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“Isn’t she beautiful, Elani?” Prince Garin sighed longingly.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Elani answered dutifully.

“She’s like a ray of sunshine. With her long golden hair and her fair skin,” he continued.

As Elani thought of the prince’s elegant betrothed, she glanced down at her own olive skin and reached up to touch her short, dark hair. She sighed.

“Elani? You are sighing. Why?” the prince asked.

“No reason, Your Highness. I am only tired,” she lied. She had never felt so invigorated in her life. She had spent every day for the last thirteen years of her seventeen years of life following around the prince,

obeying his every command. He loved to travel the countryside and journey to other kingdoms. But they had never been on a journey like this one; sleeping in tents, unsure of their destination, living off of the wild beasts that the soldiers hunted down.

When Prince Garin's younger brother, Rogan, had breathed the secret of the Magical Treasure of Isian, Garin had begun to plan the quest to find the treasure.

"But the legend tells that only a worthy prince can control it," his brother had warned. Though Elani had learned to be cautious of Prince Rogan's schemes and harsh looks, she knew she must do as Prince Garin commanded.

"Imagine, Elani," he had cried as she prepared his bags for the journey. "A treasure that will grant your every wish!" She had arched her eyebrow in confusion at his exclamation. Why he would need such a treasure was beyond her comprehension. He had her.

"It can do things that you can't!" he had laughed.

So the next day, the prince assembled a crew of soldiers and servants, including Elani, his closest and most trusted servant, and they had set off on a journey to claim the Magical Treasure of Isian.

Though Elani was in foreign territory, having never been on a long journey, she was exhilarated by the fact that the prince did not have as many servants as usual, making him rely upon her more. She smiled,

knowing that this meant she must spend every moment with the prince, tending to his every need.

“Don’t worry,” Prince Garin responded at present. “We will be stopping for camp soon. Won’t it be the greatest wedding gift in the world to bring home to Princess Livia? A treasure that will grant wishes!”

“But we do not even know what this treasure is, Your Highness,” she said. What sort of object would hold the power to grant the wishes of a prince?

The two, prince and servant, had debated the issue many times as he watched her prepare for the quest.

“We will listen to every whisper and rumor as we travel to the mystical land of Isian. We will ask questions and research the object in every land between here and there,” he answered excitedly.

Elani knew he had spent several hours pouring over books, researching the object, but had come up with nothing. The treasure of Isian was a fairly new legend, with rumors only popping up in the last decade. But overall, this was a blind search. The prince had no idea what he was looking for, only that he wished to have it.

“Your Highness!” a soldier called out. The man was galloping in their direction.

“What is it?” Garin answered.

“There is a river ahead.”

“Is it shallow enough to ford?” the prince asked.

The soldier shook his head. "We must choose a different direction. Forgive me, but I do not know this area well enough to plan out a useful path."

"We will go east," Garin commanded. "We will follow the river. And if we come upon a spot that is shallow enough to cross, we will take it."

"Yes, sir," the soldier answered and then returned to the front of the train.

"I do not think he really needed my opinion on the matter," Garin breathed. "The direction was obvious enough."

"They only wish to please you. And they know you are wise and they wish to have your advice in such decisions," Elani said.

Garin chuckled. "You always know what to say, don't you? To make everyone look good."

"I try, Your Highness," she said calmly and turned away so he could not see her twinkling eyes. In her head, she chastised herself for being a fool.

"Sir?" she said after a short silence. "How much longer do you believe this journey will last? It has already been weeks and we have heard nothing about the treasure."

"Have hope, Elani." He refused to give in to doubt and lose his excitement. "Perhaps this journey will not last too much longer. Although I love the hunt for treasure, I long to return to the palace and to Princess Livia, who is waiting faithfully for her

triumphant prince!”

This time, Elani had to turn her face to hide her frown. Princess Livia was beautiful, for sure, but she was also dull and snobbish and not nearly good enough for Prince Garin.

“Oh! I’ve dropped my glove. Fetch it for me, Elani,” the prince said and pointed to the ground several yards behind his trotting horse.

