

Nightphlox part II “Tasks at Hand”

It had been three days since I ate anything of substance. Every now and again I found a bush of raspberries or perhaps an apple tree to temporarily curb the hunger pains. When I was very lucky I stumbled across a *Garcinia Cambogia* plant. The large wrinkled berries on this plant are very bitter, but one berry would make hunger pains go away for at least 6 hours. However, I was tired of plants and my body craved meat.

The orange and purple hues that pierced the darkness in the east heralded the coming of dawn. I climbed up an old maple tree to prepare myself for some rest. As I made my way to a low hanging branch, my stomach started to twitch. My mouth started to water, and a massive headache set in. I held my head cupped in my hands as the pain seared through my skull. My eyes squeezed closed as a tear made its way out of the corner of my eye. Then, as quickly as it came on, the headache was gone.

I curled in the crook of the branch, as comfortably as I could manage, and slept.

I still had dreams of the Orc soldiers and undead magicians; and they made me very uneasy. To this day I still sleep lightly, but especially then when I was alone. I missed Nanaie.

I heard a twig snap that evening and was instantly awake. On instinct alone I rolled on the branch to crouch on all four limbs – ready to pounce. My mouth started to water as I looked for the source of the noise. It was running. Closer. I licked my lips. Closer. I tensed the muscles in my legs. Closer. I did not see the animal, but I jumped out of the tree. I landed on a wolverine, and with no conscious effort of my own, snapped its neck.

I had never killed anything before. Well, not that I could remember. I felt bad at what I had done, but my mouth continued watering and my stomach rumbled hollowly. As I looked at the dead beast I noticed a gash in its upper shoulder blade. I had not made that wound. Just then I heard another rustle in the distance – growing closer. I prepared myself for the worst. Wolverines tend to travel in packs. Once again on all fours I tried to hide. This one sounded much larger than the first. As it grew closer, I saw metal glimmer with the evening sun. It was not a wolverine. It was a human.

The man was wholly unremarkable: slender, average height and short brown hair. He wore a green tunic beneath blackened chain mail. The dying light had glinted off his long sword – polished to a high gleam save for the tip of wolverine blood. He ran right past me to the dead wolverine. He didn't even see me. He examined the corpse, grabbed it by its hind legs and started to drag it behind him. He was stealing my food! I lunged at him and knocked us both to the ground. He flung me off of him with lightning speed. Next thing I knew I had the tip of a long sword pointed right between my eyes.

“That's my dinner” I barked at the stranger.

“Yours?” He seemed surprised that I could speak. I wondered what I looked like. “Yours? Who are you to claim what you never possessed?”

Reformatting my strategy, because that's what you have to do when you have a razor sharp object about to be jabbed in your face, I said, "Look, I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in days. I don't know where I am or where I'm going."

The stranger was not swayed by my plea. "Who are you? Where do you come from?" He asked.

"I am called Nightphlox. I don't know where I'm from. I had an accident and have lost all previous memory."

"What an odd name, Nightphlox, Well my interest doesn't lie in the meat. If you wish I will share, but the jaw is mine."

I quickly agreed, because that's what you do when you have a very large metal toothpick up your nose. He lowered the sword and I let out a sigh of relief. I may have soiled myself a little, but not really, I swear.

With a bit of a cocky tone in my voice now that the sword was down I asked, "Well, since we are now so cordially acquainted, what may I call you by?"

He glared at me for my remark and muttered, "Gabe." Then silence. I swear, even the crickets were waiting for him to say something else.

Gabe began to quarter the animal into large, bloody pieces. I grabbed a piece of meat that was cut off the hind quarters and, mouth salivating, prepared to consume everything down to the marrow in the bones. Gabe stopped me. "Don't you think you should go fetch some kindling for a fire Nightphlox? We are not savages, and I refuse to eat like one."

Hesitantly, I went out and gathered some twigs. I may have said a few choice words under my breath. Although I don't remember most of the remarks I made one had to do with the jaw bone and where he could shove it. That was all Gabe said all night. I tried to make conversation, but all he gave was either a head nod or a grumble.

