

Forests of Grandeur and Malice

Evermund – Nomad Lands

Airlie stood at my side, the silence between us comfortable as we both gazed across the river. It was so easy being here with her, in our own world within the forest. I could almost forget the responsibilities that usually hemmed me in.

I glanced sideways at her. She'd proven herself a good teacher—our roles reversed as she taught me how to smell people on the wind. A smile tugged at my mouth as I considered the differences between my current teacher and my original one. I had always gotten on well with Drake, but I much preferred my new tutor.

She was certainly easier on the eye. I slid my gaze sideways again. The morning sun made her golden-brown curls gleam, the brightness reflected in the blue of her eyes, as deep and beautiful as the water in front of us. Could anyone hear the way my heart beat faster when she was near?

She smelled a great deal better than my old teacher as well—a fact of which I was acutely aware after days of sniffing at every breeze. It wasn't actually my nose picking up the presence of others on the wind, but I couldn't help breathing the nearby scents in anyway. I just hoped I'd successfully hidden how distracting I found hers.

She's not your teacher, she's your apprentice, I reminded myself sternly, as I'd needed to do a hundred times a day recently. Duty and honor had never been such a sour taste in my mouth.

Airlie smiled back at me, her mouth opening to say something. But the words never emerged. Stiffening, she turned upriver, staring at something too distant for me to see.

A beat behind her, I turned as well. I inhaled deeply, forgetting my earlier thoughts as I used the action to focus my new ability. Faintly I caught something that didn't belong. A person, for sure, and probably a mage.

But only one.

I relaxed. Whoever they were, they couldn't pose much threat if they were alone. I'd nearly missed their presence, though. My brow creased as my thoughts turned to the night hours I'd just spent keeping watch alone.

"I don't think I'd have caught that if you hadn't put me on guard with your reaction," I said.

Airlie turned from the direction of the newcomer, examining my face.

"That's because it's just one person," she said reassuringly. "And they're still far away. You've gotten good at recognizing groups or individual people closer in."

I sighed. "No amount of practice or study lets someone with a weaker ability catch up to someone else's superior strength. I'm just not used to being the weaker one in that scenario."

It was an uncomfortable thought. When had I grown so arrogant and puffed up about my strength? I had always thought of myself as humble, and it was sobering to realize how accustomed I was to being the most powerful person present.

Except for Airlie. From the beginning she had always been different. Maybe that was why she had fascinated me from the moment I first saw her.

She gave me a warm smile, clearly sympathetic, although I didn't deserve it.

"You never know," she said. "You thought you couldn't do this, either, until a situation of high enough stress brought out the ability."

I frowned, her words reminding me of the constant question at the back of my mind. How had I developed a new ability after all these years? And one beyond the strength of Drake, my influencer. It was as impossible as Airlie's own strength.

But I wasn't the first person to experience such growth recently—which meant there had to be an explanation. An explanation I was certain had something to do with the glowing girl beside me.

As soon as we got back to Tarona, I had every intention of insisting Uncle Marius tell us the full truth. After what had happened on the tour, it was clear he knew more than he was sharing on the topic. Zeke might have chosen not to press a foreign king for information, but I was willing to take whatever consequences might ensue from confronting my uncle and demanding answers. I was sick of mysteries.

"Paxton's coming," Airlie called back toward the others, shaking me out of my thoughts.

I tried to hide the wonder on my face. I'd recognized there was a mage coming, but she had been able to identify him. I might have grown stronger, but I hadn't reached her level.

Gia and Mila joined us, followed by Liara. Only a few moments of their conversation drove out all thought of strength and abilities. Liara's assertion that we wouldn't make it back to the city in time to witness the vote on the next nomad monarch filled me with concern.

"Miss the vote?" I asked. "But that's the whole reason for our visit."

What was King Marius going to think when he learned I spent our entire visit in a remote forest with only a handful of people? Would he guess the reason I had been content with the situation and not pushed to return to the city?

I carefully avoided looking in Airie's direction. When had I let the enchantment of this trip overcome me? I was forgetting my responsibilities.

"I'm sorry," Liara repeated. "But guarding the river is too important."

