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The Girl

I made no noise as I moved through the forest.

I was a wraith, haunting those who'd wronged me. Intent on finding Kylorian and *shaking answers out of him*.

He'd hit me. Again. I didn't know how often it was safe for someone to lose consciousness like I had—and in such a short time period too—but I thought I might be approaching that line, and both times I'd experienced it had been at my brother's hand.

Was it terrible that I wanted to strangle him as soon as I saw him again?

Before vanishing, he'd moved me into a part of Vale's bordering forest that I didn't know. When I'd woken up, I'd had to spend the better part of an hour simply getting my bearings. At least, an hour was how long it had felt. I had no way to keep track of time, not in this forest that wasn't mine.

Then, I'd gotten lost. I hadn't wanted to admit it, but after having passed the same weirdly knotted tree four times now, I felt like I could say it.

"I have no clue where I am."

Spinning in a slow circle, I tried to make a plan that would get me to a familiar place, but everything I considered was something I'd already tried.

Going in a straight line until the trees were at my back? I'd gone in circles instead.

Bending twigs to mark the path I'd take? I'd come across a broken twig again in no time.

Follow a creek until it reached Lake Lorne, nearby? That might be helpful if I could find any damn sources of water.

Honestly, it was making me doubt my skills as a woodswoman. Then again, my pounding headache, amplified by any direct sunlight, probably wasn't helping with that.

Could I have a concussion? That would be unfortunate.

A nearby howling scream interrupted my train of thought. Throughout the length of it, I stood stock still, pinned in place by that awful noise, but as soon as it cut off, I sprinted toward it. Anyone in

that much pain was bound to need help, and I was desperate for any human contact, even if it came from someone who might be badly beleaguered by a wound.

After what felt like an eternity of running, I was starting to worry that I might have lost my way again, but right when I planned to give up, I burst into a clearing with the sunlight filling it making my eye water. So, at the least, I'd found a new place to get lost in.

When my vision cleared, I scanned my surroundings, searching for whoever might have made that scream, and my eyes landed on four forms. Two lumps were lying in the clearing's tall grass while another two, nearly identical people were standing over them.

Bright and Dim. Raimie's splinters.

I wasn't aware of running. The next thing I knew I was kneeling over a face that I'd been dreaming of every night since he'd returned from the Birthing Grounds. He was pale with sweat rolling over his skin.

And very definitely unconscious.

I didn't know what possessed me. It was a violation of privacy that I wouldn't normally indulge, but maybe because of my probable concussion or maybe because of the stress I'd accumulated over the last few days, I kissed him.

And it felt wonderful, even if Raimie didn't respond to it. Gasping, I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him again, fully aware that I might be bruising my lips on his. Alouin, I'd missed this. I'd missed *him*.

Why had I thought leaving him was a good idea?

"You should run."

Groaning, I sat back on my heels, squinting at Bright.

"Why are you talking to me?" I said. "I thought the policy was to ignore the unclaimed anomaly who can see you."

"The stick in the mud is right this time, much as it pains me to admit it," Dim said. "You should run."

Glancing between them, I frowned.

"Why?"

They merely pointed at Raimie, which had me scanning him once more. Now that I wasn't so distracted by... *him*, I noticed how distressed he looked. He was mumbling in his sleep and...

Light and shadows were dancing under his skin, a war to fascinate the eye and terrorize the mind.

“Not good,” I breathed.

“Run,” the splinters said as one.

Springing to my feet, I fled Raimie once more, although no noble gesture was driving me this time. No, this time, fear nipped at my heels. Fear for what would happen, fear for my life when it did, fear for Raimie...

Raimie.

Grinding to a halt, I reversed course, meaning to go back as quickly as possible, and something *slammed* into me. I went flying with branches and leaves tearing at my skin and hair. The trees around me groaned until several released sickening *cracks*, and as I tumbled across the ground, something heavy crashed beside me.

With a hiss, I fluttered my eyes open, flinching when my lashes brushed a tree’s trunk. One that was lying right in front of me. I skittered like a beetle away from it, on all fours when I stopped.

What?

The question wouldn’t stop circling through my head as I picked my way back toward the clearing. Wreckage was littered across my path: fallen branches, uprooted plants, and felled trees.

What?

In the clearing, only Raimie remained. The other lump, once lying at his side, was gone, and his splinters had vanished. I approached him, ready to bolt at the first sign of... anything, really, but when I stood over him, I only found a peaceful face, completely ensnared by sleep. All signs of his turmoil had been wiped away.

“WHAT?” I screeched.

The noise prompted no reaction from Raimie, only more soft snores, and I wasn’t sure whether I should wake him up. On the one hand, he might help me find a way to Vale, and *I had questions*. On the other, I didn’t know what a reunion between us might look like and...

What the *hell* had that been?

I didn’t know how long I stood there, undecided, but when a hand landed on my shoulder, dragging me back to conscious thought, the sun was grazing the horizon.

“Ren, we’ve been looking everywhere for you,” Oswin said. “Are you... well? I’ve called your name several times.”

