

Daisy

“DAISY! CAN YOU GET down to Ruhann? The portal squirrels are all in a flap about their trees.”

“Don’t call them that.” Daisy Miller looked up from her desk to see her boss striding towards her. He rolled his eyes.

“It’s no different than calling us monkeys. I wouldn’t be offended.”

“Really?” Daisy just thought it was polite not to call people squirrels.

Not that there was anything wrong with squirrels; they were cute, even if some people considered them vermin. Squirrels didn’t have a whole lot of prowess beyond their vast nut storage and location expertise. The Ratatoskr had portals.

The forest-dwelling people of Ruhann kept themselves to themselves, preferring to live at one with nature over joining the modern-day rat race, no pun intended. No one had ever worked out how they controlled portal travel, and Daisy suspected the Ratatoskr didn’t know either; they weren’t the kind of people who needed to dissect everything. Portals just worked, and that was a blessing

from the natural world. As sentient beings, you couldn't cut them up to find out how they functioned, although no doubt some had tried over the centuries.

She supposed it was hard to describe a Ratatoskr to someone without mentioning squirrels though. They did look uncannily like human-sized Sciuridae.

"Anyway, can you? They probably just got their lunars mixed up, but we can't risk the anaesthetic crop if something is actually wrong." Hari prodded her. Oh yes, her blithely ignorant boss. She suspected he had financial interest in the crop, if he was this bothered. It's not like the Ratatoskr were their customers, and Daisy had a backlog of hundreds of cases of malfunctioning magic to work through. She did not know what was going on lately, but she didn't like it. She just wanted a quiet life, getting home at a sane time, and eating cereal in front of the television.

She sighed.

"Sure. But someone needs to go check out..." She looked down at her screen. "Ah yes, Celia Blackthorn's penthouse. She says the lights keep going out at inopportune times. There's no reason a modern building like that would have dodgy wiring."

Hari's face brightened at the mention of a Blackthorn, one of the richest families in the city. He would love an in with them. Daisy was just happy not to have to deal with the fallout of whatever fault Celia could find with their service. A trip to the countryside was starting to sound a much more appealing idea already.

She hadn't had many dealings with the Ratatoskr, not many city people had even met one, but she understood they were friendly and kind. Humans were part of the ecosystem too and deserved just as much respect as a tree. While Hari might think the Blackthorns should be

respected more than a tree, Daisy knew her place, and that trees were more important than money at the end of the day.

She was probably being sent to Ruhann because she was one of the few people at the Grid who'd bothered to study biology. Her colleagues mostly came from engineering backgrounds, with a smattering of physicists. They loved coming up with theories on magic creation, yet always failed to prove anything of any real value. What Daisy knew was trees produced oxygen, and without oxygen they would all be dead.

The trees of the Great Forest also produced a substance in their sap that numbed pain. It was crucial for healthcare, from the mildest painkiller to putting people under for major operations, and the trees couldn't be successfully farmed. It was a miracle that corporations hadn't wrestled control of it off the Ratatoskr, but they hadn't.

Daisy pulled up details of the support ticket on her console. There wasn't much to go on, just an urgent request for assistance from one of the Ratatoskr assigned to interact with human society. It implied the Grid's magic had leaked into the Great Forest somehow. The Grid's network didn't extend as far as Ruhann, so the request was puzzling. She was often supplied with the barest of information on cases, the only difference being she could usually rely on gridmail or phone calls to find out more. This time, her only option was to go in person.

"Since this is urgent, can I get a private charter?" Daisy asked.

"Not that urgent. Besides, there's that regatta on in Samaz. Good luck finding a boat on short notice."

ELLIE WARREN

She resisted the urge to sigh again. The quickest way out to Ruhann was by river boat, even if she was limited to the steamers. The roads were slow and indirect, without any places to charge cars. The range of newer models was ever-increasing, but she doubted she could get all the way to the forests of Ruhann on one charge, let alone return.

Even though she benefitted from reduced magic bills, she had never felt the need for a car of her own. Kirkhyrst had reliable trams and was easy enough to walk around, plus the old town wasn't designed with cars in mind. She could drive, just about, but there was very little reason to leave the city limits, not unless work sent her, and something about carrying around all that condensed magic in a small vehicle unnerved her.

