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Grounded

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Elianix hid in the trees, looking for the party. Both suns shone through the leaves, but luckily it was a cooler season, so she wasn’t suffering in the heat. The dirt ground, speckled in red and yellow sunlight, breathed with life. Trees creaked as she felt them reach their branches towards warmth. Critters crept in every direction: birds flitting, squirrels scampering, frogs hopping, bees buzzing, butterflies floating, deer running. Elianix felt at home. But the perfect moment didn’t last.

“Lia!” a gruff woman’s voice called. “Stop hiding, idiot!”

*Mallior*, she thought. *I should’ve taught her to stop the name-calling.*

An iguana crawled over to Elianix’s foot and looked up.

“Alright, come on up then,” she said, begrudgingly, hiking her skirt up to reveal a tree trunk for a left leg.

The iguana climbed her leg to her hip, where it sat and stared where she was staring.

“See that person there?” She pointed. “That’s Mallior. She can sense you, if you aren’t careful. And she’ll get information out of you too.” Elianix sensed the iguana’s tension. “Don’t worry. She only fights if she has no other choice. She looks muscular and mean, but she’s sweet. Especially with animals.”

“Lia! Lia! Don’t be a fool!”

“I have to go now. You, go home.”

The iguana climbed back down and left her alone. She adjusted her skirt so that only her boot stuck out below the fabric.

“I’m here,” she said, unable to muster the energy to shout. But Mallior couldn’t hear her. She gracefully walked forward.

“Lia! Lia! Li-” Mallior stopped when she saw her. “There you are! We have to get back to the party. Why were you out here? Didn’t you hear us calling?”

“I...” She needed an excuse, quickly. “I was looking for ingredients for healing salves.” She smiled weakly.

“Right,” Mallior skeptically replied.

“That’s my job!” She gestured towards the satchel sitting on her right hip to emphasize her point. “You fight, I heal, Dyren leads — we each have a role.”

“Let’s get back to the group. This way.”

Elianix followed Mallior through the woods, knowing that this was not the best path back to the encampment, but forgiving her comrade’s shortcoming. These woods were familiar to the group, having hiked them for several weeks. Well, at least they thought. None of Elianix’s comrades could remember their past. It was a strange phenomenon, but they couldn’t do anything about it. So, they agreed to work together.

“We’re back,” Mallior proclaimed to the group around the fire.

“About time. We were worried about you, Lia,” Dyren said.

“Sorry, we passed something I needed at the end of last night’s hike, and I thought I could get it today, since it’s a rest day.”

“I don’t know if I believe her, for the record,” Sperik snarled. She bared her venomous fangs for effect. Elianix feigned fear.

“Let’s not get aggressive,” Trenan said, ever the one to avoid conflict. “She helped me map everything out. She knows to be safe. I trust her.”

An assortment of sounds left the mouths of the group and floated away with the smoke from the fire. It wasn’t too cold yet, but it was definitely time to eat. Yesterday had been a hiking day, which made today a rest day. They never seemed to have enough food on rest days, which left Mallior and Sperik arguing over what to do. Mallior’s connection to animals meant she didn’t want to eat meat unless absolutely necessary. Sperik, on the other hand, was always protective of plants and upset with animals that ate them. Trenan used his water connection to navigate and to keep everyone safe and hydrated with the purest water accessible.

“We should plan tomorrow’s hike,” Dyren said, still chewing whatever meat he had bitten. “It’s been a few days since we’ve had any real threat—”

“That bear wasn’t a threat!” Mallior barked. “I could’ve stopped the fight if Sperik hadn’t sunk her fangs in.”

“You couldn’t have done anything! I made the right choice. The plants were suffering with the bear around.”

“Anyway, we still have to be wary of potential threats going forward. If Trenan is right, we’re getting close to something new, something inhabited. Maybe we can find an existence better than this.”

“Fat chance.”

“Sperik, I don’t want to hear it. We drew sticks to pick the leader, and that’s me. I’m doing the best that I can, and we’ve come so far.”

“One of us didn’t.”