Before Elani could even respond, her hands took control, pulling her horse around and galloping back to the spot where the glove lay. Without hesitation, her body jumped from her horse, picked up the glove, jumped back on her horse, and returned to the distracted prince. As soon as he retrieved the glove from her hands, she sighed and her body was once again in her control.

“Do you like your horse?” the prince asked, glancing at the tan animal she was riding.

She smiled. “Oh! I love her! She is very docile and does everything I ask her to.”

Garin laughed. “I thought you would like her. Horses are smart creatures.”

Elani glowed when she thought of the horse the prince had so thoughtfully gifted to her.

“Your Highness! We have found a crossing!” a soldier called from ahead and then turned back and began to cross the river. All went well until Elani’s horse came upon the water. The beast resisted her

urging as she tried to get it into the cold water.

“Oh please,” she whispered in her horse’s ear. “The water is not very deep. And the river not so wide.”

The horse swung its head and snorted as it looked away from the rushing water. Elani glanced up and found that the prince had already traversed the river and was traveling forward on the other side. She glanced behind her and saw that the soldiers were not far behind her.

“Please,” she cooed in the animal’s ear and stroked its head. She could not bear to make a fool of herself in front of the soldiers. It was difficult to gain their respect and she did not want to lose it.

“Do you need help, miss?”

The soldiers had caught up to her and were waiting for her to cross.

“Of course not,” she said. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Please,” she prayed silently. “Do not let me look incompetent.”

With much force, the animal slowly trotted forward and then jumped into the water, splashing Elani with cold water. The horse moved quickly and jerkily, causing her to grasp tightly to the reins. When they finally reached the opposite side, Elani sighed and patted her horse.

Laughs and cheers filled the air from the opposite

shore. The soldiers crossed without hesitation and met up with her.

“Your horse does not like water. She will get used to it. I can teach you some techniques to train her.”

“Thank you, Derik.” Derik was one of her favorite soldiers. He and Garin had grown up together and so he knew her well. He had quickly taken her under his wing and eagerly volunteered his knowledge throughout the journey.

“Do you know where we are now?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “I have not known where we are for days now. The prince has been leading us to foreign lands. Many of these places are not even on the maps.”

“Do you think it is safe?”

With a chuckle, he responded, “I hope not! It would hardly be a quest worth making if it were safe. As soldiers we would be worthless.”

“I suppose you are right. Danger makes for much more interesting tales to tell when we get home,” she agreed.

As the sun began to sink, the air turned cool, causing Elani to shiver under her damp clothes. The sky darkened and the men began to pitch their tents. After her own tent was pitched, she quickly changed into a dry dress and cloak and then went about her

nightly duties to the prince.

She brought him some heated water to rinse his hands and splash on his face. As soon as the cook had finished preparing the evening's meal, she served it immediately to the prince, first testing it to make sure it was not too hot.

He immediately wolfed down his food and then joined the captain of his soldiers to chart out their journey for the next day.

She then went to the prince's tent and laid out his nightclothes, ready whenever he should retire.

As soon as Elani was finished with her duties, she joined the men beside the campfire. Elani received her own food and sat on a small log the men had set for her beside the fire.

"Elani! Tell us another story!" one of the men shouted. Although she shyly resisted at first, the other men cheered her on until she finally gave in with a sigh.

"All right," she laughed. "I will. But let me finish my food first."

The men had learned early on in their journey that although Elani did anything the prince told her to do, she did not give in so easily to others. When one man had ambushed her on the second evening of their journey, she had punched him in the nose and kicked him soundly. Although the others had been slumbering, they awoke at the cursing and moaning

of the man and rushed to see what had happened. The prince had banished the man from the group and declared that any man who touches her on the entire journey would be punished.

But Elani had earned the men's respect when they saw the fire in her eyes and her clenched fists as she glared down at the man who had attempted to assault her.

"The land of Isian was a cold, dark place," she began, reciting a story she had read from one of the books the prince had been studying. "The witch had overtaken the throne, forcing the king and queen to bow at her feet. All of the happiness and light diminished, for they could not thrive in the magical kingdom while ruled by one who did not belong on the throne.

