

Chapter 7

Valinndor

At daybreak, they continued their journey towards Valinndor. They bypassed the wide and pleasant trade road and crossed the river Orin at the bridge and entered the deep forest of Valinndor. The deeper they went in, the more it seemed impassable. But to the skilled Elf eye, numerous paths wide enough for a burdened unicorn to pass were revealed.

Bird song, the rustling of leaves, the sounding of forest creatures and the wind through the tree boughs filled Caitlin's ears like a well known forest melody coming from an indiscernible distance.

The forest animals here were different from the ones Caitlin was used to. They approached her without fear and watched her with interest. She could stroke the shining coat of does stepping next to Lauren's unicorn. They didn't fear Bravecat or Quickfoot. A little squirrel jumped on Quickfoot's shoulder and left a hazelnut in his lap. The surprised Reptilian thanked it and accepted the nut.

"This is a righ' nice place. Even the animals are polite," he almost cried with happiness.

The day was spent in the excitement brought to them by their encounters in the world of the Valinndor forest. It seemed that all dangers and unpleasant surprises belonged to a far-off world that couldn't access the forest haven of Valinndor.

They spent the night in a small glade, under the starry sky. Quickfoot had never slept so peacefully in his life. He thought he was in heaven. He had never experienced so much peace, calm and happiness in once place. He wanted to remain in the forest forever.

But they had to move on. The glade they were in was very close to the city.

When they were five hundred steps from the city, the piercing sound of horns announced their arrival. A cry was heard from the watchtower:

"Open the gates! Lord Elesar has returned!"

"Lord Elesar? I tell ya, the name really fits fer a great big place like this!" Quickfoot said in wonder.

Though large and heavy, the gates opened almost soundlessly. When the city appeared before them, Caitlin and Quickfoot were left speechless.

"Blimey, what a place! I ain't seen it's like and I've seen all kinds," Quickfoot said in wonder.

"Amazing! What beauty!" added Caitlin. She was trying to see everything at once; the Elf houses beside and on the trees, the stream flowing through the middle of the city, the Elven children playing...everything looked exactly like Elesar had told her. With all the beauty around her, her attention was drawn by the play of the unicorns and pegasi. The horses were playing in the middle of the cobbled street, without a care for the Elves walking beside them.

When they entered the city, its population bowed before Elesar and joyously greeted him. The lord was often away from Valinndor and upon his return, the Elves were always happy to see him.

Elesar returned the greeting and was happy himself to be back home. He dismounted his unicorn and left it to the page that ran to meet them.

"Reward these two handsome unicorns," he said to the page, "They have travelled a long road and have been of great use to us. They deserve it."

"Right away, my lord," the page took their reins and took them away.

"Elesar! You're back!" a soft voice was heard.

The company turned and watched an Elven woman that was running towards them. She was wearing only a see through silk dress through which you could see her breasts and her pale purple skin. She was running barefoot, not noticing the sharp rocks and roots coming from the ground. Long black hair reached her waist. Her blue eyes, filled with joy, shone even from a distance. Approaching them, she threw herself in Elesar's arms.

"Kalisa!" Elesar said with joy, "I've missed you!"

"And I you, honey!" Kalisa retorted and kissed his mouth.

"Honey?" Caitlin asked in surprise. Unlike Lauren, her sister was lively and sociable.

"That is my sister," Lauren muttered, "Constant shows of emotions and you never know who is next," she crossed her arms and snorted.

"Sister mine! Bravecat! I am so happy to see you," Kalisa cried and continued to bestow hugs and kisses. Her gaze turned to Caitlin and Quickfoot, "Who are your friends?"

"This is Caitlin, the daughter of king Christian," Elesar introduced her and Kalisa immediately gladdened.

"Oh, a princess!" she took the hem of her dress and bowed, "It is an honour to welcome you to Valinndor, your Highness."

"Thank you, Miss Kalisa. This is a truly beautiful city," Caitlin said, "And call me Caitlin."

"Very well. I am glad to have met you, Caitlin. And you may call me Kalisa. Elesar's friends are my friends."

