

“You trapped me! You LIED! How could you?” I scream.

I shove Sinead, torn as I am by anger and betrayal. After... after everything! Everything we have done for each other, he traps me?

Too late do I realize that my strength should have caved his chest in, but Sinead merely turns aside to soften the blow and backs up a few steps. He closes his eyes, in shame or resignation I do not know. So I shove him again. I wish I had the strength to kill him here and now but I am more heartbroken than outraged. Perhaps rage will come later, when I do not feel as empty as a gored carcass, and twice as ridiculous. All of this for that?

“I did not state a falsehood,” he dares claim.

“No? NO? You said this would benefit me! You trap me here, away from my friends? You cut off the bridge back, and this is supposed to benefit me? Please tell me the gate is still active somehow, TELL ME MY FRIENDS ARE NOT DYING AS WE SPEAK.”

“The path is closed.”

“Fuck you Sinead, I trusted you, I loved you. You.... Why? WHY?”

I shake him and see his face twist in guilt, but there is something beneath that rises and I feel monstrous heat under my fingers. Suddenly, he grabs my shoulder with more strength than I would expect from a lord, perhaps as much strength as Jarek, and the gold of his hair turns incandescent. Tears run down his cheeks. Really? Really? I should be the one crying right now!

“Because... you are going to die!” he screams with more pain than I ever heard from him.

The naked emotions do not erase his actions, but they do grant him a moment of respite before I disembowel him where he stands.

“You’d better have a damn good explanation and a good plan to get me home or I swear I’ll—”

“I have both,” he interrupts with a grumble —the shameless twat— “Of course I had both before I dragged you here. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise. I... you are so very young, sometimes. Too stubborn and hopeful to see the plain truth. Semiramis may ascend or not, but even if she succeeds, she will not kill her son.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I talked to her.”

“You.... what?”

“She had need of knowledge and Sivaya knows more than most. The selfish bitch could attempt to assassinate her spawn but she has not and she will not. You know this to be true.”

I make to protest, but a memory surges in my mind, that of the stone golem. It called Malakim the primary target but called Nirari 'my son'. She still has no intention of ending his life.

"Once the Babylonian perishes or succeeds, Nirari will have free reign of this realm. You will ride to war with your allies, your tricks and your artifacts and you will die. You will use fire and metal and all those spells, your fencing techniques and still, you will die. No dragon tooth, no sun magic will save you from him. Nirari is so above you that you cannot comprehend the gap in power. He will sacrifice you on the altar of his ascension, you and all those he cannot turn to his cause in one glorious slaughter to the glory of his reign. You have no chance unless you can obtain what can only be found here, what he has denied all of his kin."

"Dragon blood," I whisper. "You want me to get dragon blood. You think this will give me a chance."

I ponder his words in silence. All of this for... and yet it makes sense, in a way. The resources of the Likaeon world are fabulous as well as beyond his reach, for now. Here, I can become more powerful than he ever expected, perhaps powerful enough to stand against him in single combat. It all depends on whether or not Sinead can deliver on his tall promise.

"You really think we can kill one?" I ask.

The question surprises Sinead, who smiles bitterly and a little condescendingly as well.

"You cannot kill a fae world dragon even if you prepare for a thousand years, my dear Ariane. I am not exaggerating. Perhaps ten thousand years would be enough, but you do not have that long. There is, however, another path, a ritualistic hunt that will allow us to request the precious liquid as prize. It will cost a significant portion of the goodwill we obtained, however. The plan is long, if simple. Let me start from the beginning."

Sinead paces, radiating heat with every step. It feels extremely strange to see him like this. He is still the same Sinead, still scheming and planning, but where an average-sized man stood before, now he towers over me like a giant. More, he is now strong enough to block me where the humanized Sinead would struggle against the strongest humans. The contrast is jarring enough to distract me from my anger.

"Sivaya left for the Blue Court to align this sphere with yours and push the time dilation to its maximum."

