

Mariel climbed one of the great trees of Margden Woods, looking for a paladin of Ehlonna she knew. The last time she had seen Willem was when Ironforge was under siege.

This was not one of the trees of the sanctuary, but rather one of the village trees. More branches had grown since last she had walked the steps of the tree and there were more elves around than she could recall. The village seemed to be thriving.

In one of the craft areas on the larger plateaus, an elf was busy making a bow. Mariel stopped to look at the elf and appreciate the craftsmanship. It was obvious the elf knew a lot about how to craft a bow, and if she had to guess, the woman was an expert bowyer.

"May I disturb you?" Mariel asked and stepped onto the plateau. "My name is Mariel Morningsun, and I am fascinated by your craftsmanship. That is a wonderful bow you are making."

"I am Xantara," the elf said, and motioned for Mariel to sit. "That is a wonderful armour you are wearing."

Mariel looked down at her armour, which she wore every day even though it looked awfully out of place in an elven village.

"Dwarven-made," she said, and focused on the elf's hands again. The elf woman had long brown hair plaited down her back, and feathers were tucked in the braid playfully.

"Do you perhaps know where I can find Willem?" Mariel asked. "I am looking for him but have not found him."

"Yes, I know where you can find him," Xantara replied with a hint of a smile in her eyes.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me?" Mariel asked. "And then perhaps, if you have the time, I can tell you a little more about my armour."

Xantara nodded. "It is a fascinating culture, dwarf culture. And I have the time. Perhaps I can teach you something about this longbow."

The elf woman put the longbow down beside her, and studied Mariel for a moment.

"I am afraid I can't tell you how this armour was made," Mariel said. "But I can tell you about the dwarf who forged it. A while ago I was called from Margden Woods in service of my Goddess. I ended up in a group of adventurers who told me I needed to be better protected. The dwarf who convinced me is called Grimm Ironforge. The mithril was a gift of the Chief of Ironforge, a great dwarf."

"I know the Chief. His deeds are well-known to us all."

"I have had the honour to fight alongside him," Mariel said. "And this brings us to the reason I am looking for Willem. I would like to learn more about the art of war as the elves see it. So far, I've only trained with humans and dwarves. Perhaps there is also a time for learning the art of archery."

"Think on it," Xantara smiled. "It will be a powerful weapon if you use it well. You will be welcome to join me here if you have time, and I will tell you more about archery."

Mariel expressed her thanks, Xantara directed her to another plateau where Willem was training. This plateau was larger than where Xantara had been working, and Willem was not alone. His back was turned to Mariel, and he didn't see her. He was instructing a group of younger elves, nearing adolescence. When Mariel stopped at the edge of the plateau, slowly their faces turned to her, eyeing her curiously. In the end, everyone but Willem was looking at her, and he turned around. When he recognised her, he called her over. Mariel greeted Willem formally.

"Class, this is Mariel," Willem said to the younger elves. The class greeted Mariel formally, who returned the gesture.

"You needed me?" Willem asked her.

"I have recently arrived in Margden Woods and will only be here for a short time. I'd like to use that time well, and I was wondering if you could spare the time to give me some lessons in fighting with a sword."

Willem nodded, and gestured to the class. "Why don't you join us? We were just ready to start our practice on the forest floor."

At a gesture from Willem, the class sprang up, and they descended down the steps of the great tree to a practicing field. Mariel joined the students in greeting their master formally. The students took out their swords - all of them of elven design and none of them wood. Mariel unsheathed her own sword, solid steel that had been forged by Grimm.

Willem turned his back to the class and demonstrated a series of movements. Then he turned around and the students had to demonstrate if they understood the moves and could copy Willem with as much grace and control. Whenever their moves were lacking, Willem would demonstrate where there were gaps in their defense or how their arms and legs should have been positioned. He walked between the students, pointing these things out.

If Mariel could ever tell Grimm how much he could still learn from the elves, she would -- but she didn't think the dwarf would appreciate her saying so. The elves around her were at least as graceful as Willem, mimicking his moves seemingly without effort. Mariel joined them, and though she would be at least as effective as the other students in hitting the right points, she lacked the grace and finesse of their movements. She lacked the speed and with it the effectiveness of their skills. When Willem observed her movements, he had touched five points he could have hit her while she practiced.

