

Positive

Orchid calls a halt to the patrol, calling you back in so everyone can get an update on the situation. As you listen to him talk you notice small changes flickering on the edges of your vision, up to and including your personal perception of the rest of the patrol. It's truly distracting, especially when Orchid develops a clipboard with a bundle of paperwork flapping and rustling in the breeze; a couple of sheets escape and tumble towards you, causing you to blink and turn your head reflexively. You give Thyrian, sitting next to you, a mock-stern look; mock-contrite, he stuffs the papers he's been reading out the way under his seat to avoiding offending the conservatives. Many things have changed over the last few centuries; Thyrian's differing attitudes have generally been accepted (and sometimes adopted) by the rest of the tribe, but there are a few times when he chooses to behave for the sake of peace.

A bard deemed to hold true talent by all four tribes is rare. Rarer still that the most stolid of the tribes could produce such a bard, but here sits Pryderi ap Hywell Catuvellunii with the promise of a new work, tuning his harp and readying himself for the performance. Your father has let slip, accidentally-on-purpose, that there is good reason for both of you to be here tonight - but you would not have missed such an opportunity even without the encouragement. Apparently now satisfied that his harp will sing true, Pryderi stands, causing silence to descend on the hall. His voice is soft but somehow still carries to every corner.

"My laird, gentles all, and family - for although we are born of different tribes I call you all my family. You have been promised a tale, and I shall sing you one new - and it only seems fitting to begin it here, for this is where it started in truth."

With that, he sits back down and starts to play...and even before he names any names, you realise to your joy that you know the tale exceedingly well, as the tale is *yours*. And Thyrian's as well - a not insignificant part of the introduction is the tale of how you met, your early adventures together, and how Thyrian initially became accepted by the Perdii both through his skills with magic and his indomitable spirit. You can't help but colour slightly at the verses about the battlefield proposal after the Stand at Manawydan's Coombe, but at least by the sound of it only the bare bones of what actually happened filtered through to anyone other than the two of you. The harp's voice makes Pryderi's telling sound decidedly poetic and romantic - which isn't to say that Thyrian's proposal wasn't, but it misses the passion of both the proposal and how you...accepted it. Thyrian catches your eye and squeezes your hand, a flippant grin promising a revisiting of those memories later.

The harp's voice changes in a way you can barely believe of such an instrument, dark and ominous and foreboding - fitting for the tale to follow. When he reaches the telling of the dark days when the Silent Ones awoke from their slumbers in the mountains to the north and threatened both the tribes and the Kingdom, a movement in the shadows behind you lets you know that another player in the story is listening too. Had you not helped with the the rite to re-empower Tânlladwyr's odd adopted 'family' then the Alliance wouldn't have had the strength to repel the invasion - as it was, you still feel a prickle of atavistic fear at the memory of a battle far more narrowly won than any would admit.

It seems like minutes and millennia both before Pryderi's song is complete, the last notes rippling and fading amongst the rafters of the hall. There is a long, long moment of utter silence as everyone finally remembers to breathe, then the hall erupts with cheering and stamping of feet and calls for more. As Pryderi surveys the hall you feel his eyes rest on you in particular; he gives you a nod of respect, and you feel more honoured than words could describe. Thyrian takes the opportunity between cheers to lean over and give you a passionate kiss - he kicks the papers he had hidden under his seat as he moves over to you, the noise of them scattering somehow making itself heard over the din of appreciation. As you feel the warmth of his lips move away you open your eyes to see the rest of the patrol...

Neutral Future

The patrol pause in a clearing - and, as it has on every other occasion, Thalassa's notebook comes out. For once her and Faliece are being quiet in their discussion, but the notebook being flicked through is oddly loud, the rustling making it hard to focus. You feel a hand on your arm and turn; Slyce gives you a half-grin and an eye flick that translates to 'keep your mind on the job'. It's hard not to be amused though, given everyone else with you - a mix of some of the younger Perdii and some of the equally young Pathfinders - is treating the raid with all the joy of a spring outing, doubly so as everyone involved knows that it has, or should have, no serious consequences.

It would have been nice to have Thyrian with you but someone had to stay back at the village to watch out for the other 'skirmish team' probably heading their way. No one can quite remember whose decision it was to try out using a herd raid as part of the 'cultural and training exchange' (you're fairly certain that Caledfwlch was involved *somehow* for all that he denies it) but, in all honesty, it's nice just to be home for a while, even with a group of carefully selected Defenders in tow.