It was getting dark and Gabe decided to get some rest. I sat by the fire thinking about the journey ahead while I picked the last few morsels from my teeth. I felt strangely satisfied with this meal. Even though I hadn't slept at night for quite some time I grew tired as well. I laid my head against a nearby tree and slept peacefully next to the fire.

I awoke in the morning – a strange feeling, to be sure. Gabe had already left; and once again I was alone. I gathered up my belongings and headed back north towards Bristol.

After a six hour hike I could see a set of city gates. Finally! I'm here! I started to run towards the city. I don't ever remember running this quickly before. My heart started to beat faster, my breath was deeper and I felt as if I were hardly touching the ground at all. Then my muscles seized up. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I fell to the ground. Curled like an infant, my head ached and throbbed. As I worked myself to my knees, I felt a soft touch on my

back. I heard some mumbled whispers behind me, then the pain started to cease.

“Open your eyes, my friend” a soothing female voice said. I opened my eyes and saw two blurry people. Weak, I let my head hang down and noticed a pool of my own blood forming on the ground.

“Here, let me help you up,” said the second woman. One person on each side they picked me up. “You took quite a spill, dear. Here’s a cloth to clean up that nose bleed of yours.” Now that the pain was gone and my strength was returning, I took the offered cloth and wiped my face.

The two women both carried very kind looks on their faces. The first was adorned in black clothing laced with gold. She had her nose pierced and wore a strange jangling hat. I liked that hat. It was shiny. The other had a pink cloth wrapped in her long brown hair, and wore a green dress with gray sleeves. “What is your name?” asked the lady in the green dress.

“I am called Nightphlox. Thank you for helping me. What may I call you by?”

“My name is Vashta,” the lady in the green dress replied. “And this is Gaia.” I noticed two baskets full of flowers and herbs on the ground at their feet. “We saw you fall and ran over here to help.” Vashta concluded.

Gaia said, “Yes, why you be in such big rush, Mr. Phlox. Where are you going?”

I pointed to the gates “There” I said, “I have been trying to get to Bristol for quite a few days now.”

Gaia quickly announced, “I am sorry Master Phlox, but this is not the Bristol you seek.” Vashta’s head snapped quickly to look at Gaia in confusion. “Bristol is 10 miles west of here.” Gaia said.

I couldn’t believe it. I was so close! “Are you sure? I was never told anything about going west.”

Gaia nodded “This I am certain. Now hurry, something tells me you are needed there.”

I thanked them both for their kindness. Although I was frustrated, and a bit discouraged, I began trudging west.

Gaia and Vashta retrieved their baskets and walked through the city’s gates. Gaia ignored Vashta’s questioning look until they were safely back at camp. “It is not Master Phlox’s time to be introduced to Bristol. Soon, but not yet.”

As I wandered west for what felt like hours the beaten path I was following just seemed to stop. “Well I must continue on,” I thought. So I pulled up my big boy pants and started to make my way through the brush. It was thick. Burrs stuck to my pants and large thorn bushes started to tear holes in my clothes. It was almost as if the forest itself did not want me to head this way. The trees were very unwelcoming and would occasionally slap me in the face as I tried to make my way through. Each step sounded of a forest alarm as twigs and leaves snapped, crackled, and

popped underneath my feet. Hmmm... Where have I heard that sound before?

In the distance I saw a small clearing about 50 ft away, but I did not make it more than 30 before I heard a deep booming voice shout, "HALT, INTRUDER! Or I will smite thee where thou dost stand!"

I ducked down hoping the voice wasn't talking to me and I tried to hide.

The male voice called out again, "If thou wilt not show thy face by choice, I shall reveal it by force!"

Still crouched and silent I heard some mumbled words. A low rumble began in the clearing. Louder and louder it grew until it sounded like the man cracked a whip. The hairs on the back of my neck felt as if they singed as the large ball of fire flew over my head and felled the tree behind me.

I fell to the ground in terror and shouted, "I'm sorry for the intrusion, I mean no harm! I have just lost my way, sir, please don't kill me!" I had never witnessed anything like this before. Magic, right in front of my eyes! And trying to kill me! I was not liking this quest I had been sent on. Maybe I could turn around and go back home with Nanaie.

