



REN VS. THE WILD

A Shielded Short Story

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Two years before the events of Shielded

“**P**RINCE ATHÁREN, MIND the mud,” Master Hafa said from where he rode just behind me. He coughed and brushed splatters from his cloak and face.

I pursed my lips to keep from grinning. “Sorry! Must not have seen that puddle.” I made a show of guiding my horse, Nótt, around the rest of what was nearly a lake in the middle of the road.

Next to me, Cris snorted. He’d seen me steer Nótt into the puddle. My father almost hadn’t let my best friend come on the journey, but the groveling was worth it if it meant I’d have someone to talk to as we rode south through Hálendi into Turia.

Hafa got that look—similar to the one my father got when he thought I wasn’t acting enough like a king. But at least he didn’t say anything in front of everyone else.

My father had lectured me for hours every day leading up to my departure from Hálenborg—sometimes in company, sometimes in private. *Be more responsible. Be the king your people need.* And I was—or, I thought I was. As the heir, I *would be* the king. Therefore, how I acted was how a king acted.

Cris adjusted his position in his saddle. “Seven more days,” Cris said, swatting at a fly buzzing by his nose. His horse side-stepped, and he grabbed the reins with both hands again.

I laughed and tilted my face toward the sky. “It’s not so bad. At least we don’t have to run laps around the castle.”

“Unless you get us on Hafa’s bad side,” Cris muttered so only I could hear.

I laughed and guided my horse *around* the next puddle. Rolling hills and pale green grasses waving in the wind surrounded us. The rain that had passed overnight sharpened colors and scents.

My father thought this trip would be good “practice”—representing the kingdom graciously, political maneuvering, that sort of thing. I had my own reasons for agreeing to the trip.

I didn’t care about the diplomacy of it all, of “maintaining relationships” or “setting precedents.”

Turians were healers. And so was I.

My father might possibly have sent me away to keep from locking me in the dungeon. I’d pretended I didn’t care about the trip one way or another—nothing frustrated my father like apathy—but if I could add the Turians’ knowledge of herbs and the body to my magic, I would be the best healer Hálendi has ever known.

I’d never lose another who relied on me.

“You ready for the Wild?” Cris asked, leaning forward to peer around the other riders. “You’ll need all those bows to protect yourself.” He laughed, and the soldiers around us joined in.

I laughed merrily, tucking the dour thoughts aside. The bows—gifts for the Turians—were stored on Nótt’s flank and rattled against each other like dry bones. “If the Wild tries anything, you’re on your own.”

Chuckles rippled around the party. We all knew the road through the Wild was safe. It had been used to connect our kingdoms for centuries. It was what lay beyond the road that no one knew anything about.

I wished Jenna could have been here.

I'd tried to talk my father into letting her come as well as Cris. Promised him I'd look after her, that she needed an escape from the castle. I didn't tell Jenna I'd asked if she could come—didn't want her hopes raised. And I was glad I hadn't; Father hadn't relented an inch.

Jenna tried to hide it, but she hated that I got to leave the castle and she didn't. Resented that my magic didn't have to be a secret. And it didn't sit right with me to complain about our father or the pressure of being heir, not with her.

Cris was always ready to listen, but he didn't have magic, didn't have the weight of his father's expectations.

I couldn't talk about any of it. With anyone.

Murmurs rolled back from the riders ahead of us. A change in energy trickled through the party. I grinned at Cris. He grinned back.

Around the bend, the road opened to a flat expanse of uncultivated fields, and a wall of massive pines cut across the hills, like someone had taken a sword and drawn a line across the kingdom.

"Whoa," Cris whispered. Nótt heard and slid to a stop. I didn't mind—the other riders continued around us. I didn't even care if they laughed at the sixteen-year-olds gawking at the view. There were more tales about the Wild than there were practice swords in the barracks.

My brows furrowed the longer I stared. Other than really tall trees and the impressively straight line, it looked like . . . a forest. I'd

thought something interesting would surely be visible. But this? I'd seen pine trees before.

"Your Highness," Master Hafa said. "We need to keep up with the others." He'd stopped on my other side, waiting for us.

I frowned at the supposedly mythical forest and nudged Nótt. "Three paces isn't exactly falling behind." At least I wouldn't have to pretend the journey was uneventful when I spoke to Jenna about it.