There was still much to learn.

Mariel continued, determined to learn as much as she could in his classes. Again she tried, and again Willem pointed out the same points. He urged her to try again. This time, Mariel lost control of her sword, and with one flip of his, it soared out of her hands. He touched her breastplate in four places and then gave her a slight push on the inside of her leg. Mariel crashed down,



flat on her back. She nodded at Willem, showing that she understood his lesson, and she got to her feet quickly, retrieving her sword.

Soon, Willem divided the students into pairs. They would continue practicing against one another, and Mariel took a defensive stance to start with. She had managed to complete the movements to Willem's satisfaction, but she was still slower than the students and afraid to hurt the adolescent in front of her.

The young elf in front of her made a gracious movement, faster than she would have managed, and missed her utterly. Then he stepped back and motioned that it was her turn. Mariel tried to mimic his grace all the while keeping her blow in check. The boy parried, parried, and in the third strike she nicked his shoulder, but softly enough that it didn't draw blood. The boy stepped in, tried to hit her but she parried, and then he misstepped on a twig. He lost his balance, and fell face-first into the breastplate of her armour. He fell down on the forest floor, and Mariel checked his face for breaks but found none. He was fine, though unconscious.

Willem motioned for Mariel to step aside, and took the boy's place while he recuperated. Three times the paladin struck, and with soft 'pings' her armour reverberated from the light flicks of a wrist Willem inflicted on it. Mariel tried to copy him, focusing on speed, grace and effectiveness, but could not penetrate his defenses. Then Willem raised his sword, faking a blow to her right arm, but in stead swinging his elven longsword up over her head, pulling it down and then up into the inside of her upper thigh with one fluid motion.

Mariel acknowledged the hit with a nod of her head, ignoring his stern look that she should do better. She focused, trying to mimic his grace and speed, but missed him completely. Somehow the paladin managed to move his body away from where her blows would land, rendering her attack completely useless. As Mariel stepped back to await his attack in return, Willem motioned for her to come at him again. This time, her sword made a smooth curve and hit him, not exactly where she had planned to land her blow, partially because he turned away from it so it would not be a deadly blow if she had not pulled back on her strength. In her next attack, she tried to mimic his feint to the right, coming up and over with her sword to gore the inside of his thigh. This time, she drew blood, though it was a mere trickle.

"Are you alright?" Mariel asked.

"Well done. Pull back your blows a bit more, you don't want to hurt anyone here." Willem replied. "Stand ready."

Mariel stood in a defensive position again. Willem's next attack was faster than she would have deemed possible. His sword came at a thrust, nearly scratching her armour right over her heart, then pulled back for an attack on her left side. Instead of striking there, he slapped down on her foot with the flat of his blade, causing her to become unbalanced for a moment. Lightning fast he drew his sword back, and before she could recover he hooked a foot behind her other leg and pulled it out from under her. Her balance was completely gone, and she fell flat on her back. Bruises welled up on the skin beneath her armour. She managed to push off and roll over one shoulder, moving away from the spot where she fell. That way, an overhead blow would not hit her, and she scrambled to her feet quickly. It was nowhere near gracious, but it did the job.

They continued. He deflected many of her blows, though some of them landed on him. Then Willem struck her sword out of her hand and knocked her feet out from under her. Mariel turned, so she would not fall on her side but on her back. A swooshing sound told her his sword followed her down, and she rolled to avoid it, kicking at his legs so he would be forced to step back. Surprised at her defiance she caught him off guard. Mariel rolled further, grabbing her sword from the forest floor as she did. She didn't manage to roll on into a crouch, so slowly, keeping her eyes on him, she stood up. If she had wanted him dead she could have attacked him while he was distracted, but this was just a mock battle.

When the training was over, Mariel had been hit a couple of more times than any of the students, but she had managed to swipe Willem off his feet once, and that was no mean feat either. The class bowed to their master when he dismissed them, and put the swords away. When Mariel turned around, she found the young adolescent who had fallen face-first into her armour in front of her. He was looking up at her, though she was not very large for an elf.

