

“Wait, guys!” Lorent called. Ufrasio turned back to face him with a pained look, but Malora kept walking to the park’s table. “Give him another chance, okay? Sure, he can’t throw a punch to save his life, but he’s frickin’ brilliant.” Lorent explained, gripping the quiver belt strap fastened across his chest.

“Look, Lorent, we’ve heard you out every time,” Ufrasio said. “We want a teammate who can hold their own in a fight.”

“Plus, I’m already the brains of the group. Are you looking to replace me?” the team leader shouted from the table. Her arms were crossed over her chest as she sat rigidly at the farthest end of the table’s bench. “He got the lowest marks at his combat assessments,” she continued. “We’re not some charity case! I’m starting to question if you’re taking this group seriously, Lorent.”

To that, his body stiffened, and Ufrasio shook his head. The three of them were at the top of their class, and their final assessment was to form a group and successfully carry out an A-ranked quest together. Their team, despite being the most successful, needed to have a fourth member for them to participate in the assessment. So, Lorent thought it’d be a great idea to bring on Veasna, his childhood friend and ancient history enthusiast, even if he wasn’t the best fighter.

“Look, either you tell him he’s out, or we’ll make him leave.”

“What do you mean, ‘make him leave’? You don’t think that him deciphering old languages and texts is something that will continue to separate our team from the rest?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty much.”

Malora and Ufrasio stated in unison. Lorent sighed and raked a hand through his hair. He knows he can’t change Malora’s mind once it’s made up, and Ufrasio has more muscle than brains, so of course, he’d agree with whatever she wanted to do.

How am I going to tell him?

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Veasna pushed his glasses higher on his nose, writing symbols he muttered from a leather-bound book in one of his notebooks. He turns to flip through the pages of

another book, stopping when he lands on an old alphabet. Just below what he wrote from the book, he scribbled letters from the alphabet that looked close to the symbols he'd written.

"Are you translating again?"

Veasna shouted, gripping the table awkwardly enough that nearly everything fell off the desk and scattered across the floor. He whipped his head around, and his widened eyes met the amused expression of his childhood friend.

"You gotta be more aware of your surroundings, V. What if I was here to kill you?" Lorent questioned, pulling seeds from a cloth bag to drop a fistful into his mouth.

"How long were you here?" Veasna asked, reaching down to pull the books and papers back on his wooden desk.

"A couple minutes," Lorent stated with a mouthful of seeds. Each loud crunch made Veasna slightly more embarrassed. "But listen," he said after swallowing, "I have some not-so-great news to tell you."

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"Why is he here?!" Malora barked.

Lorent scratched his forehead and squinted his eyes. "Uh, y'know for, um... His last training session!"

"Last?" Veasna questioned, turning from the other group members and the park's beautiful scenery to stare at Lorent.

Ufrasio turned from the fighting dummy, its burlap sack in shambles with bits of hay peeking out from the ripped fabric, and walked to stand beside Malora. She tucked her hair behind her ear with a sigh before turning to Veasna. "Lorent was supposed to tell you you're out of the group because you're not a good enough fighter."

Veasna's blood ran cold. He knew he couldn't keep up with them, but he was at the top of his class in everything else: history, science, math, and linguistics. Were they seriously kicking him out because he lacks one skill set? This was the final assessment before he'd become an official adventurer!

"I get that I can't fight, but we're all at the top of our classes in some way. How

would my skillset slow us down?"

"I'm already good at the things you're top at, and I'm *also* good at fighting," Malora explained. "There's no reason you can't be the same. I'm done wasting time talking about this. Leave now, or else."

"*Or else?* But I've been nothing but helpful to this team!" Veasna cried out. Malora screeched before telling Ufrasio to get him out of her sight. To this, he cracked his knuckles and charged at Veasna, who dodged and took off running. If it were anyone but Ufrasio coming at him, he probably would've stayed to talk things through.

"You're not worth the chase!" Malora shouted after him, an indirect order for Ufrasio to fall back. Lorent stood with them as he watched his friend bolt into a tree line.

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Veasna's legs carried him out of the park and into the forest, where he stopped at a tree whose roots were thicker than the tree's trunk. He wiped sweat and dirt from his face when he heard a whisper but couldn't understand what language it was in. He's intrigued by the whisper the wind carries and follows the sound to a river but doesn't see anyone nearby. He heard the whisper again but still didn't know what it said. "I don't understand...."

"Oh, child, what a grave mistake you've made."

Veasna looked around to see who spoke, but he saw no one. His stomach did a flip that nearly made him vomit. He's only read about spirits: He's never talked to someone who encountered one, let alone met one himself!

"You responded to my lure, so now you're trapped to do my bidding."

The way the spirit speaks rings a bell, especially after saying he's trapped for answering out loud to the whispers that brought him here. Veasna looked at his surroundings and soon recalled precisely where he was and to *whom* he spoke. "You cannot keep me captive. I know who you are and how to escape your lure."

"Mortals have said many things in hopes of freedom. You're broken-hearted and vulnerable, so you're no different from the others."

Veasna was indeed hurt by Lorent's lack of support and his teammate's betrayal,

but the matter at hand is more severe than any skirmish with Ufrasio. "You are Julmik, the Sinister River Spirit of Irusay."

There's a pause before the spirit continues. *"Hm, what an interesting human. You seem to have a capacity for knowledge and understanding that many greatly lack. Let's make a deal: I will give you the power you need to maneuver through the world."*

Veasna's eyes widen. Not only has he been captured by an ancient spirit, but said spirit now wants to partner with him. He's a scholar in every practice except combat, but his philosophy on violence is to uphold the moral of protecting himself and others. It could devastate the balance of the world if the spirit has other intentions with this deal, but such an opportunity would open a new perspective he's yet to explore. And, yet, who knows if the spirit will keep its promise.

"What is your proposal, Julmik?"

"You already speak to me so casually. I'll make a deal you cannot refuse. I'll lend you my power until you've reached your full potential in exchange for your knowledge of the ancient world after I've returned to the water."

"So you'll give me the strength I need at the cost of forgetting history itself?"

"Precisely."

He takes a moment to think before speaking again. "How about this... I'll give up my knowledge of only *your* history in exchange for your power. But you must never go astray, and, after you leave, I get to keep what strength I've gained that doesn't belong to you," Veasna countered. "That way, I know nothing of what could prevent your future entrapments, and I'm not weak after you've returned to river Irusay."

There was silence before the river's water rushed faster and harder as if the horses of hell pulled its current. *"I am pleased to have captured a mortal fearless enough to challenge me. You will go far, child."* The current calmed before a stream of water separated from the river and flows to pool at Veasna's feet. He jumped back when the water rushed under his pant leg to the nape of his neck. The stream flowed from the neckline of his shirt and cascaded down his back and around his shoulders. Surprisingly, his body and clothes weren't wet, and the water held its shape around him

like a cape.

"I accept your offer."

Alexis'

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