

Chapter 3

On Other Races

Riroshan came to life with the appearance of the sun's first rays. The farmers were already in their fields, tilling the earth; soldiers were in their morning drills, the guards at their posts. Even the servants in the castle were on the move, preparing breakfast for the king and his guests.

Before dawn and everyone else, Elesar stood on a balcony and thought. Even though he was part Night-Elf, he liked to watch life wake up in the quiet of the morning. He studied the green fields and forests in the distance and his heart was full of respect and love for everything that surrounded him. This powerful and proud ruler felt humility towards nature, life and people. He knew that something bigger and more powerful than him existed and that rule over Valinndor had been granted to him as an honour. Difficult and filled with responsibilities, but still an honour. And he intended to fulfil it to the best of his ability.

He wasn't alone in his morning contemplations for long. Lauren soon joined him. She also liked to observe the waking of the morning, nature and people.

"Well?" he asked, not turning.

"Well what?" Lauren asked, though she knew full well what Elesar was referring to. She didn't feel she was ready to talk about yesterday's exciting events yet.

"Lauren!" Elesar smiled. Lauren had spent so many years with him on his travels and he still found her innocent act endearing, "I heard you in Caitlin's room yesterday. Are you alright?"

"And what do you think? I told her a few comforting words and that was it. King Christian will have to do the rest. I believe he has had difficult tasks to do before this and that this is certainly not his first."

"Yes, but none of them were so demanding. His love and responsibilities to Caitlin and his kingdom are in question here. He also has to fight the problem he created with his dishonesty. Once again it has been proven that the problem you don't solve doesn't disappear. It grows and when it returns again, it is no less difficult. He taught this to people around him and then he fell into that same trap of deceit and hiding."

Lauren quietly stared into the distance. She loved Elesar's simple and logical truths and asked herself whether the world would ever become as simple and easy as it seemed it could. Sometimes she felt that that possibility constantly evaded their grasp and asked herself what she was doing to change that. Whatever she did seemed inadequate.

"For a moment, I almost regret her spending so much time in a 'prison'", Lauren admitted, "And yet, she has learned so much about unconditional love here and nothing is able to replace that. Maybe everything has played out as it should. Her time has come now. How do you feel about taking her with us?"

"Yes? Would you like that?" Elesar asked, smiling.

"It's not a question of me liking it or not," Lauren quickly corrected herself. She didn't want to reveal that she liked the young princess on some level, "I feel it more as an obligation. The time has come for her to leave the nest and we have found ourselves here right at that moment and are soon leaving. Is it not a curious coincidence?"

"More than you might think," Elesar answered, "I've decided with Christian last night that we shall take her to Adazar. I'm glad you feel the same," he smiled at her again.

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After a kingly breakfast, which was filled with laughter and inconsequential talk as though nothing had happened yesterday, Christian left for his regular meetings with the chieftains of nearby Kiroshan villages. The rest departed for the lush king's garden in the eastern part of the castle. The grass and trees were fragrant and underneath the modest wooden bridge a stream that came from the village quietly murmured. A lovely little pavilion was in the centre of the garden, decorated with flowers and colourful decoration, but Caitlin and Elesar preferred to keep to the shaded garden paths.

Lauren had gone to check if Bravecat had gotten everything he required. Though brave and strong, Bravecat was, like all other cats, lazy. His huge form took up almost the whole stable and he was contently sleeping. He was so relaxed he hadn't even heard Lauren enter.

"Time to rise! Get up, lazy cat!" The Elf yelled, carrying a bucket of water and a horse brush.

The big cat tiredly opened its eyes.

"Uh! So early?" it asked, yawning.

"Early? The sun has long been up! Time to clean you. This time it's my turn," Lauren said crabbily. She didn't understand why Elesar and she had to wash him every so often. How come other cats washed themselves, but Bravecat didn't?

"Why you? Where's Elesar?" Bravecat didn't enjoy it when Lauren washed him either.

