

Isra stalked through the woods, feeling slightly peeved about the whole thing.

Logically, it made sense for her to be in among the natural world, which was her domain, but she felt envious of the others, particularly of Verity, who got to go to the large mountain palace. Isra *liked* people, she *liked* magic, and she was being asked to go out into the woods and speak to birds. This was, yes, her specialty, but Isra thought of herself more as a druid by circumstance rather than a druid by vocation.

“Birds!” she called out. “Come!”

She was, she could admit, feeling a bit surly, and decided that she wasn’t going to take it out on the birds, who had mostly been minding their own business.

They descended down on her position, landing on the trees around her, filling the branches in a way that she supposed other people might find frightening. She took stock of them, mostly tiny owls and relatively uninteresting small birds, though a few that had long necks — river birds — and those with colorful plumage that was a bit surprising in a boreal forest.

Isra had a good amount of reach, but it was easier to deal with the birds when they were close to her, in range of her voice. It was the old way of doing things, which she felt only a mild nostalgia for, and she was leveraging it here for the increased power.

“I need you all to be my eyes,” she said. “Tell me the secrets of these lands, from edge to edge, and the Wildlands beyond, if you can cross the border.” She had no idea whether they could, or whether they could come back. “Be cautious in your approach, as though seeking insects you don’t wish to startle. Report any conversations of interest in the village or the palace. Don’t go to places that are unfamiliar to you. Now go, and return here in a few hours.”

It was straining the limits of what a bird could actually keep in mind, but she hoped that they would err on the side of not being obvious. It was in a bird’s nature to stay hidden though, and also in their nature to be curious, so she didn’t think she was asking too much of them.

They flew off, not quite as one, some of them flocking but most of them going in ones and twos. She was controlling them, in a sense, putting herself into them, as she now understood being a druid, but there were so many that she lost a few of the threads immediately.

Isra found a patch of springy moss and laid down, sprawling herself out. She was going to spend the day listening to the birds, watching through their eyes, and not doing a whole lot else. They were playing at being spies, albeit ones with no training (and a reset to back them up if things went wrong).

The threads to the birds were lost one by one, which was somewhat expected. There had been too many of them to hold onto all of them at once, and where in the past she might have said that certain birds didn’t have the disposition to follow instructions, she thought of it differently now. It was, in some ways, a worse version of the same relationship with the world. A part of her wished that she could have some of that old naivete back.

The finches were the swiftest of the birds, and they reached the village before any of the others, perching themselves at windows and doorways, which felt conspicuous to Isra, but which she couldn't change without pushing quite a bit of herself into them. Listening was easy though, so she listened.

Isra had traveled quite a bit, by her own estimation, not just to Dondrian but all over Greater Plenarch, and she'd decided that at least in Inter, people were mostly the same. They ate, they slept, they wanted companionship and gossip, but that wasn't bound to be much different because they were in a living demiplane rather than out in the world. As she watched, she found a bit of hesitancy to these people, an uncomfortability that she thought matched what she'd felt for so many years in Pucklechurch. She honed in on that, trying to get a sense of it.

A girl moved through the village, looking awkward, staring at everything, backing up slightly whenever anyone came near. She was trying to see how everyone else was doing things, how close they stood to each other, what they were wearing, how they were talking, all kinds of other small things that people didn't pay attention to when they felt at home in a place. It was something that Isra saw a lot of, as she looked around with a hundred eyes. People had been thrust into a new community with only relatively few of them having been there for longer than a few months, and they were all feeling each other out. Some would probably do what Isra did, and stubbornly do their own thing, trying to live with the feeling of being out of place, but maybe they would make up their own rules for how things would go.

Isra focused on one conversation between two girls that had apparently grown comfortable with each other.

"There was this old woman who offered to find me a husband," said one of the girls with a little laugh. Isra detected some nervousness there. "I don't know if that's what she did before, but she felt like maybe the younger people could use some help, I guess."