So, the waterways it was. She checked the timetable, and there was a steamer leaving in just under an hour. She did the maths; if she could wrap up her visit in a couple of hours, she could get the last steamer back and be home in time to go straight to bed. What she really needed, was portal magic of her own.

Alas, humans were destined to rely on the Grid for magic. It powered their homes and transport and allowed industry to flourish. It was a marvel, really, but it did need a whole lot of equipment to function. Imagine having magic at your fingertips...

Just as Daisy was gathering up her belongings, a young, pale-faced woman walked in looking a bit lost.

"Take the intern, won't you?" Hari called over as he strode out the room.

"Hi," the intern mumbled. She looked terrified. Daisy liked to think she was a good person, deep down, yet however much she liked people in theory, she just preferred working on her own. She braced herself for a

PAWS AND PORTALS

tiring day, but it's not like she'd be stuck with the intern forever; placements were only ever for a few months, and the powers-that-be tended to rotate them around departments. Whoever needed grunt work the most.

"Hey, I'm Daisy, good to meet you." She held out an elbow, and the woman gently bumped hers in greeting.

"Lima Samson. I, um... my dad said I should learn how the power works, so, um... here I am?" Lima laughed nervously.

Daisy smiled back at her—she could do this. She had been Lima once upon a time, when meeting new people was hard. Some days it still was. That's why she worked in the bowels of the Grid. Well, most of the time. Lately she'd had a lot more call-outs than usual and she was missing out on all the ongrid gossip. Idle browsing was one of the few perks of a desk job.

"I don't know how much you'll learn about power management today, since we're heading out to the countryside. There are natural pools of magic, and of course they use it in small quantities, but it's nothing like what you'd be dealing with here. On the bright side, you get to meet the Ratatoskr."

"Oh, wow," Lima's face lit up. "I would have loved to have studied ecological management, but Dad says there's no money in it, they sell the sap for peanuts—Oh no, not peanuts, that's what my dad says, I would never..." Lima flushed bright red.

"That's OK, I hear they do actually like peanuts, just like the rest of us. Just no squirrel jokes, OK?"

Lima nodded furiously, her dark hair falling in her eyes. She wouldn't have looked too out of place in the vamp bar Daisy lived above. No judgement, they were pretty chilled out neighbours. Who was she to judge those who needed

a bit of O positive to stay healthy? The patrons chose to give up their blood willingly anyway. Other people's judgement kept the rent down.

She was more concerned that Lima might fry in the open sun—she didn't look like she spent much time outside, her skin was almost luminous against Daisy's bronze tone. Autumn was late coming this year, and the sun had been unrelenting.

"Maybe take a hat? This heat doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and there won't be so many places to take cover." Was that diplomatic enough?

"Oh sure, I have, er... an emergency kit in my bag. I worry a lot, so I'm, um... prepared?"

"Me too," Daisy smiled at Lima. She thought they might just get along fine.

They walked down the corridor past Hari's office where he gave them two thumbs up. He was alright most of the time, lacked a bit of tact and didn't get out from his own bubble too often, but he could have been worse. He trusted Daisy to get on with her work without breathing down her neck. She was good at teasing out the root cause of magic failures, and she couldn't think of many other places where she could put her skills to use.

Her mum loved to tell her stories of how she took appliances apart when she was little, much to her embarrassment. She wasn't sure she ever put them back together again, but her parents never got angry at her. They valued her inquisitive nature above the cost of repair. They probably kept the repair man on their street fed with their trade alone.

Turns out magic is hard to understand. It's a natural resource that ebbs and flows, and it was astonishing that humans had harnessed it at all. The reason she had a job

PAWS AND PORTALS

was because it could be unpredictable at times. After more than a century of trial and error, it had become stable enough that everyone had it in their homes. In fact, most city dwellers couldn't live without it.

Combine that prevalence with an inability to fix even minor issues and you get a busy support department at the Grid. They had a whole floor dedicated to taking calls and answering gridmail, and any that weren't a simple case of user error came down to Daisy's team in the basement. She made sure her engineers had more to go on than "doohickie doesn't work" and tried to analyse patterns in the faults, hoping to further refine how they used magic.

