

Witching Woods

Dorian Latter (2022)

Alex was still holding my hand after the white light fully dissipated. He'd become my only friend, quickly making sure no one ever bullied me. I never quite understood why – he was handsome, and a rich nobleman's son. I was just a boy from some stupid backwater village who'd been found by the right people at the right time. But all the same, my life was indebted to him. Even if he didn't know it.

'Orion, if you're going to zone out for this entire test, please let me know so I can kill you myself.' His tone was jovial, but none the less it sufficiently snapped me out of it.

'Okay, we need to find water and set up a perimeter ward.'

'Well damn, didn't realise you paid so much attention O.' I lightly punched him in the shoulder.

A quick spell left my lips, the terrain around me giving way to a shadowy scape. Hints of blue scattered about. Puddles. I focused more, willing the spell to let me see further. Finally, my objective came into focus.

'Possible water source up ahead Aly,' a hint of pride inevitably spread into my words.

'Yeah, yeah, show off.' I hesitantly grasped his hand again, his gaze shifting from mine. The source wasn't far way, two-hundred meters at most. An expanse of land that we covered in no time. We'd made a gameplan before the exam began. Find water, secure it, and fight anything that came our way. The exam task was simple in theory – survive two days in the woods, get beamed back out the next day. What makes it more complex, is the fact these woods are chock-full of monsters. Something the academy informed us of a week before the exam date. Nothing like scared warlocks to feed a demonic forest.

'Nice find.' His voice ripped me out of my thoughts.

My vision returned to normal, the lush greens of the forest coming back into focus. A large pond lay before us, but the best part was an island in the middle. Large enough for a simple structure, while still leaving the water useful as a defensive weapon.

'Thank you, but this isn't going to secure itself.'

A sigh was the only response I got, and immediately we set to work. Alex gathered large logs while I prepped the ground for their installation. It was a simple spell, but by no means easy to take down. The sky was starting to turn a pink and orange hue as we finished carving the appropriate runes into the logs.

‘Ugh, you want the honours?’

‘Aly, you just want me to use the Mana.’

‘Obviously.’ I could never truly say no to him. He’d given up a lot to ensure I had a friend, even defied his father.

The spell instantly leapt to my lips, my voice taking on an echoey tone. ‘Goddess Calion, ruler of water and all within it, may you give me domain over your kingdom and protect my lands.’

Streams of water formed tentacles, jutting harshly into the runes adorning each post. The streams soon filled out, creating a dome around the entire pond, its form slowly shifting and swaying, the sound of running water not letting up. ‘That took more water than I would have liked.’ The pond before us now only reached half its former depth.

‘At least we’re safe.’ The dome bent in slightly before going rigid as he pressed against it, ‘relatively’.

His lips cast a complex building spell, no wonder he wanted me to do all the leg work before. Wooden logs and twigs flew from the forest to build a bridge across the newly depleted pond.

Alex’s lips curled into a smile, even as his body slowly swayed and I had to steady him. ‘One upped you loser.’ We broke out into a laugh, a small gap in the dome forming as we walked through it to the bridge.

‘Yes, you did.’ His eyes slowly fluttered shut. He’d gone overboard, the show off.

We awoke on the island, the grass blanket I’d woven with magic still covering us. Our limbs were interwoven, a comfortable if not far too intimate position. He was the first to break it. A bubble of water floating up to his lips as he began to stand up. Water was the easiest element to manipulate. Less mana was needed, and its Goddess was known to be easily pleased. If we didn’t disgrace her land, our ward would hold. And so far, it had, tracks near the posts hinting at wolves trying to get in. Something to keep in mind when foraging.

‘Please don’t do that again, you used too much Mana yesterday.’ My voice was more telling than I’d hoped, an obvious hint of worried sewn within.

‘You don’t need to worry O, I’ll be fine.’ His body betrayed him, an uneasy sway permeating every step he took. His Mana was still dangerously low.