I frown.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I shall not bore you with the complexity of it all as I have myself only a vague understanding of time weave magic, however the speed of time is relative in the Likaeon spheres, and

especially so between one sphere and another. Time only ever moves forward but not always at the same speed.”

“So a day somewhere could be two elsewhere?”

“Or a week, or more, and there comes the power of the Court of Blue. They have a measure of control over the... speed of time, shall we say, and the less connected a world is and the more dilated time can be. Your earth is only weakly connected to the World Tree sphere, and thus we are confident we can slow down time on earth relative to here. Sivaya estimated that we could achieve a ratio of ten thousand to one. It will, however, cost us our greatest asset: the liberation and return of one of the three greatest geniuses the Court of Blue has ever seen.”

“Ten thousand for one is...”

“One second on earth is three hours here. Sivaya should be implementing it right now. Her favorite uncle is in charge of the Chronal Solarium, and she has all the calculations.”

“You are stretching my belief in you, Sinead.”

“I did not break my promises, or you would know. We will challenge my brother Revas for his position in the succession line and use our challenger status to participate in this year’s dragon hunt. Then, you will be ready to return home, which Sivaya can arrange.”

“I’m sensing quite a few gaps in that plan.”

“I will get into details later, but know I have a way to win the hunt. As for challenging the prince, it can be done easily and we do not even have to win. We are flush with favors, Ariane, hundreds of them across dozens of courts. I need only a fraction to move forward. We will get you the tools you need to survive.”

“You seem confident that I will just follow you, Sinead. It annoys me quite a bit.”

His gaze drills into mine. His confidence is absolute.

“I am your best chance at going home. You know this and you care about those you left behind. You also know that dragon blood is your one chance of winning against your sire. I know you, Ariane. You are an idealist in your goals but a pragmatist in their realization. You will work with me, even if you hate me. I can live with this hatred, but I cannot live with your death. I am willing to pay that price.”

“If you are so sure I will do all of this and if you believe in the strength of your arguments, why the deception?” I demand with all the venom of my anger.

“Would you have followed with all your allies locked in combat, fighting for their lives?”

“I could have planned for it.”

“You could have also decided that my plan was based on assumptions, which it is, and opted to stay rather than risk your life in the spheres. You could have moved back at the last moment out of fear for the life of a friend. There were many ways you could have prepared yourself against this trip and the only hope I had to definitely catch you was to take you unaware as you were still flush with the ecstasy of battle. Let me be clear: there is not a single person left on earth whose welfare matters to me more than one of your smiles. I will sacrifice every last one of them if it means that, in the end, you triumph.”

“So you are claiming that you did it for me.”

“I did it for us, yes. I believe it.”

“There is no us, Sinead. There was never an us because you have never seen me as a partner. A partner does not look down upon their partner to the extent that they deny them the choice of a decision. If there are mistakes to be made, they are mine to make and you have no say in my final decision, no legitimacy in forcing me to choose between the immediate life of my friends or a potential victory at the end. From the beginning, you saw me as a person to be guided, not respected. Either you love me and treat me as an equal, or we are just allies of circumstances because I will never let anyone decide for me again if I can help it. I will follow that damn plan of yours and get back home but we are done. You betrayed me. It does not matter that you thought you knew better. You betrayed me and I do not grant my trust lightly. I do not have the words to express how gutted that leaves me.”

“I said it before, I can live with your hatred but not with your death. I really believe my actions will benefit you in the end,” he replies with finality.

“Really?” I retort while the numbing grasp of despair finishes wrapping around my heart.

“Really? That kiss was for my benefit?”

Sinead freezes and looks like a rabbit caught in the glare of a gas lamp. His eyes swivel, looking for a metaphorical exit.

“I find the situation upsetting,” he slowly enunciates, “so upsetting that my wits seem to have deserted me.”

“Try honesty for once.”

“I... I knew you wouldn't let me after what I did.”

My punch caves his nose in and sends him crashing into a tree.

