

Shay took a small inhale through her nose, and slowly let it sift out through her mouth, teeth clenched almost of their own free will. As the wind rustled through the trees, the crisp, cool night air was polluted with the scent of *them* once again. The smoke of fires and oil lanterns. The sound of distant voices and whetstones against iron blades.

Poachers.

Shay was a druid; a mage who drew her powers from nature itself. From the babbling brooks of melted snow to the sun washed leaves of the summer trees. It all spoke to her, and she had the unique ears to listen. While most humans resided in quaint villages, content to live their lives and toil the day away farming, smithing or crafting, Shay secluded herself to protect and tend to the wild lands beyond civilization.

With this power, Shay could evoke plants to bloom at a glance. Shapeshift into beasts both elegant and fearsome. Alter the weather and command the creatures of the natural world. But with these powers came responsibilities.

And among these many responsibilities, was the task of preventing the selfish and the greedy from exploiting nature for their own gain. Poachers were a constant nuisance in the region, though intimidating them into fleeing seemed a less than ideal strategy as of late. She would scare away one, and a week later two would return.

Shay took another slow inhale. Holding the breath for a moment and closing her eyes to listen. The rustle of trees... the call of prowling owls... and the faint sounds of stumbling human feet. She let the breath filter out through her teeth, opening her eyes.

"West."

She had a direction. Shay stood from the brush, tightening her belt and ensuring her staff was secured on her back in its thong. She closed her eyes, and her skin briefly danced with a sparkling verdant light. In the old tongue of fey and flowers she muttered a single word.

"Owl."

Her skin glowed, and for the briefest moment the light enveloped her, whisking her form away, and reshaping it in a new image. Where once a human girl dressed in green and white stood, now a barn owl of gray and brown colors replaced her. She opened her wings, glancing up, and took briefly to the air, landing amongst the branches above.

Her faint green eyes glanced amongst the shadowed canopy, faint bits of moonlight shining through like dull spotlights on the forest floor. She opened her wings again, and took flight, silent, in the direction of the poachers she had been seeking.

Her avian senses scanned the forest floor as she soared, locking briefly onto minute details that a human eye would never have taken notice of. Tiny rodents scurrying among the brush, the smell of berries that lay under their parent bushes, and the broken low branches of foliage that further confirmed the presence of the greedy hunters.

Swooping around trees, she followed the growing scent of fire and the sound of metal ringing. A glimmer of light caught her keen eye, leading her to roost in the branches of a knotted oak tree. Glancing forward, she could see them. Poachers.

Dressed in leathers and hide, each armed with hunting bows, swords, axes, and other equipment. Some human, and others bearing shorter dwarven statures, or sharpened features that gave hint to elven lineage. There must have been a dozen of them at least.

Shay would have sworn, had she the mouth for it. A faint hoot escaped her beak as she thought on her next course of action.

"There are more of them than last time... more than can be frightened away. I will have to be careful about how to handle them... or I may just end up full of arrows."

While she pondered, for the briefest of moments, a rustle came through in the wind. Distant trees creaked and shifted, like a great wind blustered through them. But only a moment before dissipating. Another bird of prey, hunting in the night? A bear who took to climbing a far tree? Shay's attention returned back to the poachers. She needed to keep her priorities.

Shay fluttered to the next branch, seeking a better vantage point. The smell of ale and oil lanterns hit her nose. She peered in over their camp, eyes landing on two figures sharing drinks and keeping watch near her perch.

"...I tell yah, ain't nothing but tall tales. Hunters who took down bears, jumping at shadows." A shaggy dwarf said between hearty swigs from his tankard.

Across from him, a woman with short cut black hair and a few scars that trailed her lips and chin glanced idly passed the dwarf.

"Like it's any surprise. Jonas and Reeds are cowards. Jonas said the plants were comin' to get him. Fuckin' nuts." She shook her head in amused disbelief, swirling a bottle in her hand before taking a sip and setting it beside her stool. "If there is a druid, we'll deal with it. Tired of all this voodoo bullshit scaring those chicken shit excuses for hunters."

The dwarf gave a glance over towards the woman, and shook his head, speaking from behind his tankard. "Aye. But... if there is a druid, you sure we got the firepower to deal with 'um? I ain't keen on getting magic slung at me."

