## HALKÉON

You mean, why are my mom and dad aelves?

{Shakes his head in negation}

No, no, it is a perfectly reasonable question. Unfortunately, my answer will be unsatisfactory. They did not know how a baby came to be alone in Perucica. There was no sign of a human parent in my vicinity, though I should note that it is a simple matter, even for the experienced to get lost in the thick jungle.

{Listens for a moment}

They were ... are lovely people. Quite generous, indeed, to have taken me in and raised me as their own. I suppose you wouldn't call them 'warm', at least not ... well, you understand, that they were serious devotees of the goddess. Indeed, Artemis was the heart of the whole community. The goddess is great.

{Gestures to his Sacred Symbol}

But it is true that, sometimes one does long for the sun. Perhaps that was my human nature shining through ... so to speak.

Oh, but do not think that I do not love my parents or that my childhood was unhappy. True, it was tough, to some extent, being the awkward human among so many beautiful, graceful aelves. Perhaps it is not so strange that I spent most of my days listening to the stories my parents would tell. Over the course of many years, I don't know that they ever repeated a tale. They were amazing and patient.

{Leans forward to listen}

Well, every child must eventually leave the nest. I had my faith in Artemis, the teachings of my parents, and the knowledge I had acquired throughout my childhood.

{Pauses to listen}

I became a guide. Though the jungle was my home, and my specialty, I found that when I recalled the tales from my parents, I knew more than I would have expected about traversing all kinds of lands.

It was a fine occupation ... I got to spend all of my time in nature, and it kept me fit as a fiddle. I traveled more widely than most and was able to see many beautiful sights. I met new people and talked with them at length.

Well, let me tell you about one trip, since it is perhaps the most relevant one.

It was near xxxxxx. A pair of fine fellows had hired me to lead them through the forest. I won't go into detail as to why they were doing so ... that is their story to tell. However, I will note that they both impressed me from the beginning. Vargus was ... powerful-looking. He was also sharp as a tack. He had a curious tendency to talk about all of them women he had been with. It made me a little uncomfortable how he would go on and on, but I suppose we all have our faults. And, for all that, he was an affable fellow and a good man.

As for Fang, well, sometimes, it can be easy to overlook batlings ... so to speak ... but he was a formidable fellow. On more than one occasion, he showed a facility with his bow that would have impressed even the folk back home. And it was he who led us to the strange encounter. I have no idea how he discerned something was awry, but he asked us to leave the path that, so we descended into the dark thickets.

There we found a barely conscious aelf who was in severe pain owing to a deadly snare she had encountered. Fang and Vargus knew just what to do, however, and after a careful examination, Vargus determined that the leg must be amputated. It was a grisly scene, but Fang and Vargus worked together splendidly to do what needed to be done while inflicting a minimum of harm.

The poor aelf was nearly delirious from the pain and shock, and we quickly decided that we should abandon the forest and find the nearest town so that she could get the proper care.

When she was mostly conscious and able to move with assistance, I noticed that, not only did she share the otherworldly beauty of the aelves (that I know so well), but there was something else otherworldly about her. Most notably, she seemed to attract swarms of bees. Inexplicable! But true. Also, in her lucid moments, I could have sworn that she would have made a better guide than me, despite spending most of her waking hours in a haze. She seemed to have an intuitive grasp of the land.

{Nods and smiles}

Yeah, my work as a guide was also how I met my wife. Well, I didn't bring it up because, as you know, she is a very private person. I can say that she had paid me to guide her to Omalos Plateau near the Morning Dew Mountains on a tiny island in the Great Green Sea. It was an unusual request in that she had to transport me there on her Airship and she had no reason to think I would be superior to a local guide who actually knew the area. In fact, I declined, stating quite clearly that a local guide would be superior to what services I could provide. Nevertheless, she persisted and as the payment she offered increased, my guilt at taking advantage did as well. Against my better judgment I went along and provided my services, as they were. She didn't tell me why she was hiring me (this was not uncommon ... the people that contracted with me varied from the relentlessly gabby to those who were as silent as the grave, though the circumstances of the hire were among the strangest I had experienced; nobody to that date had asked me to be a non-local guide!). It may surprise you to learn that I have never asked her. I believe that people, generally speaking, are entitled to their secrets. Especially those you trust.

{Smiles conspiratorially}

And, of course, an air of mystery never hurts a romance!

