shoulders in both his hands. Looking at her... no, he couldn't. The timing was terrible. She was having a bad day, and there were so many people around.

But she continued to look up at him, big eyes sparkling. He leaned down slowly, hesitantly. She tilted her head back to meet him, her lips meeting his.

It only lasted a moment, and they pulled apart. Annie breathed in deeply. Then turned and walked back to her seat by the side, a bounce in her step.

\*\*\*

Rail opened his eyes as the slow melody came to an end, and pulled his bow away from the strings. He smiled. That song had nearly brought him to tears. He glanced around, then did a double take. He could see Cory and Annie. Had they been kissing?!

The moment passed and they moved away from each other.

No, he must have been mistaken. The firelight playing tricks. Cory was probably just leaning down to talk to her, to be heard over the music. But... They *had* been acting odd lately. Rail thought they'd been in some kind of disagreement, but... maybe it was something else.

No, they would have told him! Besides, Rail was sure Annie had expressed interest in *him* several times over the past few weeks. Nothing had happened though, and Rail was growing a little impatient at her mixed signals. They'd been friends for so long, and Annie was the only girl Rail had ever actually been close to.

"You're missing the beat, son!" Rail was jerked back to reality as the musician next to him, a blue-scaled humanoid with a lizard-like face and a mandolin in hand, yelled and impatiently gestured at him to start playing again. He'd missed the first bit of the song. He laid the bow on the strings again, but his mind kept swimming, analyzing his interactions with his two friends.

He was so distracted that he failed to notice a figure stumbling towards him. Someone collided with him, hard. The impact knocked him off balance, towards the bonfire behind. He threw his hands down and twisted, trying to keep from falling into the flames. Fortunately the angle let him land on his side, barely avoiding the pile of burning logs. One sat inches from his face, the heat threatening to blister his skin. He rolled away, pushing off the person that had collided with him and getting to his feet.

He barely registered the figure mumbling at him in a slurred voice. His violin, where was his violin?

He caught sight of the tuning keys, poking out at the edge of the flames. Heedless of the heat, he quickly pulled the instrument out. It came out in two pieces, the neck splintered away from the main body which was blackened and burned.

Rail looked up at the person who had hit him with rage. They could barely stand as a friend tried to support him under one shoulder. Alcohol wasn't supposed to be allowed, but apparently someone had smuggled in enough to get drunk.

His violin! He almost started to cry, but instead his breathing became heavy. The light of the flames danced across his face. That violin had been one the only consistencies in his life, and one of his only escapes.

These people! They would pay for the way they treated him. Pushed away and demeaned for the way he'd been born, then feared and hated for an injury while he was trying to protect them!

The broken violin tumbled to the grass as Rail stood again. He took a step toward the drunken man.

The man's friend yelled and put out a hand. "Hey, it was an accident man!"

But Rail didn't care. His anger was too strong, burning hotter even than the enormous bonfire behind him. He lashed out with one hand. As he did, he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. He let out an inhuman growl. His fingers seemed to extend in an instant, claws forming on his fingertips. Those claws struck, cutting through the flesh of the man's neck. Rail felt his hand ripping through skin and muscle. Blood sprayed over the man who had tried to stop him, and a chunk of neck fell to the ground.

Rail stumbled back, blood dripping from his hand. The claws were gone. The man he had struck slumped to the ground. Onlookers stood still, all staring at Rail. His mind was a blur. What had happened?

He felt Cory tugging on his arm, but he didn't register his voice. Stunned faces regarded his blood-covered hand as Cory and Annie led him through the crowd and out into the forest.

Yelling sounded behind them. He vaguely registered the sound of the alarm bells sounding throughout the camp. They were coming for him.

## Chapter 14

### Outcasts

Annie glanced about frantically, searching the trees for an escape which wasn't there. She was going to be kicked out for this. Shamed by her parents too. But in that moment, she'd had a decision to make, and her loyalty had been to her friends, Rail and Cory.

But they couldn't evade the entire Veiled army for long.

An arrow struck a tree just behind Cory's head. It seemed like there were only a few Veiled chasing them, which was lucky. Maybe they thought they didn't need more to catch them, but that didn't seem right. The alarm bells were ringing through the forest, so Annie thought maybe, just maybe, Rail had happened to kill someone right when someone else attacked the Veiled. If that was true, they might just have a chance to escape.

Cory spoke in a loud whisper to Annie, "where are we going?"

Annie scanned the trees around her. Where had it been? Her eyes made it so she could see in the dark, but it was still harder than in daylight. Everything was shades of gray. Except for magik, magik was always bright.

"Do you remember when Jazan told us about the Forest of Wisdom? The forest within the forest?"

"Yeah," Cory said.

Rail still stumbled along in a daze. Cory stumbled too, they didn't have the advantage of being able to see in the dark. Annie tried to take a path that wandered enough to evade their pursuers, but if she moved too quickly she'd lose the boys.

"Well, I think I know where the entrance is. We can hide there." She just hoped she remembered the location right. If they got lost they'd be caught for sure.

A voice shouted behind them, "Stop where you are or I'll shoot!"

The three dove to one side, crashing through heavy underbrush. It wasn't stealthy but

hopefully it would help them avoid getting shot.

The Veiled that had shouted at them cursed.

A few weeks ago while on patrol through the woods, Annie had noticed a certain tree that gave off its own magik aura. All the trees rebounded magik, but this one had given off its own bright aura, the same way that magikal creatures do. She hoped it wasn't just a dryad nest or something, but the aura had seemed much too strong for that. It looked similar to the aura the entrance to the Forest of Life had. She wasn't supposed to have seen that entrance, but she could see through blindfolds. It wasn't something she could just turn off.

There! She caught a glimpse between the trees of a brighter portion of magik, mostly in green.

She tugged on Rail's arm, pulling him along behind her.

He mumbled something, and Annie could barely hear him over the shifting of brush and crunching of leaves. "It's no use. We should just let them have me."

Cory responded from behind, also pushing Rail along. "They'll kill you, Rail. We can't let that happen."

"I killed someone. It's what I deserve."

Scanning the way behind them, Annie caught glimpses of at least two Veiled, coming towards them from different directions. She pulled them along faster. Just a little further.

Cory responded, and Annie blessed him for whispering. Rail and Cory probably didn't realize how close their pursuers were. "We don't know if you actually killed him. They have healers that could have helped, he could be fine."

Annie grimaced slightly. She was sure that man had died. She didn't know much about medicine, but people needed throats to live. If that hadn't killed him, he'd probably have died of blood loss soon afterwards. There was so much blood...

They arrived at the tree Annie had spotted, and she scanned the ground. The roots of the tree ran in spirals through the surrounding dirt, matching the same pattern she had seen on the

tree that was the entrance to the Forest of Life. She smiled. By my bow, it actually worked!

The aura the tree emitted was intense and bright. It pulsed like ripples in a pond with green, then lavender, then brown. She'd have loved to observe a little more, take in the beauty of the thing, but there wasn't time. She grabbed Rail and pushed him towards the tree. He made a surprised yelp and stumbled backwards, his body disappearing through the tree's bark.

Annie caught sight of their two pursuers raising their bows as she grabbed Cory's elbow and they followed Rail into the tree.

Cory heard a splash. Immediately he felt water soaking through his shoes as he sunk into the mud. Rail stood with his arms held up in disgust.

"You could have warned me we were headed into a swamp."

Annie looked indignant. "I didn't know. It's not like I've been here before."

On the bright side, the nasty water seemed to have caused Rail to forget about what had happened, if only for a moment.

"We should get moving. They might follow us through." Cory said. He glanced around. The tree they had come out of looked like a large mangrove. The roots reached out from several feet up the trunk, poking into the water and anchoring in the mud. Here too, several of the roots twisted into spirals.

All around them was muddy water, choked with green algae and swamp grass. The trees were twisted and dark, and a low fog sat on the water. It was quite the change from the beautiful temperate forest they had just left. Although, it didn't seem to be nighttime here. The light was low, partially because of the fog but it was bright enough to see.

He noticed a few dozen feet away that the ground rose above the surface of the water. There even appeared to be a muddy path.

He started walking towards it. "This way."

Annie grabbed his arm. "They'll be expecting that. We have a better chance of staying

hidden if we stay in the water for a little bit.”

Cory grimaced, but nodded. They picked a random direction that was still underwater, but didn't look too choked with weeds.

Rail slumped as they started to walk. “Great. We had to hide in the Swamp of Misery.”

In a peppy voice, Cory responded, “I think Jazan called it the Forest of Wisdom.”

Rail glared at him.

The water soaked right through Cory's socks. But he started to notice interesting things about the forest around them. Several large snails crawled up a tree to the side. As the three passed, the snails turned their heads to face them. Cory gave a start. That was strange behavior for a snail. They didn't even have eyes. He resisted the urge to get a closer look, and they trudged on.

There was movement in the trees above them, and a monkey with black fur and a white face (a capuchin, Cory noted) hung by its tail to look at them. Cory gave it a friendly little wave.

To his astonishment, the monkey lifted a tiny hand and waved back, upside-down. Cory nearly tripped into Annie.

“What?” She asked in annoyance.

“That monkey waved at me!”

“Congratulations.” She kept walking.

“But...” Cory sighed and followed. But he kept his eyes out. This place was strange.

After a few minutes, they finally found some higher ground that was reasonably dry, covered in moss. Rail sat right down in it, taking off his soaked shoes and socks.

“Shouldn't we keep moving?” Cory asked. “They could be on our trail.”

Annie shrugged. “We're not even sure if they know we're in here. We might as well rest while there's dry ground.”

They both joined Rail on the ground and removed their soaked footwear. Annie was still in her cloak, since she hadn't changed for the dance. She was also the only one still with a bow

and quiver. Rail and Cory wore their leather armor, but had no cloak or weapons other than their gnarl-spine knife. A knife that was only sharp at the tip, so it wouldn't do much good for survival purposes.

Rail laid back in the moss, trying to avoid tree roots. "Thank you," he whispered towards the other two.

Cory smiled. "You didn't think we'd abandon you, did you?"

Rail shrugged. "I wouldn't have blamed you. I killed a man. I'm a monster now."

"You were our friend long before you got bitten," Cory said. "We're with you no matter what Rail."

"What do we do now?" Rail asked. "I don't know how long we can hide in here before they find us."

"Or before we starve," Annie said. She sat with her legs pulled up into her chest, chin between her knees.

Rail sat up. "It takes a long time to starve, and there's no shortage of water, though I don't know if it's clean enough to drink."

Cory put a hand on his stomach. "I'm going to be hungry in the morning though. We'll need to find something to eat or we'll lose our strength."

"I think our biggest worry at the moment is hypothermia," Annie said. "Especially since we're wet."

"Should we build a fire? Try and dry out?" Rail suggested.

Cory shook his head. "The fire would be a signal to anyone following us."

"Ordinarily I'd agree with you," Annie said. "But it's not that dark here, and there's fog."

"Still, a fire is visible from a ways away," Cory said.

Annie shrugged. "That's fair."

"Do we even have any firestarters?" Rail asked.

The three looked at each other in turn. They all shook their heads. Annie's shoulders

slumped. “The wood here is all wet anyway. I don’t know if I could get a fire started even if I had my flint and steel.”

“Well, I’m going to try and get some sleep then,” Rail said as he laid back down on the ground.

Cory looked at them awkwardly, rubbing his arms to warm them. “If we’re worried about hypothermia we should probably um, huddle up for warmth. Especially since we only have one cloak.”

“Alright.” Rail scooted over into the middle of the largest patch of open ground and turned on his side. “Pick a side. Don’t make it awkward.”

Cory looked over at Annie and raised an eyebrow.

She gave a laugh. “I’m not spooning the two of you at once.” She took off her wet cloak and shivered. “You should probably be in the middle Cory. You’re the biggest, you have the most body heat.”

Cory nodded and smiled. It probably was purely practical, but he appreciated that she’d put them in a position so that she was by Cory, and not Rail. Cory laid down and awkwardly scooted back into Rail’s chest. Rail ran a hand up his bicep.

Cory jerked away and looked at Rail in disgust as Rail rolled over laughing. Cory yelled at him, “You said not to make this awkward!”

Rail sputtered out, “Alright sorry, sorry. I won’t do it again, just come on.”

They finally got settled and positioned the cloak so it covered all three of them. Cory folded his arms around Annie and she settled her head underneath his chin. The moment was somewhat spoiled by Rail’s arms behind him, but he still tried to enjoy the moment of closeness with the woman he loved.

His eyes fluttered open. Had he just thought that? Love? Well, why not? They weren’t even officially “together” but he’d known her for so long... His feet were cold and wet, the ground was moist, and he had no pillow, but he felt such warmth as he drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*

Rail woke up shivering. The cloak had slid off his back so it was covering mostly just Cory and Annie. He felt a stab of resentment towards them. Why was Cory in the middle? When spooning, it was better for the biggest person to be the biggest spoon, so really Rail should have been in the middle. Since he was the skinniest, he probably needed the heat the most.

Inside he could feel something urging him to lash out at them, to hurt them. The wolf had such power, and he had only felt it for a moment. He of course wouldn't hurt Annie, or Cory. But maybe if he tried again he could control it better, now that he knew what it felt like. He raised his hand up to his face, the same hand that had pulled out a man's throat.

Rail shook himself and stood up, trying not to disturb the others. There was no reason to try out the wolf now, they were safe, he was with friends. If he were to try it again he would do it if they were in danger, and he needed to fight something.

He walked over and felt his socks. He had hung them over a low tree branch. They were still wet. He doubted they would ever dry in such a humid environment.

He walked a few feet away and sat on the edge of the water, careful to keep his feet out. The moss was soft on his bare feet, which were now mostly dry. Looking out over the swamp, it seemed much prettier now that he was mostly dry. It was still pretty cold out, and Rail rubbed his legs and arms.

"Feeling cold?"

Rail jumped. A voice had sounded from somewhere nearby. Rail glanced around to try and find the source.

"Up here!" A ball of yellow light descended and landed on Rail's knee. Rail's eyes widened. The light dimmed, and Rail saw what looked like a two-inch tall man with scale-like pale skin.

"What's the matter? Never seen a Wisp before?" The creature's voice was light, airy, and

cheerful. The clothing the wisp man wore was green, made out of plant material like moss, bark, and leaves.

Rail shook his head. "What are you?"

The man stood up and put his hands on his hips. "I told you, I'm a Wisp. A Willow Wisp to be specific. I am the light in the wilderness that guides you. And so I ask again, you look like you're cold. Would you like some help?"

Rail shrugged. "Well, yeah."

The Wisp floated down into Rail's lap as Rail put out his hands for him to land on. The Wisp's light grew brighter, and as it did a soft warmth spread out from Rail's hands and spread through his whole body. His shivering stopped. It was like holding a hand-warmer, but it spread and warmed his whole body.

Rail breathed out. "Wow, thank you."

The Wisp laid back on Rail's hands, his own hands placed behind his head. "You're welcome."

They sat there for a while, Rail observing the environment. The little creature in his hands seemed to take a nap, a slight smile on his face as if he were basking in the summer sunshine.

After a few minutes, Cory sat up and yelled over to Rail. "Hey, are you alright man?"

Rail turned and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Cory nodded tiredly and settled back down. Rail was still a bit groggy, but didn't feel like he needed more sleep.

The Wisp broke the silence. "So what are you guys doing in the Forest of Wisdom?"

Rail chuckled. "We're on the run."

The Wisp sat up excitedly. "Really? From what?"

Rail looked down at the little creature. "What's your name? I keep calling you "Wisp" in my head."

The Wisp smiled. "My name is Meache. Thanks for asking."

Rail nodded. "You're welcome. Well Meache, we're on the run from the Veiled. Do you know who they are?"

Meache nodded his tiny head. "Of course. All creatures of the Forest of Wisdom know about the Veiled. They are our protectors. You three look like Veiled though."

Rail shrugged. "Well, yeah, we are. Or... at least we used to be. I don't think they'll ever take us back."

"How come?" Meache tilted his head.

Rail looked down his nose suspiciously. "What makes you so interested in what we're doing?"

The little man shrugged. "Most of the time all I have to talk to are snails. It's nice to hear about something new and exciting."

"You can talk to snails?"

Meache nodded. "So can you. Just about everything in these woods can talk. That's why they call it the Forest of Wisdom."

"You mean like, I could talk to some of the rocks over there?"

"Well, no." Meache rolled his eyes. "Everything living can talk. Well... maybe not everything. I've never heard the trees talk, or any of the plants..." He shook himself. "But anyways, you were saying? Why are you not sure if you're part of the Veiled anymore?"

"Right. Well I..." He didn't want to say it out loud. It was still surreal. "I killed someone. It was an accident, but they've been wanting to kick me out for a while. This was kind of the last straw I think."

Meache seemed a little hesitant after Rail had confessed to murder. But he didn't shy away or leave. "Why did they want to kick you out before?"

"Well I..." Rail looked at him. "This is very personal. I don't know if I'm comfortable sharing it with you. We've only just met, after all."

Meache shrugged again. "That's fair. But it seems to me like it could help you to talk about it. And who better than a weird little creature in a mythical swampland? I promise I won't tell anyone."

Rail still hesitated. The little wisp had a point, but still. He didn't really talk about his feelings with anyone. But... something about the guy made Rail want to trust him. Meache was keeping him warm after all.

"Alright," Rail nodded. "Well when I first came to the Veiled they didn't want to let me in because I'm not of some kind of magik descent. Just human. Annie and Cory," Rail jerked his head toward the two still slumbering behind him. "Did some talking, and they let me in. But about a month ago I got bit by a werewolf. They really didn't want me to stay after that."

Meache's tiny eyes widened. "Was that why you killed someone? When you transformed?"

Rail shook his head. "No, it wasn't the full moon yet. Though it will be tonight. I don't know what will happen then. I was just angry, and the wolf-thing inside me flared up. I think I had claws for just a moment."

