

Everyone's Gotta Eat

Fall, Y114: Set concurrent with the end of Evergreen Forest

Lacratian Continent – Central Evergreen Forest

“*Okay.*” Cluse, juvenile Arachne Girl, picked herself up tenderly from the floor of pine needles she'd just been crushed against. She took a moment to look over the injuries. Two snapped legs—*that* she could deal with. Her abdomen was bleeding ichor, but that... well, that was manageable. It hadn't been as badly crushed as she'd thought. Good thing she'd been standing on very porous ground.

The little spider's black eyes narrowed to slits, and she bared her shark-like teeth. “*Now* I'm mad.”

She limp-skittered over to the tree hollow and peered inside. Sure enough, Anna was gone. The Chosen had doubtless taken her. There went Cluse's friend/meal.

“Yeah,” she repeated, “*really* mad.”

The spider's hind legs worked rapidly, in spite of the new deficit, and wove webbing to pull herself up the tree trunk onto a low-hanging branch. She looked around. No sign of the soldiers in any direction.

So the Chosen were coming to the Evergreen Forest. Cluse felt certain that this *meant* something. Something no doubt *she* would have to deal with. *Not* like anyone else in this forest knows a damn about what they're doing.

The blue star imprinted on the top of her abdomen—slightly cracked where the boot had struck her—sparked a little.

Cluse knew she would be a grown-up soon. Probably very soon, it would be time to weave herself a chrysalis and get it all over with.

It was probably smarter to just let this slide and move on. It would suck if she died before she got to have, like, hands and things. Cluse was very excited for opposable thumbs. Less excited about the whole 'sex' thing, but she was pretty sure she wouldn't be doing much of that. It seemed unpleasant.

Her stomach rumbled, and Cluse scowled.

“Yeah,” she muttered, pausing to lick the blood from the man's eye off her foreclaws, “I don't care how many of those creeps are here, I'm getting *something* to eat today.”

Cluse took off into the Evergreen Forest, swinging from branch to branch upon impossibly fine, silvery lines of silk. Her mind was moving just as quickly.

The Evergreen Forest was being invaded. Could people even *do* that? If the Chosen could conquer even a part of the forest, they'd be able to reach the whole rest of the continent. That would matter to a lot of people. But... *could* they? Nobody had ever managed it before. Even back when the gods had lived and the Royal Family had ruled, nobody had ever conquered the forest.

Then again, the Chosen weren't normal. All fey knew that. The Chosen did... *bad* things. Even demons hated them. Even Thriae avoided them.

Who would fight the Chosen? Fey didn't work together well. Only the fey in the Chosen's sights would actually resist—the fey who needed to protect their own territory. That meant the orchid dryads, a few nymphs, some satyrs and maenads... was Morrigan still about? The Fey Revel had been passing through, but it was surely gone by now.

And then there were the Gray Wraiths. *They* had to be the tiebreakers. Nobody could face the

Gray Wraiths. If a whole army tried to march through, the Gray Wraiths would gather from all corners of the forest to stop them.

Cluse nodded, but she still felt unsure. None of it felt *right* to her.

Aw, heck, she thought, as she drew near a camp of twinkling lights, *I can't possibly think straight until I've had someone to eat.*

The History in Brief of the Ambrosia Ranch

Y289: Set nearly two hundred years before the events of Monstrous Ranch

The Wild East – Gokuri Forests

As a brief history lesson: The Ambrosia Ranch has had seven owners, starting with Senya's great-great-great-great-great-uncle. The prison existed prior to this purchase by Senya's "sextegreat uncle", but it was not called Ambrosia Ranch at the time—he was the man to give it the name.

The man owned the ranch for many happy years before going missing on a hunt for "demonically infused fey", at which point his young daughter took over. He did not leave his daughter totally helpless, fortunately: The man had in this time constructed a comfortable dwelling, and in this dwelling was bound, by natural fey magics, a friendly house hob named Bobbin. Bobbin was the daughter's mentor as they learned, together, the ways of Ambrosia Ranch.

