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This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

This story has never been shared with anyone, and after today, it will never be shared again - so remember it carefully. This is one of few remaining accounts I have left to cherish of what was my home world, written by a child not much older than I when I first began my training. Ekihiel Raulam. Had he survived, I would have found him later the following day and been able to care for him - even taken him on as a pupil. But this is just another mistake I must bear the burden of. Another individual I have failed to protect.

As unyielding as were the fires that later tore apart everything we ever knew, the darkness spared agony from no one. The ancients that had protected us for thousands of years watched us perish in a single night, and cowered in shame. Though the petals that fell reminded us with the reflection of our fallen in mourning, it killed the ones that remained as swiftly as it was able.

THE FOREST

Ekihiel.

That was the name I was assigned before my birth three hundred and forty years ago.
It is probably the name everyone I ever knew will forget.

No, no, that was a stupid thought. Forget that.

Besides, no one is ever going to read this.

I'm only recording this in my log that I may take a lesson from my mistakes next time.
My teacher is already going to be very upset with me ... but maybe I can redeem something out of recording my experience.

I had been placed at the end of our group. Each of us were placed at a mile distance from each other in a grid-like pattern. We would communicate to each other throughout the night through creature howls, and great night bird songs, and relay information given from our teacher at the very head of the group, all the way back to me.

It was easy enough to stay awake the first day, but come the second night, I grew weary.

I had recieved my last message informing me that the others were moving up to the next overlook point about an hour ago. I assumed my position atop the ancient Arilliae about 40 paces ahead, and nestled myself at a nook in the branches to wait for the next reply.
Another hour passed.

I tried calling out, but there was never a response.

I ventured the thought of looking for a companion among my group to ascertain they were alright, but instead decided to call out again.

Nothing.

I felt anxious, and decided it was time to search for my friends. But that was the moment I fell, and, well...

My ankle is twisted. I woke this morning to find my body lodged into a pocket in the soil just beneath the tree, with its roots forming a kind of roof over me. I don't actually know if it's just been one day. My head is throbbing, and I've got the appetite of a starved goliath. I may have to reserve my energy for now...

I'm sure the group is furious with me.

I need to get out of this hole somehow though...

I managed to free my leg that was tangled under roots, but...

I tried calling for help. Maybe by now they would be nearer to my location. They had to be searching for me, right?

I struggled at first to see. I was a little ways underground from the surface, but eventually, I was able to pull myself by the sproutlets in the earth until I could peer over the edge of the hole I had fallen into.

I was terrified the moment I looked.

The Arilliae... What happened? They don't feel right. Something is horribly wrong, and I don't know what ... but the blossoms that were once angelic white have turned to the color of bloodshed. It appears to continue throughout the entire forest. I have never in my life heard of such a phenomenon. Am I just hallucinating?

I need to get out of here.

I've been able to fashion a cast for my ankle for the time being by shaving bark from the Arilliae and twisting fibers into twine to wrap around it until it was locked in place. It was a painstaking process, but for now, I can walk. I just can't run.

I haven't seen signs of my group. Where are they? I've been to two of their posts already, but they're gone. Why would they leave without warning? I know exactly where they were, so they should be here ... or at least somewhere near. I'll continue my search forward.

I suppose this is what I get for being clumsy. Afterall, one of the main lessons they teach us is that recklessness can result almost instantaneously in death. I should consider myself lucky in that respect. I feel a bit calmer with the thought. It won't be long that I find them, I'm sure of it.

Maybe they know what happened to the forest while I was unconscious.

I called out for my friends and my teacher by name. No response.

Maybe they really did head home.

Well, I may be deeper in the forest than we usually venture, but I'm fairly confident I can smell out the path that will take me back.

Actually, now that I think about it, I remember that our teacher wore a potent smelling flower in case this scenario happened.

I'm going to try and find them.

They're gone.

All of their posts are vacant. Not even a sign anyone was ever here apart from the faint notches carved into the wood just below the branches.