"You're being a pussy, Gorm. Can't be more than one druid out here, or we'd have seen something. I guarantee you, druids die like anyone if you stab them enough. Hell one good arrow in the ribs and that druid will drop like a fuckin' rock." The woman ran a hand over her head, rubbing the back of her neck before picking up her bottle and lifting it to her lips. She swallowed a mouthful of ale, and tossed the empty bottle into the brush behind them. "Your turn to go get more booze."

The dwarf huffed behind his tankard, and got to his feet with a grunt, picking up his sword and making his way off towards a few wagons that rested further into this makeshift camp the poachers had established.

Shay leaned back, taking a sharp breath. *"They know I'm out here, and they're ready to kill. Shit, this is getting out of hand... I'm going to have to deal with them."*

Shay swooped down to the ground, crouching low, and with a brief flash of green, her form reassumed that of a human. Only a few feet from that woman, she reached down and grabbed a handful of damp soil. Rubbing it between her hands, she pulled from a pouch on her belt a small, thorny twig. She muttered a few words in her druidic tongue, and the piece of tinder

sprouted from her hand into a long whip-like vine of thorns. She closed her eyes, steeling herself. She hated to take a life, especially another human's, but these poachers had to be dealt with.

Just then, that sound again. Creaking, rustling, and shaking. The trees behind her, a distance away, sounded as if they were moving, being jostled. Her breathing halted in an instant as the scarred woman stirred and glanced over her shoulder. Looking up towards the trees, the woman furrowed her brow and placed her hand on the hilt of her sword. As her eyes scanned the forest, she stopped as the glint of her lantern caught the eyes of Shay.

The two shared a look of shock, only for a moment, before Shay thrust her hand forward, the vine whip springing to life in an instant. The woman drew her sword half from its sheath before the vine latched around her neck, thorns digging into the skin. Shay placed a foot on the tree next to her for leverage, and gave a hard yank on the vine, pulling the woman into the brush and to the ground, sword landing a foot away from them as Shay attempted to pin the woman.

The woman thrashed, the two struggling in the brush, before the woman reared back and delivered a punch squarely to Shay's jaw. Shay tumbled back against a tree, the woman grabbing her sword, and in an instant Shay felt the warmth of blood trickle down her cheek as the blade was thrust forward and stuck into the tree, cutting across her cheek. The stabbing blade missing only due to the moment of disorientation the poacher had suffered.

Shay yanked on the vine whip again, pulling the woman's head forward and letting the momentum connect her forehead to the roots of the oak tree. By now the fighting had stirred the camp, the sound of confused voices reaching Shay's ears. Shay scrambled away a few feet, sitting on a knee and pulling the vine whip back to her hand. She looked up from the dazed woman, to three poachers approaching at a hurried pace in her direction, with weapons drawn.

"Shit, shit...!" Shay cursed under her breath, and summoned a verdant aura to her hands. Retrieving a handful of seeds from her belt pouch, she grabbed a fistful of earth with her other free hand and tossed both towards the poachers. The seeds landed a few feet ahead of them, quickly sprouting and rapidly growing to form tangled and writhing underbrush that threatened to wrap and constrain the legs of the approaching armed men.

The poachers stumbled, trying to cut and force their way past the plant barrier, one taking a wild shot from their bow at the druid. Shay fell back onto her rear to avoid the projectile, before she took another blow to the side of her head, knocking her face first to the ground. The woman she had wrangled with before was back up, blood trickling from a scrape that covered most of her forehead. She threw herself onto the druid, raising her fist to deliver another blow to the druid as Shay attempted to right herself.

Shay put up her hands to protect from the woman's assault, her concentration fading from the entangling plant magic that kept the other poacher's at bay. Starting to panic, Shay lifted a hand and a small gout of flame spouted from her hand, wreathing around the poacher atop her.

The woman reared back, growling in pain behind gritted teeth, as flames licked across her chest and face. She grabbed Shay's wrist, twisting it away as the flames sputtered out into smoke, and delivered a punch right to Shay's cheek again. Shay gritted her teeth, and the woman gave a wicked smile as she began to realize just who Shay was.

"You're the fuckin' druid... well... You might have your fancy magic... but it's going to take more than cheap tricks to put me down." The woman drew a dagger from her boot, panting and wiping blood from her brow. "Do you know who the fuck I am, druid? I run this operation. All these hunters? They're on my payroll. This forest? Mine to fuck with however I damn well please."