Nothing changed as we approached the Wild, but when the road crossed the line of trees, Nótt side-stepped. All the horses shivered, tossing their heads and stepping a little higher. The soldiers didn't break their quiet conversations, though. They nudged their horses back into line, and continued on.

According to the stories, nothing kind or friendly waited in the shadows behind the trees, yet something about the space beyond drew me. Called to me. Not in my mind, or even my heart. Right below my ribs.

The farther we traveled into the Wild, the stronger the feeling became. Like the crackle that comes right before a flame ignites. The trees seemed to grow taller, stretching like they'd touch the very sky.

"I heard the trees throw you out if you try and cross its border," I said to Cris.

"I heard it's home to animals that can kill you by *looking* at you," Cris responded. He waggled his eyebrows at me, and we both laughed quietly. They were stories meant to frighten children, that's all.

Yet the crackling tension in the air tightened around me. Almost close enough to spark. Almost.

Thick brambles hedged the dirt road, blocking any light or sound emerging from the Wild's depths. It also kept the dirt

the horses kicked up from blowing away. I coughed and wiped the dust now clinging to my face. Except the road shouldn't be dust...I turned in my saddle. The puddles and mud from the rains ended as soon as we'd crossed into the Wild.

Nothing beyond the hedges moved, yet I got the distinct feeling we were being watched. That *I* was being watched. I grinned at whatever hid beyond. Maybe not a completely boring forest, then.

"Are the trees leaning in?" I asked Hafa and Cris, who rode on either side of me. I kept my chin tilted to the sky, letting the sun warm my cheeks as the treetops swayed in a breeze we could no longer feel. "Like a cradle, almost."

"Or a trap," Hafa said in his gravelly voice, glaring at the trees like he could make them obey just by looking at them.

Cris scoffed and threw one of the pebbles he'd been collecting into the brush. "They're just trees. Those old tales don't scare me."

On my other side, Hafa grunted and tipped his chin down. "Be careful of things you don't fully understand." He glared at me even though it'd been Cris who said it.

Hafa didn't need to worry, though—my magic would protect me. It always had. Always would.

Something in my stomach flickered, like someone had reached inside and stirred the place of magic within me. Flashes of color winged through the branches, but only in the periphery of my vision.

"Look!" The whisper rippled through the company.

Ahead, a stag stood on the path, as though waiting for us. His antlers rose like a noble crown, and he pawed the ground once, but didn't flee from us. The others made way for Hafa, Cris, and me to move to the front of the party.

Cris slowly leaned toward me. “No one has ever seen an animal on the path, have they?” he whispered.

I shook my head. It was why everyone who passed through had to take enough food for the four days through the Wild. Four days of old, dried rations that always left you hungry no matter how much you ate.

Cris’s eyes widened. “But if *we* landed a stag in *the Wild*—”
“We’d pass into legend,” I finished for him.

Cris slowly nocked an arrow. “Whoever lands the shot gets the first helping of fresh meat tonight,” he whispered.

My hand inched to one of the bows strapped to the side of my horse.

“No, lad,” Hafa whispered to Cris. “I’ve never seen wildlife on this road, never heard of it. It’s not worth the risk.”

The stag took one graceful step, then turned to study our party. Risk? What could one stag do against twelve heavily armed men? Cris caught my eye and tipped his head toward the target.

I unlatched a bow from Nótt’s flank so Hafa wouldn’t see. The stag didn’t flinch. In one swift movement, I drew an arrow from the quiver on the other side of my horse. Nocked it. Aimed.

Hafa’s horse stepped closer. “Your Highness—”
Released.

The stag bolted into the forest, moving so fast my arrow missed by a hair’s breadth. I’d *missed*? Cris sucked in a breath. Murmurs rippled through the soldiers. I’d missed in front of everyone.

“Glaciers,” I cursed and kicked Nótt’s side, leaning into him. We flew down the road after the stag as I reached for another arrow. Shouts and bellows from the others urged me on. The stag darted into the brush. Nótt lunged after it, but instead of leaping into the foliage, he straightened his legs, jerking to a stop. I flew

over his head at the unexpected stop, broke through the ragged hedge, and landed hard on my back.

My lungs emptied. My vision went black, then green.

Wait. Not green. It was the world around me that had turned green.