‘Please,’ Dyren begged. He took a deep breath. “I miss him too. We couldn’t have saved him. He was too wounded, and we hadn’t found Lia yet.”

*Maybe this too*, Elianix thought. *Maybe the pain of loss is too much for them. They shouldn’t have to suffer. But maybe they need to in order to be ready.*

“Tomorrow we ride?” Mallior asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“That’s dramatic,” Trenan said. “We trudge through nature dragging a cart with our belongings, but maybe romanticizing it makes it less depressing.”

“Do you really think we’re close to something? Do you know where we’re going?” Elianix asked, gauging how much he had learned.

“If we walk along this stream, it should split in a few hours’ walk, and then we follow the near side. I really think we’ll get somewhere. I think there are more of us—”

“You keep saying that, but what does that even mean?” Sperik’s eyes filled with frustrated tears. ‘We have no idea where we came from. Who and what are ‘we’? None of this makes any sense.”

*If we follow Trenan’s path*, Elianix thought, *we should reach town in two days of walking, with a rest day between. Are they ready for that?*

“What if we take another day of rest to prepare ourselves for what’s ahead,” she suggested.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Dyren stood, towering over the rest of them. “We have a path to follow, and we’re all itching to keep moving.” He turned to walk downstream, likely to listen to the wind. “We may not have pasts, but we’re ready to find futures.” His tall, lean shadow strutted away from them.

“That settles that.”

It wasn’t yet sunsdown, but they were all exhausted. They split off into their own areas to coexist in silence. Elianix relaxed on the ground, feeling fully supported and joined with it. She closed her eyes. The living soil connected with and comforted her. She stayed still for hours, until she heard gentle footsteps coming nearer.

“Hey, Lia?” Trenan asked meekly.

“Yeah?” She looked up at him and patted the ground next to her.

“Thanks,” he grunted as he sat down. He stared at the stream for a moment before speaking. “Why did we find you alone in the woods?”

“Huh? Oh, I told you, I—”

“I know you said you’re like us and you have no memory before that moment. But we’d already been hiking for several days before we met you. If the same something happened to the rest of us, why are you different?”

“Oh, T, you worry too much. All I remember is a day of wandering before you found me.”

“Why do you have so much healing knowledge? I watched Mallior’s arm stitch itself back together after you helped her. That’s nothing like what the rest of us know. And our magic is small, just moments of connection with the landscape here or there.”

“I... I don’t know. Maybe I came from somewhere different.” She hid her worry, but her head was spinning. She was out of lies. His pause panicked her.

“What if we don’t like what we find?” He asked this in a whisper, as though voicing this fear made it real.

“I don’t know, Trenan,” she said, relieved that the interrogation was over. “When you don’t know what you’re seeking, it’s a question of whether knowing or not knowing is worse. I worry that there’s a good reason we’ve forgotten. Maybe we’re protect—”

“No. I hate not knowing. I would take so much pain over this uncertainty.”

“Then it’s decided.” She felt a twinge of guilt. “Onward.”

#

The following morning’s hike was uneventful. They were lightly rained on, but Dyren had sensed it on the breeze, so he had led them to shelter before they could be soaked. They took that reprieve to eat what they had on hand, which was mostly berries. Sperik lamented the untimely deaths of these plants and complained that she couldn’t just kill and roast an animal right then. The rest of them ignored her.

As the day dragged on, however, the mood shifted. Elianix felt something come over the others. They grew irksome and uncomfortable.

“The air’s different here,” Dyren spoke softly.

“I know.” Trenan squinted ahead. “It’s like I know this place, but I don’t know why.”

“We’ve travelled a long way,” Elianix said, trying to smooth over the situation. She worried about their pace. She wasn’t sure they were ready for their destination.

“No, I feel it too. Some of these animals recognize me, though I don’t recognize them.” Mallior’s tension was visible in all of her flexed muscles.

“Let’s be careful and slow down, then,” Elianix suggested.

“Screw that,” Sperik hissed. “We’re getting close. I won’t stop.” She stomped away, nearly out of sight from the rest of the group.