"Be you friend or foe come forth slowly, stranger. Once I have seen thy face then I shall deal with thee in a just manor.

I rose from the ground and, with my hands in the air, walked to the clearing. The tall, dark man stood in the center of the clearing with a white shirt and brown vest. Around his neck hung a shard of amethyst, and he wielded a large staff.

"Ahhh, I can see by the fear in thy face, and the clothing upon thy back, that thou art not of Draco decent. Am I correct?"

Fear gave me a stutter, "I... I can...I cannot promise...what you said because of two things. I don't know who I am and I don't know what a Draco is."

"Then, what is thy business here? No one in their right mind would travel through such a thick brush."

Perhaps I wasn't in my right mind. None of this made any sense. "I was sent to find a certain city, but I'm clearly in over my head. Sorry to disturb you. I'm going home."

The man struck the ground with his staff, his face contorted with rage. "Thou wilt state thy name!"

"Nightphlox," I stammer. "I am called Nightphlox."

"And I am Talis. Sit as I finish preparing camp. 'Tis clear that thou art not a threat to me." He

seemed to sure of himself that it was almost prideful. Perhaps he would see me as a threat if he knew about the wolverine. But still, I sat. Talis closed his eyes and mumbled a few words that I could not make out. His arm rose and a rumble came from the ground. As his hands went up to the evening sun, thorn bushes and other plant life grew at an amazing rate around the encampment.

This was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. First fire balls, then fast growing plants. Clearly Talis was a man to be feared with so much power. Yet I felt strangely at ease. To use his words, he seemed more friend than foe.

"The plants will help protect us from the Draco," Talis explained. "It shall make it near impossible to find us, and even if they do I will hear them coming as I heard thee." Talis sat down next to me and stared at his fire pit. His eyes rolled back into his head, he paled visibly as he mumbled a few words and pointed at the logs. A small flame shot from his finger and ignited the carefully placed twigs in the pit. He smiled at me as I realized my jaw was hanging open.

"So thou art a weak man, Nightphlox, wouldst thou agree?"

Weak? I was insulted. "What do you mean weak? I am not weak – I'll have you know."

"Thou needest to only reveal thine actions and intentions. Thou hast given up on thine quest. Thou hast Failed. Thou wert given a task because someone believed in thee; and the task was accepted because thou believed in thyself. Now, because things just are not going the way thou predicted them or how thou dost want, thou art giving up and running home. By thine own admission: thou art weak."

Still insulted I replied, "You know not of my situation! You don't understand the confusion, the pain I have suffered. I just want answers and I want to be at a place where I'm not getting swords in my face, falling down because of headaches, or having fireballs thrown at my head!"

Talis laughed, "At least thou art on a quest of passion. I am on a quest that I despise, but my master wills I go. So, once again Nightphlox, if thou wert to abandon thine quest for fear of failure or uncomfortable, then thou art weak. I have seen children with more gumption than thee. I have dealt with the undead, I have dealt with gods, and dragons. I fear death every day but still I walk on. What is thine excuse?"

"I..." He was right. Why was I giving up? Because of a little discomfort? Because I didn't like the way things were going?

"Thou WHAT?" Talis roared... he must not like excuses.

"I.... think you're right... It's time to take what fate has been given to me."

"Ahhh," Talis finally smiled, "That's more like it." Then, with a sly smile, said, "Howe'er thou art still weak." He laughed loudly.

I knew he was now jesting, so I laughed as well.

"Now Nightphlox, it is time to retire, we both have long journeys ahead of us."

I agreed. He happily shared some of his meal and after we finished I dozed near the fire.

I wiped the sand from my eyes. As I craned my head to see around the rock in front of me I saw him. The gray orc was staring right at me only inches from my face. He grunted and I could feel the wetness of his breath on my neck. I jumped up from behind the rock, grabbed the orc's leg with one arm, pushed his chest with the other and the orc fell to the ground with a large thud. The orc bellowed; I punched him in the throat. His eyes roll back in his head and I feel another set of eyes gazing upon me. I mule kick and I felt there was another orc right behind me. Knowing I need to finish the one before me quickly, I reached down, grabbed his chin with one hand, braced the top of his head with the other and twisted. SNAP. Just that easily – his neck was broken. As soon as the orc's neck snapped, blinding pain shot through my own temples. OOOOOUUUCCCCHHHH. My head...