On a good day it was fascinating work. On a bad day, it was endless data entry and arguments over who was taking ownership of tickets, passing them back and forth, or more accurately, up and down stairs.

The Grid's offices were located in an area nicknamed the Gridiron, a former warehouse district that had become the city's centre. Hundreds of small businesses touting innovative uses of magic had popped up in the shadow of the Grid, eager for their slice of the pie. Being close by gave them an air of legitimacy; some were genuinely useful, but Daisy suspected many were selling the modern equivalent of snake oil.

It was convenient for the river at least, and Daisy and Lima made their way down to the docks where the upstream steamers would depart. It wasn't quite as grand as the cruise ship port, although care was taken to make it a warm welcome to *Kirkbyrst, City of Magic*. The illuminated sign gave the impression magic came from here rather than just channelled into the Grid by people like Daisy.

The Tarac River was a hive of activity in the warmer months. Daisy enjoyed people watching, making up stories for those who passed by. Gleeful expressions signalled tourists taking in the waterside sights. Others queued for downstream steamers, the promise of sandy beaches luring tired Kirkhyrstites out to the coast and the islands beyond. It was a little late in the morning for the glum faces to be commuters, but they muttered at those blocking the pavement all the same.

A gaggle of lab-coated students dipped sample containers into the water. Daisy imagined they were hoping to discover the next big thing in aquamagic... Or just hoping not to fail a class they didn't quite understand. Maybe they were the few studying biology like she did.

She surreptitiously glanced at her young companion, who was taking in the hustle and bustle wide-eyed, as if she was fresh off a boat herself.

“So how long have you been in Kirkhyrst?” Daisy prompted, wondering if she had come in from an ambitious farming community keen to harness magic to increase crop yields.

“Oh,” Lima frowned. “I’ve lived here all my life. I guess, I um... I never came down here. My... um... my dad... he wouldn’t like it.”

Daisy blinked. She barely knew anything about Lima, but she was already starting to dislike this man, who had impressed his will onto his nervous daughter. From a professional stand-point she knew she shouldn’t pry, so she mentally zipped her mouth and looked back out at the river.

In a quiet spot away from the boats, a group of white robed humans bobbed around in the still water. The power of water to revive and refresh was trending ongrid

PAWS AND PORTALS

among influencers, but Daisy thought there were better places to take your daily waters if you were into that kind of thing. A nice tranquil spa in the mountains or the azure waters of Samaz. The Tarac did flow through a vast city after all, and even with the best intentions in the world, unmentionables escaped into its waters now and then.

Along the riverbank, a hodgepodge of architectural styles clamoured for space and attention, from functional brick warehouses positioned for convenience, to the sleek and somewhat sterile high rises favoured by those with the money to spend on a view. Smaller houses with their own jetties were dotted here and there, leftovers from a time when space was not at a premium. The last holdouts to property developers who would just love to get their hands on prime real estate.

Those who didn't know what they were looking at might miss the ancient stone temples, blanketed green with moss, worshippers long forgotten. No one wanted to risk the wrath of a god, so they were left standing, just in case the gods actually existed. They weren't completely unloved; urban wildlife had made the vine-twined temples their home. Rats, foxes, pigeons, and an occasional bird of prey with an appreciation for on-site dinner options.

Daisy checked the time as Lima rummaged around in her oversized canvas bag. The steamer should be due any minute now; punctuality wasn't always their strong point, but no one who used them was really in a rush. Since she couldn't make her journey any faster, Daisy was determined to make the most of the day. The weather was fine, sunny but not too hot, with a fresh breeze coming off the river, and the silence between her and Lima was companionable, like they were longstanding colleagues, not acquaintances of mere minutes.

Lima withdrew a big floppy sun hat from the depths of her bag and fixed it firmly to her head. It didn't quite fit with her vamp girl aesthetic but not everyone was trying to fit in a pre-defined identity. Daisy wore faded, cut-off jeans and a scruffy t-shirt she'd picked up at a work conference, the cheesy slogan in cursive font reading *Make Every Day Magic!* Hardly dressing to impress, but she felt like those things wouldn't matter to the Ratatoskr. Hari hadn't really given her enough notice to go home and change, not if she wanted to be in Ruhann before tiffin.

