

Backstory (Druid)

When I see my home again.

As you hum the melody that's been your travelling companion for as long as you can remember...

Across the field or 'round the bend

...you feel the rhythms of your breath ebb and flow...

I'll 'git on down the road and then

...echoing the pulse of the world around you.

Into the arms of home again

Morning, in the Celadon.

I'll stay awhile but hopefully

It's a forest you know well, and love deeply.

The road again will sing to me.

You can hear the notes sung by every leaf, branch, and bough.

My heart will leap and faithfully...

And though you're hundreds of miles away from the parents and hometown you love just as much.

...bring my home along with me.

You're home again.

When I see my home again...

As the song rolls into it's next verse, you feel it moving through and around you, as you begin to notice some of the nuances it carries from this particular place, on this particular day. The embellishment of a cool breeze is picked up by the canopy overhead, as it sifts a delicate vibrato of rippling sunlight at your feet. The lush babbling of the Nesser, flowing peacefully and firmly just out of view to the West, harmonizes with the warbles and flutters of birds as they flit, swoop, caw, and call.

It reminds you of how the song is sung by the Jewel as it leaps through the Welkwood hundreds of miles to the East, and how your father taught you to listen and sing along with the rhythms of water rushing, trickling, and bouncing over rocks, or weaving and whirling with the wind. It reminds you of hikes with your mother through the Kron Hills, the steady percussion of your steps in canon with the rolling backdrop of a sprawling horizon, the syncopated stretch, reach, and occasional leap between each foothold of a climb up the majestic peaks of the Lortmil Range.

As your memories resonate with the present moment, the scent of the trail you first detected just after breakfast this morning brings the day's first change of key. You relax into the harmony of the forest, and wait for your moment...

...there it is.

As the scent repeats its plaintive melody, you find the notes by which you slip gracefully into the new scale. The ground rises softly to meet your palms-become-paws, your jaw extends outwards, following the wet, black button of your nose, now the beacon that guides your steps as your tail swishes your soft grey fur like a bow across and through the brush. You snort and sniff in time with the chitters and chirps of crickets, squirrels, beetles, frogs, and all manner of skittering critters as they leap around – and sometimes on – you. With a sudden shake from tip to tail you send dewdrops flying and dancing in the light.

You love all your forms, but Direwolf is the one best suited to the task at hand. Low to the ground, you can more easily see, and keep time with the tracks you now follow, no longer thrown by the skipped beat of their occasional limp. Your nose is now far more attuned than before to the scent that first drew you to the trail, and as your ears pick up the tones that were just a bit too high when you had two legs instead of four, you begin to detect a voice struggling to catch its breath between notes. Rushed, raspy inhalations give way too soon to strained and wheezing exhalations.

It's a tune you wish were much less familiar.

You're no stranger to sickness or death, nor do you consider them enemies. Through the many seasons and cycles of your upbringing in Celene, your parents never hid the fact that all living things sing for only so much time, and as a member of the Silverfrond Corps, you've spent the past ten years doing everything you can to help the world sing its song to the fullest. In those ten years you've introduced countless new members to the choir, and celebrated the peaceful retirement of just as many others.

What you're hearing now is different. It's hard to understand. You've spent the past two weeks in the Celadon collecting soil and water samples, trying to resolve or harmonize this strange dissonance but...it's not so much an off-note or a missed beat as it is...an un-note...a void where a beat should have been.

As the scent grows stronger, you notice the freshly trampled brush and broken branches that tell you you're getting close, and then you're there, and it's exactly as you feared.

Three-hundred-and-fifty-two pounds of brown fur, heaving behind a pair of eyes that are a kind of bloodshot you've seen before but still can't figure out, tell you everything you need to know. You shift back to human form as you summon the Goodberries you know will ease the pain, but not prevent the inevitable. Running your hands as softly as you can along the hide of the grizzly, you cure the minor scrapes and bruises sustained from the broken branches of the failing final steps. You sing words of comfort and healing, and as the wounds that can begin to heal, and the pain recedes, she thanks you, tells you her name: Nissa Dusk. She tells you how she came with her husband, Gruuna Wren, to the Celadon. She tells you how she buried him months ago, after he succumbed to what she is fairly certain was the same disease. She asks you to keep her cubs safe.

For the first time, you notice the shuffling figures at the edge of your vision. You'd been too focused on caring for Nissa to notice. This is so much worse than you'd feared, but it's time. Nissa calls her cubs to

her, and they huddle around close enough that you can look into their eyes, and breathe a sigh of relief at not seeing any of the signs of whatever it is that's currently undoing their mother; whatever it was that undid their father, and has been until now only slowly, but very very surely, inexplicably undoing whatever it touches wherever it's found. As the breaths become more peaceful, and the space between them grows, you wait for the end of an exhalation, and then embrace her. You do this to hide from her children the hand that firmly grips her throat, preventing another breath. This is a mercy to both of them.

Back in the modest lab at the Silverfrond outpost in Nellix, just West of the Celadon, you look out the window at Nissa's cubs as they drift off to sleep in the sanctuary pens. In a few days, they'll join a caravan heading NorthWest to the Eranger Family Animal Sanctuary, not technically associated with the Silverfrond Corps - as their proprietors Lon, and his mother Pauline are not the biggest fans of anything resembling bureaucracy - but very good and reliable friends of the Corps and all it stands for nonetheless. This comfort slightly eases the disappointment of the results of the tests you've just run, though you had no real reason to expect that they'd turn up anything other than the exact same nothing that they have for the past two weeks. The Silverfrond branch in Leukish has more sophisticated instruments, and after two days of a nearly unbroken gallop, you barely have the energy to shift back from horse to human form before breathlessly walking the Corps lab techs through your notes.

You collapse hopefully into the couch in the corner of the lab, but wake up to grim faces.

That's it then. Two weeks of work, and nothing. The assignment is over. Failure.

The next morning, you report to the Leukish branch for your new assignment. You're to gather your notes and samples, and take them South West, to Peculiar Manor, home and sole source of the world-famous Old Peculiar Ale. Though they made their name selling said ale and similar, they've long since been on the bleeding edge of experimentation with all manner of potions and poultices, and have made some of the centuries most groundbreaking pharmaceutical breakthroughs, both medicinal and...erm...recreational. Turns out they've come across the strange substance you've been studying as well, and they'd love to hear what you know, because they think they may have made a bit of a discovery.

And so the song of sadness you'd been singing since Nissa's death gains a breath of hope. And as you prepare for your journey, even though they're miles away, you swear you can hear your parent's voices join the choir. As it turns out, it was your mother who first taught you the song, singing it as she held you close on the day you were born. It's her favourite song, and it's exactly moments like this when you'll call up the special verse she wrote just for you. The one you'll never, ever sing for anyone, or even so much as tell anyone about, because it's always been the one you save just for her, you, and moments like this. And as you take the first steps onto the road, with you're whole heart and soul you're nearly belting the final lines:

*So long as you are here with me.
Here is where my home will be.*