I can smell it. The tangy scent of the flower she was carrying. I'm sitting right where she had been. The scent lingers the most here. It dissipates in every other direction.

So which way did they go? Back home?

I just wish I hadn't been so careless...

I played a song on my Arilliae woodwind hoping that someone would hear me after a while as I tread along a disheveled path in the blossoms.

It seemed far quieter out here than before, and not just because I was the only one out here for miles. It was an unnatural quiet.

Honestly, though there was no response for hours, I continued playing my song until my lips swelled with pain because I simply couldn't bear the dead silence.

The sky is dimming now. I'm going to stop and try to wait out this hunger.

I was fortunate enough to attain a small portion of meat from an avian that had sprained a wing. I felt strange though. I felt terrible for killing it.

In the least, I'm somewhat fed for now. I'm still a bit dehydrated, but if I keep going at an even pace, I should be able to make it back home before it can pose a serious threat.

I believe my mentor told us before that it takes about three to four weeks for one of us to actually die from either starvation or dehydration.

It's slowly started to sink in that my group really did forget about me.

I don't recognize this part of the forest. We didn't come from this direction. I've strayed off from the original path.

I don't know where I am.

I've been trying so desperately to recover the scent of the path that we took on our way out, but my head throbs heavily. All of the smells have mixed together, and I can barely tell my feet from my hands anymore.

I can only rely on the position of the sun to give me a vague concept of where I'm headed.

I found a break in the trees, which is rare, and I can tell I'm headed just northeast of the Messenger training home. If anything, I should pass not too far from the shelters, and I should be able to spot them by eye once I close in.

My mother once told me something.

She said that my father was once like me. That he hadn't much courage when he first began training. She said he often sought peace by himself in the forest on the outskirts of the moonlit meadow — our sacred place of ceremony. She said he enjoyed silence. That it was the only thing that reminded him sometimes that he was alive.

I can't help but wonder what he would have done at my age in this situation.

I want to see mother...

I want her robin breast and jiyuur grass soup with the noba spice that I love. I want the white fur from my bed to wrap around myself and lie in...

I have to get home...

Agh, now the page is a mess...

If only I could be as strong as father was

It's been over a week since I was separated from my group. Something feels wrong. It shouldn't be taking this long to get back.

I should have been back at the stair to my door three days ago.

I've been passing my time throwing stones into the forest ahead of me and waiting for the sound when it takes out a chip in the surface.

I know my mother would scorn me for mistreating our ancients, but I can't help but blame them.

I am too exhausted to care, anyway.

Part of me wonders if I'm seeing things and becoming delirious.

I tried to sink my teeth into a mangled branch earlier thinking it was a fallen Nagius.

I feel ridiculous.

My tunic is slashed at my left side now. From my hip straight through the hem that my mother carefully sewed a rectangular pattern into. Now many of the threads are tangled in the area, or hang below my belt.

I thought I could climb and see ahead in front of me.

Well, I did. But...

I don't know why I'm even bothering to write this right now as I'm still walking. It feels like some null distraction for myself.

I filled myself with this strange hope earlier. I wished I could be rescued by one of our legendary warriors. What an honor it would be to personally be escorted home by one of them. I mean, if I've been gone this long, surely one of them would come, right? I really hope they come, whoever it be.

But that's what we endure our hardship for, isn't it? To become legendary like them one day. To be fearless, strong, able to see through everything against all odds.

I just don't know. Maybe it's not in my blood. Ever since my second year, I've wanted to give up. I've never had the kind of spirit that they expect of our best and finest. They're something else. I don't know if it's a separation they put between themselves and the rest of this forest world, or maybe I'm over-analyzing it ... I just can't help but find them otherworldly at times.

That sounds so stupid coming from me, regarding my own heritage.

That's just it though. It's not something we're born with. It's something we're trained to become. It's what our parents and mentors have ingrained into us for thousands of years. It's the only way we've been able to survive so long in this world of sloping hills and trees that stretch endlessly into whatever celestial hell entraps us.

Is it fear that drives them?

Like the fear of being swallowed?