"I guess that's interesting," said the other girl. She was notably short, with darker skin and hair that had been dyed pink. "I'm not sure that I would want that kind of deal though. I mean, the sort of person who would agree to that?"

"Yeah?" asked the other girl. She was taller, lanky, with white skin that was a bit sunburnt, maybe because she had her shoulders exposed. "I said maybe."

"I guess it's not that weird," said the pink-haired girl. "Only a little weird. Like do you just roll with it? Decide that whatever, it's workable with whomever? I think that would be scary."

"We left it all behind," said the taller girl. "Compared to that, being put together with someone seems like peanuts." She shrugged. "Anyway, it was just a maybe, I don't know if she'll figure anything out, and I can always just say 'no'."

There was some awkwardness to the conversation, and maybe Isra was reading into things, but it seemed like the pink-haired girl was feeling some attraction.

Isra shifted her attention to two older people, who were apparently married, working together baking bread.

"Feels odd, to be among these disconnected people," she said. "So many singletons. I hadn't thought it would be like that."

"What did you think it would be like?" asked the man as he kneaded a large batch of dough.

"I don't quite know," replied the woman. "More like us, I guess." She was frowning. "More couples. More families. More children. Sometimes things go wrong for a family, don't they?"

"Often do," replied the man.

"So I'd think that you'd see more people like, well, us," said the woman. "Families."

"Harder to pick, I'd expect," said the man. "More roots."

"Do you think we'd have come, if we'd known that it would be like this?" asked the woman.

"I suppose so," replied the man. He was looking at a cup of flour with a frown on his face. "There will be families, with time. People will get together."

"You're right," said the woman. "Of course you're right. It just feels like we're outsiders, and that's one of the things we were trying to get away from."

"They like our bread," said the man.

"True, they do that," said the woman.

"I wouldn't rush to call us outsiders," said the man. "It's like baking. You have to give it time."

Isra turned away from them. They seemed like nice people. It didn't seem good to leave your home and the people who might be depending on you, but she could understand it in some circumstances, and whatever *their* circumstances had been, she was willing to cut them some slack.

She was looking for a new conversation to listen in on, hoping that it would be about something that would let them nail Cate to the wall, rather than semi-private things she had no business or interest in listening to. Before she could find one though, she became aware of someone moving through the forest. Moving *toward* her. She turned to look at him with birds' eyes, curious, though he didn't look much like a threat.

He had the dark skin common in Tarbin, though it was difficult to say where he was from, as Isra had almost no way to tell the ethnicities of the eastern continent apart. He dressed like he was from Inter though, a shirt with a vest and long pants, the buttons in the shirt undone to show a bit of his chest. He had curled, unruly hair, and a wispy mustache that she found herself paying a bit too much attention to. It didn't look good, but he wore it with confidence anyway, and that was attractive enough to make up for how it looked. He was older than her, she thought, though not by all that much.

She waited for him to come, trying not to be too obvious about the animals. They turned to look at him of their own accord, some of them doing the particularly characteristic prey response of watching him while pretending that they were just going about their business. For his part, he seemed oblivious, but it was possible this was the very same obliviousness that the animals feigned.

He walked straight up to her. He had known where she was. She stayed resting up against the tree on her soft patch of moss, pretending that she hadn't known he was coming. She had a temptation to speak into the party channel, just for the sake of letting them know, but she was certain that she could handle the mysterious stranger on her own.

"Hallo," he said, accent hard to place. "How do you do?" He had stopped fifty feet away from her, a respectful and non-threatening distance.

"Just fine," said Isra. She stood up from the moss and then sat right back down again, against a tree. "Nice weather."

"Mmm," he said. "Sorry for the intrusion."

"No bother," she replied. She was playing it cool, which came easily to her, but she was unnerved by this young man, and had no particular idea what he was doing out in the woods, nor how he had found her. She wondered whether she was supposed to know who he was, but Verity hadn't mentioned anything, and they had all been through at least part of the day before, per Ria.