The queue for the steamer was short, one family obviously setting out on holiday with their overstuffed bags and excited children, and a few solo travellers. Mostly human, but at the back was a large male shapeshifter, a wolf by the looks of his pack tattoos. Lima was trying very hard to look everywhere but at him.

"He won't bite," Daisy whispered. "Not unless you ask him to."

Lima flushed and pointedly stared in the opposite direction. Daisy had no such qualms.

The shifter's hair was dark with silver streaking through it, curling around his ears and neck. His human muscles were well defined, suggesting he didn't spend most of his time in lupine form, and his eyes were eerily golden. The expression on his face was one of mild boredom, that he had to do something so un-wolflike as queuing for a boat. He caught Daisy checking him out, and Lima not-checking him out, and smiled warmly. He was kind of cute, for a wolf.

"I have a question." Lima turned to Daisy, who made what she hoped was an encouraging face. "Why don't the Ratatoskr use their portals to come here? Wouldn't it be

easier than sending a message and then waiting for us to get our arses up to Ruhann?”

“I don’t think they like the city all that much. It’s not exactly... natural.”

“Hmm.” Lima went quiet again, staring out at the water. Her posture had relaxed, just a smidgen, since leaving the office.

“You’re here to learn, right?” Daisy asked.

Lima nodded.

“OK then. I want you to remember there’s no such thing as a stupid question. Not knowing something is not stupid, and it’s far better to ask if a wire is safe to touch than to touch it and get zapped by magic. I would know.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, in a weird way. It’s hard to explain, but I wouldn’t recommend trying it.”

A few minutes later, the gentle chug of the steamer engines signalled its arrival, followed by a high whistle as it let off steam. They were one of the earliest mainstream uses of harnessed magic, replacing coal furnaces with clean energy, though essentially, they still ran off boiling water. This one, named *Selene*, was painted a cheery yellow with red waves along its hull. It was basic, but welcoming.

Selene’s crew consisted of a captain and two attendants, who slid out the gangplank and tied it in place before ushering the waiting passengers on board. Daisy showed them her grid ID, granting her passage on any state run transport.

“She’s with me.” Daisy gestured to Lima, who was fumbling around her bag for small change. She wasn’t sure if interns benefitted from the usual perks but very few people were willing to cross a Grid employee. You never knew when you might need their help. The attendant

ELLIE WARREN

waved them both through, and they found seats on the upper deck where they could watch the world go by.

“All aboard!” the captain yelled, and they set off on their three hour journey to Ruhann.

Lailu

THE TREES WERE SCREAMING. A cry of pain that echoed down the valley.

Traces of blue flickered up their towering trunks, bark alight with flame. Not the flame of a comforting hearth, nor the promise of a campfire to provide nourishment. No, something harder that reeked of magic. Puffs of breeze sent embers floating to another target, setting off a whimper as the next tree prepared for their fate.

A lone figure stood before the blaze, red fur illuminated by firelight, tail tip pressed to her lips. This was too soon; Tapping Day was two lunars away, and preparations for the festivities had not even begun. Seasons could be fickle, but a regenerative burn so early was unheard of.

Lailu had been sitting down to her breakfast when the news reached her. A group of Ratatoskr had gone for an early morning stroll in the Great Forest and caught the whiff of smoke. Since they couldn't find the sector's Tree Keeper—Lailu was fast asleep in her nest at the time—they'd reported it to the wardens who went to investigate without her.

She'd been honoured with the task of Tree Keeper only six lunars ago; she sincerely hoped she hadn't done anything wrong. No one had warned her of anything like this. Just the usual pests and moulds to keep an eye on. How to determine sap levels. When to give the warning that the burn was imminent. Well, she'd failed on that front.

When Lailu had finally caught on that something was wrong with the trees in her sector, she'd cornered Sylvain for more information. If she was being honest, she was hurt that the wardens hadn't woken her. She was new to the job, but how was she supposed to learn from her mistakes if she was left out of the loop? Sylvain had only muttered something about incompetent humans and rushed off to send a message to Kirkhyrst. Something about a magic leak? Lailu didn't realise magic *could* leak, it just existed. However, she barely knew anything about humans and what they did in their artificial city. A home without an abundance of nature was a terrible nightmare not worth dwelling on.