The fae world is powerfully alive, I have no better ways to express it. Its fabric is both dense and malleable, a perfect playground for those with the right key. I do not have it. A few steps into the world and the frost imprints I leave behind are pushed back into the armor with what feels like a huff. My aura of cold is still there, it is just not allowed to affect the world.

I inspect my surroundings, more wary than amazed now that my status has fallen from visitor to exile. The emerald sky is alien, the dense forest hermetic and hostile. The gigantic tree in the background seems all the more imposing now that I had a second look. It is an old and gnarly thing so massive it should have collapsed under its own weight a million times, yet looking at it fills me with a sense of eternity, as if it predated mankind itself. It most likely does, at that.

The line blurs and suddenly the tree is impossibly large, so large that it would dwarf earth. It is the single most massive object in existence and the sky is but its breath, the light its blessing. We are only gnats on its antediluvian surface, there and gone like a flicker of light as it travels through eternity. I remember what the Watcher showed me in that brief instant when he opened my mind. Concepts so complex and absurd that everything I know is detrimental to their understanding. There is simply. So. Much.

Head hurts. Ugh. I look again to see that it has returned to being just a mountain-sized tree. For now.

The scent of Sinead's blood travels to me and my teeth ache. I must kill him and make an example, let others know they cannot break my heart. What others, the squirrels? It is a matter of principle. It is a matter of feeling better. It is vindication. It is pointless. I need him to escape. I do not need him. I need him, but the very sight of him tears my heart apart.

I feel so empty right now. My false soul is a sieve. No emotion will sway me for more than a second, before being replaced by an equally ephemeral pulse. I cannot even muster the energy to cry. Bursts of anger and bursts of sadness fight each other over the pit. I am experiencing powerful emotions that do not relate with the hunt with an intensity most immortals would envy and they are so bad I would wish them upon Melusine. I must be the butt of some grand cosmic joke. I look up and seek the Watcher's gaze but it is not here, or at least not yet.

What have I ever done to...

No Ariane, better not explore this question.

I sit on the ground to wait while the second greatest twit in history picks himself up. He grabs his nose and, with a dreadful snap, sets a cartilage I had believed to be powder now. Truly, his resilience has increased to impressive levels.

Perhaps I should kick him in the unmentionables.

Discarding ideas of further violence, I wait in my little circle of frosty grass while he ambles back.

“We must move quickly,” he tells me with a nasal voice. “The news of our deeds will be the talk of the spheres within the next two minutes, and five minutes later, my brother will send assassins.”

Ah yes, an important detail I forgot. I am no longer a deadly existence here.

“I need to know more about fighting Likaeans here,” I inform the scummy weasel in the most neutral way I can manage.

“While we move, yes.”

I follow after him, leaving the tree to our right and ducking under a low branch. The forest of the fae world swallows us in silence. It shines with all the colors of the rainbow from dusky crimson to shining blues as we run by. Flowers follow Sinead as if they were the sun while they shirk away from me. A strange scaled beast glares at us with yellow eyes before disappearing behind a trunk.

On earth, there is a certain harsh messiness to unmanaged forests, a struggle for life reflected in every tiny sprout fighting to survive on a craggy slope. This merciless environment makes the fugacious beauty of life that much more valuable, for it is elusive and ephemeral. It must be seized and appreciated while it lasts, but here I am walking as if through a carefully curated garden. Every angle is enchanting and wonderful, or they would be if I were in the proper mindset. The trees are old and covered in moss, their barks showing strange patterns. The plants are varied and thriving, all of them, which should be impossible. There is a design pervading the very air, and yet it does not feel conscious so much as instinctive. The world feels fluid and heavy at the same time.

We use roots and ancient, fallen branches to move across the crowded ground on our silent trip under the canopy. The leaves are thick over our head and yet light still manages to get through, somehow, while bugs and petals radiate with inward light to keep the darkness at bay. Meanwhile, Sinead speaks in a voice that betrays little emotion.