"A new witch arrived in the land. Upon seeing the desolate conditions, she began to weep. So bitter were her tears that the earth felt them and the grass where she stood dissolved and formed a pool of her tears. The pool solidified into a looking glass. The looking glass was bewitched from the magic in her tears, to show the future of the beholder. The looking glass showed the future of the once beautiful kingdom if the witch continued on the path she was on. The kingdom would die and become nothing but a myth. The witch would then overthrow all the lands around her until the entire world was under her black feet.

"The new witch sorrowed at the sight and

more tears flowed from her eyes. She cried and cried until the land was soaked with her magical tears. Her constant tears eventually flowed so fiercely that they created a flood. When the wicked witch witnessed the flooding city, she went out to meet the crying witch.

“Every spell she cast reflected off of the sparkling lake of tears and lashed back on her. The crying witch never uttered a single spell. She only continued to cry until the wicked witch began to cry. Her body was not used to the emotion. Her face swelled from the sudden wetness. Her body eventually wrinkled in upon itself and her empty shell of skin floated over the water until it finally disintegrated.

“The king and queen were released from the spell and as the witch’s tears soaked into the cold, blackened ground, the earth became green again and produced all manner of vegetation including new plants and fruits they had never seen before.

“And the magical, future-showing looking glass remains on the edge of the magical kingdom of Isian, looking out over the land. It is said that the king and queen go down once a year to look into the glass to make sure they are on the right path that will help their kingdom succeed.”

When Elani finished, the men stared at her in a trance, completely mesmerized by her story. After a short silence, they clapped and begged for more. She was an excellent storyteller. Before she could respond,

she glanced up and found the prince staring down at her.

“Elani,” he said sharply. “Go to bed.”

Unable to refuse his command, she curtsied to the prince and muttered, “Yes, Your Highness.”

The men bid her goodnight and she went to her tent. Resisting the urge to cry, she buried her face in her covers. She did not always understand the reasons behind her master’s commands. They were often harsh and thoughtless and left her wondering what she had done wrong. But she could not hate him. Every command only endeared him to her more.

Several hours after she had fallen asleep, she awoke to the sound of scuffling outside her tent. She raised her head and listened carefully. There was only silence. Then, a sharp crack and a yell. She jumped out of her bed and wrapped her cloak tightly around her. Hesitantly, she peered outside her tent. She could not see anything through the darkness. She opened the flap of her tent wider and glanced to her right where the prince’s tent was set up. After several seconds, the prince stumbled out of his tent, securing his sword around his waist. His head swiveled all around the campground. Seeing nothing, he glanced at Elani. She hurried to his side.

“Your Highness?” she whispered. At that moment, there was another shout and an even louder reverberation. And then a thud, which shook the

ground. And another. And another. The thuds came in even intervals.

“What is it?” Elani breathed, staring into the darkness. The fire had long gone out and the moon was covered this night. The only light came from the few stars peeking between the clouds.

“Blast!” the prince grunted. “Giants!”

She stuttered. “B-but I thought giants did not live nearby.”

“We are no longer in my kingdom,” he responded. “Giants are generally noble creatures. Perhaps I can negotiate with them. Get my horse.”

Elani obeyed. Moving quickly, she fumbled with the ropes holding the prince’s horse in place. As she hurried back to him, several soldiers stumbled from their tents with their swords drawn.

“Go back to your tent. Stay there until I get back,” he said after jumping onto his horse.

Frustrated that she must leave him, she hurried back to her tent. Keeping the flaps open, she watched him gallop towards the soldiers, motioning for them to follow him, and then he disappeared from sight. She chewed furiously on her lip as she waited.

