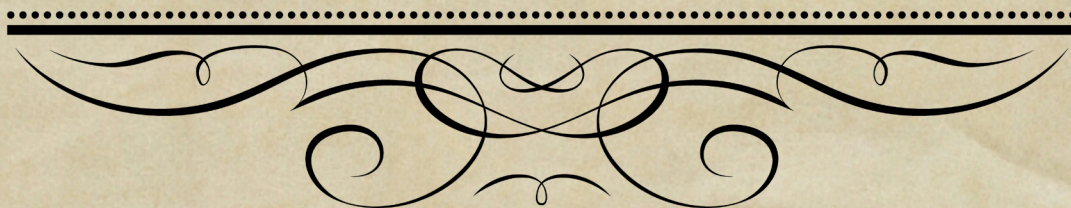


A CHAMPION'S GUIDE TO SURVIVING THE CURSED FOREST

Human Edition



ARE YOU SOUND OF BODY AND BRAVE OF HEART?



DO YOU WISH FOR GLORY IN THE NAME OF SAVING
OUR LANDS FROM THE PLAGUE OF THE CURSED FOREST
AND ITS ENDLESSLY ENCROACHING BOUNDARY?



ARE YOU WILLING TO RISK LIFE AND LIMB FOR THE
CHANCE TO SAVE US ALL AND EARN YOURSELF THE
BOON OF THE GREAT ELM?



IF THE ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS IS YES –
OR EVEN MAYBE – THEN CHAMPION TRAINING
MAY BE THE PATH FOR YOU!

Our once great and bountiful lands have long been cursed by the wandering trees and for hundreds of years our hope of survival has been dwindling as the creeping forest claims acre upon acre and pushes us ever closer to the perilous sea. We have been victims of the wrath of the Great Elm since long before your grandparents' grandparents were sired and our short and harsh mortal lives have been plagued by the knowledge of our oncoming demise for too long.

But take heart, for there is hope! Every fifty years the Cursed Forest opens its twisted pathways and allows us to present Champions who may yet save our land and people from the perils of the Taking Trees and return Arringfall to the glory our histories weep over.

That is where you come in!

Are you perhaps an orphan or vagabond? An outcast or rogue? An extra mouth to feed at a table which cannot provide enough sustenance for all who sit around it? Are you uncertain of your path in life and often without food or shelter?

Champion Training can solve these issues and many more!

If you decide to dedicate your life to the path of a Champion then you will be well fed, welcomed in every tavern and inn, hailed a hero and worshipped as such by all the fairest maidens and gallant bachelors – until such a time as the forest opens its pathways and you step inside to seek our salvation.

While it is true that none have ever survived the forest before and most likely a painful, gruesome death awaits you within those trees, there is always the slim chance of success too!

And if you are able to reunite the lost spirits then the Great Elm will grant you any boon your heart desires in thanks. You could wish to live as a king or queen, you could wish to live forever as the Fae do. Anything you may desire could be yours (even if every other human, Fae, Hag and spirit who attempted this task before you met with a grisly end). Let's be honest – someone has to win the boon eventually. And if not then we are all doomed anyway!

In the years leading up to your task, your days will be spent training with the weapons of every kind, honing your body into a weapon of its own and learning the ways of Summoning so that you might stand a chance of capturing the lost spirits which roam between the trees and uniting them as your task demands. This will be a rigorous and unrelenting regime which will aim to give you the best chance at success in saving our land and people before we are all consumed by the trees or forced to dive into the perilous sea and succumb to that fate instead.

So how about it? Will you choose a life of luxury, worship and privilege for the small price of almost certain death once the forest paths reopen? You could starve between now and then anyway, so what is there to lose? If you're still reading then it seems like you would make a fine candidate for Champion Training so read on for more information on what you may need to prepare you for entering the Cursed Forest.



THIS MAP HAS BEEN DRAWN WITH WHAT
LIMITED INFORMATION WE HAVE.

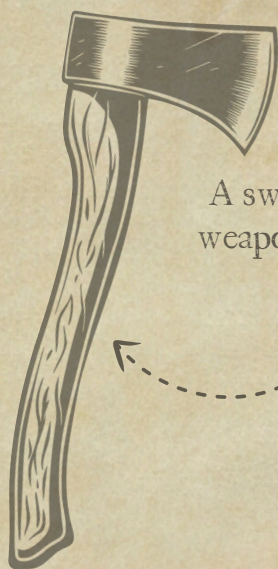
IT MAY BE YOUR GREATEST AID BENEATH
THOSE WHISPERING TREES.

OR IT MAY BE ENTIRELY USELESS.

IT IS HARD TO BE CERTAIN...



SUGGESTED PROVISIONS FOR YOUR QUEST



A sword/axe/spear or
weapon of equal might

A dagger for close combat (may
also be useful in the preparation
of meals if you survive long
enough to consume any)



A change of clothing
in case of soilage in a
terrifying situation or
through general wear
and tear



Flint and steel to
light a fire if you
dare risk it

A water flask – to be
consumed sparingly as
it is rumoured all water
within the trees is foul

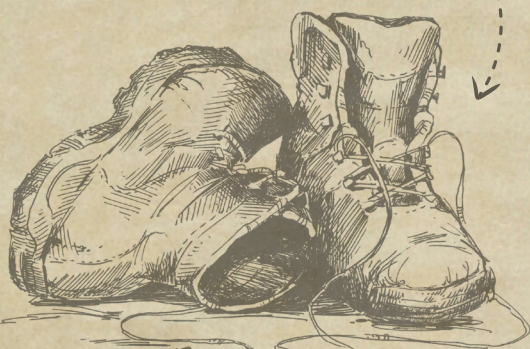


What food you can carry –
it is likely unwise to consume
the bounty of the cursed trees,
though of course you may have no
option but to risk it eventually

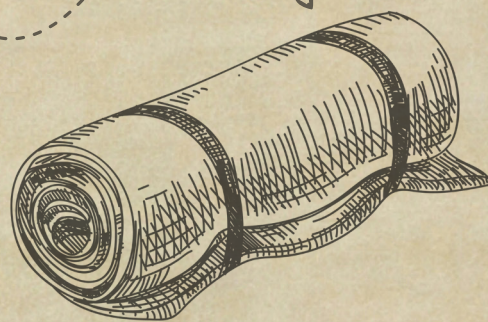


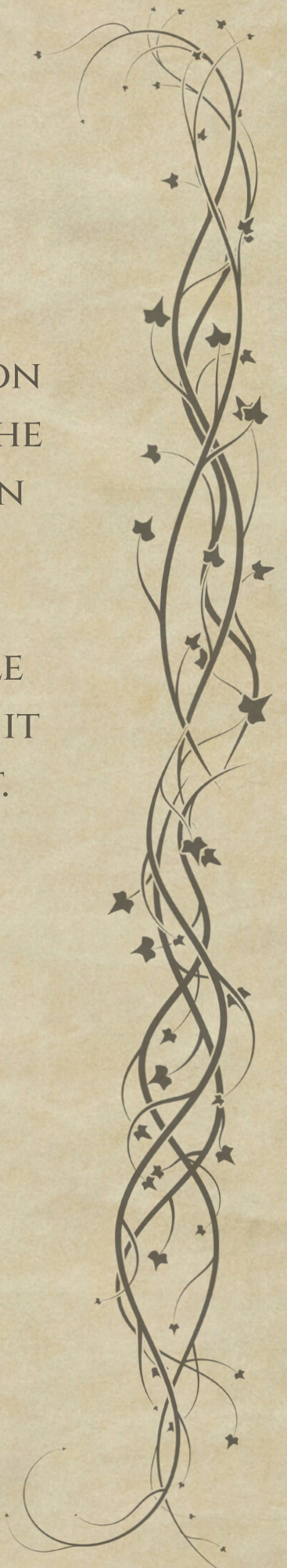
A talisman to ward off
malevolent spirits. A back-
up talisman is likely wise

Hardy boots –
broken in and good
for fleeing at speed



A bed roll and
blanket for when you
find shelter – a tent
is not recommended
as being so exposed
at nightfall is akin to
courting death itself





THE GREAT ELM AWAITS THE REUNION
OF THE THIRTEEN LOST SPIRITS AT THE
HEART OF THE FOREST IF AND WHEN
YOU MANAGE TO CAPTURE THEM.

