

We rode until the sun began to set, an orange fireball plunging into the horizon. Admittedly, I was intrigued by the men. I mean, in a way, they weren't so bad. Except for Lunoka and the Schidan, I had no actual friends to speak of. Imagine being sixty-seven-years-old, a world traveler, and never having made a single friend. Many allies, sure. But it wasn't the same. It was nice to have someone new to talk to. Fascinating. Sort of fun. And of all people to befriend, a human and an elf. Good men, at that. Not the monsters I'd imagined.

Darkness unfurled across the sky like a sail. In the last light of day, I spotted a single thorny tree on a hill. I pointed it out to everyone.

"Look. A Tizzletopper," I said.

"A Tizzle-what?" Jonathan asked.

Classic leaned forward in his saddle, squinting. "How can you tell from this distance?"

"The shape of its branches, mostly," I said. "And Tizzletoppers grow on isolated hills like that one. Let's go!"

We raced across the valley as light winked out for good. The land was swept in blackness.

"What's so special about a Tizzletopper?" Jonathan asked.

"It's a good sign of faerie activity," I explained.

"What's your plan?" Classic asked.

"Gonna perform a spell. Ask a goddess to grant me a vision."

"Of the princes' whereabouts?"

"Right."

Jonathan looked at me dubiously. "That sounds almost *too* easy."

"*Easy?*" I asked. "I had to spawn a forest to appease a god before he would even *think* of teaching me this spell. I'll be calling on Herisech, dryad goddess of power. Not the most pleasant goddess to deal with, but..." I shrugged. "She's young...for a god. Pretty arrogant. Sometimes she only answers to pure-blooded dryads, *and even then*, only when she feels like it."

We reached the hill and dismounted. I carefully touched the thorny tree. Its white flowers glowed lime green under moonlight. The tree was new and strong. There were definitely faeries in the vicinity.

“Somewhere close,” I said to Lunoka. I wandered away from the tree searching for any sign of the fae.

“What are we looking for?” Classic asked, stepping beside me. His scent was spicy, like the Dark Elf’s. But it was muted by the musk of man and green of plants.

“Faerie dust,” I said. “It will gleam like steel. Or—”

“Toadstools!” Jonathan shouted.

Classic and I spun around. Jonathan was in the opposite direction standing behind a cover of bushes. He waved us over. We arrived to find a perfect ring of red toadstools. Energy emanated from the caps like steam off a mug of hot tea. The smell of magic was potent and strong, like the smell of a smoldering fire.

“This is perfect,” I said. I went to Lunoka’s side and started sorting out my spell paraphernalia.

“How did you know to look for toadstools?” Classic asked Jonathan as I prepared myself within the ring.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to steer clear of toadstool rings?” Jonathan asked.

“My mother taught me that fear is a blank canvas for insecure minds.”

A brief silence hung between the men.

“Well, mine taught me to avoid toadstool rings. Otherwise you’d get turned into an ass. So maybe you’ve already had a few run-ins with toadstool rings and didn’t even know it.”

Classic started laughing before Jonathan even finished his sentence. They bantered a while longer until a sudden quiet fell over the hill. I looked back to find both men staring at me.

“If any faeries appear,” I began, “*don’t harm them*. A single faerie can be dangerous on its own. But a ring of them could kill us.”

Jonathan nodded and Classic crossed his brawny arms in response.

“Can one of you kill me something?” I asked. It was my least favorite part. A sacrifice. But it was necessary.

“Kill something? Like an animal?” Classic asked.

But Lunoka was already on the task.

“Yes. Anything, like a burrower, or even a bird.”

The men barely took two steps when Lunoka returned with a badger in her jaws. She set it beside me.

“Now everyone just be quiet,” I said.

I sat in the faerie ring and said a quick prayer to the moon. Its dark craters and milky planes seemed so placid. I watched it, my mind wandering. Slowly, the moon began to fade until it was a translucent silver sphere. On the other side was the sky, a black pearled sea. I watched the waves carry stars onto dark shores. I was deep in the trance and my hands moved without my awareness.

