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Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Halfling

The sun was shining brightly behind the scattered clouds, and a gentle breeze swept through the trees, sending distant birdsong and laughter wafting through the village surrounding the kingdom of Taren's humble castle. In the distance, the riders had lit a bonfire that was long-since extinguished by now, and the faint smell of burning wood and meat hung in the air.

It was a beautiful afternoon for a walk around the open landscape of Fraea's home, and that's exactly what Willyn had intended to do. He was strolling along the trodden path, glancing up at the lazily drifting clouds and breathing in the fragrant spring air.

Ever since he had left the hills, he had noticed differences in the places the company passed through, things that made these places much different from his home. One of these was the different smells. The hills always smelt of wildflowers and pastries, due to the marketplace being so close to everywhere in town, and occasionally the smell of freshly cut grass or a morning rain shower. The countryside surrounding the hills smelled like dirt roads and musty forests, of mushrooms and wet leaves, and Elvenwood smelled like herbs and wine, with the fresh scent of linens and rushing water.

To Willyn, however, the place that seemed the most different of them all was Taren, the home of his beloved shield maiden. Everything there seemed to be covered in hay or dust, the wind was always blowing over the flat plains, and the distant sound of horses whinnying or stamping their hooves in the dirt was never absent. The halls of the castle were dimly lit, as were the stairways and the rooms, with slim windows cut out of the stone. Glass was expensive, too expensive for the rider kingdom, leaving nothing to protect the rooms from the elements. Because of the ever-present drafts, every room held a generous amount of furs and heavy curtains.

Given it's many differences, Willyn felt more at home than he had ever been in the hills. It was true, as a halfling, he could never ride a horse without the aid of another man, nor endure the longer feasts with the bravest of the riders, but there was something he couldn't deny about the place that kept him there. It was no secret to anyone who paid the slightest bit of attention to his gaze during the feasts, how he found himself glancing up at her, or how he smiled a little brighter whenever she spoke.

During his afternoon walks, he preferred to stay closer to the village's well travelled paths and scenery, but for whatever reason, today he was drawn away from the castle and towards the open fields. He took a look around the village before taking his first steps towards one of the larger hills, pausing at its crest.

The wind had changed direction in the small time it had taken him to climb the hill, and he could smell the faintest bit of lavender on the breeze.

Last night at the feast, celebrating the victory against the forces of Kyrna. The drinking, the chanting, the squeal of the fiddle over the din. Her voice to his left, the flash of her golden hair as she danced beside him, pulling him with her. His cheeks flushing with color as he struggled to match her pace, his laughter mingling with hers as she sat down next to him, her skin glistening and her hair smelling of lavender soap.

He followed the wind over the hill, pausing at a large tree with its branches shielding a small pond from the view of the village. A cloud drifted out of the sun's way and the rolling landscape was flooded in warm light, causing Willyn to block the unforgiving rays with his forearm.

He rested his back against the tree's firm trunk, watching the water of the pond ripple with the wind and glisten with the shining sun. His head still spun slightly from the ale he had drunk last night, and his eyes were still sensitive to the sunlight.

The riders cheering loudly as he downed another pint of ale, her soft hand on his shoulder as her laughter rang in his ears. Her white teeth flashing behind her rosy lips, her head bobbing slightly to match his in drunkenness. The fiddle shrieking as he leaned towards her ear and whispered, "My Lady, you really are radiant-" His hands on the back of her neck as he swiftly brought their mouths together.

Wilyyn rubbed his temples and muttered to himself, "Gracious, that was strong ale..." blinking slowly before touching his lips with his fingertips. He let his knees buckle as his back slid down the tree trunk, leaving his rear on the damp ground as he held his aching head in his hands.

The sound of his empty wooden mug clattering to the floor, his fingers twisting in her hair. The riders surrounding them shrieked in laughter, his lips moving against hers clumsily. The taste of ale and honey on her tongue as she parted her lips, the scent of lavender filling his head and overwhelming his senses as they fell to the stone floor.

He sat there dormant for a few meandering minutes before hearing the soft sound of water parting, like someone was wading into the pond. His head snapped up in alert, and his eyes widened as he saw Fraea trudging into the water. The memories of last night flashed behind his eyes and he scampered up the tree's trunk like only a halfling could, finding sanctuary in the coverage the branches and thick leaves gave him.

He slowed his breath to a death rattle, his eyes fixed on her as she paused, standing knee-deep in the center of the pond with the skirt of her gown clinging transparently to her impossibly long legs. His mind raced as his headache only got worse. 'She'll see you Wilyyn, she'll see you and remember last night, when you swayed in your seat and slurred your devotion in her ear, when you kissed her like a foolish child,' his thoughts taunted. He wanted to believe that she would be merciful if he was found, but as she began to peel her gown off over her head and the color drained from his cheeks, all thoughts of mercy at her discovering him were forgotten.

He lost his grip on the branch he had been resting on and promptly fell to the ground with a dampened crash, his fall only barely broken by the fallen leaves and hay. Fraea looked up with alarm in her eyes, covering herself quickly with her gown as she said in a voice that in any other context would have been gentle, "Who's there...?"

Wilyyn stood up gingerly, brushing the hay off of his cloak before swallowing a large lump in his throat. He couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze, even though his position on the hill made it so he didn't have to crane his neck to look her in the eye. When his curiosity got the best of him, he glanced up ever so slightly to see she had tugged her gown back over herself and placed her hands on her hips, smirking at him with that same kind look on her face.

He looked back down at his bare feet in the hay when he saw that expression on her face. It reminded him too much of the look his mother would give him when she caught him sneaking seconds (and thirds) in the kitchen, or when he would come home late covered in dirt, and that comparison just embarrassed him. His overactive mind whispered to him, 'And that's how she thinks of you: a stupid halfling she has to look after.'

The night before the battle, the endless nightmares of Kyrnian warriors ripping him apart taunting him every time he shut his eyes. The cold sweat on his brow when he woke with a start, the cold breeze coming from the half-shut tent as the first thing he looked to was to see if he had woken her.

The harsh glare of sunlight reflecting off of hammered iron, the thud of his heart behind his breastplate as he squinted to see beyond Taren's ranks. Fraea's strong arms reaching around him to hold the reins of their steed, her powerful yell as the riders rushed to meet their foes.

He stammered a soft apology, tucking his hands behind his back, "My Lady, I'm sorry, I-I didn't see you approach the water, and when I heard you I panicked. It won't happen again, I promise-" He caught himself rambling and turned away, walking from the pond as quickly as his legs would allow and holding his head in something resembling shame (although last night's ale certainly wasn't helping).