She then looked at Quickfoot. The Reptilian was staring at her, as still as stone.

"Quickfoot, close your mouth and stop staring at my sister!" Lauren reminded him.

"Ha ha! It is no matter. I am already used to travelling merchants," Kalisa smiled, "They have that same dull look on their faces when they pass by the lake and see us bathing."

Quickfoot said nothing and continued staring.

"That's enough now! Come on, Quickfoot! I'll show you the city," Lauren said jealously. She grabbed his and Caitlin's hands and took them down the road. As Lauren dragged him, Quickfoot turned once more and looked at Kalisa again. A dumb smile twisted his face.

"Wherever did you find that Quickfoot, Elesar? He is a funny little thing!" Kalisa asked him.

"He found us. I will tell you about it later," Elesar answered and hugged her again.

"If you don't mind, I will head off for a well-deserved bath!" Bravecat said and, not waiting for an answer, headed towards the lake with a light step.

"Deserved? You haven't changed a bit, you great big cat!" Kalisa smiled. Even if she had wanted to, she couldn't hide her smile.

"It is good to be home," Elesar deeply breathed in the forest air. He felt peace and calm in his heart once more. Unfortunately, he had no time to enjoy it, "Where is your sister?" he asked Kalisa.

"She just took away Caitlin and Quickfoot," Kalisa answered.

"Not that sister! You know full well who I mean, you little imp!"

"Ha ha, I know! Fiona is patrolling with her unit again. She surveys the whole Valinndor border, returns to get supplies and leaves again. I rarely see her," Kalisa slumped her shoulders. She didn't know what drove her to live like that.

"Oh, that Fiona. Her soul is as untameable as a unicorn," Elesar nodded as though deriding her. He was of a similar disposition however and couldn't resent her for it, "It is a

pity she is not here. She will miss an adventure few have the chance to experience. I must call the Council at once, so you will take her place. We will discuss matters of history."

"What historical matters? Sometimes it feels like history has stopped in Valinndor," Kalisa said and Elesar nodded at her words. It really did look like time stopped in Valinndor. What he would give for that to be true...

"Come, dress in something more suitable. I shall explain on the way," Elesar told her and they made their way to the castle together.

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On the way to the lake, Lauren was still angry at Quickfoot.

"You are behaving indecently, reptile!

"Have yer seen yer sister?! What a beaut! Can't yer see it?" Quickfoot said, still dazzled.

"Quickfoot, enough! They could ban you from entering Valinndor!"

"Why would they do tha'? Who would to tha'?" Quickfoot became more serious. He didn't want anyone to banish him from such a beautiful place.

"Valinndor is a holy place for Elves. Those who do not respect the Sacred Laws are banished forever from it. And the highborn must be treated with respect. You mustn't stare at them like some lost lamb. This is particularly true for foreign merchants, who forget their manners sometimes. For this reason, there is a special part of the city for visitors and merchants," Lauren said, pointing towards the eastern part of the city. There was a small area right near the stream, which ran parallel to the road. It was surrounded by a small wooden fence. In its middle was a tavern, and in front of it a market place. Next to the tavern was a row of stables, spacious enough to accommodate all sorts of mounts.

"So that's how it is! Sorry then! I hadn't meant ta stare. Well, I meant ta, but I dinna want anyone ter see it. It's righ' hard ta look away from a sight like tha'," Quickfoot said humbly.

Even though she was listening to Lauren, Caitlin couldn't help herself from looking about the whole town. She regretted that her eyes couldn't encompass the whole city with one look.

"Lauren, what's that faint light coming from that thick woods over there?" she asked, looking to the west.

"It's the Mystic forest. It is the holy place of pegasi and unicorns and none of the elves go there," the Elvengirl said shortly.

"Which are male and which are female?" Quickfoot asked.

"They both have both sexes. They are different species, but they love each other as though they are the same. There is no place for anger and hatred in these parts. Love, harmony and peace rule here," Lauren answered.

"How d'ya do with jealousy twixt sisters?" Quickfoot joked and winked at her.