With no moon in the sky, it was hard to tell how much time had passed. It felt like hours. The vibrations grew farther apart. The shouting stopped. But Elani could see and hear nothing else. Her eyes grew tired, but she remained alert and anxious, pacing back and

forth in her tent. As time passed, she began to fear for the men and for her prince. She wanted to run to them and find out what was happening. But her body kept her in her tent, obeying the prince's command. Clenching her fists, she dropped to her knees. Her eyes tightened to hold back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Fear and worry gnawed at her until fatigue overtook her. Her head drooped forward and her breathing deepened. Weariness pushed her fears from her mind and she fell asleep.

Unsure how long she had been asleep, she gasped when she finally heard footsteps outside her tent. She listened carefully. The footsteps were definitely human. Peeking outside her tent, she heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the prince trotting back into the camp with the rest of the men right behind him.

"Your Highness!" she cried and ran from her tent. He glanced at her absently and then turned towards the captain.

Turning to another soldier, she asked, "What happened?"

He glanced down at her with his eyebrows raised and then turned away from her. She glared at his back and turned to another man. This man was older and looked more willing to speak to a woman. She asked him the same question.

The older man sighed and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "We have to leave. The giants are furious with us for camping in their field." He gestured southward and Elani noticed the odd trees for the first time. The trunks were slim and green from bottom to top and the leaves were thick and pointed. She looked at the ground below the strange trees and noticed that they were in perfect rows, with wide, deep ditches between each row that looked like streams. She finally realized that they were standing in the midst of the giants' cornfield.

"Are we going to be punished?"

He shook his head. "Not if we get out of here fast. The prince was able to convince them that we had no idea and we meant no harm."

She turned towards the prince and could not help admiring him for staying calm long enough to speak with the giants.

Before the man could turn away, she asked in a soft voice, "What was it like?"

"Hm?" he asked, surprised that she was still speaking to him.

"What was it like? Talking to the giants? What did they look like? How did the prince act? Did he look brave?" she asked excitedly.

The man chuckled. "I suppose you want to make another story out of this, don't you?"

She shrugged and waited.

He hesitated and then answered in a quiet voice, "The giants are even larger than I ever imagined. I have been told stories of the giants. They are taller than the trees. And they have deep voices and their skin is tan and their hands callused. They have good hearing and eyesight, making them able to communicate with humans on the ground, many feet below."

When he paused, she said, "Please, sir, anything else?"

He laughed again and continued in a whisper. "The prince asked about the treasure."

"And did they know of it?"

He nodded. "They have heard of it. They know that it is not where it should be. It has been taken away from its right place. And it is said that the king and queen of Isian are searching for their stolen treasure."

Befuddled by the new information, her mouth fell open and her eyes were wide.

"The prince is charting a new course. He now realizes that the treasure will be even more difficult to find. And he must reach it before the king and queen or he will never have it."

Elani turned towards the prince. He was hunched over a map while the rest of the men speedily tore down the tents and packed up the gear and horses. The man she had been speaking with excused himself and began to help the others.

Unsure what to do, Elani went to her horse and

waited. Although it had seemed like hours since she had first been awakened by the giants' thundering footsteps, the sky was still dark and she could only make out shadows of the men moving around her.

As she stood beside her horse in the darkness, the earth began to vibrate once again. She turned in the direction of the sound. She still saw nothing. Curious, she moved towards the massive corn stalks and peered down the rows, hoping to get a glimpse of a giant. She tiptoed farther into the rows of corn.

But she did not find the giant. Instead, she found a tall woman standing beside one of the stalks with her hands stretched up to the sky. So surprised, Elani gasped. The woman turned to her, a frown covering her delicate, pale face. Her lips lifted into a snarl, revealing sharp teeth.

The sight paralyzed Elani. She could do nothing but watch as the woman advanced towards her. Her long, thin hair swayed around her shoulders. With one flick of her head, the hair swished away from her face, revealing hollow cheeks, big round eyes, and pointed ears.

Elani had heard terrible things about elves, but she had not realized how fearsome, yet beautiful they looked. When the elf woman was only feet away from her, she stumbled backwards. She found her feet and then spun around and began running.

The elf leaped towards her and fell on top of

her, slamming her to the ground. The elf pressed her sharp teeth against the skin of her neck. Elani took a deep breath, knowing it would be her last.