So, I hope she found what she was looking for out there. I found her, which was something I didn't even know I was missing. This effectively ended my time as a guide. There was just no way I could continue the work, which often required me to travel extensively and be out of touch with everyone for long periods of time. If I wanted to be with my sweetheart, I'd have to find a different path.

Since it seems like the past might be a little fuzzy, I figured I'd not worry a ton if what I say here is foolish!

{A while later}

Well, you're probably wishing you'd talked to someone else, but I'm afraid I have to say, again, that I'm not too sure. The airship upkeep is pretty expensive (well, I think), but I leave most of the details about that to Mirai. She owns the ship and has a good head for that sort of thing. We do make some money with our performances, so maybe that covers everything?

{Slightly exasperated question}

Oh, yeah, the high-wire act is pretty thrilling. I mean, at least for me! I hope the audience enjoys it.

{Listens}

I've been working on my comedy, which is why I do the pratfalls. Also, I think it entertains the kids ... and, if I seem clumsy, it is maybe a little more nerve-wracking for the crowd when I'm up on the wire!

I've also really been enjoying working with the animals. Well, the lion is actually pretty scary. But don't worry, no one in the audience is ever in any danger ... I might be, of course, but that's a different story.

The show with the dogs has been expanding. I love working with them. And Jasper is really surprisingly talented.

{Listens}

Oh, yeah, I still have a dog, Diana, that I met while tramping through, of all things, a swamp. She's been with me for years. But she's not part of the show ... she's pretty old, now, and deserves to rest.

{Listens}

Indeed, Finley's magic show is very impressive. I think she has a natural stage presence that comes off well. It's not just talent, though, she also works very hard at her craft.

{Cuts off the question}

No, Vargus's performance is quite good. Sure, it makes him a bit uncomfortable, but he's a diligent guy and I think he's made great strides. He's an integral part of the show.

{Listens}

Oh, I agree. Fang's section is amazing, but a bit frightening. It's a little too tense for me, so I try not to watch, if I don't have to!

## FINLEY

Finley is the third child in a somewhat social-climbing Sorcerer-Aelf family in Willowside

Orla is the smarty in the family. She loves books and spells, and is quite adept. She has a powerful presence, and everyone in the family thinks she'll become a great leader one day. Her parents made sure she had the best education, learned all her spells, and met all the important Aelves. She seems older (wiser) than her years, and is respected within the community. Her parents are considering a strategic marriage for her, where she will gain prestige for the family. She'd probably be a leader already if she weren't constantly bailing her sister out of trouble.

Tiernan is a master craftsman. He forges swords and other weapons, as well as other useful items of great beauty. He'll often imbue a little magic into his creations, sometimes to make a weapon more powerful (or protect the owner), but often just to make it beautiful and captivating. He is well-regarded for his craftsmanship, and folks come from far away to ask him to forge special custom creations for them. He is extremely charming, and often sings while working, attracting and enchanting onlookers. While Tiernan is warm, friendly, and quite handsome, he never married, since his focus is on his craft, as well as keeping an eye on his younger sister, who keeps stumbling into predicaments.

Then there's Finley. What to say about her? She was always a likable kid, just not terribly smart, and a bit directionless. When she was younger, she was able to rope her brother and sister into putting on skits, magic acts (extra fun and amusing if you are an actual sorcerer), and variety shows for their family and friends.The kids had fun putting on the shows; Tiernan still enjoys singing while he works, and Orla seems born to be on a stage, but the older siblings outgrew the little variety shows, and moved on to more "grown up" pursuits. Finley was encouraged to take up a "real" craft or focus on education, but couldn't really find anything that held her interest. She learned her spells the best she could, but never got the hang of reading, and would often sneak away from her lessons to explore the forest, where she tried (unsuccessfully) to make friends and converse with the plants and animals. If she was adept at anything, it might be navigation, although she'd often get fascinated by an animal or plant and bump into a tree, trip over a branch, or fall into a ravine.

Mom and Dad weren't quite sure what to do with Finley, sometimes just letting her spend days or weeks in the woods, since it made her happy, and she did seem to be learning forestry or navigation, those old-fashioned things aelves are supposed to be good at, sometimes worrying that she's wasting her life, and having a "forest bumpkin" in the family is mildly embarrassing. These cliches about aelves being just a bunch of pretty, wispy creatures communing with nature are outdated stereotypes. Aelves can be so much more!