“There are dozens of common, sapient races in the spheres, a hundred billion individuals living and warring across their surfaces. While you vampires gain power by removing yourselves from the laws of a place, we harness it. The result is ostensibly the same, combat-wise. Those of us who can do so the most obtain ranks of nobility if they were not already born into it, through as many methods as there are courts. Let me be honest, I believe that only high nobility or princes can hope to prevail against you, but this is an oversimplification you cannot rely on. A Blue Court baron might succeed in trapping you into a time bubble, and then you would have been disabled as surely as if a Blood Court knight had pierced your heart. Combat is but one of many tools in the arsenals of those who seek power around here, so do not take anything for granted. Some of the methods we use for war might also surprise you. One of the assassins might try to sing you into submission.”

I could just sing back.

“And people will find out about your vulnerability to light or fire. The pecking order is much more fluid here than it would be back on earth. Circumstances will crush you or allow you to

defeat enemies far beyond your normal reach if you know how to harness them. Half of the game in Likaeon politics is managing the circumstances.”

“And the other half?”

“Equal parts sex and warfare.”

I resist the urge to tell him I had the warfare part down pat and would let him handle the sex. I want to rise above snarky remarks and witty jabs, partly because I would like to get over my pain, and partly because Sinead would not react. He has already shown no interest in defending himself, physically or otherwise. It would be punching someone willing and that makes it a kink, not a punishment. Or maybe a sacrifice. Ugh. I hate everything right now.

“We will recover some fruits and a branch first, it will allow us to get passage to a port city where I can get some work done,” Sinead continues.

“Why get them, I thought we were flush with favors?”

“And I would rather not waste one on something unnecessary. We can collect free assets and face the assassins outside of Assidina — the capital of this world — rather than meet them in the settlement and make the situation complicated. Two birds with one stone, to use an earth idiom. Ah, here we are.”

We move out into a meadow, again under the strange ever-present emerald light. A single massive tree reigns over the surrounding grass. Without hesitation, the Prince of Summer walks to its monumental trunk to climb. He is quite agile. A real little chimpanzee.

“My mother showed me waypoint trees when I was a child,” the prince explains. “The Wandering Court loves and makes use of them. Ah, those seem quite ripe.”

He climbs down with a pair of fat, yellow-green balls. I can smell sweet, tender flesh from here, but the scavenger is not done yet. He knocks on the tree as if it were a door. We wait in silence.

Nothing happens

Sinead grumbles, fiery hair fluttering in an unseen wind. He still wears expensive human clothes, I notice. They somehow expanded to fit his size and look much less rumped than a garment that has been worn for four days should be.

The Prince of Summer knocks again, this time with more insistence.

“Come on!” He finally bellows.

The trunk opens and spits a stick, which the fae grabs before it can painfully smack into his chiseled jaw.

The Prince glares at the deceptively normal bark, mumbling something under his breath. He wisely decides not to complain out loud when he sees my glare, then proceeds to place his blood-soaked hand against the surface, leaving a red print that quickly fades.

“Good, now to get to the city. It will take us an hour.”

“It will?” I ask with disbelief.

“Yes. Every point of this plane is ever an hour away from the tree, if we run. We will stop shortly before the outskirts of Assidina.”

“Why did we not do like the others and flee immediately?” I ask with suspicion.

“Because... we had to have this conversation. And it took some time for me to pick myself up from that tree. I am still a little weak.”

“How concerned should I be? We have assassins on the way.”

“With you by my side, we will be fine. My siblings have always underestimated me. They think me a dancer only.”

“We can just dispose of them, yes?”

“Oh indeed. Although I would advise you not to kill unless you are certain you are not triggering a chain reaction that ends with a king’s favorite consort whispering words in their lover’s ear. In this situation, it would be best to send a strong message. Please, kill them all.”

“Can I drain them dry then?”

“I see no reason to waste perfectly valuable essence.”

