

Two

She isn't the charitable sort
The Apple-Tree Man
Dark immeasurable coils

Much as she begrudged it anything, Katine admitted the stone was right in one regard: she always felt better surrounded by trees. Maybe not enough for anyone else to notice, but enough for her. She *was* an elf, after all (and positively *not* that other absurd thing).

Unfortunately, if Katine wanted trees, she had to work for them. Her village of StormPier was so near the sea it might have been a piece of driftwood washed up along the shore (and, indeed, so it appeared). Not many trees there. Just a hard, salt-lick wind, sand that crept into the worst places, and an untidy collection of worn out houses that dared the sea to just try to wipe them from the map again.

Oh yes, and boats. Lots of boats—wooden schools and pods of darting minnows and deliberate whales, endlessly criss-crossing the immense, cliff-enclosed harbor.

Perhaps long ago there'd been trees hereabouts, but Katine was convinced they'd all been cut down to make more boats. Instead of a lush and suitably regal forest, she was left with a bobbing pincushion of masts.

It took about a mile inland for the land to become accustomed to the idea of trees. But once it did, it made up for lost time. Deep, vast, and altogether intimidating, Ebon Wood was the dark reflection of the sea farther west. And it was there Katine had made a habit of visiting on those particularly bad days when nothing could ease her soul like cool green shadows.

A day, in fact, much like today.

She stood up, collected her bow and quiver of arrows, and strode over to the part of the cliff overlooking the bay. She stared down at the tumble-down village far below. The rickety docks splayed out on the water like broken fingers. A bustle of people scrambled

over the wooden planks, tying off their boats for the night with the casual grace that came of routine so old it might well be passed through the blood. Katine had often wondered that if the ocean was to suddenly dry up one day whether the villagers would reflexively empty into their wobbly keels and attempt to fish the hardened basin for scorpions and tumbleweeds.

The elf kicked a small pebble off into space. Her extraordinarily sharp eyes followed its lengthy fall until it bounced off a weathered roof with a faint clatter.

If only it had landed on that little straw-headed eel.

The day hadn't exactly been all sunny skies before she dug up the prattling stone. An encounter with Charity Bailiwick and her trio of sniping friends always foretold storms—the kind with lots of wind and noise.

As an elf raised among humans, Katine was accustomed to certain looks and names. Not from everyone, of course—or not so much anymore. Once they'd gotten used to the idea of the cold, limp babe fished out of the sea by Harmon Lutey eleven years ago, most of the folk of StormPier eventually came to overlook the shape of her ears. Those few who couldn't, simply didn't have the imagination or bearing to ruffle Katine.

Except for Charity.

For some reason, Charity could say the predictable names in ways that seeped through the elf as easily as the sea through netting. Maybe it had something to do with how Katine suspected everyone else continually compared the two of them. How the cheerful, well-liked Charity—despite being human—seemingly personified everything an elf should be (or at least everything people had *heard* elves should be), while Katine was . . . well, herself. Or perhaps this had nothing to do with it at all. Maybe it was simply one of those regrettable pairings in life where one person was so perfectly the poison for another that redness and scratching were always inevitable.

What *was* for certain, however, was if given a choice, Katine would suffer a dozen blathering rocks over Charity any day. That merry smile might have beguiled the rest of StormPier, but Katine knew the shark for its teeth.

Which was precisely why she wasn't going to follow the steep, zig-zag road back down the cliff to the village. She wouldn't give Charity the satisfaction of ruining the rest of her evening, and, in fact, wouldn't waste another thought on her. Not while the forest beckoned. She turned away and picked up the road where it heaved itself up over the crag's edge.

A natural love for the woods meant she always had a ready escape from misery. Plus, it made a convenient excuse whenever her stepfather tried to keep her from vanishing for a couple of days. *You wouldn't understand, Harmon; it's an elf-thing.* The only reason she was even allowed such liberty was because she'd proven over and over she'd wander regardless of his wishes. That, and he knew she could handle herself. After all, she knew what was safe to eat, what to avoid. No one was more clever with a bow. And besides, the world was ultimately a benign and dull place (talking rocks aside).

The journey between StormPier and Ebon Wood was an hour's walk through empty, wind-swept plain. The village itself was remote and isolated—not so far from the mountainous crown of the world. That suited Katine; not too many people to get in her way. Apart from the fisher folk of StormPier and the occasional trader who thought he could take advantage of them, the surrounding land was desolate.

Her arrows rattled in their quiver. She was practically running, she was so eager. Under her breath, quite unconsciously, she hummed an eerie little tune. Unnoticed, the dried length of vine wrapped about her waist slowly grew vital and green.

Beyond the cliffs she came to the crossroads and took the southern turn. Had she gone straight, to the west, she'd have eventually come to the closest thing StormPier knew of companionship—the much-too-pleased-with-itself-for-a-frontier-town of Ease. As for

the turn disappearing into the north . . . well, it had always been something of a curiosity why those black, icy wastes should require a road.

The sun had finally sunk beneath the waves, leaving a fading, crimson memory. The lights in her hair were gathering fireflies. A walk in the dark alone didn't particularly bother Katine. Her eyes saw as clearly in night as day. In the dying light, there was no chance she'd encounter anything that might see her before she saw it. Her fingers flexed over the bow in her hand.

She had all the advantage she'd need.

Her rapid pace ensured it didn't take long for the black smear on the world's graying edge to eventually transform into Ebon Wood. The closeness of the thick, shadowy trees cheered her immediately, and she broke into a proper run. But as she drew near, something which had been prowling about the shadows in her head suddenly reflected in the firelight. She slowed to a walk and then stopped altogether just outside the leafy fringe.