"What?!" Lauren raised her voice and Quickfoot answered her in a quiet tone:

"There is no place for anger and hatred here."

His teasing brought a smile to Caitlin's lips. The same could not be said for Lauren. Silently, she ground her teeth. She knew she still had problems in that area. Anger was a feeling she had the most problems with. But it couldn't be said she wasn't trying. At least, that's what she thought.

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The Dwarves, the faithful allies of the Elves, masons without an equal, who loved the hard stones more than the soft forest ground, had received Elesar's permission to inhabit the mountain. In return, they had built him a castle worthy of a lord of Valinndor. Hewn from the very mountain, the castle took up the northern part of the city. Every Man would be envious of the skill it was built with. The wall that surrounded the court peeked out at the falls of St. Itar and the Mystic forest. The foliage that grew near it climbed over the wall and blended it with the surrounding forest. Two watchtowers, similar to the ones at the city entrance and formed like tall oaks from the Mystic forest, guarded the lord's home, together with the wooden gates that never closed. All souls with good intentions were welcome.

But the most beautiful part of the castle was the main hall. At its centre bubbled and shone a marble fountain. The walls were carved and decorated to look like the forest.

The oak throne, where Elesar spent little time, was carved with forest animals. Only precise Elven hands had the skill to shape wood that way. The animals seemed almost real.

The balcony that took up almost one whole side of the castle looked over the Valinndor forest and the whole of the city; from the gates to the river's source which fell to the St. Itar lake.

The lake was named in honour of saint Itar, an Elf-wanderer, who had in some distant past decided to rest by the waterfall. When he had drunk his fill, he had felt himself fill with an unusual strength. He decided to turn part of the river into a lake so travelling passerby could

refresh themselves. After finishing his task, he rested in the shade of a great tree, whose rich boughs offered pleasant protection from all who sought it. It was the Tree of Eternity, the first to have ever sprouted in Sillwith. All other trees in the whole of Sillwith were its descendants. The Elves believed it to be the source of all life on the island.

Elesar took special care in its conservation. He had it fenced in by a magical gate, so only those of pure goodness could rest under its boughs. The Half-Elf often sat beneath the tree in Kalisa's company, together creating melodies that calmed everyone in Valinndor.

Caitlin was enchanted by the beauty of Valinndor, but her curious mind still wanted to know more:

"Lauren, you said the dwarves lived in the mountains near the castle, right?"

"Correct. Why?" the Elf knew the princess was interested in more than that.

"What is in those caves then, high above the castle?"

"Where's that then? I don't see nothin'?" Quickfoot asked.

"You would have to ask Elesar, for I do not know. Kalisa claims that dragons lived there once, but she often embellishes things," Lauren dismissed.

"Could be she's righ', what do yer know?" Quickfoot couldn't resist taking Kalisa's side.

"Dragons? I don't know! I heard the elders mention them. Besides, what would they be doing here?" Lauren retorted.

"I'll ask Elesar anyway. I'm curious as to what was in there," Caitlin said.

"Ask. I have done my duty. I have shown you Valinndor and now I can finally take a bath in the lake," Lauren added.

"Yer goin' bathin'? Yippee! We'll go too!" Quickfoot jumped in excitement. A Reptilian felt most at home in the water.

"You can join me, providing you be polite," Lauren warned.

"Will do! Let's go!" Quickfoot promised and impatiently headed towards the lake.

While walking along the road, the inhabitants politely greeted them and Quickfoot delightedly waved at them. He had never before experienced people greeting him as a guest and not demeaning him as a slave.

When he saw St. Itar lake, he could not stop himself from commenting:

"Wowee! Have yer ever seen such a thing? It's so purty! An' clear! No lakes like tha' in the Swamp. And a waterfall! Oh, I've got tears in me eyes!"

"Quickfoot! Calm yourself. It is only a lake," Lauren tried to calm him.

"But yer don' get it! The Swamp's lakes are filled wit' all manner a beasties an' silt. Nothin' like this! Gorgeous!" he was enraptured.