My magic, usually a gentle flow of healing, swirled to life like it was tumbling off a waterfall, frothing and rushing. I sat up slowly, my magic racing to my ribs, back, and head, soothing the bruises. A bone in my shoulder clicked back into place.

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Ow.” I’d never healed so quickly before.

A slight breeze ruffled though my hair and a velvety plant brushed against my cheek. I stood and brushed dirt from my trousers and tunic, adjusted my sword sheathed at my side. The bow had broken when I fell, and now lay in two jagged pieces on the forest floor.

A bird called in the trees above me, a call I’d never heard. The stag, partially concealed by the foliage, regarded me from afar.

I placed my fist on my shoulder in a salute. “You won this time,” I said, my voice twisting strangely in the quiet. He trotted away, turning one more time to look back at me before disappearing in the brush.

Quiet calm wrapped around me and, though lunchtime neared, I felt full. I grinned and stared at the canopy. I was *in* the Wild. Cris would be so jealous. A squirrel jumped from one branch to another, then looked down at me. I flinched under its gaze, then laughed. An animal couldn’t hurt me by looking at me, not really.

A shout, low and rough, pierced the birds trilling above. Hafa? I spun and ran toward the sound as its echo faded. Leaves

slapped against my face, and my ankle tweaked in a hole, but I kept on. I hadn't gone *that* far ahead of the others. Surely he should be close by.

"Hafa!" I yelled. No answer.

I ducked under branches, squeezed between trees growing closer and closer together.

His gravelly voice shattered the silence. "Get off me, you ice-cursed—"

"Hafa?" I skidded to a halt. Master Hafa lay in the middle of a small clearing, huge trees blocking him in, almost like bars to a prison. Vines tangled over his legs, and he swung his sword much too close to his legs, chopping at the vines. "Wait, let me help."

"No! Don't come—"

But I was already kneeling next to him, pulling the vines free. "How did you get so tangled?"

Hafa brushed the last of the leaves away and bolted to his feet, spinning in a circle, sword raised. "Tangled? They *attacked* me!"

My eyebrows jumped up. The *vines*? They lay like dead snakes, scattered around him, unmoving. Definitely not attacking. "Well, thank you for coming after me, but I think I can handle—"

"I thought you had more sense in your head than to dive into the Wild." He kicked the remaining vines away. "Putting your safety in peril is never worth any risk."

"Risk?" I said, folding my arms over my chest. "What risk? We're two steps from the road..." Only as I turned to where the road *should* be, it wasn't there. Only more forest, stretching in every direction. No sign of the dark hedge. No sign of the other men—not even a whisper of a shout on the wind.

I licked my lips, and they were dry. Yet I wasn't thirsty. Or hungry. I shook my head from the odd sensation building within me. I was *always* hungry. To the point that Cook banned me from her kitchen at least once a week.

Hafa crunched through the brush and squeezed through the trees the way I'd just entered. "We should get back to the—" He stopped. Spun in a circle. Marched around the ring of trees he'd been in. Then he turned on me, sword raised, scowl etched into his skin. "What were you thinking? No one enters the Wild and lives. You thought *you'd* be the exception?"

I hadn't *entered* the Wild; I'd been tossed in. My jaw clenched and twitched as he stalked by me. "I didn't think—"

"No. You didn't." He jammed his sword back into its sheath. He muttered to himself and turned in a slow circle, studying the trees, the underbrush, the ground.

I ran my fingers through my tangled hair again and again. What if the others tried to follow us in? No one would know what happened to any of us. Or maybe they'd send word to Hålenborg. What if my father tried to come in after me? Or Jenna?

Hafa was still muttering to himself. "What are you doing?" I snapped at him.

He stomped off. "Trying to find the road. We left the road going east. So if we go west, we should find it."

I pulled at my hair and stifled the scream trying to get out. "It should be right there," I shouted, pointing to my right. "I fell off my horse, not a cliff. There *is* no road to find!" My voice echoed strangely through the trees, bouncing back to us again and again.

Hafa spun and stomped up to me. "You. Will. Not. Panic." He unsheathed his sword, then pulled a dagger from his boot, so

he carried a weapon in each hand. Not threatening me—threatening the Wild. “We will stay together, and we *will* find the road.”

