

Chapter 5

The forest is dark and eerie, and it doesn't help that the grey clouds don't seem to want to let up. You keep to the path that is supposed to bring you to the other side. Before you had entered the forest, you had poured a bit of the potion on the ground to make sure you'll find your way through. Mira didn't agree with that decision, saying it's a waste of the potion. She argued that you had made it through this forest before and that the path will literally guide you right through. But it was too late, the potion was already poured, and a pink line of mist is now guiding your way. So far you have not encountered anything out of the ordinary. Neither of you have spoken since entering the forest. You don't want to let the potential danger know where you are. Eventually, the mist curves and disappears off the path and in between the trees. "Wow, some Trailfinder we got," Mira says unamused.

You spot a carcass on the ground, half hidden by trees. It's difficult to see what animal the carcass had belonged to, but it looked like it might have been a hare. Looking up to where the mist disappeared to, you see a figure standing in a clearing in the distance. Your heart skips a beat, but you realize the figure seems to be hiding, searching. "Do you think that's the hunter Jimminy mentioned?" You ask Mira, gesturing towards the figure. Mira seems lost in thought as she looks at the carcass. "Mira," you nudge her and her head snaps up as if returning to the present. She looks at you, "hm?"

You point towards the figure in the woods and ask again. "Oh, I don't know, maybe. But we should probably keep going."

"But what if he needs help?" you say and without waiting for an answer, you make your way towards the figure. Mira places a hand on your shoulder.

"Hold on, he might not be the hunter. What if it's whatever's been killing the animals?" Except you are certain it's the hunter. You're not going to tell Mira this, but you hadn't used the potion to find your way out. You had used it to find the hunter, and the potion had done its job wonderfully.

"Then we've both got my sweet charm and your powers, to defend us with," you say, not at all concerned.

"That's not..." Mira starts, not knowing how to end her sentence. She sighs, deciding to drop it. "You know the line between bravery and foolishness can be very thin."

"Come on, let's just see if he's okay at least. Maybe I can help him if he's hurt." You say and approach him. You hear Mira mutter a "if it even is him."

When you get closer, you see the figure is a man wearing camouflaging clothes. He's slightly bent over as if trying to make himself as small as possible while still standing. There's a stench coming off him like he hasn't had a wash in days.

"What are you doing?" you ask louder than you intended, and he startles, turning to look at you. He's got a round face covered in mud. A pair of big round glasses is resting on his nose. In his hand

is a large crossbow, and he's got a quiver of arrow bolts at his back. He shushes you and turns back the way he was facing.

"I am hunting," he says in a low voice, but not quite a whisper. "I think I've managed to locate the creature killing the animals."

You look around in the clearing, trying to spot it. "Where?" It's lighter here without all the trees covering the small amount of light coming from the grey skies.

"I believe its nest is in this clearing or somewhere near it." He doesn't look at you as he explains. Instead, he looks up to the skies.

"And what is this creature?" Mira asks impatiently.

"I believe it's a..." he starts, but he doesn't get to finish before you hear the sound of wings flapping. The wind picks up and the sound of flapping wings get louder. "It's here," he says, clutching his crossbow.

You look up to the sky and see something swirling above you. It's a big shadow with large wings extended out each side of it as it circles you like a raven.

"I've been waiting for this," the man smiles, excited. You don't share his enthusiasm. The creature descends, landing a few meters from you with a loud thud. Hair prickles your neck, your heart races as you take in what's standing in front of you. It's got a mostly human physique, but it's got large, black feathery wings protruding from its back. Its eyes are human, but underneath them, its face elongates into a long, sharp beak. The arms are unnaturally long, ending in long, sharp claws you'd rather not have anywhere near you. Its legs are feather-covered human legs until you reach the sharp talons for feet. It looks at you, angry, predatory.

"What the fuck is that?" Mira asks, taking a step back.

"That," the man starts, looking like Christmas arrived early for him, "is the result of an experiment gone wrong. A human experiment completely backfiring."

"So, they were once human," you say and your heart sinks. Until it screeches and your heart is right back up at your throat.

"Yes, it was. And now I'm going to put it down once and for all," he says, holding his crossbow ready.

"No, you can't put them down!" you say, stepping between him and the creature. "They were once human. We need to help them!"

Mira's hand finds her face in an impatient and exasperated gesture. "Remember what I said about bravery?"

"Maybe I can heal them," you say, desperately wanting to save this poor soul. "I can use my powers!"

