Melissa Wilds

ENGL 310

Story 2

**Son of the Forest**

 Ena strode up to the top tower built in the highest tree of his city, Deeproot, which lay a mere sixteen groves from the capital of Leaflend. He jumped to the rafters of the tower, a feat only Leaflend Guardsmen (or those in training to become such) could accomplish, climbed to the hole in the ceiling, and looked out. His head broke through the canopy, and he breathed the open air above the city that rushed around him, smelling of pine and sap and growing things.

*Fifteen today…*he thought, in one of his rare contemplative moods. *Fifteen, and ready for so much more than the little I’m doing…* Ena had been raised with his mother, his father never known to him. All his life he had heard about the war, but he knew that what he was doing now did not make a difference in the real fight. But he wanted to.

Ena was trained in the Leaflender fighting arts, skilled with a number of long-arms: staffs, spears, pikes, and the like. Next year, he himself would enter the Leaflend Guard. But right now, all Ena wanted to do was leave the comfort of his city and travel far off, getting the chance he truly wanted, to really help in the battle against Black Fortress, the army that had invaded from the east several years ago, leaving destruction wherever they passed. There was only one thing holding him back; one thing he could not leave. And that thing was--

“Ena!”

He heard his name, called up to him from the floor of the tower. He recognized the voice instantly. Spinning around, he jumped back down to the floor of the tower. Waiting for him there, as he had expected, was his fiancée, Sasof.

Sasof turned away from the window and came to greet him. She was a year older than he was, and was still a foot taller than Ena. Her black hair was tied in a knot at the base of her neck, and though her skin was fair and un-tanned, she was lean and well-muscled from spending much time outside and in the training-tree. Her eyes were an imposing pale green, but softened when she talked to him.

“Ena,” she said again, giving him a light kiss. “Happy birthday.”

Ena grinned and kissed her back, all signs of doubt gone from his face. “Thanks, Sas.”

Sasof walked back to the high window, leading Ena by the hand. “Just one more year until you’ll be working beside me,” she said.

Sasof was a member of the Leaflend Guard, having joined just over a year and a half ago. She had risen quickly, and already led a division of four other members. She was deadly with the naginata, and her squad had been tested in battle many times; each the paradigm of his class. The Red Leaf Division, as Sasof had started to call them, was the best squad this city of Leaflend had ever known.

“Yeah,” Ena said, forcing a smile. “I can’t wait.” Though he always felt at peace with Sasof, the need to truly fight had been growing ever-stronger, as of late. He looked out the window and wondered what Sasof would say if he told her his growing desire.

Sasof turned away from the window and looked worriedly at her fiancé. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but hesitated. Closing it, she smiled, almost sadly. “Come on,” she said, taking his hand and pulling him toward the stairs of the tower which led down to the branch-stair. “Your mother will want to wish you a happy birthday as well, I expect.”

 Opening the door to his home, Ena and Sasof stepped inside. “Mother?” Ena called; the inside of the house seemingly empty. “I’m home, and I’ve brought--”

 All of a sudden, a shadowed figured darted forward out of the other room. Ena caught a flash of chestnut hair, and then found himself in a tight embrace. The young warrior smiled, hugged tightly back, then stepped backward, and held his mother, Menoka, by the arms.
 “Happy birthday, Ena,” his mother said warmly, while Sasof smiled at the sight.

 “Thanks, Mom.” Ena said, smiling despite himself.

 Menoka’s jade eyes twinkled, pleased by something. “And here is Sasof.” She said, stepping over to the girl and embracing her as well. “I thank you for fetching my wayward son for me.” Kissing the dark-haired girl on the forehead, Menoka walked back to the room from which she had run. Turning at the doorway, she added, “The party is at sundown. Until then, why don’t you two enjoy yourselves?” And with that, she was gone.

 Once his mother had left the room, Sasof turned to Ena and grinned. “Let’s go.” She said; an excited twinkle in her eyes. “There’s a place I want to show you.”

