

Whilo stepped outside his front door and walked down the pathway through his garden. He sighed happily at the scent of flowers drifting in the breeze and the sound of the fountain gurgling as he walked by. When he reached the gate, he thought he knew exactly what he was going to do. His gate led out into the country side, and there was one road that led through it. At a point it would split into two roads. Every day, he would take the road that veered left, led onto the bridge over the river and continued on into the little town. He would go there to buy produce and to chat with old friends on their front porches while enjoying the midsummer air. The other road took a sharp right and wound deep through the meadow and into the wilderness beyond. Whilo never went down that road, and neither had anyone in recent years. Further back, when Whilo was a child and his parents were still alive, they warned him not to go down there, or else a big wildcat may wander along and eat him. The oldest man in the town was eighty-seven, and the last time he ventured through there, he was ten. "There's nothing down there," said the old man one day. Brom was his name. "The closest thing to a town was this mean old hermit, but apparently the further back you go, the more unfriendly it gets."

There were no clouds in the sky today and nothing to obscure the light of the sun. It seemed to bring out the fullest of the colors of everything in the countryside. Radiant hues shown from every flower and every tree. As Whilo got closer to the fork in the road, houses began popping up on his left, not much different from his own. They were made of wood and stone and had gardens, and a couple had ponds where ducks would come to settle. It was a very controlled and familiar charm that he had seen every day of his life. He looked to the right. It was wild. Untamed. Caught in the sunlight, the flowers glowed the brightest, and the trees stood the tallest. Flocks of birds rose from their branches and soared in every which way. He couldn't explain why he felt this way, today and not any day before, but he felt an itching curiosity that lead him away from his homely left. He reached the fork in the road and saw the river and the bridge and the bend, on the other side of which was the little town. He saw the unkempt road that led away from everything he knew into a country that only Old Brom vaguely remembered.

The town will be there when I get back. He thought to himself. He scratched his head for a moment, and then he turned right.

He did not know how long he planned to spend venturing out here. He had walked for an hour, and certainly, there was not so much as a woodshed to be found. One would assume no one had ever even seen this place. But it was serene. Quiet. The only thing that could be heard was the sound of birds chirping. The sunlight touching the forest gave it the likeness of silent emerald flames. *This isn't bad at all.* Thought Whilo. *I rather like it, to be honest. I think I'll come out here more often. It's not as though I do anything much these days.* He did not stop, and he came upon a river. The same river from home made a wide curve around the country and made its way out here. *Hmm. How about that?* But something else caught his eye. A boathouse sat on the other side of the river, and a row boat was tethered to the deck. It knocked against the wood as it bobbed up and down in the water. Immediately, Whilo harkened back to Brom's tale about the mean old hermit, and for a brief second, he felt the timidity he had when as a child, he looked down the road that went right, anticipating a wild beast to come running after him. Nothing happened, and Whilo chuckled at himself. Brom knew the *old* hermit seventy-seven years ago. The fact remained however, that someone lived out here and was perhaps at home, seeing that the front door was wide open.

A noise suddenly came out from inside the house, and Whilo jumped. There was the sound of objects colliding with each other and of rummaging through equipment. Whilo stepped over to the edge of the river, and he saw a shadow in the doorway. He waited to see if anyone would come out. A young man stepped through the door, and he carried with him a travel sack. He was no hermit, and he dressed similarly to a townsfolk with a white buttoned shirt and brown trousers with suspenders. He was humming to himself when he caught sight of Whilo staring at him from across the river.

"Hello," said the man with an inviting smile. "What's your name?"

“Whilo, what’s yours?”

“Alder. I’ve never seen anyone come down this way before. Where are you from?” Whilo now came to ease. “Do you know the town of Shane? It’s an hour in the direction I came from.” Alder squinted as he placed his travel sack in the boat. “Can’t say that I do. I go east mostly. From what I heard not much goes on the other way.” Whilo chuckled at that. “You’re not wrong. That’s sort of why I came out here. I’m looking for some where interesting to go.”

“Well you came to the right place.” Alder hopped into the boat and began untying it from the post. “Do you have to get home anytime soon?” He grabbed the oars and rowed over to the bank Whilo stood at. “You’re inviting me to come with you?” He asked Alder as he drew up on shore. “Sure, why not? It’s nice to have company every now and then.”

