

Upon awakening in the frigid morning, William quickly got up and revived the campfire from the ambers. He had set his cauldron above the fires, having filled it with water and oat flakes, and went about gathering the camp. He started with the tent by pulling out the things left inside, taking out the pickets, undoing the ropes, taking off the coating. He picked the empty, detached tent; he raised it above and shook it to free it from dust and dirt. He pulled the beams free from their cavities, folded them, letting the tent itself collapse. He rolled the tent and tucked it inside a bag along with all of its parts. As he was doing that and checking his breakfast time to time, he felt comfortable despite the miscalculations.

He set down to finish the cooking with most of his possessions gathered. William sifted in a spoon of sugar and stirred the porridge until the water evaporated, leaving the dense mass of boiled flakes. He grabbed the cauldron and put it on the dirt nearby. He had his gloves on; he had them on during his sleep, too. They were comfortable, reliable and durable; also stylish, in a way. The cauldron grip was not that hot, but he was still glad to have his gloves on. He poured the breakfast into the cauldron lid with tall sides that served as an elongated bowl. He took the cauldron and brought it over to the water canister. Forced to take off the gloves, he switched on the pump. When the cauldron was filled with water to the half, he turned off the device. The water sack of the canister shrunk slightly as the water was withdrawn, but there still was enough left. William washed the cauldron with hands, poured what was in it into the bushes, and then poured the water in, again. He brought it back to the campsite, pulled on the handwear and set the cauldron back above the hearth.

Relaxed, he located himself on the log and started eating.

Camping was pleasant to him. Not directly similar to his other interests, it connected to them in its own way. He gathered materials and knowledge by travelling. Sometimes he dared to visit towns and villages that presented him with the opportunity to sell devices of his that were too humble for city inhabitants. Naturally, he took great interest in exploring the sources of Aether and its places of strength. In such journeys he could find the much needed crystals, which he studied actively. Not all of those were strictly energy crystals - that was only one specific class of those. There were others, like luminescent or levitating types. Energy class by itself had interesting specimens - the crystals that flash sudden bright light are labelled as unstable and tend to release energy in bursts, thus representing danger to anything in vicinity; the burst power ranged, depending on the origin and the size of the crystal, but clusters of those are always examined with full caution. On top of that, crystals were not limited by elemental powers. Some

contorted reality, some messed with minds of living beings. Most peculiar ones were avoided by the classic arcanist schools, and majority of moderately unusual ones were considered inexistent altogether by the followers of technology.

William tossed the tea packet inside the cauldron and removed the pot from the campfire. He left to wash the lid and the spoon. As he returned, he filled a metal cup with the hot mint tea and turned his attention to the campfire. He tossed in piece of timber from the carefully arranged stack and directed his gaze to the fire, hugging the mug with both hands.

The crystals were most important thing he searched in the wild, but it was not the only thing that was to be found. He usually roamed in the outskirts of the cities of technologists. There the anomalies were limited to flora and geology, with rare exceptions. And he was in for the exceptions. Rarely in the forests can be found some mysterious legacy that was not destroyed by the technologists. But the scale of the problem was enormous.

Humans who took those territories created perfect ecosystems within the cities, cultivating the fields and forests within the enormous territories and leaving everything out of bounds to waste. The beasts were driven away or slaughtered by the technologists. The spirits and creatures of magical origin left to the distant wilderness – places that were put on maps, but discovered enough to be labelled “uncharted”. Much more bountiful were the places near the towns of arcanists. There people lived in Aether, along with some communities of higher races. There the forests lived. There the gentle sunlight was barely passing the thick growth that hid the homes of other life forms. And the more was the distance from humans, the more the elderly world had freedom. Somewhere out there were the forests of dryads, dwarf hills and undiscovered elven mountains.

William sipped the tea and frowned.