"Well, you don't need to worry about the moon tonight if you're still in the Forest of Wisdom. It doesn't really get dark here like it does on the outside, and there's no visible moon."

Rail nodded. "That's good to know."

After a moment of silence Meache asked, "So, what are you going to do now?"

Rail shook his head. "No idea. We'll probably talk about it once Cory and Annie wake up again."

"Were the Veiled chasing you when you came in here?"

"Yeah, there were at least two, fully armed, that were right behind us when we came into the Forest of Wisdom."

"They're probably gone by now, why don't you just head back through, then try and escape from there?"

Rail shook his head again. "That could work I suppose, but it's a long way from the tree we came through, to the edge of the Forest of Life. That area is always guarded, too."

"Well, there's more than one entrance to the Forest of Wisdom, silly. I know one that would put you out past the Veiled sentries, right next to the edge."

Rail's eyes widened. "Really? That would be perfect!"

"Who are you talking to?" A voice said behind him.

Rail jumped. Cory stood right behind him.

"Gosh, Cory can't you make a little more noise?"

Cory shrugged. "It's easy to be quiet on this moss." Cory made a surprised face as he noticed Meache. "What's that?"

Meache glowed and flew up into the air in front of Cory's face, twirling and bowing. Rail wagged a finger at Cory. "Come on Cory, not what. The correct question is who."

Meache bowed again. "In answer to both questions, I am a Willow Wisp. My name is Meache."

Meache then flew up to Cory's face and kissed him on one cheek, then the other. "I'm told that's a human greeting. Did I do it right?"

Cory touched a hand to his cheek, then looked at Rail with consternation.

Behind them, Annie stretched then got up and walked over. Meache bowed to her as well and gave her a similar kiss on each cheek. Annie gave a small smile.

Rail nodded to Meache. "He says he knows a safe way out."

Annie and Cory both brightened at that.

"What kind of way out?" Cory asked.

"The kind that puts us past the Veiled guard posts," Rail answered.

An hour later they were still hiking across the moss-covered ground. Was this whole place a swamp, Cory wondered? His stomach growled. First thing he wanted to do once they got out was find a place to eat breakfast.

Meache fluttered about in the trees above them, sometimes going out of sight for a minute or two. But he always came back, which was good. He hadn't said a word about where they were going. It made Cory slightly anxious.

Meache fluttered down to their eye level just long enough to say "not far now!" Before flying off again.

Suddenly Annie grabbed his arm. Cory looked back at her, confused. She had an intense look on her face as she scanned the trees around them.

"What is it?" Cory asked.

Annie hesitated, still scanning the surrounding area. "I'm... not sure. I thought I saw something. A heat signature."

Cory felt a little better knowing that at least she was on the lookout for trouble. She could see anything. He had been too busy keeping an eye on Meache to notice much of anything else.

Rail walked up closer. "What's going on guys?"

Annie held up a finger, stopping him in his tracks. "Shhhh!"

Cory wasn't sure why she wanted it quiet. She had super sight, not hearing. Shouldn't she be able to... see the sounds or something?

They stood there for a full minute before Cory said, "It was probably nothing. There are tons of creatures out here, maybe it was a squirrel."

Annie shook her head. "It was too big to be a squirrel."

Rail rolled his eyes. "Well then maybe it was a hippo, or a giant squirrel. We've seen enough weirdness here that it could be anything."

Annie looked a little peeved, then sheepish. She nodded, "you're right. I'm just nervous."

Cory nodded and turned to keep walking. "Meache! Where'd you go?"

Suddenly a dozen Veiled appeared from behind trees, bows drawn. Cory's eyes widened and he put his hands up. They were surrounded.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice said. One of the Veiled, a big man, walked up to them and lowered his hood. "Looks like we caught the runaways."

## Chapter 15

### Traitor

Tahittoa looked at the three smugly while three others bound their hands behind their backs.

Meache fluttered down and looked at the captives, shaking his tiny head.

Rail snapped at him angrily, "What? I told you we were on the run."

The glowing little man nodded. "I know, that's why I led you to the other Veiled."

Rail's face twisted in anger. "What? Why?"

Meache shrugged. "The Veiled are the protectors of my home. You'll find very few allies in the Forest of Wisdom if you're trying to defy them. Besides, you killed someone."

Rail snarled. "Come a little closer wispy, so I can squash you too."

Meache sniffed and turned away. Tahittoa gave him a small bow. "Thank you for your service little friend. You've assisted in the capture of dangerous fugitives."

Meache bowed in return. "Happy to help!"

"You may want to find somewhere safe to hold out for a few days," Tahittoa informed him. "Some dangerous invaders have made their way into the woods."

"Invaders? What invaders?" Cory asked.

Tahittoa ignored him and watched as Meache buzzed off through the trees. "Let's go. Back to the Forest of Life."

The three captives were pushed into a line and the whole troupe started marching in a ring around them. Cory tried again to ask who the invaders were, but he received no answer.

Cory didn't know what to do or think as they marched over the mossy ground. They'd been caught. He of course hadn't really done anything wrong, he was just protecting his friend. Rail was the guilty one. So maybe they'd be somewhat lenient? But, what was he thinking? What

would they do to Rail? Cory had no idea what the penalty for killing a fellow Veiled was, but he guessed it was either expulsion or execution. And the penalty for harboring an enemy?

Rail walked just ahead of him, a muscular brown-haired elf holding a rope tied to his hands. Cory had expected him to look resigned or depressed, like he had when they first ran away. But Rail walked with his head high. Cory couldn't read his expression from behind.

Annie walked at the front, another assassin holding her rope. Her handler kept yanking on her rope to get her back in line. She looked around constantly, as if trying to find an escape route. It sounded like she was whispering to Tahitoa, who walked at the front of the group, though Cory couldn't make out what she was saying.

Suddenly Tahitoa ordered the whole column to halt. He turned and grabbed Annie's face. "Your orders have changed, girl. You think Toros still wants you to protect and watch those two after the wolfman killed someone?"

He slapped her across the face.

Rail and Cory both started forward protectively, but were yanked back by the ropes on their wrists.

Tahitoa looked up at the two men and gave a small smile. "They still want to protect you. They don't know, do they? Should we tell them?"

Annie shook her head wildly. Cory was very confused. What was he talking about?

Tahitoa smiled again at her panicked expression, and Cory's hatred of him grew. The big polynesian started walking in front of Rail and Cory, gesturing with his bow.

"Haven't you wondered why Toros favored you over the others? He gave you private lessons." He pointed a bow blade at Cory, then at Rail. "And he let you into the Veiled, even though you had no magik abilities." He got up in Rail's face and sneered.

He then pointed a finger at Annie's face, though he kept his eyes on Cory and Rail. "It's because of this one."

Cory and Rail both looked confused. Tahitoa smiled again as he continued. He was

enjoying this way too much.

“Coryther Thomas, son of Alfred and Raquele Thomas. You are not a shaga. Headlights over there confirmed it.” He used Captain Drake’s nickname for Annie, the one he used because of her eyes. “No, you’re something special, someone the gnarls saved in an unheard of, split-second decision. Something Toros wants to keep a close eye on.”

He turned towards Rail. “And you, you claim to have no magik either, you’ve never exhibited any extraordinary abilities, and yet you have a magik aura unlike any Bethany over there has ever seen.”

Cory heard Annie snarl even from here. She hated her full name. But Cory was still confused. Rail had an aura?

Tahitoo rolled his eyes at their confused looks. “Do I have to spell it out? Cory, you have an aura that Annie can see, and it’s different from other shaga. Rail, you also have an aura, a dark aura. And yet none of us know if you have powers or what they might be. That’s why you were let into the Veiled. Headlights over there has been assigned to watch you two for years. Since the first time she knew either of you had powers.”

Cory didn’t know what to believe. There was no way! She’d been spying on them since middle school? And reporting back to a secret organization of assassins he hadn’t even known existed?

He looked at Annie. “Tell me that’s not true.”

Annie shook her head, but her expression was panicked. Like a cornered animal. “It wasn’t anything personal! I noticed you two had magik auras and-”

She cut off as Tahitoo slapped her again. “Shut it! You’re a disgrace to the Veiled. As soon as your friend and credibility were threatened you betrayed the rest of us and ran off with traitors.”

He turned back to Rail and Cory. “She’s been reporting to Toros this whole time to gather information on your abilities. When you said you wanted to see the magikal world it was the

perfect opportunity for Toros to observe and train you himself. So she led you right to us like a good little-”

He cut off as Annie spat right in his face. He wiped it away angrily and shouldered his bow. “Gag that one! Let’s move out.”

Suddenly, a large dark shape leaped out from behind a tree and slashed at one of the Veiled near Rail. The warrior dodged to the side but still had a long gash cut across their shoulder.

Nearly a dozen of these same attackers emerged at the same time from behind surrounding trees. Cory heard Annie curse. He hadn’t seen these creatures before, but he recognized them from Annie’s description. They had glossy black skin like obsidian stone and wore steel breastplates. Each had some kind of ornamentation on their head: tusks, horns, or antlers of all kinds.

Chaos reigned as swords flashed and Veiled struggled to take out their bows or knives to fight back. Tahitoa cursed.

The soldier holding Cory’s rope dropped it to assist one of the other Veiled. He saw one cloaked assassin take a sword slice right across the neck. The attackers seemed to be ignoring Cory, Rail, and Annie since they were unarmed and bound. Still, Cory stayed alert.

He glanced over at Rail. Rail had somehow gotten his hands free. He nodded towards the trees. There was a gap big enough in the fighting that they may be able to slip away. They scuttled across the moss-covered ground towards a small rise, trying to look inconspicuous. One of the Veiled shouted out and started after them. They were rewarded with a spear in the gut.

Before they disappeared from sight, Cory glanced back at Annie. Her hands were still bound but she had gotten them in front and had a Veiled bow held awkwardly in her bound wrists. The troop of Veiled seemed to be recovering from the initial surprise and were using their greater numbers to overpower the attacking demons.

Annie glanced up and made eye contact with Cory. Her face fell. Cory's stomach dropped, but he set his jaw and turned away. The traitor could fend for herself. He slid down the other side of the short rise and stumbled through the trees after Rail. He heard Annie scream a battle cry behind them.

## Chapter 16

### Cornered Animals

Cory and Rail ran through the trees, Cory's hands still bound. He stumbled and fell, his face almost colliding with a tree root.

"Rail!" Cory shouted, but tried to keep his voice low enough not to carry too far. "I need to get these ropes off!"

Rail jogged over. His ropes looked like they had been cut. He quickly untied the ones on Cory's wrists and tossed them aside. Thinking better of it, he grabbed them off the ground then threw them as far as he could. They splashed into some shallow water.

"Come on," Rail said. "We should keep moving."

Cory nodded, and they started jogging again. "What about Annie?"

Rail's face darkened. "She can fend for herself. Maybe her old friends will do her some favors."

Cory frowned. "I... don't know what to think about it. Do you think Tahitoa might have been lying? How could she have been spying on us this whole time?"

"I'd rather not talk about it right now," Rail said. "Let's find somewhere to hide, so we can figure out what to do."

They continued running for an hour or more. Fortunately their physical training over the last few months gave them the stamina to keep going. The terrain started to change, becoming more rocky and steep. The trees and moss changed to pines and scrub.

Cory slowed, and scrambled up a boulder to get a better view. Above them rose an enormous mountain, covered in pines and large, gray boulders. He climbed back down and pointed up the slope.

"Looks like there's a cave a little ways up the rocks. We can shelter there for now."

They scrambled up the rocks, searching for several minutes to find a suitable place. What

they found was less of a cave and more of an enclosed space between several massive boulders. But it was big enough for them to lay down if they needed to.

Cory shivered. "We should get a fire going. I'm cold."

Rail nodded. "I'll go look for some wood. You don't have any of your weapons do you? Just your knife?"

Cory nodded. "What are you thinking?"

Rail shrugged. "It would be nice to find some food. Do you know how to gut an animal?"

"I've never actually done it, but I've seen it done. If we got something I think I could prepare it well enough to eat."

Rail nodded. "One of us should probably stay here so we can find our way back easier."

Cory slumped, but nodded. The last thing he wanted to do right now was sit alone with his thoughts. So far he'd been able to distract himself with his own survival.

"When you get close, whistle or something so I can help you find your way back."

Rail walked off to find some wood.

Cory sat down in the dust. Fortunately it was relatively flat. Above their heads was the rough surface of a boulder the size of an elephant.

After sitting on the ground he realized it was still pretty cold. He hugged his knees to his chest and rocked back and forth a little. The ground was gravelly, hard, and cold. He decided to stand up and look around. There were a few trees among the boulders, maybe there was something he could use for kindling.

As he climbed up on top of the boulder, he took a moment to look at the surrounding area. A chill wind cut straight through his shirtsleeves. Fortunately the leather armor at least blocked the wind. He hugged himself. The wind was sweeping down the mountain face above them. He couldn't see the top of the mountain. It looked like the slope lessened up towards the top. The opposite direction was the enormous misty swamp they had walked into. It seemed much more beautiful from above, full of green-topped trees and various birds fluttering among

the branches.

To one side the trees grew taller and more dense. Cory had no idea which way was north, or even if north existed in an extra-dimensional space inside an extra-dimensional space, so the only way to orient himself was landmarks. It looked to be a sort of jungle. To the other side the trees spaced out into a desert landscape of sparse, twisted trees and shrubs. The sky was a sort of dull orange. He couldn't see the sun, though some stars twinkled through the misty sky.

He stepped down off the boulder towards a scraggly conifer that punched out from a crack between the boulders. What looked to be a perfectly straight stick leaned against one of the branches. As he got closer, he noticed it had just recently broken off from the branch it was leaning against. It was the cleanest break he had ever seen, almost like it had been cut.

Suddenly Cory stopped and looked around, stooping to be less visible. Someone must have cut the branch, then left it. But... that tree was barely ten feet tall, and most of the branches were twisted, not straight. Something here wasn't natural.

*This would make an excellent walking stick*, he thought. Or... maybe a spear haft! They needed something to hunt with. Excited, he broke off the last bit of bark, and pulled out his gnarl-spine knife. Yup, if he could get some rope to last the knife to the end, it would make a decent spear.

He raised the stick towards the tree, "Thanks!" he said.

Cory stumbled back. The tree had *bent* towards him. As if it were bowing or nodding.

The Forest of Wisdom. The animals here seemed more intelligent, would that apply to the plants as well?

He took a step back towards the tree. "Can you hear me?"

Again the tree bent towards him as if in acknowledgement.

Cory held out the stick. "Is it alright if I take this?"

The tree bent towards him again. Cory smiled and climbed back down into the cave. At least here he was protected from the wind.

He cut a slit in his shirt and was able to pull out a long thread. He was then able to split

one end of the stick so he could slide in his knife. Unfortunately the gnarl-spine knife wasn't very good at cutting things. The edges weren't sharp, just the tip. But it was better than his fingers. He had to be careful not to prick himself though. He'd felt what it was like to be poisoned by that thing, and he was not anxious to repeat it.

Cory tried not to think about Annie as he wrapped the split end of the stick, lashing it tight around the knife. The threads of his shirt didn't work very well, but they would do.

Tahitoa's words rang in his head.

*Headlights over there has been assigned to watch you two for years. Since the first time she knew either of you had powers.*

He wasn't sure if he really had a right to be angry with her. She was doing her duty, right?

Cory ground his teeth. The string snapped in his hands. He cursed and pulled out another, tying them together.

Yes, he had a right to be angry. She saw an aura around him, something different and special. And Rail had an aura! He had some kind of magik ability and Annie hadn't said a word. She'd reported back to a tyrant commander about it before telling her best friends they had magik powers.

Rail had even more reason to feel betrayed. Despite himself, Cory still really hoped she was okay. As angry and betrayed as he felt, he didn't want her to get hurt.

Cory finished his makeshift spear right about the time he heard Rail whistling. He climbed up on top of the boulder and whistled back, waving his arms. Rail turned and started back towards him. He had a pile of sticks in his arms.

He dumped the sticks onto the ground. "Do you know how to get one of these started?"

Cory looked at him. "Weren't you in boy scouts at one point?"

Rail shrugged. "One of my foster parents put me in it, but it didn't last very long. I didn't care to learn any of the wilderness survival stuff anyway. What about you? I thought you did it too."

Cory nodded. "Yeah, except we don't have anything to start it with. I've never actually done it just with sticks, and that takes forever from what I've heard."

Rail pulled something from his pocket and held it out. Cory took it. It was a fire starting bar!

"Where did you get this?"

Rail shrugged again. "I found it by the bonfire at the dance. It looked cool, and I figured it could be useful."

"Nice," Cory said. "I might just be able to make this work. We need some kindling though."

Rail raised an eyebrow. "That's the small stuff, right?"

Cory smiled. "Yeah. I think I know where to get some."

He climbed back up on top of the rocks to the twisted tree that had given him the spear haft. Hesitantly, he asked "We need something small to get a fire started. Any way you could help with that?"

After a moment, the tree raised its branches and shook. Hundreds of needles tumbled to the ground, collecting in the cracks in the rocks.

Cory scooped up as much of the needles and debris that he could. When he came back, Rail had the makeshift spear in his hands. He nodded appreciatively, "Nice work".

"Thanks," Cory said. "I figure we need some food, that ought to help."

Rail nodded. "I can go see if I can find something to stab while you get the fire ready."

"Do you know how to hunt or use a spear?"

Rail scoffed. "Please, I've played a few hunting games. What's so hard about search and stab?"

Cory smiled and got to work on the fire as Rail stalked off. Rail was very good at sneaking up on things.

By the time Rail got back Cory had managed to put together a decent fire. He was

warming his hands when he heard Rail whistling. He carried a dead raccoon in one hand, the spear in the other.

“How was the hunt?” Cory asked as they settled down around the fire.