I clamped my jaw together and gripped the hilt of my sword hard enough that my hand stopped shaking. “Right,” I said. The *full* feeling turned my stomach to stone. My father’s lectures echoed in my head. *Lead by example*. I swallowed and tried to calm my erratic breathing. “Right. Let’s go.”

Hafa led the way. No matter how I tried to piece it together in my mind, it didn’t make sense—I hadn’t run that far when I’d heard Hafa’s shout. But I should have seen the hedge when I’d run toward him. It hadn’t been there. Almost like instead of being two steps into the Wild, we’d fallen into the very center.

The canopy above us swayed in the breeze, and every now and then a waft of something sweet crossed our path. We climbed over fallen logs, and jumped a crystal clear stream with strangely striped fish darting from bank to bank.

Hafa kept checking the sun, the moss on the bark, making small adjustments to our path. The stag reappeared to my right, but stayed far away. If I’d had another arrow, I’d have taken another shot at him. If he hadn’t wandered onto the road, we wouldn’t be stuck in here now.

“We’ve been here,” I said, brows furrowed as we approached the stream again. I pointed to the prints of my boots in the bank, but as Hafa turned to see, the boot prints faded. I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them again. The prints were gone.

Hafa grunted and sat on a rock. “You couldn’t have waited until after lunch to dive into the Wild?” His stomach growled.

Mine didn’t. But it had been just as long since I’d eaten. Whatever it was keeping me full, I was grateful—at least I wasn’t hungry on top of all this.

I turned slowly, searching out any clue that could give us a sure direction. A shiver cascaded down my spine as I locked eyes with the stag waiting downstream. He stared back. Everything looked the same—trees, dirt, bushes. No discernible paths, no clear expanse of sky.

“Maybe if we follow the stream, it’ll lead out of the Wild,” I said with a shrug. “I think I heard a stream near the road.”

Hafa grunted his agreement. “We walk side by side. I don’t trust this place.”

I heard what he didn’t say—he didn’t trust *me*, either. And why should he? I’d followed a stag into *the Wild*. That stag probably didn’t want us here any more than we wanted to be here.

As we walked along for at least another hour, the stag trailing us from afar. Branches always blocked Hafa’s path, but never mine. Blood trickled down his cheek where a leaf had sliced into him, where I only encountered the soft brush of leaves against my skin.

Then it started getting dark.

“I...I don’t think it should be this dark yet,” I whispered in the quiet of animals settling all around us. No clouds blocked the sky above us, so where had the day gone?

“I don’t think so, either,” Hafa said. We came to a small clearing, where the stream pooled on one side, and a flat expanse of soft grass stretched on the other.

“We can make camp here. Do not eat anything,” he said with a glare.

I nodded. I wasn’t hungry anyway. The stag trotted off into the shadows. I wasn’t sure how its antlers didn’t catch on every branch in here, but it glided away like a wraith. Had Hafa seen it? I didn’t bring it up. No point in reminding him of my foolishness.

There were no bedrolls to take out, no kindling to gather, not even any dead leaves scattered on the forest floor. Hafa tucked his weapons away and sat, ankles crossed, hands clasped together tight. Too tight.

I unbuckled my sword, then sat, resting it on my lap. “Do you think the others will send a message home?”

Hafa stared at an invisible speck on the forest floor halfway between us. “Of course they will.”

My father had barely trusted me to go to Turia. Lectured me for hours about comportment and taking my role seriously. If by some miracle we found our way out of the Wild—with or without my father’s help—I’d never hear the end of it.

And if we *couldn’t* get out...My stomach dropped. Jenna would be alone.

A branch snapped somewhere beyond our spot of grass. Hafa stilled, but nothing appeared.

I lay back against the soft grass. “I should have listened, back on the road,” I said, running my thumb along my sword’s sheath. “I’m sorry.”

Hafa let out a great sigh. “Let’s hope we make it out of here so you can learn from it.”

A wolf howled in the distance. How many stories circulated the castle, the kingdom, about those who entered the Wild and never returned? I couldn’t heal my way out of this forest. Didn’t have any special talent to get us out of its grasp.

What if ... I never got to become king?

Pressure built up in my chest, like my magic, but painful. My father had been training me to become king my entire life. He’d always stood strong in the face of any danger, any threat. He’d put his kingdom over his own needs again and again.