The raid is pulled off remarkably smoothly, netting ten goats - about as many as you'd be willing to try herding back with so many inexperienced people in the group. Slyce had suggested setting up a distraction to lure the watchers away and by Esus' name he and Team Mischief had certainly been a distraction. You're fairly certain that everyone's hair will grow back in the long term, and no real damage was done...

It is a cheerful and thoroughly pleased with themselves group that makes its way home, just about keeping the goats on track, and everyone silently cheers as the village comes in sight. Your fellow Perdii split off to escort the goats to their new home while you lead the Defenders back to Padran's feasting hall for 'debriefing' and catching up with the home defence team. Rounding the final corner you realise that things might have not gone exactly as people had hoped...

It's really, truly, hard not to laugh, although you do try to avoid hurting anyone's feelings - besides, Slyce is laughing hard enough for everybody. Somehow it looks like the Audii and their guests had caught the Perdii and theirs completely off guard, and you can spot both Varog's and your cousins' sense of humour in play. The Perdii have been face-painted with Audii symbols, the Defenders with the green-and-black of the Barony, and everyone has been hog-tied and left neatly stacked around the hall entrance.

Except for Thyrian.

In deference to his 'Kingdom' sensibilities he has been allowed to keep his underwear, but he has been otherwise stripped and painted in Defender colours and Audii symbols - and left tied, upside down, to the hall door. As he meets your eyes with a long-suffering look your attempts to keep your composure finally break; you turn and bury your face in Slyce's shoulder to stifle a whoop of laughter, putting a hand on his pack to steady yourself.

The contents of the pack crackle under your touch, the sound oddly paper-like; when you finally get your breath back and lift your head, Slyce is gone - but at least the argument between Thalassa and Faliece has stopped?

Traumatic Future

Ahead of the main bulk of the patrol, exactly where a scout ought to be, you come across an odd sight - a tree goes from winter bareness to spring buds to summer bloom to autumn fruit in front of your eyes. Within moments the leaves turn dry and skeletal, rubbing against each other in a sudden breeze and whispering like paper being ruffled. The breeze kicks up dust and fallen leaves and you raise your arm to shield your eyes with your forearm. The movement drags up your other arm, tied as it is at the wrists; it catches your captor's eye and with what sounds like a snarling curse he drags your arms down again, giving you a look that threatens everything should you move once more.

You can barely see the other drow in the twilight, but you can hear him rifling through your pack; the rest of the ambush are elsewhere - certainly out of hearing distance no matter how you strain your ears - hunting down Thyrian. For once when you'd screamed at him to run he'd listened, and you can only hope that you gave him enough of a head start to escape. Assuming he didn't get a bad attack of heroics... your thoughts are interrupted by the unexpected sound of paper rustling as the drow pulls something from your pack. You rack your brains to try and recall why you'd have paper in there, your thoughts underpinned by the sound of the drow apparently trying to read what's on there; you only remember the report at the same time as the drow gives a short bark of laughter.

This wasn't business, it was a pleasure trip - but you'd stopped at the guard post at Langley Green anyway, purely out of habit. Checking out the lie of the land as it were. On your way out the next morning, one of the Pathfinders had tried to catch up with you, waving a small sheaf of papers at you - you'd recoiled, Thyrian had taken them and promised to read them later, but...later hadn't happened, had it?

He comes over and thrusts the paper in your face. In heavily-accented Common, he snarls, "You knew we were here, and you walk in darkness as only two? You are either very brave or very foolish, surface dweller." Before you have any chance to react you hear a very unwelcome sound; Thyrian is making his displeasure at having been caught well and truly known, and from experience you can catch the edge of pain on his words until they are suddenly muffled. Soon he - and the three drow that have chased him down - come into view, Thyrian being half-dragged; your guards grab hold of you as you instinctively try to go to him and push you down to the floor. When Thyrian is thrown down beside you, a rough gag tied firmly in place, you can see blood oozing from one leg and seeping through his hair, but his eyes still say, 'Don't give up. We can get out of this.'

Trying to find an escape route, you get the feeling that the drow are waiting for something...and then you see the last member of their group stroll into view. She regards both of you haughtily, every inch stiff with regal pride. A priestess. She reaches down and grabs your chin, tilting your face to see it more clearly; while you try not to react, Thyrian makes a noise of protest and tries to wriggle into a more defensive position. He stops abruptly when one of the male drow kicks him in his injured leg.

The priestess lets go of you and promptly starts ignoring you in favour of her men. You don't understand what she says to them but the results are immediate - your guards drag you to your feet, two of the others drag Thyrian a little way away, and the last one draws his sword. With as little compunction as you would have butchering a sheep the drow pulls Thyrian's head back - and now the cockiness and encouragement are gone, now you see only fear in his eyes - and neatly cuts his throat.