 They passed out of the house, and travelled along the main bough-road, to the Green Wall--the perimeter that encircled Deeproot set up by the Leaflend Guard. It was literally just that: a barrier of wood and brick, covered by so much moss and leaves that it looked completely green. It had protected their city for many decades, and every Guardsman took their turn stationed at points on it each week.

 Once the two reached it, they were met by a black-haired man a few years older than Ena, with a scar along to bridge of his nose and tanned skin. “Halt!” he cried, when the two were a few meters from his guard-post. “None may pass the Green Wall!”

 Sasof stepped forward, her green eyes slightly narrowed, but not hard. “Baerk, it’s me: Sasof.” She said, her voice strong but not defensive.

 At once, the man’s posture relaxed, and he grinned. He stepped forward and clasped Sasof’s hand tightly. “Sasof! Didn’t see it was you there!” he stepped aside and bowed low in good humor. “Of course you and your friend may pass,” he said; his voice and manner having changed completely once he recognized who was standing there.

 Sasof turned then, and presented Ena to him. “Baerk, this is Ena,” she said; a smile in her voice. “Next year he will be one of us.”

Baerk laughed aloud and clapped his hand on Ena’s shoulder. “So *you* are Ena!” he said, grinning widely as he finally put a name to the strange face. “Sasof has spoken often of you, my friend. She says you will make an excellent Guardsman.”

Ena grinned and stood up to his full height. “Thanks a lot,” he said earnestly, for the first time in a long while feeling anticipation for joining the Leaflend Guard.

It wasn’t that he didn’t *want* to join--after all, the Leaflend Guard were the elite warriors of Leaflend…but serving duty in a city, instead of leaving to actually fight, was not his idea of help. But hearing about Sasof’s good words for him made him think that maybe he *did* have a chance to help here. It may have been silly, but that was what he thought.

Sasof stepped forward then, passing between the two men as they broke apart. “Come on, Ena,” she said, stepping to the edge of the Green Wall; to the long branch-stair that led down to the forest floor. “You have to see this!” She stepped onto the ladder-like stair, and nimbly began to climb down the interwoven branches with the speed and skill known only to a Leaflender.

Ena grinned and followed after her, his heart still soaring after the praise he had been given, while Baerk stood at the edge of the Wall and watched them go.

Once they reached the floor of their forest, Sasof turned to look back at Ena. “Ready to go?” she asked him.

Ena hesitated. “Wait,” he asked, unsure as the momentary high left him, and the knowledge of what they were actually doing sank into him. “You mean we’re leaving the city? And traveling on the forest floor?”

In the near-endless forests of Leaflend, cities were the safest places to be. High above the floor of the trees, and guarded and walled, they protected against both the fell beasts that populated the forests in Leaflend and raiding parties of men who sometimes journeyed through, both of which could not scale to the topmost boughs. In Leaflend, height and civilization meant safety, and Sasof was taking Ena both out of the city and down to the forest floor. Usually, Ena would have kept silent in times of doubt, not wanting to lose face, especially to his warrior-girlfriend, but the rules changed when they left the high city. Everything changed when you left the high city.

“Sasof…” he started slowly, as they began walking.

“Mn?” she said, looking around as if for a certain place or thing.

“Are--” gods, this was killing him to say it… “Are you sure that the way is safe down here?” he said, forcing the words out with all his power.

At this, Sasof looked back at Ena, face a mask that barely concealed equal parts understanding, worry, and confusion…all of which was directed at Ena.

Ena felt his face flush as Sasof looked him over. *She must* really *think I’m a rookie now…!* He thought, frustrated. Leaflend Guard members ventured down here all the time, doing border patrols and occasionally fighting creatures that came too close to their respective cities. Needless to say, however, this was Ena’s first time down here.

“Don’t worry,” Sasof said finally. “It’s not far, and we shouldn’t run into anything this close to Deeproot.”

