

# Ods' journey

## Chapter 1: The Doom Forest

"It is getting dark", Mod said, "Should we start looking for a good camping ground for tonight?"

"I think we have at least two more hours of light. We can still cover more ground today," answered Pod.

"Not if those clouds bring heavy rain with them", was the reply of Tod.

"The winds change all the time in this valley. I think we should risk it," Pod said, eager to leave the valley behind.

"The last time we risked it, we couldn't find flat ground to place our sleeping rows. I do not want to wake up with you guys over me again," complained Mod.

"He is right, Pod. It is better to rest as much as we can tonight. We will arrive in Heetom tomorrow and need to find an affordable inn and work. We can start early and refresh ourselves before looking for a job. Nobody will like to stop and listen to a dirty and smelly fiddler. Plus, we can buy fresh bread and cheese if we arrive early enough. I am tired of this hard bread and chewy and tasteless dry meat".

An early start sounded good, and the prospect of freshly baked bread made their minds. They found a small creek with fresh and clear water. The creek was coming to the surface in different places and disappearing inside the rocks after a few meters. It looked like flowing South-East, but with the hidden creeks, you never know. They found a place for the evening. The water was wide enough to swim if they wanted and 10-meter long. The terrain in this part of the valley was rocky and occasionally covered by a thin layer of grass. The Datum Forest was close, less than 20 meters from the other shore of the creek. The abrupt transition between the vast and empty fields and the forest looked gloomy. Dark green moss covered the ground, preceding the trees and their trunk. The forest was shadowy, almost black. The giant trees were heavy with leaves, stopping the light from everything that was growing near the ground.

"I don't like this place even a bit. Looking at the forest gives me a dreadful sensation. My guts are telling me to run and not stop until I can't see or smell the forest anymore," Mod whispered.

"It is the Datum Forest warning you not to go inside. We will be fine if we do not put a foot there," calmly replied Tod.

Getting on his feet, Pod said: "It is creepy all right, but I have been in worse places. I am going to look for some dry wood for the campfire tonight. I prefer not to burn the dried manures we found the other day".

When Pod and Tod were alone, Pod asked: "Do you really think that the forest is cursed and that the stories are true?"

"Even in the bizarre and exaggerated stories, there is something true. Are there ants as big as an adult arm that can devour a human being in minutes? I do not think so, but I am sure dangerous things are hiding deep in the forest, waiting for some brave fool to enter," replied Tod.

"I do not like the darkness coming from the forest. I feel like it is coming for my soul".

"It is just the type of trees that make the forest look so dark and gloomy. The evergreen trees are mixed with the seasonal ones that make the forest humid all year long. Do you see the tallest evergreen in front of us"?

"Yes, the one with the pointed triangular crown"?

"Yes, this is a Spruce"

"Can not be, they grow up to 20 men's height, and this one is at least triple that. And look, this one's trunk is thick as 4 of me stack one upon the other, and I am the tallest in our group. Why is it so different from the one near our village"?

"You are right. If you look closely, you will notice that the bark is pink in colour and not the reddish-brown colour of the Spruce tree we are used to. In the books, it is written that the forest hasn't changed

at all in the past 10 of thousands of years. No other Spruce tree outside this forest lives more than 1000 years. The third tree further on the left is a Common Beech tree. The difference between this and the normal Beech is the height and the bark. Normally, the Common Beech is taller than the Spruce, and here, they have the same height. The bark of the normal Common Beech is smooth, grey and thin, while in this forest, it is dark grey, almost black, has red vertical marks and is really thick”.

“Look at these red spheres, they must be bigger than your head, Tod. I bet you a pint of supreme cider that Mod will want to get some pieces of them. Imagine what he can draw with that vibrant red colour.”

“Only a fool man will go near the forest, and he is not a birdbrain”, laughed Tod, brushing away Pod’s offer.

“How long must a tree live to create them?”

“If I am not mistaken, those are resin pockets, and the tree that created them is a Silver Fir. That one is ancient. Look at the cracks on the bark.”

“Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is something moving inside the cracks?” asked Pod, getting on its feet and slowly walking towards the forest.

“Oh, I bet the cracks are big enough to host a snack, but we are too far away, and the forest is too dark to be able to “. His last words died as he started looking at the closest Silver Fir bark.

The two friends were half across the space between their camp and the river when Mod called across the camp:

“Can you feel my water flask too”?

The sudden sound of Mod’s voice awakened Pod and Tod from their dreamy state.

