

The Forest's Wisdom

An Excerpt by Annika Sage Ellis

Asim traversed the wetlands with a walking stick in hand, mud splattered up to his ankles, and grass up to his knees. Clouds of gnats swarmed where the water pooled, and not even a wide-brimmed hat could deter the humid heat of midday. Sweat dripped down his temple from the weight of his long, dark hair, even tied up from his neck as it was, but Asim kept a light heart. In the near distance, he saw the tangled trunks and branches of mangrove trees, encroaching upon the sky. Farther above them, the craggy, violet peaks of the mountains. The forest was near.

His foot sank deep into the mud, *again*. He tugged, trying to take another step, without success. Bracing against his walking stick, Asim heaved with all his might. With a grunt he successfully tugged his foot free—but his boot stayed behind.

“Praise to Sister Nature,” he muttered, “and all Her persistent annoyances.”

Balancing on one foot, Asim bent awkwardly to retrieve his boot from the mud. The heavy pack strapped to his back jostled. His stomach flipped and he froze, putting a hand to it to make sure nothing had fallen out. The strange artifact thrummed against his hand, like an answer. It did nothing to soothe his anxiety. Asim worked quickly to get on his way.

Whatever this thing was, it was clearly magic, and clearly ancient. Whatever he could find at the Mirror Pools would be better aid than none, but if any one of the world's cousins could tell him what it was, he'd bet everything on the dryads. The trees were older than anyone in the village could remember, and spoke of things Asim barely understood. The one challenge would be asking for help without risking their ire. Souring his standing with the forest would... end poorly.

Asim wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to put it out of his mind. He could worry about angering the trees when he was within a conversation's distance.

On the slim chance the dryads *didn't* know what this artifact was, or refused to help him so explicitly, what would he ask the Mirror Pools? There were so many questions to answer. What was it?

Was it dangerous? What sort of magic powered it? Were there more artifacts like it? Why did it come from the sky? Did the Family send it? *Why?* At least a dozen more options buzzed in his brain like blood-sucking flies, and equally draining. He didn't have the resources for more than one ritual. He'd have to make his single question count.

Asim spent the majority of what remained of his journey puzzling over them, long enough to hear the calls of the swamp birds that made the forest their home. With the mangroves near-overhead, he put the Mirror Pools dilemma to the side temporarily. The forest would need his full attention.

Tangled roots broke through the soft earth under his feet, a wooden alligator's back cresting the grass and mud. No wind disturbed the hot air, but Asim swore he heard the whisper of leaves. Damp wood joined the pungent smell of swamp water. The mangroves stretched as far as the eye could see, and even deeper where the forest swelled. Beyond him was dense with twisted branches and roots that sprouted from their trunks long before they touched soil or water.

Instead of entering the forest, Asim picked his way over to one tree, taking care not to trip on any roots. With practiced reverence, he pressed a fist to his chest and bent at the waist.

"If the forest should honor me and speak for itself," he said, "I seek both entry and guidance from it."

The wood creaked and groaned as if this single tree alone was caught in a gale. Branches snapped, leaves rustled, roots writhed like the tentacles of some great ocean menace, but Asim dared not move. He kept his eyes trained on the dirt as the roots slithered away, and the shadow of the tree loomed over him of its own accord.

"They are the Speaker," said a voice, and it thrummed deep in his chest. "Are they not?"

"I am," Asim replied.

The voice rumbled, akin to an earthquake, or a mountain-sized cat purring. "They should look upon us, as the sure friend they have been."

"And an honor it is to be one."

Asim slowly unbent to face the dryad he called forth. Standing at ten feet tall, part of the mangrove tree he addressed had come to life and detached from itself. The low branches served as arms, the ancient, textured wood for skin, and the trunk for a torso. The roots twisted around each other in an approximation of legs, still partly buried under the dirt. A great head, featureless except for a pair of eyes made of glistening amber sap, tilted affectionately at him.

“What brings the Speaker back so soon?” it asked, words booming from seemingly nowhere, but heard all the same. “Surely they are not here to gather from us.”

“Ordinarily, I would ask no more of you, Mangrove,” Asim said, using the only name the forest had allowed him to give it, “but I come seeking the Mirror Pools, and—”

Mangrove cut him off with a laugh, like wood creaking in the wind. “Ask of us!” it chortled. “Our friend may come and go as they please. They must know this, do they not?”

“As gracious as the forest may be, I would never exploit it by taking what was never mine.”

The pleased creaking stopped. Mangrove lowered, placing its branches in the dirt. The weight of it sunk them into the mud, but it didn’t seem to notice. Down it went until it could look Asim eye-to-eye.

“The roots gossip about the Speaker,” it told him, the hushed rustle of leaves. “We say that they are too wise for their own good.”

Asim bowed his head briefly. “I’m flattered that the forest thinks me wise enough to again become foolish.”

“We were not complimenting them.”

“And yet I am not wise enough to take offense.”

Silence. Asim held his breath. Mangrove picked itself up, returning to its full height.

It burst out laughing. Bark creaking and groaning, branches shaking, it was Mangrove’s equivalent of a laughing fit. Asim joined in to vent his relief, letting the strange joke from his unconventional friend roll off his back.

Mangrove calmed itself, a sigh like the wind. A drizzle of sap leaked out of its eye. “Take ease, Speaker,” it said. “They are free to pass through us, as we have said.”

“Thank you,” Asim said, “but I’m afraid that’s not all I need from you.”

“Oh?”

“I’m bringing a—” He paused, unsure how to describe it. “I have a strange, enchanted artifact with me. I’m not sure how dangerous it may be, and I would never take it between your branches without your say.”

“Is this what they seek the Mirror Pools for?”

“It is. I can show you if you wish.”

Mangrove slouched down again, expectantly, and Asim slung the pack off his back. Carefully, he retrieved the artifact, wrapped in the fabric just as he’d left it. The moment his fingers touched the first corner to unwrap it, it thrummed in his hand. Asim threw off the wrap until he held it in the palm of his hand, a single layer the only thing separating it from his skin. The rune shimmered a soft green.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he said. It pulsed, magic tingling his palm.

“Old,” Mangrove rumbled, amber eyes glistening. “They have brought us old magic.”

“You’ve seen it before?”

“We have felt it. The roots remember such power.”

“What kind of magic is it? Do you know?”

“The Speaker might ask us—what kind of magic are *we*? What kind are they? The old magic *is*.”

His heart sank. “So you can’t help?”

A deep hum shook the air and the earth as Mangrove shook its head. “Not how the Speaker might wish us to.”

“Do you think the Mirror Pools will?”

“We do not know. But we know the visions do help the Speaker. They may take this old magic within us.” Asim wrapped the artifact again and put it away, pausing when Mangrove put a branch on his arm. “We ask them to tread with caution.”

Afraid to ask why, and not planning to take the artifact out of his bag again anyhow, Asim nodded. Mangrove released him and lumbered back against the tree from which it appeared.

“Go, Speaker,” it said. “May their roots stay watered, and earth be fresh.”

“And yours, Mangrove,” Asim replied, bowing shortly.

Mangrove closed its eyes, sap disappearing into the bark. Its body melded with the rest of the trunk, the branches snapped out, the roots tunneled under the dirt like so many worms. The dryad had returned to slumber, and Asim was alone.

He leaned against his walking stick and sighed heavily. After Mangrove’s warning, there was no question about what he would ask the Mirror Pools. Knowing how dangerous this artifact was for him, Mira, or any of the villagers he spoke for was the most pressing matter he could think of. The rest would have to wait.