"He's walking with the little princess and telling her fairytales," she answered and a trace of jealousy could be heard in her voice.

"Do I smell envy?" Bravecat said warily.

"Nonsense, where did you get that from?!" Lauren said defensively, as though she'd been caught stealing candy.

"Come, Lauren. You know that I can smell emotions. How could I miss this one now? What's going on?"

Lauren hesitated at first, but then opened up:

"Princess Caitlin discovered she possess powers inherited from her father and now Elesar intends to take her to Adazar. And she's enchanted by Elesar and his stories. Which means she'll want to hear about his adventures the whole way."

"And you're bothered that Elesar's attention will move from you to her?"

"Is it that obvious?" Lauren felt ashamed.

"Maybe not to others, but I can feel it."

"You know, you are very wise...for a cat!" Lauren mocked and splashed Bravecat over his face.

"And you're acting like a little girl and not your ninety-eight years!" Bravecat retorted. He wet his paw in the bucket and splashed Lauren.

"Hey!" Lauren yelled.

"Hey yourself! You started it!" Bravecat defended and splashed her again. In retaliation, Lauren grabbed the bucket and poured it over Bravecat. The cat jumped Lauren and threw her on the hay. They wrestled and laughed liked they had used to, when Lauren was young and had just met Bravecat.

"Thank you, Bravecat. I needed that," she said, satisfied.

"You worry too much about that," Bravecat answered, "Caitlin is interested in Elesar because he has travelled over almost all of Sillwith, met races people know nothing about and she hasn't moved from the castle. This is the first time she has met a Half-Elf and Elf and she is naturally curious. No worries, when we reach Adazar, everything will return the way it was."

"Thank you, Bravecat!" Lauren said and kissed his muzzle.

"Now wash me!" he growled and smiled.

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During that time, Caitlin and Elesar were talking while strolling.

"This is a truly beautiful place. It reminds me of my Valinndor," Elesar said, impressed.

The garden was carefully built to approximate the wild forests of Sillwith, just like the Valinndor forests.

"Your Valinndor?" Caitlin asked in surprise.

"Valinndor is the name of my castle, but also the name of a great forest at the foot of the mountain Enolar."

"I've heard of that place, but I never knew that there's a castle there?" she admitted.

"Yes. But it is nothing compared to the Kiroshan castle."

"My father spoke about you, but he never mentioned you're a nobleman?"

"There are no noblemen in Valinndor," Elesar answered.

"You have a castle and you're not a nobleman? What are you then?"

"Elven titles are different. I am what Men might call the steward of Valinndor. They call me lord Elesar."

"Truly? How come you did not arrive with a carriage and escort?"

"Because I don't care for such ceremonial titles and I don't take advantage of my position," Elesar said humbly.

"You are truly noble, lord Elesar."

"There is no need to call me lord. Elesar will do."

"Very well, Elesar. Please tell me what it's like out of Kiroshan. Father must have told you I don't go out often. Except when I run from the guards. But that is mostly it. I've never been outside the Kiroshan border," Caitlin admitted.

"It is much different than within Kiroshan's borders. Here people obey the law and respect your father as a ruler, because life here is good," Elesar answered, "Unfortunately, this is not the case throughout Sillwith, except perhaps the neighbouring kingdoms of As'silaria and Black Rock." Elesar sat on a stone bench next to a small lake. Caitlin sat in front of him on the soft grass and listened to him avidly.

"Everything has changed since the Great Battle. Men and Elves don't live in harmony as they did before it. They've become estranged. Men have populated the valleys and hills near the sea, Elves preferred the forests. With time, new kingdoms formed, such as Black Rock which I have mentioned previously and Kaamon-Raht. The free area of Imani, a land that belongs to no kingdom also formed. It is mostly a place of commerce and trade. East of Imani is Valinnor. To the further east, the whole area is covered in a swamp, so that is what we call it. To the south is Everdark. Because of its high mountains and their shape, barely any sunlight reaches that place. It is a wasteland and there is no other light there, but in the dungeons the Men and Elves built to keep the greatest criminals of Sillwith in. There, Kodran is also held captive."