*Shoot*, Elianix worried. *This is going to end terribly.*

“Lia? Hello?” Trenan waved his hands in front of her face to get her attention. “Are you in there?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I was distracted.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I was trying to ask you about the water here. It’s more polluted.”

“It’s not like we haven’t disturbed the areas we’ve been in.” Mallior was growing tired, since she had been tasked with dragging the cart.

“You’re right. I just—”

Sperik’s scream cut through the woods. The other four ran in her direction, dropping whatever they couldn’t manage.

“Help! My leg!”

Elianix gasped when she saw. Blood poured.

“I was just walking, and I couldn’t, and I didn’t, and now my leg,” she stammered, unable to catch her breath.

“You’ll be fine,” Elianix reassured her. “We’ll get you out of that trap, and I’ll mend that leg.”

“Trap?” Trenan asked. “How do you—”

“Trenan and Dyren, each of you reach into the ditch and grab an arm. Mallior, once she’s lifted a bit, you should be able to cradle her and bring her here, where I will prepare my healing salves.” Elianix turned away before anyone could counter her plan. She didn’t want to watch them lift Sperik off of the wooden stakes in her leg. *The trap must’ve been to catch wildlife for food*, she thought. *Disguised to look like the ground on the surface but hiding a pit of stakes below. I should’ve stayed with her, guided her away from this. I’m not very good at this*.

“Here you go,” Mallior said, gently laying Sperik on the ground.

“Don’t baby me, freak.”

“You’re so welcome for saving you. I’m glad I could help.”

*This injury is the worst we’ve seen. I have to do this alone*.

“Do you need anything, Lia?” Dyren asked.

“Yes, actually.” *Perfect*. “If you three could pick up our dropped belongings and look for some food that would be great. If you want, you could start a fire for cooking too. Just please do that at a safe distance.” She smiled, and they took her instructions. She caught Trenan staring at her, only to look down and see her tree leg barely showing beneath her skirt. She calmly covered it and focused on Sperik.

“How bad?”

“It’s not great, but you’ll be fine.” Elianix was trying to convince both of them. She wasn’t sure she had the power to handle this, but she hadn’t led the group this far to lose one now.

“I want to keep going. I don’t want this to be all there is.” Sperik’s eyes welled up with pain and sadness.

“Close your eyes,” Elianix whispered. “It’ll help if you think positive thoughts.” She gingerly placed one hand on the broken, bleeding leg and the other deep in the soil. She took a deep breath and channeled her energy into healing her friend. She knew Sperik was telling her about her thoughts, but Elianix couldn’t focus on that. She felt healing power recede from her body like vines curling to their roots, which were her fingers in Sperik’s wounds. Threads of healing energy wrapped around her leg, mending the broken pieces.

“Lia, I don’t know how you’re doing this, but it’s helping.” Relief filled Sperik’s voice. “The plants are talking about… magic? Is that what you have? Do we all really have it? Some of them say we do, but—”

“Shh, Sperik.” Elianix, having healed the major injuries, gently applied a salve to the wounds. “You’ve lost some blood, so take it easy. But you’ll be back to normal soon.” She suddenly felt lightheaded. “Mallior! Please come bring Sperik over to the temporary camp.”

“Coming!”

Elianix stayed seated and gathered her ingredients into her satchel. She sensed Trenan walk over before he spoke.

“Time to fess up. You’re different, Lia. What happened to your leg? How did you heal Sperik so fast? I wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep going.”

“T,” she sighed, struggling to stand up, ensuring her leg stayed hidden. “Please trust me. I’m one of you. I’m out here trying to find something, but I don’t remember what.”

“That’s not good enough. I’m sorry, but I think you’re holding back.”

“I…” She trailed off as the world went blurry.

#

Elianix’s eyes fluttered open. *Am I moving?* she thought. *Where am I?*

“There she is,” Sperik announced. “Thank the gods. Didn’t want everyone blaming me.”