"How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?" she asked the boy. He shook his head that it didn't, but the large red bump on his forehead told the truth. He would be feeling the bump for several more days. Though it would be a lesson for him to watch his footing, his being unconscious taught the same lesson.

"Will you allow me to heal you?" Mariel asked, and the boy nodded this time. She put her hands on his face and mumbled one of her healing spells. The bruise faded, cured by her spell, and the boy grinned. He shook her hand, and stepped back a few paces, before turning around and running off at great speed. She watched him go with a smile on her face.

They continued training for the next few days. Mariel's time at the village was well-spent. In the morning she would say her prayers when the sun came up over the great trees. She would work on the garden of the sanctuary until it was time to go to the class of Willem, which was every other day. Each day, she wore her armour, and each time she had to work very hard to stay apace with the other students. They had years of experience in the style and though Mariel had the practical experience of battle, she had to learn a whole new style. Willem encouraged her to keep training even if there were no elves around to train with, and spoke of balance and timed exercises she could do alone. He also admonished her if she made mistakes, pointing them out with his scabbarded sword, or striking a blow to teach her a hard lesson when her mistakes were grave.

At night, she relished in the peace of the sanctuary. Spring was truly on its way, the first budding leaves enhanced by Ehlonna's blessing. It was quiet in the dark evenings at Margden Woods. There was no Melvin tossing pancakes, no Grimm training in the garden, and no Leona -- but she already missed Sir Jean. She had grown accustomed to his calming presence at the end of each

day, and she would have to admit that she often sought refuge in his arms. For an elf, this was extraordinary, for they usually take their sweet time deciding on a partner, taking years to grow close to one another before finally deciding to take the first step towards becoming pregnant. Mariel did not regret the decisions she made in the slightest and she was content with her chosen path. She had moved the relationship forward at an amazing pace for an elf, but her decisions were sound and well-considered, and she did not regret them.

One morning as she was doing Ehlonna's work in the sanctuary as though she had never left, she met Sermon amidst the flowerbeds. Mariel had practiced the moves Willem had taught her that morning, and had changed into her white prayer robe to be closer to nature. Sermon greeted her with a smile, and she greeted him formally in return.

"It feels good to be back here." Mariel sighed. "In some ways it is like I never left. And in some ways I've changed so much that I will always know I can't stay here."

"That is why it's so important that you have come. You should take this time and come back to yourself, be at peace. Find your innermost essence and let it drive you." Sermon sighed. "You can use the peace the Sanctuary will give you, my child."

"Is there anything else I can do? I know I am doing Ehlonna's work, but if there is anything else I can help with, I will gladly lend a hand."

"Be at peace. That is important too."

Mariel nodded, glancing over the garden she had just tended. The first spring flowers were budding, and some of the shrubs had a green sheen over their branches, the first promise of the new leaves. "I am. And I also wish to do more."

Sermon looked to the south. "There is a dark place in Margden Woods where something is not right. Perhaps it is the Gnolls who have returned, though their tracks speak of less organization than they displayed ever before."

Mariel accepted the mission, and spoke shortly about what tracks the rangers had found before donning her armour and sword. She hadn't taken her rings off, but now she took along wands and scrolls along as well as her sword. Just in case.

She walked south for two miles. Para was stabled safely at Sir Jean's house, and she had not expected to need her faithful horse. The journey to Margden Woods would have taken two weeks on horseback, something Melvin and his skills cut down to the blink of an eye. The further she got from the sanctuary, the sicker the forest became. It was a gradual change, but when Mariel was close to the place Sermon had described, the forest looked grey, like ash from a fireplace. There where no birds she could hear, and when she focused a bit more she found that there were no animals around at all. They had deserted this place, just like the life of the forest seemed to be missing.

Mariel came to a small pond and squatted down to look at the water. Though algae thrived, there was hardly a sign of fish or other animals around. The silence was eerie, the clanking and creaking of her armour deafening in the silence.

'Something is not right here.' The thought came to her unbidden. Though she had tried to bless the forest so it would recuperate more swiftly, the thought provoked in her an irrestable urge to flee. Slowly, she retreated from the pond, and turned away to go back to Margden Woods. It would be smarter to go back, get someone to watch her back and then try again. It would be folly to do this job alone. But then a soft sob reached her ears. It wasn't very loud, but in the silence of the forest she could hear it clearly. Mariel turned back, and her eyes spotted a bare leg beneath the undergrowth. She approached it, and found a child, a young elf girl who was sobbing on the forest floor.