“Yep, water, we need water for the tea, yep”, awkwardly said Pod to no one in particular. The two friends shook off the numb sensation that had taken their bodies and started preparing the camp for the night. The rest of the night went by without any significant incidents. Mod collected some dry moss and leaves blown by the wind from the forest. He managed to collect a sack full of different kinds of leaves. The dried ash and maple tree leaves will help start the fire, and the mixture of the dried and semi-dried moss will help keep the fire up for longer.

“I even found some walnut tree leaves”, said Mod, layering the moss and leaves over the improvised fire pit. “We can make tea from them. I am tired of drinking red clover tea over and over again. It has been what? At least 2 weeks since we finished the lemongrass”.

“I am not sure if we should drink or eat anything made with ingredients from Datum Forest,” advised Pod. “Something is perturbing about it”.

“In this case, we should not burn the leaves or even the moss due to its closeness to the forest. You are too cautious most of the time. Tod, you decide whether we should use the leaves for tea.”

“You both have a point, and we all know that some enchanted leaves can hinder a person or, even worse, kill. But in those cases, a teldom was involved and created a spell. The leaves were just the vehicle.”

“You do not think there are such evil creatures around here, do you?”

“Oh great, only this is missing on our plate right now, teldoms going after us”.

“I do not think so. We are not far from the eldoms realm; elves would not allow the dark ones in their territory. In any case, we are not appealing prey for them. None of us is from a pure-blooded family and we do not have much money. Do you think anyone, human or not, will care about us? We are too much work for almost no return.”

“Yes, that is right. What will they get the Pod’s smelly shirts? Those by themselves can kill a person,” jokingly said Mod.

“If you continue talking, you will never finish the fire pit. I am getting hungry and cold.”

“Ohh, the young these days are so impatient. All right, all right, the tea will be ready soon.”

The sun slowly descended to the east, behind the forest, creating a beautiful, colourful spectacle. The orange colours started to pierce the blue sky, contrasting with the white clouds, giving the impression that the sun rays were avoiding touching the clouds. The clouds embrace the sun, trying to squeeze its last warmth. Gradually, the colour changed from bright orange to vibrant red. Darkness and coldness spread over the meadow as the last flickers of sunlight were chased by night. When the golden light

dispersed over the Datum Forest, the asleep and gloomy place became alive at once. A plethora of sounds explode from in it, leaving lots to the imagination of the three humans of what can be hiding inside. Finally, the red colours were upon the forest, creating the illusion that it was burning. For a few seconds, the friends stayed silent, trying to figure out if it was just a mirage or if the forest was in flames. A thick mist came from the south, spreading through the trees and the burning forest, extinguishing the fire together with the sounds and any reminder of life in it. By the time the sun was gone, and the sky's only colours were the clouds' purple and blues, a deadly silence had spread upon the forest.

The meadow also started to transform with the dying sun. First came the insects. Just before sundown, the mosquitoes spread fast. The humid environment allowed a swarm of mosquitoes to conquer the sky. The low-pitched sound of those hungry insects was everywhere. Even the smoke from the fire was not enough to chase them away. But their victory was short. Soon after them, the damselflies were airborne. The mosquitos were so tiny, almost invisible, and the only way to know they were around was when they buzzed near the three friends' ears or viciously bit them. In comparison, the damselflies were ginormous. With a body 20 cm long and wing 1/3 of it, they look slow and stiff at first glance. Their body's metallic light blue colour, with the red-orange wing and round black eyes, made them look atrocious. When they were in the air, they had only one mission: to feed. Soon, the air was a battlefield. The mosquitos entered a chaotic flight mode so that they could escape the massive damselflies mandibles. Some of them were so desperate that they started flying against the smoke towards the fire's flames. In those cases, both insects perished in flames. Surprisingly, the predators were agile and fast and did not have problems getting their dinner.

