

The Bessrin Wood Company

“From where?”

“They say that they’re from the Bessrin Wood Company, your Majesty.”

King Crendle scratched his chin, leaning back in his chair. The small council was all waiting for his next word, but the king didn’t know how to reply. The Bessrin Wood Company had nearly passed into myth when King Crendle was a boy. His grandfather had told him stories of Veron Bessrin, his friend and son of the leader of the Bessrin Wood Company. The request for the king’s audience from these strangers was made all the more strange by their mythical claims.

“Why would they choose such an obscure legend?” Lord Ritten asked. “What benefit would they gain from this claim?”

“We know the heads of state and all the usual guests of honor,” Lord Ligon said. “This strikes me as just a scam.”

“Did they bring any evidence?” King Crendle asked. “Some proof of these claims.”

“There was this,” the steward said, holding out an old, brass-colored plate. King Crendle took the plate and examined it. It was fine metal work with intricate edging like leaves. The coat of arms in the center was unlike anything King Crendle had seen. It was a stag with a wood ax resting on its antlers. It wasn’t any house that King Crendle had visited, but he had seen it in history books.

“A gift from their house?” Lord Rotten asked.

“It could be a fake,” Lord Ligon said. “It’s a crime to falsify a house’s coat of arms, even a fictional house.”

“Except that this,” King Crendle said, turning the plate over and pointing to another seal, “is my family’s mark. This was given to the Bessrin Wood Company by my house as a blessing to their journey. It’s too well made for the common man to create and there isn’t a blacksmith who would dare make a false coat of arms.”

“The Bessrin Wood Company disappeared over a hundred years ago!” Lord Ligon said. “How come we’re only hearing about this now?”

“Perhaps our friends can tell us that,” King Crendle said, holding onto the plate. “See them into the grand hall, I’ll be with them shortly.”

The servant bowed and left the room. King Crendle considered the plate for a moment, frowning a little and shaking his head. “Too many unanswered questions. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“They may well be charlatans, my king,” Lord Ligon said. “Don’t give them

anything.”

“I will hear what they have to say before I pass judgment,” King Crendle said. “Come, let’s go and meet with these mysterious new friends.”

King Crendle led the small council to the main hall, tall pillars of stone held the domed roof aloft with banners of the eight houses suspended between them. The king’s throne was carved of marble, draped with layers of fur, and adorned with decorations of gold. King Crendle looked down from the granite dais and saw two strangers. The young man was tall and muscular with dark hair and a freshly-trimmed beard that covered the lower half of his face. He was dressed in wool with leather shoulder armor and a cloak of dark-green material with the hood drawn back. The person next to him was much shorter and it took King Crendle a minute to realize that she was probably younger than ten. She was dressed in similar clothing, but lacked shoulder armor and had shorted cloak.

The two bowed deeply as King Crendle came in. If they were frauds, they had studied well. Their form was old, about a hundred years old. If they were truly from the Bessrin Wood Company, their behavior matched the timeline.

“Hail King Crendle,” the young man said. “We are humbled by your presence.”

“And I am honored by yours,” King Crendle said. He turned the plate over in his hands and looked between the pair. “Tell me, where did you come across this?”

“A family heirloom,” the young man said. “It was given to our great-great-grandfather by your great-grandfather, King Andros.”

“And I’m led to believe you are of the Bessrin Wood Company? Where has your company been all this time?”

“We just recently left the woods after one hundred years.”

“You only just left?”

“No, your majesty,” the young man shook his head. “We just escaped.”

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“It will be a long journey,” King Andros said. “But I’m hoping that you will come back.”

“By the end of the year,” Lord Bessrin said, smiling, “we’ll come back with enough lumber to build a fleet that will make the navies of the world look like pleasure cruises.”

“Whatever your success, it will be the success of a nation. Now, go. Your charge has been given and you’ve been given the king’s blessing. Good hunting to you!”

The Bessrin Wood Company was loaded up with horse carts and enough supplies for the men and their families. The families were all chosen and paid in advance for a one-

year mission to explore the farthest parts of the wild forest. Lord Bessrin had questioned the success of the small trips out to the forest and back each day. A year in the wildest part would yield the best collection of lumber that the kingdom had ever seen.

The expedition had left with a great deal of pomp and circumstance, the caravan being led out of the city like a parade with cheering crowds and celebration. Outside the city walls, the journey was quiet as the horses pulled the wagons, punctuating their march with loud snorts and grunting. The two or three woodcutters rode with their families, enjoying some time to relax as the company moved far into uncharted territory. There would be work and pay not just for the woodcutters, but the women and children who were willing to lend their hand to the success of the camp. The caravan traveled for three days before settling in the farthest reaches of the forest.

From the moment Lord Bessrin changed out of his formal clothing, he joined ranks with the woodcutters. He marked the trees that were scheduled to be cut and would join the group as they cut through the trees he'd chosen the day before. The first few days were successful and smooth, trees felled to clear space for the camp in the coming months. The camp was fully assembled with long-term structures rather than flimsy tents. The trees were already being processed into easier-to-travel boards and Lord Bessrin was able to calculate the profits of each day in his own home. On the fourth day, the company encountered trouble.

“No one wants to go near it,” Tomlin, Lord Bessrin’s assistant said, “they’re afraid of it.”