At some point, Mom and Dad decide it might be a good idea to send Finley to her aunt Vorinta, who may be able to knock some sense into, er, help her find her path, or at the very least marry her off to Vorinta's friend Sorcerer Banyan, who is from a good family. It might also help Orla and Tiernan focus on their own lives. Finley is game to explore a new area (especially if there is a forest!), and thinks she may like Mr. Banyan, since his name suggests he might be a tree, but after some time at the Hooked Inn, she gets bored with these fuddy duddies (also Mr. Banyan is creepy), and decides to explore the surrounding forests. Maybe she can make friends with the local fauna.

As she wanders though the new forest (How long has it been? Is she delirious?), she thinks she sees a large bat walking upright with two humans. She climbs a tree to get a better look, and \*snap\* the branch she's standing on breaks, and she falls right into a snare. As she starts to lose consciousness and enter hypoxia, she has a moment of clarity where she realizes she can communicate with the animals. She is also not really clumsy--she has been prevented from communicating with animals and being the truly graceful creature she is by her own fear of not being as good or worthy as her siblings. She calls out for help. The first animals to hear her are a swarm of bees, who fly over to try to get her untangled, but they are unable to free her. Fortunately, the bat also hears her call, and he and the two humans come over and help her out of the snare. They had to amputate her leg, which was surprisingly not painful. She passes out again. When she is coherent, she sees that she has been taken to town for medical care. She's not overly concerned about her leg, since it can be easily regenerated with sorcery (worst case, her brother can fashion a prosthetic for her), but more exciting--did she really make friends with a swarm of bees? Can they really communicate? Did she really meet a bat, and will the bat and two humans be her new friends? Exciting!

## VARGUS

Vargus had a fairly normal life for a son of a tyrant barbarian and a slave. Which means it was brutal, unforgiving, and filled with violence. His father was a strong warrior but a cruel man who enjoyed humiliating others. His mother was a slave who had healing powers and a mind much sharper than she presented. This is the only reason that she and her third son survived. Her first two children died violently when his father’s wife had them murdered. Due to the reduced attention to medical chores that occurred when her children were killed his father put a stop to that and said this child is going to learn to fight. He was taught the basics of combat although he never became front line barbarian material (For God’s sake, for some reason he could not even rage, and he got lost trying to find the latrine).

His mother early on taught him that to survive you must not show your true feelings or intentions and you must be useful. He practiced deception from an early age. Hiding the fury and hate he felt watching his father mistreat and rape his mother was difficult but necessary. Managing the hate he felt for himself, unable to protect his mother, was even more difficult. He was so unhappy inside, only finding respite in studying, where he could spend time with his mother. She taught him about medicine and potion making.

Vargus was expected to fight and then provide medical support to the troops. Because of his general lack of awareness (he once walked straight into a tree) and his lack of either beauty or mental strength he was mercilessly picked on by his peers and loathed by his father and the other elders. He was easy prey and became angry and depressed. His only friend was his mother, with whom he spent as much time as possible. He was also her only friend. A bond in which they developed and nurtured hatred and a desire for revenge on the clan and especially his father. They planned small pains, embarrassments, and humiliations for others. These small successes, this inflicting of physical and emotional pain, never acknowledged outside the house, became a source of pleasure. While he could not rage he would become insanely protective of his mother, about the only time his clan even noticed him. He holds onto this suicidal rage to this day.

Their sadism was normally expressed through painful medical practices, sickening potions (and maybe poisons), belittling people, and causing painful wounds or hits to people. They would study the dead, charting their nervous system to see where to inflict the most pain or cause debilitating wounds.

This is a study he continued for most of his life, as there were always corpses available to him. He has taken good notes and wonders if someday they might name a nerve after him. (FYI – Due to an historical error the nerve he will be remembered for will actually be called the vagus nerve)

He was not an exceptionally strong youth nor particularly well trained in weaponry. Running away from his tormentors one day, he ran into pirates who promptly captured him and quickly sold him to a lanista, a gladiator owner and trainer. They thought this barbarian would be fun in the arena. When they discovered that he knew medicine his role quickly changed and he was assigned to the Do Not Kill or Hurt Too Bad group. Remembering his mother’s advice to be useful, he also learned how to repair their armor and weapons. While he worked on all gladiators, he never forgot those that hurt him in the ring and their medical procedures were “unpleasant”. Even so, he ensured they recovered and they generally forgave him because they were alive. Having some small status, he learned that being part of a group was essential to staying alive. He made “friends” and, being curious and intelligent, became part of a useful network of gladiators, doctors, alchemists and adepts. He learned a bit of magic from the adepts but the alchemists had the biggest effect on him. Their experiments, combined with the constant training regimes, matured him physically into the person he is today. His mental maturation is another matter. He misses his mother and has trouble forming mature relationships. He has little empathy and a bedside manner even fellow doctors find harsh. He does not have much experience with women, none have lived up to his mother, and the way he treats women in brothels is often expensive. He does sometimes brag about women because it can make other men feel bad and it’s just part of his deceptive nature.