So, she did the only thing she could; she opened a portal to the Great Forest and went to look for herself. She was due to do a weekly check-up anyway. She was responsible for reporting on the forest's welfare and conditions that may affect the harvest. Her recommendations were supposed to be small things like moving Tapping Day or arranging extra nutrients to be delivered to the forest floor. She had not been expecting to see the forest ablaze when she woke up that morning.

The Great Eldur Pine Forest stretched out for miles and miles, and for as far as she could see, the trunks shimmered with blue fire, the blaze consuming fine needles as it passed by. It reminded her of the air around

PAWS AND PORTALS

portals when they opened, reality breaking apart, just for a moment. The air, thick and heavy with smoke, caught in her throat. And the noise. It set her fur on edge, each hair vibrating with the frequency of anguish.

It wasn't just the desperate plea of the trees; beneath was a crackling static and an almost unheard sound of claws scraped across slate. Images of Ratatoskr kits being dragged from their nests lanced through her mind and she shook them free. She didn't need the visual message. She knew the trees were desperate, saw her as someone who could help. They were just trying to reach out to her in the only way they knew.

Lailu stepped through the pines' lifecycle in her head, trying to work out what stage they were at. A sapling would grow from the ashes of the winter before last, spend twelve lunars regrowing to their full height, an impressive achievement. The most patient of Tree Keepers could see the growth happening before their very eyes. Then came reproduction. Pine cones would form, pollen released, the moment of fertilisation wholly dependent on the luck of the wind. Tiny particles of potential drifting in the air. And sometimes up an unsuspecting nostril.

Once their offspring were released to the whims of nature, they would prepare for the burn. The cycle of life, death, and regrowth. Fire was no stranger to the Eldur Pine, but they came prepared. For six lunars they would use all the resources available to them to generate a soothing sap, pulling from the earth below and air above. For of course these majestic, living beings could feel hurt if they did not protect themselves.

The awful keening of the pines told her head what her heart already knew. There was little chance that their sap

had built up enough to soften the pain of the inferno before her. Something was seriously wrong.

The least she could do was try to take back a sample for further investigation. She wasn't completely useless at her job. Lailu quickly scanned her immediate surroundings and gathered up some wide, waxy leaves from the forest floor, folding them carefully into a make-shift pouch. Countless hours spent exploring the forest meant at least her bushcraft skills were honed to perfection well before she knew what she wanted to do with her life.

"Please forgive me for any discomfort I may cause," she apologised to the nearest afflicted tree, though she doubted her presence could be felt over the flames. The scream was unbearable close-up. She attempted to muffle it, clamping her tail over her tufted ears. Using her slender, sharp claws, she scraped a small section of bark and wood into the pouch and sealed it closed with the tiniest dab of sap. It was important to be prudent with resources, especially so if the trees were dying.

No, she shouldn't get ahead of herself. She pushed the negative thought from her mind.

There wasn't anything she could do right now, certainly not by herself. She had to get back to the scurry, find out if other sectors were affected. Maybe there was something that could be done. The natural world was always able to surprise her and maybe it knew what it was doing.

The portal snapped open behind her, and with one last distraught look at the forest, Lailu stepped back into it.

* * *

PAWS AND PORTALS

“IT’S NOT THE BURN,” Otso said, surveying the scene before them. He was a great bear of a Ratatoskr, taller in stature than Lailu, who had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. To prove his point, he threw a bucket of water at one of the burning pines. It fizzed and crackled, but the blue flame didn’t waver. If anything, it burned brighter.

“I told you,” Sylvain said. “There’s something uncanny to it.”

“I looked at that sample you took,” Otso said to her. “The sap levels are low, as you suspected.”

Lailu took the compliment with a small smile. Otso had been a Tree Keeper for as many cycles as Lailu had lived. He could have been a warden if he’d wanted to, but he was too fond of his role to give it up. Trees talked back less than Ratatoskr, after all.

“There’s another thing,” he continued. “There were strange patterns in the bark. A sort of scarring.”

“Did the flames leave it behind? Like charcoal?” Lailu suggested.

“No, it was too regular for that. More like those printed fabrics we sometimes get from the humans.”

“See,” Sylvain said.