"Are you hurt?" Mariel asked the child, and reached out her hand to it. "Don't be afraid."

The moment she touched the child, the image of the child rippled. Her hand seemed to go through the arm of the young girl, and then touched real skin which was green. The reason her hand seemed to pass through the child's arm was because the creature that had caused the image was much more slender and its arms were twig-like. Its hands flailed at Mariel, but their fingers found no purchase on the mithril armour. Mariel pulled her arm back and recoiled, and then tried to stand up. The creature took a hold of her arm before she could do so, and her knees buckled. She suddenly felt very weak for no reason, and she realized the creature had cast a spell on her. She could see it a little better now, and realized that it was a creature she knew to be a green hag. Mariel took comfort in the fact that she had identified her attacker, and a list of things they were susceptible to came to mind. Her arms felt weary, dragged down by her armour, and trying to fight with her sword would be a bad idea. Instead, she groped for a scroll from her scrollcase, unrolling a scroll of Sunbeam and reading it aloud. When she had finished reading the scroll, the parchment crumbled to dust and sunbeams shot from her hands at the green hag. They hit the hag, and the creature recoiled in turn, letting go of Mariel's arm. Though her arms felt weak, she unsheathed her sword. Another beam shot from her left hand and she followed it up with her sword, hitting the hag over its torso. Though the blow cut it, the hag was still standing. It groped for Mariel's arms again, but missed. A lumbering sound behind her made her look over her shoulder and she blanched as she saw two ogres moving towards her. She was rather preoccupied with the green hag though, and used a Summon Monster spell to ask a celestial gryphon for help. Then she finished off the green hag with two last sunbeams and turned to face the ogres.

Her celestial gryphon kept one of the ogres busy, while Mariel stood ready for the second. She knew ogres could do heavy damage, but their aim was not always true. She had little time to contemplate ways to counter their attacks though, because the ogre came charging at her at full speed. She managed to cast a Magic Vestment on herself to increase the strength of her armour, and then cast a Righteous Might to strengthen herself. The Righteous Might spell increased both her size as well as her strength and proved to be very useful. The green hag had somehow drained her muscles of their strength, but that strength



returned with the spell, and though the effect of the spell would wear off soon enough. She hoped she would be done with her enemies by the time the it did.

The ogre covered the distance between them fast enough to strike at her with its club right after she was done casting her second spell. The wood and nails tore over the mithril of her armour and hurt her, bruises forming on her side. Mariel took her revenge on him though, striking him across the chest in turn, her sword reaping through flesh and muscle, but not so deep that the ogre could not heft his club anymore. She found out first-hand soon enough. The ogre lifted his club over his head and brought it down on her chest hard. Her entire chest, from shoulder to kidney, felt like it would be purple for days, and it knocked the wind out of her. Mariel gasped for air, and clutched her side. From her desperation came determination, and she focused. Then she chanted an incantation, casting Holy Smite on both the ogres. For a moment, they seemed to glow, and then they burst into pieces like a porcelain cup that was dropped on a stone floor.

Mariel thanked her celestial gryphon for his help, but the bird did not seem to pay attention to her, glaring determinately at a fallen tree trunk. Mariel followed his gaze, and winced as she saw another ogre come out of his hiding place. Quickly she mumbled a healing spell, taking care of some of her bruised ribs. The ogre charged at her, and slammed his club into her with great force. It felt like he ignored her armour and tried to beat through it at her ribcage, though she knew that was not the case. One or two of her ribs must have been broken, but she ignored the pain for now. She was infuriated, and took out one of her scrolls. It was thrust in the back of her scrollcase, because she knew first-hand what that spell could do. It was a branch of divine magic she had little affinity with, and she would not willingly use it except in special circumstances. The last time she had used this kind of spell on an enemy, she had had a flashback to her vision, and phantom pain had blossomed and resolved itself in a splitting headache because of it. On the other hand, she was extremely mad at this ogre, and would like to finish him off straight away. How dare he defile Ehlonna's forests? How dare he attack a loyal servant of Ehlonna! He would pay for his crimes against Her. And she, Mariel, would be the tool of Ehlonna's wrath. Mariel's hand flashed out at the ogre's exposed flesh and she read the scroll of Harm before it could react. When she was done with it and the parchment crumbled to dust, the ogre swayed on its feet and fell, with an echoing crash, down to the forest floor.

