

The Battles I Picked

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The wind whispers stories from across the desecrated plain. Of course, I never wanted it to come to this. Our legends say that the Okapi were blessed with the ability to sense danger centuries ago by Mat'selesnya after our grazing ground at the world tree was colonized. Most think this simply makes us scarce, as we flee with the herd far before danger comes near. But this is typical humanoid arrogance and hopelessly ignorance of our true blessing. We sense danger, and sense how the world's inevitable march towards entropy might be sated. If that way was to flee then so be it, but this time....it was to fight.

I was never satisfied in the greens of the third precinct. Hiding among the sentient forest under the protection of dryads satisfies the majority of its residents, but I sensed a greater danger brewing. The physical threats of the other precincts were terrifying yes, but for me the danger lay within. I...was lonely. And I feared that should I not find a purpose greater than constantly seeking refuge from far away perceived threats my nimble body would give into the ever present anxiety. So I began to explore the city. At first, I loped gracefully among the tall wooden homes of the Selesnya but before long I went further. I reared in disgust at the relentless rats of the pestinial sewer. Viewed with awe the chronoarchs and chemisters in the bustling laboratories too busy to even notice a creature as strange as I leaping from each hiding spot to the next. And in the winding back alleys of the fifth precinct I saw of mages fluxing their hideous forms at will, no doubt to some nefarious manipulative end.

But it was in the tenth precinct that I saw the most glorious thing of all. I had surveyed the bands of Boros, from the flaming sword of Razia to the lowest Thundersong Trumpeter. And indeed, these armies were brilliant with colors even more vibrant than the greens of the my forest and structure so robust one almost forgot the inevitability that chaos would come for them all. But all of the armies of Boros were less glorious than her: the Truefire Captain. The sun glinted off her armor like the moon off of Selsnya's Guildgate. Her expression stern but with a sense of kindness that even from a distance my keen eyes could make out. And most beautiful, around her I sensed no danger. My vigilance could subside and I could feel a pull that I had heard described as love.

I knew not how I could ever introduce myself to a figure so brilliant. After all, I didn't even belong here. My home was so far from and foreign to this part of the city that it was hard to believe that we even inhabited the same planet. Perhaps it was Mat'selesnya's blessing taking a hold of me because next thing I knew I revealed myself to the captain. While she was observing her troop's training exercises I crept out from the dark alley where I concealed myself and lept atop a small pedestal. I can only imagine how beautiful my stripey sinews looked rippling among marble towers. My eye caught her's and I watched her expression move from confusion, to alertness, to wonder, to...an emotion I had never seen before. Her horse snorted and eyed me with suspicion, shaking us out of the moment and prompting a few of her soldiers to move to hunt me. Within seconds I had lost them and was back to my hiding spot in the alleyways listening to my captain bark at the men to get back in formation. Curiosity got the best of her and before long she appeared at the mouth of the alley. Tentatively I came out to greet her.

I do not expect you to understand our love nor will I bore you with the details of our giddy foray into the lust of a hidden romance. She remained a captain but when she could get away we met in secret and travelled the realm together. I took great pride in showing her the spots of the

forest no human should have ever known. And she took pride in teaching me the art of a being a soldier. No one would ever accept us and although we dreamed of a world where we did not have to meet in quiet deserted groves and disreputable inns, we did we had to for our love. After not long we were betrothed at the same spot my parents were married: the Canopy Vista. Like I said, at first I felt no danger with her, perhaps because there was none or perhaps because I was too moonstruck to sense the ever-encroaching terror. But soon, that sense of danger would return.

You likely can guess how this story ends. For she was a soldier through and through and would not break the bonds of her secret masters. And I knew that there was only way to free her: defeat her master before he sacrificed her in some petty battle and I lose the only love I had ever known. So I enlisted and now stand on this desecrated plain across the battlefield from my fiancée. No one can ever know. The wind whispers danger and I fight my natural instinct to run, instead remembering the true fire that she showed me. The courage deep within myself.