“I’ll kill them thinking about you,” I deadpan despite my earlier resolve.

“I fear that the taste may not match your expectations,” he replies without missing a beat.

“A bit like expecting a Saint-Emilion and tasting a Gris de Toul,” he continues.

I give him a cold glare to make him know that his attempts at humor do not amuse me, and I see genuine hurt on his delicate traits before he can pull it back inside. I find it... satisfying, but it is a hollow pleasure. Like taking someone else when falling to one’s death.

“When you are done being a wine snob, perhaps you can help me prepare for the incoming battle?” I coldly ask.

“You are as ready as can be with your armor and magic,” Sinead replies off-handedly. “Just be aware that winter magic will be weaker here, though not the weakest. Do not worry overmuch, Ariane.”



Not worrying overmuch is how vampires die to humans.

The rest of the short race is spent in silence. I attempt to enjoy our little outing, in vain. My heart really is not in it. That unconscionable rake ruined my first foray into the World Tree sphere even though I usually love forests, one more notch to add to my growing list of grudges. Finally, after jumping through a copse of trees whose roots and branches could not be told apart, we reach another clearing.

This one is considerably larger than any we've been in before. It could host a festival, but not any time soon because its current occupants may ruin the mood.

"Corpses?" I ask, aghast.

Before us, the remnants of a battle spread across the green grass undulating under a strong wind. Pennants and cloaks wave in a symphony of color that is reflected on the ground by the bodies of combatants. Armors come in hues of gray, brown, and green. Some weapons still shine with some unknown enchantments, and this variety is reinforced by the curious anatomies of some warriors. By our side, a man with four arms leans against a stump, his quatuor of swords stained with blood and his chest pierced by arrows. The blood itself glitters crimson and shiny. I can smell it, and I can guess that it would be potent, except, it is not there. Not really. I get an impression like a painting reminding its spectators of past deeds. We are not treading the site of a recent massacre.

"This is a memorial," I realize.

"The succession battle. Trebilen fell here. He must have been favored by the World Tree because the field has been conserved as is for the past millennia. We will wait and fight. Pay tribute with the blood we shed today."

I walk a bit to inspect the site, curious despite my reservations. I find a slice through the ground with melted glass on its surface. The temperature must have been hellish, and yet the grass around it is barely scorched. Come to think of it, Sinead's bulk should have broken the tree I sent him against. Perhaps this place is harder to damage. I do not mind, because the people are not. Fallen warriors litter the ground, still clutching their weapons, expressions frozen in displays of rage, regret.

Terror.

There are quite a few women, I notice. They were offered no more quarter than their male counterparts. I even spot a girl with snake hair clutching a dreadful gash in her chest, her hands still frozen around bandages and a poultice. The Likaeans are not merciful races. I must remember that,

Finally, Sinead stands from the spot he had picked and I join his side. We do not move.

A trio emerges from the tree. The lead woman holds an orb with a single drop of blood in its midst. She has golden, reddish hair that remind me of Sinead's but her traits are thinner and

she wears a hard, cruel expression. Her smile widens to reveal pointy teeth and she grabs the handle of a thin sword by her side.

The second is a man covered in armor seemingly made of bark and transparent stone. His skin has the color of the earth and he looks at me with large, colorful eyes with no white and no iris, just an amber sphere around a dark dot. His expression feels strangely vacant. The last person is also a woman in a dress holding a wreath of all things. She is taller than the others and wears blonde hair the same color as mine. Her black eyes survey the area with concern. She is the only one to display signs of concern.

“The prodigal son has returned!” the leading woman exclaims. “Welcome back, Prince Sinead of the Court of Summer. Welcome back.”

She gives us a mocking bow. She speaks adult Likaeen, but the gap between the two languages is extremely small in everyday conversations. I would be lost if it were a philosophical discourse. Insults and threats? I can follow.

“We were so disappointed after missing you last time, but here you have returned whole and hale. My friends and I could not be more pleased,” the woman gloats.

