

SIGH

“Let’s just get this over with.” a man seemingly in his twenties said as he climbed on his horse.

His hair was a light blue colour, like Elaine’s. His face sported eight or nine points of similarity to hers too. He was Gawain, her father. Funnily enough, he had reached Green about the same time as his daughter, despite being around fifty years older. It was the inevitable consequence of being born at Orange and having a child more talented than he was. That, coupled with the fact his branch of the family hadn’t inherited the bloodline, meant his status had only ever been slightly higher than the likes of Percy. At least until Elaine came along.

“Sure.” Percy nodded, getting on a second horse, with his cousin right behind them on a third.

He didn't dislike this uncle of his like the others. They'd never talked much, and it wasn't like Gawain had ever particularly shown any care for him, but at least he wasn't among the crowd mistreating him either. If he *had* to be escorted to the temple – and he *did* have to, it was a long and dangerous trip – then he wouldn't have picked anyone else.

The horses galloped forward, Percy already feeling excited about their destination. He was still tired of course, having trained relentlessly over the last three days, but the thought of finally learning his affinity after being in the dark his whole life was invigorating.

'Not to mention the other thing waiting for me there.' he grinned.

"You seem to be in good spirits today." Elaine chirped as her horse neared his.

"Well, *your highness*. Us *lowborns* don't get to leave the House very often." he chuckled.

This earned him a casual punch in the shoulder.

He rubbed the 'injured' area in an exaggerated manner. He made it seem like a joke but truth be told, it did hurt some. Elaine had two grades on him, which translated to a ninefold advantage in physical strength. Even a light tap from her felt heavier than she realized.

"Let's see if you're still as cheery after two weeks on horseback." she replied with a smile of her own.

The trio pressed onward for several more hours, with Elaine and Percy chatting at the back, while Gawain ignored them, riding a few paces ahead.

Soon, they entered a forest. It smelled fresh, especially to Percy who hadn't ever breathed anything other than the stale air of the mansion. On each side of the path, he saw rows upon rows of tall and wide pine trees, their cones a strange oblong shape, their surface filled with small holes. Every now and then, a gentle breeze would blow, causing them to emit soft high-pitched sounds. It was precisely this unique variety of trees which made the "Whistling Woods" famous in the region.

Only when the sun began to set did Gawain stop, gesturing at them to help him set up camp. They'd have to spend four nights in the forest, and another two along the grasslands on the other side, before reaching the foot of the mountain where the temple was located on the seventh.

“Uncle, how safe are these woods even?” Percy asked, as he gazed at the imposing trees which already looked much scarier than they had just minutes ago.

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Gawain chuckled.

“Don’t worry kid. The most dangerous thing we can run into is a pack of wood goblins. A simple Crude spell from a Green core can easily kill a whole bunch of them.”

Percy looked at his grinning cousin, his uncle’s words reminding him that the innocent-looking girl was really a little monster in disguise.

Shrugging, he finished preparing his tent, before sitting by the campfire with the others and eating some dried rations. The group dined in silence, as he and Elaine had already spent all day chatting.

Next, his uncle went to sleep, leaving the two to take the first watch together. Percy was too weak to take a shift by himself. If they were ambushed, he might not be able to do much before waking the others. Consequently, Gawain and Elaine had to split the night between themselves, with Percy simply serving as a second pair of eyes for his cousin.

In the end, their first night at the Whistling Woods passed uneventfully, as did the one after. It wasn't until the third day they stumbled upon a grizzly bear, but it actually fled from them on sight. Most animals on Remior – even the ones which didn't possess magic of their own – had evolved the ability to sense another's mana core, mostly to avoid danger.

'Geez, she fell asleep again.' Percy rolled his eyes.

While Elaine had been a bit tense at the beginning, she had noticeably relaxed over the past few nights. This was the second time she dozed off an hour before their shift ended. He felt bad waking her up, especially since nothing would happen most likely. Still, he knew he couldn't protect the group by himself on the off chance it did.

“Elaine.” he muttered, trying to get her to hear him, without waking his uncle who was sleeping just a dozen yards further.

Yet, he didn’t even hear his own voice. Come to think of it, even the whistling sound of the wind passing through the trees seemed to have gone silent.

He frowned.

“ELAINE!!!” he yelled again, this time not caring about waking Gawain by accident.

Nothing. He felt his vocal cords vibrate, but not a sound came out of his mouth. Paling, he darted towards her, hoping to shake his cousin awake.

An arrow landed soundlessly just in front of his foot, stopping him in his tracks. Another soon followed, this one whizzing by him, nicking him in the shoulder. Turning to look in the direction the projectiles had been fired from, he only spotted several pairs of bright yellow eyes glinting in the darkness.

'*Shit.*' he thought, right as a third arrow hit him in the thigh.

Gritting his teeth, he resumed his dash to Elaine. She was only four meters away, though they now felt longer as he limped, barely dodging the fourth arrow by accident.

He was about to reach her, when the fifth arrow hit his other calf, sending him tumbling on the dirt. Normally, the sound should have woken her up as he was only half a meter away, but something was still muting all noise in the area.

Percy stretched his arm, trying to reach her foot as he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

Turning his head, he saw a silhouette standing over him. It wasn't very tall, probably shorter than he was. Still, the savage look in its eyes, coupled with the glint of its weapon's edge – some kind of hatchet most likely – were enough to convince him of the danger it posed.

As if by instinct, he turned his palm the way of the creature, repeating the same move he'd been practicing over the days leading to the trip. He hurled the mana a second sooner than he would have liked. While he could have charged it some more, he had to stop his assailant before it swung its weapon.

Not even waiting to see if it had any effect, he reached for his cousin, this time succeeding. The girl's eyes snapped open, as did her mouth. She tried to scream, but he couldn't hear her.

Luckily, she regained her wits a moment later. Just in time too, as she was already surrounded by three more of the fiends. A quick flash of azure later, and the upper bodies of all four of the goblins – including the one still standing motionless over Percy – were cleanly separated from their legs.

Another spell sent a bucketful of water splashing over her father, waking him up.

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Percy let out a breath he hadn't even noticed he was holding, as his relatives rounded up the remaining goblins. The creatures tried to run away of course, but their short legs couldn't possibly outrun a Green cored human's.

Only now did he take the time to examine the arrows sticking out of his flesh.

'Riding a horse is going to suck so much tomorrow.'