“Well, I can’t see why I shouldn’t come. Do you have enough rations for two?”

“I’ve packed enough for three.” Alder patted his travel bag next to him. Whilo gingerly stepped into the boat and fell on his face as the boat teetered back and forth. “Whoa, just don’t capsize us, friend! You’ll upset the fish.” Whilo sat up and shook his head laughing. “Sorry, it’s been a long time since I’ve been in a boat...” he looked at the travel sack confusedly. “Are we going fishing?” “No, it’s just that the fish will eat us if we fall in.” Whilo took that as a joke, and Alder began rowing.

The river took them deeper into the forest. Along the banks grew willow trees, their branches draping lazily over the water. Little robins and blue birds flew in and out among them picking remains and flying them back to their nests hidden further back into the forest. A lone porcupine waddled by on the far bank, and on the left hand, a family of beavers wandered down the opposite direction with bundles of sticks in their mouths. The sunlight reflected off of the water, creating a golden ripple in the branches. Evergreens towered beyond the river and from within their shadows, wilder cries from animals unseen could be heard.

“Are you all alone out here, Alder?” Whilo asked his new friend who continued to row them. He shook his head. “Not at all. My family lives in the village just a few miles away. That was our old boathouse you saw when we left. We haven’t really used it in years. However, lately, I just wanted to get away for a little while—see these old sights, explore the old woods again. There’s something about this place that just feels like coming home again.” “I see it.” Whilo reclined back with his arms behind his head. “I rather prefer this place in the wilderness than my own house. However I’m not so lucky as to have a family to need a break from.” “No?” Alder saddened a little. Whilo sighed. “A few years ago, a fever had spread in my town. Nearly a quarter of everyone died, including my mother and my father.” “I’m sorry, Whilo.” Whilo’s eyes became glassy, but he changed the subject as quickly as he’d brought it up.

“It’s funny that you say you live in a village. Old Brom told me that the closest thing to a town out here was some cranky hermit that didn’t take too kindly to him.” Alder smiled. “That certainly was an overstatement; yet he’s not far off from the truth. There is my village east of here, and there’s another that’s a good distance away. Beyond that is the hermit you speak of who lives on the edge of the Goblin King’s land.” Whilo opened his mouth, ready to question him about the hermit he claimed was still alive and the Goblin King he said was real, when he was cut short by the sight of a grizzly bear crouched at the far side of the river. It would not have been so distracting had it not been the size of Alder’s boathouse. Alder noticed that Whilo’s fearful gaze was fixed on the enormous creature, and he laughed. “That’s Malto. He has protected the inhabitants of this forest for hundreds of years. By far he’s the most good-natured beast in all the countryside.” As they passed Malto, the bear looked up at them and shook his head up and down excitedly. “Hi, Malto, good luck fishing!” Alder waved as they turned around the bend.

Whilo could not hide the smile on his face. “Alder, this might be my favorite place on earth.” “I’m glad you think so. To be quite honest, not everyone likes it out here.” Alder frowned a little bit. “Why is that?” asked Whilo. A dragonfly hovered between them and stopped as if to listen in. “If you don’t know

what you're doing out here, it can be dangerous. Careless people have gotten into trouble in the past, and the stories have grown in the telling. Only a handful of people in my village come out here, but only when they need to hunt food for the winter. Hardly anyone comes out here simply to enjoy this splendid world." "Is there anyone else?" Whilo jumped as the gigantic face of a catfish emerged out of the river. Its open mouth was certainly large enough to fit him inside, however it disappeared the second it glanced over at Alder. "My cousin Lilly, comes out here sometimes. She may be fonder of this place than even I." Alder continued as though he had not seen what just happened. "Well, perhaps the three of us should come out here sometime," said Whilo as he regained his composure and sat back down again. Alder smiled. "I'd like that. You and Lilly would get along well, I think."

They had been traveling longer than Whilo had realized. The sun had lowered and turned the sky orange, casting dark shadows over the forest, and the lightning bugs were out. "I suppose we're going to set up camp soon?" asked Whilo. Alder drew the boat onto the bank and brought out his travel bag. "Yes, but we'll turn back tomorrow in case you need to get home. I took you out here, and I don't even know if I ruined your schedule or not."