“Not really,” Lailu said, confused about where this conversation was going. She wasn’t ready to get involved with human dealings, perhaps she never would be, but the trees... The trees were her life, her calling. If she had to talk to humans to sort this out, then she would accept that burden.

“Did you send word to Kirkhyrst?” Otso asked.

“I sent a magpie first thing, requesting an investigation post haste. This whole thing stinks of human interference,” Sylvain said.

Lailu thought it smelled of magic, but she let him continue.

“Should the Grid acknowledge the magpie, I’d expect someone today. It doesn’t take them that long to get here with all their technological advancements,” he sneered.

“Sylvain! We should accept our differences with grace,” she admonished him.

“Sweet child, you are better than this old Ratatoskr. I have seen humans do too many things that defy nature to trust they mean well with it. But perhaps I am mistaken. If it is their doing, they will fix it promptly. Leaks are not friends to profits.”

Lailu frowned over the strange word. She would look it up later rather than seem even more naïve in front of the warden. The scurry had an excellent library, and despite Sylvain’s prejudice, the collection held many human works.

“I’m a Tree Keeper, should I not be aware of the potential for leaks, as you call them?”

“We didn’t know there *was* potential. Wait and see, dear. We will have answers soon enough.”

“If it was the burn, too many trees have caught to stop it now,” Otso said, ignoring Sylvain. “You have to let nature take its course.”

“If it’s the humans, they can stop doing whatever it is,” Sylvain said.

“You think?” Otso chuckled. “If they’ve lost control of magic, we’re doomed.”

It didn’t bear thinking about, the idea that magic could burn out of control. Water would douse fire, but what would douse magic? A portal blazed only as long as a Ratatoskr held it open, but the magic humans traded in

was untethered. A human couldn't shut it off any more than she could stop the rain from falling.

"Will the trees survive this?" Lailu asked in a quiet voice.

"Only time will tell," Otso said, patting her on the shoulder. "It's hurting them for sure, but there's no reason their cycle won't start afresh next year. They're used to this."

Lailu wasn't so sure, but she yielded to Otso's experience. She hadn't seen a regenerative burn up close before, the Great Forest being off-limits to most Ratatoskr during burn season, and she'd always assumed it was just like a normal fire. The trees before her burned cooler than any fire she'd ever felt.

"I've gotta get going. We're attempting to set up exclusion zones around the other sectors. Just in case." Otso waved and disappeared through his portal. Sylvain nodded his goodbye and followed suit, leaving Lailu alone with the whimpering trees.

They had quieted somewhat, resigned to their fate. Perhaps they'd understood their conversation, that there was nothing the Ratatoskr could do for them. She was grateful they'd stopped invading her thoughts, but their discomfort was still making her head ache.

As she turned away from the disaster, a smouldering twig snapped under her feet, disturbing something in the undergrowth. A blueish grey blur streaked out of the smoking scrub and clawed its way up Lailu's leg. It was a young male balurat, an adorable sight with its big golden eyes and soft, downy fur.

While the forest was farmed for resources, it was still a rich ecosystem providing food and shelter for thousands of creatures, from the tiniest ant to the colossal, brown

bears. The first time she'd seen a bear, Lailu had been terrified, its paws the size of her head. Yet the bear had been busy picking the same berries that she and her mother had ventured deep into the forest for. They weren't that dissimilar, although Lailu was glad bears couldn't portal into her nest on a whim.

Not that Lailu ever used her magic for such things. Maybe she cheated at hide and seek every now and then, but didn't every young kit test the boundaries of their power? She sighed—those days were in the past now. She had responsibilities, an important job, one she was determined not to fail at. She very much hoped she wasn't failing.

"Hey, little cutie, you're safe," she cooed at the bundle of fur who had clambered up onto her shoulder, claws digging in a tad further than she would have liked. She knew his home was anything but safe—little white lies were a comfort when scared. It wasn't just the trees that looked to her for help; if she stayed much longer, she would have a whole menagerie of creatures to care for. "You can come home with me."

She settled the balurat into a pocket in her harness, giving him a reassuring tickle under the chin. He trembled against her chest, poor little thing. Staying there wasn't doing either of them any good. Instead, she'd go to the library and prepare herself for the arrival of the humans.