I dipped my fingers into the jar of ancient Menyna ashes. Before their extinction, the Menyna were a species worshiped for their link to the afterlife. Using their ashes was a sign of deep respect and faithfulness to the goddess, Herisech. I only had a small handful of ashes left. I sprinkled them in a large, wooden bowl as my other hand dug deep into the ground. A root grew from my palm, coiling around my forearm.

“Do either of you men have ale?” I asked.

As the island lotus bloomed from my zeosang tree, I plucked it from the earth. A symbol of life, pure and untamed. From the tip of my finger, I sent a tiny flame that slowly burned the plant but wouldn't kill it. I set it in the bowl. A blue hand reached into view holding a flask. Without turning my head a fraction at the risk of losing my connection to the goddess, I took the flask and poured some of the liquid into the bowl. Ale for merriment.

The burning tree continued to grow, more lotus buds sprouting. The smoke over the bowl hovered into a red cloud, shimmering like stardust. The noxious smell nearly pulled me from my trance. But I remained focused, watching the mysterious ocean in the sky, the sensation of magic residue on my skin. When the time was right, I took the princes' personal items and placed them in the bowl.

“Herisech, Goddess of Power,” I began. “I offer you these eyes. In return, I ask that you lend me yours.” I grabbed the dagger and pulled the badger onto my lap. I plucked out the first eye and added it to the pot. The fire blazed.

A bad sign.

An overwhelming sense of nausea shook me. I licked my lips and swallowed the rising bile. The moon vision began to fade as the red cloud dissipated. My hand clenched around the

badger's neck. I slowed my breathing, composing myself. Panic and negativity had no place in spellcasting. Losing control now would be a waste of resources. As images of the angry Herisech hijacked my vision like flashes of lightning, I felt my heart rate pick up, temples pounding as I forced myself to concentrate.

“My goddess, I ask of you in complete humility and reverence, aid me in my quest.”

I cut out the badger's second eye and dropped it into the pot. The fire immediately snuffed out. The red cloud expanded into a mist, filling the faerie ring.

The spell was working. My flesh burned from the powerful magic. I lost sight of the ocean sky, looking only into the red. Slowly, I shut my eyes. The dark of my mind was tranquil and untouched by the burning magic.

And then Herisech spoke.

“Iceeelyyyynnn...Ssssseeeee beyond stretchsss...through waaaaallsss and greaaaaat abyssssss...Ssssseeeee befoooooore youuuuu...”

I opened my eyes.

I saw through the eyes of the first prince. And there was nothing. Blackness. I waited, unblinking, looking in every direction. Nothing above me, below me, behind me. I was tempted to speak, but it would do no good. No one would hear here. The darkness worried me. It was a bad sign. A hint that maybe...one of the princes was dead.

I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer and blinked.

The second prince. Again, blackness. I looked for anything, any sign of life. An object. A reflection of dull light on a surface. But there was nothing. Hope sank inside of me. I blinked again.

A-ha!

The third prince. He was *alive*. I grinned, amazed at my luck—and his. I could just make out his legs stretched in front of him. There was a square of red light coming from the ceiling a few feet away. The shadows of bars on the stone floor. A prison cell. An oubliette, maybe. I bit my bottom lip, yearning to speak to him. After all, there he was. Trapped and waiting for rescue. The sight of him filled me with hope. Just *seeing* him made it all so real. The quest, the objective. This wasn't just an artifact. Gods, no. This was a *man*. A living, breathing person. And he needed help. My help. He had no clue I could see. No idea we were coming.

The prince looked down at his hands. In the darkness, I could just make out the cuts and dirt caked on his palms. His head snapped up to the door in the ceiling. A shadow passed by. It was fluid and gone in a second.

My eyes teared. I fought to keep them open, waiting for any other hint of his location. But they involuntarily shut, and the vision was gone. I rubbed my eyes, pressing them into my fists. They burned fiercely, tears streaming down my cheeks. When I could see again, the red mist had vanished. Lunoka, Classic, and Jonathan stood a safe distance away, watching.