I'd laughed off my father's lectures, his advice. Found a way around studying, got out of meetings faster than Jenna could braid her hair. Not because I didn't care about becoming king, but because I never imagined anything would stop me. Becoming king was an assumption that lived in the background of every thought, an unavoidable eventuality.

Until now.

I rolled onto my side, clutching my sword tight to my chest. If anyone could get us out of here, it was Hafa.



I dreamed of a silver lake. Of lying on white sand, the water lapping against my feet, the sun baking everything, and air that tasted sweeter than any pastry. Of peace and freedom and weightlessness.

The stag had stood next to me on the beach, and in the strange way of dreams, I'd heard his thoughts, felt his friendship, his desire to help me.

Soft grass tickling my cheek woke me. That, and the oddest sensation of flying.

My eyes blinked open slowly, the dream urging me back into sleep. My ankle bumped against something. My head lolled to the side. A muffled thump sounded somewhere by my feet.

Above me, the canopy rolled by, as though—

As though I was moving.

I shook myself awake and stared into the great brown eyes of an animal I'd never seen before. I flinched, but didn't die, so apparently it wasn't the animal that could kill on sight.

Tufts of brown fur puffed out its cheeks, and tiny round ears stuck up on top of its head. And its little claws were in my tunic, dragging me into the forest.

“Argh! Get off!” I yelled, at a higher pitch than I’d ever yelled before. Tiny little animals crowded all around me, their claws in my clothes. I shook and shimmied, but they only grasped me tighter. “Hafa!”

I thrashed more; they pulled faster, branches and ferns slapping against me. Then Hafa was there, yanking the creatures off one by one and tossing them into the forest until they released me and scattered into the brush.

I rubbed stray leaves from my hair and tried to get my heart-beat to settle. “What in the ice and snow—”

“The little rodent *bit* me.” Hafa held his wrist and cursed under his breath.

Blood welled between his fingers. He pressed his tunic around the puncture wounds, but they continued to bleed.

“Let me,” I said, stepping forward, palms up.

He shook his head. “I’ll be fine. Save your strength.”

“It’s my fault you’re here.” Plus, maybe if I could heal him, the boulder of regret for getting us in this situation in the first place would lighten.

Hafa nodded, gritting his teeth. My eyes closed as I gripped his arm, and my magic roared to life like it never had before. It overwhelmed me, rushing and fluid, in a way I’d never experienced. Heat filled me—warm and delicious, and that silver lake from my dream returned in my mind’s eye. Serene. Ethereal.

A large hand pressed against my chest, and then I was flying backward. My eyes jerked open when I hit the ground. But Hafa wasn’t standing over me. He was at least ten paces away, staring in horror at his hand.

“You... What happened?” I shook my head to clear it of the tentacles from the lake vision.

His hand shook, and he continued to stare at it. I'd never seen his hands shake. Ever. He wouldn't look at me. Kept his fighting stance.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," he said. "I don't know..." He looked up at me and, even from where I sat so far away, every line of tension etched deeply in his face. "What did you do to me?"

I stood easily—the fall hadn't hurt, and healing him hadn't depleted my magic like it usually did. "I healed you. I think." I studied my hands—the palms and backs.

"The whole forest started humming when you used your magic. The birds and animals went wild. And you..."

My mouth dried out. "I what?"

"You were nearly glowing," Hafa muttered.

Glowing? Any other time—and I do mean *any*—I would have been thrilled at this development in my magic. I reached for my sword, but it wasn't at my side. The trees leaned over us, and I could just make out the stag's antlers and black eyes as it stared at us from the brush.

Hafa tightened his sword at his side, and we trudged back to the meadow to find mine lying in the grass where I'd fallen asleep. Hafa took his signature stance: feet wide, arms folded, glaring at whatever problem lay before him. In this case, the Wild.

"I think the magic here resonates with mine," I said quietly, studying the stag. He'd been with me in the dream. Maybe he'd help us find our way out of his home.

"But there's no magic on the road." Hafa glared at a bunny that hopped by giving him the side-eye. "Can you feel a difference with your magic?"

I nodded, pulling a stray twig from my hair. That's what the full feeling was—*magic*. The whole forest was saturated in it.

“If you can sense the forest’s magic—”

“I can sense where its magic *isn’t*.” I could find the road.

Hafa drew his sword, and the metallic ring echoed through the trees. A *can* from above answered back. “Lead the way.”