The woman brought the knife up against Shay's throat, as Shay held her breath and glared up at the woman. "You don't belong here..." Shay said through gritted teeth.

The woman grinned, and pressed the knife into Shay's neck some, drawing a little blood. "Well I don't see anyone here who can make me fuck off. And you sure as hell don't have what it takes to take me down."

Shay winced from the sharp pain of the knife on her throat, swallowing, looking up to the woman... and then that sound returned. Creaking, rustling... this time all around them. Shay looked up, passed this grinning poacher, passed the brush and bushes, passed the nearby glow of lantern light, up into the canopy. And a pair of large humanoid eyes was peering right back down at her from above the trees.

A massive form, mostly silhouetted by the dark of the night. Humanoid features she noticed first. Male, with defined musculature all down his chest. Long wooly hair that hung over his eyes and fuzzy ears, framing a curious and almost arrogant grin. Wide antlers stretched from either side of his head. Defined muscles sculpting his chest that trailed off into thick brown fur at the waist. Some kind of deer-like lower half with massive hooves that until only recently had been mistaken in the darkness for tree trunks.

A massive cervitaur, of incredible size and stature. How it was able to approach so unseen was a mystery, but even more concerning were its unknown motives. Shay had never seen such a creature in her forest before, and in this moment... She wasn't sure if the poachers were her biggest threat.

The woman seemed to notice Shay's distracted looks, and glanced over her shoulder. "What... the hell...?" The woman's mouth hung open, eyes widening as she took in the size of the creature looming over the both of them.

The other poachers seemed to be taking notice too, as shouts and clamors from the dozen or so hunters turned their attention from the scuffle their supposed leader was in. Hooded lanterns lit up, casting dim spotlights up into the canopy. Giving only small glimpses over the truly colossal form of this deer-centaur creature. The centaur's eyes glanced over the poachers, his grinning smile only continuing as he opened his mouth slowly to speak.

"Well this... is interesting~" His voice was smooth, but commanding, overpowering anything the poachers may have been saying. There was a confidence and smugness to his words, relaxed as they were. "I didn't expect finding poachers to be this easy... but I suppose with all the noise you've been making, anyone could have found you." His eyes returned to the poacher leader, and his form leaned down, a hand stretching out to pluck her up off the forest floor.

The woman gasped, stumbling off of Shay, and held the knife at the ready. "Shoot it... Fucking shoot it!" She yelled at her men, who until this moment had been stunned by the presence of this imposing cervitaur. The hand closed in, and while the poachers scrambled to action to draw their bows, the poacher leader thrust her knife into the thick flesh of the towering cervitaur's hand.

The looming creature paused, tilting his hand slightly at the dagger which had been driven hilt deep into his palm. He slowly plucked it out of his skin with his other hand like it was merely a splinter, and examined the blade. His emerald eyes glancing over it, he grinned and turned his attention back to the poacher leader.

“Cute.” He dropped the knife, and reached down, closing his hand around the thrashing woman, as arrows began to fly. Most glanced off of his imposing form, the large leather bound wrist bracers on his forearms catching many of the projectiles that tried to free the poacher he now held.

Shay gasped and rolled over, crawling on her hands and knees away from the cervitaur, moving behind a tree and leaning against it, panting and rubbing her neck. She glanced around it, looking up to the cervitaur who was examining the squirming poacher leader.

“You know... I think I recall overhearing stories about you from some nearby villages... Cleaver Riley... quite a bounty on you...” *His eyes shifted down, locking on Shay for a moment. The druid scrambled back behind the tree, pulling her staff off her back and holding it close. The cervitaur’s lips curled into a grin again, and his gaze drifted over the stammering poachers, in disbelief at the sheer uselessness of their attacks.

“In fact... your whole little crew had bounties... dead or alive I believe.” He hummed, before his eyes turned back to the poacher leader held firmly in his hand. “I guess it would be only right of me to collect on such a bounty~” He then plucked the poacher leader up with his other hand. Gasps escaping the other hunters as he dangled her over his face, the poacher leader kicking and growling angrily... and opened his mouth.

Instantly the woman’s face went pale, and she went from angrily beating on his fingers with her fists to kicking at his teeth and lips as he lowered her in, the cervitaur beginning to collect her in his mouth.

