

## Chapter 10

“We should turn in for the night,” Thrax said as the moon began to climb, peaking over the trees.

Since the group had started their journey that morning, the forest had grown quite thick. The trees were gathering closer together, and the leaves became so thick that the branches had begun to weave across each other. It was becoming harder to see, with sunlight struggling to break through the canopy of leaves. Though the sun was only now out of the sky, it had been darker for far longer as the light failed to pierce the leaves.

The group set their stuff out, and Thrax stood straight. “I’m going to find some wood.”

“Wait!” Astricus cried quickly, grabbing his cloak. “You can’t cut anything down!”

Thrax stared in astonishment. “Why the hell not, faun?” he scoffed, tugging his cloak from his hands.

“You already know I mentioned the fauns protect the forest, but that’s because we protect the outside, so nothing harms the inside. The deeper we go into this forest, the more alive it becomes. If you harm this forest, it will kill you and anyone else with you. An innocent human girl, a human prince, even a faun prince.” Thrax’s face blanched.

“You must gather what has already fallen or is already dead. Dead tree wood often lies around to make room for what is still living.”

“O-okay...th-thanks for telling me,” Thrax hesitated before going further into the woods, creating a little green fire in his hand to light his way.

“Is that true, Astricus? Is the forest really alive?” Gwen asked.

“All too true.” he nodded solemnly. “I’ve seen the forest’s vengeance take many down. This place is a powerful magic force. It’s wise to respect it as such.”

“Do the centaurs also protect it?”

“Very much so. They protect the outer forest just as much as a faun does. The forest leaves trees that are alive but not quite, so the centaurs can create weapons and power their forges.”

“What do you mean “not quite living”?”

“They are living, growing trees, but they have no magical force. They are normal trees.”

“You mentioned the dark elves as well. They would protect the center of the forest, then?”

“Yes. They live in its heart, the Eternal Night. The elves have more magic than fauns or centaurs, so most know how to use at least runes to produce it, if not their abilities. The forest serves the elves with all they need as a thank you for protection.”

“What do you mean?”

“The forest allows them to hunt or to use sick or dying trees as wood. The forest may do more drastic things like divert a stream or grow medicinal plants around their village.”

“How does it do that?”

“Don’t know. We’ve never been told, as far as I’m aware. I know that somehow, this forest has potent magic, and you do not try to mess about with it.”

“If it’s so dark, how will we know when we’ve found the elves?”

“Well, usually, they would find you. Any wanderers tend to be snatched up by them and based on their intent, they are either returned or...” Astricus gulped and looked away. “Used to feed the hounds.”

“Oh,”

“Don’t let him scare you too much, Gwen,” Aaheer assured her. “The dark elves are also very kind and understanding. They know that sometimes people get lost accidentally or are

curious about the forest. They're not monsters." He chuckled as though the thought was a little joke.

Thrax ended their conversation as he returned with armfuls of sticks and logs. "I was a bit surprised," he admitted as he dropped the wood and began building a fire. "I wasn't expecting to find so much dead wood."

"The forest helps those who respect it," Astricus smirked and nodded sagely.

"*Míthas simo laúdas.*" Thrax lit the wood with green fire. The flames turned golden when they hit the wood and grew into a beautiful fire. "I remember master Majora telling me about magical forests, but I've never visited one. We were going to visit the Black Forest one day. There are many across the country, especially around the border. It's a natural protector. The forest houses fauns, centaurs, nymphs, or dryads, though those last two are more common in the spring and summer. There are also fairies, though those aren't as fun, and elves, of course. Sometimes you can even find the occasional siren."

Thrax skewered some fish on a stick, handing one to each of them, and held it over the fire. "Astricus, are there not also forest druids? I remember a coven lived in the forest near the palace."

"Forest druids have been gone for many years. I'd honestly be surprised if there were any left. They used to be their protectors and sometimes even worshipped the forests. Our forests do not need druids, in any case. We have our strength as protectors, and the magic within it is what we truly need. As more creatures fill forests to protect them, fewer druids are needed. I think, by now, they've just...left." the faun prince shrugged. "There might be a few more out there, but they're certainly not in Hevaña."

"How do you all know so much about this?" Gwen asked, finally.

“Faun princes are raised to know this sort of information. It is our duty to our village and the forest we reside in to know all we can to protect it.”

“And human princes are raised to know as much as possible and interact with other rulers. Spending so much time with Astricus taught me about the forest’s magic.” Aaheer added.

“I’ve learned some forest magic myself,” Thrax said, putting his hands to the ground, murmuring something, and revealing a single flower blooming from where he’d put his hands. Gwen gasped and grinned with excitement, causing Thrax to smile himself. “But I would have to become a forest druid to learn it all.”

“I still think it’s wonderful,” Gwen said, making his cheeks go pink.

Astricus and Aaheer exchanged glances and smirked knowingly.

“So how exactly do we find the elves, Astricus?” she asked.

