

ONE



FROM a young age, Ora Widogast dreamed of a land that stretched to a star-bright horizon. Her body knew the dry air, wind, and moonlight. These elements came to her as she slept. And the crevices in the land, the hidden spaces, those came to her as well. It was a slumbering microcosm all her own. When she awoke, the dream lingered, but she never mentioned the desert to anyone. It was too quiet and strange to dwell on for long.

Ora grew up in Fel, a small trade village in the country of Nor. There, rain came across the ocean in shining, silver clouds. From atop the basalt cliffs, she felt as though she could reach up and brush her fingers through the bellies of storms. She liked the sensation of being small under those heavy skies, but she loved the forests more, even if her mother told her to stay away from the dark old growth.

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The Hy Borea Forest was not a place for girls, her mother would tell her. The meandering trails were for men like her brother Hademar, who hunted for fine furs to trade in Port Besil. Fur from the Hy Borea was famous for being thicker and softer, whether it be fox, beaver, or rabbit. In the evenings, the men of Fel would gather in Mathilde's inn to brag about their hunts. The colorful stories enthralled Ora, who wanted nothing more in all the world than to have exciting tales of her own.

If only her mother would leave her be. Ora tired of chores in seconds. Dusting seemed pointless if dust would settle again within the hour. Why sweep if Hademar would arrive with mud on his boots later that afternoon? And cooking. She hated cooking. No matter how often her mother showed her how to make burberry pie or rabbit stew, she would add too much salt or leave the pot over the fire for far too long.

As often as she could, Ora would sneak away from chores to meet Hademar behind the shrine house. They would leave an offering of salt, bread, or fresh flowers for Farig, their silent god, and she would follow her brother into the woods. She adored him for these small acts of disobedience. Still, he never took her hunting. He only showed her beauty—the tumbling creeks, the boulder fields, the waterfalls, the curtains of moss glistening with dew.

Then, they would return. Her mother would give them a stern look, but Hademar was not a child anymore. He would laugh and say they had not gone far, though they had. That they had not strayed from trails, though they always did. If her mother began to argue, he

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would give her a giant hug and tell her not to worry. She always worried.

They lived in a cabin beneath a hemlock pine. Like all the other buildings in Fel, their home was made from weathered, gray cedar. Moss grew on the roof, and pine boughs scraped the windows when the wind picked up. The wind blew more often than not. On stormy winter days, Ora would run down the street to pester her Uncle Lupin for stories.

When he wasn't drinking at Mathilde's inn, he liked to watch the rain blow by as he smoked a pipe on his porch. Ora often showed up soaked and grinning with her frizzy black curls matted to her head. Half the time, she left her shoes at home and had smudges of mud on her face.

The day before she turned seventeen, she had something other than stories to ask for. "Uncle Lupin!" she said as she leapt past the stairs and onto the porch. She had been running. Red blossomed on her cheeks, and her chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. "Can I ask a favor?"

"It's freezing cold. What are you doing in the rain?" he grumbled, ignoring her question. "Inside with you."

She did not wait for him to stand up but burst through his front door to sit on the hearth. As he came inside after her, she placed another log onto the dwindling fire. Lupin was a giant of a man, and the floorboards creaked under his heavy footsteps.

"Tomorrow is the Tabas hunt *and* my birthday," she said.

"I know it."

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“Well?” She had been impatient for her seventeenth birthday. Among the Nors, turning seventeen meant she would no longer be viewed as a child. At last, she would have the freedom to do as she pleased.

Lupin sat down at his big wooden table to tap out his pipe. The knock of it against the wood was a familiar, cozy sound to Ora. Her uncle’s cabin housed a permanent, herbal cloud. “I spoke to your ma if that’s what you’ve come to ask for.”

“It is.” She sat shivering beside the fire. Flames glittered in her black eyes, and she looked devilish as ever. “What did she say?”

“She said it’s up to your brother.”

This made her smile. She had spoken to Hademar the night before.

“She also said you’d be the death of her if you carry on like this. Gives her such a fright, you going into the woods.” Lupin pressed more mageweeds into his pipe as he spoke, then nursed a flame with a lighting taper.