It was quite dead, but she checked nonetheless, and then decapitated the brute, ignoring her stinging ribs. She thanked her celestial gryphon again for his help, and it returned to its native plane. She had not felt anything like phantom pain, and there had been no flashback to her vision. In fact, it felt good to kill the ogre in that way after he had done such critical damage to her. It felt like a relief.

After healing herself, Mariel turned her attention to the forest. She used the power Ehlonna had given her for that which she had done since childhood: encouraging nature to grow. It was the thing to do, after ridding the forest of its foes. When she could do no more, she returned to Margden Woods again. She sought out the village rangers, who guarded the village from intruders, to tell them about the corpses of the ogres and the hag.

"We know," the elf opposite told her. "We kept an eye on you."

Mariel nodded, comforted in the fact that had things gone wrong, the rangers would have stepped in to help her. 'Grimm would have been mad.' Mariel thought, 'scolded them for not helping him out. I am just assured by their unseen presence.' She thanked the ranger, and walked back to the Sanctuary, where she cleaned her sword and armour of the ogre blood.

So it was that she had gained another task during her stay there. She returned to the patch of forest to help it grow back to its former health. Slowly the changes took effects, and Mariel couldn't help but smile as she heard the first lark singing a tune in the tree above her.

In her training sessions with Willem she was paired up with the same young elf every time, and twice he had managed to land critical blows on her, despite her wearing armour. Once, she had been tossed flat on her back, his elven sword quivering an inch from her neck. She had not been conscious to praise her luck that he had managed to pull the blow back instead of severing her head from her torso, and she had been brought to by Willem. The training sessions were hard, but she refused to take off her armour to learn the new style - she would need to fight in it again soon enough. Finding the balance between being cautious and trying too hard to get the moves right was difficult, but slowly she made progress.

She also visited Xantara again on the days that she didn't have training sessions with Willem's class. The woman smiled at her when Mariel stood at the edge of the plateau. She had taken her helmet off, and approached Xantara as she called her over. They spoke of archery and how elves viewed it as an art.

"You must be one with your bow, and return to the essence of the art. Be the arrow. I will show you." Xantara said, summarizing. She took the bow from her lap and stood up, guiding Mariel down the steps of the great tree to another practicing field. This particular field had archery targets at the end, and quivers of longbow arrows were available for any and all who would want to practice. A rangemaster kept an eye on when it was safe to retrieve any arrows, and nodded politely at Mariel. She was glad not to have brought her own bow, something Grimm once salvaged for her from a tribe of hobgoblins. The hideous, badly-kept wood she had tried to hide by weaving strips of spun wool around the bow, but the result was laughable. She felt that all the elves in Margden Woods would have laughed at her for shooting with it.

Xantara loosed two arrows in close succession, focusing on the target and closing her eyes for a moment just before releasing the bowstring. Then she handed the bow to Mariel. She admired the bow first, knowing it was made by Xantara and admiring

the craftsmanship. Then she took the arrow the other elf handed her and loosed it at the target. She didn't focus overly much, and she didn't administer any of the tricks Xantara had told her about in the past hour. The arrow hit the target, quivering on one of the outer rings. Xantara handed her a next arrow, and this arrow too stuck in the target in on of the outer rings, on the opposite side of the bullseye this time.

"Again. Remember what I told you. Feel the arrow, be one with your bow."

Though she didn't completely comprehend what Xantara meant, Mariel tried. A calm feeling washed over her and she loosed the arrow. "Better." Xantara said.

Mariel tried to recall the feeling of calm she had when she was meditating, letting go of any stress she felt. The arrow loosed, and her aim improved. Xantara encouraged her to calm her emotions, guiding her through the steps of meditation. It was the very first time Mariel used meditation techniques in archery, and she found the calming voice of Xantara a comfort. At some point, she heard the voice of Xantara float through her meditation. "Well done." It was a whisper.