DOCUMENTED HERE IS WHAT LITTLE
IS KNOWN OF THEM IN HOPES THAT IT
MAY AID YOU IN THE GREAT HUNT.

THE RAVEN

The Raven is the guardian of the night within the forest. Its wings are cloaked in darkness and it courts the moon as it flies silently between the trees, making certain that all slumber soundly beneath its watch.



THE RAT

The Rat guides and cares for all insects which roam within the forest, encouraging their work and helping transport them to where they are most needed among the roots, leaves and trunks of the towering trees.

THE SPIRIT CAN SEND
INSECTS FORWARD
TO SWARM UPON
UNSUSPECTING PREY

ITS BODY IS A RIVER
OF MOVING ANTS,
COCKROACHES,
BEETLES AND MORE



SAID TO BE
THE SIZE OF A
LARGE DOG

DUTY OF THE FOREST:
PROTECT AND
FERRY THE INSECTS
OF THE FOREST

THE WOLF

The Wolf is a beast of darkness and secrets. It herds the shadows beneath the trees, shielding its plants from the sun or allowing them a taste of it when desired. The Wolf brings shade to the forest floor, keeping it cool and damp and offering shelter from the beating sun.

A BEAUTIFUL
PELT OF PURE
SHADOW

SHADES THE
FOREST FLOOR TO
KEEP IT COOL

EYES THE
BRIGHTEST BLUE,
GLINTING IN
THE GLOOM

A CREATURE
MADE UP
OF THE
PUREST
DARKNESS

RAGGED
CLAWS AND
SHARP
TEETH

DUTY OF THE
FOREST: HERDS THE
SHADOWS

FUR IS A MASS
OF EBONY
TENDRILS

FEARS THE
SUNLIGHT



THE TIGER

The Tiger protects and cares for the creatures of the forest, aiding them when needed and fighting to defend and shelter them when required. Attack one of its wards at your peril.

SHEPHERDS THE
WAYWARD
CREATURES OF
THE FOREST

DUTY OF THE
FOREST:
PROTECTOR
TO THE BEASTS
OF THE FOREST

HAS A BITE
STRONG
ENOUGH TO
CRUSH SKULLS

STRIPED PELT
IS COATED
IN SMALL
ANIMALS

MAKES
CERTAIN ALL PAY
HOMAGE TO
THE GREAT ELM

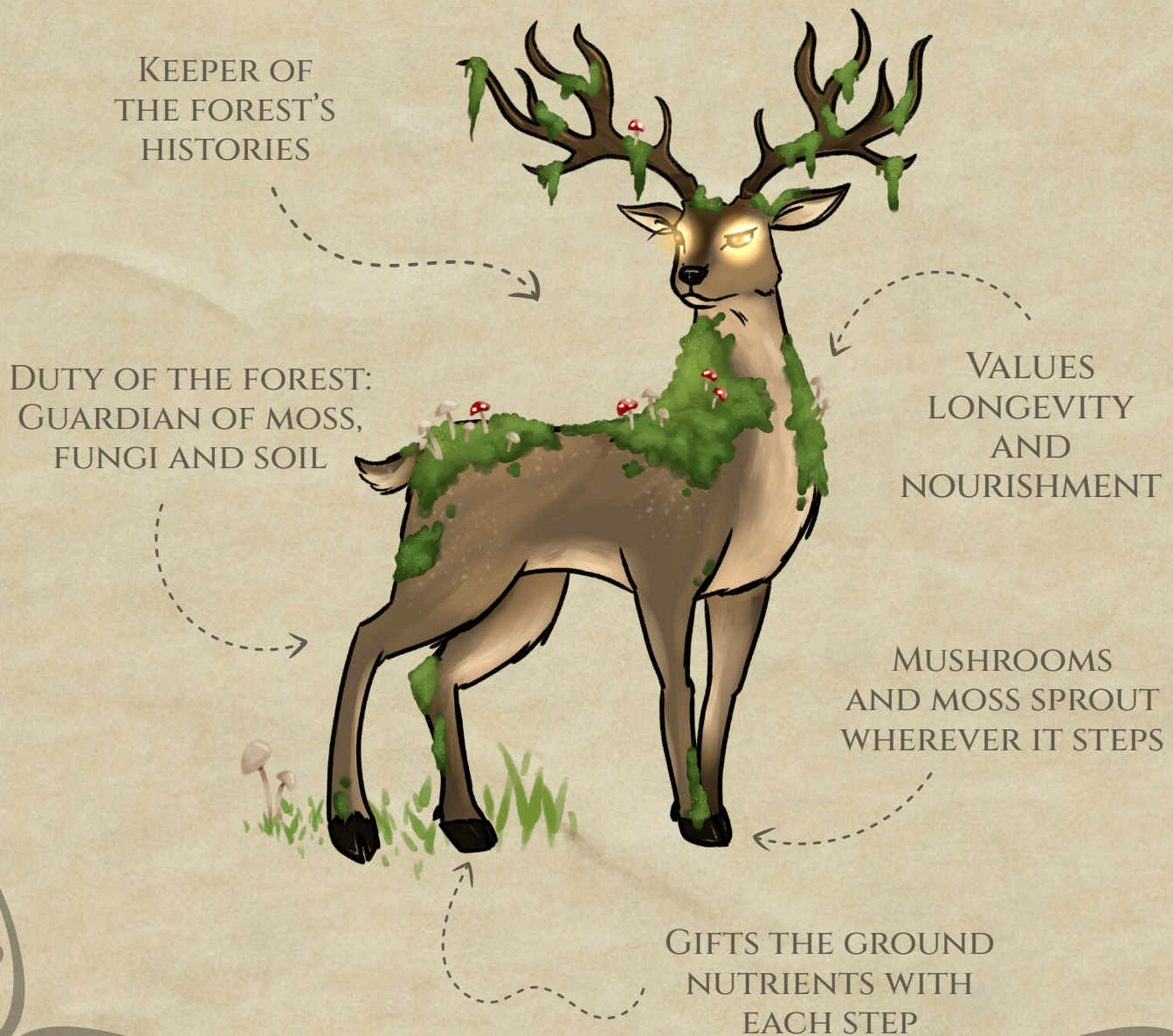
CLAWS SHARP ENOUGH
TO TEAR THROUGH
FAE FLESH



THE STAG

The Stag is the keeper of the forest's histories and the guardian of moss, fungi and soil. Where it steps, nutrients bleed into the ground, moss spreads across the trees and mushrooms sprout in honour of its passage.

"The Stag's domain was the moss, lichen, fungi and soil, all things which cloaked the forest floor and provided nutrients to the air and earth. The spirit itself was said to be taller than two men, its antlers hung with draping moss, their span so wide the trees had to shift aside to allow it passage between them."



THE UNICORN

The Unicorn is the bringer of life to the forest, spreading blossom and blooms wherever its hooves fall. Often agreed to be among the most powerful of the spirits of the forest, the Unicorn is shy and elusive by nature but can be brutal and unrelenting when provoked, using its horn to maim and even kill if it feels the life of the forest is being threatened.