None of them had to be urged into the water. The Reptilian had no compunction about taking his clothes off in front of the girls. He took off the black cloak he had gotten from the Orcs and the cotton shirt and pantaloons he had to carry as a slave and nude as the day he was born, he jumped into the river. The girls stayed a bit more decent and only removed their vests and boots.

There was no one else by the lake apart from the three of them and the water's surface was soon foaming from their jumps, splashes and churning. Their happy cries and laughter could be heard from afar.

They were having so much fun they did not notice the Night Elf that approached them:

"Excuse me, lady Lauren," he said and bowed, "Lord Elesar requests that Master Reptilian attends the Council meeting."

Quickfoot could barely believe his ears. "Master Reptilian"?! Never in his wildest dreams had he dared to imagine someone would call him that one day. And here, it happened in Valinndor. The world had suddenly turned into a joyous place where he too was a welcome guest. He quickly exited the water and, forgetting about his clothes, went to go to the castle. Only the polite reminders from the Elves made him remember that he was in a world where clothes were necessary. He ran back to the lake shore, quickly dressed himself and hurried after the Elf. He was followed by the girls' laughter.

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The Valinndor Council was held in the main hall at a round table. At its head was lord Elesar and with him were Lakon, the head pegasi and unicorn trainer; Omar, the druid elder; Darg, king of the Dwarves; Melron, Elesar's second, keeper of law and order; Kalisa, captain of the Valinndor archers, who was reluctantly in place of her sister Fiona.

"Good evening, my lords..." Elesar said. The importance of this Council was great. He hadn't even changed his clothes. He had merely put on a lord's cape.

"Has anything changed in Valinndor since my departure?"

"Nothing much, my lord. There are still more pegasi than unicorns, and the Dwarves still wish to turn the dragon's caves into their mines..." Melron informed him. He was a Night Elf, with long black hair and serious features, which were unusual for Elves. He was sitting to the right of his lord.

"Not mines, but magnificent halls!" Darg justified.

"I told you to not touch the caves," Elesar reminded him.

"But lord Elesar. It's been more than five hundred years," Darg said into his thick black beard. He did not understand why Elesar wouldn't leave the caves to them. They would make such marvellous stone palaces from them, the likes of Sillwith had never seen.

"I know, Master Dwarf, but I suspect Korback will be back with a flight of dragons."

The rest fell silent. No one dared disagree. Elesar looked into the fountain for a moment, remembering the time he had spent with Korback. The green dragon had often spent time with Elesar, speaking of life, Sillwith and everything. Elesar had had the rare honour of being called a friend amongst bipeds by dragons.

An impatient cough from Kalisa brought him back to reality.

"Right, we are here to talk of a serious matter – Kodran is free."

"What?!" the others said with one voice. They had thought this would be another meeting where they would talk about their bickering between the Dwarves and the Elves or expanding the merchant's section.

"Is it possible?" Kalisa asked worriedly.

"Not just that. He has been freed by the Overlord and I believe they are planning a joint assault upon Sillwith," Elesar added. The faces of the others hardened.

"Overlord!" Darg exclaimed, "I had thought he was just a legend used to frighten small children."

"The Overlord is real as is the problem he presents," the lord answered, "He is free once more and twice as strong. It is only a matter of time before he rises to the surface and begins conquering," he stopped.

"The time has come for Men, Elves and mages to unite together in battle against a common enemy."

"And dwarves!" Darg corrected him. Dwarves might have been shorter than Elves, but they made up for it with their strong builds and penetrating voices.

"And dwarves, of course. Kiroshan is aware of the situation. King Christian is attempting to win over Black Rock; he has a long standing alliance with As'silaria."

"What of Kaamon-Raht?" the Wood Elf Lakon asked. His usually cheerful nature and mild face, almost maidenly, were not present. Worry had replaced them.

"I assume that the Overlord and Kodran will first conquer Everdark. After that, they shall march against the first kingdom in their way," Melron said.

"So Kaamon-Raht falls..." Omar didn't sound too concerned. A druid, his long white hair in braids that fell to his chest, didn't have much sympathy for Men.

"Four remain: Kiroshan, Black Rock, As'silaria and us," Melron added.