Mariel noticed that her eyes had closed, and then she realized that she had loosed the arrow in her trance. When she looked at the target, her arrow was still trembling slightly where it had split one of Xantara's arrows.

"Use this. Hold on to this knowledge, and practice." Xantara smiled at her. Mariel smiled back in earnest, and reverently held the bow in front of her to give it back to Xantara.

"You may keep the bow to remind you of your lessons." Xantara said. "The bow chooses its master, and this one is for you."

"This is really for me?" Mariel asked incredulously. "What did I do to deserve such a gift?"

"You show the will and the determination to learn. May it serve you well, Mariel Morningsun."

"I have been away from elves too long." Mariel sighed, dropping her gaze so the tears in her eyes would not show. She was deeply moved by the gesture.

"Return to your roots, Mariel. Never forget where you came from."

One day she was training with Xantara when voices disturbed her concentration. Mariel put down the bow and glanced over to where the voices were coming from. In the middle of the clearing stood a dwarf, dressed in platemail with the crest of Ironforge on his breastplate. He was received by a clerk of the elven council, and the two spoke briefly. The dwarf gestured heavily and raised his voice a couple of times, though the elf he was speaking with remained polite and composed. Fifteen minutes later, the dwarf left again, rangers accompanying him to the edge of the village.

Mariel packed up her things, apologizing to Xantara. "I can not concentrate today, because of this messenger. I should find out what the message from Ironforge was. The dwarf seemed excited. I am sorry to cut our training short."

Mariel went to the sanctuary, and stored her bow and quiver. It was quiet there and Sermon was nowhere to be found. This suited her fine, and she sat down under a tree to meditate. Many thoughts crossed her mind before she could calm her nerves. She thought mostly of what that dwarf had come to tell the council, but she also thought about her friends, Sir Jean foremost, closely followed by Para. It had been four weeks since last she saw them, and the arrival of this messenger did not bode well for their peace.

When she had calmed herself sufficiently, she got up and started to train with her sword. Her composure had returned and the meditation seemed to have a positive effect on her control of the weapon. Soon enough though, she was distracted again when Sermon entered the sanctuary. There was a frown on his face, and he was more agitated than usual. Mariel put her sword away and walked over to him.

"What news, father?" she asked.

"Ironforge has sent a messenger because there is trouble brewing again. It seems that a town called Southshire has been attacked. A small search party led by general Grimm has been dispatched, but Ironforge calls for our aid. The council is in session now, deciding whether we can send aid."

"The council is wise." Mariel said. "They will make the right decision. You should not worry overmuch."

"Sir Jean is with that group too." Sermon said. "And Melvin, and another."

"I did not expect anything else. I think Leona is with them also." Mariel said.

"Do you not want to join them?"

"Yes. But I think they will come for me if they need me. They would not call me away unless there was need, and it could be that this is all about nothing."

"They should arrive in Southshire tomorrow, according to the messenger." Sermon said. "If they decide they do need your help, they will come for you no sooner, I think."

Mariel nodded. "I shall prepare nonetheless."

"You should say goodbye to the elves here. If Melvin comes for you there will be no time to say goodbye."

Mariel visited Xantara and Willem in turn, explaining to both of them that the situation in Ironforge could mean she would be recalled early. She thanked them both profusely for their guidance, patience and help, and expressed her desire to visit them again when time allowed. Lastly, she looked for the boy she had sparred against to say goodbye to as well. She didn't explain everything to him but just said that she would have to leave soon, and that she would like to train with him again. Finally she visited the area of forest where she had spent many hours trying to coax life back into the drained forest. It looked better, the ash-grey colour replaced by the vibrant green of spring. She could not resist a final blessing.

She packed her things after that, making sure all wands and scrolls were tucked in place. The potions were safe in her rucksack,



along with a wand of healing.

The next morning she prayed to her Goddess. "I have learned so much in my time in Margden Woods, and one of them is how I can serve You better. It has brought me close again to what I used to do for You, my Lady, and it was good. Though I am sad to leave this time behind, I hope I have served You well, and I hope You will stay with me as I set out to fight against those who oppose all that You stand for. Please stay with my friends until I am with them again, and be with us in our hour of need."