“Ugh,” Hafa grunted, pushing at the branches on his side of our path. We’d been walking for what felt like hours, yet the sun hadn’t moved. Which was annoying in general, but also made it impossible to track our direction.

The stag, always ahead of us, shifted his path to the left. He looked back to make sure I followed, then continued picking his way through the trees. The path sloped down the slightest bit, and a cool breeze filtered through the branches and smelled like the air in my dream had.

Next to me, Hafa panted. His arms and face had tiny scratches from leaves and branches, and sweat poured from his temples.

“It shouldn’t be this hot in a forest,” he said, then sat back in the dirt.

My brow furrowed. Hot?

“How is the...the magic?” Hafa asked, wiping at the sweat. “Can you sense a difference?”

The magic? I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my hands over my face. I’d been so intent on following the stag, I’d forgotten about sensing the magic within me. How—

Ahead of us, the stag waited, pawing his hoof against the ground and shaking his antlers at me. I turned and looked to the right, away from where the stag led. The magic inside me shivered, resisting the change in direction.

“I think...I think we should go this way now,” I said. Hafa nodded and rubbed his shoulder, willing to accept my word. I bit my lip and turned away from the stag.

Some of my hunger returned.

Maybe the stag wasn't my friend after all.

I glared back at the stag, and he was closer than he'd been since we'd entered the Wild, only a stone's throw away.

We pushed through the forest's growth, and this time, branches blocked my path as well as Hafa's. Leaves sliced into my skin. I stared at the ground, yet rocks I somehow hadn't seen snuck under my shoes so I turned my ankle again and again.

Hafa was right—it shouldn't be this hot in the shade. But we continued on for what felt like another hour.

I shifted my path to the left, and the branches eased. Hafa put his hand on my arm to stop me. “Why did you change direction?”

I rested my hands on my knees while I caught my breath. “Because those branches were getting too thick.”

“Did the magic change?”

My brow furrowed. “No.” The stag was back—directly ahead of us. I muttered curses at it and adjusted our course away from it once again.

Hafa followed a step behind. “You must focus on the magic, not—”

A great crack rent the air, and a tall, skinny pine to our left shivered, then tipped. Its branches broke off against other trees, scattering bits of bark and leaves in an explosion that grew as it fell. Hafa shoved me out of its path, and I flew back—far enough to slam against the trunk of another tree. The falling pine crashed to the ground right where Hafa had stood.

“Hafa!” I screamed. I held one hand over my forehead to protect my eyes, and tried to push into the wreckage. Hafa had

to be there. Had to be okay. With the Wild's help, I'd be able to heal—

“Atháren?” Hafa called out. Coughed.

Not dead. Hafa wasn't dead. Not yet. I ducked under another branch and froze.

Hafa wasn't crushed under the weight of the trunk. He'd *caught* the tree. He stared at me, eyes wide, hands over his head, lifting the tree as though it were a staff, not an entire tree. He swallowed hard, then heaved it away. It cracked and rolled once, leaving a path of flattened brush in its path.

My lips stretched into a smile, and I laughed, long and loud. “That was *incredible!*” I went to punch Hafa's shoulder, but he caught my fist in his palm.

He swallowed loud enough for me to hear. “When you healed me, I felt...” He shook the thought away. “That was *unnatural.*”

I grinned. “Unnaturally amazing, maybe.” I tried to sober up, I really did. But he'd caught and thrown a *tree*. He *wasn't dead*. “Besides, now we know.”

“Know?” he said, that dazed look fading away very slowly.

“If the Wild doesn't want us to go somewhere, it's probably exactly where we want to go.”

Hafa eyes cut to me, and his lips tipped into the closest thing to a smile I'd ever seen. “I think you might be on to something.”

We forced our way through the Wild, little by little, as I tried to focus inward on my center of magic. Animals hissed along our path just out of sight.

But we were making progress. We'd get back to the road soon, eat all of the rations we could, drink enough water to drown a fish—

A fallen tree lay in our path. One that had flattened the brush behind it like it'd been tossed.

“A circle.” I sat on the trunk and rested my head in my palm, elbow on my knee. “All that time, and we’ve been in a huge circle.” My magic swirled to my muscles and scrapes, healing and healing and healing, yet never depleting. Any other time...