“It was fine. I think the trees weren’t very happy with me though.”

Cory looked at him questioningly.

Rail shrugged. “It wasn’t until after I’d killed the thing that I realized it was probably intelligent like everything else in these woods. I’m pretty sure I heard it swear before the spear struck it, and several tree roots nearly tripped me, though I swear they weren’t there before.”

Cory looked down at the dead raccoon. “So um, would it be wrong to eat it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if it was intelligent that would be kind of like eating a person, right? Well, not a human but like eating a minotaur.”

Rail looked down at the creature. Both of their stomachs grumbled aloud. “It would be a shame to waste it, don’t you think? I killed it, we might as well use it.”

Cory could have kept arguing. Would he say the same thing about another dead soldier? But he was starving. He had eaten next to nothing since the night before. At least, what he thought was the night before. Without the sun it was very difficult to figure out what the time of day was.

Cory did his best to skin the creature with his unsharp knife. It didn’t work very well, but he got enough off to make it edible, though it took at least an hour.

“Did you see any fruits or nuts? Any edible plants while you were out?” Cory asked.

Rail paused. “I didn’t really look. I was concentrating on finding meat...”

Cory nodded. “I’m going to go see what I can find, if you want to keep cooking this.”

Rail took the stick with the impaled carcass on it and turned it slowly over the fire as Cory went off in search of more sustenance.

He returned a short time later with his pockets stuffed with nuts, and his arms full of

berries. It wasn't easy to scramble over the rocks with full arms, and he spilled plenty. But there had been so much available that Cory wasn't too worried. It seemed there were dozens of fruit and nut trees around.

Neither of the two had eaten raccoon before, let alone talking raccoon. But they wolfed it down eagerly, supplemented with berries and nuts. They curled up on the hard ground around the fire and fell asleep with full stomachs.

—

Cory awoke to the sounds of snarling. His eyes snapped open and he grabbed his spear defensively, looking for the source of the sound.

Part of him had expected it to be dark, but he quickly remembered where he was. The fire was reduced to smoldering embers. On the other side, Rail was the one making the strange sounds.

He convulsed on the ground, arching his back then curling back into the fetal position while growling and whining.

“Rail? Are you okay?”

Rail didn't seem to hear him. Cory went over and shook his shoulder to wake him. “Rail! Wake up!”

Cory barely drew his hand back in time as Rail snapped at him with his teeth. Cory's eyes widened. Rail's dark hair seemed to have spread over his shoulders and his teeth had morphed into sharp canines.

Was he transforming? With all that had happened, Cory had nearly forgotten the full moon had been coming up the next day. But... There was no visible moon here. Maybe that's why he wasn't fully transformed.

Rail continued to bare his teeth and stare Cory down like he was a dangerous piece of

meat.

Cory put his hands out in front of him and backed up slowly. "Rail, it's me, Cory. I'm a friend."

Rail crawled forward. His hand stuck directly into the smoldering coals of the fire. Rail yelped in pain and sat back on his haunches, licking his palm. Cory started forward to try and help, but Rail snarled again, and fled from the cave, still crawling on all fours, but favoring his burned hand.

"Rail, stop!" Cory yelled and ran after him. Rail scrambled over the rocks, still on all fours. He seemed to be transforming even more into a black-furred wolf, but it wasn't long before Cory lost him among the trees at the base of the mountain.

He started looking for footprints. Maybe he could track Rail, calm him down. But after a few moments of frantic searching, he stopped. Who was he kidding? He knew nothing about tracking, and wolf-Rail could move much faster than Cory could.

Cory kicked a rock, bruising his foot. He cursed and sat down hard, burying his face in his arms. What was he doing? His friends were both gone now, and he was alone. His stomach rumbled.

Now wasn't the time to think about that. He tried to focus on what he could do, and that included feeding himself. He started to gather a few small red berries, trying to fill his pockets without squishing them. There were also some low-hanging fruits that looked like pears. Some of the branches even dipped lower so he could get at them more easily. He thanked the tree for each fruit he picked. It felt a little silly, but it seemed they could understand him.

He went back to the cave and snacked on the fruit. He sat there for several hours, leaving to gather more wood and to drink from the nearby stream. If Rail came to his senses, he might be able to find his way back.

Was this his life now? Cory would live here in the woods for years to come, sleeping in caves and eating nothing but fruit and nuts, maybe some leaves if he had to. Rail would become

a half-crazed wolfman like the one that had bitten him. Eventually the Veiled would catch them and kill them, or throw them out. They'd probably kill Rail.

Annie would be forgiven of course, and become a faithful assassin again. When Cory and Rail got caught, she would make some plan to get them away safely and disgrace herself again, probably getting kicked out of the Veiled. Then maybe Cory would go get a job, probably move in with his parents.

He shook his head. There was no way he could go back to his normal life again, not knowing that places like this exist. Living in the woods forever sounded preferable to that. But... maybe there were other places he could go. Annie and some others had mentioned another magikal army. The Shadowcasters, or something like that. Maybe he could join them. Though he knew nothing about them, let alone where to find them.

Something scraped the rock outside. Cory hurriedly grabbed his makeshift spear and tried to stay silent. He probably should have doused the fire, but there wasn't enough dirt to cover it quickly.

"Hail the cave!" a voice shouted from outside. It sounded friendly, with a slight accent that Cory couldn't place. If they were Veiled, Cory could be in trouble. Unless they didn't recognize him.

The creature that dropped in front of the cave entrance was definitely not a Veiled.

It was a monkey. It stood about the height of Cory's knees, and had thick white fur and a red face. Cory recognized it right away as a Japanese Macaque. Was it intelligent? It had to be the one that had spoken earlier.

Cory backed away, spear held threateningly out, but the cave was only ten feet deep.

Seeing Cory's apprehension, the monkey held out a hand in a non-threatening way. "Calm, friend. You are Veiled are you not?"

It spoke in perfect English, but the accent was strange. Like they weren't accustomed to speaking it. Cory lowered his makeshift spear.

“Yes, I am.” He wouldn’t make the same mistake Rail had by telling them he was an outcast.

The monkey placed one arm across its chest, supporting itself with the other. “You need not be afraid. My name is Conja.”

Cory was still hesitant to trust the creature, who he now thought was female. “Are... you a friend to the Veiled?”

Conja smiled, showing large canine teeth. “You are the defenders and protectors of our Forest. All creatures here are friends of the Veiled.”

That made sense. Cory leaned the spear against the wall and sat hesitantly on the ground by his fire, which was now reduced to embers.

Conja followed suit. Fortunately he had gotten rid of the remains of the raccoon from earlier. He doubted this creature would take kindly to seeing its remains.

Conja spoke first. Which was good, because Cory had no idea what to say. “So. What brings you to our mountain, noble warrior?”

“I...” Well, he couldn’t tell the truth. That would reveal right away that he was no friend to the Veiled. Not now. So he decided to go with what he knew and hope she didn’t ask too many detailed questions.

“The Veiled are under attack. A friend of mine and I chased here while we fled for our lives.”

Conja furrowed her already wrinkled brow. “That is troubling. These enemies have followed you here?”

“Into the Forest of Wisdom yes, but we lost them down in the swamp.”

“Who are these enemies that can send the mighty Veiled running?”

Cory shrugged. “I don’t know why they’re attacking, but the ones I’ve seen are cave demons, if you know what those are.”

The monkey nodded. “This is indeed worrisome. Do you know how many of these enemy

cave demons there are?”

Cory shook his head.

“And what of your weapons, and cloak? You do not look dressed for a fight.”

This Cory could be relatively honest about. “When... they attacked I was at a party. I wasn’t equipped for a fight.”

Conja nodded and rose to her four feet. “And what of your friend?”

“I think he’s still alive, but we were separated.”

She gestured for him to follow her and started to exit the cave. “Come. I will take you to my tribe where you can rest. We can provide you with proper shelter and...” She glanced back and smiled at him, as if there were something funny. “And something to keep you warm.”

Should he go with her? It had to be a better situation than he was in now. Plus, she was right. He was cold and needed weapons. He would have a better chance of finding Rail with their help. He grabbed his spear and followed.

As they emerged from the cave, Cory saw Conja’s companion. A furry, white mountain goat stood just outside, snacking on freshly dropped needles from the tree that had assisted Cory earlier. The goat noticed them, and bowed to the tree, making an odd noise, as if thanking it.

Cory didn’t know why that still surprised him. Every creature he’d seen so far had been more intelligent than normal.

The goat made a braying sound at Conja, who responded in English. “We should speak in a language our friend will understand. He is a Veiled warrior.”

The goat turned toward him and spoke, also in a very accented, deep voice. “It is an honor to meet you, noble warrior. Where are we going, friend?”

“We’re taking him back to the springs. He needs rest, warmth, and supplies.” Conja climbed up onto the goat’s back using a rope that hung from its bridle, then turned to look back at Cory. “I will assist in any way I can, but you are much too large for Bryllig to carry. Are you

strong enough to climb the mountain?”

Cory gripped his makeshift spear like a walking stick and nodded. In truth he was sore all over from sleeping on the ground, but he didn't see what choice he had. One arduous climb, then actual rest.

The goat wore no saddle, just a thick leather collar with handholds and several straps for supplies. Cory smiled at the odd sight of a macaque sitting atop a mountain goat.

The goat shook its furry head and sprang up a nearby boulder with ease.

Cory tried to follow, jumping from boulder to boulder. But the goat was much more dextrous and sure-footed than he was. Conja and Bryllig ended up waiting for Cory to catch up many times.

As they ascended, the temperature decreased and snow began to fall lightly, the clouds obscuring their view of the forest below. Cory shivered. His fingers became stiff from the cold, making it difficult to hold onto his spear.

He breathed a sigh of relief when they finally reached the mouth of a large cave several hours later and Conja dismounted.

The three of them entered the cave where clusters of monkeys and goats huddled in groups. Cory rubbed his arms, grateful to be sheltered from the wind. Gradually as they all noticed Cory they turned to stare. Apparently it was not common for them to see humans.

Conja gestured toward Cory with one hand. “Hello family. I have found a Veiled warrior, in need of our assistance.”

The entire crowd rose at once and walked over. Cory stood awkwardly, but honored, as each one bowed and thanked him in turn for protecting their home and way of life. The goats barely stood above his waist, and the macaques didn't even reach his knees, walking on all fours as they were. One macaque with a particularly wrinkled face patted his hand as he passed.

“He looks like a strong one!”

When the goats bowed, they turned their heads sideways onto the ground. It looked

odd, but it made it so their horns didn't point directly up at him.

Cory was astounded at the profound gratitude they each showed. He felt awkward accepting their praise since he was actually on the run from the warriors they thought he represented. But he felt a new appreciation for what the Veiled was doing. Entire cultures that, as far as he knew, existed nowhere else in the world continued because the Veiled protected them and the secret of their existence.

He had been impressed by the beauty of the Forest of Life before; they saw that frequently on their morning runs. But hearing it from these creatures made it somehow even more noble. It wasn't just a nature preserve, it was an entire world reserved for the continuation of unique cultures and races.

As the last of the creatures said their piece, Conja noticed that Cory still had his arms folded to keep in the warmth.

"Come," she said. "We have a place to warm you."

Cory followed her toward the back of the cave where it diverged into two passages that proceeded deeper into the mountain. Bryllig didn't follow, but joined some of the others in the first room of the cavern. They took the passage on the right, which soon led to another opening. Cory was confused. How could the outside be warmer than inside the cave?

He saw steam before anything else. Snow continued to fall lightly around him. They exited out into a narrow space between steep cliffs, almost like a tiny crater in a volcano. The volcano idea was reinforced because the entire place was filled with thick steam, like a sauna. They descended a short incline to the bottom of the crater which was filled with water.

Half a dozen macaques lounged in the steaming water, heads back and eyes closed. They looked up as they heard Cory and Conja approaching.

They spoke to Conja in their strange language Cory didn't understand, but she responded in English. "This is a Veiled soldier. He needs to warm himself if we may join you."

Conja lowered herself slowly into the pool and slid over, making room for Cory. Even the

steam coming from the pool felt amazing. Cory was anxious to get in. He removed his shoes and was about to climb in when one of the other macaques spoke up. Its voice was lower and gruff, Cory assumed it to be a male.

“You will want to remove your clothing, soldier. It will feel much better if you can put on something dry afterwards.”

Cory hesitated, looking over at Conja. “But...” he was going to object, not wanting to undress in front of a... woman? What did you call them when it’s a monkey?

Several of the monkeys laughed out loud. “You are worried about exposing your pale hide?”

Conja shrugged, “I have been unclothed this whole time, you were not embarrassed for me.”

They continued to laugh as Cory sheepishly undressed and started to lower himself into the water.

“If I had a bare pink behind such as you I would cover up as well!”

Conja splashed water at them. “Show respect for your defender!”

They immediately apologized, looking sheepish.

They fell silent, and Cory could start to enjoy the warmth of the natural hot spring. It felt amazing. He hadn’t realized quite how filthy and tired he felt until the hot water soothed his joints, aching from two nights of sleeping on the ground.

Cory could have stayed there for hours. He even dozed off for a few minutes, despite the hard rock underneath him. Some of the macaques asked him questions about being a Veiled, and what brought him here. He tried to be as truthful as possible without mentioning that he was a fugitive.

After a time, Conja climbed out of the pool and shook the water off her fur. She spoke to Cory before walking back into the cave, “Rest as you need, warrior. But be warned that spending too much time in the hot spring is not healthy.”

“Where are you going?” Cory asked. Besides Bryllig the goat, she was the only one Cory knew the name of.

“I am going to go talk to the chief. If the Forest is under attack, I believe we should take action. The others can direct you as needed.”

A few minutes later, Cory decided to get out. His fingers were starting to prune. The snow had stopped, but the air was frigid. He shivered horribly as he pulled his clothes back on to his damp body. As he finished dressing, another smaller macaque approached him carrying what looked like a fur coat in one arm.

He took it gratefully and threw it around his shoulders. It was roughly made, more just a fur blanket than a coat. Then he noticed what kind of fur it was.

“Is this made from your own fur?”

The macaque nodded. “Goat fur as well. We shed it each summer, and make clothing from it. We usually do not need it, but on a cold night...”

“Thank you, this feels much better.”

The macaque bowed his head, then waved to him. “Come. We have made a fire, and would hear you.”

Cory furrowed his brow. “You would hear me?”

The monkey just waved to him again and kept walking into the cave. “Come!”

Cory followed, pulling the fur blanket close around his shoulders. It was amazingly warm. Not as good as the hot water of course, but it was also dry.

As he followed, he realized he hadn’t asked the macaque’s name, so he did.

The macaque looked behind and smiled. “Tarkon is my name”.

Cory nodded. “That’s a cool name.”

“It was my great-grandfather’s name before me.”

Cory raised an eyebrow. “How long have your people been here?”

“Here in the mountain caves? Since we first bonded together as a tribe.”

“And when was that?”

Tarkon shrugged. “Centuries ago. Soon after the founding.”

Cory stepped around a few stalagmites. A ping of water fell on his ear. They took the fork he had seen earlier, which led deeper into the mountain. It would have been pitch dark, but glowing stones had been placed by the walls every thirty feet or so. They weren't bright, but there was enough light to see by.

“The founding of what?”

Tarkon stopped and looked back at him. “You are a protector of the Forest and you do not know its history?”

Cory shrugged. Why hadn't they taught him any of the history of the Veiled? “I'm kind of new, I guess they haven't gotten around to it yet.”

“I would think those that are new would be the first to learn...” he shook himself. “It is not my place to question your methods. But if you desire, I can tell you a short history of the Forests.”

Cory nodded, “Yes please.”

Tarkon nodded, then continued walking as he began. “In the beginning, the Dragon and the Unicorn saw that many species of animals, both magikal and mundane, had begun to die and go extinct from planet earth.”

“Wait,” Cory said. “In the beginning? What does that mean? And when you say the Dragon and the Unicorn, do you mean those creatures exactly?”

Tarkon shrugged. “I give you the information as I received it. The beginning was some time long ago, perhaps many milenia. The Dragon and the Unicorn appear to be titles, so I personally do not think they refer specifically to a dragon and a unicorn, but to some powerfully magikal beings. Though some do think the story refers to a real dragon and a unicorn who were forbidden lovers.”

Cory nodded, though it was very strange to think of a dragon and a unicorn as lovers.

“Okay. Continue, please.”

“Thank you. So, the Dragon and the Unicorn formed a space outside of the constraints of planet earth to safely house species that are in danger. This became the Forest of Life, in which the Veiled reside. The Dragon and the Unicorn thought they had devised a clever solution, and that all was well. They congratulated each other and left for a long while. By the time they returned, the Forest was overcrowded, and creatures fought for space and resources.

“They then created the Forest of Wisdom within the Forest of Life, to house those that would not fit. But, such powerful magik has powerful side effects. Creatures that live within the Forest of Wisdom gain superior intelligence, akin to that of the humanoid races. This is how my race came to be, as well as the other beastfolk: minotaurs, alcetaurs, bugbears, and such.”

Cory interrupted, “But I saw minotaurs and alcetaurs that are members of the Veiled, that aren’t in the Forest of Wisdom.”

Tarkon nodded. “We are free to come and go as we please, as denizens of the Forest. Most however, choose to remain within the safety and familiarity of their ancestral home.”

As they proceeded down the tunnel, Cory started to wonder how deep they were going. They must have been walking for nearly half an hour. But he did see other macaques and some goats that passed them, so he wasn’t too worried. He had no reason thus far to mistrust these creatures, and even if he did, what would he do? Run back into the cold of the mountain?

Cory thought the monkey had finished his story, but Tarkon continued to speak. “Seeing the changes wrought on the creatures in the Forest of Wisdom, the Dragon and the Unicorn sought to create yet another Forest, within the Forest of Wisdom. I have never seen evidence of such a forest, but the legends call it the Forest of Ages.”