“Afraid of a tree?” Lord Bessrin scoffed. “What for?”

“It’s Old Fren again. Superstitious old coot has every in a panic about it. Omens or some nonsense.”

“I should have left Fren behind,” Lord Bessrin scowled. “If I didn’t need his experience, I would have...”

“Not this one!” Old Fren was yelling at the other woodsmen. “Any of the others are fine, but we should respect the Lord of the Forest!”

“Fren,” Lord Bessrin walked over with a sigh. “What is all this?”

“My lord,” Old Fren bowed. “I’ve never asked for much, have I? I’ve been a hard worker and a loyal woodsman. I’ve got more chips in my ax than any of these pups and I would wager I’m as strong as any of them.”

“You’ve been reliable and your experience has been helpful, but the problem is that your superstitions stand in the way of our progress.”

“Lord Bessrin, I beg you. This tree belongs to the Lord of the Forest. I may be the only one who believes in him, but I know his marks. Look at the branches! Flowers at this time of year? This is a beloved tree of the Fae Lord and if we do any harm to it, we will be punished!”

“Fae Lord?” Lord Bessrin said. “Fren, the Fae Lords are just fairy tales. They can no more harm us than the Bear of Hours.”

A few of the men laughed, but no one seemed especially convinced. Lord Bessrin stepped forward and looked at the tree. It was marked with a strip of bright red cloth to tell the men that it was to be cut down. The trunk was thick at the base and grew well over twenty feet tall. The branches were covered in tiny pink flowers that seemed to glitter like stars in the midafternoon sun. It would be easy to work around it, but Lord Bessrin needed to take control of the situation. This would be one inch to give, but Old Fren would take it as far as he could.

“Fren, if you want to protect this tree, I won’t make you chop it down,” Lord Bessrin raised his ax. “But I won’t let an old story scare me off.”

The ax swung and smashed into the bark of the tree. The men around him all seemed to hold their breath until Lord Bessrin took the sharp edge of his tool out of the wood. There was a moment of quiet and Lord Bessrin turned back to his men. As soon as his eyes left the tree, a bright light erupted behind him and a force knocked him off his feet. The men all fell in front of him and staggered to get to their feet. Lord Bessrin turned, looking at the tree behind him.

The being that stood in front of him was tall and lithe, with long arms and fingers flexing in the air like roots looking for water. His head was covered with thick boughs of leaves and he wore no clothing. He stood as still as an oak tree as he examined the wounded tree.

“The greed of men,” the Lord of the Forest said, shaking his head. “It never fails to amaze me.”

“You—you...”

“Silence!” The Fae Lord yelled, turning to the company. His face was human in shape, but distinctly animal as well. The features looked like they would be better suited for a wolf or a big cat that prowled the foot of a mountain. The Lord of the Forest fumed as he looked over to the men.

“All my trees,” the Fae Lord snarled. “All my domain and you do not listen to my warnings. The old man knows the tales well. You chose not to heed the signs of the Fae

Lords. Now, my favored tree is dying because of you. Shameful. There must be a cost...”

“I’ll take the punishment alone,” Lord Bessrin said, bowing his head. “It was my ax, my command, my decision. Let my men leave this place and they won’t bother you, I swear.”

“You feel responsible,” the Lord of the Forest said. “At least that is admirable. Any punishment I give you will not be enough. Killing you will be too quick and I would grow bored of constantly torturing you. Therefore you will torture yourself.

“I sentence you to one hundred years,” the Lord of the Forest smiled, a predator snarling down at its prey. “You will never leave this forest. Your woodsmen and their family will be trapped with you, a permanent reminder of your greed. If any of you survive your punishment, perhaps you will be wiser to the world outside of your prison.”

The Lord of the Forest raised his arms and Lord Bessrin looked away from the light as it blinded him again. The forest felt quieter, marked by some shift in the universe. Lord Bessrin told the rest of the men to head home and tend to their families.

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“Lord Bessrin,” the young man explained, “sent search parties out to try and escape the forest, but they would always end up going back to the camp. We had enough to survive, but a one-year expedition turned into a lifetime of trying to survive. My sister and I were born in the forest. We are the first people since that expedition began to leave.”

“Why one hundred years?” King Crendle asked. He hadn’t interrupted the young man as he told his story.

“The Lord of the Forest didn’t want Lord Bessrin to feel he had only failed those who he outlived,” the man said. “He wanted the guilt to devour him until his dying day. Not just for those in his company, but the generations that would come after him.”

“And you are his descendants?”

“Rymen Bessrin,” the man said, bowing his head. “And this is my sister, Lyra Bessrin.”

“And do you come us only to tell this tale?” Lord Ligon asked. “Or have you come to ask for your lordship back?”

“On the contrary,” Rymen said. “We’ve come to offer ourselves to you and the kingdom. As your majesty will recall, we owe the kingdom our promised lumber and we’ve had one hundred years to harvest it.”

“And what do you ask in return? We will not turn away from a gift, but what do you

want from me?”

“Our people have been separated from your kingdom for too long. We know we need allies in a world that aren’t contained to ourselves. With your permission, our small community would like to join the kingdom. That will come with all the duties and responsibilities to you that any other part of your kingdom has. We don’t ask for much beyond a home.”

“Then welcome home Lord Rymen Bessrin,” the king smiled. “There will be much we’ll have to discuss...”