IT HAS A
SHIMMERING
HORN WITH
ETHEREAL LIGHT

ONE OF THE
MOST POWERFUL
AND REGAL SPIRITS

RELEASES POISON
IVY WITH ITS STRIKE

ITS MANE AND TAIL IS
A CARPET OF PALE
BLOSSOMS, ROSES,
TULIPS, DAISIES
AND MORE

DUTY OF THE FOREST:
BRINGER OF LIFE



THE PHOENIX

The Phoenix is the opposite to the Raven in that it covets sunlight and once made certain that every tree, plant and shrub within the forest got to feel the rays of the sun on their leaves so they could flourish to their fullest potential. The two spirits are said to be in love with one another, creating balance as they fly over the trees, adoring what the other can bring and endlessly admiring the changes their magic brings to the forest.



THE BEAR

The Bear is a spirit born of water, tasked with keeping the forest nourished. Its job was once to see to it that water reached every root, every sapling, every seed. It is a dangerous entity indeed. If you hear its roar at your heels, fear for your life.

A ROAR SO FIERCE
IT SOUNDS LIKE
THE CRASH
OF A RAGING
WATERFALL

EYES LIKE
ROILING BLUE
TEMPESTS

DUTY OF THE
FOREST: KEEPS
THE FOREST
AND ANIMALS
SUSTAINED

RAZOR-SHARP
TEETH AND
CLAWS

A MIXTURE OF
BEAST AND
ELEMENT

ITS FUR HAS BRAIDED
STRANDS OF
PALE BLUE LIQUID

"THE TREES BOWED
IN THANKS AS THE
BEAR PASSED THEM"



THE BOAR

The Boar is the keeper of the seeds of the forest, spreading them far and wide and protecting the shoots and stems in their earliest moments as it guides them toward strength and prosperity.

DUTY OF THE
FOREST:
KEEPER OF
THE SEEDS

ONLY A DIRECT
STRIKE BETWEEN
ITS EYES WOULD
DOWN IT

HAS AN
IMPENETRABLE
HIDE



ITS TUSKS
ARE DEADLIER
THAN ANY
HUMAN-MADE
SPEAR

TINY SHOOTS APPEAR
ON THE EARTH WHEN
THE BOAR'S TUSKS
GOUGE THE DIRT

HAS CLOVEN
HOOVES SHARP
AS KNIVES

THE SERPENT

The Serpent's duty to the forest is for the protection of rocks and minerals but it is also a warrior, the creature destined to protect the forest from outside harm. It is ferocious in its responsibilities and single-minded in its task.



THE CARP

Though large and beautiful in its own way, the Carp's dominion is over puddles – a most peculiar endeavour. Beware this strange spirit, for none know its true desires.

THE SPIRIT LIKES
TO FLICK ITS FINS
AND THROW WATER
AROUND THE FOREST
TO CREATE PUDDLES

GENTLE AND
NON COMBATATIVE

DOMINION IS
OVER PUDDLES

A CURIOUS
AND BEAUTIFUL
SPIRIT

SOME THEORISE THAT
ITS CREATION WAS
SOMETHING OF A JEST
BY THE GREAT ELM, OR
PERHAPS A MISTAKE
ALTOGETHER

A SPIRIT WHICH
BRINGS GREAT
AMUSEMENT AND
BAFFLEMENT



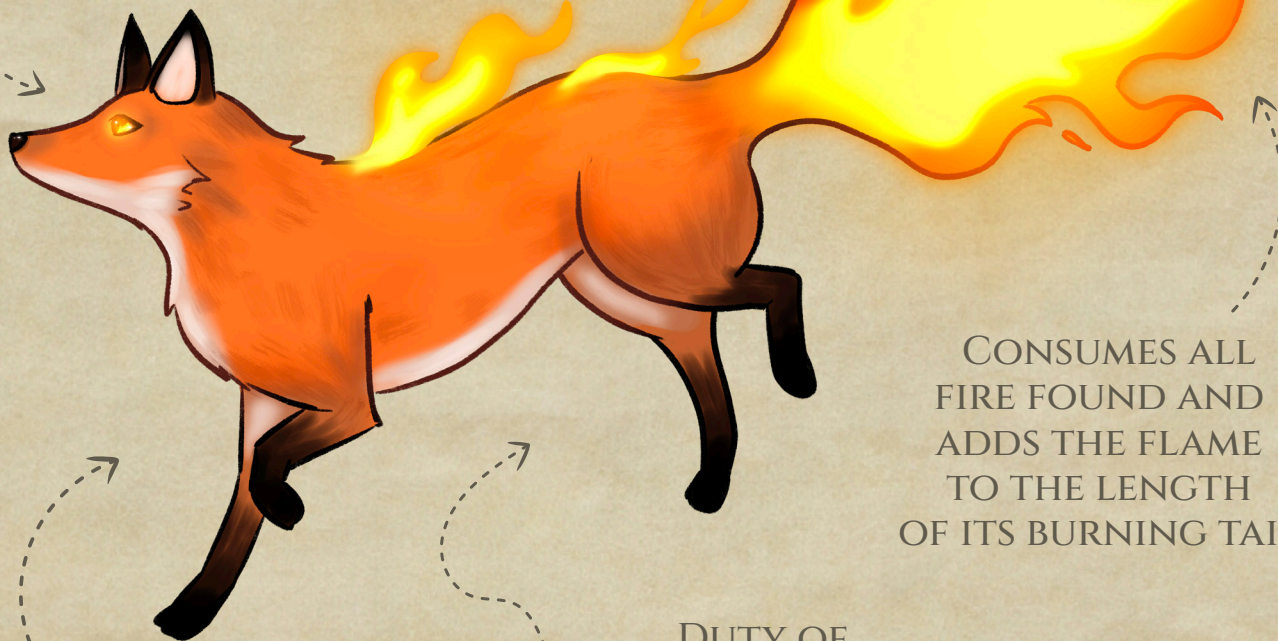
THE FOX

The Fox's job is to protect the forest from the threat of flame by consuming all fire it finds and adding to the length of its tail. It is an elusive being but its fire is deadly. Beware.

ITS EYES ARE
ALIGHT WITH
TWIN FLAMES

ITS FUR IS A
SWIRLING
STORM OF FIRE

FLAMES OF RED,
ORANGE AND
GOLD FLUTTER
FROM ITS BODY



CONSUMES ALL
FIRE FOUND AND
ADDS THE FLAME
TO THE LENGTH
OF ITS BURNING TAIL

THE SPIRIT'S
ETERNAL FIRE BRINGS
WARMTH BUT
DOES NOT BURN

DUTY OF
THE FOREST:
TO PROTECT THE
FOREST FROM
THE THREAT
OF FLAME

THE DRAGON

The Dragon commands wind and storms, thunder and lightning. It is strong and fierce, wild and wary. And it will rain down terror upon any it sees as a threat to the forest. It is said to be the greatest warrior of the trees. Never turn your back on this monster of magic and malevolence.

DUTY OF THE FOREST:
PROTECTOR

A LUMINESCENT,
SERPENTINE BODY
WITH TEAL-COLOURED
ELECTRICITY SCORING
PATHS BETWEEN
ITS SCALES

A DEEP WISDOM
IS FOUND IN THE
DEPTHS OF ITS
EYES

RAZOR-SHARP
TALONS

FEATHERS CLING
TO IT LIKE A
MANE, COATING
THE BACKS OF
ITS LEGS AND
ALONG ITS TAIL

HAS THE POWER
TO SUMMON A
STORM TO FELL
ANY TREE OR FOE



THE GREAT ELM, MOTHER OF SPIRITS

The Great Elm is the mistress of the forest and mother of all other spirits. It is she who has set this task and to her you must return with the rest of the spirits should you wish to end the curse and claim the boon. Little is known of her besides the enormous power she possesses. Approach with deepest caution.