Cory remembered Jazan had mentioned a third forest. “Do the stories say anything about what it’s like?”

“They say the magik there runs so deep it shapes the very fabric of the land and air. Creatures there can grow to enormous sizes, or even fly. But this is only hearsay. I do not know

if such a place exists, but I would greatly like to see it if it does.”

Cory tried to imagine what such a place would be like, but there just wasn't enough information. How old was it? Were there mammoths and dinosaurs there? He imagined a T-rex flying with tiny wings instead of arms and chuckled to himself. Another question occurred to him.

“What about the Veiled? How did they come here?”

“The Dragon and the Unicorn sought out creatures who they thought could protect their secret and preserve these spaces of refuge. They ended up asking the elves, who are denizens and protectors of the forests. These elves formed the organization known as the Veiled, who carry on the mission given to them by the Dragon and the Unicorn.”

Cory nodded. That made sense. He had noticed there were more elves among the Veiled than of most other races.

Cory saw a light ahead, and the tunnel started to brighten. Tarkon turned his head again to look at Cory. “We are arriving at the council room. We have gathered to hear and evaluate information you have presented. All here respect your position and desire to hear you, but please respect our elders and our ways. Do not speak unless spoken to, and respect our decisions.”

Cory nodded nervously. They emerged into a large, dimly lit cavern. Cory couldn't see most of the edges of the room. He missed his nightvision. Macaques and goats stood in a tightly packed circle around the light from a crackling bonfire in the center. As Tarkon and Cory approached, the circle split as the creatures made way for Cory and Tarkon to go to the middle.

Cory could feel the eyes of more than a hundred creatures watching him. Their worshipful attitude still made him uncomfortable. He awkwardly continued to follow Tarkon to sit near the fire in the middle of the gathering. Cory could see across the flames where a small group of macaques and one goat that looked older than most of the rest were gathered. Their faces were even more wrinkled, and most had some kind of pillow or small seat to sit on. One

macaque had their eyes squinted shut, as if they were blind. These must be the elders of the colony.

Cory saw Conja rise onto three feet, a staff held in one hand. She walked closer to the fire, into the center of the circle, to one side of the group of elders. She pounded the staff on the stone floor, causing a sharp echo to break through the muffled noises of the crowd.

“Denizens of our mountain colony! I am Conja, and I have been appointed to conduct this meeting, at the request of our elders.”

She gestured to the side toward the old monkeys. “We will conduct this meeting in English for the benefit of our honored guest, a member of the Veiled, known as Cory.”

She then gestured towards Cory, who shuffled and smiled as murmurs sounded all around him.

“We gather together in regards to an urgent circumstance, brought to our attention by Cory. It seems that a group of enemies has invaded the Forest of Wisdom, and is trying to take over, ousting our protectors, the Veiled.”

At that, many voices expressed their shock. Conja had to bang her staff again to regain their attention.

“It is thus my proposal that we take up arms in defense of the homeland. The Veiled have protected us for many years, and they now need our assistance to regain control. It would be ungrateful of us to sit back and hope that they are able to solve our problems. We must take action against these enemies.”

Conja placed the staff she was holding at the feet of the elders and sat back down in the circle. The other monkeys looked to the sides at one another, wondering who would speak first.

One macaque scurried forward and grabbed the staff, then placed it in the hands of an elder with a sagging face. They spoke in a voice that sounded male. Apparently he didn't speak English though, because he spoke in a grunting language, and the attendant to their side translated.

“We would honor the opportunity to help our human defenders. But we are not warriors. We have no weapons. How could we help in this fight?”

The staff was again placed on the ground and an uncomfortable silence fell again. Conja looked like she was itching to get up again, but for some reason she didn't.

Cory leaned over to Tarkon and whispered, “Would I be permitted to speak?”

Tarkon looked at him. “Yes, as a member of the circle you are permitted to express your thoughts as well.”

“Are there any rules I should know about?”

Tarkon nodded with a slight smile. “You are wise to ask. You must be holding the staff to speak to the group. Once you are finished, place the staff on the ground once again. But be sure to say all you desire before releasing the staff, for once you have expressed your position you may not speak again until a decision is reached.”

Cory nodded and turned his attention back to the proceedings. A goat had emerged from the crowd and was speaking, one hoof placed on the staff. The goat claimed that many may die if they entered a fight with real warriors involved, and that they were against getting involved directly.

As soon as the goat was done speaking, Cory stood. All eyes turned to him, and the goat backed away. Cory awkwardly walked over and picked up the staff. It was oddly short in his hands, more the size of a cane than a full staff.

He looked around at the strange audience around him. He still wasn't sure if he wanted them to get involved or not. Many could die, as they said, and of course he didn't want that. But, exiled or not, he was still a Veiled and he wanted this place protected. A small piece of him hoped that maybe if he helped, he could plead for Rail's life and freedom, and his own, from more of a position of power.

“Thank you for permitting me to speak, and for taking me in. I am greatly in your debt.” Many macaques graciously nodded their heads at that. “As a Veiled warrior, it is my solemn duty

to protect these woods, and your home. In all my time as a part of the Veiled, I have never known more than a handful of hostiles to get inside of the borders of the Forest, let alone an entire invading force all the way to the Forest of Wisdom. This is a great threat, perhaps greater than the Veiled have faced in a long time. If they should fail, what becomes of your home? As I see it, you can face death defending your home, or you can watch it fall into enemy hands and lose it anyway. Since you are not warriors, it would be unfair for me to ask you to fight. Many would die, and it would do little but distract the enemy.”

They seemed to take it well. He saw some heads nodding solemnly. But he wanted to make sure that he said all he meant to before sitting down. “But remember also that you are not alone in this fight. Besides the Veiled, there are many residents of the Forest of Wisdom who would be willing to fight alongside us. I propose that you send out riders to warn all in the Forest of this threat. They all could help root out this evil if they know of the threat that we are faced with. The best riders should ride out to spread the word to all they find, and anyone who is willing to fight.”

Cory hoped he had said enough as he set down the staff and sat back down next to Tarkon. Tarkon leaned over to him, “You are a gifted orator. I think you made a good impression.”

Cory smiled and thanked him, then noticed a slight smile on Tarkon’s face. “What’s funny?” he asked.

Tarkon cleared his throat softly. “You speak a lot, and with much flower.”

Cory frowned. He speaks with flower? What did that mean? Then he realized Tarkon meant he spoke in a way that was flowery. He leaned over again. “Is that bad?”

Tarkon shook his head emphatically. “Not bad. Only different. I have been accused of similar things.”

Several others addressed the group, expressing their opinions and thoughts. But most seemed to have made up their mind from Cory’s speech.

After a few moments of silence, one of the elders spoke up again, this time without a translator. "All want to help Veiled?"

They raised their hand, and nearly the whole crowd did as well. Cory noticed Tarkon and Conja had their hands raised. The goats didn't have hands to raise, so they lifted and turned their heads sideways.

"Any no?"

Cory turned his head to look. He saw one or two hands. One of the elders solemnly raised their hand, but they seemed more confused than opposed. The crowd burst into conversation. Cory caught Conja grinning satisfactorily.

"Majority rules I guess?" Cory asked Tarkon.

The macaque nodded. "This decision does not require a unanimous vote, since those who do not want to participate may simply remain here, protected."

Per request, Cory took a moment to describe what the invaders looked like, so they could accurately tell others who the enemy was, and the crowd dispersed.

An hour or so later, monkeys riding goats galloped off in different directions. Cory was back by the entrance, getting ready to leave, his makeshift spear held in his hand. He saw Conja and Tarkon both riding their own goats trotting toward him down the tunnel. He smiled as they stopped next to him, expecting a goodbye.

"We will go with you," said Conja.

Cory was confused. He shook his head. "I don't even know where I'm going. I'm going to try and find my friend."

"Then we will help you locate him," said Tarkon. "Five pairs of eyes look better than one."

Cory bit his lip. He really didn't want them to come. First of all he didn't want them to know that he was a fraud. They thought he was a hero. But he also didn't want them to get hurt, either by the invading demons, or by Rail. But it would be nice to have company.

"Why are you helping me?" Cory asked. "You really don't need to."

Tarkon smiled and was about to speak up when Bryllig, Conja's mount, spoke up. "It's our pleasure, now let's go."

Cory sighed, rolled his eyes and exited the cave.

"Where to, friend?" Tarkon asked.

Cory hesitated. He'd really much rather do this on his own, but what could he do? "Last I saw him was near my campsite, where Conja found me."

Conja nodded. "Then Bryllig and I will lead the way."

They trotted out the cave entrance and into the cold open air. It had stopped snowing, though a frigid breeze cut straight through Cory's clothing. He started jogging down the mountain, the goats trotting to keep up.

Fortunately it warmed quickly as they descended the mountain. Cory breathed hard, his legs sore. The morning runs had done their job though, and he was able to keep up a swift pace nearly the whole way down the mountain when Conja declared they had reached their destination.

"Which way did your friend go, do you remember?" Conja asked, looking around.

Cory pointed off around the side of the mountain. "He ran off that way."

Conja began studying the ground in that direction. "When you say he ran off, what do you mean? Why did he leave you?"

Cory shifted uncomfortably. He definitely couldn't tell them that Rail was a werewolf, but he couldn't come up with a good lie on the spot. "That's... private."

Conja looked back up at him. "If you're not going to tell us, how can we-?" She cut off and shook her head. "I apologize Cory, but I see no human footprints. Or any footprints, this area is far too rocky."

Cory's shoulders slumped. She should have been looking for wolf prints to find Rail, but it didn't matter. There were no prints to follow.

"I am sorry," she said. "I can tell this friend means a great deal to you."

Cory nodded. "He's been my... best friend for years."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then Tarkon spoke up. "Your friend, he is a Veiled warrior is he not?"

Cory nodded.

Tarkon shrugged. "Then he should be able to fend for himself without you, should he not? Perhaps the best course of action would be to go where he might meet up with you again. Perhaps the entrance to the Forest of Wisdom that you came in through."

Cory had to acknowledge that it was a good idea. Rail might try to make his way back through the Veiled forest and escape, or wait by the entrance. There would probably be other Veiled around there, but Rail was pretty good at staying hidden.

Cory nodded again. "That sounds good, let's do that."

"Which entrance did you come in from?" Conja asked.

Cory raised his eyebrows. "There's more than one?"

Tarkon nodded. "There's one in nearly every region of the Forest. The Veiled really should do a better job of educating their soldiers."

Conja shot him a glare.

"We came in through a tree in the swamp, a mangrove I think." Cory said.

"Ah," said Tarkon, pointing. "Then we should proceed this way."

The goats turned in the direction of the swamp, and Cory followed at a brisk pace.

As they left the rocky slopes of the mountain and entered tree cover again, Cory felt more energized. He wasn't normally one to pray, But he was worried and uncertain about Rail, and about his own decisions. He sent some silent thoughts to whoever might be listening, asking for Rail to be protected, wherever he was.

To his shock he felt some murmured replies of acknowledgement. He realized that he had been broadcasting his thoughts telepathically, and some of the trees had heard him. Tarkon turned his head to look at Cory.

“Was that you?”

Cory shrugged. “Sorry, that was meant to be private.”

“How did you do that?”

Conja scoffed at him. “He is shaga of course. He has special abilities, otherwise he would not be a Veiled warrior.”

Tarkon nodded and faced front again.

Cory smiled. It felt good to think that the forest might now be protecting Rail. Cory continued to broadcast his thoughts outward, trying to avoid Tarkon, Conja, and the goats, Bryllig and Akinah. This time he told them to watch for the cave demons, that they were enemies, and that the Veiled warriors needed help to defeat them. He figured that should also cover protecting Rail, but he added that Rail needed help as well, thinking about an image of his friend. He thought about Annie as well, even though it was painful. He still wanted her to be protected.

A few minutes later, it seemed the whole forest was stirring in response to his call.

## Chapter 17

### Demons

Rail saw blood. His vision blurred in a mess of red. He wasn't quite sure if there was real blood on his hands, or if his mind was just playing tricks on him. He could taste fresh blood on his tongue. Ooh it was so tasty. The warm liquid rushing down his throat as his teeth crunched on struggling flesh.

He put his hands on his temples. What was he doing? That's disgusting! He could get diseases from eating things raw like that. He stumbled over to a stream and tried to wash his hands and rinse out his mouth. A few small birds landed on the other side of the stream to wash and drink. Rail growled at them. They fluttered away.

He saw his reflection in the stream, wavering as it flowed past. His eyes were dark and hungry. His teeth had elongated into sharp canines. His dark hair spread down the back of his neck and onto his shoulders and arms. His clothing was ripped and tattered. As the water shifted in the light his appearance shifted. He was no longer angry and hungry, but terrified. Not of someone else, but of himself.

He was a monster.

He'd felt like a monster, an outcast, and a worthless scrap of dung before. But now it was real.

Ooh but it felt so good. When he embraced the wolf he felt like he could run for days, he could tear the tendons and snap the neck of a creature five times his size with his bare teeth. He had never felt so powerful, so strong, yet so out of control.

If this is how they saw him, why not feel it? Why not embrace that power? Instead of looking at him with scorn and hatred they would quiver in fear as he tore the expression from their faces.

He had already killed a man. It had been so easy. A single moment of anger and his heart

stopped beating, his lungs emptied.

Which is terrible! Rail growled again at his own reflection and crawled off at a run.

How could he consider staying like this? He wasn't a murderer! He was... what was he?

What was I?

*What do you want to be?*

A voice in Rail's head seemed to speak to him. It was a strong, low voice, like a deep-throated growl. It seemed almost to be his own thoughts but he sensed it as if it were coming from something else.

*You have a choice here. You have been given the chance to be the man, or the wolf. Or perhaps something in-between. The brilliance of a man, and the ferocity of the wolf.*

Rail shook his head, a hand to his forehead, "I don't want to be ferocious."

*You don't know what you want!*

The voice was suddenly angry and forceful.

*They rejected you. You don't belong with Annie and Cory. They fit here with their precious magik. But you, when magik was given to you, they pushed you further away. They pretend to still accept and protect you, but they are scared. As they should be.*

Rail paused and looked at his claws as they scraped the bark of a tree. He was powerful. If they wanted him to be a monster, why shouldn't he be? Sometimes.

*Yes. I will serve your needs. I will kill and destroy when you give yourself to me, on your command. But you must decide what you want, so you can point me in the right direction.*

Suddenly Rail heard screams and shouting. The beast inside rose in excitement and rushed toward the sounds. Perhaps there was fresh meat he could steal!

As he rounded a patch of dense trees, he caught sight of the battle. A squadron of more than a dozen Veiled were being attacked by the same ones that had attacked before. The big demons with horns.

Time seemed to slow. A Veiled soldier's throat was sliced open by a sword. Part of Rail

yearned to taste the blood that sprayed hot across the leaves. But what did he want? He wanted to leave the Veiled. That was his immediate desire. But he had killed one of them, so they would never let him leave without harsh punishment, perhaps even execution. If he could somehow earn forgiveness, maybe they would consider the debt repaid and let him go.

The moment ended, Rail made his decision and the wolf laughed in a gleeful growl.

Claws out and teeth bared, Rail leapt, tearing into a demon's calf muscles as they tried to run. A demon held a halberd over a Veiled that had been knocked to the ground, preparing to finish them off with a stab. Rail's teeth tore out the offender's hamstring and a gut stab from the Veiled's bow finished the creature off. A third demon went to the ground with bloody claw marks across its char-black face.

Rail moved through the battlefield, tearing apart the enemy demons, constantly shifting between man and wolf, and some kind of hybrid to gain the advantage and dodge counterstrikes. He couldn't save them all, but that wasn't the plan. The plan was to kill the enemy.

A single demon managed to sneak up behind Rail and tried to end his rampage with an ax blow. The creature tripped over a tree root and fell to its hands and knees. It went stiff a moment later as Rail's jaws clamped around his neck.

Rail returned to full human form and stood triumphant over the mass of corpses on the ground. The surviving Veiled watched him apprehensively, hands tight on their bows. Some showed looks of fear, others revulsion, and others hatred. Two of them strung arrows and pointed them at him threateningly. Rail wiped the blood from his mouth with his sleeve, then turned full wolf and fled back into the trees.

—

Bryllig and Alkinah trudged through the swampy water with obvious dislike. They were

mountain goats, made for cliff faces and rock, not mud. Fortunately they were able to avoid much of it by sticking to the land. They hadn't come across any other humanoids, enemy or Veiled, for which Cory was very grateful.

Tarkon and Conja had insisted on getting some sharpened sticks, in case they needed to defend themselves. Cory still only had his makeshift spear.

"How close are we getting?" Cory asked.

Conja opened her mouth to speak, but Tarkon turned and spoke first, "I believe we should arrive within the next hour."

"We should probably approach more quietly," Cory suggested. "Just in case anyone else is there, we don't want them to know we're coming."

Bryllig looked at Alkinah and they nodded to each other. The two goats began expertly stepping only in mossy areas, carefully jumping over puddles. Cory tried to follow suit. He wasn't good at it, but he at least knew how to walk quietly.

As they got closer, Conja raised a fist, indicating they should stop. She put a finger to her lips and pointed through the trees.

Cory crept up behind the goats, trying to see what she was pointing at. It didn't take long before he noticed three demon soldiers standing guard around a mangrove tree with roots that spiraled. Cory jerked his head back away from the threat, and the group retreated.

Once they had gotten a safe distance away, the three animals looked at Cory. It suddenly struck him what a strange situation this was.

He took a deep breath. "Alright, I saw three enemy soldiers, is that right?"

They nodded.

"K. So here's the plan. We'll try and get as close as possible to them before we attack. Tarkon and Conja, you're good at climbing right? Do you think you can get into the branches above their heads?"

They nodded and Tarkon spoke up, "I'm not sure I can do so without them noticing."