"How are you finding the forest?" he asked.

"It's ... familiar," replied Isra. "Boring, honestly."

"Boring?" he asked. There was some of the same hesitancy to him, which made her feel better.

"It's a boreal forest," said Isra. "Most of the trees and plants are the same. There are flowers I've never seen before, and trees that we don't have, but it's not any different than home in most ways." She had seen a lot of central Inter, and the forests had a lot of variety to them, but not as much as she had hoped.

"You're disappointed?" he asked.

"I had thought that coming all this way, I might see something more ... interesting," said Isra. "In the north, in Dondrian, there are trees whose roots descend down from their branches into the sandy soil. The forests are *different* there, filled with other animals. This is just like the sort of place I left."

"You could try the Wildlands," he replied. "*They* have something different."

Isra tensed slightly, as she'd realized something that hadn't been obvious until that point: the man had a mouse in his vest pocket. It was asleep, or nearly so, which was how she'd missed it, but their conversation seemed to be stirring it.

"Well, I'm sure they do," said Isra. "But I did some dungeons before this, and they weren't really to my liking."

"It's not at all like a dungeon," said the man. "You should try it, you might like it. I could take you, if you'd like. You'd be safe with me." He gave her a grin. She hoped *that* wasn't what this was, though there was something about him that didn't exactly make her shrink back.

Isra rolled her eyes. "I'd be plenty safe by myself."

"There *are* dangerous things out there," he said. "Especially once you get far from the palace."

"No dungeon madness though, or that's what I heard," said Isra.

"A creature doesn't need to be dungeon mad to attack," he replied. "And there are other threats, bigger than in a dungeon."

"Mmm," said Isra. She still didn't know how he'd so unerringly found her. "And who are you, that you can protect me?" He didn't look particularly muscular, but perhaps Isra was just used to being around Alfric.

"You don't know?" he asked.

She shook her head. "One of Cate's people?"

"We're all Cate's people, in a sense," he said.

"Is that a yes?" asked Isra. "Some kind of entad tracking?"

"Maybe it's better to keep it a mystery, if you don't know," said the man. "I guess we don't even know each other's names then."

"Isra," she replied.

"Callum," he said. He breathed out a bit. She wanted to ask about the mouse in his pocket, but she didn't want him to know that she was a druid. "Can I ask why you're out here?"

"Just hiding out," said Isra. "Waiting for the day to end, I think." The others would have information, more than she was going to get from the birds. It was clear the palace would be the place to learn things, but Ria had prohibited all but Verity from going there. After the day was done, and they had more information, it was possible that Isra would be allowed to go into the palace and watch through mice or whatever else was around.

"You've been watching people," said Callum.

Isra tensed again. "And how do you know that?"

"You don't deny it?" he asked, cocking his head.

"No," she said. "It's true. But how do you know? Entad?"

"I've heard there *are* entads like that," Callum replied. "Those that let you know who's watching you, and where they are." He raised an eyebrow. "I think that's how I got caught, when I did it."

"Did what?" asked Isra.

In response, he reached into his vest pocket and pulled out the mouse. It was small and brown, and woke slowly, then stood up on the palm of his hand. Isra stared at it. There was still a part of her that thought perhaps it was well-trained, or simply obedient, but when her mind brushed against the mouse, she could tell that there was no more room in it: it was full.

"You're a druid," said Isra.

"One of three here," said Callum, nodding. The mouse ran along his arm and dove back into his pocket. "Four, counting you."

Isra looked at him for a moment. By rights, she should have felt vulnerable, because her primary defense, being able to call on the animals of the forest, had just been neutered. She hadn't brought her bow, and even if she had, it would have been quite a bit of work to get it into position in time. She had her dagger, but that was more or less it. She wasn't supposed to have needed anything.