LIES AT THE
HEART OF THE
LABYRINTH

CAN GRANT
THE BOON OF
THE FOREST

MOTHER
OF ALL
THE SPIRITS

MOURNS THE
LOSS OF HER
SPIRIT CHILDREN

THE CURSE STOLE
THE MINDS OF HER
CHILDREN AND
ALONG WITH
IT, THEIR LOVE





I whistled to catch her attention and she whipped around, causing me to cock my head and study her even closer. She was an intriguing thing indeed. Her heart-shaped face held the beauty of Fae but without the perfection of my dull kind. She had a wild look in her uniquely violet eyes that told of her mortality, and I could almost taste the fear on her, the uncertainty of the big bad world she found herself in. But then she lifted her chin, rose to her feet and pointed a stick at me. Not even a branch. It was even more breakable than she was.

Those eyes continued to blaze at me and I frowned at their brilliance, how they shone with a near-ethereal light.



I took a single step before a hand caught mine, jarring me to a halt, and I flinched as though captured doing something I shouldn't.

"Axel?" I questioned with a frown, glancing between him and the Champions who were now halfway to the forest.



A scream stalled in my lungs as my eyes roamed up the enormous body of the beast that stood over me, raised onto its hind legs, its head almost brushing the canopy of the trees far above.

The Bear.

My fingers shifted in the detritus beneath me, scrawling a shaking X into the dirt, though I knew superstition would do me no good.

The Bear growled in a low and menacing tone, its head cocking downward, more water spilling from its snout to rain down on my cheeks..



I fed her grapes next, one by one, and slowly too. Her lips brushed my fingers on the fourth one and a low growl rolled up my throat. When I offered her another, her eyes met mine and she did it again, just for a moment, perhaps unaware of it, her lips skated against the pad of my thumb and sent a ripple of potent desire through me. My gaze slid to her soft lips and that ache grew, my body shifting closer to hers without me telling it to do so. Then I offered her another grape.

“I’m done eating,” she said.

“You’re done when I say you’re done.”



CHAPTERS ONE &
TWO AWAIT...

FERRIS

CHAPTER ONE

My nights were filled with haunting music, spun from a tongue I'd once known to whisper jokes and pass gossip from ear to ear. The words struck chords in my heart which stung when I woke and ached throughout the days until finally I succumbed to slumber and her songs found me again.

I dreamed of trees so tall they blotted out the sun, their bark a rough and anciently marred map to the one and only want I held dear. Sometimes I found myself running between those wicked trunks, calling out to a girl who ran ahead of me, her song just out of sight, always coming from beyond the next bough, next branch, next bramble.

Of course, I'd never truly set foot in the cursed forest. The path was barred to all; the trees and the magic tangled through them made a wall of the forest's border which was utterly impenetrable – unless the trees chose to admit you. And they only ever moved at night. But I knew better than to risk approaching them in the dark.

The lyrics which knotted with my dreams turned to screams when the sun went down and the wicked nature of the forest was unleashed to its fullest. I'd considered risking it; I'd planned to sit at the edge of the forest while the sun set and allow the trees to claim me, but I'd found reason in the one thing I truly trusted. The written word never turned me wrong. And if there was one thing all of the tomes and scrolls I'd scoured agreed upon it was that facing the trees at night was nothing less than a death sentence. The blood smearing those cursed branches on the nights the forest found prey was proof enough of that. And I was no good to anyone if I was dead.

The song I cherished and loathed wrapped itself around me in my fitful dreams, her words both a caress and a warning.

*“Come to the trees where their faces grow pale,
Lean close to hear secrets of terror and scale,
My worth was well measured, my journey awaits.
You'll only come find me when we un-bar our gates.”*

It was painted in the whispered words of a child, its lyrics like a river which changed course and spun secrets, never the same yet always pulling me in one, unchanging direction. And I was done resisting the draw of the current. It was time I dove in and let it carry me away.

Music of another kind carried across the town, the jolly tune at odds with the knotted dread in my gut and drawing my thoughts back to the present. It was finally here. The day of the Great Hunt. It had been fifty long years since the last of its name and for eight of those, I'd been bracing for the impact of its arrival.

I swallowed. A shaky breath skipped down my throat, and I fought the urge to forget everything I'd been planning and simply accept the fate which had been dealt to our family all those years ago.

This path had been laid out for me for far too long to allow doubts to turn me from it now.

"Are you ready?" The firm banging of my mother's fist against the weathered wood of my bedroom door jarred me out of the daydream which had seen me standing before my window, peering out at the not-so-distant treeline. "The drums are already sounding and the Bradeys will be wondering where you are," Mother hissed, pulling my inner turmoil from fear into disdain. I couldn't give a withered fig what the Bradeys thought of me one way or the other.

The panicked screams of my past faded, the frantic scouring of the village, the despair, the horror, the grief; all of it slipped back behind that mask my family wore, never to be spoken of, never to be acknowledged.

I glanced at the small pack I needed to bring with me, a lie silently forming on my lips, the rehearsal giving me something to focus on as the door was predictably pushed open.

Mother bustled into the room, her brown hair perfectly coiled, her deep blue dress recently re-fitted and trimmed to appear almost new. She stalled on the threshold to my room, looking me up and down while working to choke down the words I knew were expanding in her chest. She managed to contain them for an impressive six seconds before they inevitably burst free.

"You chose the green?" she asked, though what she really wanted was to ask me why I'd ignored the pale pink satin she'd laid out.

"I'll wear that one later," I told her, barely even flicking a glance at the new dress and wishing she hadn't wasted so much money on it. "It rained for half of the week, and the Hunt is launching right outside the town hall where the mud is practically a swamp. The green is more practical."

Mother pursed her lips, the sense of my words colliding with her desire to impress the Bradeys. I knew she expected the marriage proposal to come at the feast tonight. I knew she wanted that life for me, the comfort, the security. And truly, Axel Bradey wasn't the worst option in this forsaken corner of the human lands, but I had no intention to wed anyone. Not yet. Not until I'd followed through on the promise I'd made to Rissa.

So yes, the gown I'd selected was plain compared to what most of the women in attendance would

have chosen, the mossy green colour of it like a reflection of the forest which awaited us at the edge of town. Though truthfully, it wasn't the edge any longer – the forest had devoured eight homes and the inn this last month, and we all knew we didn't have long before we would have to abandon Aarringfall altogether. Our town was one of the last still standing between here and the cities which lined the coast where the last hope for humanity lay. Beyond the cliffs at the southern border of Rathian, there was nothing but sea. If the trees ever made it that far, we would be faced with a choice between them and the waves and both, were certain death.

The skirt was long but not voluminous, the fabric thick but not too heavy. I'd always favoured it for that fact. It was practical, easier to move in, run in if needed. And it *was* needed all too often with the forest creeping ever closer to our border and the Hollows haunting us in the space between breaths.

"At least let me fix your hair," Mother begged, and I conceded, sitting on the edge of my small bed and closing my eyes while she worked my warm brown hair into a braid.

I breathed in the scent of our home as she worked, the hint of lavender from the sprigs of the plant Mother hung in every window to ward against foul spirits, and the underlying warmth of pine from the beams which held the whole place together. It wasn't a grand home, but it held the memories of all I cherished in this world within its walls.

"There are whispers that the Fae have selected twenty-five of their greatest warriors to enter the Hunt this time," she said, drawing my focus away from the ache of this place. "Perhaps this will be the final hunt. Perhaps all isn't lost..."

She didn't need to say more than that. The cursed forest – or the Taking Trees as we called them – had spread further in the last few years than ever before and all the realms surrounding it were suffering, pushed to the edges of the land, resources running thin, their people plagued with hardships which layered upon one another until the weight of them had become suffocating.