I'm deep in my thoughts when a strange voice starts nagging at me from the brush. "Come with me, come with me!" A pang of danger rips through my lean torso rippling the perfectly groomed stripes that come as a benefit to being a soldier. My wary ears twitch in excitement and fear as the voice continues to call "Follow! Follow!" I know I should not but the possibilities are endless. What if this is a dryad come to help me in my quest of love? Or perhaps a message from my wayward captain? A way to end this madness without bloodshed? I think what my fellow Okapi would say and do but I am not them anymore. I am a soldier and will not run at every sense of danger. I peek into the brush and my eyes flash in recognition. It's one of those strange creatures that terrorize the furnaces of the smelt ward. A mischievous critter but usually harmless and the perfect messenger. I follow the creature through a charred thicket. The land cries out in pain to me and I bound faster, eager to leave the plain that I had once bounded through to reach the tenth precinct. Eager to escape the now painful memories that come with it. How naive I was.

As I run I realize I hear the ignus screech out in pain and watch as it's suddenly consumed by its own flame. The smell sickens me and the sound penetrates my battle-hardened mind and shakes my soul to the core. But as I shake off the fog, I see her. Riding atop her trusty horse who, even now, eyes me with suspicion and perhaps jealousy. She reaches out her hand and I nuzzle it softly. "I'm glad you're here" she says, "we can be together now." I'm confused by how our romance seems to be accepted here, the other soldiers avert their gaze but make no effort to stop our open displays of affection. Before the war, this is a comfort that we never knew.

As the day goes on I meet the colorful cast of soldiers she commands. A kind bodyguard takes a glaive off a strange, morose knight and gives it to me. He gives the captain a knowing look before promising to teach me some new ways to move and fight. I do not know why I am here but I know that she could never hurt me so once again I ignore the cloying tightness in my chest. She tells the only way we can be together is if I fight my "friends" that I abandoned on the other side. I gladly take up horns against them, any companionship I felt now a dissonant dream trumped by my joy at being reunited. As we prepare to fight strange roots explode out of the ground making battle today impossible. What is this? Some trick from the dryads I abandoned? A warning from my forgotten Okapi brethren? I do not care. I cannot care. The one thing that has ever made me forget the perpetual danger in this world and here and I will fight for her. Despite the lack of a formal battle, my captain and the bodyguard teach me what they can.

Since we do not fight today, we retire to her quarters. My true captain tells me that our time together is shorter than she made it seem but that she does not intend for that to stop her. And that I needed to trust her. Six months ago, I wouldn't have known what that word meant but now I do.

It's only then that I realize that she has taken off armor and put on a hunter green dress. My gaze is frozen upon her beauty as she lays a red carpet across my back. The colors of our people. She leads me to the ruins of a brilliant marble arch reclaimed by forest older even than my people. A deep joy spreads from my heart and turns into a hearty laugh as I realize what is happening. She has adorned the scene in both of our cultures. We are to become one.

Suddenly, the sad knight steps from behind the pillars begins to sing a song that I had heard many times, but only from a distance. I had been to weddings before but only as an unknown unwanted guest. The song wove its way throughout me as I sway gently with the captain, getting used to the idea of finally becoming one. Before long the grove fills with the remnants of her army. I think briefly of the small ignus who had given his life to bring me to this moment, but could not focus on the scamp for too long. A veteran soldier asks us to bow down for the approaching of our priest. Though my head was down I caught a glimpse of her windy snout swaying in front of her vestments and stole. I bow my head even further down and blush with honor. A Loxodon I had seen before but one of such status was truly a sight to behold. The ceremony is short and strange, the audience seems more invigorated by the Loxodon than by our union. But I do not care, I just stare straight ahead at my lovely wife blanketed by the lost dream of love.

