

“Who is this child?” Asked the imposing man as he scowled down at Twigg.

Twigg shrunk behind Julius, clinging to his arm.

“She's my assistant.” Replied Julius. The man scowled.

“You aren't getting more money.” He said, bluntly. “We asked for a single trapbreaker. We won't pay for two.”

“That's fine.” replied Julius blandly. “But we're a set, so she comes or neither of us do.” The man scowled for a long time, offering no answer.

“Oh for sky's sake, Gorham, it's fine!” Blurted Gorham's cloaked companion. “Let him bring the girl so we can get going!” Her voice seemed to startle the imposing man, who quickly turned to face his associate.

“We have to work out the pecking order...” He moped.

“The pecking order is I'm in charge and everyone else does as I say, and I say its fine.” The hooded woman barked. Gorham seemed on the verge of tears, but sat down next to the wirey man who had remained silent so far.

“Chay.” Said the woman pointing to herself. “Gorham, Bund. We lost our last breaker, and two good men last time we tried looting the place we're going. If you're willing to put this girl in danger on your head be it.”

Julius nodded.

“Fine then,” said Chay. “into the cart. We'll be there by nightfall and get started at dawn.”

Twigg squeezed Julius's arm as the others walked away.

“Don't worry,” He said reassuringly. “We can take care of ourselves.”

The cart jostled down the road for a very long time before before Bund chose to speak. He alone rode in the back of the cart with Twigg and Julius.

“The girl,” He asked. “how old?” Julius hesitated, but couldn't see the harm in being truthful.

“Seventeen or so.” He replied.

“Both of you have the gift...” Bund mused.

“Magic?” said Julius. “Yes, a little.”

“The girl... Much stronger than you.” Bund continued.

“She had more teaching than I did.” replied Julius.

Bund was silent for a long moment. “Wasn't a question.”

Julius and Twigg look at one another. Not sure what to make of this.

“As strong as Chay... Stronger maybe. In one so young it's a danger. Needs to learn from a master.”

“It's not really an option for us.” Replied Julius. “We have to eat too.”

There was a long silence. Bund turned away to stare out the window flap. “Pity...”

Scene missing

Later on the group arrives at a forrest tavern run, and patronized almost exclusively by, elves. Havent written the bridging parts yet. Wrote this all in a go at 3AM one morning after waking up for no obvious reason.

“These aren't the polite city elves you're used to, city dweller.” Growled Chay. “They're wilod, like they used to be. A part of the wood and capable of savagery like all creatures of the wood.”

“Even deer?” Asked Julius.

“What?” Asked Chay.

“Are deer capable of savagery?” Aske Julius sarcastically. “They're creatures of the wood.”

Chay was awestruck by the rogue's impertinance. Gorham chimed in happily, as the conversation had turned to something he actually knew about for a change.

“A buck will gore you to death in a mate rage, and a doe will protect a foal with a fury just as dangerous.” He grinned over his ale.

“Never take a wild animal for tame, or safe. They ain't. They'll do you over as quick as you like if you let your guard down.”

“Interesting.” Replied Julius, turning toward Twigg. “We've learned something valuable today. Mark it, my friend.”

“Yes, master!” Chirped Twigg across her bowl of soup.

Distracted by the conversation none of them noticed the burly elf cross the room. He was suddenly there at the table glowering at them all. Julius and Twigg barely reacted, while the others stiffened and put hand to weapon handles discreetly. After a long moment he spoke to Julius.

“You, where did you steal that bow, human?” His sword hand was ready to draw. A fact Julius took notice of.

“I earned my bow, friend.” He replied calmly. The elf sharpened his gaze.

“You've come to a dangerous place to tell your lies.” The elf said sternly.

“I retrieved it from a forsaken hole in Dorelia.” Said Julius, reaching slowly behind himself. “A place where few would dare set foot in. It's previous owner hadn't need of it for well over a hundred years, I expect.”

Julius carefully handed the bow across the table. The elf looked

over the others before taking his hand off his sword. Julius noticed a few other elves taking an interest in the bow.

“No weapon of elven make would accept a human as a master.” The elf said, drawing one of his own arrows and aiming at a beam well across the hall. “It's wasted on your kind.”

He let the arrow slip. It spun wildly around, veering off course enough to scatter a table. Although the arrow arced away from anything living before lodging itself in a windowsill.