I didn't know whether to be pleased about the Fae investing so much into the Hunt or not. Their kind had turned their backs on us a long time ago – hundreds of years before I was born. They'd built their walls of dark stone and kept their borders well-guarded, leaving the humans to suffer the wrath of both the forest and then the Hollows without aid. Resentment for their kind had bred into hatred once the sacrifices had started. The cursed forest placed many burdens upon us but none so cruel as the Offerings it demanded. The Fae had been quick to decide that the humans would be the ones forced to pay the price each year when the blood moon rose in its fatal demand. A price which my family had been selected to endure.

My breaths grew thin and faltered as the weight of that truth pressed down on me. It didn't matter how many years passed. It still felt like yesterday.

I'd seen a few of their kind, the ones who deigned to travel to our lands and trade with the lowly humans. My people were too desperate to turn them away and too weak to refuse them regardless. But I was never sure what exactly the Fae got out of the trades they made with us. The ethereally beautiful

males and females I'd caught glimpses of had seemed better nourished than our kind and clearly far wealthier too. I'd often wondered why they travelled our lands, suspecting their deeds were motivated by far darker desires than they pretended. The Offerings proved they were capable of anything after all but despite their part in those atrocities, I'd never seen a single human stand against one of them.

The reality was, we needed all the help we could get out here, and the fact that they were able to dispatch Hollows in our land waylaid any questions the humans might have demanded of them. We weren't strong enough to stand against Hollows regardless of our hatred of the Fae, so we scowled and muttered curses at their backs but did nothing to stop them passing through our realm whenever they deigned to.

Still, there was no explanation as to why they never came in force or why those who did travel through our realm never stayed in one place for more than a night. They never spoke of their own lands or offered much communication at all. They wanted stories in payment for their wares more often than not, and there weren't many willing to deny them what they sought in favour of pride. Though I'd have spat in their faces should any ever dare to ask for a tale from my lips.

Despite my hatred of their kind, I couldn't deny I'd wondered why they didn't make a real stand against the Hollows, why they hid behind their walls. If they were able to fight the monstrous beasts the Necromancer had risen to plague our lands, then why not do so? Why leave us all to suffer their wrath?

Just ten days' travel from here to the east of our town lay the border with the Fae. I'd never seen the wall which marked the division between our lands myself but I'd seen sketches, heard tales. And they all matched. The Fae lands were closed to humans. Just as the forest was closed too – unless it claimed you for its own.

My stomach knotted as I considered that, the nearness of those damned trees making me uneasy as they always did.

When I'd been a child, the forest had been a full week's travel north of here. Our town had seemed safe from its grasp. But every year, its boundary spread, the trees inching outward, stealing land from the three realms. So far as I knew, no one had ever been able to slow the forest's advance, let alone stop it. And so every living creature in Rathian was losing the battle to save themselves from its clutches, just as we were losing places to run to.

We were surrounded. The Taking Trees to the north, the Hollows and their Necromancer king to the west, the Fae and their wall to the east and nothing but the open ocean and a promise of oblivion to the south.

"There," Mother announced, turning me so that I could appreciate her handiwork in the mirror on my dressing table.

My brown hair was braided in a style I could never replicate alone, the strands knotted and intricate, drawn together while still framing my heart-shaped face. I studied the warmth of my skin, the dusting

of freckles which coated my cheekbones and touched my nose. As always, my eyes stood out the most, their sapphire colour flashing to a deep violet in the light. Rissa used to say they changed with my moods, sometimes as bright as a summer's day when I laughed, others as dark as an oncoming storm when I frowned. I wasn't certain that was true, but I had always appreciated their otherworldly allure. It was the one thing about myself which seemed to agree with my heart – they didn't fit. Didn't belong. Perhaps my eyes were the one thing about me which betrayed my intentions because they spoke of something outside of this place, they spoke of something...other.

I stood, smiling at my mother and hoping she couldn't read what I was planning in the tempest of my expression. I felt as though my long-held secret was suddenly becoming so obvious, like perhaps she'd suddenly see it there in my face, plain as day, and realise what I planned to do.

"Ferris..." she said slowly, rising too and taking my hand in her own. "I wanted to—"

"The day is wasting," Father called jovially from downstairs.

He had always been a jolly kind of man, the type to gather friends as easily as plucking weeds, the kind to have compliments scattered in his wake. But I could see through his smiles. For eight long years, they'd failed to touch his eyes. No matter the fact that we didn't speak of it, no matter how hard we all worked to pretend.

"Mother?" I urged, squeezing her fingers as she made to withdraw them.

She squeezed mine in return, then smiled. "I only wanted to say...be happy. If Axel Bradey isn't what it will take to make your heart shine, then you don't have to accept him. You don't have to do anything which would demand something you can't offer."

"I know," I told her, my secret burning through the pit of my stomach.

It would break her. Father too. I knew it with a certainty that had stopped me from sleeping properly for weeks. It was the one thing which made me doubt what I had to do, the one thing which made me question this choice.

But it really wasn't a choice at all. Even on that night, eight years ago, I'd known it would come to this. I'd been a girl then, only fourteen, yet overnight, the innocence of childhood had been ripped from me.

I'd have done it then if it had been possible. I wished with all my heart that I could have tried – I'd even attempted it before. But this was my only true chance to keep the oath I'd made to Rissa back then and I couldn't turn from it. Even though I understood how high the price of it would be.

"I love you," I said, my voice cracking on the last word, and Mother blinked at me as if she understood the finality of that declaration. But then the evidence of my betrayal cleared from her eyes and she breathed a laugh, drawing me close in her arms and kissing the top of my head the way she'd done ever since I was a babe in her arms.

"I love you more," she told me, squeezing me tightly and making me hate myself for what I had to do.

We parted on an awkward laugh at our emotional moment, and I waited as she headed from the

room, stooping to grab my pack once I was confident she wasn't watching. The weight of it felt like evidence, the bulk too.

I grabbed my grey cloak and swung it around my shoulders, concealing the bag and tugging my hood up for good measure. The day was bright but a chill still clung to the air, so I wouldn't be alone in dressing for the harsher edges of the weather.

Father made a show of fussing over our lateness and bustling us out the door. His hair had greyed in the last few years, his eyes and brow lined more heavily too, like his body was tired of the weight he fought to carry, the burdens he bore painting themselves onto his flesh in defiance of the smiles he tried to hide them behind.

He offered an arm each to Mother and me, and I took it, enjoying the warmth of his body beside mine, the rough wool of his brown coat a familiar, steadying point for my slick palms.

Our village was large – practically a city now by the old standards, if my parents were to be believed. But the flint houses and thatched roofs looked as tired as the people who dwelled within them.

Wooden doors were branded with scars, symbols to ward off evil scratched or burned into them, sometimes painted in blood. So far as I knew, nothing truly helped. But without our superstitions, I supposed we would all have succumbed to hopelessness long ago.

I glanced over my shoulder as I thought on that, the cobbled street empty behind me, a dozen houses just like our own gazing after us.

A shiver ran down my spine as if I were being watched.

I slipped my fingers into the pocket of my cloak and turned over the wooden relic there three times before releasing my hold on Father and crouching to scrawl an X into the dirt with my fingers.

Superstition or not, I took no chances in this lawless world.

My parents paused so I could catch up to them, the three of us moving towards the northern edge of the town where the music rang out loudly and the excited chatter of the crowd could be heard too. It wasn't often the people raised their voices in jubilation like this, and I wasn't certain if my spirits were lifted by the sound or if it only stoked my nerves.

This had to work.

The forest wouldn't give us another fifty years. In that time, it would consume everything. Our town alone likely had less than a handful of months left. We'd all been preparing our possessions for weeks, packing up our lives in preparation to relocate south. Many of the people living here had already fled the forest before, some had done so five or six times, others had simply passed right through our village and kept going to the southern border where most of our population now resided in the towns along the shore, awaiting the inevitable at the end of the world.