Is it the echo and groan of the forests, the patience of the night, the prolonged lives we've been granted to endure it all for hundreds of years? Do we really stay here for safety?

I know that we may leave when we're grown. I know that there are other worlds out there waiting to be visited, and that I shall see them someday should I succeed, but something drills at me that keeps me from sleeping for the last couple nights.

Why do we still stay here when we only remain to conquer death?

I fear this may have been a mistake.

Maybe I should have waited where I was for someone to send for me and take me home.

I'm losing my will to continue picking up my feet over and over only to get nowhere.

I don't even know if I'm headed in the right direction.

I haven't seen these forests like the older one's have. I don't know these places like they do. Everything looks the same to me. The same blood red blossoms. The same pale skinned trees. The same slopes weaving in and out of my field of vision.

Everything is starting to blur.

I'm passing the time by carving a segment of branch I tore off from a tree with my knife.

I heard that some of the older students would do this a lot to regain focus, and concentrate their thoughts in the silence.

I'm not very good at it though. I split the wood in half by mistake. It was too dry.

I'm starting to have swirls in my vision.

I needed to stop for a while.

I started to cry. I feel pathetic, weak, diminished.

I want to go home.

The forest is whispering horrible things to me.
They're watching me, standing tall above me.

I just want them to stop staring...

Don't look at me...

It's been a few days since I last wrote. A hot, humid rain is falling today. I can't write as legibly in this weather, but I've found a marker finally that can tell me where I am.

I bypassed the entire shelter area by a couple miles north. But there's a deep pond here concealed on one side by a barrage of trees and roots. If I take the path near the base of it, it will take me straight through to the heart of the Royals' home.

I'm finally almost there.

I'm coming home.

I'm so relieved. I thought I was losing my mind.

I am so elated right now, I just have to write as I make my way closer to capture this excitement. I can see it now. I see the clay tiles, and the hints of gold. I can see the elven grass growing from the stone gate to the front door. I can see-

The Royal premises have been torn apart. Silk curtains are ripped from the walls and thrown into the corners. Ornaments and scraps of clothing are scattered to the wood floor. It's broken in some places.

Something terrible happened here.

Even the siblings quarters have been jostled, though are mostly intact. Her brush looks almost as if it were just used this morning, but upon closer inspection, there's a thin film of dust coating almost everything.

How long have I been away for? When did this happen?

Mother.

I need to get to mother.

Everyone is gone.

Bodies have been dragged from homes, burned, carried away. There's trails of blood and scorch marks everywhere. The rain must have put out the remaining flames, but there's still piles of smoldering materials that I can't identify scattered everywhere. Mostly sections of roof or wall, and remainders of gardens, broken pottery, and clothes.

I can't find traces of anyone left.

How could they have fallen so easily?

Homes have been burned to the ground, some appear to still stand only to reveal the interior completely scorched. Only one shelter seems to have been unaffected.

I'm making my way home as quickly as I can.

But I feel a severe cavity inside of me growing, a void that's telling me not to feel what I want to feel yet.

I'm nervous.

I'm scared.

I'm standing stone-still at the gaping doorway to my ashen coated home.

I don't want to go in.

No

I ca 't ac ept it

Sh 's not

g one

no...

I am consumed by intolerable hunger.

I can't take it.

It's not true. None of this is true. It's not possible.

I'm delirious.

Raiding for food.

It's moldy.

It tastes like powdery dirt and cheese.

I swallow it dry.

I am disgusted by my own hands. I've been scrubbing them on and off for hours. They've started to bleed.

I screamed at the top of my lungs for anyone to hear me.

Anyone at all.

Or anything.

But no one could hear me.

I fell asleep in another's bed last night. I felt at peace. I woke up this morning to the best meal I've had in a hundred years. My mother greeted me with a smile after I left my room.

My friends from training are waiting for me just outside the door.

It was all just a dream.

Ha...

Who am I kidding?

Everyone is dead.

My mother is dead. My friends and teacher, too. Everyone is gone. There's no weapons to be found, and I have no way to escape.