The man's eyes light up. "You have healing powers?" he asks intrigued and looks at you like you are something he wants to study. Then he shakes his head, focusing on the present problem. "There is no helping it. We need to put it down." But you stand your ground, and you argue back and forth.

Meanwhile, the creature is getting more impatient, flapping its wings as if preparing for some kind of attack.

“Let’s just subdue it first and then you can argue later,” Mira says, noticing the creature’s agitation. The man sighs and hands you a blowgun. “This would be much easier with my tranquinet, but I don’t have it so this will do.”

“Your what now?” Mira asks, but he ignores her question. Instead, he moves on to a set of instructions. “You shoot it with this. The sedative should be enough to subdue it. Redhead will distract it, and I will stand ready in case you fail to subdue it.” Rude.

Mira looks very displeased by a stranger telling her what to do, but she doesn’t argue. Instead, she simply says “okay,” and pushes him towards the bird-human creature. The man is caught by surprise and stumbles forward, too close to the creature for comfort. It’s furious at this intrusion and immediately slashes him with its claws. He raises his arms in defense and barely manages to dodge, the talons only grace him. You don’t notice Mira disappearing into the shadows. Your mind is racing. You don’t know if you should go to his aid or try to hit it with a blow-dart. The man shouts at you to shoot it as he desperately defends himself against the creature’s furious attacks. Its wings are flapping, sending gusts of wind that makes him stumble. With every stumble back, the creature lunges at him with its claws or beaks or talons.

You ready the blowgun, trying to get a clear shot but it’s difficult with the creature’s constant movement. That’s when dark tendrils emerge from behind the trees and engulf the creature, limiting its movements. It’s not enough to keep it completely still, but it’s enough for you to get a better aim. You steady yourself, take a deep breath, and aim for its chest. Then you shoot. The creature screeches as it’s hit in the chest with the tranquilizer. It looks directly at you, furious. The hunter seems to have been completely forgotten as it lunges at you, only held back by the shadowy restraints. Finally, the tranquilizer kicks in and it slumps to the ground. The dark tendrils around it retreat into the darkness behind the trees. You take a moment to calm your racing heart, then you approach the hunter who is lying on the ground.

“Are you alright?” you ask, but you can see his shirt has been torn up and stained red. He sits up and looks down at himself.

“It’s just a scratch, I will be fine,” he says, apparently not faced by the scratch marks at all. You place your hands over his chest, and they glow with a warm light. His wounds heal before your eyes, causing his own eyes to go wide.

“So, you actually are a healer? That’s rare,” he stands up and brushes dirt off him. “I’m Dwite, assistant to the regional General.” He extends his hand to you, and you take it. His grip is firm and clammy.

Mira emerges from the shadows, looking down at the unconscious creature. “You got it. Good job!” she says to you. Dwite narrows his eyes at her. “I told you to distract it,” he says.

“I did. I distracted it with you. Worked wonders,” she smiles.

“I will remember this,” Dwite responds, giving her a look that says he definitely will remember this and she’s not going to like the consequences. He turns his attention back to the creature. “Now,

back to the important matters at hand. What do we do with this thing, and where did those tendrils come from?"

"Beats me," Mira shrugs.

"We need to help them of course. They used to be human, so maybe they aren't completely lost in there," you decide to ignore the second part of his question. You kneel beside it and place your hands over it. It's a longshot, but you have to try. You put all your energy into trying to heal it, but unfortunately nothing happens.

"I told you it is beyond healing," Dwite says. "Don't worry, I will make it quick." He gets a knife out of his sheath and kneels beside it.

"If you kill them, I will charge you with murder," you glare at him.

"You don't have the rights to do that," he scoffs.

Mira laughs. "Are you telling the princess that she doesn't have the right to charge you?"

Dwite looks up at you, studying you. "You're bluffing," he says to Mira, but his eyes are on you.

"Would you like to test that theory?" you ask, trying to sound confident as you stand up.

He studies you some more, probably trying to figure out the pros and cons of calling you out on the supposed bluff. "Fine. I will bring it to a secure place, and we'll see what we can do." Dwite sheathes his knife and gets up. "What are the two of you doing out here anyway?" he sounds annoyed, as if you've just denied him a great pleasure.

"We're heading for Hometown," you explain without going into detail as to why you're travelling. For a moment you think he's going to offer to guide you out of the forest.

He nods. "Then you go there, and I will take care of this. Good travels," he dismisses you. Okay, then.

Mira seems all too happy to go. Before you leave, you say, "let me know what you find out." Then you walk away. "Oh, by the way! There's a Christmas party in the capital at the end of the season if you'd like to come." With that, you leave him to it.