No.

I stopped that thought in its tracks.

Not inevitable. If I believed that, then I would have run too. I wouldn't be here, grasping onto my

secrets like they were sand in my fist, the grains spilling away like the seconds they marked, my truth so close to revealing itself.

We stepped into the square where the town hall stood proudly, and I couldn't stifle the breath which sawed into my lungs in a sharp gasp.

The forest had moved again. I'd been here only two nights prior. Beyond this square there had been four rows of houses, a tailor, a blacksmith's forge, a stable...

"When?" I breathed, my eyes on the colossal trees which loomed like glowering statues just a handful of steps away from us. Their trunks were thicker than carriages, so tall they appeared to brush the clouds with their spindly branches. The space between them was thick with bracken and brambles, thorns knotting together to create a wall which I knew to be impenetrable.

No one could enter that forest at any time other than during the Hunt. Not by their own choice anyway. And legend had it that any taken in the night fell prey to the most monstrous of beasts within its wild walls.

My thumb rolled over the faded scar on my forefinger, the most prominent of those left to me by the same thorns which now tangled together so close to our home.

The music didn't change in pitch but there was something about it which sounded less jovial and more hurried now that I was closer to it. Like those who were playing wanted an end to this celebration so that they might run from it.

The smiles on the faces around us were tight at their edges, whispers passing between the crowd which all carried the same message.

"We'll be on the road by nightfall," Father said gruffly, and I knew he was speaking for the entire town.

It was madness to linger once the forest crept this close. I'd watched countless others make the pilgrimage away from their homes throughout my lifetime and had always known our time would come too. But it had never seemed so real as it did now.

I swallowed thickly, thinking of the familiarity of my bedroom, the whorl on the edge of the table that I'd skimmed my fingers over at every meal, the stains of my childhood in each corner and crevice. Within days, it would be gone, seized by the forest and lost like so much of our land. This Hunt really might be the last.

"Ah, Ferris, you look dazzling this morning," a voice crooned, and I turned to find Axel Bradley approaching with his parents. I gave him a smile, assessing the mud splatters on his pants and boots, the sheen of perspiration on his brow and the windswept look of his golden hair.

"As do you," I said, the corner of my lips lifting a touch while he did very little to disguise his recent arrival.

His father frowned at him then turned to exchange pleasantries with my parents, the three of them moving aside to give us a chance to speak alone.

“The miscreants have been abandoned to one another again then?” Axel said conspiratorially, and I offered him a slight smile. We’d both quickly realised that the pairing our parents were so keen on was something of a practical one too. Neither of us were perfect, our reputations those of recklessness and defiance – which I supposed might have meant we were a good fit in theory. Axel was nice enough, handsome enough, kind enough... But I had no intention to tie my life to his and turn my back on everything I’d waited so long for.

“Was anyone lost in the Creeping?” I asked, glancing at our parents to check that they weren’t listening. Clearly no one here planned on discussing the shocking advance of the forest, but I couldn’t get it out of my head.

Axel glanced at the trees, hatred darkening his brown eyes before he nodded once. “The Penleys were in their house. The Truewards too, and possibly several more families besides. There’s disagreement over whether some of them left already or not. And there were nine horses in the stables,” he added.

My skin prickled at his words, my eyes roaming the impenetrable wall of vegetation, my ears straining to hear over the musicians. The shadows between the trees loomed with a darkness so thick that I had to wonder if even sunlight could penetrate the dense canopy of the trees.

“What about the carriages?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

Axel’s silence was answer enough. Every carriage in the stables had been lost too. Without them, the people would have an even harder time escaping to the next town. The carriages were essential to transporting goods, but more than that, they were the only form of shelter that would be offered on the long road – the only place which might offer a chance of survival if the Hollows came.

How could this have happened? The forest never moved so far in such a short space of time. At this rate, the entire town could be consumed within days. The trees might even reach the coast within months, and then there would be nowhere left to run to. Beyond the cliffs which lined the southern border of Rathian, the ocean extended on to the edge of the world. We were staring at the end of our people, this Hunt the last hope any of us had for survival.

“Listen, Ferris...” Axel took hold of my arm, drawing me closer, leaning down to say something with urgency in his expression, but before the words could leave his lips, the music fell quiet and Chancellor Haydon called out for our attention.

“Don’t do it,” Axel breathed, his fingers locking tightly around my wrist, and I startled.

He couldn’t know. Surely he couldn’t have figured it out.

I shook my head at him, not trusting any words I might speak.

“I see you, Ferris,” he hissed, closing in on me as I tried to pull away, his voice low and his words intended for me alone. “I’ve always seen you. All those ancient tomes, the scrolls, the relics. Not to mention the way you run laps around Old Mitchel’s field when you think no one will see you. You move as if you’re running for your life.”

"I don't know what you mean," I muttered, the weight of the pack which was concealed beneath my cloak seeming to weigh me down more heavily as my cheeks stained in clear admission of my guilt.

I tried to tug my arm free of his hold and a few people glanced at us as he pressed closer.

"The trees only take," he said in a low, warning tone. "They don't barter or bargain, they don't offer or gift. The boon could be a lie, a trap, a trick. You know they'll never—"

"I don't know," I snapped, jerking my arm from his grip. "And neither do you."

Mother was looking to us, reaching out an arm, and I hurried closer to my parents, moving with the crowd towards the small stage which had been erected as close to the forest as anyone in their right mind would dare to go.

Axel's gaze bored a hole into the back of my skull, but I ignored it resolutely, refusing to acknowledge it, my decision made long ago and his words nothing to all the warnings and discouragement I'd offered myself.

My fingers twisted into the straps of the small pack I'd brought with me, its contents seeming to heat against my skin as if daring those around us to look at it more closely. But none did. No one was interested in me today. All hope was pinned on the collection of people who were moving up onto that stage.

"Today is a day unlike most others!" Chancellor Haydon called out, his voice silencing the murmurs of the crowd, his jowls wobbling with each word. He had led the people of our town for years unopposed. In part, I suspected, because no one else wanted the burden of his job – who would wish to lead a people doomed in every direction anyway? But it was also because he was in fact a good man by all accounts.

He truly cared. He did whatever he could to help us survive here. He even offered out aid to all who fled the horrors beyond our small sanctuary. He made sure we grew enough crops and guarded them sufficiently to survive each winter on the harvest they brought. Honestly, I believed he was the reason we were still here to bear witness to this moment at all.

"The Great Hunt is the one opportunity the forest gives us to break this curse upon our lands and the lands of our neighbours," Chancellor Haydon went on.

Mutters broke out at the mention of the neighbours who had so wilfully abandoned us to our plight. Yes, they were all struggling to survive the forest and the Hollows, but our histories told of the way they'd shunned us when the outlook darkened. Humans had been willing to work with the Fae to face what was coming, but they'd chosen to abandon us to our fate. Hell, we would have worked with the Hags if there had been any way to secure such an alliance. But the wandering nomads who were blessed with the gift of foresight and use of old magic didn't even hold loyalty to one another, let alone make deals with outsiders who didn't bolster their own fortune.

"This day is one of hope," Chancellor Haydon continued earnestly, and the brightness in his eyes said he really did believe that. "It is our chance to finally reclaim the land we have lost – to break the

curses, unite the spirits and defy the fate which has been creeping closer like a tightening noose for so many years.”

Silence followed his words as the people acknowledged the truth of them. Aarringfall was dying. We all knew it, we all felt it on the breath of the wind, we could see it in the decay of the land and decline of the homes we’d once treasured. Our world was running out of time even without the forest devouring it bite by bite. And the Hollows only made the clock tick faster.