She certainly likes the sound of her own voice. I have difficulties assessing her strength. Her aura inexplicably tastes of torn skin and porcelaine while the pungent odor of sun-baked blood comes from the man, and the tall woman bears the scent of a hand gripping a family portrait. Humans feel so drab by comparison.

“Oteissa, a pleasure as always,” Sinead replies in the uncaring voice of a bored socialite. “Out of curiosity, how much will you be compensated to look after my well-being? I find myself curious.”

“The wandering prince is curious! How unexpected,” the woman mocks, and the bark man chuckles in a voice that sounds hollow. Only the tall woman glares at us with increasing panic.

“One protection favor and a hundred bright tokens,” the woman says with a shrug. “Pretty disappointing considering you are technically royalty. Why, I would almost be inclined to negotiate since it appears... you have something to bargain for?”

She stares at me and discomfort crawls up my spine. It does not take much study of Likaeen society to guess that they would have their slavers as well. I turn instinctively to Sinead, but not because I do not trust him not to betray me. It is because his aura is flaring spectacularly.

It starts like an amber, then explodes outward like an alcohol-fed fire in a great, incandescent plume. His hair sticks to his scalp under the pressure of an unseen hurricane. Heat radiates from him in great waves, so intense that I take a step back. So intense that the unchanging grass under his feet wilts. I am certain that he is still weakened, and yet the power on display is absolutely monstrous. Sinead is angry. And for the first time in a century, he has the physical means of his ambition. He grips the branch between reddening knuckles.

“It appears you and my brother need a reminder. No matter who my mother is, I am still Prince of Summer and summer, my dear, is the season of war.”

Sinead hurls himself at the assassin with lord-like speed. He uses the branch as a sword, casually slapping her hand away from the sheath of her rapier. His next strike pierces her thigh, drawing blood despite the lack of sharpness. With a dreadful snap, the woman is sent tumbling away. She screams in agony.

The rest of us are too awe-struck to react. I would have reacted to anyone else but... this is Sinead? How did the smarmy dilettante turn into a ferocious warrior? Have I missed something?

“Do you need an invitation?” Sinead asks me.

Oh, right.

The assassins.

I rush at the bark man, who was already casting something. The yellow stone in his armor gain in radiance and I panic for an instant before realizing that it is not sunli—

**BLIND.**

“HSSSS!”

Instincts and practice take over. Octave trained me well. When blinded, attack. Swing where the enemy will be. Strike wide and disrupt, rather than retreat.

Rose materializes and bites deep into...

Oh my.

Oh my!

**DELICIOUS.**

I can taste, I can smell. His aura is just there. Blood flows, so much of it. A waste. Quick! I jump and bite down, drinking the vitality before the blood-soaked meadow can drink more of my prize. He is lazy violence and overlong hunts, the blood of the victim congealed by the time he delivers the coup-de-grace. Perfect.

Someone interrupts the feeding.

Thorny brambles snared my feet and climb up my chest, but the Aurora’s power cannot be denied and they freeze, the concept of cold shattering them even in the pleasant heat of spring. This is pathetic. Risible.

**“YOU CALL THESE THORNS?”**

My consciousness expands in a sphere. One is fire, not prey, punishing an idiotic huntress. Annoying, but not a foe. The other thinks she can hold me down with little twigs. A tendril grabs her around the waist, pulls her to me. She is slow.

“No, please! I only—”

**“YOUR WORLD IS SO RICH.”**

She tastes of a ship dragged by a sudden tide, with a zesty note. I love it here. The fire bloom throws a twitching body in my direction. She smells scrumptious. I am not even thirsty at all. In fact, I feel fantastic.

**“WHAT DO YOU WISH FOR, SUPPLICANT?”** I ask. As is proper.

“Forgiveness?” the fire bloom replies.

Forgiveness?

Oh.

I pull the roots in, letting my essence return to its human limits. The thorns burrow. They leave the grass undisturbed. It appears that my Magna Arqa can be counted on here. I look up but do not perceive the familiar presence of the Watcher. Hmm.