Paxton interrupted, waving enthusiastically as he called a greeting from a distance.

Liara sniggered. "He doesn't want you to mistake him for a raider and attack."

"If raiders are approaching us from the mountains, we've failed our job." Hayes looked as concerned as I felt. "I hope you're right, and we're going back, though. I don't like our delegation being separated for so long."

He glanced at Gia, and I could read my own concern on his face. I wasn't the only one feeling the pinch of responsibilities abandoned.

"What news?" Liara called to Paxton. "Have the reinforcements arrived?"

It was good news he brought, thankfully. Not only were reinforcements taking our place, but we had received permission to be guided back through the tunnels without blindfolds or other disguise.

"That's excellent news!" Liara exclaimed. "We might make it back for the vote after all."

Hope filled me. Maybe I could still complete some of my original mission, at least. If I intended to confront my uncle, it would help to have him favorably disposed toward me first.

Conversation turned to breakfast and news from the capital, something that set Airie strangely on edge.

Her fears proved grounded when Paxton revealed Annora's treachery. She had announced Cadence's power affinity to the entire collection of nomad tribes. Airie reacted as badly as I expected, but she still showed far more restraint than Gia.

Silently I adjured them both to calm down and conceal their emotions. Gia, at least, should know better than to react so unguardedly in such a political situation. She wasn't looking my way to see my warning look, however, too busy glaring down at Liara.

Airlie caught my eye, though, examining my impassive face with a slight crease between her brows. Emotions flitted through her eyes, too fast to track, before her expression smoothed.

“Sit down,” she said to Gia, accompanying the command with a firm look.

Pride filled me. Airlie might not have been raised a princess, but she had a more instinctive grasp of the disciplines required for a political role than Gia had ever possessed.

Thankfully Gia responded to the authority in Airlie’s tone, slowly sitting back down.

“So you did already know,” Paxton said. “I thought surely you must, but—”

“Of course Tartora knows.” I cut him off firmly. Annora had put King Marius in a position of weakness, and I needed to do everything possible to retrieve the situation. “And we will take any attempt by the nomads to claim Cadence extremely poorly.”

Paxton held up both hands. “I’m just a junior member of Tribe Callen. Don’t look at me.”

Airlie stood, seeming oblivious to any tension, her thoughts clearly on her sister. “We need to get back to the Hidden City. I’m going to gather my things.”

She strode away from the fire, leaving awkward silence in her wake. After a moment, everyone else scrambled up as well, many still clutching their breakfast, and everyone murmuring about helping us gather our belongings and seeing us on our way.

No one actually followed Airlie, however, and after a moment’s consideration, I strode after her. I found her hidden behind the first row of trees, clearly agitated as she pulled her bag closed.

“Are you all right?” I asked, making her freeze.

She slowly rose, still facing away from me, and I willed her to turn so I could see her face. When she did, her expression clearly showed her perturbation.

“*I’m fine*,” she snapped. “It’s Cadence I’m worried about.”

Of course she was worried about her sister. It was inevitable.

“Why does that not surprise me?” I asked with a shake of my head. “You’re always thinking about someone else, Airlie. But I can tell you’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset!” she cried. “I thought I could trust Zeke and even Annora. And now...” Anger filled her face. “I feel like a fool, and I hate being a fool.”

“You’re not a fool.” I spoke quickly, compelled by the pain in her eyes. “You just judge people by your own standards, so it’s natural to be disappointed when they let you down.”

I caught and held her gaze, trying to communicate the truth of who she was—the incredible person I saw so clearly.

Her stance softened, and she gave an unconvincing chuckle.

“I do sound a bit insufferable when you put it like that.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” I moved instinctively toward her. Was she the only one who didn’t see how amazing she was?

I forced myself to halt, the effort of restraining myself from reaching for her almost a physical pain. But I wasn’t helping the situation. My words had produced the opposite effect to the one I intended, only making her feel worse about herself.

“Why is it that I can talk to kings and master mages with ease, but somehow I feel like a fumbling apprentice with you?” I asked, trying to hide my internal frustration behind a humorous facade.

“It’s because I’m so advanced,” she said with perfect seriousness. “I have so much to teach you.”