"Kodran? Who is he?" Caitlin asked.

"The one responsible for the Great Battle. His plan was to conquer the whole of Sillwith. Before he'd started using black magic, he was a valued mage in Adazar, the city of mages in the mountains of Enolar. To hone his skills, he began practicing on living creatures and that is strictly forbidden amongst mages. The Council of Mages banished him from their order and exiled him from Adazar and he swore revenge, not only against all mages, but against anyone who practiced any form of magic, even medicine. As Elves and Men do both, Kodran declared war against them as well. He was determined to fulfil his plan. He organized an army of Orcs and Goblins, mercenaries and slaves and with black magic he turned them into an army of demons. Bokani also stood by his side; another black magic user."

"The one that father killed and received his powers from..." Caitlin added.

"That's right. But Kodran's plan failed, for the mages, Elves and Men formed an alliance and defeated him. Kodran was sentenced to eternal imprisonment in the dungeons of Everdark and the surviving Orcs and Goblins of his army ran through Gateway to the east."

"It's an unusual and interesting story, Elesar," Caitlin said and then added, "I've never seen an Orc."

"You have not missed much then," Elesar answered, "Kodran turned them into foul creatures, without an ounce of morals or honour. They are wild and immoral. Some people confuse them with trolls, which is incorrect. They are nothing like trolls."

"Trolls?" Caitlin was avidly listening to every word. She didn't want to miss anything.

"Yes. They live in the wilds, in tribes. But they are far above Orcs in their features. Trolls are amazing creatures," Elesar enjoyed telling tales about trolls. Ever since he had met Razor, he's had a very high opinion of them. "Few have seen them, for whoever went farther north from Gateway has never returned. Rumours of them being eaten by trolls spread. In truth, there is such a deep forest there that an unwary traveller can easily get lost. I was there, but I had the luck to meet Razor, a troll.

I believe that one day he will be the leader of a mighty tribe.

Trolls are very tall. They can reach twice the height of an average Man. Besides their height, their strength is also enviable. For instance, I have seen Razor lift a rock twice his size," Elesar smiled, remembering that occasion. The troll had been so determined to prove his strength that he had lifted an enormous chunk of stone above his head that had almost slipped from his grasp and fallen on his head.

"Their skin is as hard as stone and resistant to flame. They have a natural protection against certain magic, so mages don't have much of a chance against them. Their keen senses make them excellent hunters and warriors. They have the ears of a fox, can see in the dark and their sense of smell is much more developed than that of most other races. They can smell the members of their tribe at a great distance, which is perfect, for trolls, with their green hides, are difficult to see in thick forests, where they blend in."

Caitlin couldn't stop herself from speaking:

"How exciting! It seems trolls are truly remarkable creatures," she said in delight.

"They are. But those advantages have their weaknesses as well. Apart from what I've already listed, they are also temperamental and unrestrained. Should they get angry, it is best no one approach them. Besides that, most of them are not particularly smart, by which I mean that they do not give much thought to develop their knowledge. They are still smart enough to recognize someone smarter than themselves. And they cannot abide those. Of course, they have their own culture, but few know about it. Most fill their time hunting and proving themselves. I have found all this out from Razor and he has proven to be a most atypical troll."

"And which race is the smartest?" she wanted to know so much. And now she had finally met someone willing to talk to her about the wider world outside the castle walls.

"It is difficult to say. Every race is clever in their own way. But as a whole, the most capable are the mages. Their advantage being that they study their whole lives. They call themselves the High Society and at their head is archmage Zeron. He is the wisest of them all. I have known him for years and every time I see him, he surprises me anew with his knowledge, skills and wisdom. He is the right teacher for you."