“I refuse.”

“Take her anyway? No need to let her essence go to waste,” Sinead offers.

“Wait! Wait!” the bloodied woman retorts. She looks like her world is crumbling around her.

“I know things! I can help!”

Sinead grips her neck with more strength than purely necessary. His jaw is set in a rare expression of hatred.

“I know you can be useful, but there are plenty of useful people out there and only a few I genuinely hate. Goodbye, Oteissa.”

I drink her dry. I take my time now that the fight is over. She tastes of a powerful drive coupled with a terrible lack of foresight. Once I am done, I feel as if I were floating. I have consumed so much powerful essence that I feel full, even a little tipsy despite the purity of Likaeon vitality. My inebriation dulls the pain of the betrayal I still feel, pushing it into the background. I gaze at the world around me with renewed interest. The turf we damaged with our fire and ice already recovered its lustrous green, like water flowing back into a puddle. The earth has swallowed the blood we spilled.

Sinead sits a distance away, eating glazed mushrooms and meat skewers he recovered from the dead. The rest of their interesting belongings wait in a pile by his side. I notice he took the time to lay a cover on the ground to protect his butt before plopping down to eat, turning the slaughter into an impromptu picnic.

As I approach, he swallows and hails me.

"I told you we didn't need to worry too much."

"Why did you flee them before? You could have handled all three," I remark.

"Two reasons. First, I was not that strong. Liberating all those fae has increased my pull on the spheres. Second, if you get rid of a group of assassin but not their client, your reward is a more expensive group of assassins."

"I see."

"Here, take this."

He throws two pouches at me. In them I find cubes and crystals of different colors. I pull one that looks like a miniature pillow made of amber. It is slightly warm to the touch.

"Court tokens. You can swallow them for power or sustenance, or to fuel a spell. They are useful for bargaining, but keep in mind that nothing truly worthwhile can be bought with money around here."

"Hence why we need the fruits?"

"Correct. If there are any dark blue, cold tokens, they can help you to cast winter spells."

I do not find any. Our would-be killers were not flush, apparently.

"If you are ready, we can depart. I will keep the rapier if you do not mind. The rest is up for grabs. Assidina awaits."

There is little we can recover. The wreath the woman hosts some enchantments, but just grabbing it would destroy it. The man's spear is trash designed to inflict suffering rather than killing. In the end, I only keep the pouches. We leave the battlefield behind and walk on directly towards the World Tree. The woods around us grow less dense until we meet our first orchards. Strange houses that feel more grown than built pepper the ground, their walls dark wood shaped to be flat, or at least flattish. The roofs are made of bark instead of tiles, and the chimneys look like hollowed out trunks. All of them lean as if tired and, as I watch, an eye opens next to a window sill. It inspects me lazily before closing again. A cat watches us pass with twelve slitted pupils arranged in a cluster. It still meows.

Eventually, we come across a stone road leading towards the base of the giant, and I spot complex wood structures in the distance. The houses grow more common and we come across our first inhabitants entertaining themselves under the shade of a willow.

More specifically, I spot firm buttocks grabbed by two feminine hands. Another man pops out from behind the first one's back, thrusting into hips unseen. The trio has hair and skin in earthy tones, or what I can see anyway as the sole woman appears to have her hands full, so to speak. The only man facing us smiles. He is quite handsome, with elfin traits and a squarish jaw.

"Welcome to Assidina, travelers! Enjoy the embrace of the Eldest!"

Sinead thanks him while I avert my eyes. I do not consider myself too conservative, but surely...

"Is this normal?" I finally ask the prince.

"Oh, I forgot to warn you. The Spring Court is the most promiscuous one. Today might also be the Day of Seeds, which occurs every fifth one."

"The Day of Seeds?" I ask, afraid of the answer. Sinead merely points forward to a square we are approaching.

"Oh dear."