My now re-ironclad fia...wife is strangely silent and I don't know if she is taken up in the feelings of the night or if there is something that she is not telling me. No....I know it to be the latter. But I also know that whatever fate is in store for me is already set. And I know that I do not want to know what secrets she holds in case these moments are our last. Late in the night, with tears in her eyes she places her massive hand on my snout and begins to speak. But I brush against her and place my head down, signalling that I do not want to listen. She chuckles and tells me that I'm the smartest Okapi she's ever met and I laugh. Old inside joke: I'm the only one she's ever met. She tells me she loves me. And in our own way I tell her the same. We drift off to sleep, love warding us off from whatever horrors await tomorrow.

I awaken in my own den back on the other side of the battle field. A fog has cleared from my mind and I am unsure at first if my reunification was just a hopeful dream. But no, it was as real as the rest of my strange, wonderful life. I stroll out of the battlefield and immediately notice how powerful I feel. Aches and pains that normally plague my everyday life are gone. And instead of brushing branches and leave aside my horns seem to cut them like the sword that sits constantly at my love's side. And the glaive lies still strapped strategically to my back. I am given little time to experiment with my new body as I hear our informant call out "A rider. A rider approaches with a challenge!" A rider? Could it be? My wife and that nauseating pile of covetousness she calls a steed? It must be!

I rush out on the battlefield and cry out to her. Perhaps she has deserted! Has she finally decided to break her bond of honor. No...no she never would. And if she would, she could have done it much earlier avoiding much bloodshed. My mind flashes to the moment yesterday before I silenced her. Perhaps I should have let her speak. As she rides I notice that she also seems invigorated, her armor looks almost like it was newly forged and her sword shine with a keenness I have never seen before. She stops and rears up, still even more beautiful than the day I first glimpsed her training her troops. Her face is wet with tears. That brilliantly sharp sword comes up and she wordless point it at our army. No. Not at our army. She points it at me.

My master calls out "SO BE IT" and orders me to rush into battle. No, Mat'selesnya please no! Not like this. I pray that Mat'selesnya will populate my animal instincts that I have discarded for that of a soldier but alas, my love had trained me too well. I shall not run from this fight. I gallop

towards her feeling a rage building up in me. She knew this was the plan. She could have left at any time but no, she chose this. Did our final night mean nothing to her? Do all the bonds of nature that I have broken to forge one with her mean nothing? I kill her horse first, taking glee for the first time in bloodshed as the powerful glaive swirls around my back. My horns and hoofs slice and kick with an unnatural power and I revel in my new found ability to destroy. Danger and vigilance are foreign words as I seek only the vengeance of betrayal. I begin my final charge to run my horns through her skull but then see something I did not expect. She placed her sword straight up and down in the ground and has instead readied her bow. Pointed not at me, but at my master. She lines up her shot and tears her gaze away from her target to look me right in my ever widening eyes. "It was always going to end this way you know. I am a captain and you, you are the wild. You cannot strip away my armor any more than I can tame that beautiful entropy that lies within you. And why I would ever want to take away what I fell in love with? Why would anyone ever want to?"

I am not charging. I am walking. She has quieted the rage within me and I feel nothing but what I left the forest to seek so long ago. I thought it was love, but it is not. It is serenity. I think of the dryads and other animals living back home in constant vigilance and begin to weep, thinking that they will never know the calm that has come over me. I know that my story is almost at an end. But for once I feel not manipulated by danger, or by even by love, but that I am simply myself. Wary of nothing. I accept the world as it is with all the danger and beauty I have soaked in.

I look deeply into her eyes for the last time, and return her sad glowing smile that spreads across her rigid jawline. The sweat glistens off of her brow, she cannot hold the shot much longer. I will do this, I must do this for the woman who taught me what it is to be at peace. In one motion I thrust my horns through the gap in her armor, just as she showed me to do on other soldiers, and throw myself on her sword piercing my hardened hide and slicing my heart. I hear the woosh of her arrow and the splitting scream of the dragon as the Sun goes dark. I hear her gauntlet clatter to the ground and feel her bare hand stroking my head. She whispers, "They will know of our love, and they will know we are at peace. We do not die as we live, chasing our dream of being accepted, but rather die in that dream, that we will dream forever more."