It was only a dream. The headache was real. Real and painful. I tried to push myself up but couldn't find any traction. I was on something slippery.

"NIGHTPHLOX, GET DOWN!" I heard Talis shout.

Eyes still closed and head still searing, I dropped down onto whatever puddle was beneath me. A large boom followed by a scream was all I heard.

In the silence that followed, the pain in my head receded. As I opened my eyes I saw the dead man in the black cloak next to me. The unnatural angle of his head told me that his neck had been snapped. The puddle I was in was his blood. Behind me I could hear a man gasp once for air and lay still. In the distance lay the remains of a third who had been cooked like a turkey. Talis reached down to pick me up. "That was absolutely amazing! In all my years I have never seen anything like it. Take pride in these words: I take back ever calling you weak. Where did you learn to do that?"

"Do all what?" I asked

"You do not remember? You just disposed of two Dracos with your bare hands faster than I have ever seen."

"I did?" I was confused.

"You genuinely do not remember, do you?"

"No."

"You are a skilled fighter, Nightphlox, and if you were to remember your actions then the world will not have seen your equal. There is a port town east of here that can help in your training –

and they are having problems with the Dracos. I believe you should meet my friends there. They will happily accept your help. I would travel with you but, Master Ignis has commanded me to go back and protect the capital city of London. But you, Nightphlox, I believe you may prove to be very valuable back in Bristol."

"Bristol?!" I shouted. "East? That's where I just was. Don't you mean west?"

"No, East, I am sure of this."

"Thank you, Talis, for all your kindness. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a Gypsy to deal with."

"STOP," Talis commanded.

I had not heard anger in his voice since the day prior.

"You will not do or speak any ill against the gypsies of Bristol. If they commanded you to come this way it was for a reason. If I hear that you so much as attempt to split a hair on one of their heads I will personally come for yours. Do you understand me?"

His eyes brooked no argument. I took a deep breath and calmed myself. "Yes, Talis. I understand. Thank you."

"Then be off, Nightphlox. Help defend my friends against the threat of the Draco."

Talis cast a spell and the protective plants withered back into the earth. Now I could clearly see the path ahead. I began my journey back to Bristol.

The thoughts that occupied my mind, made the trip back to Bristol seem short, the evening night sky said otherwise as I walked up to the front gates. Why would they send me the wrong way? Did they not want me here? If they didn't, why not?

The town was quiet. All the shops were closed up for the night. In the distance I heard some laughing and saw a small hue of light. I walked close to what I could now see was a campfire.

Not knowing what kind of reception I would receive I moved as quiet as possible. I hid behind a large tent and tried to eavesdrop on the group surrounding the fire.

"Looking for someone Master Phlox" said a voice behind me. I spun around and got ready to pounce in fright, and then I saw who it was. "Gaia, you startled me." I said.

"I startled you? I am not the one sneaking around foreign lands."

"I wouldn't be sneaking if I didn't think I was not wanted here Gaia." "Why did you send me the wrong way?"

Gaia replied "I did not send you off your course. I kept you right on track." "You see the

universe works in mysterious ways. Sometimes we are where we are needed, sometimes we are early, sometimes we are late, but we are always where we are supposed to be.”

“You are speaking in riddles, I don’t understand. Bristol is where I was supposed to be.” I said.

“You are part right. You are in Bristol so this is where you need to be, but the other day you were due 6 miles west of here, but you did not know that, so now you are here right on time. See All actions have a purpose, to put together the universal puzzle as a whole, you have to lay each piece and make sure they fit. As for yesterday, as I stated you were needed where you were, also since you had arrived here early, you needed to leave, because someone else needed to catch up, ISNT THAT RIGHT GABE.”

At that instance I heard someone begin running behind me. Just in time I dashed to the left as a sword slammed on the ground to my right. It was Gabe, and he was not happy to see me.

“WHERE IS SHE?” Gabe shouted as he lunged at me.