Luckily, the new Mistress was very much interested in women. This allowed her to see to the various needs of the Ranch inhabitants. Still, she required an heir. She would not live forever, and Bobbin was very firm on it: A direct bloodline was needed to uphold the requirements of the prison bindings.

And so one day the Mistress underwent the, in her words, "unsavory business" of finding someone with the ability to impregnate her. A few decades later, she went missing on a hunt for a local umbra hag and left the Ranch to her son. The owners of the Ranch have been Masters ever since. This also generated the tradition of keeping a stockman or stockwoman around at all times—originally intended as an emergency mate.

Bobbin privately thinks this is a shame. It is *much* more convenient, in her mind, to have the owner of the Ranch also carry the baby. But nobody really cares what she thinks.

Four generations went by with scarcely a blip on the radar. Bobbin remembers each Master quite vividly—there was Senya's thrice-great uncle, with the catgirl domination obsession, and his two sons, each in their own ways wrapped up in their own greed (one of them inherited, and the other one was literally sucked into Hell). There was Senya's five-greats uncle, who got lost one night hunting for mermaids, and his sixth-greats uncle, who loved Brigitte just a little too much.

It was his great-great-great-great-uncle who caught the holstaur. He brought the curvaceous creature straight back to the house, a bell around her neck and red ribbons binding her up tighter than an Arachne Girl's mate. He was very proud of his prize.

And Bobbin was... quite taken with her.

Uneasy Alliances

Summer, Y114: Set directly following Sea Slimes

Lacratian Continent – Southwestern Coastline

"You took longer than I'd hoped," the little goblin said. "But less long than I'd expected."

Snatch rubbed his arm. This was *weird*.

They were speaking to the goblin through a projection in the mist of a waterfall. Through the mist, they could see a pale gray-skinned, four-armed goblin climbing up a pillar for gods-had-known-what-reason. This goblin had a job for them, or so it claimed.

“We came as soon as we could,” Larya said, smiling politely. “We’re... busier these days. I think we’re starting to get a reputation.”

“You are.” Yillit grinned. “Mixed, to be sure, as adventurers, but that’s still a reputation. The thief and the druidess get the job done. The incident with the vampire is infamous.”

Larya’s cheeks reddened slightly, and Snatch let out a small growl. “We’d rather not be well-known for that,” she said. “It didn’t go quite as we’d... ah...” She trailed off.

“Heh.” Yillit tapped his fingers together. “Does it ever, with vampires? All the same. You are just what we need.”

“And what do you need?” Snatch asked, trying to keep this on-task. Praise was all well and good, but it was just padding.

“Do you know who I am, Snatch? Larya, you? No?”

Larya and Snatch exchanged uncertain looks. “Do you work for the Goblin Queen?” Larya asked politely.

Yillit’s face fell. “What? No. *No*.” The skittergoblin shook his head furiously. “We don’t *all* work for the Goblin Queen!”

“Yeah, geez, Larya,” Snatch said, shaking his head. He had been guessing the same.

“I serve the Living Goddess,” Yillit declared. Snatch stiffened. So did Larya. The goblin seemed to recognize it, because he held up a hand. “I know. I know. She has... a reputation.”

“She’s a blasphemer,” Snatch said before he could stop himself.

He wasn’t particularly devout, but he still called a spade a goddamned heretical spade.

“A false prophet,” Larya said, crossing her arms. “A cult leader.”

“Mm. She’s a friend of mine.” Yillit held up his other hand, seeing that the pair were starting to back away. “I know that she is no divine. I know that many hate her, and I understand why.” He rubbed his neck. “I bear the gods no special enmity, you understand. May they forever rest in memories untainted.”

“May they forever rest in memories untainted,” Larya and Snatch said together, by pure reflex.

“But.” Yillit held up two index fingers. “I don’t see what she does as heretical. We simply... offer an outlet for those longing for religious purpose again.” His eyes darkened. “You have felt the darkness in your heart that godlessness brings. This world, what the neogi call the Cloistered Lands... our gods were as much a part of us as the air we breathed. Is it so wrong to offer some struggling souls something to fill that vacuum?”