"Not at all. I have no real desire to go back, however it is probably not for the best that I stay away too, too long. On the other hand, I'll be happy for our next meeting." They set up a ring of stones and made a campfire. They then rolled out mats, blankets and pillows and laid down after having a meal of roasted nuts. Whilo did not realize there were so many stars in the sky.

At home in Shane, the lanterns were always burning in the streets and lights would often remain on in the windows of some houses. Only a handful of stars would appear over his little town. Out here, unobscured by yellow light showed untold millions of stars in the wilderness glimmering like little pearls. It struck him as ironic that in the place he was most familiar with, with the people he had known his whole life: he had felt less at home than he did now, in the forbidden woods with only monsters as

companions and this one stranger he had met only earlier today. But to the sounds of creatures lurking in the shadows he happily fell asleep.

He woke to the sound of a conversation going on next to him. He was too drowsy to sit up, so he listened while his heavy eyelids closed back again. "Oh, hello, Lilly. What brings you out here this early?" "It's not early. It's going on past noon." Answered a young woman's voice, bemusedly yet sadly. "I'd ask you if you were doing alright, but seeing that you're out camping while you should be planning for your wedding, it's apparent that you've run into some problems."

"I'm not running away, Lilly. I just... need time to gather myself before I go back there." Alder did not sound as burden free as he had yesterday.

"She's going to want to see you. She'll find it worrisome that you proposed to her and then just disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Did she say anything?"

"Not yet, but I wouldn't push my luck if I were you." Alder chuckled. "I'm glad that you care about us, Lilly. If she asks, I'll be back home in a week or so."

"Who's this?" Whilo felt something wet touch his nose. His eyes snapped open to find a raccoon pressing its snout against his face. He quickly sat up and looked around. Alder and Lilly were sitting on a log together taking notice of Alder's new companion.

"Don't mind Patch. He doesn't have a concept of personal space, and he gets excited when he meets new people." Said Lilly. She had long auburn hair that went down past her shoulders and green eyes that twinkled with amusement. Patch scurried away from Whilo and climbed onto the log next to her.

"This is my new friend, Whilo. He just showed up at my boathouse yesterday, and I took him camping with me." Alder explained. "Hi...I'm Whilo." Whilo quickly pulled his blanket to his neck, realizing his

shirt was lying next to him. Lilly smirked. "Is it like you to just hop in a stranger's boat and let him take you anywhere he wants to?"

"Apparently so. To be frank, I don't know if I wouldn't do it again, the next time I meet a stranger."

Whilo answered as he slid further underneath his blanket. She got up and walked over to him. "I'm Lilly, nice to meet you." Whilo reached out and pulled his shirt under the blanket with him. "I'm Whilo..."

"I know you are. It's sweet that you're trying to be decent, but your blanket has been down to your waist for the past ten minutes."

"So it has." Whilo threw the blanket off of himself while his shirt was still draped over his neck and struggled to pull the sleeves over his arms. "Alder's getting married? He failed to mention that to me."

"He probably had no intention to." She motioned to Alder. "I did say that I came out here to take my mind off of things." He said weakly. "But Alder," Whilo finally managed to pull the shirt over him. "Aren't you happy about this?"

"It's not like that."

"I get it." Lilly put a caring hand on his shoulder. "I know you feel overwhelmed, but so does Bree. Think about it. The man she had known all these years one day kneels to her in front of her friends and family and asks her to marry him. You don't think that changed everything for her too? You both are feeling the same excitement, sharing the same fear and uncertainty. You two should be there to reassure each other."

"And we will be. I'm not running away."

Whilo was humored by this. "Did you come all the way out here to bring Alder back home?" Lilly shook her head. "No, it's his choice what he decides to do. I didn't even know you two were out here. By the way, I've never seen you before. Are you from the Eastern Village?"