Hafa sat next to me. Though his beard twitched, his eyes had lost the feral look they’d had before. “It’s about focus, Atháren. The same as in a fight. Close your eyes.” I did, and immediately, my breathing eased. “That’s it, breathe in, out. Slow and steady.”

“Like a fight,” I muttered.

“Focus on what you want. Where you want to go.”

In. Out. I wanted to show my father he could trust me. Wanted to take care of Jenna and protect her and her secret. The ridges of my sword’s hilt pressed into my palm as I gripped it. I wanted to heal others, help my kingdom. I wanted to be king.

“The road,” I murmured.

“Good. Now,” he said, standing, “never look away.”

I waited another moment, finding that center, the calm I needed in a fight. Then I stood. Straightened my shoulders.

The stag waited several lengths away. It took two steps, then looked back at me. A voice on the wind seemed to whisper, “Will you follow?”

My magic buzzed inside me, yearning, leaping toward the stag. I turned away. The road filled my mind’s eye.

Those first steps away physically hurt. Like the stag’s antlers had pierced my spine to pull me back the other way. Like a giant hand had strung out my innards behind me.

That’s when the forest started *moving*. Vines unwrapped themselves from branches to brush against our arms, reaching, twisting around us if we didn’t cut them away quick enough.

Roots rose up out of the ground to trip us. Rocks rolled underfoot.

I didn't close my eyes as we fought our way through the Wild, but they remained unfocused—unfocused on what the Wild tried to throw in our path.

The road. I wanted the road, and nothing else.

We continued on, making small adjustments as I felt the magic in me rise or the forest ease its attack. Hafa drew his sword and cursed with every swing as vines tightened their snares in front of us. I drew mine and joined him.

Birds darted at us from overhead, their sharp beaks aimed for our backs. Hafa batted them away with the flat side of his blade.

“Just get rid of them,” I panted, ducking under a green bird's onslaught as I tried to free my wrist from a bright green vine.

He grunted and cut at the vines. “We're the ones intruding on their home.”

It was a fair point, but not one I particularly liked at the moment.

Never look away. A vine stretched across the path, wrapping around me, pinning my arms to my sides. My next step, a rock rolled under my foot and I tripped.

Hafa, cut the vines holding me, and hauled me back up to my feet. A loud groan rolled over us, and a huge boulder crashed through the bushes. It butted up against a tree—right where Hafa would have been if he hadn't stopped to help me.

“You can't have us!” I yelled into the Wild. The birds and squirrels and who knew what else answered back, shrieking and shaking leaves down onto us.

“We've got to be close,” Hafa whispered, panting.

I nodded and raised my sword again—it would be dull soon, from hacking through the vines. Would it last long enough to get to the road?

We edged around the boulder. Thorns snagged my trousers, branches tangled in my hair. The voice on the wind whispered louder, the stag stomped just out of sight.

Was this fight even worth it? My magic had never been more powerful. I'd *glowed*. Given Hafa incredible strength. I didn't need to go to Turia or rule Hálendi. I could become the greatest mage on the Plateau, I could—

A tiny voice cut in, one that sounded vaguely like Jenna. *Be safe. Come home.*

Find the road.

All the vines draping the taller branches moved, then, lashing around Hafa's arms, ankles, chest. "No—" was all he got out before a vine wrapped around his mouth. Another dragged his sword away.

I grabbed a handful of the vines holding him and dug my heels into the ground. "No," I grunted, and hacked at the forest trying to pull Hafa back in.

But a vine snaked out and wrapped around my wrist, squeezing so tight my sword dropped to the ground. Another vine dragged my sword away.

I scratched against the vines, pulling until welts formed on my palms. Hafa eyes were barely visible, but they darted down, then back to me, then down again.

His boot. I reached down and pulled out his dagger, then sliced away everything pulling him away.

He shook off the remaining vines and we turned to face the last obstacle—branches and leaves knitting together into a writhing wall, a quilt of living rope blocking our way forward.

“We can’t,” he panted. I’d never seen him without a weapon, without hope. “It’s too strong.”

The silver lake of my dream called to me, weightless and carefree.

I grabbed the front of Hafa’s tunic in my fist. “We will not panic.”

He licked his cracked lips and met my stare. “We’ll find the road.”

And, with a cry worthy of any battlefield, we lunged at the wall of vines, my borrowed dagger slicing through first.

