

Ariviter: TA 1051

The duty of a princess is never done-- at least, that had been the sentiment that Minowen was given as a child. The work was often petty or tiring, there was no in between. The completed task at hand was given to her in an air of urgency-- the shadows ruling the Wended Wood were growing more quickly than anticipated. Spiders began to spread a plague among wood, and it was these pressing conditions that drove the forest to take up a new name: *Dul Dalrok*, or "Hills of Sorcery" to the common tongue. The people that dwelled in the trees had fallen victim to numerous accounts of spider attacks, orc raids, and the occasional disappearance was becoming more and more frequent. Minowen feared for her kin, but above all she feared for her father.

After taking the throne at the end of the Second Age, King Kariam was constantly fighting with his anxiety of influence, and his moral compass. He wished to do well for his people, and protect them from the shadows-- and this inevitably meant moving constantly subsequently, the frequent moving caused the Woodland elves' faith in their king to falter.

Kariam began to spend more and more time excluded from the eyes of his kin. He would remain in his chambers for day on end, and when he would emerge it would be to travel outside their borders. The latter did not happen frequently, but it happened enough to stir rumors. Everytime he departed, he would do so without warning-- a flaw that set Minowen on edge every time it happened. The small bonus that came from Kariam's absence, however, was that it allowed Minowen to run hunting rounds with the guard. Kariam did not typically permit such things; it was "not her place" the King would say, and "far too dangerous for a princess."

Minowen returned from the day's hunt with the guard in tow. The Princess considered their efforts to be a minor success in the grand scheme of things. But being her father's daughter,

Minowen was not content-- the threat remained, and he swore more could be done. The falling Sun, however, protested his desire to remain in the wood, and after a long day, Ayliella was waiting for her at the gates.

“And how did you fare today, *hîr vuin*?” asked Ayliella as the Princess approached

“As well as we could,” she quipped “And... I thought I told you not to call me that..”

The scout bowed apologetically and began moving through the corridor, Minowen trailing behind him. Ayliella was a valued member of the guard, though a recent injury had her relocated to the position of the chamberlain. This reappointment had kindled a fast friendship between her and Minowen, much to both of their disdain.

The remainder of the guard passed through the grand hall and began on their way to the kitchen. Minowen would have joined them, had the chamberlain not pulled him aside.

“Your father returned while you were away,” Ayliella said quietly.

Minowen watched as the rest of the guardsmen continued on their way before reacting. She knew her father would want to see her, but the kindness of that meeting had yet to be determined. She nodded curtly.

“He is in his chambers, when you wish to see him,” Ayliella dismissed himself with a bow, and scurried away before Minowen could stop her. Thus, the heir was left with her decision. She was sure her father had noticed her absence, and consequently she knew he would not be pleased. She hesitated to turn towards her father’s chambers for a moment, but with a suppressed groan she turned down the hall.

As Minowen approached the room, she could see her father sitting in a chair with his back towards the door from the doorway. The Elvenking's fingers tapped lightly on the arm of the chair, as the rest of his body sat erect and dignified in stature. Minowen entered the chamber cautiously, as to delay the encounter as much as possible.

But to Kariam, Minowen's quiet approach did not go unnoticed; his hand dropped immediately, and the tapping ceased. The Princess stood still-- she had been spotted.

"I'm *blind*, not *deaf*," Kariam called, "Come."

In that moment, Minowen had decided walking with confidence was her best bet-- and hoped that walking with pride would somehow save her the lecture she could feel in the air. But as the Princess walked around the chair to face her father, she had to control the look of shock that spread across her face. Kariam looked worn, and beaten-- fresh cuts and scratches decorated his face and hands.

"*Ada*," Minowen exclaimed, "Where have you been? *Man agorech*?"

Kariam held his hand up to silence his child. He did not wish to be bombarded with questions. "I'm fine, *ionneg*," he waved him away in a sweeping motion, "I do not need your concern. I did not call you here to disc--"

Minowen shook her head, "What happened? Tell me!"

"Orc raid," Kariam conceded, "I got caught on the Northern border."

"Were you alone?"

Kariam said nothing. He turned to the fireplace in front of him and watched the flames lick at the burning wood.

"You cannot leave on your own," Minowen hissed, "*Ada*-- this is the second time you've done this, you could have died!"

Kariam found her concern touching, but it was not the place of the princess to know of her father's kingly duties. Fixing the elfling with an unwavering stare, Kariam leaned back into his chair. Minowen's words did not ring untrue, but pride would forbid him from admitting it. The Elvenking forced himself to suppress a cough that was flirting with his throat, hoping the stress on his face does not allow a blood vessel to burst in his eye (naturally, it would only prove Minowen's point).

Clearing his throat, Kariam dismissed Minowen's fears, "I could die right now, and it would not change a thing in the world," he sighed. "I would have thought that your mother taught you all about death, and how no one is powerful enough to stop it - not even us."

Minowen stared at her father with a blank expression. Her mother? How could he bring her up in a moment like this?

"Do not bring *Mama* into this, not now." Minowen implored.

"And why should I not?" Kariam asked, "She was my wife. Her death is my burden to carry." No one in the realm was permitted to discuss his late wife. It was a part of his life that he constantly chose to erase.

"*An ngell nîn, Ada*," Minowen sighed, "A burden you do not have to carry alone. Let me help you-- you won't even tell me what happened."

Silence.

"One day you'll have to tell me," the younger proclaimed, "She may have been your wife, but she was my mother."

"I was going to the Børjnlands," Kariam said loudly, "That's where your mother was taken, and that is where she died. She was ambushed in these woods, and taken prisoner for the enjoyment of the Necromancer."

It was a harsh death, Kariam could assume. He had placed the blame entirely on himself. He could have protected her, had he accompanied on her journeys. But Kariam was busy in the affairs of others. He was the newly coronated King of the Wended Wood and all eyes were on him. Highever needed trade, Ariviter was seeking homage, and the fiasco with the Crimson Ministry (something about a rising darkness... if he remembered correctly; Kariam did not pay attention to the requests of Demetri or Maximillian) had kept him busy. Not to mention, he was suffering through the first real loss he had faced: the death of his father, Brydcor. How could he have known she would be taken? How could he have predicted the Necromancer?

Minowen furrowed her brow, "And why were you going there now?"

"For all that remains," Kariam responded solemnly, "It calls to me yet. There is a part of her there, *ionneg*."

They sat in silence for an extended period of time.

"You cannot leave our borders," Kariam declared, "And neither can the guard. It is getting worse by the day. The shadows of *Dul Dalrok* are heavy and it is not safe for you."

"I can handle myself," Minowen dejected, "And how can you keep me here when you are running through the Børjnlands on your own? You're pushing yourself too far." she reached for

her father’s hand to examine his wounds, “If you keep doing this, you are going to end up...a shell.”

Kariam said nothing else and dismissed his daughter from the chamber; it was a conversation for another time.

A shell.

Those words weighed on his chest. The Elvenking had no fear of becoming a shell, because he had been one for many years already.

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