

Jeremy Cole

English 218

Bro. Richards

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Short Story: Guardian Rynth

In the bright orange sunset of the evening, the trees of the East Kaena Wood rushed in the low breeze. Shrubbery crowded around the few paths throughout the forest, while the canopy blocked much of the light, leaving it in an eternally gloomy state no matter the time of day. Crystalline quartolfs darted in the shadows with the rest of their pack, hunting down the wiry ajax for a meal. Songbirds tittered in the canopy, wellings quacked in their mudbanks, and tiktoks swarmed together in the treetops, ever watchful for their next target as they hooted amongst themselves.

Down in the underbrush, a sprat hopped past, brushing its bushy orange tail across the ground and leaving an amber trail of dust in its wake. It constantly sniffed the air and kept its beady black eyes open for predators. It wove into a small hole beneath the ground and into the tunnels beneath, speeding toward the light that it knew lay at the end.

The ceiling rumbled, and the sprat froze, unsure of what was happening. Soil fell, and the sprat rushed even faster toward the exit. It neared the end of the tunnel, but the ceiling caved in right on top of it, trapping its body just before it could get to freedom. Its head lay uncovered, hyperventilating as it struggled to get free.

A shadow descended and blocked the light. The ceiling rumbled once more, and an enormous, wooden hand pried it up. Another hand swept away the dirt around the sprat, then gingerly picked it up, holding it high above the ground.

The sprat calmed once it saw its rescuer: a tree over ten feet tall, with ropes of woven grass looped all around his bark body and bags of leaves hanging from knots and burls. Small holes retreated deep into his body, which housed nests complete with mother and chicks within, while his thick leaf-laden crown sagged over his amber eyes, studying the sprat carefully.

The ancient mouth creaked open and said, **“Young spratling...you are not meant to tread tunnels...remain in the bushes and feed...so I do not have to save you once more...”** The sprat sniffed in agreement, and the tree lowered it to the ground for it to run off into the undergrowth.

The tree straightened and remained still listening carefully. When the birdsong returned, he turned around and hastily marched through the forest, rustling his leaves and shaking the nests within him.

A mother silverling squawked and leered outside of her nest. The tree turned his head and nodded. **“Yes, yes, I’ll slow. Ilm Lightwood is not a rynth to disturb your rest.”** His march turned into a walk, and his body stopped shaking. The silverling cooed quietly and ducked her head back into her nest, settling over her young chicks.

The rynth continued to march through the woods until the gloomy dimness turned into utter blackness. At that time, he ventured deep into the center, where the trees grew large and thick, until he came to a circle of tall, tightly knit trees, with seemingly no way into the grove for even a sprat.

Ilm waved his hand toward them. Two trees creaked and groaned, forcing their roots forward and coming apart making a narrow entrance for the rynth. He passed through carefully, and the trees returned, settling back into their growth.

Above, the canopy was free of leaves, allowing the light of the full moon to shine. The branches of the wall of trees came together into shelves, perches, and bowls for the many animals that rested

there. Birds of prey tucked their heads under their wings as young fish swam in the pools of water, sprat kicked their legs in their sleep within intricate cages of living branches, all while young ferrun curled up in the sheets of warm moss.

Ilm stood in the center of the grove and planted his feet into the bare soil. He then twisted all around to the varying levels, carefully inspecting the creatures in his care: a quartolf with a mending eye, kramon spawn with a gray complexion, tiktoks with sprained wings, and many others, feeding all of them with fruit growing on the high branches of the trees and a stream of fresh spring water flowing underneath him. All remained calm, patiently waiting for the rynth's careful hands to finish their work.

He turned to an ajax with a burned hind and broken antlers, panting heavily as it struggled to heal. The rynth scooped a clear gel from one branch's bowl and slathered it over the burn. The ajax calmed, sleeping uneasily.

Ilm closed his eyes and lowered his arms. ***'Humans and their foul weaponry...'*** He thought. He clenched a fist. ***'So many young have lost their parents, and so many have been heinously injured...all for no cause.'*** He relaxed, then, before he slept for the night, thought, ***'That is why Fendus created the rynth...to protect the wild from them...'*** He settled with the rest of the woods, gathering nutrients for the coming day.

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In the golden dawn of the morning—barely after the ramboards began their morning croaks—Ilm's head jerked up, and his eyes snapped open. ***"Someone entered my domain...someone gravely wounded..."*** He uprooted his left foot, then the right, much to the complaints of the nesting birds barely awake.

He rolled his eyes and knocked against his head. A cap of bark covered the knotholes, blocking the birds inside. **“Hold tight to your nests,”** he muttered as the trees guarding the glade parted. He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes.

They parted completely, and Ilm rushed forward with a lumbering gait, zooming past his fellow trees with extraordinary speed. He wove through them expertly, hopping over brooks and narrowly dodging the skittering pebluds crossing from one stream to another.