Ora took up the fire iron and dug at the white coals beneath the burning logs. “*Everything* I do frightens her,” she said. Then, with a sly glance at her uncle, she added, “Hademar said I could go with him.”

“Hm.” Lupin puffed at his pipe. Smoke soon filled the one-room cabin along with the sharp, crisp smell of mageweeds. “Ora, get that box. Bring it here.” He pointed with the stem of his pipe at a wooden box on the mantle.

She pulled it down straight away. It was about as long as her arm and had a satisfying weight. Though tempted to open the box

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herself, she placed it in front of her uncle. Setting aside the pipe, he lifted the copper latch and then the lid to reveal a polished silver short sword nestled against dark blue velvet. The hilt was made of ruddy leather, and silver wolves danced on the guard. Her eyes lit up as Lupin took it from the box. The sword appeared small in his giant hand.

“An early gift for your birthday.” He turned it so the blade rested in his palms and held it out to her. “It’s silver.”

Speechless but beaming, she took the hilt in her hand. She raised the blade so the firelight would reflect in the polished silver. “Thank you, Uncle Lupin. It’s beautiful.”

“I had a sheath and belt made for it too. It will be finished today.”

She placed the sword back in the box and flung her arms around him. He patted her back.

“Don’t tell your ma,” he said as she pulled away.

“Never.” She winked. For years, she had practiced the sword with her uncle. Lupin would meet her in a hidden cove when the tide was out. There, they would spar on the hard sand with dulled blades. It was one of her dearest secrets and painstakingly orchestrated so that neither Hademar nor her mother knew.

“If you are to go with your brother tomorrow, I want you to take it along. Should you run into any fae, the silver will—”

“I know, I know.”

“Didn’t your ma teach you not to interrupt?”

“She tried,” she said with a laugh, then added an apology.

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Before he could give her a playful clout over the head, she ducked away and sat down across from him. She knew he didn't mind. Most of the folks in Fel thought Lupin a touch mad for his stories about the fae, but Ora loved to listen to his tales. For that reason, he let her get away with almost anything.

Lupin coaxed the pipe back to life with a few long drags of air. He spoke around curls of smoke. "Listen, child, even a small cut from silver is poison to the fae. If it does not kill them, it will fester and drain their magic. Do not forget this."

"Do you think we'll cross paths with the fae?" she asked, almost hopeful. The idea of magic had long fascinated her.

"You shouldn't wish for it. Haven't you listened to your old uncle all these years?" His brow wrinkled. "The fae are cruel beings. Best keep your wits about you. And, above all else, do not speak your true name."

"Yes, Uncle Lupin." But her voice sounded distant. She sat staring out the window as if being inside felt the same as being in a cage. "I don't think it will be raining tomorrow."

"And what makes you say that?"

Ora's dark eyes returned to him, and she wore a crooked smile. "It's my birthday. Why should it be raining?"

He laughed. "You little imp. Why shouldn't it?"

"It's never rained on my birthday."

He stroked his scraggly beard, thinking back. "That may be so."

There came a knock at the door, and Lupin snapped the box shut. Ora sighed. "That would be Hademar," she said.

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Her brother swung the door open without waiting for an answer. “I thought you’d be here,” he said as he stepped into the warmth. He was seven years older and carried himself with a quiet confidence. Ever since he grew a beard, Ora thought he looked like their uncle, though leaner and without the gray peppering Lupin’s dark hair.

“I’m glad you came. Your sister here was starting to be a pest,” said Lupin.

Ora pinched his arm as she passed by. “*He* was the one being a pest.”

“I happen to know you’re both rotten,” said Hademar with a laugh. “Come on, Ora. Supper has been ready for a while.” He tossed a coat to her. She had left it hanging by the door at home. It was lined with soft brown rabbit fur and staved off even the coldest of winds.

They said their goodbyes to Lupin and hurried through the rain together. On the porch, they took off their soaked shoes. As Ora unfastened her laces, Hademar spoke in a low voice. “Ma doesn’t want you to come along.”

“Of course she doesn’t.”

“Hear her out.”

“I thought this was settled.”