Her somber expression dissolved into giggles. Even now, she was laughing at herself, her laughter painfully endearing. Despite myself, I took another step forward, my control cracking once again.

“That must definitely be it,” I said, playing along, although her words weren’t far from the truth.

“Not that it’s an accurate picture of your behavior,” she said. “I’ve never seen you fumble in your life.”

I hoped she was speaking the truth. It meant my years of practice at hiding my emotions had paid off. I’d certainly never hidden so much as I had since Airlie came into my life.

She sighed, the sound piercing me as her mood turned bleak again.

“Not like me,” she said. “I keep messing up over and over, and it wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t my sister who keeps—”

Without my permission, my feet carried me all the way to her side. Her pain pierced my resistance, and I placed a hand on her arm. My breath caught at the contact.

She went silent. Did she feel it too? I desperately hoped so, even as I feared the possibility.

“Cadence will be all right,” I said, speaking almost at random, seeking only Airlie’s comfort. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Her eyes met mine, full of uncertainty and fear and pleading. I ached with the need to gather her into my arms and soothe her anxiety.

She's your apprentice, I reminded myself, but the words sounded faint and unconvincing compared to her heady beauty and the message in her eyes. Silently they conveyed her need for me, and everything in me responded to the call.

“You’ll help me?” she asked. “You’ll help Cadence? I know I don’t have a right to ask it. You’ve already done so much for us. But none of this is Cadence’s fault, and she needs... You never asked for an apprentice, let alone one responsible for a younger sister, but Cadence at least—”

“Airlie.” Her name on my lips pushed me further over the edge, the connection between us deepening. “Of course I’ll help your sister. I know how you feel about her. I kept her safe for you this long, and I’m not going to stop now.”

It had always been about Airlie. Protecting Cadence had been my duty, but I had never once had to remind myself of that. Everything I had done for her had been done with Airlie’s face in my mind.

“Of...of course.” A strange, pained look flashed across Airlie’s face. “I’m your apprentice, and I know you take that responsibility seriously. It’s why I feel bad asking.”

She thought I cared for her only as my apprentice. That everything I had done for her had been done to satisfy my responsibilities. It was exactly what she should think—the false impression I had worked for so many months to convey.

But it had never been my intention to make her feel guilty. And there was something else in her expression as well, some deeper pain that swept away the last of my restraint.

“Airlie, no,” I whispered. “I don’t do it because you’re my apprentice.”

I knew my emotion showed in my eyes. It was impossible to feel so intensely without conveying at least a shadow of it.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, my sensible self was screaming at me for the loss of control. But that part of me had finally lost the battle. Even my self-restraint had its limits.

For a breath-taking second, I read desire in Airlie’s eyes and thought she meant to throw herself at me. But instead she jerked backward, pulling her arm from beneath my fingers.

“You don’t have to tell me you’re just as prone to taking responsibility for everything and everyone as I am,” she said. “I worked that out in the first few days after you activated me.”

Cold reality swept over me, dousing the warmth building inside. Whatever I thought I’d read in Airlie’s eyes was now firmly tucked away behind the usual barrier she maintained between us.

I had come so close to acting against the dictates of honor, and the shame of it only amplified the pain of her rejection. Her ability might be stronger than mine, but I had the years and the life experience. I should never have given in to the moment of weakness.

“You overestimate me,” I said, struggling to return to a neutral tone. “But you can count on my aid with your sister.”

It didn’t matter if she would never see me as anything more than her influencer—I would always stand ready to help her.

She met my eyes, her own briefly softening once again. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Fresh pain speared through me. It took all my willpower to wrestle my emotions back under control, a control that was already threatening to crack again as she took a step in my direction.

But something made her freeze and spin toward the river. The crackle of emotion in the air changed so instantly and so completely that I strode to her side without thought of the tension between us.

For the duration of our conversation, my whole world had narrowed to her. Now I reached outward again, drawing in a breath, and was instantly aware of my mistake. I had allowed myself to be distracted at the worst possible moment.

“Did you smell that?” I asked, hoping I was misreading the air.

“It’s them.” She started running. “They’re back.”

The raiders were here.