“Well, we’re heading west, which will take us toward the forest’s center. Because it’s such a magical force, the forest will be able to lead us, as long as we-”

“Respect it?” Thrax repeated.

“Exactly! Fauns have learned to read the forest, but we must still be careful. We could still easily become lost.”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure we don’t become lost,” he said, checking his fish.

“I suppose it shouldn’t be too hard when you put it like that.” Gwen agreed. “If all it takes is respecting the forest and following the signs that Astricus reads.”

“It’s easier said than done, though.” Astricus quickly jumped in. “The forest is only willing to help so much, and it’s still hard to tell sometimes in such darkness. We need to make sure to remain vigilant and be careful.”

“He’s right. We should get plenty of sleep after we eat to cover as much ground as possible tomorrow.” Aaheer said.

The group agreed, and after eating, they all stretched out and fell asleep, except Gwen. She couldn’t help but remain awake, her mind swirling with the flood of information she’d received. She tucked one of the rolled-up blankets under her head as a pillow and looked up into the vast night sky. Even with the winding branches, Gwen could make out the enormous kaleidoscope of stars across a deep blue and purple sky and even what seemed to be a bat fluttering by.

“Can’t sleep?”

She jumped slightly and looked over to Thrax, who was propped up on his elbow.

She shook her head. “You?”

“Well, I was, but my dreams woke me…” he admitted.

“About your half-brother?” she asked.

There was a long pause before he answered, “Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “No… I-… I want to know about your world… where does your king live?”

“We don’t have a king,” Gwen said. “Well… not really. There are some still around, but they don’t have power.”

“Really…? No king…?” He seemed almost hopeful at the thought.

“You didn’t like king Jarkus, did you?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t,” he said firmly. “I loathe him. He’s cruel and cold and deserves his punishment. I never felt any love for him. When I heard what happened, I didn’t care about his life, but I feared for Aaheer’s,”

“You two are very close?”

“Yes, sort of...I know my mother wanted us to be closer, though...she didn’t love the king but loved my brother and me.”

“But you don’t care for your mother,” she said.

“I...have a complicated relationship with her...I would miss her, but she frustrates me. There are many things I wish she did differently,”

“I understand...I feel the same about my father, sometimes.”

“Tell me more about your world,” he insisted. “You mentioned you don’t have warriors?”

“Well, we have soldiers. But they no longer fight with swords, axes, or arrows. When you learn to use those things, it’s usually for fun. Like falconry. Do you lot have that?”

“Yes, Aaheer and I both raised falcons.”

“Well, our soldiers now fight with tanks, guns, and computers. We still have navies with ships and cannons, but they’re metal, not wood.”

“What are those things?”

“A tank is sort of a big metal shell with a gun. There are wheels on it to make it roll, and it can cross over lots of land. Guns are these sorts of metal sticks that shoot bullets. They’re sort of like tiny cannonballs. I guess you could call a gun a handheld cannon. But they shoot much quicker than a cannon. Computers are...well, I’m not very good with them, so I don’t know if I can explain them very well. You use it to...write things and look up stuff. Like a book, but

without paper. There's a board with letters you press to make words, and the words show up on what's called a screen and show you what's happening."

"Fascinating..." he murmured, with genuine intrigue. "Do you not have books in your world?"

"Oh, we have plenty of books. Lots of libraries, and whole shops full of them. I love reading."

Thrax grinned. "I do too...I could spend all day reading...what about animals?"

"We have normal ones like you, cats, dogs, wolves, deer, rabbits, all that sort. But we don't have centaurs or fauns or druids. We call that fantasy. To our world, that's stuff you make up."

"Your world sounds so interesting."

"It's really not...it's quite boring compared to yours."

Thrax went quiet before saying, "Do...do you miss your home?"

"Well..." Gwen paused for a moment. "I will admit, I miss my father, but...there are only some things I miss."

"I'm afraid I've been horrible to you," he sighed. "I've forced you to a strange world that you never wanted to go to and have put you in a dangerous situation that you have nothing to do with...you must think terribly of me."

"Thrax, while I do admit I don't appreciate being snatched from my home," her eyes twinkled teasingly. "I don't think poorly of you. Though you've been stubborn, snarky, and a right prat, I don't think you're a bad person. I just...wish you'd be a bit kinder, I guess."

"I can't promise I won't stumble, but I will do right by you."

"Good. Or I'll insult you to death," she smirked.

“Your viper tongue knows no bounds!” he laughed, gripping his chest like he’d been shot. He smiled gratefully and rested his hand on hers. “I know I’ll need your help, and I’m very grateful to have you by my side...besides, who else will pick at you if not I?” He teased.

She smirked and lightly shoved him. “Ass.”

He flopped onto his back, snickering. “Before you return home, I would like to give you a chance to tour our country. When we’re not under threat of war, of course.”

“I think I would like that very much.” She yawned and curled up under her blanket.

Thrax tucked himself in and looked over at her. “Thank you, Gwen...for everything,”