‘I’ll go out hunting for today, stay here, rest up.’

A refusal died on Aly’s lips – he was obviously feeling the drain. A small nod was all he afforded me before I headed out. We were informed the only animals were demon-animal hybrids, not entirely ideal for food. But a simple cleansing ritual would do the trick. It felt

peaceful in the forest, a never-ending expanse of greenery, the subtle sound of the wind flowing through the trees letting my mind drift.

That was until I came upon six large wooden constructs, intricate shabby huts weaved in and out of the trees. At first my mind went to one of the larger alliances formed in our class. But these huts were scattered with moss and rot. Werewolves. The only thing in this godforsaken forest that would have enough intelligence to build such constructs. Fortunately, they must've been off on a hunt. This was a once in a lifetime chance to see the way in which werewolves lived. I warily moved towards what seemed to be the largest hut. Messy ceramic pots lined the walls, strips of wood were strewn on a primitive desk, covered with scribbles in a different language. Yet one word stuck out to me – less of a word, more of a drawing. Our hut, along with what seemed to be some kind of wind rune; they must have a shaman. An ear-piercing scream made me stop. Probably just one of the lone kids getting in trouble, but still that direction, it sounded almost like it was coming from-

Before the thought could fully register, I was immediately running in the scream's direction. It all made sense. They wouldn't just hand us a prime piece of land, not without grand cost. The academy was far too harsh for that. Alex was still recovering. He can't – I can't lose him. Scenarios rushed through my head as stray twigs broke under my feet. Aly would be left defenceless. Their shaman would crush our posts and I'd left him all alone. A shrill scream ripped through my ears; my legs immediately willing for more speed. I needed to get there in time.

The forest broke out into the familiar landscape, yet this time no warmth was to be found. Five werewolves surrounded the pond, each waiting on what I could only assume to be the shaman. While the others all had dark coats, this one was white as snow. They all were standing on their hind legs, their claws as long as daggers. That's when I saw him: Alex stood in the middle of the island, his hands weakly glowing with Mana, ready for battle magic he didn't have the Mana to cast. The shaman finished his spell, the logs adorning the pond instantly flying inwards with some invisible push. Water came crashing down, its streams returning to the pond, settling just below the bridge. It was now or never.

An incantation left my lips and instantly a shockwave of earth erupted into the group of werewolves. Yet only one was impaled on the jagged edges, its body going limp as I charged towards them. The shaman continued across the bridge, while the four remaining wolves turned on me. We were both heavily out-matched.

My hand tugged at the water ahead, a simple sentence turning them to ice. Yelps came from one of the werewolves ahead as a large spike of ice pierced through it. Three left. An

agonising pain ripped through me as I got close to the bridge, sharp talons carving across my back. So close. I turned around to meet my assailant, a string of Spanish causing its fur to erupt in flames, its yelps drowning out any other noise.

My Mana was getting low, I knew it. Yet Alex's voice kept me going. Just two more. To my surprise two jets of water formed on their own. Wrapping their tentacle like forms around the wolves. Their yelps being quickly drowned out as their forms disappeared underneath the ponds surface. The posts. Their wood bobbed up and down in the water, a quick spell and they soon dissolved into nothing.

I turned back to Aly. The shaman was gone, most likely facing the same fate as the others. But Alex was strewn across the ground, numerous scratch marks cutting through his now reddened clothing. I dropped next to him, my hands wandering across his body. There was still life. Incantations ripped from my lungs one after the other, the aching pain from my back slowly dulling as both our wounds healed. The words became heavier as more Mana ripped from me, my body slumping over his.

'I love you Alex, stick with me.' My voice was craggily and breaking, tears stinging at the edges of my eyes.

'I love you too, told you I was going to be fine.'

Laughter rippled through both of us as we collapsed into each other.

The sky was a blazing orange. Maybe, just maybe, we can outrun the timer.