I side stepped his blade once again as it hit the ground and flew out of his hand.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Gabe.”

“LIES” Gabe shouted as he charged me, as we both fell to the ground, I grabbed for his throat. Surprisingly he did the same, both laying on the ground squeezing the air out of each other’s lungs.

“ENOUGH” Gaia shouted “GABE, HE DOESNT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOUR SISTER.”

Gabe glared at Gaia and let go of my neck, as I reciprocated. “How do you know about her? How did you know my name? How....”

Gaia interrupted, “Let me make this simple, I am Gaia, I am the soothsayer of this the Band of the Twisted Claw.” “You both are here because we have summoned for you, also in the process of your destiny, you may find a way for the answers you both are searching for.”

Gabe looked at me in non trusting way, believe me, the feeling was mutual.

Gaia Continued, “Now I must introduce you to some people come walk with me.”

We both got up and started to walk towards the campfire.

“Twisted Claw, yet another two apprentices have found their way to our camp, they shall prepare for training first thing in the morn. Each day, the next day looks more promising.”

Yips, and hollers filled the camp as Gaia introduced everyone. Then she called out to four specific individuals to step forward. “Nightphlox, Gabe, this is Gage, Illyria, Ryder, and Skylana,

They are our current guardians, may you follow in their footsteps.

Both Gabe and I, confused, greeted the guardians, in hesitant respect.

“Now I know you may be a bit overwhelmed, I have one last person to introduce you to, and I think she will help you understand better what is going on.” “Talía, our two new apprentices need to understand why they were brought here, could you please tell us the story of the paragons?”

“Yes, gather all who wish to hear.” Talía said

As Talía told us the story, Gabe and I were instructed to choose a faction based on what part of the story we believed was the proper course of action.

“Well that’s easy,” Gabe replied, “The Order of the Sun was right.”

“How could you say that?” I shouted. “Well actually I know why your simple kill now and ask questions later mind could say that.” “Lunar Tribe is where I was meant to be.”

There we went our separate ways.

My training began. Now, only the chosen can partake on such training for its power in the wrong hands can be devastating, because of this, I have taken a vow not to reveal its makings.

Gabe and I crossed paths a few times since the campfire, but now with a new rivalry on top of everything else, we did not speak to each other.

Finally the day had come. My studies and hard work all made sense as I completed my training. It was time to be honored with the title Guardian. I went to the instructed location and who did I see... Gabe...

“I see you have also completed your training Gabe.” I said with a bit of mistrust in my voice. “Yes, as have you, I do see.” Gabe replied.

“I didn’t think you...” we both started to say at the same time, then we paused and then just laughed. Strange I know, right, I don’t quiet get it either.

“Look phlox, I’m uh, sorry about trying to uhh, you know, kill you and all.”

“I understand, and hey, we are both here for the same reason so why instead of working against each other, I really feel that we would be stronger if we worked with each other.”

“I agree, Truce” Gabe questioned

“Truce” I replied

The Ceremony was amazing, Everything just fit together like a cosmic puzzle, just as Gaia stated. I felt a overwhelming sense of pride as I saw all four guardians I had previously met, even though I never really got to know them, at my graduation.

As all the words were spoken, out of nowhere, it started up again. My mouth, started to water. No why now, My muscles started to clench. NOT IN FRONT OF ALL THESE PEOPLE.

I ran off towards the woods. Gabe jumped up and shouted PHLOX, and went to run after me. Gaia stepped in his way.

“Gabe, everyone is where they need to be when they need to be, he is not early, or late, he is on time. Sit enjoy your celebration, you deserve it.” Gabe hesitantly sat back down.

I fell to my knees as the pain in my head began. My temples pumping each beat more and more pain. My eyes clenched closed as I felt the familiar warm liquid squeeze out but this time it was thicker. The pain was more intense, No longer able to hold myself up on all fours, I fall to the ground. Teeth clenched, the pain does not go away this time, as the pool of my own blood forms on the ground under my head, I can't help but to think of all the amazing people I have met. The adventures I had been on. I wish I could share my true appreciation for each and every one of them, but this time, this time, I don't think I'm going to

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