Still, there was something unthreatening about him. Maybe it was the wispy mustache. She didn't know how a fight between druids would go, but if they neutralized each other, she thought she could probably cut him up.

"You saw what I was doing with the birds," said Isra.

"I did," said Callum. "And I won't tell anyone, but I thought you should know it's the sort of thing that will get you in trouble. You're not supposed to be spying on people."

"Which ... you know from experience," said Isra.

"I was scolded, yes," said Callum. He hesitated. "Were you ... trained?"

Isra was silent for a moment. She didn't understand the question, and it was her long-standing policy to not admit when she didn't understand things, at least unless she was among friends. "No," she said anyway. "I'm in a druid's guild, but it's small, and they don't speak all that much."

Callum regarded her for a moment. "Your skin ... Tarbin heritage?"

Isra pursed her lips. "My parents left there," she said.

"Parents ... plural?" he asked.

She nodded, waiting for him to say something like 'that's odd', which was what a lot of people said. He stayed silent though.

"I guess we're here, so it doesn't really matter," said Callum. "I was a manufactured druid, one made by Tarbin. Born in a stretch of the Echo Desert, like a few others. They'd hoped that I would be a spy."

Isra narrowed her eyes. "You were wondering whether that's what I was too?"

"Yeah," he said. "Just ... you were spying, you're a druid, you're from Tarbin too, you've got a bit of an accent."

Isra didn't think that she had an accent. People only rarely mentioned it, and she had been around people enough that she'd suspected it had sanded itself off. *Hannah* had an accent. "No," she said. "I've lived in Inter my entire life. I was born there." She wasn't entirely sure about that. Her father had never really said, or shared all that much about what had happened before she had solid memories.

"Like I said, it doesn't really matter." He gave a nonchalant shrug. "The old world is gone. *But* that does mean that we need to be on good terms with the new world. Which means not spying on people, or at least not getting caught a few days in."

"I was doing it for a reason," said Isra, feeling defensive. She didn't like the feeling of getting caught, even if it was by someone like this who seemed more nosy than likely to get her in trouble.

"Oh?" asked Callum. "What reason?"

Isra shifted. She *knew* that there were certain things that she wasn't supposed to say. "I'm trying to find out more about Cate."

"Like what?" asked Callum. His tone was cautious.

"I don't know," said Isra. She folded her arms. "It's just a bad feeling." It was considerably more than that, but she was trying not to lie, and she would *need* to lie if he kept pressing. It was one thing for her to have been found out, which might necessitate resetting the day, but it was another thing entirely to admit that she was here when she wasn't supposed to be, more than just a druid ensnared in Cate's trap.

"Yeah," Callum said with a sigh, as though deflating. His hands had fallen loosely at his sides, and some of the confidence was gone.

"You agree?" asked Isra.

"She's kept things from us," said Callum. "And ... she's odd. I think you'd have to be, to run a place like this, to want to create it in the first place, especially in the way that she did."

"There's nothing wrong with being odd," said Isra. "It's the way that she's odd."

"It might spell trouble," said Callum with a sigh. He looked around. "Can I ... sit down?"

Isra nodded, and he awkwardly tried to find a place to sit on the forest floor. He ended up against a tree, close to Isra, a spot that she'd rejected when choosing where to sit because the stones seemed uncomfortable.

"I'm not a part of the inner circle," said Callum. "If I'm honest, I think most of the reason I'm here is because she wanted a backup druid. We're valuable, that's part of our curse. The weather seems to take care of itself, and I'm sure she gave you the talk about how a nice storm every now and then is part of how she likes the rhythm of the world, but the Wildlands have all *kinds* of things. Especially if she wants people living out there, a druid means near-absolute protection from wild animals and the more dangerous plants."

"Because there's no dungeon madness?" asked Isra.

