

48 – Skovslot Enclave

I had no idea why I was following Elye’s father into the forest they’d all emerged from. But here I was, already forty minutes into a trek towards their ‘Enclave’.

“I told you this was a bad idea.”

You’re just worried I’ll make you perform tricks for their entertainment.

“It is not just that,” he said in a way that seemed to imply that it was ninety percent of his reason for being on edge. **“Since Enclaves are sovereign states, they do not allow most Adventurers to venture into their land, meaning they are often full of dangers that they have simply learnt to deal with themselves or which they sometimes even co-exist alongside.”**

Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.

“In my time, there was an Enclave that was infamous for harbouring an Earth Dragon that had devastated the northern territory of Lacksmey. It caused a large political conflict, but eventually ended in the Enclave being burnt to the ground as Adventurers hunted down the Dragon.”

I halted in my tracks out of surprise. *A Dragon??*

Elye bumped into me a moment later, as she was walking uncomfortably close to me, while still using my body as a shield between her and her father’s ire.

“Why are you so warm?” she asked again.

Seramosa floated around near the girl, but I was pretty sure that when she was manifested that some of her tremendous flames flowed into me, making my body warmer, and also lending more power to the Ifrit Claw.

“Magic,” I replied and stepped away from her.

Elye stepped with me, as though taking part in some dance routine.

“You’re too close,” I told her, “It’s suffocating.”

“I do not wish to leave your side for my father is quite upset. And I like your warmth.”

Seramosa giggled to herself, sounding like a tiny flame pushed around in the wind. Apparently she had taken it as a compliment.

“At least don’t walking directly on the heels of my boots.”

She looked down at my boots, her horns nearly taking my glasses with them. Her scent washed over me suddenly, and it was like moss and cut grass, which somehow wasn't surprising, given that her kind lived in a forest.

The people ahead had stopped to wait for us to catch up to them and I quickly continued forward, while Elye followed close behind, but this time seemed to be overly conscious of where she put her feet.

She's an odd one.

“All Elfin are odd, but our standards.”

Our standards? I asked. We're from separate worlds.

“And yet you likewise feel they are odd.”

Fair point, I admitted.

“To resume our conversation,” he started, “it was a Dragon, yes. I do not know if you have them in your world.”

We don't, but they exist in stories and fairy tales.

“I see. They exist in Midrealm, but mostly in myth of old. They are said to be creators and givers of life. In Mondus, they are forces of potent magic, but they seem very much like any other monster native to this world, except tougher to kill. Where they appear, a large hunt is sure to follow. Tools and weapons and armour made from their bodies are after all very powerful and will outlast any person who is fortunate enough to wield them. The regalia of the Royal Family is made of such remains as a Frost Dragon and a Thunder-Bringer.”

The Gyldenrose Family?

“That is the name they bear in your time, but in my day they bore a different one: Harbinger.”

That's ominous.

“Regardless, any family that rises to their station are powerful, in more ways than one. I have witnessed their presence on more than one occasion, and each moment was as though standing close to a kiln.”

I wonder what sort of aura they must have to wield such an effect? Then I thought about it for a moment and asked, Are they Otherworlders?

“It would seem likely, but there are always tales of their births, so perhaps not.”

Well, as we saw with Lukas, it is possible for Otherworlders to pass on their abilities and powerful souls to their children, even if their partner is a Native. It stands to reason that a union between two Otherworlders could potentially produce powerful offspring.

“I have heard such a theory,” Armen started, and knew where it was going from the tone of his voice, **“but as a Priest, I oversaw many births and those of Otherworlder unions rarely produced healthy offspring, if any offspring at all, I am saddened to say.”**

Why not?

I wondered why this was the first I was hearing about this. Even when I had shared a bed with Rana, it was not something we talked about. I realised that contraception hadn’t even been brought up, as though she knew it wasn’t needed. I wanted to ask her about it, but perhaps it was something that people did not talk about for good reason? Perhaps the idea of being unable to bear children was too hard to bear for most people?