Shay watched from behind her tree, a hand over her mouth in shock. The other poachers gasped, some firing arrows, others dropping their weapons and stumbling back, as the cervitaur fully gathered the struggling poacher in his mouth, and sealed his lips. His eyes drifted over the poachers, and with an audible swallow, the hunters were forced to watch their leader’s form slide down the cervitaur’s throat.

In only a moment, chaos erupted. Some poacher’s tried to flee, others fired wildly with their bows. Shay scrambled to her feet and tried to run from the cervitaur, and in the midst of all this the imposing, smug giant lifted a forehoof, and slammed it down into the clearing, sending everyone tumbling to the ground from the sheer shock of the impact.

He began to lean down, snatching up poachers one by one. And one by one they began to suffer the same fate of their leader. Pushed into the waiting maw of this massive cervitaur, who disposed of any weapons they carried as easily as one would pick pickles off a sandwich.

Shay tumbled across the clearing from the initial impact of the carriage sized hoof, landing and rolling before hitting a tree and huffing, panting and trying to collect her breath. She looked down, and gasped as her magic staff lay snapped in two in her hands.

“No no no...!” She looked up, and yelped as she saw the cervitaur turn his gaze to her, slurping in the dwarven fellow she had eavesdropped on before. With a swallow, his form too

disappeared down the cervitaur's gullet, and he reached a hand out towards the comparatively little druid.

Shay's eyes widened and she scrambled back up to her feet, drawing her hand across the ground to grab up a fistful of dirt. With a flare of verdant green energy, she tossed the dirt up into the air, and a swirling cloud formed up above the clearing, at about chest height for the cervitaur.

The hand was then repelled by a sudden crack of lightning from the stormy cloud that momentarily obscured the giant's view of the clearing. The cervitaur drew his hand back in pain, gritting his teeth at the burn that had been made on the back of his hand.

In the moment of confusion, Shay darted off, and slid behind a tree, huddling up behind it, closing her eyes, breathing heavily and tucking her knees into her chest. From there she heard the sounds of the last few screaming poachers as they were grabbed up, their yells muffled and disappearing almost instantly as the sounds of the cervitaur swallowing reached Shay's ears.

The cervitaur, taking a moment to scan across the now quiet and empty clearing, waved his large hand and dispersed the small storm cloud, which disappeared into smoke and static. All across the clearing were bent, broken or abandoned weapons. Carriages lay toppled or crushed underhoof. Barrels of ale lay strewn across the grass, some cracked and leaking, others intact.

Slowly the cervitaur's grin returned, as he began to lean down, taking a few thundering steps into the clearing. Keeping his head low and listening. "I know you're still here..." He said, glancing towards a lone tree on the outskirts of the clearing.

Shay kept a hand over her mouth, heart pounding in her ears. But even then the cervitaur's smooth and confident voice boomed over it. She glanced around, not daring to poke out from around the tree as the cervitaur could be heard moving in the clearing. She reached a shaky hand down, and gathered up a few acorns and grass. Beginning to slowly weave them together, whispering druidic words into her cupped hands, making them glow with a fiery orange light.

She jumped almost a foot off the ground as a hoof landed near the tree, and Shay tucked herself close to it as she heard the giant looming just nearby... searching. There was a long, intense moment of silence.

Then, Shay saw a set of giant fingers wrap around the trunk of the tree. She gasped and threw herself forward as the cervitaur wrenched the tree forward and back, before tearing the pine tree from the earth with an explosion of roots, dirt and pine needles. Shay got to her feet, and looked up to the cervitaur, who held the pine tree like it weighed nothing. The giant looked down to her, grinning, and slowly grabbed the tree with his other hand. With a spray of splinters and pine needles that showered down over the clearing, he snapped the tree in two. Twisting the two halves apart, he let them drop on either side of his large form, Shay taking a few stumbling steps back.

Shay kept a handful of what looked like little explosive acorns at the ready to throw, trying to look up to him with as much confidence as she could muster. The cervitaur grinned at her display, and idly picked pine needles and wood chips out from under a nail.

"There you are. It's been a long time since anyone has attacked me with magic... you're no poacher, that's for sure." He said, humming, an intimidating confidence in every word.

"Yeah, I'm not." Shay replied briefly, her eyes glancing down towards his human midsection. Imagining the dozen people who were now trapped inside him.