“Shane. I don’t know if you...”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s West isn’t it? I hear it’s a lot fancier than our home.” “Wait, how do you know about it?” Alder asked with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve...been around more than you.” Lilly shrugged. The raccoon climbed up on her shoulders and wrapped his paws around her forehead while chattering. “Alright, alright...” she stood up. “Patch says he wants to keep going. You two can come along if you want, if Alder still feels like running away from his future, that is.”

“You know, I think a big part of why you’re so domineering over other people’s relationships is that you’re trying to live through them. Perhaps if you find a man of your own, it won’t look so bad to you that I deal with this in my own way.”

“Perhaps.” Lilly lifted up her chin and crossed her arms. There was an awkward silence, and then Alder sighed. “I’m sorry Lilly. That wasn’t really fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Hey Whilo, you want to come?” Lilly glanced over at Whilo and smiled at him. He stretched and cracked his neck a couple of times. “Where are we going?”

“Patch and I were out here a couple of days ago, and we found this huge cave a little over a mile away, but it was growing dark out, so we headed home. We decided to come back out here again and see what’s inside.” Alder began rolling up his equipment and loading it into the boat. “We have to get our stuff ready first. I promised Whilo I’d get him back home today, and I want to make sure he has time to spare.”

“What do you do that’s so important?” Lilly asked him. For the first time, Whilo took time to think about it. He was not a busy man. His parents had been wealthy, and they left him with enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life. He spent time furnishing his house and tending to his garden, but he

had no obligations. To be honest, he was not sure if he really had anything to live for. "I'm sort of an architect." It wasn't a lie. He'd built a number of extensions to his house, and his neighbors were often impressed with his work. "I wish I did things like that." Said Lilly. "Where we're from, there isn't much going on, so if you're looking for something to do, you have to get creative. That's why I come out here into the woods, because things actually happen."

"So I take it there really is a Goblin King and a hermit that's over a hundred years old?"

"Shane must be completely cut off from the east if you don't know anything about the Goblin King or the thousand-year-old sage." Lilly raised an eyebrow. Whilo shrugged. "Where I'm from, they tell us not to come down here. No one really knows or seems to care what goes on in the east; they just say it's a lot of trouble that's not worth getting into."

"It's funny. That's exactly what they tell us about the West." Said Alder as he finished loading the boat. He had with him some rations for the hike for which Patch reached out his paws from on top of Lilly's shoulders. "Which again begs to question, why do you know about Shane, and I don't?"

"Someone that you don't know told me about it. Anyway, if Whilo has to be home soon, then we should get moving." Alder gave up on his inquiry, and the newly found trio made their way for the cave.

"So tell me about Shane, Whilo. Is it all it's cracked out to be?" Lilly walked alongside him as they went on. "How is it cracked out to be? I wasn't aware that we had a reputation." He remarked. She grinned and tilted her head to the side as though expecting him not to take her answer seriously. "They say it's as close to happiness as a man from the east can hope for." "Is your home that bad?" Whilo had no idea people thought that way about his town.

"We have a whole slew of problems." Lilly answered. "Our lives are about survival and making it to the next season. Things aren't as bad as they were decades ago. But men go out hunting, and rarely come

back. With infrequent game, we typically resort to home-grown vegetables, but lately they haven't been turning out very well." "But if that's the case, how is it that you and Alder fare so well out here?"

"The few that survive out here are the ones that know their way around. Alder and I have been breaking the rules since we were very little. We would go out and explore the woods and come back home to our parents who had been crying over our disappearances and rounding up search parties for us. We did this frequently and against their commands, but seeing that we managed to find our way back without anyone's help each time around, they eventually gave up. Alder's parents even built that boathouse where you met him, so that he had a safe place to retreat to when he came out here. It eventually became the place where our family would get together and enjoy each other's company on our holidays, but that hasn't been the case for a while now."

"Then I guess Shane is all it's cracked out to be." Whilo nodded. "I lost my parents a while back, but we never fought to survive in Shane. Everything we need, we have, and then some more."