I currently didn’t think that I wanted children, but to have the option completely swept off the table hit me harder than I had expected, but also, who would wittingly bring a child into this kind of world?

“In truth I do not know. A big part of my duty back then was to console the bereaved mothers and fathers, who grieved both for the knowledge and the loss of the future they had envisioned.”

So that’s why there aren’t a bunch of half-Otherworlder kids and adults running around? I had never fully put this observation into words until right then, but realised it was something I had subconsciously accepted, as my Spirit Sight made it fairly clear who was and wasn’t an Otherworlder.

“One persistent rumour I always heard is that the twisted offspring of Otherworlder Unions are what led to the existence of Elfin, but it bears no merit. They are simply a highly-intelligent sub-species of humans that has existed in Mondus as long as the humans.”

Are they long-lived? I wondered. I remembered *that* from earth fantasy, where elves, whom the Elfin reminded me of, were said to be long-lived and wise.

“They are,” he answered, **“But they, like Otherworlders, have difficulty rearing Offspring.”**

Could they pair with humans and have better odds?

I felt Armen’s glowing eyes behind his blurry helmeted face stared at me judgmentally. **“What are you planning?”**

You know that’s not what I meant!

I slowed down as the Elfin ahead of me were suddenly crouching low in the brush and grass. I followed suit when I saw even Elye mimicking them.

“What’s happening?” I whispered to her.

She held up a hand, palm-out. I took it as meaning: *hush*. A moment later I felt rumbling through the soles of my boots.

Suddenly something large and moss-covered broke through the trees ahead, coming from the left side and going right, while barrelling through the thick trunks. Splinters and branches flying all about as it tore through the forest, seemingly unimpeded by crashing against the obstacles in its way. It was moving with such speed that it was quickly out of sight a second later, with the rumbling receding until gone some moments after that.

“What the hell was that!?”

“***I will burn it to cinders!***” the Ifrit announced and soared after the trail left behind by the colossal creature.

Do not use your fire within the forest! I yelled at her in my mind, knowing that she would probably not heed my command.

“*It is one of the Welin that make a home near our Enclave,*” Elye’s father answered, his deep voice carrying the same lilt as his daughter’s voice. “*It is hunting. There must be a fresh corpse nearby.*”

“**I will resist the urge to say: I told you so.**”

About Elfin being trouble or Seramosa?

“**Both.**”

Wait, I recognise that name! It’s one of the entities from the Encyclopaedia. A Monstrosity type.

“**I have not heard of it before,**” Armen replied, surprising me.

I hope they don’t want me to help get rid of it.

Then I realised something.

“Did you just say ‘one of’!?”

“*Let us continue,*” the Elfin replied, not deigning my question with an answer.

“Why are we following them??” I whispered to Elye behind me. “Didn’t you want to run away from this place?”

“*I cannot outrun father without a long head-start,*” she answered. “*And with an Andasangare like you by my side, I may bargain for my freedom. This is a better choice for me.*”

“I hope I’m getting something out of this,” I replied. “I don’t work for free.”

She was about to answer, when I added, “And I don’t appreciate being used as a bargaining chip on your behalf! I don’t even know you and you’re just assuming I’m your friend or something!”

“But the spirits sent you to me. It is fate that you must aid me!”

I was about to argue back, but she had said it with such sincerity that it felt pointless, since I doubted she would believe anything that didn’t conform to her rose-tinted image of the world.

How naïve can she be?? What if I was some monster who just wanted to use her!? She must surely understand that the world is dangerous! Right??

Armen made a chuckling sound.

What?

“Do not mind me. I am merely enjoying the irony of this moment.”

We did not encounter another of Welin as we continued through the trees. I had no clue how the Elfin were navigating the forest, as I was fairly sure we were walking in circles, until, suddenly, a clearing manifested itself up ahead of us, suddenly just *there* after two hours of an unendingly-uniform horizon of densely-packed trees.

As we neared the treeline before the start of the clearing, three figures dropped out of the canopies and landed before us.

