

Chapter 01 - A Walk in the Woods

It was early winter in the village. As harvest had come to an end, the scent of the recent Festival was still in the air. The cold damp of the wood, the smell of early fallen leaves, a twist of bonfire smoke, and feast meals still lingered at the edge of the forests – even as the soft falling of scant flakes of snow began to drift forth from the gray clouds above. It was cold. The night had been long – and yet, Ljotr and Argi ventured out of the village, slipping through woods together. Though this was her job, Argi had little reason to be out in such places in these conditions. He'd have been better served staying home.

Yet, Ljotr knew he could rarely refuse her. It was why she plied at the window of his small workshop to drag him forth and into the cold. The two had been friends for as long as she could remember and were nearly inseparable from those early days. As a Hagborn, he had been her only real friend after all of these years. When she was a child, she was a little different than the other girls in the area, save for her sharp ears. But as she aged, her body changed. Her gaunt and lanky build was odd enough but only accentuated by the large, wide-open eyes that centered on her face. Her hair was long white and gray of a kin to snow on a cobbled path. Her pale skin set her apart in her homeland as well, near translucent in places with visible blue lines of blood underneath peeking out when she stretched. Those were the surface levels, but despite knowing the odder parts of her heritage – Argridr had never once judged her. Others had drifted away, made their discomfort known, and kept a distance except when it was required they didn't.

She had always admired Argi. He was a carpenter's son. He had a good build and handsome face under tan skin with undertones of the worked wood he specialized with, and his art was only surpassed by his genuine kindness. He was quiet, someone who preferred to be home but who could rarely avoid being approached by others hoping to court him or engage him in something. Despite her appearance, it was she who he spent most nights with – though, not in that way. They were out here together on a cold morning. They spent nights sharing secrets. So, perhaps, she had gotten a bit sentimental about him as they grew older.

So, she had taken to heart the old Festival superstitions. The past year was gone now, and the new one would arrive after winter. Perhaps it was time that she left the fear and trepidation she felt in the past and moved towards something more. That was her reason for dragging him out here.

Their chat had been idle and more about little things such as gossip and the Festival, of new projects and finds. Invariably, they drifted away from the topic of any sort of romance or courtship. But this morning, she was going to change that.

"Argi," She hinted towards him as they passed over some fallen underbrush. Her voice was sharp – not in the way she spoke, exactly. It was the tone of her voice. The general volume was average, but she sounded hoarse as if the words were near cutting themselves free of her throat. It was always like that, a hissing and unpleasant reminder of her heritage that she had been given. "You know I didn't just want to talk about this kind of thing..."

"I kind of figured that out," He responded with a nervous but nearly heartwarming chuckle from his chest. His voice had none of the oddities that hers held. It was a calming thing to listen to him, not just for Ljotr but near anyone she had met would say the same. "I guess we should quit beating around

the bush, eh?" He said with a nod, offering her a hand as he stopped in his trekking. "You can talk to me about anything."

"Argi," She felt the heat of a blush in her cheeks, a blush that would have lingered long after her actual statement. But that crucial moment between a young woman and a young man was interrupted.

A scream echoed through the wood. It was a startling sound, a pained sound. It could only have been described as a woman's scream, but it did not come from the village but from deeper within the wilds. The two stopped in their tracks, and their heads moved towards the sound.

"Coyote?" Argi asked quickly. The creatures tended to hunt in the woods nearby. The sounds they made were easy to mistake for someone screaming.

"Maybe," Ljotr spoke quietly, though her tone was unsure.

Then there was another scream – a different voice, a different tone. Another soon after that. These screams were interspersed with the sound of steel on wood or steel. For a few long moments, the two stood frozen in the forest. The sounds of a nearby battle drifted from a distance towards the two, and neither was sure what they should do or even if there was anything they could do—the thoughts of what it could mean for them and their village. But the sounds were soon but a memory. It had lasted merely a minute or two at most. Then the forest returned to quiet, even softer a sound than before.

"We should warn the village," Argi spoke in but a whisper with a soft nod to Ljotr, his hand resting on her shoulder as he put himself between her and the direction from which the sounds came.

There was truth and logic to his statement. If there was something afoot, the village needed to know. Yet, the forester couldn't give him that answer, "What if someone is hurt and needs help... what if it was one of the others?"

"No one else would dare travel that deep in the forest without you, Ljotr. We need to go back." Argi argued.

"I can't." She replied with a shake of her head. "I'm the town's Forester... I'll check. You go back, warn the watch." She swallowed and gave him a soft smile, "I'll be fine." She said before pulling away from him and moving towards the previous sounds of battle – keeping low and making each step purposeful and light.

"Ljotr!" He whispered as loudly as he could, "You're going to get us killed," though he protested, he did not hesitate to follow, crouching and following her soft movements through the wood.

A man stumbled towards the woman fallen on the forest floor. He was barely in condition to move. Each step was agony, each movement worse than the last. Blood streamed from an open slash wound in his stomach, a broken arrow pierced his shoulder, and minor injuries could be seen across his arms and legs. From his mouth dribbled lifeforce, his face splattered with that lost by himself and others. He weakly held a longsword in his offhand, dragging the chipped and newly weathered blade across dirt and debris before finally dropping it to the forest floor as he fell forward.

His knees hit the dirt hard, merely a few feet from the woman he had called for a moment ago. His voice cracked, "Shiri?" He repeated without an answer. It took much of his energy to keep from collapsing. Now, he struggled to crawl across the forest floor to her. He could not make the entire trek, though. His body gave way, and he collapsed, close enough to reach a hand beyond his head and to her hand. He gripped her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers. There were words he said beyond this, quiet and whispered words unheard by anyone – muffled by the rising bile in his throat and mouth and thick and crushing despair. Despite his best efforts, he could not keep his eyes open any longer, his struggling to breathe, to think, to survive coming to a pause as the unwelcome rest of unconsciousness gripped his weakened form.

It was mere minutes later that Ljotr and Argi arrived. Having checked for anything dangerous, they came upon the battlefield – where lie the fallen woman, her eyes open and towards the soft cloud-covered sky above, but unblinking and dulled. The man seemed to yet live, though. His chest struggled to rise from time to time with a shallow breath. His fingers were intertwined with the woman, and for the two villagers that had found the scene, one thing was clear. Whatever had happened here had been no ordinary battle. The use of magic still lingered as static in the air.

Behind the two forms lay a small cadre of men, each clad in gray hooded cloaks – with simple fine swords and blades scattered near their bodies. Each seemed felled by a single slash that found purchase against a vital area. There were few, if any, stray marks upon them. No errant tears or stabs could be seen on their forms. Legends raced to mind, but the copper chains held the Vestry emblem – a simple starburst stamped into the copper piece no bigger than a coin. The two had been a Hymnist and her Companion.