

An Interlude Between Gathers

Crisp winter air blew across the clear skies of Eldyrwood to match the sharp sound of snapping twigs beneath boots. It wasn't an unbearable cold, but it did make the breath rise up in brief bursts before quickly vanishing. The silence in the forest, which had at first been welcome, was growing dreadful. There was a stretch of days where the winter seemed to be breaking and a few song birds had cheerfully made an appearance. However, this was short lived and the harsh coldness had quickly returned and the agonizing silence with it.

As Kel followed the forest path, he stepped purposefully on twigs to break the silence surrounding him. In his hand, he tossed a small stone into the air and caught it again without looking. He sighed dejectedly, looking bored. He longed for something... *anything* exciting to happen within the woods. It had been weeks since the last gather had ended and he had said goodbye to his friends. The loneliness that had followed had pushed Kel out of the safety and warmth of his shelter and back onto the trails. With the foliage gone, it was easier to see long distances between the barren branches and into the deep woods. It wouldn't be difficult to see if there was anything approaching. You could never be sure what was lurking in this corrupt forest.

Perhaps I'll bump into those bandits who stole my money pouch last gather, he thought to himself as he reached into his cloak for spell components. However, as Kel looked ahead into the forest, he saw only pale, leafless trees. Sighing with disappointment, Kel placed the components back into his pockets and returned to tossing the small stone to himself as he continued onward.

He left the main trail, heading into the deep woods. He decided to make his weekly trek out to where the lock box had been hidden. Oftentimes, there were messages left in there by the shaman who lived in these woods. It was a means of communication between gathers, but it was also a place that had become a solace for Kel. Even if his friends were too busy to meet with him between gathers, Kel found reading their notes made him feel much less lonely. It was probably worth the trip to see if anyone had left a new message. *Plus*, Kel reminded himself, *keeping my legs moving will help fight off this chill in the air.*

Passing the quarry, Kel made one last toss of the stone before pocketing it. He looked up and noticed that flat, grey clouds were gathering on the horizon. They streaked across the empty sky like a stain upon the wind. Kel knew this meant the weather would soon turn for the worst. In this cold, it would almost certainly mean snow. He needed to hurry to the lock box if he were to make it back to his shelter in time before the coming snowfall.

As the woods loomed before him, Kel turned and saw, in the middle of a clearing by the quarry, the charred remnants of the Shaman Fire from the previous gather. He paused, taking in the scene. The fire pit. The charred logs. The empty seats.

Kel closed his eyes and imagined he could hear the sounds of the shaman and townsfolk at the fire, sharing food and drink, stories and songs, laughter and cheers. He smiled briefly at the image before slowly opening his eyes to the empty circle before him. The only sound he heard was the wind raking the barren branches of the trees and the stillness of the black coals filling the empty clearing.

Kel's boots hardly made a sound as he carefully approached the ashes of the fire circle. He poked at the dead coals for a moment with the toe of his boot before stooping down, picking up a shining coal between his fingers, and placing it within his cloak. Then, he turned back towards the forest and carried on.

The world seemed to darken ever so slightly as the weather changed. Over the next few bells as Kel traveled through the forest, the clouds grew larger, looming ominously over the treetops. He kept his fingers in his cloak pockets, toying with the small stone and the piece of charcoal as he walked. The cold in the air seemed to sharpen rapidly and soon there were small white flakes falling to the forest floor.

A steady snowfall had already begun to envelope the forest when Kel arrived at the lock box. It was a simple box, placed slightly off the path and nearly invisible. Kel bent down, brushing the gathering snow from the lid. On one side, the lid was secured tightly with a small lock. Kel drew a key from his pockets, and fitted it into the keyhole. He paused for a moment before turning the key. With an audible, "*Click!*" the box opened easily and the lid lifted. Kel peered inside. He frowned slightly.

There were no new messages. It appeared that no one had been to visit the box this week.

With a heavy sigh, Kel closed the lid and placed his key back into his pockets. The snow was building quickly upon the lid again and had already begun to cover his footprints behind him. He decided that he would have to come back again when the snow cleared. Hopefully, someone else would have left some news by then. It would be weeks until the next gather.

A sudden noise from the left made Kel jump. He tried to draw his hands from his pockets quickly, but the awkward movement caused him to stumble and slip backwards in the snow. He fell to the forest floor in a heap, his cloak twisting around him as he fell. Laughter rang through the air as a woman with long dark hair appeared from behind a nearby tree.

"I thought it was graceful as the wind, and steady as the earth... not the other way around?" she said. Her lips twisted into an impish smile and she pressed her hands to her hips as she spoke. Looking closer through the dimly lit snowdrift, Kel recognized the woman was Io, a shaman of these woods and one of his closest friends.

With a mocking shake of her head, Io added, "What would Mother Phoenix think of you now all twisted up in the snow?"

Kel quickly untangled from the cloak and sat up, brushing snow off himself. He raised a hand in surrender.

"Mother always said that a warm heart can only get you so far."

Io reached down, grabbing Kel's hand and lifting him to his feet. She glanced at the place where Kel had fallen. His small stone and coal had fallen from his cloak.

"Are those your treasures?" Io asked excitedly, pointing to the objects slowly disappearing under a fresh coat of snow.