The trees around became smaller and more spares, so much that the bright orange morning light could be seen rather than the dreary darkness of the deeper woods. The emerald grass of the plains could be seen beyond the trees, along with the spiraling smoke of a distant human settlement.

Ilm scanned the area, looking behind every tree in search of the wounded visitor to the woods. He noticed trampled grass leading from the plain, then snapped twigs and scraped soil, making a path to a large oak split in its center.

***“Uuuwwaagghh!”***

Ilm’s eyes went wide. **“Ursazard...what in Brium came over him?”** He shambled toward the source only yards away, toward a lumpy hill that stood in a glade. Standing in front of it was an enormous black mass of fur, with a black maw full of teeth and a scaly onyx tail. It stamped its great claws on the ground, directly in front of a small, unmoving child. The ursazard roared once more and raised its claw to strike it.

Ilm leaped forward and held his arm high toward the beast. ***“Halt, denizen of East Kaena, by the grace of Solus!”*** The beast froze, uncertain. It slowly lowered to all fours, still growling at the still form beneath the rynth’s root feet.

Ilm lowered his hand, then stepped back, allowing the child to be positioned between him and the ursazard. **“What is the meaning of this? Why...did you attack this human child?”** The ursazard whined and growled, then stamped a claw.

Ilm crossed his arms and nodded slowly. **“It trespassed your domain? Is that all?”** A low growl emanated from the ursazard’s throat, and it turned its head, revealing a jagged, furless scar from ear to jaw.

Ilm barely flinched, but it was enough for the ursazard to notice and bark in conclusion. Ilm stared at the child, then back at the beast. **“Ursazard...humans have harmed you...but not this one. It is clearly innocent...and unarmed. Attacking it...was not justified, even if...it trespassed your domain...”** The ursazard roared once more, quieter, but still combative.

Ilm groaned and spread his arms. The canopies of the trees around him grew thicker, dimming the environment around them. **“Do not test me...”**

The ursazard shut its jaws and shrank down. It gradually stepped back around the hill, only to give a glance back at the human child. Ilm stamped his foot, and the ursazard turned tail and ran back into the trees.

Ilm remained still for a moment longer, than sighed and relaxed. The canopy returned to normal, allowing the morning light to return. He knelt in front of the child and carefully turned it, revealing a young girl wearing a plain green dress. Her arm had a large, clawed gash, seeping blood. Her eyes remained closed, leaving her oblivious to all around her.

The rynth studied her, narrowing his eyes. He looked around, seeing no adults nearby, and heard no cries for a name. She was alone.

Ilm looked back down at her. Her grip on her arm relaxed, and her face was peaceful, if pained. ***'Unconscious,'*** he thought. He sighed and reached down, gently lifting her up by the waist. He cradler her in his hands, then slowly marched back toward the center of the woods. ***'Human or not...she needs my help...'***

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Later, in the darkness of Ilm's grove, the young girl slept on a low shelf on top of a blanket of moss and leaves. Her arm was splinted and wrapped with moss covering, while a smooth, clear substance coated it underneath.

She turned and groaned, then slowly opened her eyes, stretching her arms. She pulled back on her injured arm and held it close, then inspected it and saw the covering. She gasped and looked around her, then shrunk back on the shelf, noticing the dozens of animals sitting all around her, staring. The quartolf seemed to shimmer in the dim light, the orange eyes of the Tiktok glowed—all the creatures simply stared, knowing that she did not belong with them.

She breathed quickly, asking herself, "H-How did I get here?" She looked all around and shouted, "H-H-Help! Somebody, anybody?" She saw the many trees closing this small grove and realized that there was no way anyone could come help her—or for her to escape.

She drew her knees up to her chest and sat in a fetal position, whispering constantly, "I never should've left, I never should've left..."

She remained like this for several minutes, until she sat straight studied the dark environment more closely. She eyed the gnarled tree in the center of the grove and saw that it was tall enough to potentially climb to the branches of the other trees without disturbing the animals.

She slowly slid out from the bed of moss and leaves and landed on the ground, careful to not let her arm hit the shelf. With the stares of the creatures prompting her, she hurriedly grabbed a sturdy knot on the tree, then reached with her injured arm toward another. She seethed as she held on and forced herself up, trembling with the effort, but she continued on ascending the tree until she was nearly up to the crown.

She wheezed and paused, staring at the bark of the tree. The tree stared back.

"Eeek!" she screamed, losing her grip and falling back toward the ground.

Ilm reached out and caught her, then holding her by the waist, jabbed a finger at her and said, **"You ought to know better...with your arm in that state...little human! I did not save you...for you to fall...and break your spine!"**

A silverling shot out of a knothole at the side of his head and squawked angrily, much to the girl's surprise. Ilm hmphed and nodded, then said, **"Yes, mother silverling...I understand you were resting...I will watch my voice..."** The silverling gave a final squawk, then dove back into the knothole. Ilm groaned, then leaned down and set the girl back on her shelf. She sat and stared at the rynth, stunned.