"You lost your parents?" Lilly looked up at him with sympathy in her eyes. Whilo nodded somberly. He did not know why he bothered to bring it up a second time, but he seemed to be needing to mention it at every opportunity. Almost as if it were tired of being unspoken for the past ten years. "Since they got sick and passed away, I took up work and continued in it excessively, and I was always looking for something new to do. One day I decided that none of it was enough, so I went down the road that took me here, and so far I like what I've found. I feel like this is leading me somewhere, and I'll be complete when I get there." Lilly brushed her hair back and looked thoughtfully at him. "It's funny if you were to hear it from someone else, and you did not experience it yourself. But this wilderness, where people venture into and fail to return from alive, is a good place. It's not safe by any means, however it brings you to a place of rest that not even the safety of home can bring."

“It is funny.” Said Whilo, “I never expected to feel this way about a place that I’ve been told my whole life would be the end of me if I set foot in. I still can’t quite explain it.” Lilly’s smile was radiant. “You belong here, Whilo.”

They had been hiking for over a half hour before they arrived at the cave. It was off to their left and was obscured by a cluster of evergreens. On their right the hillside steepened into a ravine which dropped off a few stories. They peered into the mouth and inspected the inside before stepping in. The entrance was well lit, and there was plenty of walking space before it grew pitch black. They walked along as far as they could see, but something stopped them. Whilo’s foot pressed down on something soft, and it burst, soaking his ankle. “Patch, did you know the whole time that this was a snake’s den?” Lilly scolded the raccoon as he leapt down from her shoulder and began lapping up the yolk from under Whilo’s feet. “He smelled the eggs, of course,” said Alder as he stepped backward. “We need to get out of here,” Whilo piped up. “I don’t want to know the size of the thing that laid these.”

“Well...we’re too late for that.” Alder had his hands stretched out, signaling the others not to move. Two yellow lights appeared directly in front of them. They moved up and down in unison, starting as low as the cave floor and reaching as high as the ceiling. Wherever the beams were pointed, a large, scaly mass was revealed. The serpent’s coiled body filled the entire cave. A low hiss filled the air, and the snake’s fangs were caught in the light of its eyes. Its top half was lifted off the ground, poised to strike.

“Get down!” Lilly pulled the men down just as the serpent lounged for them. Its long body soared over head as it missed them. It quickly whipped back around to face them, but on her mark, they leaped forward underneath its head and scrambled out of the cave. It chased them out into the open, and the drop off lay directly ahead of them. “Jump and catch the roots, it’s our only chance!” Lilly yelled. There was no time to object. They leapt off of the edge of the ravine and grabbed onto the roots that hung over the side and just barely caught themselves from falling.

Meanwhile, the snake peered over the edge and glared down at them. Whilo could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and his palms started to sweat, causing his grip on the roots to loosen. The serpent maintained its gaze and did not leave the edge. He struggled to find footing beneath him, but as he moved his feet around, he discovered a large cleft that was directly under them. He mustered the will to let one of his hands go to motion to Alder and Lilly to climb down into it. They obliged, and once they were inside, they helped pull him in with them. Patch had been wrapped around Lilly's torso the entire time.

"Careful, there isn't a lot of wiggle room." Alder grunted as they hugged their backs against the wall. Pebbles were crumbling and toppling down beneath their feet. He looked up to see if the snake was still there. "It's looking back and forth... almost as if we confused it. Maybe it'll think we fell and just give up." "If it leaves, then we need to sidle further away from the cave before we climb back up," said Lilly. "We don't want it to just be sitting there waiting for us when we reach the top." Whilo was trembling and struggling to catch his breath. "Friend," said Alder reassuringly. "We're getting out of this. I promised that I would get you home today, and I intend to hold up to it. We just have to keep our heads clear."

"Alder, look up again." Lilly told him. He glanced back up to see if there was any change. He sighed heavily and nodded. "He's turning around. I think we have our chance."

"No, we have to wait. We have to be sure. If it hears us climbing back up before it goes back inside, then we're done." Whilo was staring down into the gulley with his eyes glazed over. "This one's...going in my scrapbook...right next to the one where the brown recluse bit my thumb..." Lilly squeezed his arm and held him back against the wall. "Whilo, I'm sorry. It's my fault for bringing you out here. Just let me get you out of here and we'll call it even, alright?"

“Or maybe it will go better with the time I fell off the roof and broke my ribs...yeah...because in that one I fell...hah, hah...”