“Impossible...” Gaped the elf as several other came to inspect the bow. “I haven't missed a shot that easy since I was a boy.”

“Perhaps you don't know elven weapons as well as you think.” Said Julius, leaning back in his chair.

The elf wheeled on him in a rage and drew so quickly that none of his companions had time enough to do anything. Not that Twigg even tried. She casually ate her soup and watched the entire affair transpire without so much as flinching.

As soon as his fingers released the arrow it splintered with a resounding crack. Several pieces shot backwards, causing the elf to drop the bow and topple to the ground. The assembled crowd gasped, including Julius's employers.

A very old looking elf stepped forward and picked up the bow.

“I haven't seen such a thing since before most of these children were born...” He said, as he inspected the weapon. “A bow that can't be turned on its master. However did you find such a thing, boy?”

“I think it was lonely.” Smiled Julius.

The old elf looked shocked, then let out a long genuine laugh. “I think you might be right! May I test your weapon, child?”

Julius nodded.

“I think this weapon deserves a test under the light of the moon.”

A few minutes later nearly the entire hall had emptied onto the road.

“It may surprise you to hear this,

“ Said the old man. “But my son is actually one of the finest archers in the world, in spite of what happened inside.”

The angry elf stood, embarrassed looking, beside his father.

“Fire an illuminated arrow, Calen.” Ordered his father. The young elf obeyed without a word. He fired an arrow that glowed brightly as soon as it left his bow. It sped away at a steep angle, high into the sky. A moment later the elder elf drew Julius's bow, which instantly lengthened into a longbow, glowing a faint green as it did so. He let slip an arrow of his own which sped into the night as quietly as a sigh.

A second later the brightly glowing arrow split neatly into two halves and fell, light diminishing, from the air.

“Friend of elves,” Said the old man, turning to Julius. “I would know your name.”

“Julius Drywood, sir.” He replied, bowing.

“Bowen Featherfinger.” The old man bowed in return. “When you're as old as I am it's a rare blessing to see something you haven't seen before. And I've never seen a bow of the forgotten arts with a human master.”

“What do you call you weapon?” asked someone from the crowd.

“Sure Shot.” replied Julius sheepishly.

The elf, and old woman, took the bow and held it a moment. “It's name is here.” She said, pointing to some script on the handle. She chuckled as she handed it back. “Do you read our language as well, human?”

“Barely a letter.” Admitted Julius.

“Amazing...” The woman smiled. “The bow is called Elianth Ora Toge. In your tongue it would be Sure Of Shot.”

The crowd was suitably impressed by this seeming coincidence.

Twigg leaned in close to Julius, pulling down his ear. “Did you know that, master?”

“I had no idea.” He admitted. “It just came to me one day. I wasn't in the habit of naming weapons before that.”

A moment later Calen, the angry elf, stood stiffly before the pair. With a very pained expression he spoke. “I have judged you unfairly. Only a true hearted man could master a weapon this

excellent. For it to have chosen you is... Exceptional.”

“Chosen me?” Said Julius.

“old weapons, the ones of lost crafts, have powers unlike the crude weapons we make now.” Explained Calen. “Some are said to be infused with spirits, and magics unknown to us now. Craftsmen and smiths who fell in the days of tears took their secrets with them.”

“I knew it was old and rare, but its true value was unknown to me.” Said Julius, regarding his bow anew.

“None can wield that bow who you count as a foe.” Said Calen. “Why it chose you none can tell, but legends say that only the true of vision and wise of heart carry weapons such as yours. They are qualities we rarely see in your kind.”

“Of that I'm sure, I'll do my best to live up to the legacy of this bow.” Said Julius. “But, just out of curiosity, why don't you take it from me? Surely someone among you is worthy of it.”

“That weapon will serve you till your death, Anyone who would claim it by force would find it no more use than any stick from the ground.” Said Calen. “no one worthy would take it from your hands until your body had returned to the earth. Or so it is said. In truth most of old weapon lore is just that. Stories passed down and mutated by time.”

“Good to know.” Said Julius. “I hope we remain a team for a good long while. It'd be a shame if Sureshot spent another hundred years or more laying in the dust again.”