Ena smiled weakly, thankful for both the assurance, and the fact that she did not mention his amateurism.

They continued to walk for another half an hour. By this time, the sun that had been climbing in the sky, when Ena looked out over the trees from the tower, had reached and passed its zenith.

Not far into the huge forest outside Deeproot, Sasof started to talk happily, presumably about the place they were going to visit.

“It’s *so* beautiful…!” she began, weaving a tale of a place so utterly different from the cities of Leaflend. “There’re trees so young they must have sprouted only *years* ago--small and tender and green. With leaves so soft and gentle; they brush your face like children’s hands. And flowers of every shade and hue, from bloodwine to summersky to budleaf.” She paused, and threw her hands up, as if to touch the sky, blue above her.

“And the *best* part…is the *fountain*!” she added, going on and on and on. “The water sparkles in the sun, and it’s so clear and cold and refreshing to drink. The statue is beautiful, too…but that *water*….What you can find in all the cities is nowhere near what that one fountain has…”

It seemed that she could not contain her anticipation and delight to reach this place. As she talked, Ena began to catch her mood, and felt happy and excited himself. He had never known that there were places like that down here. Of course, his city was full of trees. It had been *made* upon trees. But the other two wonders that Sasof spoke of were nothing more than distant memories; things told out of stories.

Flowers never grew up high in the tree-cities of Leaflend. In those tree-cities, it was considered the most beautiful and deep act of love to give flowers to your beloved, because to do so, one had to venture deep into the heart of the forest, probably fighting past monsters and fell men to reach a sparse few blossoms.

Fountains, whether man-made, or welling forth from natural springs, were never seen at all.

As Ena walked further, became more accustomed to the sounds and smells of the floor of the forest, he found himself more and more at ease. The words his girlfriend spun made him excited about reaching this place, and he no longer felt the same distrusting fear of the place that he had when he had first begun to walk. He was at peace; he was happy. The same, however, could not be said of Sasof.

The Leaflend Guardswoman was now casting her head from side to side, as if looking for something frantically. She seemed tense--on edge. “It should be here,” she said, over and over again; so quietly, Ena could barely catch the words. “It should be here; it should be here…”

Ena felt a growing dread in his gut, the worry of Sasof spreading inside him, intensified by the pressure of the dangers in this part of the forest, which all came crawling back up into his gut as his guide grew anxious and unsettled. “Sas…is something wrong…?” he asked nervously.

Sasof looked at Ena, and a doubt that was almost *wild* was in her pale-green eyes. “Ena--it should have been *right*--” but her words, and Ena’s focus on them, were both cut off at the same time as they caught sight of a thin, spiraling trail of smoke dizzying into the sky about half an acre to their right.

At once, they took off running.

By the look on Sasof’s face, Ena could guess that she knew where the smoke had issued from. They crashed through the trees and Ena grew more and more apprehensive as they drew closer and closer. When they were not fifteen trees from the place, Ena felt his mouth and nose clog up with smoke. He coughed but kept on running, until at last they came to the origin of the smoke.

It came from a great clearing in the forest, the sun openly illuminating the scene that lay before the two warriors.

It must have been quite beautiful once.

This was indeed the place Sasof had been guiding him to, but now it was utterly in ruin.

The young saplings had all been cut down, and many of them had been heaped together and set alight in the smoldering fire that thrust up the smoke, like a foul poisonous breath from a fire-demon. The flowers had all been trampled to a pulp, and a haze of soot and ash lay over all. The older trees around the edges were fire-blasted, most with great chunks hewn out of them. The couple dozen rocks scattered around were all scorched, with evil marks scratched into them.

But the worst destruction of all lay in the center of the clearing. A beautiful marble fountain stood: in the likeness of a fair dryad, birthed out of the roots of a great tree, clad in bark and long leaves, hair like a waterfall down her back.