“No, Whilo. It won’t go in any of those, because we’re going to get you home, and you’ll forget all about this,” Lilly was fighting to hold Whilo back now. He was clearly going into shock. “Alder, we have to wait for him to come to his senses. We’re going to be here for a while.” They didn’t know exactly how much time they spent hiding in the cleft, but the shadows had changed, and it was slightly chillier where they were. Whilo had stopped rambling, and there was a consistent absence of the giant snake. The only thing that would break the silence was a hawk circling above the forest beneath them.

“Alright,” started Alder. “I think it’s time we try our ascent.” Lilly looked over at Whilo and nodded in order to see if he had come through. He did not say anything, but he grabbed onto a root and helped her up. They made their way a good distance to the left before they climbed back up, out of the desire to steer clear of the serpent’s lair as much as possible.

When they pulled themselves up over the edge, they found nothing. Behind them, they could see the cluster of trees which hid the cave, but the beast had apparently retreated back inside. Having taken deep breaths and brushed the dust and rubble off from themselves they made their way back to their campsite.

“Alder, Lilly,” Whilo said as they drew near the river bank. His voice was heavy with remorse, and his head was lowered. “I’m sorry for holding us back like that. I didn’t know it was that easy for me to crack, and we all could have died.” The sound of the rushing water, and the sight of boat gently bobbing in the river helped him feel more grounded as they sat down on the log together. “Are you kidding me?” Alder slapped him on the back reassuringly. Lilly put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “We certainly could have died, and that was all thanks to that lousy raccoon, but Whilo, if you hadn’t found that little spot for us we might still be hanging by those roots with the beast looming over our heads. You are the

hero here!" Whilo looked at him, unsure of himself. "You mean that?" Lilly beamed and put her arm around him. "This memory won't fit in your scrapbook of horrors, because you never faced anything like it. We can't accept your apology for cracking up because there's nothing to forgive." At that, Whilo blushed. "It was as if I were floating outside of my body...and I were listening to myself say all of that without having any control over it and watching myself lean forward ready to fall off from the edge..." Alder shook his head. "We have you back now, and that's all that matters." The three of them sat there on the log for a while, enjoying each other's company.

In spite of their grim misadventure, it seemed to Whilo that the woods had become friendly again. A monarch butterfly circled over the river, and the dragonfly from yesterday flew over to greet her. The two fluttered around happily for a few full minutes, but they eventually parted ways, each to their own business. It was now just the silence and the rushing of the water.

Finally Whilo stirred. "I should go home now. I don't want to, but I should."

"Oh...but we we're having so much fun..." Lilly sighed and slowly replaced her arm at her side. Alder nodded sadly, "I have everything ready to go. When we get back to the boathouse, I'll send you off with some dinner."

"I should probably get going too." Lilly got up and lifted Patch out from under the log where he had been cowering away from the others. "I know you're sorry, Patch. It's okay. You just need to be more aware of whose nest you're pillaging next time." Alder climbed into the boat and got ready to untie it. Whilo nodded to Lilly and began to turn away for the boat as well. "Goodbye, I guess." She said. Whilo turned around and she was still standing there with her hands behind her back. He crossed his arms and walked back over to her. "Until next time, of course," he added. Lilly brightened a little. "You mean you want to come back... after everything that's happened?"

“Why wouldn’t I? That was the most excitement I’ve had in years, and I have you and Alder to thank for that. I’ll be glad to see you again.” Lilly laughed softly and nodded. “Just be sure to feel bored sometime soon, alright?”

“Sure thing,” he answered, and extended his hand. She took it readily and shook it, then added, “And remind Alder that he needs to go see Bree before too long. I don’t know how it is in Shane, but where we’re from what he’s doing is bad ethics.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Whilo began to step away again, and this time he did not turn back again.

The ride back to the boathouse seemed quicker than when they had first rowed out here. Whilo did not pay as much attention to his surroundings being enamored with thoughts on the events of the past two days. Meeting Alder, seeing the wilderbeasts, having Lilly save his life twice. He did not know what he was going to do with all of this now that he was going home. Tell his neighbors about this? They probably would not believe most of it. Not to mention, they would not look at him the same way after knowing he had gone down the road that went right. They would be wary of him, the way they had been with Old Brom. But at this point, did their opinion matter to him? He was not sure. Such a change had come over him since coming out here yesterday, that he was not sure who he was to Shane anymore. What would he even be when he came back? Would everything go back to normal?