"That shouldn't be a problem!" Darg exclaimed, stroking his beard.

"Never underestimate the enemy, Dwarf King," Elesar warned him. "Kordan's Orcs might have been scattered across the east after the Great Battle, but it is only a matter of time before he rounds them up.

"Who knows what Kodran has planned? He will surely summon new demons," Omar added. He twirled his braids in one hand.

"Not to mention the Overlord's army. I cannot even imagine what army he has 'bred' under our feet all these years," Melron added.

"We can find out," Elesar said, "On the way to Kiroshan we were attacked by Kodran's Orcs," the rest jerked. The Half-Elf had said it so off-handedly, as though it was not even worth mentioning. He continued:

"He must have had a spy in Kiroshan, for he knew what we were planning. Along with his Orcs was a Reptilian..."

"Quickfoot!" Kalisa interjected. She did not understand how the Reptilian was then freely walking amongst them. But she knew that it had been Elesar's decision and the right one, "You think he knows what Kodran's army is like?"

"I believe so," he answered. "Servants, bring the Reptilian," he referred to the servants readily waiting by the doors. One of them bowed and quickly left.

"My lord, are you certain we can trust him?" Melron asked. He had never met a Reptilian before, and was naturally cautious.

"Certain enough to trust him with my life."

"I wish I was as certain as you, my lord," Lakon said. His lord made odd decisions sometimes. But they always turned out to be the right ones later on.

"Let's just hope that your instinct is not wrong," Omar said, sprawled in his chair.

"Elesar, I believe you have forgotten something. The mages," Kalisa told him.

"I haven't forgotten. It is the next step. I am bringing Princess Caitlin there and talk with Zeron while there. He surely already knows Kodran is free."

The council was interrupted by the servant who had brought Quickfoot along. Seeing the hall, the Reptilian stared in wonder. His legs weren't listening to him. He stood in place, amazed by the beauty. Only when Elesar called him did he re-enter reality.

"Quickfoot, we are in need of your assistance. Can you tell us anything about Kodran's army?"

Quickfoot glowed. He was ready to extract every detail from his memory he could remember and offer it to Elesar.

"Oh, boss, it was crawlin' with Orcs. Them's mean buggers. I met 'em at the entrance to the Swamp, so I thought they'd snatch the Reptilians into their army as well. An' if they get a 'old of Mystos, it'll be righ' bad. There's wicked beasts in them parts. Five headed monsters an' such! Oh, another thin'! I heard 'em say they'd pay some Men from the east ta attack. I can't 'member if it was ye or the wizards," he was speaking so quickly in his excitement, the other had a hard time keeping up.

"Thank you, Quickfoot. This is valuable information. You can go," Elesar thanked him.

"Yer don' need me no more?" Quickfoot was disappointed. The moment of honour handed to him had seemed too short.

"Thank you, but for now, no. However, we are counting on you," Elesar said and that returned a bit of the Reptilian's shaken self-esteem.

When the Reptilian left the hall, Melron spoke:

"Men from the east? Barbarians!" he said worriedly.

"The situation is becoming more serious. If we do not act quickly, we will have a strong army on our doorstep," Kalisa warned.

"Truly. We cannot waste anymore time," he stopped and stroked his chin. He looked again to the fountain and then through the balcony at the city. Finally, he said: "My lords, we must prepare for war. Each of you knows what your task is. At dawn, I will bring Caitlin to Adazar and speak with the mages. I expect everything to be ready when I return."

"Worry not, my lord. It will all be prepared when you return," Melron said.

Elesar stood, signalling an end to the meeting. Everyone but Kalisa left the hall. When the doors closed and the servants left them along, she gently hugged Elesar and asked:

"Shall I bring my lyre?"

"Yes," he smiled at her, "I will wait for you by the Tree."

Night descended. The street lanterns, different from those Men knew and lit with fire, glowed with an unusual blue light. Elven magic. It looked as if hundreds of stars floated over the city.

The Wood Elves and other inhabitants retired to their homes, while the Night Elves had barely started their 'day'. The city gates were closed. Everything grew quiet.