You scream and throw yourself towards Thyrian; the guards fail to hold onto you and you slip and fall, landing on the discarded report. The papers flurry up around you, the rustling oddly loud, and as you scramble to your knees you find yourself once more with the patrol.

Ridiculous Future

You scout ahead of the patrol trying your best to hunt out the route; but the subtle ways of the world seem to randomly shift, throwing off your tracking instincts. Birds' tunes change halfway through, rabbit tracks begin and end unnaturally, each one a distraction leaving you on edge. You close your eyes to focus on what you can hear and catch the sound of rustling paper. Looking round, you see an unwelcome sight; someone, probably overly officious and from the Kingdom at large, has put up a set of written posters around the Perdii village and they are rustling in the wind. The villagers are studiously ignoring them, and there's a nervous atmosphere pervading the whole place.

Assuming it's the writing making everyone uncomfortable you start moving around the village taking down the posters, trying not to look at them - although you can't help but catch sight of the same drawing of a sheep on each of them. As you reach the path into the village you notice the unusually large sheep pen, and strolling towards town a single black sheep; there's something...odd...about it you can't quite put your finger on. You look around for the rest of the herd, confused, before a panicked cry makes you turn around; one of the other villagers had wandered over to chat to you and is now nervously pointing at the sheep. Looking back at it again, and this time *really* focussing, your Pathfinder training kicks in - and you finally realise what you're seeing...

Vampire.

It's a vampire sheep. And it's heading right for you.

You turn and shout to the villagers, "Run! Get indoors, hur- Aaaaaaaargghh!"

You have to get away right now, run, run, RUN. You can feel its pitiless eyes like miniature portals to the Plane of Tortured Souls boring into the back of your head, ready to rip your soul right out of your body. You have to run, you can't stop moving. You run frantic, wild, heedless of your footing, the other villagers running desperately ahead of you. You can hear the thunder of its hooves upon the packed earth behind you, coming to trample you, crush you, to rend the flesh from your still living bones. RUN.

You turn a corner hoping to duck behind a cart, to hide, to escape, and see it. Its fearsome ears twitch towards you as if it can read your thoughts right down into your darkest secrets. Run. Run! Don't stop! A child stumbles crying, terrified, you don't slow as you run right over her, it's so, so close. The child reaches for you and you stumble, your breathing ragged and panicked as you kick at her, pulling yourself to you feet. You can feel its foetid breath across your neck, imagine it catching you in its powerful jaws. RUN! The tears flow from your eyes, your terror is absolute. You and the villagers move as one, no thought just instinct, you... have... to... RUN!

Then you see it, as the entire village runs around the corner; the pen, you'll be safe inside the pen. RUN! You're in, the last one in, and your fumble frantically at the gate, pulling it shut, then join the villagers pressing yourself up against the far side. Hoping praying its razor like wool won't just slice through the flimsy wood that stands between you and it.

"Baaa."

The sound of nightmares, the sound of an eternity of eternal torment, the sound of your soul being dissected piece by piece, painfully slowly, never stopping. You huddle into a ball, you and the whole village curled up tight, trying to crawl into the very earth to get away from the monstrous, terrible, unspeakably...cute and fluffy sheep.

Why were you so scared? You look out of the pen. Look at its soft doleful eyes, its bright and fluffy coat, the cute little ears, its tiny ickle hooves. Oh look at it, the poor thing, it's just lonely. Lonely and in need of a cuddle, a

scratch behind the ears, and food. Yes food, oh the poor thing must be so hungry, so hungry and lonely after being separated from her herd. You can't leave that poor thing, your good friend, all alone.

You open the gate and step out of the pen, bemused at all the villagers still curled up in fear. Can't they see how lovely this sheep is? Can't they see how hungry she is? You reach down and scratch her behind the ears, then kneel down and offer her the food she needs. *Here you go, lovely ewe, come have some of my tasty blood. I don't need it all.* You feel pain as its teeth sink into your forearm, then elation as your life blood pours out of you to feed the poor thing. You're tired now, so tired, you rest your head on her soft woolen body. You can rest while she feeds, yes, just cuddle her and rest and let her feed.

Your hand grows slack and the posters you were still clutching fall to the floor. Rustling so loud in your tired ears, you close your eyes, so very sleepy... You wake with a start as your body hits the floor, suddenly very awake and surrounded by the patrol.