Cory nodded. "That's okay, I'm hoping they will look up at you, so then I can attack. I'll take the one in the middle, then as soon as I strike, Bryllig and Alkinah, you charge in with your horns. Don't get too close though, you're more of a distraction so that Conja and Tarkon can drop on them from above. Be sure to try and stab them right in the neck to take them out as fast as possible.

Conja nodded confidently. Tarkon looked a little nervous. "I am concerned about what happens after that. Especially if I miss."

"Well, hopefully I'll be able to take out my target quickly enough that I can help you out. The goats will be there too."

Five minutes later, Cory was crouched behind a tree about fifteen feet from the strange warriors. Bryllig and Alkinah were on either side of him about twenty feet away. He looked up and saw Tarkon and Conja swinging from branch to branch.

Cory's heart pounded harder in his chest. He wasn't sure if he could pull this off, let alone keep the others alive. He had only really been in one fight before, and that hadn't gone well at all.

The enemies glanced up at the two monkeys. Cory sprang to his feet and rushed the middle soldier. He saw the two goats splashing forward at the same time out of the corners of his eyes, but tried to keep his eyes on his target.

The enemy soldier held out a large sword protectively, but Cory's spear was longer. He thrust it past the creature's outstretched blade. They managed to deflect the tip, but it still caught on their exposed arm. It was a shallow wound, but it was enough that the gnarl poison could take effect. They tried to take a swing but swayed on their feet. Cory struck his sword hand with the shaft of his spear, making him drop the sword.

His enemy mostly incapacitated, he looked to see how the others were doing. He saw Tarkon standing triumphantly over the corpse of an enemy soldier, his sharpened stick still protruding from the side of their neck.

Both he, Bryllig, and Cory looked over to where Conja should have been. Alkinah stood over the body of the enemy soldier with head down and shoulders slumped, blood dripping from her black horns.

Cory shook his head. As he rushed over, Conja was nowhere to be found. Tarkon was also by his side. "Where is Conja?" he asked.

"She fell into the water," Alkinah said.

Cory immediately began feeling around under the water. He quickly located a furry leg, halfway under the roots of the tree. He pulled Conja's small body out of the water and picked her up. A bloody gash split her torso nearly in half.

Tears and anger began to well up in Cory's eyes, and Tarkon's hand covered his face as he started to sob.

"She was stabbed," Alkinah explained. "I was able to finish them off but..."

Cory remained kneeling in the muddy water and Bryllig laid on the ground beside him.

"I'm sorry," Cory said.

Tarkon sat down, the water up to his chest. "It is not your fault. We chose to come with you."

"I shouldn't have let you. You don't know how dangerous this kind of thing can be. I was almost killed on the last mission I went on. I had no right to take you into such a dangerous situation."

Tarkon climbed up on top of Bryllig and put a hand on Cory's shoulder. "You had no right to forbid us either. We make our own decisions, and we chose to defend our home beside you. Conja knew what she was getting into and accepted the risks. She has the heart of a warrior."

Cory looked up. Only then did he notice that the bodies of several other Veiled had been piled between some of the trees. Cory grit his teeth. Part of him was disgusted by the blood and death, but a stronger part was angry. These horned demons thought they could walk into one of the most beautiful places on earth and kill those defending it?

In the back of his mind he wondered why? Were they Outcasters? But now was not the time for answers. The demons had to be stopped before they caused any more death.

Cory rose to his feet, muddy water dripping from his pants. He realized he was still holding Conja's body. He looked over to Tarkon. "Do you bury your dead?"

Tarkon shook his head. "No. We have a ceremony of death that we rehearse. I will do it."

Cory glanced back over to the bodies of the other Veiled soldiers, but looked away hurriedly. "I am going to the other side of the gateway, tree... thing. I will stop any enemy soldiers who try to get through to your home."

Tarkon nodded. "May the Dragon and the Unicorn grant you strength and long life." He looked towards Bryllig and Alkinah. "It appears that there are enemies on both sides of the gateway. I will remain here, and will warn you if others are approaching. I will also take care of the dead." His voice broke slightly at the end, as he looked towards the Veiled soldiers, then back to Conja in Cory's arms.

Cory walked over and set the small macaque's body near the pile of other dead, then washed the blood from his hands. He went to retrieve his makeshift spear. The knife he had tied to the tip was loose, so he pulled it off and sheathed it. He then retrieved the sword from the enemy demon he had killed from where it had fallen, sticking point-down in the mud. He gave the sword a few experimental swings. He'd only practiced with swords a few times, since most of the Veiled thought that if you couldn't get your target with a bow or a knife, you'd already screwed up.

The sword was long, heavy enough that he had to use two hands to keep control of it.

As he approached the gateway tree, Bryllig walked up next to him. "I will defend the tree alongside you," the goat said.

Cory nodded, gave him a grim smile, and put a hand on the goat's warm fur as they walked into the mangrove.

As they emerged, Cory was surprised to see that the sun was setting, blood-orange light

piercing between the leafy branches of the trees. Apparently he'd been in the Forest of Wisdom for about two days. No other people were in sight. But it would get dark soon, and Cory wanted to be prepared.

He glanced at Bryllig. "How well can you see in the dark?"

Bryllig looked at him strangely. "I can see well enough. Can you not?"

Cory shook his head. "Not really. Humans aren't that great in the dark. Would it be alright if you gifted me some of your abilities?"

Bryllig tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"It's my ability as a shaga, if a creature or person lets me, I can gain some of their abilities."

Bryllig nodded. "So long as I do not lose these abilities, I give you permission to use them."

Immediately Cory could feel a change within him. First, the light hurt his eyes, until they adjusted again. He also felt increased strength and agility, especially his balance. He tested it out by running up the trunk of a nearby tree. His feet gripped perfectly, propelling him ten feet up the trunk before he landed on his feet, absorbing the impact with a slight bend of the knees. He was ready.

He and Bryllig took up positions on opposite sides of the gateway tree. Cory began scanning the woods for movement. Bryllig munched on some leaves.

## Chapter 18

### Guardians

Annie continued to jog alongside the other Veiled back through the swamp. She was still surrounded on all sides by other Veiled soldiers, but Tahitoa had begrudgingly allowed her hands to remain free, and had given her a bow. He reasoned that she was actually helpful in a fight, and she had not run like Cory and Rail.

Cory and Rail...

She still could not decide if she had done right by them. They clearly felt as though she had betrayed them by spying on them. She hadn't ever really lied though. But who was she kidding? Hiding important facts from someone was pretty much as bad as lying.

The fact remained that she had been reporting on her best friends' abilities for years.

But she was just following orders! Her parents had taught her that a good soldier does not question orders, because that can cause lost battles, and lost lives. Commanders know the big picture, and they need their subordinates to obey quickly. They don't always have time to explain, and they shouldn't have to. Exact, prompt obedience. That's what a good soldier does.

So then why did she run and hide when Rail had killed that man?

She had justified it to Tahitoa, saying that she had orders to keep track of Rail and Cory, so really she was just following orders. But she didn't even believe that herself.

The fact was that she loved them. She loved Cory and Rail more than she cared about being a good soldier. She felt a duty to protect them that went far beyond what she had been taught about a soldier's responsibility. She still felt bad that she had manipulated Rail. She had hoped he would just forget about it. But he hadn't.

Rail cared for her. He felt something for her. At least part of that was Annie's fault. She had hinted that they could possibly be more than just friends. She was such an idiot! She did

love Rail, but there was something unnerving about him. Even more so now, since he was a werewolf.

She didn't want to admit it, but that fact disturbed her much more than she let on. Werewolves were savage creatures, bent on destruction and death, and those that tried to stop destroyed themselves. But she was still so afraid to lose her friends.

They had found her when she felt like a freak. As a kid, people saw her looking at things that weren't there. Sometimes she'd play with matches or candles so she could see how the thermal energy played with the light. Or she'd go off into a corn field to watch the magik bounce between the stalks. Her parents had said that her powers were nothing to be ashamed of, she was special. She was powerful and valuable.

But the other kids couldn't understand.

*Freak!*

*Bethany's seeing ghosts!*

*Will you read my fortune?*

*Psycho!*

Cory and Rail, they had auras. They were magik, just like her. They understood. Or at least they empathized. They didn't think she was a freak. It was childish. But she was so afraid. If she lost them, who could love her? Who could understand her?

She would probably fit in, even without them. As much as she cared about them and wanted to be with them, she knew they wouldn't spend the rest of their lives together.

Jazan was nice to her, Jazan talked to her. There were some others too, but it was more of a soldier's comradery than actual friendship. Annie was darn good with a bow though. The other Veiled soldiers accepted and admired her for that. Fighting the cave demons had been hard, both in the caves, and here in the forest. But she also felt useful. She felt she was making a difference, she was helping to save and protect people. Maybe Rail didn't need her protection anymore. He still had Cory.

They had been friends for so long, it was hard to imagine things without them, scary even. But she couldn't keep them here, not if they didn't want to stay. She'd been putting her own wants ahead of theirs, and she had to admit, she'd been rather selfish.

Neither of them really belonged here. Cory liked to be out in the woods, but he was no assassin. A fighter maybe, but he was too good to kill when it was necessary. He was so good. She loved that about him.

She smiled as she thought about him. He might forgive her, but Rail was stubborn. He held grudges. That was how he protected himself.

He would never be accepted among the Veiled. They claimed he wasn't a shaga, but regular people didn't have magik auras like he did. Annie still didn't know what he was. His aura had changed slightly since getting bitten, but his original negative energy was still there, stronger even than the aura put out by the wolf inside him. Perhaps... he would be better off if he did leave. Cory would probably go with him. She hated the idea of Cory leaving. They were just starting to become something more than friends.

She had to be better now. She had betrayed them before, but now she could do better. They may not forgive her, but their happiness was more important than her comfort. She could let him go. If that's what he needed.

Annie was pulled from her thoughts as Tahitoa put his hand up to stop the march.

They were making their way back to the Veiled headquarters to help retake the bunkers. A messenger had found them, saying the bunkers had been taken by the enemy, and Toros was trying to organize a full assault to take it back. The rest of the battle was chaos.

They had lost many Veiled in the initial assault, which happened the same night as the Olympic celebration. The cave demons had attacked the Veiled guards quickly and quietly, preventing them from sounding the alarm, then attacked those at the celebration, most of whom were unarmed. Most of the Veiled had scattered. Because some had been trying to apprehend Annie, Cory, and Rail, some of the enemy had gone through the gateway to the Forest

of Wisdom. It seemed that news of the gateway had spread quickly among their ranks, and many squads had used it as a refuge.

Annie peeked forward to see what was going on. The shoulders in front of her barred the way, but that wasn't a problem for Annie. Her super vision pierced through the people and the trees. What she saw was the gateway back to the Forest of Life, the same mangrove with spiraled roots that she, Cory, and Rail had come through.

Completely surrounding the gateway a melting pot of creatures and animals milled about hurriedly. She saw an alcetaur, several minotaurs, and some gatataurs, but those were the only humanoid creatures of the group. She saw several crocodiles (or alligators? Who knows?), a few enormous salamanders, a beaver, a gigantic toad, and several other creatures she didn't recognize, including what looked like a giant snail with slimy arm and leg-like appendages.

Tahitoa returned and gestured the rest of the group forward with a confused smile. A dark-skinned male alcetaur greeted them with a bow as they approached.

"Welcome honored Veiled warriors! How can we help you?"

"First," Tahitoa said, "Who are you and why are you all here?"

The alcetaur smiled. "We all heard a distress call from the Forest itself. We have gathered here to protect our home from these trespassers. Most here are untrained, but we are willing, and we are many."

"So why are you gathered here?" Tahitoa repeated.

"We know this to be an entrance to the Forest of Life," said the alcetaur. "Our plan is to eliminate any enemies who try to get through. Others have gathered around each known entrance as well."

Tahitoa nodded, observing the gathered creatures for a moment. "Alright, well. As you were." He gave the alcetaur a small salute and marched right past him, splashing through the shallow water.

Annie was confused. What was Tahitoa doing?

He was almost to the tree when he looked back toward what was left of his squad. He gestured impatiently for them to follow. Annie looked back at the others, her 'handler' was still right behind her. He shrugged, "I guess the plan hasn't changed?"

Annie shrugged back and they trudged through the mud after their commander.

On the other side of the gateway it was nearly dark. Cory stood nearby, as if guarding the gateway tree. Annie was so excited to see him alive and uninjured that she nearly ran over to give him a hug. The cold look he gave her stopped her in her tracks. Right. He was still mad at her for spying on him for years.

Tahitoo lost no time in wasting time and effort. "Seize him!"

Cory rolled his eyes but made no effort to resist as a Veiled soldier grabbed each of his arms and pinned them behind his back.

"Is this really the time, Tahitoo?" Cory asked.

"There is always time to deal with traitors!" Tahitoo yelled.

Annie stepped forward. "Then why did you let me loose?"

"Because you are useful right now. But if you continue to argue with me I may change my mind."

One of the soldiers holding Cory's arms spoke up. "Sir, with all due respect, we can't afford to keep babysitting these two. The rest of the force needs our support now."

Tahitoo's eyes shifted between the others all looking at him. Why did he hate them so much, Annie thought. Toros had disliked Cory because he was a little disrespectful, and he was no good with a bow. That was hardly grounds for treating him the way he did, but that was Annie's understanding. But Tahitoo? They had run from their duty, but was that really worth all the vehemence? Why was he willing to let Annie walk but not Cory?

The big polynesian threw his hands up. "Fine! But I want to talk to the traitor for a moment. Tie his hands."

The two soldiers did as they were asked, binding his wrists with rope. Tahitoo picked up

the sword that Cory had been using and looked at it. "Even using the weapon of the enemy! No respect."

Tahitoa pushed Cory in the back, forcing him to stumble off into the trees. Annie was confused. What were they doing? Fortunately her superpower kept them from getting out of view as they wound between the trees. She stepped forward as they got further away, trying to keep them in view. Her handler objected and followed right behind her.

Tahitoa forced Cory to his knees. What was he doing? Annie saw him raise the sword he still held in his hands to strike Coryther with it.

Annie reacted immediately, drawing an arrow from her bow and bolting forward. There were too many trees in the way!

It would have been too late if Cory hadn't realized what Tahitoa was doing. He threw himself to the ground, barely avoiding the thrust of the sword. But Cory was bound and weaponless against a bigger man. Tahitoa stomped a foot straight on Cory's ribs and raised the sword again.

Finally she had an opening. Annie's arrow soared through the narrow openings between the trees and struck Tahitoa in the shoulder. He shrieked and dropped the sword. Cory kicked him right between the legs, and he fell to his knees.

Annie sprinted towards them, her handler and most of the rest of the squad right behind. It didn't take long to get there. Cory was standing up, holding his ribs with one hand.

"Why would you try to kill me?" Cory yelled at Tahitoa.

Tahitoa grunted in pain and spat right at Cory's face. Cory responded by punching him in the face.

Tahitoa chuckled, blood on his lip and looked around at the other Veiled who were arriving.

Annie stared back at him. "You call me a traitor? Toros will hear of this."

"You will all die!" Tahitoa yelled, mostly looking at Annie and Coryther. "Long live the

King.” That last part he whispered, he then reached around to his back and grabbed the ice arrow still protruding from his shoulder and yanked it out with a grunt of pain and a crack of breaking ice.

He then lunged at Cory, arrow held outstretched. But Annie was quicker. She thrust the sharp end of her bow straight into Tahitoa’s gut. His eyes widened as he took a heavy breath, and Annie thrust him backwards with a shove (which was especially impressive, considering the weight difference). He stumbled, then slumped to the ground.

Annie looked at the other Veiled, pointing her bow at the body. “You saw what he tried to do? Tahitoa was trying to execute a Veiled soldier without authorization.”

“He was executing a traitor!” one of them shouted.

“Cory’s crime was harboring a fugitive. I admit that’s serious and I did it too, but his crime did not deserve death, and Tahitoa did not have authority to issue it. He is the traitor, and we acted defensively.”

There were grumbles from the group, but no more objections.

“Now,” Annie continued, “We have lost enough time already. Let’s go join the others.”

Slowly the group turned and started marching back towards the Veiled central buildings. Cory picked up the sword Tahitoa had tried to kill him with. Annie looked back at him.

Hesitantly, she asked, “Are you coming?”

Cory shook his head and looked up into the branches of the trees. Annie only then noticed a strange monkey with light gray fur watching them from the trees.

“There might still be some of the enemies in the Forest of Wisdom. I’m going to stay here and guard the entrance.”

Annie nodded. “I’m staying with you.”

Cory shook his head. “You should go with the others.” He started back towards the gateway.

Annie stepped in front of him and looked up into his face. “Cory, I know I hurt you, and

I'm sorry I kept secrets from you. I'm sorry you found out the way you did. There were many opportunities for me to tell you and Rail what was going on and I didn't take them. I put loyalty to my parents and to the Veiled over loyalty to my best friends, and I was wrong."

Cory didn't respond, but his face seemed to soften a little.

"I don't expect you to forgive me," she continued. "But I'm not going away, so you're going to have to tolerate my presence for now."

Someone grunted behind her. Annie turned. The handler assigned to her by Tahitoo was standing there. "Are you finished?" he asked. "Because you're not staying here, I'm supposed to keep an eye on you."

Annie rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Tahitoo is dead, and was a traitor himself. You're still going to insist on baby-sitting me? I'm not going anywhere."

He thought about that for a moment, then threw up his hands. "Fine! Suck an arrow for all I care. I'm going to actually follow orders."

Annie bit her lip to stop an angry retort. She did feel guilty that she wasn't going to join the rest of the army, but Cory was making a strategically sound choice as well. If there were rogue squads of enemy fighters, there needed to be at least some kind of lookout.

When she turned around, Cory was already walking back towards the gateway. Annie followed.