My kingdom has been destroyed.

I have spent a week here trying to find consolation in all of this wreckage, living on spoiled food, getting progressively sicker as I wait for a sign.

I have no reason to continue this suffering.

If I were to live forever, I would never understand why I was made to survive only to witness the death of my entire civilization.

A horrible monster did this.

Someone among us.

Someone *did this* to us.

To my mother, and my friends.

They killed them with bare hands.

The forest turned this color the night they were killed. I know it. They were already dead before I even awoke.

They started with my group of friends. Killed us off silently without any of us aware, just waiting for a sound that would never be uttered. I fell before they could reach me.

Of course.

My options...

I don't think I can make it 900 miles to the next Messenger village. And that's even to say if they were alive, as well. This was no accident. I don't think we were the only ones affected.

I've used up what little there was left as far as food rations from the entire area. I can't go forward, nor back.

To my knowledge, everyone that was here is now dead. I can't reasonably try and wait out some kind of rescue.

Oh god...

I've spent the last few hours sitting by the edge of the pond, staring into its surface.

I don't think I could look any worse at any other point in my life. My skin is nearly as pale as my hair, my eyes look black instead of brown, and I have discoloration under my eyes so pronounced it looks like I was beaten half to death.

I'm honestly already almost there.

I don't even know why I hesitate.

But I believe I would like a few more moments of peace.

If I close my eyes as I lay beside the pond with my hand resting against the water, I can hear my mother singing to me.

She sings to me of the golden gates of the elven kingdom, and the glory of our war heroes, and the battles fought with all our allies.

I'm crying again.

I feel myself dimming slowly.

My hands have started doing things I don't want to do. They're whispering to me.

Please, just let me continue resting here...

Just let me be...

I could fall asleep here for hours.

It's the only thing that feels comfortable to me anymore. Days keep coming and going so slowly and peacefully. The hunger doesn't even hurt any more.

But if I lay here forever, I won't be able to go the way I want to.

I'll rest some more ... just until tomorrow, when the cool evening air sets in.

Ever since I woke up, something strange has come over me. An erratic energy I was only acutely aware of.

After having shredded my tunic into strips with my knife, my hands have been moving rapidly, knowingly, weaving and intertwining the knots in my salvation.

I finally have a way out.

It's been fifty two days since contact with my own kind.
Almost two weeks since I realized what had happened.

You know how I said in the beginning that no one was going to read this? The writing seemed pointless to me. And even after I realized everyone was gone, I still continued to pour my thoughts here, and I didn't really know why.

But I realized, I'm writing to *you*.

Whoever you are.

And I'm thankful.

I wanted to be remembered somehow, for who I was. I want someone to find this, to know what happened to our people. To my friends, my family.

I'm so glad I was finally confident enough to do something worth remembering.

And however long this journal may lie here until you happen to find me, I'll know this was worth it.

Right now, I'm about to jump.

There's a strong branch hanging just above the pond. I tied the rope I had crafted onto it, and, well... I guess you'll know.

I'm throwing my journal along with my flute onto the ground from here before I go.

I am excited at the thought of leaving something so important behind. I've recorded almost all of the teachings from my mentors starting at my beginning up until now. Maybe we can keep all of our hard work alive still.

And maybe, you happen to be a Messenger, too.
Maybe some of us *did* survive.

I really hope so.

If you *are* a Messenger ... I'm glad to have my belongings passed into the hands of someone I can respect so much.

Thank you for everything you ever did.

I'm genuinely happy if you made it out okay.

But ... I'm afraid I have to say goodbye now.

If I can just ask one last thing before I leave, it's to preserve my memory as best as you can.

I'd like you to remember me for who I was before all of this.

Ekihiel Raulam.

Just a young Messenger in training.

Thank you.

And goodbye.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.L.K. was born and raised on the coast of Northern California along with four younger siblings. She learned of her love of writing and art at a very young age and began pursuing a movement towards an artistic career. This is her first published work of fiction.