Kel hurriedly scooped both the objects from the snow and showed them to her. She raised an eyebrow, leaning in to gaze at the strange objects.

"Ooooh, what are these for?"

A grin spread across Kel's face. Io wasn't one to let something so interesting pass her gaze unnoticed.

"I was planning to use them in a small prayer as an offering to the spirits of the elements," Kel said, putting them back into his cloak pockets.

Io bowed her head in reverent understanding.

"Ahhh. Nothing like a special rock and an old piece of coal to appease the spirits," she said with a playful smile. She paused, putting a finger to her lip as though thinking of something.

"Actually, did you want to come out of the snow and join me at my cabin? It isn't too far from here. And I do remember promising to have you over between gathers. A nice cup of lavender tea seems to be in order. We can pray to the spirits together and lift our spirits on this cold day!"

Kel nodded adamantly, happy to hear that Io hadn't forgotten her offering. It had been some time since he had been with company and he wasn't about to risk having Io wander the forest alone in this weather. They set off together, Kel taking Io's arm as she walked. Their quiet voices went as unnoticed as the snow building upon their heads while they strode through the darkening trees.

It wasn't long before they arrived at Io's small cabin. Kel had never been there before. Small, built with strong wood, a simple door and few windows. It blended nicely into the surrounding trees.

"So this is where all the shaman funds go..."

Io slapped Kel's arm in annoyance and opened the door to let them inside. Just before they passed through the threshold, Kel stopped Io. He reached up to her hair, brushing it from her face. His hand lingered for a moment, gathering the snow that had collected there. She gave him a questioning look.

"Just something to add to the prayer," Kel said balling the snow into his hands.

Inside the cabin, there was only one room. It smelled of lavender flowers, fresh moss and dry earth. The cold from outside had crept into the small space and Io quickly made to light a fire. Kel moved into the center of the room to cleared a space for prayer. As he cleared the floor, his gaze shifted around the room. Scattered across the cabin were peculiar items. Oddly shaped branches lined the walls, shining gleams of precious things glinted from odd places that reflected in the growing fire light, and large, beautiful feathers wove across the walls and ceiling.

Io joined Kel as he took out the small stone, the piece of coal, and the lump of snow from Io's hair.

"Aren't you missing an element?" Io asked.

"I thought you might help me with that one," Kel said, glancing sideways at her as he knelt to the floor, "If you wouldn't mind."

Io nodded solemnly and Kel began to pray. He leaned across the floor, cupping first the stone, then the coal, and finally the snow in his hands.

"For the Gargoyle, may this lucky stone bring him good fortune and honor in the earth he dwells.

For the Phoenix, may this coal symbolize our community's promise of future fires in her honor.

For the Drake, may this melting snow reveal to you an unspoken secret of my own..."

Kel lowered his head to the snow in his hands, whispering words so softly that the crackling fire drowned them out from Io's ears. When finished, he rested the nearly melted snow upon the floor.

He raised both hands into the air and said, "For the Djinn, a song in her honor to stir the wind into dance and play to travel wherever it ma-"

"You just wanted an excuse to hear me sing, didn't you?!" Io interrupted with a hint of annoyance in her voice. But when Kel turned to look at her, a sly grin was playing across her face. He smiled back, shrugged and nodded.

"I don't get a lot of entertainment between gathers. Can you blame me?"

Io thought for a long moment, choosing her song carefully. Then, she began to sing. The song was full of laughter and life, like a warm breeze across flowing grass. It warmed the room and grew until, abruptly, it ended. Like a spell had been broken, the cold crept back into the room and the warmth settled around the fire.

There was a moment of silence that filled the small cabin. Kel stood slowly, the fire crackling quietly. The snow had melted completely, but the stone and the coal still sat where he had placed them. Kel collected the treasures back into his robes and adjusting his cloak, turning to face the door. Io looked up at Kel, confused.

"Won't you stay for a little while longer? We haven't even made tea yet."

Kel looked through the windows at the darkening sky. The snow had continued to fall and waiting would only make the travel back more difficult. Leaving tracks would also be a problem. *What if someone found Io's cabin by following my trail in the snow?*

"I... I should bring these offerings to my shrine..."

Io stood, grabbing Kel's arm.

"Please, you must stay! Even a fool knows it's too dangerous to travel through the forest alone... especially in the dark. I couldn't live with myself if you were sent to fate because something found you in this weather. If you stay here with me, I promise to teach you one of my family's most sacred rites."

She pointed towards the fire.

"In Oakholme, my family sits by the hearth in mid-winter and we share our goals for the coming cycle. And as I haven't had family around for some time... maybe we could spend some time by the fire and share ours together?"

Kel smiled and nodded. He relaxed, realizing that he was being such a fool. Jeopardizing his life wasn't going to appease the spirits. Neither was leaving Io's cabin and risking her home being discovered by those troublesome bandits or maybe something worse... it wasn't worth it. Being patient and spending time with his friend and sharing their plans for the coming cycle was definitely the better option. These things could wait until the coming gather.

Perhaps, he thought to himself as he walked with Io to the edge of the fire, this wouldn't be such a bad stretch between gathers after all.