Or, at least, that was what it *had* been. Her head had been broken off, and shattered to pieces around her feet, and in the spot between her breasts, where the heart of a real girl would have been, something had cut the symbol of Black Fortress.

“No…” Sasof cried softly, falling to her knees. Tears, almost never seen on the warrior’s face, formed in her eyes and fell, moon-bright, down her cheeks.

Ena, however, stood erect. His back was stiff, his posture perfect but taunt as a bowstring. His fists were clenched so tightly the knuckles were white and his hands shook.

“This…” Sasof said; voice indistinct and slightly shaky. “This…” she reached out to touch the dryad’s face, the only part of her head still intact, and cradled it gently to her own heart. “*How*…could this *happen*…?!”

Ena lowered his head, his hair falling in front of his eyes, obscuring the emotions within them. “Why? How? It doesn’t matter. While I’ve been sitting here, safe at home, our enemy has been creeping to our very borders--and destroying every beautiful thing in its path!”

Sasof turned to look at the boy she loved and reached out one shuddering hand towards him. “Ena, *please*…!”

Ena turned to glare at Sasof, pale-green eyes flashing. “What? Do you want me to live in blind happiness, while the people of our nation are dying?”

“Ena!” she pleaded.

“I will not!” His whole body shook with the rage and passion of his words. It was indescribable, the selfish desire loosed and mixed with righteous fury for what had been lost. “I will not wait for the evils to destroy everything around us, until they come for me, alone and weak, at the very steps of my home!” He was terrible to look at, not himself, not anything close to Ena of Leaflend. He was…a boy breaking. “I will not wait by idly for the destruction of Leaflend! I--”

“Ena!” a new voice called, stern and hard. The two turned to find Baerk and another guard: a woman with dark brown hair, run through with strands of gray and bound up in a long warrior’s braid. Both stood at the edge of the clearing, watching Ena and Sasof.

Sasof turned to look at the two warriors, and said unsteadily. “Baerk, Thorn…what…?”

It was the woman, Thorn, who spoke in reply. Her voice was stiff, formal, and cold. “We saw the smoke, and came to investigate.” Then she paused, and directed her glare to Ena. “To think that we would find *this* young upstart going on about war and battle…”

Ena bristled and was about to give a sharp retort, but Baerk intervened. “Thorn, take care of Sasof. Ena, let’s get moving--whatever did this is probably still out there.”

Thorn went over to the upset Sasof and knelt next to her. Her stern face became gentle, her military rigidness disappearing into comforting warmth. “Come, child,” she said, laying one strong hand on Sasof’s thin and shaking arm. “We must leave this place. Do not weep overmuch for this loss--the darkness must be fought back with steel, not tears.”

Weakly, Sasof nodded and stood. Thorn walked her over to Ena, and when the younger woman was close enough, the young Leaflender embraced his love tightly. “I’m so sorry, Sasof…” he said softly. “I’m *so* sorry…”

As soon as Sasof felt Ena’s arms around her, she burst into tears, clutching tightly at his sleeves. Ena put a hand around her head and breathed into her hair, “It’s okay, Sas. It’s okay; they can’t touch you while I’m here.”

The walk back was mournful, like a funeral procession. Baerk led the group, face blank and eyes lowered, then Ena with his arms still around the quietly weeping Sasof, and Thorn in the position of rearguard, her face set in a hardness that must have been to fight back her own tears. They did not speak, and all heads were downcast.

By the time Baerk stood at the base of Gatetrunk, the huge tree that held the branch-stair up to Deeproot, the sun was nearly set. Thorn climbed up the stair about half-way, then gave a clear whistle. From above, an answering whistle came, and Thorn motioned for the rest of them to come up.

When they reached the top of the branch-stair, it was to both Ena and Sasof’s surprise that they found the members of the Red Leaf Division (the best division of the Leaflend Guard in their acre of Leaflend) waiting for them. All were men, and all had at least a year’s more time in the Leaflend Guard than Sasof, but they followed her with the utmost devotion and respect. As one, they took Sasof into an embrace and led her (still crying) away from the other three.