The rest of the evening was spent in closer company with the elves. Stories of the local lore, warnings, and advice for surviving encounters with straggling creatures of all types.

“The forest is wild and alive.” Bowen cautioned. “It took back acre upon acre of land men once claimed in so few years it speaks to the presence of forces more powerful than mortals understand. Even we children of the land go with care through the deep places.”

“Would any of your number be interested in coming along as a guide?” Asked Julius. “I value my life above potential treasures.”

The others were within earshot of his question and visibly stiffened at the mention of further dividing any spoils. It didn't go unnoticed by the old one. Perhaps to spite them he suggested that there were adventurous elves in their company who might jump at the chance to improve their circumstances.

A little later Chay cornered Julius.

“Who told you it was okay to recruit these elves?” She asked quietly.

“I took the initiative myself.” He replied. “You three have already proven that travel in the forest is not your strong suit. Your woodsman has scarcely traveled 4 miles from his lands.”

Julius motioned casually towards Gorham. The burly oaf was loosing badly, but graciously at darts.

“And your... I don't even know what his function is. Creepy guy? Doesn't seem to have much skill beyond backstabbing and purse

cutting. We started this little venture with you questioning my pedigree, but I seem to be the only one with any actual experience in the world outside the walls!”

“I-” Chay replied, taken aback. “We've worked together on several jobs!”

“Robbing houses? Looting graves?” Julius shot back. “What exactly do you have experience doing?”

“Never you mind!” She replied. “But if you're going to lash out over the matter then have your mud covered guide! Their pay comes from your cut!”

“Maybe I should forgo the guide and wait for you to get yourselves killed! Then there will be plenty for me to spread around however I choose! I'm starting to think you needed my services a great deal more than you let on!”

Chay was speechless. For a few moments her harsh face melted into one of genuine worry and hesitation. Eventually she regained her composure.

“You're deluding yourself, child.” She replied shakily. “We can more than handle ourselves. See that you don't forget that.”

With that she excused herself and melted into the crowd.

“Your companions are ill chosen...” A voice commented as Julius watched Chay retreat.

Julius turned towards the speaker, an elven maiden with pale skin,

but dark hair. She was glancing at his associates with a calculating eye.

“Except the little one. A lover perhaps?” She asked.

“More like a sister.” He replied. “It's a long story.”

“Not as long as you think it is I suspect.” She smiled. “I am Coraphelia Skydark. You may call me Cora.”

“Thank goodness.” Joked Julius, taking her hand. “How much of that did you hear?”

“I think you'll find that almost everyone within three meters heard the entirety of your conversation.” She winced. “You forget where you are, I think.”

Julius closed his eyes and tapped two fingers between his brows.

“Wood elves...” He muttered.

“Our hearing is known to be... exceptional.” Cora smiled. “Your friend didn't do herself any favors by calling us mud covered.”

“She's no friend of mine.” He replied. “She's an employer, nothing more.”

“You should choose your employers with more care then, I should think.” Cora offered.

“I keep telling the guildmaster that but he keeps giving me these offers.” Explained Julius. “I think he's trying to get me killed...”

“You're an odd man, even for a human.” Cora laughed. “But I think I'd like to join your party if you would have me.”

“Really?” Julius replied incredulously.

“Indeed!” She replied. “The elders think you travel under a unique star. I'd like to see where it takes me.”

The woman seemed trustworthy and earnest and, as no other elves seemed interested in joining the group, Julius essentially hired her as his assistant. Chay was adamant that any pay the elf received would come from the cut he was already splitting with Twigg. Julius reckoned that treasure had little value to a dead man anyway.

Cora had extensive knowledge of the elf paths and a better understanding of what lay off of them than most. The Skydarks were named thus for staying in places where leaves were so dense the sun never reached the ground.

When the sun rose the party set out, afoot, since no roads past the inn would accommodate the cart. They left it in the care of Bowen, fully assured that no one would dare put finger to it under the watch of his family.

The trek inward was pleasant enough. The trees kept the sun off of them, but weren't so dense as to make things unnerving. Cora led, Julius and Twigg came near after and the three others lagged behind. Gorham in particular made a point to voice his displeasure with walking loudly, which caused Chay to scold him for agreeing to something he apparently didn't understand. Bund loped along in near total silence.