Callum nodded. "That means all kinds of creatures become temporarily tamable. I actually do have a mount, a creature a little like a turtle with eight legs. Fast though." He was silent for a moment. "How they did it, in Tarbin, was to have a woman out on her own, connected through a guild, able to be whisked away by entad when she needed to socialize. Cate talked about doing that here."

"Making druids?" asked Isra.

Callum nodded. "I didn't like it. I don't think three years alone at the start of a baby's life is good for it. I don't think it was good for *me* to only ever see my mother's face, to not know my father. Which might be why I'm on the outs with her."

"You said that to her?" asked Isra.

"No," said Callum. "Not in so many words. But I said it to other people, at dinner one night, and I think it might have gotten back to her. Along with the spying — if you can call it that — I think she ended up disappointed with me."

"Sorry," said Isra.

He shrugged. "It's mostly my own fault. I'm hoping that you don't make the same mistake, or at least not as visibly as I did."

"You're looking out for me?" asked Isra.

"Something like that," said Callum. "I would say that druids need to stick together, but the other two at the palace don't seem to be, so I guess I'm just ... I don't know. I saw you looking. That was all."

"Tell me what you know about her," said Isra.

"Cate?" asked Callum, leaning forward slightly. "There's very little that *anyone* knows, and that's with me listening in on conversations that I really shouldn't have been. There are questions, but no answers. She's keeping things from us. The 'stabilizers' that can apparently be deployed in the Wildlands weren't known to *anyone* until not too long ago. And there have been people

living here, in this demiplane, for *years*, some of them brought on when they were still young and who've now grown middle-aged. The source of her wealth and knowledge is a mystery. I'm not against her, I want to make that very clear, but I think when you decide to go with a mysterious stranger, there's some expectation that they'll stop being mysterious at some point."

"But she still is," said Isra.

"I think she's not human," said Callum. His voice was soft. "That's a rumor that's going around."

"Because she's unearthly?" asked Isra.

"Lots of reasons," said Callum. "Her habit of floating above the ground instead of walking is definitely a part of it. Plus ... all of this. All the work she's done, for unclear reasons."

"She wanted a place of her own, without interference from the government," said Isra. She could, at least, understand that. "If she's not a human, what would she be? Feili?"

"No," said Callum. "She'd be an exceptional feil, from what I know of them. They mostly keep to themselves, and she has an entourage most of the time. Something ... else. Maybe even something that explains how she came to control this demiplane."

"Maybe she *is* a demiplane," said Isra.

Callum cleared his throat. "I'm not sure you're taking this seriously."

"Places can be alive," said Isra.

"In a sense," said Callum slowly.

"Those are the words that Cate uses to describe this place," said Isra. "She says it's a 'living' demiplane. I'm trying to take her seriously."

"What would it even mean?" asked Callum. "Wouldn't we be able to ... feel it?"

"We can't feel people," said Isra.

"I suppose not," said Callum. He let out a breath and rested his head against the trunk of the tree behind him. "Thank you for being understanding about me coming out here."

Isra shrugged. "So long as we don't have to do battle."

He gave her a look, and she knew that this was the wrong thing to have said, but he seemed more baffled than offended. "I don't even know what that would look like."

"I'd stab you," said Isra.

"Oh," said Callum. "Just like that?"

"No one seems to know what happens if one person assaults another," said Isra. "Or what happens when someone steals from someone else. So if it came down to a fight, I would stab you and then figure out the finer points of governance later."

Callum laughed, which was good, because she'd been trying to be funny. She grinned at him.

"Is this what you're doing all day?" he asked. "Sitting out in the woods?"

"Not if you think I'll get caught," said Isra. She stood up from her spot against the tree. "And it seems like I've already been caught once. I'll figure out something else to do." She wasn't sure what, given that this was the role she'd been assigned, but she hoped that Callum's rumors would be enough, and that being found out wouldn't warrant a reset. In fact — "Do you want to spend some time together?"

"Together?" asked Callum. He'd stood up when she did, maybe because of the uncomfortable seat.