Thorn looked at Baerk, then inclined her head in a gesture of respect. “I have to return to my post,” she said, then walked away without a backward glance at the two men.

Baerk, the last of the group left with the young Leaflender, looked at Ena, and addressed the younger boy in a serious tone. “She may not look it,” he said, eyes fixed steadily on the dark-haired youth so that he could not look away, “But Sasof is fragile. It’s your job to protect her when she is weak--” here he looked at Ena with a fierce, hard glare in his eyes, “But today you failed.”

Ena flinched.

“She was distraught, but you thought nothing of her sufferings. The only thoughts in your mind were your own selfish ideas.” He looked down at Ena scornfully, with more than a hint of disappointment in his eyes. “You cannot be always thinking of yourself--not if you love Sasof even a little!” he cried chest heaving

By the time Baerk had finished speaking, Ena felt like the lowest of the low. As the Leaflend Guardsman left him, saying he also had things to attend to, Ena sank down onto the nearest bench, lost in his own dark tumble of thoughts.

He thought back to how he had acted in the clearing, and all his own selfish pain disappeared as he remembered how he had not only ignored Sasof when she was in pain, but he had probably made it worse. *Sasof…* he thought achingly, *Sasof, I’m such an* idiot*! Your friend is right--I hurt you when I should have comforted you.* His fists clenched, and he lowered his head. *I’m…so…so--*

He stopped, as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Asanterth standing there. This was his mentor, a slight man of no more than five feet, with long brown hair, clad in wooden armor and mask that covered nothing except his mouth and the end of his nose. Asanterth played a part in the governing of both Leaflend and Oaklend, as well as commanding the Oaklender bowmen, but he preferred to keep in the shadows than to step into the brightness of the spotlight.

He looked calm, like he always did, and the calmness spread to Ena, easing the boy’s own fervor and franticness. “Ena,” he said in that surprisingly deep voice of his. “Let’s talk.”

 “…and now I feel so stupid--I *hurt* her, leaf-master.” Ena finished, and looked up at his old teacher, face betraying his hope that Asanterth could give him a way out of his problems.

 The slight man gazed long and hard at his student, then finally spoke, only a few short words. “This has been hurting you?”

 Something in his voice told Ena that his leaf-master, or teacher, was not talking about the problem with Sasof. Instead, Ena had a distinctive feeling that the archer had found out his deepest, most secret wish: the desire to leave his city to fight in the war.

 “…Yes.” He finally managed to choke out.

 “Enough to hurt the people you love?” Asanterth added, fixing Ena with a quiet, penetrating stare.

 Ena felt a small trickle of sweat run down his spine. “I…it wasn’t supposed to happen…like this,” he protested.

“The war is everywhere--‘this’ was inevitable.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt Sasof!”

“Running away would hurt her, too.”

“I wasn’t going to leave!”

“Yes, you were.”

“I *wasn’t*!”

Asanterth turned away from his student, and let out a small sigh. “I wonder if that is really true.” with that, the slight man stood up and walked away, leaving Ena on the bamboo-woven bench as the sun set. The young warrior growled, thinking: *How can he be so cold? How can he think I would leave here…leave her…I would* never*…!*

But in his heart, Ena knew that he might have left…that he *still* might leave. Even after all that had happened, he still felt that secret desire burning like a firebrand in his chest.

Even after so many people had warned him against it. Even though he knew that it would devastate Sasof. Even though it was the stupidest, most selfish idea he had ever had in his fifteen years of life.

He still needed to.

There were some things he could never change about himself; some things he needed to do, no matter the cost. And this was number one, at the top of the list. He needed to be out there, to *fight*. And more than that, he now knew why.

