

The XVth Appolinaria was moving like a great ant swarm in the warmth of the late summer afternoon. Apparently oblivious to the rivulets of sweat tracing clear lines in the dust covering their faces, the soldiers kept their eyes forward, moving as one, heads high. Suddenly the “stop” command made them freeze in their steps. “All right people, get the camps ready for the night” the voice of the centurion was heard. “Blah, and not a second too soon” murmured Arrius to his friend. “My throat is so parched that the first sip of water I will take will take with it at least a layer of skin”. “I hear you, friend”, Gallius replied “I can barely talk myself. Cursed be this barbarian land and its dryness. Give me a Roman summer at any time, mosquitoes and all, not this stupid, dry and dusty autumn in the middle of the woods”.

They went towards where the tents were pitched and found the ones belonging to their centuria. A cook with a big jug of wine mixed with water was passing around full cups. After drinking two cups each the friends started helping pitching the tents. “I think your wish is about to be fulfilled, Gallius. Look, there’s a fog coming, you will have all the humidity you want” Arrius smiled to his friend, then went inside the tent to drop his helmet and the heavy shield on the sleeping pallet. Coming back out of the tent, he called to the cook and got a new full cup, then walked towards the edge of the camp, while sipping his wine with delight. Sitting himself on an old stump, he watched the shadows of the trees getting longer and longer on the ground, then slowly fading as the mists were raising in the forest.

He caught movement with the corner of his eye. Turning his head, a glimmer of white between two heavy leafed branches of a bush caught his eye. Carefully setting the cup on the ground, hand on the hilt of his sword, he cautiously walked towards the underbrush. With the tip of his sword he parted the branches and peered intently. Far away, under the denser trees,

he saw a young woman half-walking, half running through the high ferns, a big dog at her heels. She stopped for a second, turned her head and looked him in the eyes, then turned around and disappeared behind a taller bush. Half torn between going back to the camp and getting Gallius and more men and not losing the girl, finally Arrius broke into a run after her.

Somehow he seemed to not manage to get closer than seeing her fleetingly right at the moment she would disappear again behind the trunk of a tree or behind another tall bush. Then he finally saw her clearly: a big clearing in the forest opened and he saw her hurrying ahead, towards the other edge of the clearing, where the fog seemed to pour in a thick wave to cover the ground. She turned again and looked at him, then stepped forward and was like swallowed by a dense wave of fog. Almost out of breath, Arrius crossed the clearing and hesitated for a second. In this very spot the fog was so dense it seemed almost solid. Telling himself he was making a big mistake, he withdrew his sword from the scabbard and cautiously stepped ahead, feeling the ground with his foot, hand clenching the hilt of the sword to the point his fingers started hurting.

After a couple dozen steps and a few minutes that seemed like hours, the fog became less dense. He was actually starting to see the rays of the setting sun piercing through the fog. Hold on a second, he must have been turned around in the fog somehow, when he had entered the clearing the sun was to his left, now it was to the right. Sure enough, he saw he was in the clearing again. Or was he? Something didn't feel right. For sure the clearing looked different somehow. He looked around and in the now dissipating fog saw that the clearing did not look like a forest clearing in

autumn, but like a forest clearing in spring, with fresh green leaves on the trees and myriad of wild flowers covering the ground. And the sun was too high in the sky. When he had entered the forest the sun was setting, and was almost ready to disappear below the horizon. Now it was a good three spear height up in the sky. A bird to his right started chirping, and like that was some kind of signal, dozen of others started singing, and butterflies invaded the clearing. Staggering to the fallen trunk of a tree nearby, Arrius put back his sword in it's scabbard and sat heavily on the thick fell tree, looking around in a daze. What was going on?

"You lost her, didn't you?" an amused voice sounded close to him. He jumped to his feet, hand to the hilt of the sword again, and looked around. Not farther than a dozen steps away, a fox was sitting, fuzzy tail wrapped around itself, looking at him intently. "Who's there?" Arrius shouted, looking wildly around him. "No need to be so agitated, my boy. She does that all the time." The voice said again. Arrius stopped and looked at the fox. The pointy muzzle opened and the fox said "Now calm down and tell me, what are you doing here?" Arrius took two steps backwards, tripped on the fallen tree and fell on his back. He hurriedly scrambled back on his feet, grabbed his sword from the ground and faced the fox. "What did you say?" he asked, while thinking to himself "I must be going nuts, I'm actually talking to a fox".