After a very long day of, increasingly difficult terrain, even the elf

was ready to set up camp. Gorham continued to grumble to the point that Julius set his tent up for him just to shut him up for a moment. Chay lit a fire and Twigg helped make some food. They were sitting down to it when Julius realized Cora was missing. He was about to say something when she strode into view.

“We're within the hunting range of at least two groups of something.” She declared grimly.

“What kind of somethings?” Asked Gorham.

“My best guess is Kobolds.” She replied. “Deep forest tribes are very good at keeping themselves obscured. It's possible they're already aware of us.”

“Don't they usually avoid humans and elves?” Asked Julius.

“Aye, but if they think they have an advantage they have been known to raid.” Cora nodded. “We'll need to set a watch.”

“I can cast a scream charm around the camp.” Said Chay. “That should be enough to put fear back in their little hearts if they get curious.”

“Excuse some animals are drawn to noises like that. Can you make it more of a bellow, or roar?” Asked Julius.

Chay looked embarrassed. “No, I can manage a range of shrieks, but they all sound artificial.”

“I'll take first watch. Four hour shifts.” Said Bund, emotionlessly.

“It's better if we do it in pairs.” Said Cora. Her words hung a moment.

“Fine!” Exclaimed Gorham. “I'll take first too.”

“I'll take second.” Said Julius. “I usually don't sleep well in the wild anyway. “

“Then I'll take second as well.” Added Cora. “Chay and Twigg can rest properly since they're mages.” She looked at Twigg for a moment and added. “Right?”

“Sort of.” Replied Twigg.

“That's settled then.” Concluded Chay. I suggest you two turn in early. We need keen senses in the dark.”

Night was already falling. After finishing their meal Twigg, Julius and Cora retired to Julius's tent.

“I don't usually sleep inside anything.” Cora mused. “I suppose I should if I'm, going to take a watch. Can I sleep here? There's room enough for three, don't you think?”

There was, but not much more.

“We can manage that. Can't we Twigg?” Asked Julius. She nodded energetically.

“I'd feel more... comfortable if I could...” Cora mumbled.

“Come again?” Asked Julius.

“I have a little magic.” Said Cora. “It makes me feel better in the forest. Would you mind if I cast it on the tent?”

“I don't see a problem with that.” Said Julius. “Do you need anything for it?”

“A few sticks laid along the walls is all.” She replied.

In a few moments a few branches were braced against the outside of the tent. Cora made a few gestures and spoke a few words. The limbs suddenly planted themselves and wove new branches along the sides of the tent. In a few moments it was hard to tell a tent had been set there at all.

“It's a wall spell.” Explained Cora. “But I was never good enough to do it properly. All I can manage is a little bit of camouflage and armor. It's saved me from harm on more than one occasion though.”

Twigg bounded inside gleefully. Their little tent had been turned into a tiny cabin as far as she was concerned. As he slid himself in Julius had to admit it felt much safer than a canvas strung over some poles.

They could still hear the fire crackling and the others talking as they settled in to sleep. It came easily.

The sound of footsteps woke Julius a number of hours later. Slow methodical plodding steps. Bund. The dour man leaned down and tugged on Julius's foot.

“Your watch is next.” He said evenly. The sound was enough to wake Cora, but Twigg remained asleep. She had been wedged

snuggly between the two and couldn't have been happier about it. They slipped carefully out of the tent to avoid rousing her. Bund was already slipping into his tent when they stepped into the fire light. It was smaller than when they left. A few more branches were added and soon it was much larger than it was before. Its light stabbed forcefully into the darkness. Julius could see a few pairs of eyes react to it in surprise.

“They're out there.” commented Cora.

“A handful maybe.” Julius agreed. “Few enough that they could move in close in the dark...”

“Don't let on that we know.” Said Cora. “if they think we don't notice we can get a better count.”

Julius sat down casually by the fire, looking past it into the trees beyond. Cora did the same roughly opposing him.

“About twenty behind you.” He said quietly.

“twelve or so...” Replied Cora. “Ever fought them before?”

“No, but I've seen them fight.” Said Julius. “Alone they aren't much, but they overwhelm you with numbers.”

“Exactly.” Said Cora. “And if there are this many we can see there are twice that many we can't...”

“Hopefully, if we look alert, they'll move on.” Said Julius. “I hate fighting them.”