“She’s more upset than usual.”

“Fine. I’ll hear her out, but it doesn’t change anything,” she said. When he did not meet her firm gaze, she nudged his arm. “Hademar?”

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Rather than answer, he jerked his head toward the door. “Let’s get inside where it’s warm.”

They carried their shoes to the hearth to dry. The savory scent of bone broth filled their noses. Their mother sat at the table, stirring her soup with a soggy chunk of bread. After they hung up their coats, they joined her. Ora could see the worry working at her mother’s features.

“Your uncle spoke to me this morning,” said Nel without looking up from her soup. Lamplight flickered against her pale face and deepened the shadows beneath her eyes. She looked more tired than usual, small and worn. Over the past year, her hair had become more gray than black, and new wrinkles creased her brow.

The two siblings stole a quick glance between each other. “He told me he did,” said Ora.

Her mother let the bread sink into the broth and placed her shaking hands against the table. The dread in her eyes made Ora feel a pang of guilt, but she would not yield to her mother’s fears. When the silence became too heavy, she reached across the table and touched her hand. “Ma, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Nel took a deep breath. “If I asked you to stay home tomorrow, would you?”

She opened her mouth, ready to lie, but she shook her head instead. All her life, she had watched as Hademar returned home in the company of proud and boisterous men. She admired—even envied—their success. Their hunts were the lifeblood of Fel, the reason their small village thrived. Ora felt certain that she was meant

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for something greater than domesticity, and she daydreamed of being the first huntress to conquer the beasts of the Hy Borea.

“I’m going with Hademar on the Tabas hunt. I’ve always wanted to go, and he said he would take me,” she said, firm and final in her words. Her ma’s eyes fluttered closed for a heartbeat. Ora’s headstrong manner was nothing new in their household and often the source of conflict between the two Widogast women.

“I know I can’t make you do anything, Ora. I never have been able to. But if you could, just this once ...” Nel took hold of her hand with a tight grip, her voice rising with a strained pitch. “If I must beg it of you, I will.”

Ora turned to her brother, not knowing what to say. Their mother had always been nervous about her venturing into the forest, but this was different. She was almost hysterical.

“Perhaps you could come along next year,” Hademar said.

“What?” She pulled her hand away from her mother’s and glowered. “You told me you’d take me along *this* year. You promised.”

“*Ora.*” He gave her a meaningful look, but she would not have it.

“This is ridiculous. I will be seventeen tomorrow.” She got to her feet. “Why should I have to wait another year?”

Whatever the reason, her mother seemed incapable of saying more. She pressed her lips together, and tears filled her eyes. When she opened her mouth to speak, she only succeeded in producing a miserable moan before sinking her head into her hands.

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“*Hademar*,” Ora said, hoping he would speak reason, but he only shook his head. Seething, she glared down at her mother and said between clenched teeth, “I am not a child. I will do as I please.”

Though Ora immediately regretted her harsh words, she could not bring herself to apologize. Instead, she stormed out of the house barefooted. By the time *Hademar* reached the door, she was halfway to *Lupin*’s front porch.

That night, Ora slept on a bed of furs before her uncle’s fire. *Hademar* did not bother trying to coax her into coming home. After all, she was only a few doors down. As for *Lupin*, he returned with the sheath for her sword to find her feeding his fire and scowling. When she told him what happened, he pulled a quilt from a cedar chest and tossed it to her.

“Why is she afraid of everything?” Ora said as she unfurled the quilt. “*Hademar* has been on many hunts. He’s returned safe every time.”

“Don’t be hard on your ma. She does not have the same wildness of being that you possess. I’m afraid you got that from my side of the family.” The fondness in *Lupin*’s voice quelled her anger, and she settled into the quilt.

Still, her mother’s trepidation over the hunt left her perplexed. She lay awake, staring into the flames for a long time and trying to discern what made her mother worry. *Lupin*, sensing that she could not sleep, cleared his throat. He had yet to go to bed himself and sat

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smoking his pipe at the table as he read a battered old book on nautical astronomy. He had never been a sailor himself. The guide had come into his possession in Port Besil, after winning a game of traveler on the docks. Ora had been with him and suggested the book when his opponent turned out to be broke.