The cervitaur smirked. "So let me guess... you look like... the thieving type~" With a surprising swiftness, he slid a hoof forward, knocking Shay off balance and giving him the opportunity to grab her by a leg and hoist her up off the ground, her little firecracker acorns spilling out of her hands and fizzling out on the ground.

Shay flailed her arms, kicking at his fingers, until she came face to face with him as he held her up over the treetops. "Put me down! I am not a thief!"

The cervitaur leaned an elbow on a tree, sending several branches cracking and snapping through the canopy to the forest floor below. "Hmmm... I don't know... How can I really be sure there isn't some wanted poster of you up somewhere?"

Shay panted and glared at him, a nervous adrenaline pumping through her, wincing as his breath puffed softly in her face with every word. "My name... is Shay! I am the druid who protects this forest! And as the druid of this forest I demand you let me go!"

The cervitaur just grinned, amused by the fear and tenacity of this little human. "Well, Shay, druid-thief of the forest... you must not get out much. My name is Cornelias. I roam the land from little town to little town," He swayed her back and forth as he spoke, "Doing my part to make the land a safer place... and make money of course~"

Shay gritted her teeth as he swayed her like a pendulum. "Stop... stop that!"

"I just don't know... If I let you go, and I find out you really are a thief, I might never get another chance to catch you..." He hummed, sticking his tongue out. "And you can *never* be too careful, right~?"

He stopped swaying the druid about, and as she steadied herself she panted. "What are you talking about?" She asked, but suddenly went pale in the face as he gave a wide grin and opened his mouth. Lifting her up, and beginning to lower her in.

Shay yelped and pushed on his teeth with her hands, wincing as his tongue slid out and licked over her chest and face as he collected her inside. Once her upper half was between his teeth, Cornelias let her leg go, leaving them to kick and squirm outside of his lips. He watched them flail for a briefly amusing moment, before opening his mouth and dipping his head back enough to collect them inside as well, flopping her fully into his mouth. He sealed his lips, and gave a satisfied grin, pressing her into a cheek.

Shay trembled, pushing her hands into that tongue as it licked and drooled over her in the darkness of his mouth. "Nnngh... Let... me out of here!" She called out.

Cornelias smirked and began to make his way away from the clearing, stretching his arms and putting them behind his head as Shay began to be swished from cheek to cheek, savored like a piece of hard candy. "Hmm... a bit earthy..." He mumbled, commenting on the druid's taste as she struggled to resist against the whims of his large tongue and pooling drool.

Then, all at once, Shay felt her entire world get swirled around and turned upside down. She coughed and sputtered, trying to get her bearings once it calmed down. She had only a moment to collect herself and look to see Cornelias' throat ahead, his breaths puffing out over

her like a powerful heated wind. In an instant, Cornelias swallowed, and like all the poachers, Shay's form slid down his gullet, wiggling its way down past his collar and out of sight. The cervitaur sighed and patted his abdomen, smirking when he felt the little druid slip into his stomach.

As Shay arrived, she tumbled out in a gush of drool, coughing and sitting up with a wheezing pant. She sat up on her knees in a waist deep pool of drool, summoning a weak magical light to illuminate the pitch black cavern of his stomach. She didn't see any of the poachers within, but that did little to calm her panic in the moment. Then, all around her, she heard the ever confident humming voice of Cornelias.

"Well my little druid-thief, I hope the accommodations are to your liking. If you're looking for the poachers, they've passed into my second stomach."

Shay panted and wiped a bit of thick drool off her face, looking up and around in the swaying stomach. "Your second stomach... in your deer half." She mumbled. "So... what... Happens now then?"

"Well, we wait until we get to the next town. If there isn't a bounty for a little druid-thief, I'll just have to let you go. But if you are a thief..." Cornelias patted his abdomen, making Shay stumble and fall over. "You'll get to see where the poachers went~"

Shay huffed, grimacing at the drool soaked into her clothes. "Great..." Cornelias then hummed. "Oh and... when we do get to town... you don't mind being an eyewitness for me do you? After all I need someone to confirm that I did catch those poachers~"

Shay rolled her eyes and waded through the drool to sit against the stomach wall. She crossed her arms, dimmed her light... and tried her best to relax to the swaying of the stomach. She knew she wasn't a criminal... so she just had to hope that Cornelias would keep his word and let her out when he realized that.

...Still, she did owe him for saving her... not that she would ever let him know that.

To Be Continued?