In time he stayed alive long enough to be released with honors from the gladiator school. He was given his armor and stayed in touch with his friends. He returned to his island in time to see that his mother had outlasted his father. He was furious about this as he was planning on killing his father. He was “awarded” his mother as a result of his successful return from the gladiator ring. They continue to share the secrets joys of the pain they cause. She is sometimes sad about what her son has become but knows that their life corrupted both of them.

He hooked up with Fang one day when the battling had won a bit too much at gambling and was being accosted by a number of locals who had cornered him in the local saloon. You were pretty much a goner if you fought fang outside or at a distance, but once fist a cuffs started the little guy could have a hard time.

Vargus, seeing the opportunity to beat up some people, defended Fang. After a few drinks, realizing that Fang’s blood could work as an anesthetic he suggested they team up. Fang liked the idea of free fresh blood and their partnership was started. Neither of them seemed to have much “social consciousness”.

These days, Vargus sits in the bar while Fang gambles,. He reads, sells bad tasting healing draughts, and beats people up as necessary. It works for them both. Fang helps out at his operations.

His feelings for Finley are a bit of a mystery to him. After he, perhaps prematurely, removed her leg she has been every thankful and thoughtful to him. So few people in his life have been unabashedly nice to him that he has some of the feelings for her that he has for his mother. Nobody gets to treat her badly or he gets crazy angry.

Halkeon seems so wise and calm in his belief in Artemis that sometimes, not often, Vargus just feels like crying and confessing his sins around him. And Halkeon also seems to think well of him. Most unusual.

Vargus is less unhappy, insecure, and angry than he was in the past. But his immaturity and cruelty are solidly part of him. He has come to terms with his desires to cause pain to others and has found safe ways of feeding that need. He is still angry at the world and himself. He foresees a hard life and a bad ending.

## GM

The tiny island is inhabited by dinosaurs and a tribe of barbarian raiders, which I think would be a great birthplace for Vargas.

Fang came to the island via subterranean tunnels that run under the sea. He was kind of weak from lack of food because it was not an easy journey. Once on the island, he was helped by some priests of Apollo but found the high priest, Ulthadar, to be a little preachy, or perhaps peevish would be a better way to put it. After a particularly bad scolding about library etiquette, Fang decided he’d had enough. So he borrowed a few things, thanked the priests, and was on his way. Vargas, having returned from his excitement in the Berserkr Corps met up with him and they became good friends. Fang isn’t a very good judge of character.

Fang and Vargas met up with Halkéon while he was hanging around while his wife was doing something, kind of like someone else we know… unnecessary tangent. His wife seems to be doing some kind of archeology… kind of like… never mind. You didn’t catch her name because she quickly hides her face (she seems to be deformed) and hastens back to the airship on which they arrived while Halkéon speaks with you. You all become inordinately intrigued by what you find at the site. In fact, you could say you made a life-altering discovery. It’s a bit hazy now, but it happened. Turns out good old Halkéon is deeply in debt and when you generously offer up a golden statuette of Apollo (where’d that come from?) to help out if you can hang out on his airship, he takes you up on it. Some time after that (time is now acting strangely so you can’t quite remember how long) you stumble across an Aelf in a snare. Halkéon decides a little too quickly, perhaps, but certainly competently that the leg has to go, so off it goes. For some reason Finley is thankful, especially when Fang assures her it was life-of-death. Halkéon’s not so sure, but it might have been.

 As for that Aelf, she grew up in Willowside, but was raised in the wilderness [fill in some backstory here?]. Her aunt, a half-elf by the name of Vorinta Irrinesse, let her stay in the Hooked Inn for a bit. However Finley had a big crush on Stirvyn Banyan, probably because he was a Sorcerer like her more than anything and she was trying to fit in. Stirvyn wasn’t a bad dude or anything, but he was a dude. So Finley got offended, bored, or maybe bored then feigned offended, and off she went back to the woods. After a week (or was it a 10  years?), snap! There goes the leg.