The followers of elder traditions and keepers of magic were few compared to the population of the technologists. And the difference grew. The latter group expanded their territories swiftly. They lived long lives, replicated swiftly and had all of the comforts except for the spiritual one. They had it all: medicine, firearms, machines, money. And the arcanists, or, as they called themselves, homos aeternam, were roughened up by the less welcoming nature. They were sowing the plants that grew where they lived. They traded with other villages, they had their goods taken to towns and they exchanged wisdom and tools with those that were not human.

But since arcanists were actively purged by the technologists, the homos aeternam did not welcome the modern humans. And that, above

all, bothered William. He needed to reach the places of magic. He had had enough of the aggressive liberalism. And yet, he was confronted by followers of conservatism who were ready to kill him at once.

He sighed and tried to relax. He glanced around and decided to take a better place. Moving away from the firewood, he walked through the bushes and leaned against a pine tree.

Camping was something that his father inspired in him before losing himself in worries and work. The cauldron belonged to William's father before it was passed to William himself. Father's tent was worn by years of irregular usage, so William picked a new, small one for his own journeys. As he started going hiking alone, he understood that it does not take much to have enough equipment. A typical large backpack could fit in a tent, a sleeping bag and the utensils along with provisions, leaving a lot of space for extra trinkets. At first, he used the medium-sized backpack, but then he felt like carrying more items of luxury as books or papers or gadgets. Hiking was not popular among the technologists. In a way it was, yes. People would travel in safe forests with beautiful clean water running down the perfectly imperfect fabricated rivers. Leaving the cities made sense only to those who wanted to see the other cities, since cities lacked nothing at all and were only different by fading cultural features that were reduced to souvenirs and clothes instead of rituals and languages. In the dissipating folklore, the far lands were described as those that were filled with monsters and unwelcoming populations. The tales of the undiscovered lands were integrated into the modern cinema as dangerous adventures, but people watched them in awe with popcorn on their lap. The modern human was thrown from inspiring adolescence into the rash chaos of studies mixed with work and had nothing to achieve in life but a good job, a great family and a comfortable vacation. During all that the problem of overpopulation was fought with huge metal-and-plastic autonomous machines that were fabricating houses and redigging the lands to make more cities to fill.

William noticed that he had drifted in the pessimism once again, so he tried to concentrate on the nature around him. After all, it did cause him happiness.

He usually brought books to read in the tent or outside. At day he either travelled or slept. At night he preferred to lean against his backpack and read novels or scientific materials in the light of an accumulator-powered flashlight. When the mood was fitting, he would walk in the deserted darkness and stare at the stars, wondering how something so constant could be so attractive. In the evenings he would relax and prepare food or take care of the campsite. In the mornings he had inspirations gathered, so by then he started

sketching his ideas and preparing the blueprints. Otherwise, he could write down his thoughts in journal or sort the ideas into strict notes, building theories and reconsidering the known dogmas. He did not eat much, and he was not too demanding for food, so he could pack enough for one long trip at a time. William found comfort and inspiration in such timespending.

On one fateful trip he had decided to take a shortcut through the least passable territory out of scientific interest. And he was glad that he prepared for a long and unorthodox journey. He spent one day walking around the tall mountain, seeking a way to get past it. It was unbelievably tremendous. His peculiarity, however, led him to an overgrown depression in between the skewed rock masses. And this is where his extra utilities had come handy. He used his pocket saw past its three thirds of the charge to cut a zigzagging path through the crowded trees and cottage-sized bushes. Behind the forest he discovered...

As William was recalling the general image of the cavern entrance, he had heard something. This was more than alerting, since in the deserted overgrown forest nothing but the wind and the river nearby would make a sound. He turned to the sound, coming from behind him, his mug in one hand.

"Valeo!" someone yelled.

William dropped the cup as the sudden bright flash had come at him from a silhouette that started fading in. His wrist bands flashed red and emitted the perturbing sound. This signaled him that the Aether had dangerously high level in the direct vicinity, which was obvious enough by that moment. In a heartbeat the light crossed the distance and collided with him, briefly blinding him. He regretted not wearing the protective goggles as he pushed his weakened eyesight to search the disturber.