“I... disagree.” Snatch noticed how slowly Larya was speaking. That was not a sign of friendliness.

“Hm.” Yillit tilted his head to the side, appearing to concede something. “I understand. And believe me, if the situation were not dire, I would not be troubling you. But there is something worse than the Living Goddess.”

“Something worse than an opportunistic con who sexually exploits her worshipers?” Larya snapped.

“Well, yes.” Yillit’s eyes narrowed. “The Kingdom of the Chosen has begun to move west.”

The words hung in the air like mosquitoes, buzzing angrily in Snatch's head.

"We don't do wars," he said, quietly. "Bad policy for adventurers. Messy."

"The Living Goddess," Yillit went on, "leads the *only* real force standing in the Chosen's war. You may not like her, but everything her worshipers do is their own choice. She does not brainwash. She does not control. She lies, yes, but... you must understand the *scale* of evil." He held his hands up for emphasis. "Her 'cult', as you call it, numbers several thousand strong. The Chosen have at least twenty thousand soldiers to bring to bear."

The numbers made Snatch swallow.

As a man, in theory, Snatch had little to fear from the Chosen. Most of his... well, not friends, but partners and acquaintances, though, did. Larya. Mier and Suissu. Theisa. The Rangers he'd met. Snatch didn't like the idea of seeing any of them Converted, obviously, and the Kingdom of the Chosen was a terrifying, distant foe to anyone in the free lands—a cult that had somehow grown into an empire.

Snatch was trying to experiment with looking out for people. Not being a piece of shit. Ever since the incident with the mermaids yesterday, he'd been trying to think more about the fates of others. It was weird.

"So it's hopeless," Larya said. "Those aren't winning numbers, Yillit. If they make it past the Evergreen, we just lose."

"We have soldiers," Snatch said uneasily. "The... there are fiefs and shit. Plus, the Mage Towers. And the Rangers. And, hey, Larya's druids. The Mountain Folk are vicious bastards, and they fight like devils. The Cloistered Monasteries." He paused. "Shit."

"None of those are armies," Yillit said, echoing Snatch's own thoughts. "And few of them are united. Perhaps a fighting force could be cobbled together, but the Chosen have manpower and unity we simply lack. They make promises no other kingdom could keep, drawing in a constant influx of mercenaries." He pinched the bridge of his nose with two hands. "Over the last few decades, the rest of our worlds have fragmented—duchies turned to baronies, nations turned to clusters of bickering villages and tribes. But the Chosen never fragmented. They have been expanding since day one. And then there's their slave force. They've perfected this by now."

"So it's hopeless," Snatch snapped. "So what?"

"It's *not*," Yillit insisted. "The Living Goddess has agents in position even as we speak. You see, their Chosen Commander is behind all of it. The Conversion in particular. We believe that whatever he has done might be... reverse-engineerable."

Snatch's eyes narrowed. He hated magibabble. "Meaning?"

"Meaning we could break the spell," Larya said, sounding unsure herself. But Yillit nodded. "It's all one spell, isn't it? I've spoken to sorceresses. They don't believe it *could* be multiple spells."

"It very likely isn't a spell at all, by traditional measures," Yillit said. "And if we could capture the Chosen Commander, we might be able to force him to surrender the information we need to break it completely."

"Do you think you could do that?" Snatch asked.

"It depends." Yillit rubbed his chin. "We'd need some agents who have experience taking on mind control. Agents the Chosen wouldn't recognize. Preferably, agents who know how to deal with fey, since our plan involves them. A small force that can—"

“We know it's us,” Larya said, rolling her eyes.

“It's you!” Yillit grinned, pointing with all four index fingers.

Snatch sighed. “Goddammit. Do you *actually* have a plan that can work?”

“Oh, of course, of course.” Yillit smirked. “But it involves the Deep Evergreen.”