"I'm new to this place and not fitting in," said Isra. "Show me around the forest, or the Wildlands?" She felt unexpectedly nervous. Maybe it was the wispy mustache.

"I'm not really fitting in myself," said Callum. He shifted from foot to foot.

"Then show me how not to fit it," said Isra. "I need something to do with myself. Ideally in the village rather than the palace."

"Alright," said Callum. He beamed at her, and for a moment he seemed so happy that she worried she'd made a mistake. "You're up for walking?"

Isra rolled her eyes. "I'm a *druid*. What kind of druid isn't up for walking?"

"The kind who sits around watching through birds," said Callum. "But come, let's go. There's a ravine I want to show you."

They talked as they walked. Callum was quite open about having been deliberately raised to be a spy, which amounted to, after his third birthday, being taken to special school in Tarbin where the very small selection of 'crafted' druids was educated and prepared for time in foreign countries.

"It's nice to be able to talk about," said Callum. "We were sworn to secrecy, which was something I hated. I was never supposed to speak plainly to other people."

"When did you come here?" asked Isra.

"Two months ago," said Callum. "But Cate had contacted me almost half a year ago, I think, at least from the memories I now have. I don't know how *she* found out who and what I was, but there was some ... coercion on her part." He pursed his lips. "She understood I wasn't happy. She was offering a way out. It wasn't *nice*, not as nice as some other people seemed to have gotten, but even if there wasn't the risk of being outed, I might have come."

"It proves the idea of willingness to be a lie," said Isra.

"No, there are all kinds of other motives," said Callum. "Is someone really willing if this is the only way to escape crushing debt, or a terrible family, or whatever else they've got going on? Some people jumped at the chance not because it was so appealing to go somewhere new, but because staying was intolerable."

"Do you regret it?" asked Isra.

"I don't think it matters," said Callum as he kicked a rock out of the way. They were going down a deer path, or something like it, not a properly prepared trail. Some of the trails that Isra had seen looked like they must have required years to construct, moving earth and cutting stairs, but this one had been worn down by the periodic movements of animals trying their best not to expend energy. "One of the few things that Cate has been crystal clear on is that there's no going back. But the thing is, this is a demiplane, right? So there has to be a way home, unless she's somehow locked us in here with a demiplane core. I wish I had studied more before I came here, but I wasn't sure exactly what kind of place this would be." He looked up at the trees. "We're coming to the ravine now."

The ravine wasn't big, but it made up for that by being quite steep, with smooth rock on either side. It looked like the kind of place that had been worn down over time, water doing the long work of carving out rock and making it nicely worn down, but there was something not quite right about it.

"You're not just showing me this because it's interesting, are you?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Callum. "What do you see?"

"It's not natural," said Isra. "Someone carved a path for the water here, to divert this stream."

"Carved?" asked Callum, questioning.

"Not with hand tools, obviously," said Isra. "The rock is too smooth. But something else, some entad." She looked at it. "It looks ... melted."

"Fire," said Callum, nodding. "It's a scar from some battle."

"Or someone needed to cut a path for some reason," said Isra. She frowned. "You think this is a piece of history?"

"It's *definitely* history," said Callum. "Just like the older parts of the village." He placed a hand against the smooth stone. "It's just a question of what it means."

"There's a tower out there, burnt," said Isra. "I imagine by the same thing."

Callum was silent. "Entads, you think?"

"I don't think there's a pyro strong enough to melt stone like this," said Isra. "Though ..."

“Yes?” he asked.

“Only thinking,” said Isra. “The list of creatures that could do something like this is very short.”

“Something from a dungeon?” asked Callum. “Or from the Wildlands?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra, though that wasn’t entirely sure. She’d had a thought, and wanted to keep it to herself, just in case it was dangerous to speak. She’d tell the party later, while they were in extradimensional space, hidden away.

*Dragon.*