But with the darkening sky, two new players entered the battlefield. The bats attacked from the sky and the toads from the ground. The bats were enormous, almost a forearm length from head to tail. Their body was hairy, and the fur had a dirty orange colour, contrasting with the hairless black wings. The wings were at least men's arm length and had a finger-long claw on the top middle part. Their heads were palm thick and had a black nose leaf shaped like a hook. 2/3 of the bats had deep red fur on their heads and the rest had pale grey fur. The bats were skilled hunters. When they were close enough to their prey, a mosquito or damselfly, it does not matter, they used their claws to catch the insect and wrapped their mighty wings around it. The red-headed bats preferred to go after mosquitos. Less than a second later, the insect was swallowed, and they were on the way to a new one. The greyhead bats were going after the damselflies. After they wrapped their wings around the insect, they just bit its head, littering the ground with the bodies. The toads came from the ground. They started to emerge from the small cavities of the river course. The toads were tiny and could fit in a human's hand, with short, chubby legs and big, bulgy eyes. They stayed away from the humans and the fire but close enough for the flame to reflect on their dark brown skin and yellow warts. The battle continued until the last sun rays died over the forest. The mosquitos were trying to feed on the humans while trying to avoid the damselflies and bats. The damselflies were also trying to feed as much as possible and avoid death in the jaws of the bats. And the toads were just enjoying the leftovers of the bats. The silence over the meadow was restored when the sky turned pitch black and the stars flickered high above. The mosquitos flew away, taking the bats' annoying high-pitched screams and the toads' deep croaks.

It was a cold night before the mist, the dampness changed it to a chilly and wet evening. The moss and leaves that Pod found were enough to heat the water for the tea that night. With hot liquid in their hand, the overall mood of the three friends started to improve, as well as their chattiness.

"If we start our journey before sunrise tomorrow, we should be able to cross the west bridge just after the midmorning supper. And if we are lucky, we can get the performance permission after lunch. By the end of the day, we should have made enough money to pay for our meals," thoughtfully said Tod.

"By this time tomorrow, we will be enjoying a pint of ale and a warm bed", cheerfully replied Mod.

"Ohh, hopefully, by this time tomorrow, we will already have the pleasure of seeing elves. My uncle's friend said that he saw an elf once in Heetom".

"Yes, that is right, Heetom is one of the few cities where elves mix with mortals. The books say that the friendship between the elves and the city's royals has gone since the magic war. Back then, the city

chose the elven side and fought with them to protect their forest. This is one of the reasons why the city has not been conquered since then.”

“One of the reasons?” inquired Mod.

“The city has a really advantageous location. Mountains protect the north side. It takes 2 months to cross them on foot, and most of the way is covered by snow. It is so cold that you can fall asleep and never wake up again. Also, a huge ice lake with beautiful blue colours is in the middle. It takes two days to cross it, but no path is 100% safe. Once, a rich merchant was swallowed together with 4 mules and two carriages with silk. People believe that the silk was so good that the Gods under the frozen lake just wanted it for themselves. No army will even think of trying to cross the mountains, and even if they do, if the cold does not kill them, hunger and exhaustion will do it. Besides that, the city was built on a neck of land surrounded by a deep river. In the narrowing parts of the river, the current is so strong that it is almost impossible to swim across it. Guard towers are placed every 100 m on those parts to monitor the waters. The elven forest is on the east of Heetom, and elves do not let anyone pass through it. No humans have been inside their forest for millenniums. Finally, on the west is the Datum Forest and only fools will try to enter it”.

“What your books say about the elves, Tod. Are they as beautiful as everyone says? Asked Pod, overlooking the entire conversation about the citadel.

“There is not much information about their physical appearance in the books. Most are about their fighting skills, artwork, poetry and music. The Book of the Races described them as tall and athletic with dark brown skin, bright blue eyes and dark green hair. The dark skin and green hair enable them to merge with the trees, making them the best hunters in Maynoon. For human eyes, they are the epiphany of perfection, with perfect features and melodic voice. The bright colour of their eyes helps them see in the dark. All the elven children are taught the arts of fighting, hunting, dancing, painting and music since birth. This is why all of them can sing and dance. The most interesting thing about them, in my opinion, is that their language uses forest and animal sounds. The way they speak and produce sounds is completely different from ours. This is why only a handful of humans ever learn how to speak and read in elfish,” managed to answer Tod before Pod interrupted him.

“Ohh, I would give everything that I own for 1 hour in the presence of an elf. Imagine the painting that I can create. People will pay to glance at it,” dreamily muttered Pod.

“Do you know any melody or poetry written by them? I agree with Pod. I would give anything to be able to hear them play or learn some of their music”.

“Hum, let me see. There is a poem that was given by the royal elves to the Daruen, the chief librarian during Kolms reign. It goes like this:”

“Come, come, come to the river  
Where the air is fresh and life is jolly  
Come, come, come to the river  
Where the fish is big and dragons fly  
Come, come, come to the river  
Where you will feel light and gaily  
Come, come, come to the river  
Where the monsters vanish and the seraphs stay  
Come, come, come to the river  
Come to see the light in you.”