Cory sat down on the ground, watching the forest. Annie walked up and sat next to him. Cory leaned over and said "It's probably better if we watch different areas of the forest."

She nodded. It hurt, but he was right. She moved over to the opposite side of the tree.

The monkey Annie had noticed swung down next to Cory, and a large white-furred goat also approached. Annie jumped when the monkey spoke.

"Are you going to introduce us to your friend, Cory?"

Cory gestured over to her without enthusiasm. "This is Annie. Annie, this is Tarkon and Bryllig. They're helping us keep watch."

Both the goat and the monkey came over and talked to her for a few minutes. She supposed she shouldn't have been so surprised by it, since she had seen a few talking animals in the Forest of Wisdom. But it was still an odd experience.

Tarkon, the monkey, kept jumping back and forth between the two forests, just to check on the other side. Annie continued to watch the forest, anxiously scanning for signs of movement.

\*\*\*

Rail crouched behind a rise, watching the crowd of animals surrounding the gateway. They kept moving around. Some creatures swam about, including an enormous alligator. Or maybe it was a crocodile, who knows? Some creatures jumped or flew between the branches of the trees. There were some that stood still, watching the surrounding woods.

Fortunately he had noticed them soon enough that he could hide without being seen. He had to stop himself from leaping after a badger that had gotten too close. It looked so tasty, so warm...

But he had his goal in mind. He was getting out of here. There was no way he could get past this motley crew without being seen. He had debated about trying to talk his way through. He was a Veiled soldier after all, and creatures in this forest seemed to respect them. But talking his way through things was not his strong suit. Cory was pretty good at that. Rail preferred to sneak. Besides, his uniform was torn and covered in blood. He had been able to wash it all off of his face and hands, but it still stained his shirt.

So, he decided he was going to turn into a wolf, and hopefully just walk right through. So, he transformed. It was an odd sensation. He could feel his fur growing beneath his clothing, and the shape of his body changing. But it was actually very easy to do. Almost like breathing.

Instantly though, he could feel his mind change. It was not all violence as he had thought

at first. There was a sense of loyalty for the family, or the pack. There was also a sense of curiosity and other feelings and thoughts that felt familiar and recognizable, but somehow also foreign and new. Like a childhood home after renovations. The desire to eat fresh meat was stronger than ever. He started to creep towards a beaver which was milling around just a short sprint away.

Rail bit his tongue, and it bled under his sharp teeth much easier than it normally would have. He had a purpose! He didn't need food right now, either. That would have been a very risky kill.

He looked down and realized he was still wearing his clothing, even though he was a full wolf now. That would be a problem. He shifted back to his skinny human form and stripped his clothing off, sequestering it in a dry spot under a tree trunk. The cold air was very uncomfortable on his pale bare skin. He was very thankful for the thick coat of black fur when he transformed back into a wolf again.

Slowly, he began walking towards the group of creatures milling around the gateway. He tried to look casual, trotting with his head up rather than crouching. But he kept on alert, watching as other creatures started to notice him.

Most ignored him. But he was getting close to where the circle of large creatures, an alcetaur, a couple minotaurs and the like were standing in a circle when he heard a voice shout, "Hello there, wolf-brother!"

A group of four other wolves, three grays and a black, trotted over to him. Rail hadn't yet tried speaking in his wolf form, and he wasn't sure if he could. So he stood silent as they approached.

One of the wolves walked right up to him. "I don't recognize you, what part of the forest are you from?"

Rail tried to respond, but his mouth was shaped differently than he was used to. It didn't feel natural to speak. The sound he made came out as an odd growl.

The demeanor of the wolves facing him changed immediately. Rather than being friendly and open, they became defensive, teeth bared and eyes intense.

“No need to be aggressive, friend,” said the lead wolf. “We did not recognize you, so we wanted to meet you.”

Rail wasn't sure what to do. It felt wrong to turn his back, but he did, and trotted through the shallow water towards the gateway. He wove under the legs of a minotaur and sped up as he neared the tree. He could feel the eyes of the other wolves still on him, but he didn't look back.

He emerged into the darkness of the Forest of Life. Fortunately his wolf's eyes had no trouble with the dark. But Rail stopped in his tracks. Cory sat right in front of him. To one side was a white-furred goat, taller than he was.

Cory turned immediately, a large sword held out defensively. “Who are you? Is there trouble on the other side?”

This was fine. Rail was happy to see Cory, and part of him wanted to turn human again and greet him. But Cory didn't need to be involved. Rail tried to walk right past Cory into the woods.

Cory lowered the sword. “Rail? Is that you?”

Dang it! He'd forgotten Cory could communicate telepathically. He tried to shut Cory out, but it was too late. He grudgingly started turning back into a human.

“Rail is here?”

A female voice Rail immediately recognized sounded behind him, and he immediately went back to full wolf. That goat looked really meaty...

“I'm pretty sure it's Rail,” said Cory as Annie walked up from the other side of the gateway tree. “He knew my name. Rail, are you okay? Can you turn back into a human?”

Rail tried to speak again, but it came out as a whimper. Instead he responded telepathically to Cory. *I would, but I left my clothes back on the other side.*

*Oh.* Cory responded in his mind. *Can you go get them?*

Rail shrugged. *I guess. The creatures on the other side were looking at me funny.*

*I'll go with you. Come on.*

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Annie said impatiently.

Right. She couldn't hear them.

"We're going to get Rail's clothes," Cory said.

Cory's tone was a bit odd, like he was impatient with the question. Then Rail remembered. Right, she was a spy. He growled at her, and Cory and he both walked through the gateway, passing the group of animals again. The wolves continued to stare at Rail.

Fortunately it wasn't too long ago, or Rail would never have been able to find his clothes again. All the trees looked the same. He grimaced as he pulled back on his bloodied, damp clothes. The creatures around the gateway made way for them as they walked back through, some even saluting as they passed. Though Rail's bloodied clothing did get some odd looks.

As they emerged back into the Forest of Life, Annie was on her feet, bow drawn and pointed into the darkness. Rail and Cory followed the direction of her bow, trying to see what she was aiming at.

"There's a lot of enemies coming straight for us!" Annie shouted as she let an arrow fly and quickly drew out another.

Cory pulled out his sword. "Tarkon, alert the others!"

Rail looked up and saw a strange little monkey nod and jump through the tree.

"What the heck?" Rail said.

"He's a friend. Met him in the woods." Cory responded.

Rail shrugged and eyed the oncoming army of horned demons. He transformed halfway into a wolf, his claws and teeth elongating. That enhanced his vision enough that he could see them coming. Their large, dark forms running through the woods as a group made them look almost like one single, solid mass of black, flooding through the forest in a torrent. The

silhouettes of their various headgear crossed with the shadows of the tree branches. Annie continued to fire arrow after arrow, striking some to the ground, but only injuring others. Rail twisted his head from side to side, cracking his neck.

“Good, I was getting hungry again.”

“What the heck?” Cory looked at him oddly.

Rail bared his teeth at him. “Get out of my head!”

“You said that one out loud.”

“Oh,” Rail shrugged. “It was a joke, I’m not going to eat them.” He was lying of course, but Cory didn’t need to know that.

—

Cory was more than a little disturbed by Rail’s offhand comment about cannibalizing their enemies. Was it cannibalism though? They weren’t human. All things considered, Rail was only half human now. There ought to be a word to describe eating sapient creatures, even if they aren’t human. Sapializing? Humabalism?

Tarkon emerged through the gateway again, along with several other armed creatures. A big male alcetaur with a spear, a female dryad clad in leaves holding a hooked cudgel in each hand, and an enormous tiger.

“I brought some volunteers to help!” said Tarkon from the alcetaur’s back.

Cory smiled and nodded at him. “Annie will keep up cover fire, the rest of you, surround the gateway and take out as many as you can. If you start getting overwhelmed, fall back through the gateway. Tarkon, keep the other side updated.”

The three newcomers nodded and they all took up positions around the tree. Several of the demons sped up as they approached, lowering their horned heads and pointing their weapons forward.

Annie shot down two, causing them to tumble to the ground. She was going to run out of arrows soon. Fortunately she had salvaged two extra quivers, one from Tahitua. But more simply leaped over their fallen companions and kept coming.

Cory readied himself, sword out as a demon barreled straight towards him. He still had the abilities he had borrowed from Bryllig, so he could see properly. Cory was just about to parry and stab as the enemy came close, but it tripped as a black-furred creature snagged its leg in its mouth. Rail was covered in black fur, his skinny chest bare and a tail poking from the back of his pants. He was still mostly human in shape, just hunched over and furry.

“That one was mine!” Cory shouted at him.

Rail’s only response was to smile and growl as he left after another demon.

Cory shook himself and jumped into the fray. The cave demons seemed more concerned with getting to the gateway than with actually killing them, which made it easier to not get stabbed. Cory was new to a sword, but it came so much more naturally than sparring with a sharpened bow. He swiped, slashed, and parried, using the length and size of the sword and his own body to his advantage. Most of the demons were still bigger than he was, but with his increased sure-footedness from the goat he was able to stay upright and keep from getting pushed around.

But it was by no means easy. His heightened goat’s agility saved him several times. Sweat began dripping from his forehead. How many of them were there?

Cory saw the tiger clamp its jaws around a demon’s neck, then drag it to the ground. The minotaur, who had features like an American Bison, smashed its enormous ax through a demon’s sternum.

The boss of a demon’s horned forehead smashed into Cory’s chin. He had managed to knock aside the demon’s ax, but they kept coming at him. He fell to the ground, vision blurry.

The demon raised their ax to finish him, but something hooked their wrist and pulled them back onto the ground. It was the dryad. She pinned his wrist with her foot and smashed

her cudgel into its face. She gave Cory a brief, beautiful smile, then leaped into a tree. Not up into the branches, but straight into the bark, melding with the material of the tree itself. She emerged an instant later from another tree, hooking another demon's antlers with her clubs.

*Man, I wish I could do that,* Cory thought.

*Wish granted!* Came the reply.

He looked up at the dryad who had rescued him. She saluted him with a single club. Apparently he had accidentally directed his thoughts at her. He had to be more careful about that.

But the feeling was incredible. He felt as light and whimsical as a leaf, but also rooted to the earth. He had a heightened sense of the trees around him. A demon swung its sword at his head. Cory leapt backwards, straight at the tree directly behind him. He felt himself merge with the woody makeup of the tree. Instantly he was aware of the other nearby trees and the connections between their roots to the one he was inside of. He chose one at random and was suddenly expelled from it, back into the fight. Fortunately the sword and his clothing had come with him.

Cory continued to fight, trying to use his new ability to his advantage by jumping from tree to tree to avoid or strike at unsuspecting cave demons.

He saw Rail, still in his half-wolf, half-human form, snap his teeth onto the back of a demon's neck. He was bleeding from half a dozen small cuts, but he seemed to be relishing the experience. The alcetaur was standing by the gateway tree, one back leg held up, favoring what looked like a painful gash. The minotaur and the tiger were nowhere to be seen.

Cory felt intense pain in the back of his leg, and he collapsed to the ground with a scream. Cory saw Rail howl and leap towards him, but it was too late. He saw a sword blade rocket towards his face and everything went black.

Cory blinked slowly. His vision was blurry. He lay on the ground, surrounded by blood. Cave demons still swarmed around him. Then he remembered,

He reached up a hand towards his face and neck. He could feel blood there, still wet. But there was no cut, no wound at all. What was happening?

Cory heard a voice in his head.

*Listen, Coryther!*

Cory was listening. The voice sounded male, but unfamiliar.

*The place where you are is full of magik. Feel it washing over you, listen to its sound. Bring it into you, let it become you. It will give you strength.*

Cory had no idea what this voice in his head was. Usually he couldn't communicate with anything unless he reached out first. But he could feel what the voice was describing. This place was saturated with magik, pulsing, flowing, rebounding through the trees. He breathed in, allowing the magik to fill his body. He suddenly felt strength, agility, and power to a level he had never known before.

He stood with a single bound. Annie lay on the ground near the tree, reaching for her bow. Cory couldn't see Rail, or any of the other warriors who had been fighting beside them.

Cory leapt to Annie's aid, slicing straight through the necks of two demons before they other even noticed him. Cory continued hacking, jumping, and slashing until he had cleared a circle around Annie. This gave her the space she needed to rise and set her stance again.

Annie was on her last quiver. She drew and released arrow after arrow with a natural, deadly grace that Cory couldn't help admiring for just a moment.

"Fall back!" Annie shouted. Cory briefly noticed she was out of arrows before he leapt towards the gateway, giving one last slash to a demon's gut.

He and Annie emerged from the gateway into the light, splashing through the water as demons flooded through after them. A puma gatataur ahead of them yelled "Fire!"

Cory and Annie tried to get away from the tree as the waiting creatures threw sharpened sticks at the invading force, or leapt forward with teeth bared. The creatures were unpracticed, but the sticks did enough damage to slow the Hermes down. Annie fired more arrows; the backup force had given her another quiver. Cory surged back towards the front of the line to pick off enemies before they could attack the others.

It didn't last long. The creatures waiting had thrown most of their makeshift spears in the first volley, and there were many more demons to come. Several demons lowered their heads and pushed through the army of animals like linemen, reaching the cover of the trees.

Cory was a bit preoccupied to see what was happening, but he did see a large baboon snap its jaws onto a demon's shoulder who had passed by its tree. An alligator exploded from the water, catching another enemy in its jaws.

The defending creatures started to fall back. Cory tried to stay with them, but slipped in the mud. A demon slashed at his previously injured leg as he stumbled in the water. A fiery pain seared through Cory's hamstring. Cory spun around to defend himself, but he didn't need to.

Tree roots erupted from the swamp enveloping the demon that had cut him and dragging the creature down into the water.

As Cory looked around, he could see other demons being clotheslined by swinging branches. They couldn't hide from the trees. Several decided to head back into the Forest of Life, bolting back through the gateway. Cory tried to stand, but fell back down when the pain in his leg flared.

Tarkon appeared by his side. "You are hurt. Come, we will wash your wound."

As he limped away, aided by Bryllig who also walked by him, he saw Annie. Sweat carved lines through streaks of mud on her face as she wiped a stray hair off her cheek. Rail stood panting, almost in full wolf form, his face unrecognizable. His clothes still hung awkwardly from his body, mud and blood caked his fur. That was a weird thought, Rail had fur. Rail rushed towards Cory and for a moment Cory was afraid Rail would attack him. But instead Rail

transformed back into a full human and wrapped his arms around Cory's neck. Cory widened his eyes in surprise.

"It's good to see you too, man," he said, patting Rail's wet back.

Rail released him and rushed towards Annie. She was also surprised, but hugged him right back, tightly. Cory saw her eyes water

"I saw you go down!" Rail said. "I saw you both die, how are you here?"

"What do you mean?" asked Cory.

Rail turned towards him. "You were stabbed right in the neck and fell to the ground. Then Annie lost her bow and was stabbed in the gut. We all retreated through the gateway. But I don't even see a scratch, how the heck did you...?"

Annie interjected. "It was my father."

Cory and Rail both looked at her strangely, so she continued.

"My father is a shaga, his ability allows him to place wards on people. The next time someone would die after he wards them, they are healed instead. But after that the warding is used. He must have warded you, Cory, before they left."

Tarkon washed and bound Cory's leg as they continued to talk. Fortunately it hadn't gone deep enough to cut anything major.

"So was that his voice I heard in my head?" Cory asked.

Now Annie looked at him in confusion. "What voice?"

"After I awoke again," Cory explained. "I heard a voice in my head, telling me to get up and strengthening me. Would that have been your dad?"

Annie shook her head. "I don't think he can do that Cory. I don't know whose voice that was."

Rail gave him an uncomfortable smile, but turned it into a joke. "I guess Cory's hearing voices now, huh?"

Tarkon interjected as he finished tying a strip of cloth around Cory's leg. "Perhaps the

One Who Awakened the Forest has a guardian angel we are unaware of.”

Cory pondered what had happened as they rested. Dead or dying creatures floated in the shallow water around them, but the fighting was over. They’d won.

Several Veiled soldiers came through the gateway a few minutes later, and medics helped take care of the injured. Apparently the main force of the Veiled had successfully stormed the bunker houses, and the Hermes had fled as a full force, trying to seek refuge in the Forest of Wisdom. If the three friends and the creatures from the Forest of Wisdom hadn’t been there, the Hermes may have been able to hunker down and survive in the Forest of Wisdom for months before the Veiled could track them all down.

The next day, after a very long rest, Captain Drake approached Cory, Annie, and Rail as they were eating. Cory and Rail still had a hard time talking straight with Annie, but they were coming to terms with what she had done. Captain Drake had a chunk cut out of one of his large ears, wrapped in bandages, and he seemed oddly solemn.

“Toros would like to see you in his office immediately. All three of you.”

Cory rolled his eyes. Did he mean to scold them one last time? Annie lightly slapped his shoulder. “It’ll be fine. Come on.”

They shoved down a few more bites and made their way to Toros’ small wooden office. As they entered, Toros looked up from a list on the desk in front of him, and gestured for them to sit. Toros had tired eyes, but seemed otherwise just fine. His hair was silky and perfect as always.

The three sat down, and Toros sighed as he looked at them. “Firstly, I want to thank you, and congratulate you for your help during the battle that just occurred. Bethany Stone—”

Annie flinched at the sound of her full name.

“Your skill with the bow is undeniable, and I heard that you took out as many enemies as an entire squad. Well done. I believe you may have a bright future with the Veiled.”

Annie glowed. As much as she disliked Toros, she couldn't resist the feeling that came from such praise, especially from a superior officer. "Thank you sir," she said.

Toros then turned to Cory. "Coryther Thomas, I was told that the marshaling and organization of the creatures in the Forest of Wisdom was your doing. They are calling you the One Who Awakened the Forest. Had it not been for your efforts there, the lives of many more good soldiers would have been lost."

Cory shook his head but smiled. That would be Tarkon, spreading rumors.