“They can be very dangerous in large groups.” Observed Cora.

“Yeah, but I just don't like killing them...” Said Julius.

“You don't?” Said Caora quizzically. “Most humans jump at the chance to exterminate a colony of Kobold.”

“Well, most humans have never seen a Kobold village.” Replied Julius. “They may not be as smart a people, but they have families. I've seen them mourn their dead. It's pitiful. Little dog like families wailing at the sky.”

“I've heard rumors, but never seen a Kobold village with my own eyes. How did you manage it?” She asked.

“I... got lost in the woods.” He replied sheepishly. “I only found my way out by following a group of females and pups to a river I recognized. It took 3 days, so I saw a lot of their little encampment. Keeping them from smelling me was no easy task.”

“No, I expect not. She smiled. “An unwashed human becomes offensive quickly... Although I'm inclined to think you have a little elf in you.”

“i assure you, I'm completely human.” Julius grinned. “Just a strange one who doesn't like killing needlessly.”

“I'm not sure if I would call you strange. Interesting maybe, possibly exceptional... I think I might like to have a little human in me when this is over.” She smiled wickedly.

Julius chuckled uncomfortably, smiled, and went very red. Cora

giggled.

“I think,” Julius said, after a long pause. “That I can scare them off.”

“How can you do that?” She asked.

“They have a particular call they make when something dangerous is near. I think I can mimic it. They would scatter if they heard it when I was observing them.”

“By all means, learned human,” She smiled. “If it keeps us out of a fight I'm all for it.” Julius nodded.

Cupping his hands to his mouth he let out a shrill bark like noise. Something like a dog in distress or afraid. He did it quickly twice then once long and slow.

A call came back. A series of yips. Here and there, all around the camp they echoed. Then silence. Julius made his call again. This time the sound of the yipping came from further away, an in one direction.

“They've left...” Gaped Cora.

“I expect they left a scout or two. We shouldn't let down our guard till morning.” Julius replied seriously. “They'll be curious about this encounter now.”

“I suppose so.” She replied. “They seem much smarter than my kind has ever given them credit for.”

“Elves have never been short on arrogance...” Said Julius. “Present

company excluded.”

“No, you should include me.” Cora laughed. “I was very arrogant in my youth, and still have bouts of it even now.”

“I know it's impolite... but can I ask you your age?” Julius said awkwardly.

“I am approaching my one hundred and third year.” Cora said matter of factly. “By human reckoning I am considered middle aged.” To his eyes she looked no older than twenty, if that. “I'm impressed that you've managed to educate yourself so well in your short time.”

“You're almost four times older than me.” Julius marveled.

“And I've rarely strayed from the forest.” She added. “I must admit, from time to time I've thought about seeing more of the world. It was more dangerous when I was young, but it's settled a lot since then.”

“Did you... see the rise of the necromancers?” He asked.

“We rarely had dealings with the world outside these mountains in those days.” She said, seeming to look back in time. “By the time we realized how much danger there was it was almost too late. They wanted fresh bodies and were too scattered and few to suit their foul plans.”

“I was too young when the call to arms was raised, but I lost friends and family in the years that followed. Not a pleasant time to come of age in. Of course there hasn't been a necromancy in a very long

time. And no major attacks except for the assault on the walled city, but that was put down, as even you are old enough to know.”

Julius nodded grimly.

“My father was in the city that day. Helped defend it. Saw the red maiden repel the horde at the gates. I wish I had chosen to go with him. It breaks my heart to think of those poor people attacked without warning.”

“I'm sure you would have been a great help.” Julius offered.

“I tried to be after the word reached us.” Cora continued. “I spent a year felling trees to help rebuild. Even rode in with the shipments a few times. Human settlements are beautiful, even if they do seem a bit cold sometimes.”

“Some of us have minds of stone.” Said Julius.

“And they've infected the city elves.” Scowled Cora. “Distasteful, creatures. It seems like they only live in the cities to spend their time heaping scorn on other people.”

“The old families at least.” Offered Julius. “I know some very decent elves who've never set foot in a forest.”

“I find that hard to believe.” She laughed.

“I like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt.” Said Julius. “Of course I've nearly been knifed in the back more times than I can count, so maybe the one with the problem is me.”

Cora laughed heartily, then pulled Julius into a very long kiss.