“Is it over?” Jonathan asked.

I nodded. The men and Lunoka approached.

“What happened?” Classic asked.

I got to my feet. My legs wobbled and I stumbled forward, caught by Lunoka’s furry head. I found my balance but swayed slightly.

“Maybe you should lie down,” Jonathan said, taking my arm.

“I’m okay,” I assured him. “One of the princes is in a cell of some kind. An oubliette, I think. I couldn’t tell where. I don’t think it was Malik. Maybe one of the older two.”

“Perform the spell again. You might see more,” Classic urged.

“I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I can’t call upon the goddess again immediately after. She’ll be furious. The spell just barely worked as it is.”

“What about the other two?” Jonathan asked.

I shrugged. I wouldn’t tell them two of the princes might be dead. Not yet, anyway. Nothing was certain. I squatted and fished the princes’ valuables out of the bowl, tossed Lunoka the dead badger so it didn’t go to waste.

“So, what now?” Classic asked.

“I have an idea for another spell. But—”

Something sharp and long pierced my foot through the bottom of my boot. I fell to my side. The men and Lunoka rushed forward, but I threw my hand up, warning them against it. The whispers started. Tiny voices, curious, maniacal, amused.

Something stabbed my palm. I winced and snatched my hand away. There was no external wound, but it bled beneath the skin. A bruise quickly formed.

“Faeries,” Lunoka said, dread in her voice.

I looked up to see the small, glowing orbs of colored light coming through the darkness like disembodied souls. A faerie guise. They weren't nearly so pretty. They surrounded me, thirty, maybe forty of them. The orbs melted away like raindrops and the faeries began to take shape.

These faeries were gangly beings, striped like the rind of a melon. They wore tiny animal skulls to hide their strange, little faces. They were big enough to sit comfortably in both hands. Hardly intimidating, but appearances were deceiving. Some pointed at me, arms spindly as the legs of a spider. Their giggles jingled like bells. The faeries landed delicately on the toadstools. Their furry, hooved legs were coated in glimmering faerie dust that dusted the red caps like fine flour. The magic-infused toadstools emitted a soft green glow.

The faeries stared at me. Stared *hard*. Some leaned in, got a good look, hopped from one toadstool to the other as they took me in from all sides. They seemed harmless, playful even, though I knew better. Small fae like these had a mean streak. They were often very cruel and unpredictable, making up for what they lacked in size.

In my hand was Dino's bottle of scented oil. The glass container was slick with badger blood and ale, coated with ashes. I held it on my lap and waited patiently. I avoided eye contact with the faeries, instead shooting both men hard looks, urging them to keep their distance. Classic slowly removed a hand from the hilt of his sword.

They are...annoyed, Lunoka said, speaking of the fae.

I gave a mental nod.

The tension in the air thickened as the faeries tightened their magic bond in the ring, effectively trapping me. One hopped off a toadstool, his butterfly wings batting like a hummingbird's. He flew to the tip of my nose and wagged his finger at me. His animal skull was wide and arched, a tiny bear skull.

“Trying to steal our magic, huh?” the faerie asked.

“No,” I quickly replied. “Merely borrowing it to enhance my own. I needed the magic to reach great distances.”

“H'mm.” The faerie tapped the chin of his skull. “Ask before you borrow things. What good is it if we haven't given you our permission?” He snorted. “I think you were trying to suck up our magic and run away before we returned.”

Something stabbed my thigh. I flinched but remained stoic. Another prick, this time at the back of my neck. I yelped in pain, rubbing the spot.

“That’s it,” Jonathan said, unsheathing his sword.

“No!” Lunoka bellowed, biting the back of his tunic.

“Let go!”

The faeries laughed.

“Look at your friends!” the bear skull faerie said. “So pretentious and stupid. How ‘bout we kill ‘em for you, huh?”