His attention was brought back to the present moment when Alder drew back up to the deck and began retying his boat. “Well, I know we ran into some trouble there at the end, Whilo, but I’m honestly glad we did this. It was just the distraction I needed.” He helped Whilo out of the boat, and having unlocked the door, invited him inside.

They stepped in through a narrow walkway on either side of which hung assorted gear and camping equipment. It was lighted by two small windows, one on each wall that let in the sun. Shoes were also piled on the floor and coats were draped over little pegs sticking out from the door that led further

within. Whilo had volunteered to help Alder prepare dinner which they now had boiling in the cauldron over the fire in the living room. They both sat in cushioned chairs facing the fireplace, as it crackled with warm colored embers and the seasoned smell of stew filled the den.

“You never mentioned the fact that you were getting married.” Whilo began. “That’s incredible news. I for one am glad for you.” Alder nodded. “I’m very happy.” However a look of sadness appeared on his face that seemed to the contrary. “From what I gathered from your conversation with Lilly, you don’t have the same kind of troubles in Shane that we do. I hope I’m not presuming.”

“No, you heard us right.” “Raising a family in our village is difficult, to say the least. As Lilly told you earlier, hunting is rarely successful, and recently, the Goblin King has put a curse on our crops, so in turn we’ve resorted to scavenging for nuts and berries in the wilderness. That can be a problem if one is not as knowledgeable of the forest as Lilly and I are. Today, you learned firsthand what can happen.”

“You and your cousin seemed to handle the situation rather well.”

“However most people are as inept as that raccoon who got us into that mess. Not that it’s their fault. I’m not saying that, but they were not raised to understand the wood. I would like to teach them.”

“It sounds like Bree is lucky to have you. You might raise the most successful family in your village.” Said Whilo as Alder served them both from the cauldron. The flavor of the soup was unfamiliar. He assumed it came from what Alder scavenged from the forest, but it was an enjoyable taste all the same. “It does me good to hear you say that, Whilo. Believe me, I intend to, and yet... something troubles me.” Alder held his spoon over his bowl, almost as if he’d forgotten to take his first bite. “What is that?” Whilo asked. Toward the bottom of his soup, the flavor became strong and tangy, and he immediately drank the whole thing down. “What if I’m not able to teach her? What if my children don’t learn, and they end up like all the others who were taken?”

“My guess is that Bree is smart enough to learn, if she’s anything like you.”

“She’s brilliant, and she’s even a tutor to the neighbors’ children, but our village and the Wood are two different worlds with their own set of rules.” Whilo nodded and put his bowl on the little table to the side, then stretched out his legs onto the footstool in front of him. “Well, I’ve learned a lot about you in these two days, Alder, and from our little fiasco earlier today, I’d say you’re more than capable of protecting Bree. You were the first one to see the snake, and you stood in front of us. You looked like you were going to take him on head on! Not to mention, you and Lilly were agile enough to dodge it when it attacked; I only managed to slip buy. I would even go so far as to think that Bree agreed to marry you, because she knew full well that you would take care of your family better than anyone else could.” Alder chuckled and finally took his first bite. “Thank you Whilo.” He ate silently for a moment, and their attention was drawn to the crackling fire.

Then after a while, he said something that Whilo did not see coming, “I think that’s why my cousin is interested in you.” Whilo turned to look at him. “Come again?”

“Lilly. She likes you.” Whilo laughed out loud and shook his head dismissively. Alder just continued to eat. “Alder, I don’t know what you think you saw...”

“You were asleep, but when Lilly first showed up, while we were talking, she kept glancing over at you.”

“She said so herself that she didn’t recognize me. From what it sounds like, strangers are a big deal here.” For a second, Alder choked on his soup. “So are pretty boys.”

“Alder...”

“When we set out for the cave, just before she walked over to your side, she whispered to me about how neat she thought you were. Then, after you led us into that cleft and helped us escape the giant serpent, she told me that she saw something in you—something that set you apart from all the others.”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

