

Silver Forest

by Verity Ritchie

The Silver Forest was tall and topped with pale leaves, gray as if sunbleached. The forest were thought impenetrable by mortals, bushes and thick ivy tightly woven across the trees as high as one could climb. Small spring animals disappeared into the forest, but only resurfaced in their old age, among the corpses that floated out of the river Sangwyn. Dead flora and fauna poured out the forest from the river, and sometimes, when the moon was full, a torrent of blood could be seen for several nights. Mortals once gave wide berth to the river, though in a time of drought, some were now seen loading water into carriages to return home on long journeys. One such journey saw the fateful passage of one mortal man into the forest.

Despite mortal myth, there were always paths one might travel through the trees. The passages grew predestined by the will of the First Spoken, available only when the Silver Elves wanted them to be. Like these paths, it could only be that the knowing of this mortal man to the elf-witch Aetas was written into the fates of their peoples.

Many winters after, at the centre of the vast forest, Aetas, child of elf-witch and mortal man, completed her journey up the Blood Tree to the pavilion. The tree was white and grown wide, tall, twisted, so that its trunk could be scaled as a steep path, its bark as footholds. The roots spanned the width of the river Sangwyn, into which the tree would deliver its fruits.

Sweat dripped from her brow as Aetas took her place within the pavilion among the other women of her people. She was one of the youngest taking part in the ceremony, and thereby the most exhausted, though she tried to hide it. In the centre of the circle stood the Lady Lucimina, elder of the Silver Elves, standing far taller than any of the other men or women, including, to her relief, Aetas.

The pavilion was carved dragon bone, made to echo the branches and leaves of the tree that held them. (Legend insisted that the dragon had given itself to the Elves, that its flesh would be their meat, its scales their jewelry, its bones their structures. Aetas wondered about the truth of this, suspecting her mother's kin had taken it by force, perhaps when the dragon found itself trapped in the web of the Silver Forest.) The pavilion floor was forged from silver, an intricate pattern of circles carved into it; shallow circles linked to deeper ones, and those to ones still deeper, until they passed off the edge. (The silver a "gift" from the western mortal miners, though Aetas suspected the mortals weren't so likely to give away their livelihood for nothing.)

The elfin men's song rose from far below, "Life givers, you are saviors of the land." Lady Lucimina swayed to the music, her eyes shut, hands raised. Her white robes draped over her golden skin danced in the breeze as the last few women took their place in the circle, and though no words passed among them, Lady Lucimina seemed to know it was time.

Entranced by the hymn of her sons and brothers, spots of red began to dot the Lady's robes below her waist. The drops of blood pooled below her, sinking into the engraved circles, passing from one to another, as it began its journey across the floor. And so began the flow, each elf offering a part of herself to the Blood Tree.

In the moons before this, Aletas had been a problem for the Silver Elves. Not because an elf-mortal union was forbidden, nor because it was immoral or distasteful. But because no one knew quite what was the protocol. Legend, myth, and prophecy contributed generously to all questions, social, political, or otherwise. Perhaps the Legend of Faenith could be consulted, with the union of a White Elf and a Mountain Elf? But no, mortal culture was dissimilar to elfin, uncivilised, indulgent in wanderlust, and the mortal father had journeyed on long before the birth of the little one. A child of elfish blood could never be handed over to mortals, bearing the power of the land itself - with this mortals could not be trusted.

And so Aletas was raised as a Silver Elf, taught the magic of the land, ultimately inheriting the social standing of her departed mother - for Aletas was indeed a woman, if only half elf. Early in life Aletas was believed to have been a man, but her soul contested this. It had taken some time for Aletas to confess the mistake of the midwife, her self assurance perhaps impeded by a lifetime of self doubt and mortal tumult.

On this day upon the Blood Tree, Aletas raised her robes, and with the fine diamond upon her ring, she cut open her thigh. This was custom among women of the Silver Elves, such as those with child, who did not bleed, and those who never had or never would again. The pain was sharp, and she bit her lip as the blood began to pour down her leg. Blood welled within the patterned floor, the power of each woman combined, until it fell, pouring over the edge of the pavilion onto the Blood Tree itself. The red streaked the white bark, drawn toward the river, where its journey would take it out of the forest, into the land. Each drop multiplied, catching along the way dead leaves and animals, fresh rain water and waste alike, into the land beyond the Silver Forest, where it would nourish the soil.

"Life givers, you are saviors of the land," the elfin men continued to sing, tears dampening their cheeks, overwhelmed by the beauty of the ancient tradition. Aletas cried too, as Lady Lucimina caught her eye and smiled. Aletas knew there was no doubt she was born to be a part of this ritual.

While her elfin blood gave life to the earth, Lady Lucimina's final day was blessed, and would surely bring great beauty to the land beyond. As tradition demanded, all elves took to their beds as upon any other night when the Elfin queen renounced her post. Alone she would climb into a boat, taken from the oldest tree, and carved into curves like water, and take her leave of the Silver Forest, where a new Lady would inherit the role of elder.

The witch-elf loved Lady Lucimina. And while Aletas' elfin blood drew her to follow the Lady into the outside world, her mortal bones urged her to leave the borders of the wood. Mortals were known as nomadic, unsettled, and therefore coarse and unrefined. Aletas wondered if her call to adventure prophesied a deeper cause than the ancient traditions of the elves could know.

So it came to pass that in the dead of night, Aletas, the half elfin witch, followed the Lady of the Silver Forest at a distance, taking an old raft, farther than it was ever intended to journey, along the river Sangwyn as it ventured into the mortal lands it fertilised. And something new was gifted to the world.