I braced for my suffocating end. Instead, we tumbled forward and fell face-first into a dusty road.

“About time you came back out,” Cris said, looping his arms under mine. My ears rang from our shout as he helped me to my feet. “Did you decide to have lunch in there, or what?”

The others guffawed, leaning against their horses in whatever shade they could find. I stared at Hafa, and he glared at every member of the company.

What... what was happening? The hedge along the road looked like it always did—impenetrable, no sign of our violent escape. I licked my parched lips. I could barely breathe, my throat was so dry. And my stomach—it growled loud enough the entire camp heard.

“Not lunch then,” Cris said, laughing. Lower, so only I could hear, he said, “What was it like in there? The captain was starting to get nervous.”

I squinted at him, at all of them. We’d been gone *hours*. Hadn’t we?

Hafa picked up his dagger from where I’d dropped it. “What has been done?” he commanded. His eyes darted around the company of soldiers, assessing until their laughter died.

The captain shifted. “Done?” he asked. “What do you mean? You told us—”

“You didn’t send for help in the nearest village? A runner to Hálenborg?” Hafa’s voice rose until he shouted at his men.

I studied them all a little closer. Their clothes and hair remained exactly as they’d been when I’d foolishly darted into the Wild. Their gear hadn’t changed, nothing. My horse stood near the front of the group, wrangled by one of the soldiers. Nótt side-stepped like he was still spooked from me trying to lead him into the Wild.

The captain straightened, his brows furrowed, but clearly cautious of the undertone of fury lacing Hafa’s words. “You’ve been gone less than ten minutes, sir. I considered alternative action, but thought it best to remain, as your last command was to wait here.”

I rubbed my forehead, then grabbed a waterskin from the nearest horse and guzzled its contents. “Ten minutes?” I croaked. Impossible.

And yet I’d seen vines move of their own accord. Hafa had caught a tree. The Wild had . . . wanted me, tried to pull me deeper into its depths. It was *all* impossible.

Hafa stared down each of the soldiers. His stare landed on me last. “Do not leave the road.”

“Yes, sir,” we all muttered.

I needed to warn Father and Jenna. If it was my magic the Wild had wanted, neither of them would be safe traveling this road. Jenna’s magic was only the tethers, but still, she’d—

A voice slithered into my head, an echo of an echo. The voice from my dreams, the same that had carried on the wind in the Wild. *The magic is mine. Another will come, it hissed. I will wait.*

Sharp pain started in my skull, and one by one, memories of my time in the Wild dulled and faded away like a dream. *No!* I needed to warn Jenna. Warn her of ... of ...

The harder I tried to hold on, the faster everything evaporated.

The hedge bordering the Wild swayed in some invisible wind. Hafa pulled me aside as the others mounted their horses.

He glared at the trees. “Do not speak of what happened with anyone,” he whispered to me, sending a pointed glance toward Cris.

My stomach swam, like my innards had been stretched out then wrung dry. I bit my lip hard, but the memories stayed just out of reach. “Speak of what?” I asked, lifting a shoulder and attempting a smile. Something I was supposed to do . . .

Hafa squinted at me, then bobbed his head in a sharp nod. The captain started to ask about Hafa’s missing sword, but stopped at Hafa’s glare as he stomped back to his horse.

Cris flicked my empty scabbard. “So what was it like?”

“It was—” I shrugged. “It was like a forest. I mean, we were only in there for a minute, right?” I studied Cris, hoping for some clue as to what I’d forgotten, but Cris let out a defeated sigh and mounted his horse, muttering about a lack of enthusiasm.

Maybe I hadn’t forgotten anything after all. Not much could have happened in a few minutes’ time. I’d probably just lost my sword when Nótt had thrown me.

But as I mounted my horse and continued on with the others, I couldn’t help but look back to the hedge.

A stag, vaguely familiar with his black eyes and crown of antlers, watched me go.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KAYLYNN FLANDERS HAS a degree in English Language and editing, and has been a freelance editor and book designer for over twelve years. Her debut series, *Shielded* and *Untethered*, was published by Delacorte Press. KayLynn and her family live in Utah between some mountains and a lake, and she is directionally challenged without them. She loves reading, writing, traveling, and volleyball, and thinks there's nothing better than a spur-of-the-moment road trip.

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