“You won’t be sneaking off tomorrow, will you?” Lupin asked.

She could not stop herself from smiling, so she remained facing the flames when she answered. “It wouldn’t be sneaking off if I told you, would it?”

“I suppose not. Your ma ever tell you why she’s afraid of the Hy Borea?”

This piqued her curiosity enough to get her to roll over and face him. She had few meaningful conversations with her mother. They quarreled too much, and Ora weaseled her way out of the house as often as possible. “She’s never said a word.”

“Hm. No surprise there.”

“Then you should tell me.”

“Seeing as you come of age tomorrow, I think I might, but promise me you won’t breathe a word of it to your ma.”

By then, she was sitting up. The quilt fell from her shoulders. “I promise I won’t.”

“Very well.” He set his book aside and blew out a small cloud of smoke that swirled above his head. “It happened on a moonlit night before you were born. Your father had been ill with fever for days, and your mother refused to leave his side. Imagine my surprise when I woke up to a knock and discovered him on my porch. He was bent over—” Lupin hunched his back and held the bowl of his

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smoldering pipe like the knob of a walking stick. “Couldn’t hold himself up. I helped him inside and asked what in Farig’s name had brought him to my door. You know what he said?”

“What?” Ora asked, her brow knitted with worry.

“He said your ma was missing. She got up and walked out the door, left it open. No explanation. No warning. She just ... vanished.” He spread his hands wide. The pipe wobbled in the crook between his thumb and forefinger. “Now, you know as well as I that your ma isn’t one for midnight walks. Remember that hound I had for most of your childhood?”

Ora nodded. “Thrush?”

“That’s the one. Well, I took her with me to search. We went up and down every street in Fel. No trace of your Ma. Thrush couldn’t pick up her scent either. I roused every able-bodied man next. We spread out. Sent some down to the beach. The rest of us, we searched the forest.

“For three days, we looked. Your brother cared for your pa with Mathilde’s help. Losing your ma only made him sicker. Mathilde said he wouldn’t stop calling for her. He wouldn’t eat or drink. We all began to fear that he would pass before we could find her or that she would never be found at all. Every night I prayed to Farig to protect her, to save Hagen.

“That third day, I must have walked from dawn ‘til dusk through the woods. I could hardly lift my feet anymore. We were losing hope. I remember Mathilde brought me dinner that night, and while I was eating on the porch, I saw something move at the edge of the woods.”

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“Ma?” said Ora, her voice soft.

Lupin grimaced as if the memory pained him. “Yes, child. Your ma. She stood there in the ferns, naked as the day she was born. Once we got her cleaned up and warm, we tried to ask what happened. But she couldn’t bring herself to say. To this day, she hasn’t spoken a word of it.”

Ora shivered. “What do you think happened?”

“Hard to say. But I’ll tell you one thing; I feared the fae had something to do with your birth at first. She learned she was with child not long after that. But the second I saw you, I knew you were Nel and Hagen’s daughter. You look just like them.”

Doubt struck her. “What if I’m a changeling?”

“No! Changelings are ghastly things,” he said, but he raised a brow at the possibility. “Then again, you are an ugly little sprite, aren’t you?”

She stuck out her tongue. “Not as ugly as you are.”

“Must run in the family.” He chuckled and stamped out his pipe. “Alright, alright. Your old uncle is tired at last, and you best get some sleep yourself.”

As Ora lay back down, she wondered what had drawn her mother into the woods. She could not imagine her mother rising from bed only to roam naked through the Hy Borea for days on end. The impossibility of it distracted her from other thoughts, and she soon fell asleep with the warmth of the fire against her cheeks.

That night, she wandered the dark land of her dreams, feeling the flat earth firm beneath her feet. But a voice broke through the quietude she had grown accustomed to, calling out a name she did

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not recognize. The voice made Ora tremble because it felt foreign, like someone had crept into her sleeping world. When she turned, she expected to see nothing but empty land. Instead, she saw the stark silhouette of a cliff elk on the horizon. It stood unmoving, a sentinel against the stars.