Toros looked at the list in front of him. As Cory looked a little closer, he realized Toros was writing letters to the families of the soldiers who died during the battle.

"And you," Toros said as he turned to Rail. "Rail Miles, I received several reports that you were able to control the impulses of your wolf form and were a ferocious force in battle."

Rail's face was expressionless. He still had a myriad of cuts and bruises visible on his face and arms, but at least he was clean.

"However," Toros continued.

Ah, here it is. Cory thought.

"You cannot stay here, Rail. You are too volatile, and I do not want to expend the resources to keep you contained. Besides the fact that many other soldiers are still very uncomfortable that you have stayed as long as you have. You must leave. You can stay tonight, but I expect you to be gone tomorrow."

Rail nodded. Annie looked like she was going to object, but Toros held up a hand.

"I am offering you two a choice. Your trial year is nearly up anyway, you might as well decide now, when your friend is leaving. You may stay here as a soldier, or you may leave. Cory, I would no longer be training you personally, but you would work more closely with Captain Shepherd. Your skills and abilities relating to wildlife and creatures can be very useful to us. Annie, you would continue to be sent on assassinations and other excursions. If you prove successful there, I can see you becoming a squad leader very quickly. I would like you both to

stay, as you can be great assets to the Veiled. But the choice is yours. If you are leaving, Drake will escort you out before tomorrow. If you are staying, I expect to hear about it before then. You are dismissed.”

The three friends got up to leave, but Cory paused in the doorway. “Sir?”

Toros didn't look up. “I said you're dismissed.”

“Why did Tahitooa try to kill me?” Annie and Rail paused to listen as well.

Toros leaned back in his chair and looked Cory over, as if deciding whether he was worth the time. “Some of the other soldiers told me that before he killed himself Tahitooa said the phrase ‘long live the king’, is that correct?”

Cory nodded.

Toros continued. “That statement alone implicates Tahitooa as a Moonlighter, ‘the king’ referring to Adumas, their leader. We have yet to examine the bodies, but I suspect that the cave demons were in league with the Moonlighters, and that Tahitooa was the one who led them to the entrance to the Forest of Life. He was likely a double agent for years.”

Cory shook his head, “That still doesn't explain why he tried to kill me, specifically.”

Toros leaned forward. “The Moonlighters want you dead. Years ago it was prophesied that someone was going to kill Adumas, and apparently they think that prophecy refers to you.”

Cory's eyes widened and he exchanged glances with Annie and Rail. “Why would they think it's me?”

Toros turned back to the papers on his desk. “You could get more of that information from your parents, they know a lot more about it than me. Now get out of my office, I have work to do.”

Considering himself lucky to have gotten the answers he had, Cory followed orders, shutting the door behind him, his mind reeling.

## Chapter 19

### Wolf

That night the Veiled held a celebratory dance. By then most of the injured had been treated, and the dead taken care of. Some of the bodies were being shipped or picked up by family. Cory wasn't sure how the magik world dealt with bodies, or what they believed about death. Were any of them religious? Tarkon had seemed to follow some kind of religion to do with the Dragon and the Unicorn, but maybe that was just reverence or respect.

These thoughts, along with many others, ran through Cory's head as he sat next to a bonfire, a cup of weak wine held loosely in his hand. Cory sat up as he heard Jazan's voice call for quiet.

Toros stood up on a table in the middle of the field scattered with bonfires and filled with Veiled soldiers. Toros still looked exhausted, his shoulders slumped, and a mug held in his hand.

"These last few days have been more difficult than any in my career as a Veiled soldier. For the first time, the Forest of Life was invaded by an enemy force, and it is likely that some of those enemy soldiers have escaped our notice. As such, the guards around our borders have been doubled, and will remain that way for the foreseeable future."

There were murmurs from the crowd. Nobody liked guard duty.

Toros continued. "Gateways to the Forest of Wisdom were used during this attack, both by the enemy and by our own forces. These gateways are to remain a secret, both their location and the fact that they exist. Any soldier caught discussing them will be punished, and they are not to be used by anyone without my express permission.

"But we are not here for business, we are here to celebrate! The Forest is safe, and the Veiled continue to defend it. This was a victorious battle, with many painful lessons learned. For those of you that stood fast against the enemy, I congratulate you. You are valiant warriors, and I am proud to be your commander."

Toros raised his glass and took a swig. Cory and the other Veiled around him did likewise.

More somber now, Toros continued, "We are also here to honor those who gave their lives to defend the lives that we protect. Many went too soon, before their time. But we have avenged them, and will continue to honor their sacrifice. May they find peace, glory, and everlasting life, wherever they may be."

Toros took another drink, followed by everyone else. Cory hadn't realized there would be another toast, so he only had a few drops left.

Toros stepped down from the table, and was replaced by a fiddler. Because of the solemn mood, the fiddler, and other instruments who joined him started with a somber, slower tune.

Cory closed his eyes and swayed to the music. He thought about Conja. He thought about Tahitoa. He tried to think positively, but he could see very little beauty in their victory. So many people and creatures dead. For what?

Cory furrowed his brow in anger. This was not glorious or honorable. He admired the Veiled as defenders, but their assassin cutthroat mentality, and Toros' controlling, strict attitude were dumb.

\*\*\*

Rail stood by one of the bonfires, drawing his bow across the strings of a violin. It wasn't *his* violin, that one was broken. He had to borrow another one. The Veiled had a surprisingly large supply of instruments. It wasn't nearly as good as his old violin, but he could still feel the old magik of its melody. The music matched his thoughts.

That was his favorite thing about playing the violin. He could express his emotions through music in a way he could never put into words. When his thoughts became the music, he felt like he was floating above an endless spread of majestic clouds. Sometimes the clouds

reflected the brilliant beauty of the sunset, sometimes they were calm, white, and puffy. Today they were gray, dark, and roiling.

That idiot who had broken his old violin... Rail was still angry at them. He hadn't meant to kill them. He'd wanted to punch them in the face, then maybe he'd keep going, punching them a few times before having to be pulled off by Cory or the man's friend.

*He deserved it.*

Rail fought these thoughts. They seemed to come from the growling voice, the one that came from somewhere else, but was somehow also in his head.

*They all deserve it!*

They hated him! Why was he here? Even Annie and Cory were going to abandon him. Rail had to leave, he had no choice. He was too dangerous, a monster, a freak who couldn't be trusted not to kill someone at the slightest provocation. They feared him.

*They should fear you. You are powerful.*

The might and ferocity of the wolf lingered just below the surface. He could wreak havoc on this whole cursed party. Cory would stay. He loved the creatures and the woods here. Besides, Annie was here. He'd stay for her, and she fit in here. She was good with a bow, good as a soldier. Rail was good for nothing but destruction.

He couldn't go back to his last foster parents, he was even more dangerous to them now. He'd end up hurting them just like all—

“Rail? Can I talk to you?”

Rail cut off his bow stroke abruptly. Annie stood just a few feet ahead of him, looking concerned.

A dancing satyr suddenly stumbled just a few feet to Rail's side. The soldier nearly fell face-first into the bonfire, but Rail stepped forward, catching them.

The satyr's eyes widened as they stared into the flames. They patted Rail's shoulder, “Thank you! That was a close—”

They cut off abruptly as they looked up and saw who had caught them. They stood up abruptly, brushed themselves off and hurried away.

Rail sneered after them. Let them be afraid.

He remembered that Annie was there, and turned to her. "Sorry. Yeah, we can talk."

One of the other musicians, an elf woman playing around the same fire as Rail, objected as he started to walk away.

"Hey, you can't just walk away, we need you to—"

Rail turned and snarled at her.

Her eyes widened. "Alright, take whatever time you need I guess." She went back to playing her flute.

Annie led Rail over to a pair of seats by the edge of the dancing field.

Rail sat without looking at Annie, who sat next to him, biting her lip.

If she had something to say, spit it out.

"Rail, I wanted to apologize," She said.

Rail looked at her.

"It was wrong for me to spy on you and Cory and report you to the Veiled. I felt awful doing it, but I rationalized telling myself I was being a good soldier. I should have at least told you."

Rail shook his head in consternation. "But you weren't a soldier, you were just a kid!"

Annie nodded, "I know. I was... a wannabe soldier. I know I can't change what I did, especially since it went on for so long, but... is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

Rail sat in silence for a moment. Was there anything she could do? He hated that she had spied on him, one of his best friends, and reported him to some secret assassin organization. He wanted to ask her to come with him. But she wouldn't. She didn't want to. He couldn't bring himself to ask.

Instead, he asked "What are you going to do now?"

She shrugged. “Well, I want to stay here with the Veiled. I have the chance to do really well here. What are you going to do?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Annie hesitated. “There’s... something else I should apologize for. I...” She was having a hard time getting the words out, Rail noticed. He felt a little nervous. What was she going to say?

“I’m sorry that you have to leave. I know you wanted to leave before, and I tried to stop you. I think I even led you on a little, and I wasn’t honest with you. I...” she sighed. “I was never really interested in you romantically, and I’m sorry if I gave you that impression.”

Rail’s heart sunk, but he feigned surprise. “What? No, I wasn’t... I didn’t ever think that. You’re my friend, and I like it that way.”

Annie smiled at him. “We’re still friends, even after everything?”

“Of course,” Rail put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

Annie smiled again. “Thank you, that means a lot.”

They sat for another awkward moment. Until Annie stood up. “I’m going to go find Cory. Have you seen him?”

Rail pointed to a cluster of chairs. “I think I saw him sitting somewhere over there.”

She left. Rail’s insides boiled. He was somehow angry, excited, nervous, heartbroken, and depressed all at the same time. What would he do? Where could he go where he wouldn’t hurt people?

—

Cory sat slumped in a folding wooden chair as he saw Annie’s silhouette approaching. It wasn’t hard, she was the only one as short as the elves, but who clearly wasn’t an elf. Not lithe and graceful enough.

She stopped just in front of him, and bit her lip. Then she held out her hands to him. “We need to talk. Do you want to dance?”

Cory looked away and took another sip of wine. “I’m afraid I don’t really feel like dancing.”

“Fine”, she said, and sat in the chair next to him, arms folded.

They sat in silence for several minutes. Cory kept sipping his wine, waiting for Annie to say something. He wished they had something stronger to drink, but this was the best he could get here. He supposed he was lucky to get any alcohol at all, since he was technically still underage. He could hear Annie’s frustrated breathing. He smiled slightly at her expense. Let her stew. She could wait.

He tried to take another sip of wine. Dang it. Empty.

He stood up, “I’m going to get some more to drink.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” she said, and she grabbed his arm.

Cory looked down at her. “What?”

“C’mon. I want to show you something.” She took his hand and guided him off into the woods, away from the somber celebrations.

“Where are we going?” He asked. She didn’t respond, but continued to pull him along, her hand a deathgrip on his. Despite his anger at Annie for keeping her secret from him for so long, he couldn’t help but smile as she led him, determined.

Soon they came to a circle of six trees, with a hexagon-shaped platform between them, about twenty feet up. Cory wasn’t channeling any sort of gift at the moment, so it was too dark for him to tell what it was.

Annie led him to a ladder that hung down from one side of the platform, and stood next to it. She nodded up the ladder, “Up you go.”

Cory hesitated. “What is this place?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re up there.”

Cory sighed. She really was cute. He wanted to stay angry and stubborn, but couldn't bring himself to disobey. Plus, he was curious to see where she was taking him. He climbed up the ladder to a small rectangular opening in the wood platform above. He climbed up through the hole and looked around. It was lighter here than down below, but still dark. Around the edge of the platform, connecting the various trees were strung tight nets, covered in... something. He walked up to one of the nets as Annie emerged from below.

As he got close to the net, reached out his hand and felt a clump of grapes.

"This is where the Veiled grow their grapes. Putting it higher up than the forest floor gets them much more sunlight." She looked up, "Or moonlight."

The moon hung bright above them. Not quite full, thankfully, that happened a few days ago. Behind that shone thousands of stars. The Veiled didn't have electric lights to drown out the skylights, so the milky way was easily visible above them. But he had been out on starlit nights before, and had seen these stars dozens of times.

"Why did you bring me here?" Cory asked.

Annie shrugged. "I wanted to talk in private. And it is beautiful."

Cory continued to look upwards at the brilliant array of pinpricks in the sky.

Annie came over and took his hand, pulling him into the middle of the platform. "Come on, you'll hurt your neck looking up like that," then she sat, pulling him down next to her. Cory had decided to stop resisting at this point, though he still felt the urge to close off to her, or better yet to scream in her face. But he laid down and looked up at the sky. Annie took off her cloak and rolled it into a ball, placing it by his head. She then plucked a large bunch of grapes from the nearest net, and came over to lay next to him, her head resting on his arm.

She passed him a grape. She tilted her head to look at him, "The stars look even better to my eyes, do you think you could use my powers now without blinding yourself?"

Cory nodded. "I think so, since it's dark and I know what to expect." He reached out with his mind and probed a little at her consciousness. She let him in, giving him permission to use

her abilities. Before, she had made sure to close off certain parts of her mind, but this time she hesitantly let him see it all. He tried not to pry, but he could see some of her thoughts. She was thinking about all that time she had spied on him and Rail. He could see that she thought she was doing her duty, trying to impress her parents by following orders, trying to be a part of the group.

As he looked up at the sky again, Cory gasped aloud. An overwhelming amount of light poured in through his senses. Not blinding, but overstimulating and at the same time incredibly beautiful. Each individual star had its own shade of light, made up of dozens of graduated layers like their own personal rainbow. Behind each of those stars was another dozen stars Cory hadn't seen with his own eyes. He could see galaxies, tiny as grains of sand across a room, but somehow illuminated with the detail of a million, billion individual stars and worlds. The light shifted and pulsed in a twinkling kaleidoscope sea. The moon dimmed in comparison to the brilliance of the infinite reaches of space.

He heard Annie snuffle. He looked down at her, surprised. He had almost forgotten whose shoulders his arm was around. He could see tears slowly rolling down her smooth skin.

"What's wrong?" He asked, confused.

Her voice was choked, and she didn't look up at him. "I'm so sorry! You and Rail deserve a better friend than me. I spied on you for years, I should have told you. I'm so sorry for treating you like I did, for lying, for hiding, and for violating your privacy. And I'm sorry I couldn't give you the friendship," she wove her fingers between his. "Or the relationship that you deserve."

She finally looked up at him. "You are amazing, Cory. You're kind, you're brave, you're selfless. You see beyond your own needs, and you do well wherever you apply yourself. I am so grateful to have been your friend for so long. Thank you for being an amazing, loyal friend to me. And to Rail."

Cory's eyes were wet now too. He took a deep breath. "I am angry, Annie. What you did feels like a betrayal, like I somehow matter less than orders, or than that prick Toros. It feels like

everything you've told me, and everything that I feel for you is a lie, or a trick. It feels like I don't know the real you."

Annie nodded, but said nothing.

"But I want to know the real you," Cory continued. "I want to get to know you better, no secrets, no lies. I hope I can come to... love you. Again. Because I have seen how amazing you are as well."

"No more secrets, no more lies." Annie said, "I promise."

Cory hesitated, and looked back up at the stars, resting his head on Annie's balled-up cloak. Annie scooted in even closer to him, her body pressed against his.

"But I'm not staying here," Cory said. Annie looked at him sharply. "I'm not sure what Rail will do, or where he wants to go, but I don't think I can leave him alone. He might hurt somebody again, or himself. I also want to find out more about this supposed prophecy."

Annie nodded. "I think that's the right thing to do. As much as I hate it."

Cory looked at her. "I think you should stay here. I'll figure out how to get letters to you. I'll stay in contact, but I think you'll do better here. You're already doing great here."

Annie's eyes were wet again, but she nodded. "I've been thinking the same thing. I'm sorry. I wish I could go with you, I wish we could stay together."

They looked each other in the eyes for a moment. It was an awkward angle, but Cory didn't mind. Her eyes emitted an aura that reflected the brilliance of the stars. He could see her aura, and his own, like she had described before. His own was a light, transparent blue that flowed in waves like water in zero gravity. Hers was a deeper bluish-green, concentrated around her eyes.

His neck started to hurt, so he decided to stand. "Come on. I still owe you a dance."

He took her hand, pulling her to her feet, taking one hand in his, and wrapping the other around her waist. She smiled, looking to one side. They could faintly hear some of the music drifting over from the dancing that was still going on. Cory and Annie began to sway back and

forth, and Cory closed his eyes, taking in the moment.

She was far from perfect. She was far shorter than him, and a little thick-set, she was prone to obsession, she had some kind of authority complex, her shoulders were just a little uneven, and she was still wearing her leather armor. Worst of all, her betrayal still pained him. But in that moment he found it easy to forgive her. He found it easy to love her, as she pulled in close and placed her head on his chest.

As the song transitioned to another, they pulled back and looked at each other. Despite himself, Cory leaned his face down towards hers. As he got closer, she put a hand behind his neck and stood on her toes as their lips met.

\*\*\*

Rail wove his way between the dark trees. He had seen Annie and Cory walk off this way. He didn't want to, but he needed to talk to them. He still didn't know where he would go, and he wondered if they had any ideas.

Could he maybe go back home, and just lock himself up every full moon? He hadn't been in contact with his old foster family for months, and he liked it that way. He doubted it would work anyway unless he had some help, and even then... He still felt the urge to transform into a wolf now. As a wolf he was somehow in control, and out of control at the same time. As a wolf there was only aggression and anger. He could understand those emotions. The things he was feeling now... he didn't know what to feel, but whatever it was was painful and he didn't like it.

Rail looked up at the moon. What a beautiful, cursed thing. It was waning, since the full moon had been only a few nights ago. He transformed just a little bit into the wolf, his hair growing thicker, and his teeth sharper. That gave him enough to see clearly in the darkness. The moonlight shone down through the canopy of the trees, extending into the night sky like shadows of fingers clawing at the skylight.