The ground beneath Lunoka and the men began to steam like the spout of a giant teapot. The faeries watched in morbid amusement. Some clapped their tiny hands.

“Wait!” I cried out.

They spun to face me.

“How about a song?” I asked. I smiled, nodded at them. “I promise I can get your hips wagging and hooves moving.”

“Oh?” the bear skull faerie said. “A song, you say? We do like a good song, don’t we, friends?” He looked to the others. They cheered, jolly as a wedding party. The faerie planted his hands on his narrow hips and said, “We’d like to hear a song. But truth is, we’ve heard them all.”

“Oh, not this one.” I got to my feet.

The lute! I said to Lunoka.

The morpol yanked a lute from the back of the saddle. The straps holding it snapped and Lunoka hurled the instrument. I leapt to catch it and stumbled when I landed, the pain in my foot and thigh throbbing terribly.

“This is an old tale from Nurah. I think you’ll like it,” I said.

The faeries just stared, probably not expecting much. My gaze moved around the crowd.

Here goes nothing.

I swayed my hips while strumming the strings to the cheery melody. The song choice was deliberate, a compliment to the fae and their covetable lifestyle. I kept a smile on my face while humming with the music. The faeries started to react, bobbing their heads and bodies right along with me. A few even took off their skulls. Their heads were horse-like, skin speckled auburn and white. They had large, vivid eyes and grinned like loons.

This is good, I thought.

Lunoka gave a mental nod.

I licked my lips and took a deep breath, then started to sing.

“So curious, this girl I found from the Nurahn hills,
Far beyond the apple groves, beyond the red windmills,
Into musing acres where humans rarely tread.
She wore a red rose in her hair, ventured far from bed.
Unusual is how I would indeed describe that day.
Human child out in wild somehow led astray
Came across a gnome family far from any road,
Thought herself a bold young girl, thought it might’ve showed.
May sound quite a mystery to hear this unique wonder,
In the earth along the way, dwellers from deep under.
One sprung out, told the girl, ‘We’ve nothing here for you!’
And the brave, young girl replied, ‘Your way is fair and true.’
For she meant to leave her world and live among the fae.
She loved the gift of faerie lore, she meant to seek the way.
The gnome held out his tiny hands. She took hold of both.
He warned, ‘I pray you’re ready. This is a binding oath.’
To this, she said, ‘I’ve made my choice to leave this life behind.
I will not miss their selfish ways. I will not miss mankind.’
And while the sun did slumber, she crawled into the ground,
Whisked away from human worlds, never to be found.”

The song was over, but seeing the faeries revved up in spirit, I continued to play. They spiraled through the air, lighting up the night like blazing butterflies. Instruments materialized right before them and they joined me in a lively band. I took the opportunity to casually slip out of the toadstool ring while dancing and strumming the lute.

A group of faeries whooshed to Lunoka and the men. They spun and twirled on Lunoka’s saddle, blew Jonathan dozens of kisses, and pulled Classic’s hands to join them in a dance. When the elf refused, they glowed red with anger. I worked fast, stepping in front of him to get their attention. I winked at them, grinned, whistled the tune. They followed my lead like well-behaved children. Anything for a good time. Anything.

I played and danced and sang. It went on forever it seemed. Therein lied the danger of faerie rings. They could keep you prancing like a puppet until your feet were worn to stumps and you died from exhaustion. I didn't give up. I kept moving until my joints ached, muscles burned. Rivulets of sweat traced their way down my forehead and chest. My arms glistened with perspiration and faerie dust, legs covered in a glossy sheen like a layer of ice. My fingertips were raw, the lute strings tinted pink from blood.

And when I thought I couldn't go on anymore, just about ready to collapse, the faeries ceased playing. I paused and watched them cheer and clap, hugging and kissing, absolutely jubilant. They rushed over, twirling around me like a small tornado. They fixed my braid and strung flowers in my hair and clothes.

And then they were gone, moving in a disorganized flock over the hill and off into the night.