

Talina on the other hand was glad when it rained. The days were hot, generally, and the rain provided a welcome chance of cooling down. More importantly, however, it meant that Arela had no chance to use her lute because, according to her, the rain would ruin the instrument. Rain meant no rhymes about Talina's exploits. When Dresgar and Ebrik tried to tell Arela that the rain would likely have no negative effect on an instrument given by the Lady herself, it only provoked an angry response from the gnome.

"An instrument is an instrument," she snapped back. "An artist takes care of it, no matter the origin!"

"But what if you'll need it during a fight in the rain or something?" Dresgar asked, earning himself another furious glare.

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it! Until then, I will take care of *my* instrument as *I* see fit!"

The pair went quiet after that, though only for a short while. When Arela tried only rhyming without music, the dwarf and Outcast attempted to come up with the most ridiculous lines they could think of.

"If I can't concentrate in peace, then I won't write!" Arela growled after a particularly horrible line from Dresgar, one even Talina had chuckled at. Arela spent no more time on her song during the days after, but each evening when it did not rain, she took out her lute and entertained them with songs and stories.

Overall, the first days of their journey were pleasant enough, and much of it reminded Talina of her time with the dwarven merchants and of Dagnir, the dwarf she had not been able to save with her powers. It seemed like that was a lifetime ago now, though in truth it had only been about a month past.

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On the fifth day of their journey, the clouds had disappeared, making way for a bright blue sky. The canopy above was less thick in this part of Corfellan, this far from Nyr Myrenial, and the trees gradually became more like the size of the woods back home around the Clear Lake.

Dresgar and Arela walked side-by-side, discussing parts of their powers, and Ebrik walked in front next to Ereth, when something caught Talina's eye and made her halt.

"Talina?" Arela asked. "What's wrong?"

Ereth had already nocked an arrow on his bow, and Ebrik fingered his hammer nervously as they watched her.

"I'm not sure," she said, staring in the direction that had caught her attention. It was mostly thick shrubs and dark green foliage that rustled with

a soft breeze. At least, she hoped it was the wind. "I thought—"

An arrow suddenly whistled out of the undergrowth nearby, straight for her heart. It bounced off the barrier of Light that Ebrik threw up just in time before it would have struck.

Guttural cries and howls immediately followed the shot, and more arrows flew at them from all directions. Ebrik's armour lit up brightly, and shimmering barriers enveloped each of them, deflecting the arrows or simply splintering them when they hit. Several shafts clanged against Ebrik's thick metal armour, doing no damage, and suddenly several figures jumped out at them from the thick foliage.

"Gather up!" Talina cried, drawing her sword while she immediately reached for the Light herself. The five of them moved in a tight circle, their backs to each other while they readied their weapons, as the horribly malformed bodies of the twisted rushed towards them, waving rusted swords or spears.

One of them, a disfigured mockery of an elf, screamed and fell as a blast of fire landed square in its chest. At the same time, Arela let out a screeching howl, strengthened by the sound of her lute. It sounded like an eagle, at first, but it got louder and louder. While it did not bother Talina, several of the twisted clutched their ears and fell to the ground, writhing as if in terrible pain.

Another twisted, a burly, malformed human, came for her, and she stepped back in time for the massive hammer to strike the ground instead of her. A quick flick of her blade sliced it open from navel to neck, warm blood spurting out and spraying over her. More cries and shouts sounded around her.

Talina could hear the thrumming of Ereth's bowstring as he loosed arrow after arrow, each followed by a dull thud and a guttural cry. Behind her, Ebrik roared, and she could hear the thick metal hammer land on the soft flesh with a sickening crunch, again and again.

More of the twisted attacked her, but those that dared died as she flowed between them, leaving blood and death in her wake.

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As quickly as it began, the fight ended. There were at least fifty corpses around them, scattered over the forest floor, some of them still twitching.

"Is everyone alright?" Talina said, turning around. Dresgar stood doubled over, resting his hands on his knees and breathing heavily, but he gave her a thumbs up. Ebrik simply nodded, as did Arela.

Ereth on the other hand winced as he clutched his wrist, where blood trickled out from under his hand. "I might need some assistance," he mut-

tered, his face paler than usual.

Talina stepped towards him and grabbed his arm. In a flash, she closed the wound by reconnecting the torn tendrils of the Light that made up Ereth's body in her mind's eye. The nasty gash that ran from his elbow to his wrist closed up and only a smear of dark blood remained.

Ereth's eyes widened as he wiped it away to reveal unmarred skin. "Now that truly is amazing," he breathed, and Talina laughed softly.

"Not the first time I heard that." She still held her power, as did all the others. She was surprised when she noticed that they all glowed faintly now, just like her. Only their eyes remained the same where hers were two brightly glowing spheres. She vaguely wondered why that was, but quickly decided that now was not the time. "Scouts?"

"Could be," Ebrik replied, crouching over one of the still corpses. "They can't be remnants of the army, since they all fled south."

"Did any of them escape?"

"None that I saw," Ereth said as he crouched down and put his hand on the ground. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. "None nearby," he said after a moment.

Arela arched an eyebrow. "You got that from feeling the ground or something?"

Ereth shook his head. "I... asked the forest. It doesn't make sense, I know, but... Just trust me, okay?"

"Hey, we're not judging," Dresgar's deep voice rumbled between gasps for air. "One of us literally screamed them to death, so talking to plants is not that much of a stretch."

Arela giggled softly. "People always tell me that I have a very powerful voice." Dresgar barked a laugh.

"In any case," Talina said, cleaning her sword on one of the corpses. "If none escaped, they can't carry word of our journey. Still, we should be more careful from here on out." The rest of them nodded, and after a brief rest, they set off again.