"For me? What do you mean, Elesar?" she was surprised by his statement.

"Caitlin, how do you feel about coming with me to Adazar and learn how to control the magic you were born with there? I have leave from your father to take you to Adazar."

Caitlin could hardly believe her ears. What Elesar said seemed unbelievable.

"That I go to Adazar? Really? Father allowed this?" Her greatest dreams were coming true. She would be allowed to leave Kiroshan.

"Of course. He wants the best mage-tutors to teach you how to control your powers. They teach those who possess power, but do not know to use it. Like you, for instance."

"Elesar, but that's incredible. Of course I want to go there! Oh, thank you!" she couldn't stop herself from hugging him, "I really would like to learn how to use my powers. And meeting other races seems so exciting. It means a lot to me. Discovering I have magical powers has changed my life."

"It would change anyone's life," Elesar answered, "But change is an integral part of life; the Elves know that well. Longevity offers us the chance to participate in many changes."

After the joyous news, Caitlin calmed and attentively listened to Elesar again.

"Before your arrival, I had never met Elves. Lauren told me you are a Half-Elf. Tell me about them..."

"There aren't many Half-Elves in existence. They are offspring of Men and Elves. In my case, my mother was a Night Elf and my father a Man. They met when my father got lost in the forests of Valinndor and found my mother in his wandering. They fell in love at first sight. In that time, Men were not on friendly terms with Elves, so my parents had to hide. Their love was strong enough to overcome that. In time, my father grew to love the forests and living among them.

After a few years, I came into the world. I inherited characteristic of the Night Elves from my mother and my build, strength and endurance from my father. After my mother's tragic death hunting, my father took me to the Elves in what is now Valinndor. He knew they could care for me better than Men could. Unfortunately, there was no place for him amongst the Elves. For them he stayed an outsider, so he returned to live amongst Men and spent the rest of his life there. I never saw him again.

But the Elves became my real family. I got used to them, adopted their customs and values and learned their skills. I have spent many years among them and so I feel more Elf than Man. Apart from a few things, there is little difference between the two. Elves are shorter and more slender than Men. Their faces are not covered by beards, so they look younger. They have pointy ears and long, gleaming hair," Elesar moved his hair behind his ears and added with a smile, "Unfortunately, I didn't inherit the pointy ears from my mother."

Caitlin smiled.

"Elves move swiftly and lightly like the wind. They leave no trace behind themselves, neither in mud nor snow. Some are so light they can walk over the thinnest tree branches. There are two kinds of Elf, Wood and Night and each of them have some feature of their own like hair and skin colour. You noticed how Lauren has gleaming blonde hair and a white complexion. She is a Wood Elf. Night Elves have hair as black as night and their complexion is dark, almost purple. They share immortality and beauty. Wood Elves can speak the languages of animals, which allows them to get far more from them than Men who train them. Their hearing is excellent and along with their ability to see at great lengths, it makes them good scouts and archers."

"And Night Elves?"

"They are my favourite, for I am part Night Elf," he smiled, winking, "They are excellent hunters, for they can meld with darkness and even shadow. They move quietly, almost soundlessly. Their characteristically light blue eyes serve them well in either day or night. They have more endurance than Wood Elves, so they are better in close combat. But they make good archers when the need arises. Like Lauren's sister Kalisa. She is a Night Elf and is an excellent archer."

"How is it that she is a Night Elf and Lauren a Wood Elf?" Caitlin had so many questions. Elesar decided to leave them for another time.

"There is much that can still be told, but it is enough for today. You will learn many things on the way. Certainly about surviving in the wild. For now, let us head back to the castle," he suggested and they made their way back to the castle.

The princess couldn't wait for the moment she would go on her journey. There was so much she wanted to know and learn, to see Sillwith and meet its inhabitants. The adventure that would change her life was waiting for her.

End of Chapter 03