Of course Raimie had his Hand with him. One of them had always been hovering over him, even when in the safety of Tiro.

As I blinked, I realized that I was staring at empty ground where a body had once lain.

"Where's Raimie?" I asked.

Sighing, Oswin crossed his arms.

"Thumb's carrying him to Vale," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I... heard a scream. Ran to it," I said. "How did you find him?"

Oswin pointed.

"We followed the path of destruction."

Right. A forest devastated. Something that had sent me flying.

"What was that?" I whispered. "He... he..."

"I imagine this was the Enforcer's work," Oswin said, surveying the mess. "Whether it was caused during their fight or afterward, I couldn't say."

The Enforcer. The man who'd led Vale's bandit infestation. That must have been the second lump. Yes, that bastard might have been the origin point of what had happened here. But then, there was Bright and Dim's warning to me...

"Ren, you know I can't let you near him, right?" Oswin said. "At least, not if you mean to commit to this separation you've insisted upon. He's barely holding it together as it is."

Did I want to continue along as I had? Could I live the rest of my life without him?

No. I couldn't.

But.

I also couldn't be around him now. Since Hadrion's death, I'd become a box of broken pieces, only just beginning to put myself together once more. I wouldn't come crawling back to Raimie like that. The pieces must further meld before I could hope to beg for forgiveness.

Plus, whatever *that* had been, the force to fell a copse of trees, I needed time to process it. If it had come from Raimie, then I might need to redefine what I thought of him. I wasn't sure about that yet.

So, I said, "I have to find my brother."

"Already done," Oswin said. "Pointer and Little took him to a homestead, near the turnoff for Vale. He's probably recovering there. I can take you to him."

“Thank you,” I said, “and Oswin? I don’t plan on staying away from Raimie for forever. When I’m ready, I’ll return to him. If he’ll have me.”

A faint smile crossed Oswin’s face.

“Oh, he will. Once the stubborn fool has his heart set on something or someone, he never lets it go,” he said, “and much as I might resent the pain you’ve caused him, I think you’ll do him more help than harm, in the long run at least. I’ll set aside my anger for my friend’s happiness.”

“That’s... forgiving of you,” I said.

Oswin’s grin turned sharp.

“Don’t test that forgiveness. If you hurt him again, I’ll murder you with my bare hands, and I won’t feel a thing once it’s done,” he said. “Now, let’s get you to your brother.”

“So, that’s been my last few weeks,” I said. “Pretty intense, right?”

Pausing, I glanced in the direction of Tiro. Home. Or what should have been home.

“I understand Ky’s reluctance to visit us now. Having returned after seeing more of Auden, I know how *small* Tiro is, and... I feel your absence more keenly, Had-had.”

Blinking back tears, I cleared my throat.

“Anyway, I should finish my story. By the time Ky woke up, Raimie had not only removed Corruption from Faramede, Vale’s mayor, but accepted her and the town’s undying gratitude for saving them. Kylorian wasn’t happy about that, but then again, I doubt Raimie was either, the idiot.

“You were right, little brother. I shouldn’t have ended things with him, but don’t worry. I’m planning on taking your advice. I will do what’s best for me, but it’ll be in my own time.”

Far distant, Kylorian called, “Ren, are you almost ready?”

Puffing a sigh, I blew hair out of my eyes.

“Give me a minute, Ky. Alouin, you’re impatient sometimes.”

Crouching, I laid a hand on Hadrion’s grave.

“I’m off again, Had-had,” I said. “I’ve got to keep Ky safe, even if it’s from himself. I’ll be the shield for him that I failed to be for you because I love my brother. I love you both. See you soon.”

Rising, I brushed off of my hands as I hurried toward Kylorian.

“*You*,” I said, pointing at him, “are very rude.”

“I’m sorry, but we have a schedule to keep,” Kylorian said.

“I know that,” I said, rolling my eyes. “So? Let’s get to it.”

I strode forward, but when Kylorian started after me, I whirled on him, poking his chest.

“You owe me two unbidden trips into dreamland,” I said.

Kylorian made a face.

“I said I was sorry and explained why I did it-”

“Trying to protect me is *not* a good enough excuse for something like that,” I said.

When I shoved him, he rocked back.

“The next time you do *anything* like that, I will leave you in whatever scrape you’ve landed in, and I won’t look back,” I said. “Do you understand me?”

At his sides, Kylorian clenched his fists. I probably hadn’t been meant to see the motion, close as I was, but I had, and it made me wince. I’d never actually follow through on my threat. Kylorian must know that, but I had to establish how little I needed him to keep me safe. What I’d said wouldn’t, however, help him with whatever internal battle he’d been fighting since Hadrion’s death, and I hated adding to its difficulty.

“I understand,” he eventually said through gritted teeth.

“Good!”

Wrapping my arms around my brother, I squeezed until he returned my hug, and after a moment, I escaped from him, dancing away.

“Come on, Ky! Let’s go convince a bunch of suspicious, twitchy survivors that you should be king!”

Together, my brother and I left home and the grave of our youngest sibling behind.

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