A silhouette of a girl finally took shape and colour. It was a person with sharp face features, black wavy hair tied in a loose ponytail and a figure concealed by an old-styled leather jacket and hand-sewn trousers. Clothes, adapted for swift travels as much as for sudden fights.

She spoke, her voice sharp. "What?" She took a brief pause. "Then die!" She raised her arms, her eyes flashed violet, and she cried "Mori!"

This time William had seen a bolt of energy, but he was ready to react. He brought his arms before himself and crossed the wrists against each other, letting the bands touch. The bolt came at him and crashed against the concentrated barrier, giving him a push. He landed on his back, slightly hitting himself against the ground, but still managing to throw his arms back to absorb the impact.

The girl pinned him down in an instant and looked at him. "How?"

He lowered the brows.

"How did you survive? Answer!" she demanded.

"Milady," William began, "I would like to explain."

"Now!" she roared, punching him in the face.

"Science." he let out, clenching his teeth.

"Liar!" she swiftly raised her hand.

"Lavender!" he yelled.

The girl frowned for a second. And William used it whole. Moving his hand millimetre by millimetre since she had him down, he now was ready to throw one hand on the switch on his belt and the other one on the girl's waist. He flipped the switch and grabbed her wherever he could reach under her jacket.

"Désolé, ma cheri."

He winced as she shrieked in pain at the sudden electric charge put to her spine. She jumped away instinctively and he blasted to get a distance from her. The girl hissed and charged at him. He jumped to a tree, his back against it, and, disabling the shocker, slapped the wrist bands against each other, crystal against crystal. Crystals shone bright. He tightened the muscles in his arms, but felt pain as hands were pushed back to his torso. He hit the tree with the back of his head and heard his firm shirt rip, but he spared himself from severe damage. The girl was thrown good four meters back, but landed with a somersault. The wrist bands stopped glowing altogether as they cracked apart.

The girl stared at him. Looked at the fresh debris.

And started at him.

"Please do not," William spoke gently, feeling pain in the head, but reaching for his belt.

The girl collapsed with a shriek. William stood. He took one careful step towards her.

"Do not... come close," she hissed, gasping but still full of rage.

He stopped. She started crawling away, still looking at him.

William pressed his lips together, tightening the cheeks. Then he relaxed his face, closed his eyes, sighed and opened them again. He swallowed nervously, then spoke.

"Would you like some tea? I... think there is still some left."

"Why didn't you kill me," the girl growled, "Do you want to toy with me?"

"Why would I ever?" William answered.

"You... techheads... are shameless. You kill everything."

"I am not exactly... affiliated with technologists." William spoke carefully.

"Liar! How did you block my magic?"

He stood with his arms cast down. She sat, holding her leg. William looked in her eyes and smiled slightly. "Can I explain this by some mint tea? Please?"

"Why?" she answered. Her voice was once again steady despite her state.

"Because I hate to see you this way."

"Don't fool me."

"I do not. In any way, it is a long story."

He slowly walked to pick his mug. The girl stiffened as he strode towards her. As he came two large steps away from her, she raised her hand. He stopped, bent over and put his dusty cup on the ground. He took four slow steps away.

The girl looked at him. "What's wrong with you?"

William smirked. "That is a question I ask myself often. Please, do not think it is a poison. I drank it just fine... before you attacked me."

She looked at him still, holding her bleeding leg but keeping the other hand, ready to prepare a spell. He cast a gaze at her sullen form and gave away a sad smile. He turned in the direction of the campsite and strode carefully.

William stopped for a moment. "I am going to bring more tea. I have some more. Also... I know a bit of incantations of healing-"

"Don't try it." she hissed.

"Just tea, then. I can leave you alone for a bit. If that is what you need. Just do not leave."

"Why?"

"I can explain how I am different from the technologists and *why*. Also... I have a bit of biscuits. They are stale... but still good. I promise!"

He rushed away to the camp, leaving the girl confused as she stared at the dirty mug.