Because that moment in the clearing had shown him everything he needed to see to be proved right. Because he had looked down on Sasof, and she had been crying: crying, like she had never cried in all the long years he had known her. The war continued to destroy things; precious things. Every day, places like that clearing were ruined. The war did this, the war, which he could not fight in, would eventually wipe out all that was good in the world. The war…could destroy her.

So he had to go. He had to fight. To protect those precious places…to protect *her*. He had to go; he had to hurt her…in order to *save* her. It was as simple as that. His teacher was right: Asanterth had known from the very beginning, knew him well enough to foresee the path he would take. He had to leave, to protect the ones he cared about. And, when the war was over, he would come home.

But right now, he had to go. There was no stalling it. He would stop back at his home, gather the things he needed, and then leave. He would not see Sasof; it would hurt too much. He knew she would try to stop him, and he knew he could not let himself be stopped. But she would know why he left, and though he knew it would break her heart…it was the best thing he could do for her.

In the end, it was all he could do for her…

Ena crept stealthily into his house, to find it empty. Even if his mother had been home, his natural Leaflender abilities would have allowed him to pass undetected, but as it was, everyone he knew was at his birthday party right now--the party he would never attend.

 Creeping to his room, he realized how dark the house was, no candles lit or fires going…the shadows seemed to press close around him, as if they knew his purpose, and did not want to let him go through with it. *Betrayer; selfish boy…* they seemed to say; *Wicked, cruel…! Live a life of misery; never come here again…you are not wanted here, if you choose this path!* Ena gritted his teeth and pushed forward, blocking out the voices his imagination pulled forth from his own fears.

 Walking into his room, he lit no lights, but worked by the faint starlight and the rays of the slim, crescent moon. He picked up several pairs of clothing, hunting and fishing equipment, a number of small weapons, food enough for a fortnight, sleeping bag, and various other essentials. He did not touch the presents from his mother, laid on his bed, nor the gifts from Sasof given a few weeks ago.

Only the essentials. He did not want to be reminded of home…

 Then he stopped. His eyes came to rest on the wood print of Sasof and himself, done so many years ago when they were still young and untroubled by the woes of this world. His eyes lingered on her smiling face, as he picked up the picture. He felt the true depth of what he was about to do wash over him as he looked at her picture. He…

 He heard the front door open. He dropped the picture in a crash on the floor. “Hello?” he heard his mother call. “Is anyone there? Ena?”

 Ena let out a mental curse and did up the straps of his pack. Climbing to the window, he slid himself over the side and onto the bough-ladder just as his mother opened the door to his room.

 He bounded down the ladder onto a lower branch and took off running. It seemed that his mother caught sight of him as she leaned out the window.

 “Ena!” she yelled. “Ena, don’t leave!”

 Ena ignored her, and kept on running. *I cannot look back…* he thought. *If I look back, I won’t have the strength to leave…*So he ignored the pained cries of his mother, and did not look back.

 “Ena!” his mother called beseechingly, one last time. “Ena, stop, you’re--”

 But her last words were cut off as Ena jumped an unguarded part of the Green Wall and left Deeproot for the first time in his life.

 He ran for a long time: until the sun came up, at least. And when he could not run, he walked. Day by day, he watched the forest change around him, but the only thing that filled his thoughts were the faces of the people he had left behind.

 Asanterth would be disappointed--disappointed that he had to be proved right. Ena’s old teacher had known this would come, but, Ena knew, had hoped desperately that he was wrong.

 His mother *his mother*, whose face he could not turn to see as he fled in the dark. Her last words haunted him, but more so was the desperate voice in which they were spoken.

 And Sasof. He could not even imagine what this would do to her. Before the day he left, he had not even seen her cry. Would she break down again? Would she be angry? He didn’t know--but what he *did* know was that what he did would hurt her more than anything else in this life. He hurt her…

 But he hurt her to save her…

 So he would go on, until the war was over (helped in part by his own hands) and then…he could come home.

 So he kept on walking.