“Lia!” Mallior cheered, stopping the cart and turning. “Glad you’ve come back to us. Think you can walk? My arms are tired.”

“Yes, of course.” Elianix slid off the cart and stood. She felt stiffness in her left leg and was still low on energy, but she thought she was fine. She looked around and was astonished. *It’s not possible…*

“We continued hiking without you,” Trenan explained. “We were impatient and didn’t know how long until you’d be yourself.”

“Plus, we’ve had a safe journey since my injury, which you healed perfectly, by the way.” Sperik looked at Elianix, hoping for an explanation.

“I’m glad you’re all safe.” She forced a smile. *Just over the hill. We’re already there.*

“We’re so close to something. I can feel it.” Desperate hope filled Dyren’s voice.

“Hey! You!” a woman shouted. Her exact location was concealed by the elevation and the trees. “Stop right there!”

“We mean you no harm,” Dyren replied, lifting his hands in innocence. “Where are you? I want to see you.”

“You know you aren’t welcome here,” a man growled. “My men will be here in moments if I send up a warning sign. Don’t make me do it. They are far less patient than I am.”

“You don’t know us! How dare you reject us!” Sperik seemed close to tears.

“We don’t know you?” Both hostiles scoffed. “You’ve brought enough shame upon us. We’re lucky the gods helped rid our village of you fiends.”

“We have no memories,” Trenan pleaded. “We come seeking allies and friends. We can take care of ourselves, and we are peaceful.”

“You are not.” The woman finally stepped into view at the top of the hill they had been climbing. “All you’ve done is cause us pain. You are unnatural and unwanted.” She nocked an arrow and aimed it at Dyren. “You were always the worst.” She let the arrow fly.

“Stop!” Elianix shouted, lunging forward and catching the arrow in her hand. “Stop this.”

“Who are you?” The woman gasped, horrified. “*What* are you?”

“These people are to be welcomed into the village. You should admire them for how far they have traveled on their own without their memories.”

“Do you even know what you speak of?” The man leaped down from a tree several yards to the right of the woman.

“Lia, what’s going on?” Mallior asked, her brow furrowed.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, but this is over.” The man shot three bright red arrows with orange fletching into the sky. “Because you couldn’t stay away, twenty of our best hunters will be here in moments, ready to kill you all.”

“Lia?” Trenan whispered. “Any chance your secret can help us out here?”

“No!” Sperik shouted. “I did not make it this far to die. I’ll kill you all with myself if I have to.” She bared her fangs at them.

“Fiend! You all should’ve stayed away!” The woman’s voice was full of spite and fear. As she spoke, the other villagers arrived, encircling the party.

“I’m sure you all recognize these leeches.” The man’s face contorted in disgust. “We tried it the kind way, but now it’s time to rid ourselves of them permanently. Archers, ready!”

“Yes, sir!” a chorus sounded as one.

“Aim!”

“No!” Elianix stomped her left foot into the ground and screamed as she unleashed what remained of her power. The bark covering her leg spread over the rest of her body as it extended up to a great height, and her limbs split into branches protecting her friends.

“What…” Trenan whispered in amazement.

“Destroy that thing!” the hostile woman shouted.

“You don’t recognize me, Merin?”

“Oh, by the gods,” Merin gasped.

“I’m Elianix, the Goddess of the Ground.” Her voice came booming from every inch of the tree. “You ordered me to take away their memories so they would never come back. I did it to protect them, but they’re so alone without their families. You should never have rejected them.”

“Lia…” Trenan muttered. He shook his head and smirked in realization.

“They’re too powerful, too different. They’re a threat.” The man had his hand in the air, ready to tell the archers to fire at any second.

“They’re the bringers of the new way of life. The gods are dying.” She grew beautiful blossoms of purple and white and turned her voice to her friends, now protected beneath her branches. “I had to leave something good behind. Build this haven for yourselves and everyone who needs it with the magic you have been gifted. I believe in you.”

“Fire!”

The arrows buried themselves in her branches. Elianix breathed her last, scattering pollen over the enemies to knock them unconscious.