I glanced over my shoulder, the feeling of eyes on my skin intensifying, making me wonder if some beast might be considering me for a meal. But nothing lurked between the rough stone of the buildings and it was impossible to see into the shadows of the forest.

“And so, without further preamble, I present to you our brave and ferocious band of Champions. As you know, each of them has been tirelessly preparing for this very day, gathering their strength and voracity in the pursuit of redemption for us all! They will risk everything for the slim hope of our survival, entering the Great Hunt and seeking out the lost spirits in hopes of finally freeing our land from the grasp of these forsaken trees!”

A cheer went up from the crowd, the noise an explosion which made me startle, my heart thundering in anticipation.

The sun was almost at its apex overhead, the hour drawing closer at last. I hadn’t been born before the last Hunt took place but I knew how it went. At midday, the trees would part to allow entry for the Champions, their twisted branches at last allowing admission to the daunting labyrinth within.

There weren’t any tales of what awaited those who entered because none had ever emerged victorious. There was no way of knowing what happened among those trees but the screams had been heard. Battle-hardened warriors crying out in terror, human and Fae alike finding nothing but death between those boughs.

I’d read every chronical of every Hunt I could find, screams and cries noted, sightings of spirits between and above the trees which had been glimpsed on rare occasions. There had been little I could call real fact, not much of substance, but I’d devoured every scrap of insight regardless, compared notes and compiled lists of whatever information I could glean.

But I knew in my soul that there was more to the forest than simply death. When it took people in the night, we heard them singing long after they were gone, their voices travelling beneath the light of the moon, calling out to the loved ones they’d left behind.

The Offerings the trees demanded were more proof of some greater purpose. The children it stole in sacrifice couldn’t just be more fodder to the savagery of the spirits which roamed the forest. So I believed with all my heart that there was more than bloodshed within those woods, but that didn’t lessen the terror I felt as the minutes ticked on.

Chancellor Haydon was making a show of announcing the Champions who were ready to enter the forest, speaking loudly of their prowess and the preparations they’d made in anticipation of this day.

There were twenty-five of them, and I knew them all by sight, if not to speak with. They'd spent the last few years like gods among mortals, the hopes of every person in our realm depending on them. They had every meal paid for at every tavern they visited, bedded half the people in the village too – even married couples allowing for a night of carnal worship at the altar of the people they believed destined to save us.

I didn't see heroes when I looked at the warriors who preened beneath the attention of the crowd. I didn't see hope. There had been Hunts before this one, and the Fae sent their warriors to compete in them too. It didn't matter how impressive they seemed here and now. It mattered what they found within those trees and whether they were able to fulfil the task the forest had set. And I wasn't convinced they could. Why now, when none had ever succeeded before? Endless generations had attempted the Hunt and none had ever completed it.

I feared we were all doomed either way. But that didn't stop my heart from rioting as the sun shifted to its zenith and the trees began to groan before us. The point of no return was fast approaching.

The Great Hunt was about to begin.

FERRIS

CHAPTER TWO

The music fell quiet and the crowd hushed, all of us enraptured by the movement of the trees before us. We all knew they could move. We'd awoken countless times to find their positions changed, their borders having stolen more of our land, of our people, but no one had ever witnessed their movement and lived that I knew of.

To watch the forest wander was to be consumed by it.

A weight formed in my chest as boughs creaked and leaves rustled, a swathe of hanging white moss moving across the thick trunks like a curtain being pulled wide. I couldn't see much of what was taking place as the crowd surged around me, every pair of eyes peeled wide to gain a better look at the spectacle before us, a sea of heads bobbing and necks craning ahead of me and blocking all too much from view.

The Champions filed from the stage, their footsteps loud as they descended the wooden steps, and my attention snapped to them, the line of humans approaching their fate while unknowingly beckoning me to seize mine.

I gave my mother and father a lingering look, my throat thickening with the goodbye I couldn't utter before I slipped away, using the distraction of the forest's movement to my advantage. Pain splintered through my heart as I hurried from them, that final glimpse of their faces searing itself into my mind as I captured it like a butterfly in a jar, wanting to keep it to cherish in the dark that awaited me.

"This day will go down in the histories," Chancellor Haydon called, his voice perhaps less steady than it had been. I supposed he knew as well as all of us did that if no one won the Great Hunt this time, then history would only tell of our demise – not that anyone would be left to lament it. We were out of chances to complete this challenge and everyone here knew it.

The trees were still shifting beyond the crowd, but I couldn't see more than the rustling of their upper branches from within the density of the nervous bodies. Birds took flight and a piercing trill hummed through the air, the sound so beautiful in its other-worldly nature that it drew a tear to my eye. The spirits were calling to us from within the cursed forest and I could almost believe there was something more than death awaiting us at the sound of that cry.

“These fine Champions are tasked to save us all from ruin, to lift us out of hopelessness and return the land that was stolen to our people. When the spirits are aligned once more, the forest will quiet, the trees will be tamed and they will return to the heart of this land where they belong. Think not of the fate that awaits us if we fail but of the hope success can offer. This curse *will* be broken!” Haydon exclaimed.

A cheer followed his proclamation, a raucous frenzy to the sound which betrayed the panic we all felt. My lips stayed closed against their cries, my pulse pounding in my ears and perspiration gilding my spine. I was no Champion, no hero. Hell, I wasn’t even a fighter by any means of the word. I was a woman who had been sheltered with a desperate protectiveness for almost all of my life, the burden of loss clinging to me like a second skin. I hadn’t trained for years like the Champions before us or honed my body into a weapon worthy of the challenge ahead. But my steps stayed steady all the same, my focus fixed on what I needed to do, what I had needed to do for so long that it felt as though my entire life had been consumed by it.

“I’m coming, Rissa,” I breathed to no one but myself.

I finally made it to the edge of the crowd, finding a gap between the town hall and the edge of the platform the Champions had been crowded upon moments before.

All of them stood facing the forest several feet from the onlooking spectators, and I couldn’t help the way my feet faltered as I beheld what they were staring at.

The ground sloped downward towards the trees, their looming trunks blocking the view to both the left and right of my vantage point, and only one space between them lay open.

My lips parted as I stared at the writhing movement at the edge of the forest, the trees creeping aside on tangled roots, vines twisting through the hanging boughs like knotted twine cracking open a door.

Everything within the forest looked utterly ancient, the massive trees stained with a bright and eerie green moss. The bark that was visible was chipped and scarred as if having survived a thousand storms. And yet, none of those trees had been here yesterday. It was impossible in the way all magic was impossible, but water sprites and bargaining Hags were nothing in comparison to this. The magic here was ancient, sentient and hauntingly intimidating. Something in my bones told of a wrongness to that place without me needing to take a step closer to see more. Whatever had caused the forest’s curse had done its job well.

A dull cry echoed out from within the dense canopy of the trees, its source lost to the deep darkness of the woodland.

I sucked in a sharp breath as I spotted a face protruding from the bark of a tree to the right of the opening. Moss and lichen had claimed most of the man’s flesh, but his blue eyes were open wide and staring out at us, filled with pain. I stared at the poor soul in horror. His body was almost indistinguishable from the trunk of the tree which had consumed him, only the rough outline of his shoulders and arms discernible at all while everything beneath his chest had vanished into the tree. His lips parted on

another groan, and I couldn't help but wonder what madness had made me believe I could face this. How was he still alive? How long had he been there?

I'd heard whispers that the victims of the forest were destined to become a part of it, but never had I imagined a fate so twisted as this.

A chill ran through my veins and coated them in ice, my boot slipping in the mud as I found myself questioning the choice I'd made so long ago. Surely no one could survive the clutches of that place for long. Certainly not for years.