Ilm crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. **"Well...what is your business here? Why did you run...into my woods?"**

The girl gawked and pointed at him. *"Are...are you a rynth?"*

"Yes...what else could I be?" Ilm irritably replied. The girl lowered her hand and kept it close to her chest, remaining quiet.

Ilm focused on her injured arm. **"Be grateful I found you...when I did. A moment more...and the ursazard would have slain you."** She gave no response.

Ilm stroked a twig sprouting next to his lip. **“What settlement do you...hail from? Is it...the one called ‘Respit’?”** She slowly nodded.

He yanked off the stray twig and winced, then said, **“Very well...I’ll return you in the morning...I’m sure—”**

“No!” the girl cried, rising to her feet. Ilm gave her a curious look, then she sat back on the shelf and said, **“N-No...I don’t want to go back...I can’t go back...”** She held tight to her wounded arm, staring at it.

Ilm continued to stare at her. He stroked his chin, considering her reaction. **‘Even with the near loss of her life...she would rather stay here.’** He narrowed his eyes. **‘Whatever happened in her home?’**

He tapped the side of his head, vibrating the wood beneath. A curious chirp echoed in his head, and he stopped, simply resting his finger on his chin. He let out a low groan, then turned back to face the girl. **“I can’t have you stay here, human. This...is a place for the wild...for those under my care.”**

She moped and lowered her head. **“Does that mean...I have to go back?”**

Ilm waved a dismissive hand. **“Not to Respit...if you are so reluctant to return. There is...another settlement, farther away...but there will surely be someone...to care for you.”** He waved a hand, and a stream of glowing insects streamed into a crystal sphere hanging from a branch in the center of the room. The girl stared in awe, and Ilm waved his hand again. Three small, purple fruits fell from the branches above, landing in one hand. He set them on the girl’s moss shelf, and she graciously accepted them, immediately beginning to eat one.

Ilm studied her as she took enormous bites out of the fruit. **“What’s your name, human...girl?”** The word felt so foreign to him, but after hearing it from human hunters some years back, he figured it would be a more respectful term.

She wiped the juice off her face with her sleeve and replied, "Serea. What's yours?"

The rynth lowered his arms and replied, **"Ilm Lightwood...guardian of East Kaena..."**

The girl bit off the last bits of fruit, leaving an empty pit in her hand. "That's a nice name." She held the pit up to throw it, but Ilm's hand dove in front of her.

He stared at her with a scolding look. **"Respect the young of all creatures...that includes the slickbark trees."** Serea sheepishly deposited the seed into Ilm's hand, who raised it up and dropped into one of the many bags hanging from his chest.

She grabbed a second fruit and went to eat that as well but stopped when her eyes locked with an ajax fawn sitting on an opposite shelf with a splint on its leg, much like her arm. She stared back at the fruit, then up at Ilm. "Is...is this where you take animals and help them heal? Just like you did for me?"

Ilm slowly nodded. He waved his hand in the sky once more, and another fruit fell into it. **"Many rynth choose to simply...guard their domains from humans...and let nature take its course...no matter the interventions...humans make."** He offered the fruit to the ajax fawn, who greedily ate it whole, smacking its lips. **"I, however...care for those wronged by humans...or by fate."**

He faced Serea once more, who yawned, covering her mouth. He looked up at the glowing bugs, who zipped out of the crystal ball and back to their business. He leaned toward Serea and silently took back the fruit still sitting in her lap. She lay down on the shelf and set a hand under her head.

Serea's eyes drooped, and after yawning once more, she said, "Thanks for letting me stay with you..." She closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep almost instantly.

Ilm stared, lost for words. The ajax fawn slept soundly behind him as well, with half of the fruit hanging out from his mouth. He faced it and took it out, muttering, **"Slipbark fruit...a valuable**

sedative..." He gave the half-eaten fruit to the litter of ferrun kits in a knothole, then returned the two whole fruits to another bag on his person. He returned to studying Serea, who slept soundly, undisturbed by the night sounds of the other animals in the grove.

After staring at her for over an hour, considering her. He ignored the soft cooing of the birds in his head, instead paying attention to the girl's movements. ***'This 'Serea' ...is different from other humans. She cannot stay...but I don't mind her being here.'***

He sighed and closed his eyes. ***'But that ursazard...concerns me. Yes, Serea intruded his domain...but she was innocent, and had no way...to defend herself. He should have let her...go free, even as an intruder.'***

Ilm's body stiffened as he fell to an uneasy sleep. ***'I may have been too quick...to hold nature's creatures...as purer than man—even if they are better caretakers of these woods.'*** In his last moments of wakefulness, a thought crossed his mind. He let out a small, sarcastic chuckle.

'If I kept Serea with me...could she be a caretaker?'