Something caught his attention. Some of the light was not shining through like the rest. There seemed to be a dark spot, possibly some kind of structure midway up the trees. He walked towards it, curious. As he got closer he could see above the structure what looked like some weird net with clumps.

The moon shone directly behind it, backlighting the scene perfectly as he drew close enough to see two figures behind the net. They were wrapped tight in each other's arms, their faces glued together. Rail rolled his eyes and was about to walk away, but something about them seemed familiar. That stupid tall, muscular figure hunched over a short form with hair down to her shoulder blades. It was Cory and Annie.

He walked a little closer just to be sure, but it was definitely Cory and Annie, their faces pressed against one another like they'd lost something at the back of the other's throat and they desperately wanted it back.

Rail felt a bitter taste in his mouth as he turned away, stalking out into the woods in a random direction.

Of course. This was why she didn't want Rail, pretty-boy Coryther was the one everyone liked. Rail was just the angry dark one, the ugly, skinny, shadow, always lagging behind a better man.

*You're better than them.*

Rail was better than that. He deserved to be promoted, protected. Didn't they see how much he had done during the battle? He could control it. The wolf was his to command.

*They should suffer.*

Rail had suffered his whole life. Rejected by family after family, by peers, by society. Sometimes it felt like even God had rejected him and abandoned him to his fate. Now his only friends were pushing him away too. He was nothing but a liability now, the one that holds them back. But as much as he hated that idea, he didn't want to hurt them.

*They should suffer!*

The voice in his head was getting louder. The harsh growl pushed him to anger, to hate, to violence.

*I can make them suffer.*

Rail finally put the pieces together. The voice in his head... It was the wolf. Like a parasite in his mind, it was now speaking to him, urging him to hurt, even though he didn't want to.

But he did want to escape.

*I can help you.*

"How?" Rail asked aloud.

*I know a place where you will be accepted. Where you will be valued.*

"What place?"

*Trust me.*

"Why should I trust you? You're the one that got me into this mess."

*You got yourself in this mess! You have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Trust me.*

The Wolf was right. Rail had nowhere to go. If there was a place he would be accepted, where he could be valued for who he was, even as a werewolf... it was worth a shot. He felt he had so little to lose.

"Show me the way."

The wolf in his head smiled as Rail transformed, and trotted off into the darkness.

## Epilogue

### Sokatoa

Rhuftog groaned and rolled over as another kick landed right in his stomach. He breathed heavily and looked up at the man who had delivered the kick. His torturer was average height, with a handsome face, and sleek, black hair. Judging by the man's skin tone and slight accent, he was from somewhere near India. He wore loose-fitting white clothing with a cloth belt around the waist. Around his head was tied a black cloth with a flame surrounding a white circle: the symbol of the Moonlighters.

Rhuftog coughed, bloody spittle spraying on the ground of the small, dark room. "You will get no more information from me, no matter how hard you kick."

The torturer kicked him again in the chest. Rhuftog was having a hard time breathing now.

The white-robed man squatted down next to the satyr's face. "Oh we already have the information we need, I'm just having fun."

He grabbed the hair at the back of Rhuftog's head and pulled him to his feet.

"I have a game we can play if you like." He slid his arm around Rhuftog's neck, cutting off his air. The man started to sing.

"Ring around the rosie..."

He suddenly kicked the satyr's leg, hard, breaking a bone in his lower leg and forcing his knees to buckle. Rhuftog tried to scream, but no air entered his lungs.

"Pocket full of posies..."

The man pulled a knife out from his belt.

"Ashes, ashes, we all..."

He shoved the knife into Rhuftog's kidney. The satyr's eyes widened, then rolled back.

“Fall...”

The man loosened his grip and Rhuftog slumped to the ground.

“Down.”

There was a knock at the door.

“What is it?”

A goblin attendant stuck his bald blue head through the door. “The King wishes to speak with you, Lord Sokatoa.”

“Very well. Dispose of this body please.”

Sokatoa walked out of the room without looking back as the goblin bowed out of his way.

It took a few minutes to walk to the King’s hall. Most of the fortress was made of sleek, dark metal, but the colors became brighter as he came nearer. The dark metal gave way to murals devoted to the Skull King’s greatness, and statues in various states of disrepair. He reached the enormous doors to the throne room. The entire doorway was decorated with gold accents, and even the guard’s spears were decorated with elaborate hooks and engravings.

The guards immediately opened the doors at Sokatoa’s approach, and he continued on without slowing. Adumas the King sat on his elaborate stone throne, surrounded by pillows, Kematian the mace leaning on the side.

Sokatoa tried not to look at the King’s face as he knelt in front of him. Presumably out of respect, but really he still found the King’s appearance slightly unsettling.

“Rise,” said the king in his raspy dry voice.

Sokatoa rose and looked at Adumas. The King was a flegar, a rare race with a skeletal appearance. His robes hung over a skinny frame. His head was white as bone with empty eye sockets as deep black as the deepest pit.

“Tahitoea has failed. I send you now to eliminate the threat. Kill the boy, whatever it takes.”

Sokatoa stooped into a deep bow. “Your wish is my command. Long live the King.”

## Creatures and Characters

**Adumas-** Male, flegar sorcerer, son of Teresanas, leader of the Moonlighters. He wields a magik mace called Kematian.

**Alcetaurs-** Large creatures of the north, half human, half moose, built much like a centaur. Live in large tribes on the tundra, and originated in the Forest of Wisdom. Jazan is an Alcetaur.

**Alfred Thomas-** Male shaga, father of Coryther, former member of the Shadowcasters.

**Annie Stone-** Female shaga, best friend of Coryther and Rail, member of the Veiled. She has reddish-brown hair, and is rather short with dark green eyes.

**Bobby Stone-** Male shaga, Bobby is Annie Stone's younger brother and Calvin Stone's twin.

**Bugbear-** Bugbears are one of the ten original races. They are very strong, but not very intelligent. They look like bears with enormous bug-like eyes and feathery antennae. They sometimes walk upright, and sometimes on all fours.

**Bush Deer-** Both the males and females of these deer have large branching antlers which grow leaves during the spring and summer months. The leaves help them blend in in the forest, and even do their own photosynthesis, providing the deer with extra nourishment.

**Caleb-** Caleb Aclarin is one of the children of Rail's foster parents. He and Rail have a decent relationship as surrogate brothers.

**Calvin Stone-** Calvin is Annie Stone's younger brother, at about twelve years old. He has a twin brother named Bobby.

**Cara-** Female elf with bright green hair. She's a member of the Veiled who started just before Cory, Annie, and Rail. She is attracted to Rail.

**Cave Demon-** Demons are one of the ten original races. The cave demons as their name suggests live below ground. Each has some sort of combination of antlers, horns, and tusks on their heads. Their entire bodies are colored pitch-black with a glossy sheen like obsidian stone. They are very large and strong, but also quite stealthy, especially in darkness.

**Centaur-** Half human, half horse beings who originated in the Forest of Wisdom.

**Coryther Thomas-** Male shaga, best friends with Rail and Annie. He has the ability to communicate telepathically with creatures within a certain radius.

If a creature gives him permission, he can temporarily use abilities the creature has. He is very tall, with brown-blond hair and blue eyes.

**Drake, Captain-** Male fletcher. Captain Drake is a Veiled captain, in charge of newer recruits, those with less than a year's time. He frequently calls everyone by a nickname, using new, random words when addressing groups, but usually settling on one name for each person. He calls Annie is headlights, he calls Cory Wingman.

**Dryads-** Dryads are a species of intelligent beings which are integrally connected to the trees of the forest. They have bark skin, leaves for hair, and are generally very attractive. They can speak with and merge with the wood of trees. Females are elusive and beautiful temptresses which enjoy leading men into traps. Males protect the females and their territory. Captain Shepherd of the Veiled is a dryad.

**Dwarves-** Short, stocky, hairy beings that often live in the ground, especially to mine ore and jewels.

**Elves-** Elves are short, graceful creatures, taller than dwarves but shorter than humans. They have pointy ears with furry tufts, and often live in forests. They are especially adept at climbing trees. Toros is an elf, as are many members of the Veiled.

**Five Blessed races, The-** Humans, Dwarves, Elves, Sei, and Nymphoids. Shaga and Naga can be born into these five races.

**Flegar-** Tall, once weak, skull-faced creatures endowed with great magikal abilities. They are responsible for the beginning of the Moonlighters. Adumas is a flegar.

**Fletchers-** Skinny, one-foot tall humanoids covered in short green fur with large, fox-like ears. Live in trees much like monkeys, though they have no tails.

**Flying Sloth-** Flying sloths are sloths with flaps of skin between their arms and legs like a flying squirrel, which they use to travel from tree to tree. They went extinct in the wild due to deforestation and invasive species, but survive on in the Forest of Life.

**Gnarls-** Gnarls are rabbit-sized creatures that look like hedgehogs with eight legs rather than four. Their spines contain a special poison that makes a person unable to use their limbs for several minutes, before knocking them unconscious. It kills in 24 hours or less. The only known cure for gnarl poison is if a living gnarl deems the victim worthy of saving, and willingly cures them. Gnarls are rather intelligent, with their own sort of language. Their deliberation on if a person is worthy of saving can take hours on end.

**Goblins-** Human-sized, blue-skinned harsh creatures with short fangs, pointy ears, and no hair. They almost appear reptilian, but have skin, not scales.

**Griffins-** The front half of their body is an eagle, the back, a lion. Big and strong enough to ride.

**Hurricane Butterfly-** These butterflies can cause huge gusts of wind with a flap of their wings, which they use to evade predators. When flocks of these butterflies gather together, they can cause hurricane-force winds.

**Jazan Novak-** Female alcetaur, captain of the women's dormitories of the Veiled.

**Jescia Lake-** female elf, cousin of Toros and twin of Maritia. She has blond hair, white skin, and is a member of the Veiled. A few inches taller than Toros, but still short.

**John Joseph-** bulky human man. Has the power to inspire people with his words, despite his stutter.

**Josephine Stone-** Female shaga, former member of the Veiled. Mother of Annie Stone and wife of Kyle Stone.

**Kyle Stone-** Male, former member of the Veiled. He is the father of Annie Stone, and his wife is Josephine. He has the ability to ward up to five people at a time against death by touching them. This ward lasts until he dismisses it, or until the person he touched would die. Rather than dying, they are healed of their wounds and restored to health, and the warding ends on them.

**Leigh-** rotund elf. Trans-gender man, and member of the Veiled. He joined a little before Cory, Annie, and Rail.

**Maritia Lake-** female elf, cousin of Toros and twin of Jescia. She has blond hair, white skin, and is a member of the Veiled. A few inches taller than Toros, but still short.

**Minotaurs-** Strong, half-bovine, half human humanoids.

**Naga (Wizards)-** Naga can be born into any of the Five Blessed races, and have very strong magikal capabilities, as well as prolonged life.

**Nymphoid-** Nymphoids are one of the Five Blessed races. They are amphibious humanoids with hair like water.

**Peter-** Male, phantom. Was a shadowcaster in life, and friend to Alfred Thomas.

**Railarin Miles-** Human male, Coryther's best friend. He is skinny with pale skin, black hair and dark eyes.

**Raquele Pastrana Thomas-** Human Shaga, female, retired Shadowcaster

soldier and mother of Coryther Thomas.

**Rhuftog-** Male satyr, Veiled soldier who started soon before Annie, Coryther, and Rail.

**Sei-** The Sei are one of the Five Blessed races. They are bird-like humanoids who live in the skies.

**Shaga-** magikal beings gifted with specific, limited abilities such as control over fire, enhanced eyesight, or telepathic communication. They can be born into any of The Five Blessed races.

**Shepherd, Captain-** Male, dryad. Captain and caretaker for the Veiled in the Forest of Life.

**Shuah-** Male, elven shaga. Recruit from around the time Cory, Annie, and Rail join up. Has the ability to grant a few creatures near him luck. He has reddish hair and freckles.

**Sokatoa-** Male, human shaga, elite assassin and commander for the Moonlighters.

**Tahitoa-** Human shaga of polynesian descent, male, second in command of the Veiled.

**Toros Lake-** Elf, male, leader of the Veiled. He has chin-length blond hair and a short temper.

**Veiled-** The Veiled are an army of assassins charged with the protection of the Forest of Life, which is also the location of their headquarters. They wield metal-reinforced bows with blades on either end, arrows that look like icicles and freeze on impact, and knives tipped with gnarl poison. Toros Lake is their leader. Their main enemies are the Outcasters, who seek to destroy all magik in the world.

**Werewolves-** Werewolves can be either born through werewolf parents, or they can be formed when a member of another species is bitten by an existing werewolf. They have the appearance of a normal member of their species, but on every full moon are transformed into a wolf, and have no concept of who they are, effectively losing their minds. They also have the ability to change into a wolf, or remain at any part in the transformation between themselves and the wolf. However, the more wolf-like they become, the less of their mind they have control of.

**Willow Wisp-** Willow Wisps are found in the Forest of Wisdom. They are tiny, about four inches tall at most. They are humanoid in shape, but have pale white or yellowish brown scaly skin. They have no wings, but can fly while they glow. They emit a yellowish white glow that focuses in a sphere around them. This glow can also be used to warm and comfort other

creatures in contact with the Wisp. They originate from the seeds of willow trees that never germinated, but fell in highly magikal areas, which gave them life. Meache is a Willow Wisp.

### **What do I want to change?:**

1. Remove Rail as a narrator
2. Add more magical creatures, describe those that recur. Show the world in the same way I did in the first chapter.
3. Reinforce Tahitoa and the Moonlighters as villains the whole time (and the Outcasters), drop puzzle pieces along the way.
4. Reinforce character. Show Rail's mischief, rebelliousness, and past.
5. People want to know how the mundane world interacts more
6. Show Cory's interactions with Captain Shepherd, show development of magical powers, show more shaga powers (like during fights)
7. Show development of magical abilities possibly with a mentor (either Captain Shepherd or Toros) character, show more of Cory talking with animals.
8. Make sure the encyclopedia is consistent.
9. Shorten the olympics or make other portions longer, so they match, expand on relationships developing.
10. Review/edit chapter break placement

### **What are potential issues with Shadowlight 1?**

1. The audience. New adult, which is the age of my characters, is (or was?) often seen as erotic, which Shadowlight definitely is not.
2. The narrative. What is the narrative question?
  - a. It could be: Who is trying to kill Coryther and why? This would also make it more exciting. Perhaps Cory, Rail, and Annie could have gone to the Veiled to protect Cory, and joined them for this purpose. Problem with this is that his parents and Toros know the answer.
  - b. Could be: will Cory survive and how? Something could try to kill Coryther earlier, before going to the Veiled, and Tahitoa would try to kill him sooner in the story. A lot of the hidden information (Cory's parentage, the prophecy) does it have to be hidden?
3. The main characters don't really solve the problems! They are more like bystanders.
4. Whining. Cory is kind of whiny, and not very competent.

5. The ending. It wasn't a real ending, sometimes new writers just say "this feels like an ending" add a fight scene and end it. Things actually need to resolve, the ending should actually resolve the arcs and stuff.

New Shadowlight outline! YA! (Just for David)

Major changes: the three main characters are teenagers (15). Creatures start trying to kill Cory, Starting because Rail posts a video of Cory using his powers. The Moonlighters recognize signs of an Angel child and start trying to kill him. His parents (counseling with Annie's parents), decide to send him to the Veiled because it's closish, well-protected, and they can train him. Also they don't want him going to the Shadowcasters.

Cory trains with Toros, who wants him to be able to assassinate Adumas. The rest is similar, though it may take place only over one summer. Tahitoa tries to kill Cory but fails, including turning Rail into a werewolf accidentally, the black demons invade but also fail. Rail kills a guy, they run, etc. Rail gets angry and decides to leave (Annie's manipulation should be more overt).

Why do the Moonlighters suddenly start attacking Cory?

Maybe the prophecies appear in other lairs so that the prophecy is jump-started.

Maybe Tahitoa finds out from Toros?

Maybe Ether lets something slip to one of the other Angels?

Maybe children of angels display recognizable signs. Rail posts a video of Cory using his powers, and the Moonlighters come to track him down. (probably this, they could get in trouble with the law, which would show how magik interacts with the mundane world. Then maybe the Moonlighters impersonate law enforcers and try and take Cory but he is rescued)

Chapter 1

Rail films Cory taking on the powers of a squirrel and climbing a tree.

Chapter 2

Federal agents show up at Cory's door with Rail and give them a warning.

Chapter 3

Moonlighters come and kidnap Cory (he thinks it's the authorities again) but he is rescued by his parents and by Rail. He channels the powers of a mouse and escapes?

Chapter 4

They meet up and it's decided that Annie, Cory, and Rail will go to the Veiled for their own protection.

Why don't the rest of their families go? Maybe they figure Annie's family isn't as directly connected, and Cory's parents refuse to go back.

Chapter 5

They meet the leadership of the Veiled: Toros, Tahitoa, Jazan. They also meet some of the newer

recruits: Rachele, Cara, Rhuftog. The Forest is beautiful, show magik.

#### Chapter 6

They start training. Toros trains Cory personally, both with magik and with the bow.

#### Chapter 7

Rhuftog is taken while he was with Tahitoa monitoring the entrance.

#### Chapter 8

Rail becomes a werewolf

#### Chapter 9

Veiled Olympics? Black demons attack, Rail kills a Veiled

The rest is the same/similar.

### Shadowlight in a medieval fantasy setting

#### Advantages

1. I would probably enjoy writing it more.
2. I wouldn't have to deal with people's perceptions of our world, or as much how the Magikal world stays hidden, or technology.
3. It would be relatively simple to Make those changes now, since I'm doing a rewrite.

#### Disadvantages

1. Different audience. Urban fantasy is a different kind of book, with different kinds of readers.
2. Lots of work/pretty major plotting changes