But the songs I'd heard hadn't been lies. I knew that in my soul. And I'd made her a promise.

I took a deep breath, trying to quiet the panicking drum of my heartbeats, but my terror only increased as a crooning voice called out from the depths of the forest.

*"Don't walk into the woods, my dear;
For worse than darkness lingers here,
The spirits sleep between the trees,
Their voices lost to sultry breeze.
A long time I have mourned my loss,
Your children gained but mine forgot.
Your Offerings soothe my pain,
And stealing them is not in vain.
For here within the woods that wander,
We wait for those who chance did squander.
The time shall come for truth to rise,
And justice return to the skies.
My power waits for one to claim,
But no two spirits are the same.
One blesses with a force of grace,
Another curses in its place.
The weak may rise by claiming one,
The strong might find they can claim none.
But one fate strikes all who wander,
The spirits pull all souls asunder.
To halt the progress of the trees,
You must unite them all with ease.
Return the world to what it was,
Before greed corrupted my cause.
In forty days, your time is done,
Their amulets must all be strung.
For if you fail to find them all,
The price you pay will be your soul.*

*But should you happen to succeed,
A boon you'll win for such a deed.
A prize worth more than any other,
A gift for which you will not suffer.
The one who finds most of my kin,
Shall be the one to truly win.
And beneath the light of sultry moon,
I'll grant my favour with your boon.
Be warned, though, if this curse endures,
The final price to pay is yours."*

I looked between the Champions who had all fallen stock-still to listen to the words the forest whispered. A few of them exchanged glances, and one even took a step back, but my gaze lingered on Colton Evast.

I knew him just like all the others, his prowess and strength having been boasted of throughout our realm for years in anticipation of this day. He was taller than the rest, broader too, and I couldn't deny that there was good reason for so many of my peers to swoon over him. I'd always found him to be boorish and arrogant beyond the point of me allowing myself to admit to the somewhat obvious attractiveness of his features, but in that moment, I couldn't deny it. More than any of the others, he looked the part of the hero destined to save us all from this fate. I could practically hear the other unwed women swooning throughout the crowd even though we all stood staring into the face of our demise.

He pushed his fingers into the strands of dark hair which had spilled into his even darker eyes and glared at the forest like it was little more than a bug standing between him and his destiny. My stomach knotted as I watched him, a spike of adrenaline coursing through my limbs as he broke from the line and began to stride towards the opening in the forest as though it were the most natural thing in the world. It was impossible not to admire his courage.

Cries went up, cheers and wails alike, women calling out for him to be careful, men begging him to save us all. The other Champions may as well have not been there, though they had all started walking too, descending the hill in a long line, their armour glinting in the bright sunlight, weapons hanging heavily around their bodies.

Then that haunting voice called out from between the trees once more, halting them where they stood.

*"Beware the woods when darkness falls –
protect yourself within four walls.
Unite the spirits wild and good – but you cannot earn them shedding blood.
Forty days to do it all – earn your boon or you shall fall."*

The forest's warnings had been recorded at every Great Hunt since they began, and they never changed. It was the one thing about the cursed trees that every person in this crowd knew well. The rules of the Hunt. Don't be caught out at night. Don't kill another Champion for their amulets or the spirits they hold won't bond to you. Complete the Hunt in forty days or you're all fucked.

As the voice fell silent once more, the Champions started walking again, led by Colton who continued forward with a certainty to his gait which I couldn't help but envy.

My muscles coiled in anticipation. The timing had to be right. I couldn't screw this up.

I took a single step before a hand caught mine, jarring me to a halt, and I flinched as though captured doing something I shouldn't.

"Axel?" I questioned with a frown, glancing between him and the Champions who were now half-way to the forest.

"Don't do this, Ferris," he said in a low voice. "I understand why you feel you need to, but Rissa wouldn't want—"

"Don't speak about her like you know her," I hissed, trying to yank my hand from his, but he only tightened his hold.

"You know I can't let you—"

I punched him square in the nose, pain splintering through my fist at the contact with his hard face and a curse escaping me as I tried to yank my arm free, but he still held on. I wasn't a fighter and my strike hadn't so much as bloodied his nose, much less freed me from his grasp.

"What the fuck, Ferris?" he growled, tugging on my arm, hauling me away from the Champions who were just approaching the edge of the trees.

My time was running out. Panic flared through me. He was going to cost me my only chance.

"Axel, let go of me," I snarled, shoving his chest and trying in vain to wrench my arm away but he held me tighter.

"I know I'm not the fate you wanted, but I'm more than just the man they think me to be," he ground out, snatching my other wrist as I tried to strike him again. "I *will* protect you, Ferris. Even if it has to be from yourself. I—"

The ground bucked beneath us and we stumbled back, my side slamming into the wall of the town hall as something beneath the dirt almost knocked me from my feet.

Screams came from the crowd, my mother's voice rising above them all, calling my name with a note of pure terror.

Pain splintered through me at that sound, my choice haunting me even though I knew I couldn't un-make it.

Axel cursed, his grip on me slackening as the ground bucked beneath our feet once more, almost knocking us over.

I spun to try and see what was happening, adrenaline coursing through my veins as if we were under attack. I caught a glimpse of green before something coiled around my ankle and yanked so hard that I was flung onto my back.

Axel fell with me, his hold on me unyielding as I was dragged across the ground at an alarming pace, a scream spilling from my lips, my cloak and pack snagging and tearing while they cushioned me from below. Mud and dirt billowed up in a great cloud, coating us in a layer of dirt and concealing us within it.

I screamed louder as I was hoisted downhill, my throat ripping raw at the sound, and all the world screamed with me, my mother's voice the loudest of them all.

I thrashed against the hold on my ankle, my arm colliding with the body of someone else who was being dragged across the dirt too, but nothing I did came close to freeing me from the vice-like grip on my leg.

I tipped my head back to the sky, clouds whipping past overhead at a furious speed, the sun blazing so brightly that it burned my retinas and then, so suddenly that it was akin to thrusting my head beneath water, darkness snatched me.

The forest closed in around me. The people closest to me were screaming differently now, their voices filled with anguish in place of fear.

Something wet splattered across my face. Axel's grip on my wrist grew bruising as he cried out in pain.

The thing around my ankle stopped dragging me along and I cursed wildly, fighting my way to my feet through the torn fabric of my dress, my ruined cloak falling off of me as I made it upright at last.

Horror tore chunks out of me and I stumbled back, shaking my head at the sight before me.

Axel lay unmoving on the ground, his glassy expression taking my attention captive for endless seconds before I could process the unnatural twist to his neck.

"No," I breathed, backing away, shaking my head. He shouldn't have been here. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. I was...he was...

I whirled around, the deep green of the trees pressing in on me from every direction, my scream rebounding off of them as I stumbled towards the one, shrinking patch of sunlight with desperate need, panic bleeding into every piece of my soul.

I reached for that scrap of light where the towns folk watched on, breaking into a run, my pack falling from my back, my boot slipping off my foot along with the tangled green vine which had hauled me into these cursed trees.

With every sprinted step, the space between the trees shrank, the trunks closing together like an ancient gateway, vines tangling between them to block out every speck of the world beyond until only one tiny path of light remained, my mother's frantic face framed within it, devastation crumpling her features as her eyes met mine and the forest slammed closed between us.

Before I could hurl myself against the trees, strong arms banded around my body, a hand slapping down over my mouth to stifle the endless scream which had broken from my lips.

Blood dripped into my eyes as Colton Evast held me tighter, his words a rough growl against the shell of my ear, his arms a bind I couldn't free myself from even as tears burned pathways down my cheeks and I shook my head in denial of what had just happened.

"It's too late to turn back now, Ferris Creed," he said roughly. "Welcome to the Great Hunt."

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