"I said" the fox replied with an amused twinkle in its eyes, "to calm down and tell me what are you doing here". "All right, I am going nuts" Arrius thought while working hard to find his voice again "not only I am talking to a fox but a

fox is talking to me". After he inhaled deep a few times, he managed to say: "Where exactly is this 'here'? And if you don't mind me asking, 'when' is this 'here'? I entered the forest a few minutes ago and it was autumn and the sun was setting, now it seems it's spring and it's morning". "I see", the fox replied, getting up and stretching with delight. "By your clothing you are from another land, and never heard of the Charmed Land or the Gates of the Mists, am I right?" "Charmed Land? Gates? No, I... I saw this girl in the woods and followed her and found myself here". "But you did pass through the mists, didn't you?" asked the fox, walking nonchalantly towards him. "Yes, it was a very dense fog, I couldn't even see the ground under my feet". "Well, my boy, that was a Gate of Mists. The Gates are the connections between your world and the Charmed Land".

"All right, you know what?" Arrius snatched nervously at his sword and pushed it back in its scabbard. "I am not really interested in all this 'charmed' business, 'misty gates', talking foxes and singing birds. I need to get back to my army, how do I get there?" "My dear boy, I have no idea what army you are talking about, and no idea where or even 'when' was the Gate you came through. The Gates are a one-way deal, can't go back and forth through them, so you need to find the Gate that will bring you back to your time and your place. I wish you luck." And the fox started walking towards a path that was winding among the trees at the edge of the clearing. "Wait!" yelled Arrius, hurrying after the fox. "And how do I find this Gate?" "Frankly, my dear boy, and how would I know?" "But... but... you have to help me. Who would know?" asked Arrius, now walking beside the fox on the path. "You can try asking the Mother of the Forest. She about knows everything, the old hag, but I am not sure if you will like her help. She always asks for a reward first and what she asks for is not easily found". "And where do I find this... 'Mother of the Forest'? Can you take me to her?" The fox stopped, cocked its head at him and said: "I think I could. It would be interesting to see you struggle to get what she will ask for as reward. Follow me. Her cottage isn't

too far from here.”

Struggling to keep up with the fox that seemed to have no problem jumping fallen branches or going underneath them and graciously jumping from stone to stone over the rushing creeks in the forest, Arrius finally saw another clearing opening. In the middle of the clearing, what he first thought was just a pile of old fallen trees proved out to be a cottage, with walls of weathered logs and a roof made out of thick grass that seemed to grow straight from the roof itself. “Here we are” said the fox, sitting down and furling its tail around its legs. “Now go in and don’t forget your manners.” He timidly knocked at the old door and the door started opening with a loud creak. “Come in, now that you are here. What do you want?” The grumpy voice of an old woman came from inside. Timidly he entered the dark room and saw the Mother of the Forest sitting in front of a fire, stirring in a cauldron. Her skin looked like old crumpled parchment and strands of white hair were escaping from under a dark hood. She looked as old as the forest as she was stirring in the cauldron with the long-handled wooden spoon held in stick-thin fingers with long dark fingernails that looked more like claws than fingernails. “Good aftern... er... Good morning, ma’am, I need to find the Gate to bring me back to my world. The fox outside said you could tell me where I can find it.” “He did, did he?” the crone cackled. “I hope he told you that I won’t help you for free”. “Yes ma’am, he did. What do I need to do? I really need to go back to my army, or they will think I’ve deserted right before the war.” The old woman chuckled “yes, yes, you young people are all in a hurry. Don’t worry, child, the time here is not like the time there. You can spend here a lifetime and still get back to your time not more than a minute after you’ve left there”. Relieved, Arrius said “That is great. So, what is the service you require for helping me?”. “See this brew I’m making? It would be nice to add some extra flavor to it. So why don’t you and get me a few golden apples from the garden of the Stag?” “Errr... ok, and where is this garden?” The crone chuckled again “and for telling you where the garden is, what would be the service you will render unto me?” her big ironic smile revealed yellow crooked teeth. “Nevermind” said Arrius and left the cottage, closing carefully the door behind him. “Well?” said the fox, “so what does she want?” Arrius sat himself heavily on the ground. “She wants some bloody golden apples from some bloody garden of some bloody Stag and she asked me for another reward if I wanted her to tell me where this

bloody garden is” and full of frustration he hit the ground with his fist. “Come, come, my boy, no need to get so mad. I will get you there.” “You will?” Arrius jumped to his feet. “For free?” “Sure, my boy. Follow me. It will be interesting to see how you will be able to defeat the ogre guarding the garden“ (to be continued)

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