“You found her?” one of them asked, a woman who bore a striking similarity to Elye. Her aura was also similar to the Elfin behind me: greenish-brown.

“Is that your mother?” I asked Elye.

She came up directly behind me, trying to hide completely within my silhouette.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

The woman came closer, while the Elfin that Elye’s father had brought all dispersed into the clearing or crawled up into the canopies above. She was shorter than her daughter, but had an intensity to her, and her aura was covered in short needle-thin spikes, something I had not seen before. I wondered if it represented motherly anger.

“Foolish daughter!” she said and I could feel how Elye was cowering behind me, curling herself into the smallest size she could manage.

“But you brought us an Andasangare, so I will tell your father to listen to your plea.”

Suddenly the Elfin emerged from behind me, *“Really!?! Thank you mo—!”*

The mother’s hand suddenly grabbed Elye by the hair and pulled her away from me.

“But you are coming with me until then!”

“No, please! Andasangare, save me from this witch!”

I sighed.

“Do not.”

Please just help her this once, I told Armen.

He made some kind of annoyed grumbling sound, then floated towards the mother dragging her child and easily seized a hold of her wrist, stopping her from moving.

“Let Elye go,” I told her. “While I am here, she is under my protection.”

Both of the women gaped as they looked at the Guardian Wraith that had manifested before their eyes.

“I would like to voice my displeasure.”

You already have, but it has been noted. I will not abuse your trust in me.

Armen released his grip and turned incorporeal, which I could only see thanks to the fact that the two Elfin started looking around in confusion.

“I do not truly believe you.”

I promise...

Elye pulled herself out of her mother’s grasp and then ran behind, putting her hands on my shoulders and peeking out from behind them at her parent.

“How old are you?” I asked, when she started pointing her tongue at her mother.

“Nineteen years!”

She’s older than me!?! Are you kidding me!?!

“I believe I mentioned that Elfin are odd.”

You did.

After some minutes, the stand-off between petulant-and-rebellious child and irate mother calmed down, with the latter stomping off into the clearing.

I sighed, again. Then I followed behind the woman.

As I broke through the treeline, my boots touched down on a carpet-soft moss floor that coated everything as far as the eye could see.

Holy shit!

The Enclave was absolutely enormous, with the clearing having to be at least ten kilometres across in both length and width to encompass the sprawling city that stood before me. Buildings like towering cocoons rose three-four-and-five stories into the air, with everything formed into organic shapes and not a single square brick in sight. My mind struggled to fathom just how much labour

must’ve gone into shaping wood into such forms and being it into such angles, but I then realised that a lot of the buildings were not put together from planks of wood, but rather the wood grown and grafted into the specific shapes. Houses had literally been planted and nurtured over what must’ve been centuries to accomplish such sizes. Evidence to this lay further into the horizon as even taller pod-like towers rose eight stories high.

How is this not visible from outside the forest??

“I believe this clearing is in an artificial valley, so that even if you stood atop the tallest building, you would not see out above the canopies.”

This is so incredibly impressive!

“Why would you wish to run away from a place like this?” I asked Elye as I continued to look around at the tall buildings. They were connected between each other with bridges and ladders grown from roots. It was an astounding feature of botanical architecture, which would make any bonsai tree owner green with envy.

“I have already seen every corner of Skovslot, so it is boring! I would have stayed if not for father’s insistence that I marry one of the Trakys sare!”

“What’s that? Some kind of occupation?”

“They grow the Enclave. But I want to run and explore. I may have accepted someone like one of the scouts, but everyone knows that the Trakys sare never leave Skovslot! They are dull and uninteresting and smell of beeswax!”

I sighed, contented.

“I think I could live here.”

“Really?” she asked sceptically with a frown.

“But there is just *one problem*,” I continued. “Your people are too odd for my liking.”

Elye nodded as though she did not count herself amongst her people.

“I will help you while you are here, in exchange you will take me to the city of helmets!”

“That is not at all what we talked about earlier, also, it’s called Helmstatter.”

“That is what I said.”

Armen made a sound like he was clearing his throat.

Don’t you dare say it.