Quickfoot stood in front of the courtyard entrance and observed his surroundings. He didn't know where the girls had gone. They were no longer by the lake. He noticed the streets were empty as well. He tried to see if he could hear something. Nothing. He got worried. Where did everyone go? Was this all a dream in the end?

"Greetings, Quickfoot!" Kalisa's sudden voice made him jump like a startled cat.

"Cor! I almost dropped dead from frigh!" he said, spooked. When he noticed Kalisa in her silken purple dress which fitted her purple skin perfectly, he was struck anew by her beauty. He calmed.

"Oh., it's ye, Kalisa. I dinna hear ya. I got good ears on me, most other times."

"Ha ha, I am sorry, but I could not help myself," Kalisa smiled. The lantern light danced across her eyes.

"What'cha playin' wit me like that fer? An' where'd everyone scarper off ta?"

"Lauren is with Caitlin in her chambers and Elesar is at the Tree of Eternity," she kindly answered.

"I meant all the other Elves! Where'd they all go?"

"Can you not see them? They are going about their daily business," Kalisa answered, "Or to correct myself, their nightly business."

"Where'd ya see 'em then? I can't see nothin'!" Quickfoot admitted. He strained his eyes to see something. Here and there, it seemed like he could see some movement under the lanterns, but only for a moment.

"Ah...it is because they are Night Elves," Kalisa smiled, "Other races find them difficult to see in the dark."

"Yer nighters sure are diff'rent!"

"Have you just referred to Night Elves as nighters?!" Kalisa raised an eyebrow and reproachfully looked at him.

"Jeepers! Sorry! I fergot tha's offensive like ter ya!" Quickfoot repented and threw himself to his knees.

"It is not wise to forget a thing like that. I do not mind, but be more careful in the company of other Night Elves. It is an insulting word to them," Kalisa took pity on him and

helped him up. Her gentle palm on his face was like a touch from heaven. Kalisa's palm was even softer than the palm of his mistress. He'd almost forgotten what it was like.

"I understand, yer grace. Thank ye for bein' so kind. An' where're ye off ta, if yer don' mind me askin'?" Quickfoot quickly changed the subject to evade discomfort. He'd learned to do that with his previous owner.

"I am heading to the Tree of Eternity. Elesar and I will play a little," Kalisa answered and strung her fingers through her lyre.

"The boss plays the lyre?" the Reptilian said in surprise.

"No, he plays the flute. Would you like to come listen?"

"O' course! I'd like ter hear tha'!"

"Come with me then. Just keep quiet and do not disturb us," Kalisa said and took him to the Tree of Eternity.

Elesar was leaning against the Tree and cleaning his flute. When Kalisa and Quickfoot approached, he spoke, not raising his gaze.

"I see we have an audience."

"That's righ'! Don't ye mind me, ye just play! I'll just sit 'ere on the grass and listen!" Quickfoot said and found a spot on the grass not far from them.

"All right. Kalisa, let's begin," Elesar said and started to play.

The melody they played hypnotized Quickfoot. The beautiful music that calmed the soul and body didn't leave anyone untouched. The Night Elves stopped their work and let themselves over to the magical music. Elves and druids came out of their homes and listened attentively. For some it was a lullaby, for others a pleasant waking.

Children and the elderly, women and men, strangers and natives. All of them gathered around the Tree and enjoyed the divine melody.

Kalisa's gentle fingers picked the lyre's strings like playful birds on the branches. Her black hair, glowing in the moonlight like a black pearl, fluttered to the rhythm of the melody. She melded seamlessly with the overall picture.

Elesar's flute had a life of its own. Its sounds followed Kalisa's lyre and at the same time created its own sounds, imitating bird calls, inviting birds of the night to join in the magical melody.

The public was carried away by the moment. Even the pegasi and unicorns came from the Mystic forest to the Tree and joined the numerous audience.

Quickfoot could not believe his eyes. Not even a step away, pegasi and unicorns sat or stood. He felt completely safe in these magical surroundings.

So safe, he fell asleep leaning against a pegasus.

End of Chapter 07