Her eyes swept back and forth over the murky tree line, but what prickled her skin wasn't anything *seen*. It was *felt*. A sense. An impression. A spider tip-toeing up her spine. A cloud moving against the wind.

Katine rubbed at her neck, uneasy for the first time before the thick, black trees. The few people who lived around here, lived on the fringes of Ebon with reason. Wild beasts, skulking bandits, and vengeful faerie had all been blamed for random disappearances at one time or another. But what threatened others, never fazed her. Or hadn't before tonight, anyway. In all her time spent exploring those green depths, Katine had yet to encounter anything worse than the occasional faerie ring of circled toadstools.

But this new feeling unsettled her, uncovering alien thoughts like the strange, quivering jellies exposed along the shore when the sea sucked in its breath.

Should I go home?

It was then—before she could truly follow the path of her fears—that she noted the vines. Specifically, that she was covered with them. Small, arrowhead-leafed creepers had

sprung from the one about her waist and woven up her arms and down her legs like emerald yarn. The knitting was snug, clipped short at her wrists and heels, and didn't restrict her movement at all. Until now, she hadn't even noticed the growth. But then, this had been the custom ever since she'd first plucked the original from a tree and knotted it about herself nearly six years past.

The vines had never failed to impart their own particular sense of confidence and wellbeing. Being clad so . . . well, it was almost as though the wood itself recognized her as kindred or something. *Good evening, roving stalk. How tastes the earth and sun by the sea?*

On this night, it proved decisively assuring.

Warily moving beneath the dusky eaves of the wood, Katine felt her disquiet worsen. The air was tense and breathless—the air beneath a blanket where a huddled child out waited the terror in the dark.

She quickly and silently moved further in, preferring the depths of the forest to the shallows. The paths she avoided—partly because she didn't care to meet anyone (as if any normal person would be so foolish to wander the wood at this hour), and partly because she found them rude intrusions. The longer she walked, the closer the trees grew, eventually keeping even the ungainly moon from slopping its light over the brambly floor. This continued for some while, the forest growing ever more grudging to passage, until she finally arrived at a tall, impassible hedge.

The peculiar stillness of the wood was disrupted by the sound of flowing water. A small river serenely lay beside her. The song of the water did much to lighten Katine's heart. Swollen with importance, the river flowed unhindered beneath the low, entangled spears of the guardsmen trees.

Reasonably confident in her immediate safety and not wanting to wet her bowstring, the elf unshouldered her quiver and lay her bow beside it among the scrabbling roots near the water's edge.

The water was fiercely cold. She waded out until thigh deep, and then simply got it over with—swallowing air and sinking into the clutching chill. Beneath the surface, the way was strangled with fallen trees and engorged roots. She faced the drowned wind, and felt out her path, pulling herself over sodden wood that often broke in her hands. Nearly blind in the black water, she sensed rather than saw as she passed through an entwined frame of roots. The passage and her bursting lungs were her signal to rise.

Breaking the surface, Katine swept the river from her eyes. She was in the midst of a small lake. Freed of its leafy netting, the pale fish of the sky floated lazily in the water. The elf moved toward land. The shores were crowded with trees. Small, phosphorous mushrooms glowed in their pockets and clefts like ghostly blossoms. Their dappled glimmer sat upon the lake like lounging faerie.

It was said that where ever trees assembled—orchard, grove, weald, stand—each had its own Apple Tree Man: the eldest tree, the governor of the wood.

Ebon Wood had such a lord.

Thrust out on the lake by a pointed finger of earth was a towering white oak. Gnarled with countless years, the great, marked trunk and wide-spread branches were almost entirely adorned with glowing mushrooms, a grand festival pole hung with lanterns.

Katine's feet touched mud and she stood up in the waist-high water. The lake fell away from her as she approached the oak slowly, almost reverently. This was the choicest spot of the forest—of the world. Nothing of the day could spoil the tranquility here. Not even the general unrest of the wood. In this place, everything was precisely as it should be.

Except for the giant snake—that was new.

She might have walked right up to it unawares had the flexing of dark, immeasurable coils not snuffed the light from several mushrooms. Katine paused at the water's edge. Her respect for the natural world extended to all its creatures, but this serpent was considerably

larger than any she'd known or imagined. An extra helping of respect was always due to anything sized to swallow you.

The serpent slowly raised its massive head toward her, tongue questing in and out. "Hail, Bleeding Maid." The voice was a slow, insistent whisper.

Her heart went a little faster and she unconsciously took a step back. Where was the silly confidence that had led her to abandon her bow now? *Talking rocks and now talking snakes?* One was decidedly more alarming than the other.

"What do you mean, 'bleeding?'" Katine tried to sound indignant. "What are—"

"You bleed, elf-maid." The mushroom lanterns caught the unblinking eyes strangely. "If it iss not ssssoon sstemmed, you will die. Your kin will die. *All* will die."

"*Me?*" Katine shivered. "*I'm* going to die? What's that supposed to—"

"The vaultsss of the earth have been broken and their black fire releasssed," it continued. "It feedsss withhout ssslake. Itsss fare isss the young. It burnsssss for them. It *burnsssss*." The snake stirred, agitated. The cinder scales suddenly glowed with hot, flickering radiance. Katine stared as the serpent grew molten and actual flames erupted along its rippling length. A hissing, fiery chain enwrapped the oak. And then the tree itself was ablaze. A sigh of wind, and the flames brushed the branches of surrounding trees in shining paint. The water burned golden.

Breathing became painful. The heat made the air harsh and stifling, but Katine couldn't stir from her shock. *This . . . this isn't happening. This can't—*

An odd sensation suddenly crept over her and she looked down. The creepers wrapped around her began to smolder. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to scream.

The vines ignited.