

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: 'Shadow' POV!

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After watching the Lordling and his minder leave the destroyed goblin camp behind, the Dark Elf known as 'Shadow' to Eloise stays still on the branch of the tree she's been observing from for a few moments longer. Then, she leaps straight up, easily clearing quite the vertical, a jump that terminates in her arm snapping upwards to wrap around a thicker tree branch above her.

Swinging herself up onto it, she leaps from branch to branch before moving through the canopy of the Darkwoods like she was born to it, darting from tree to tree until she eventually hits a particular black patch of shadow, too dark for human eyes to even see in.

She vanishes in an instant, only to reappear in another part of the Darkwoods, far enough away that it would take the two humans she just left behind the better part of a week to travel the distance on foot. Thanks to her shadowstep, it takes the Dark Elf a split second.

Hopping down from the tree and landing on the ground below, the masked Dark Elf approaches a dead, hollowed out tree stump, its jagged edges reaching up to the ground and the darkness within promising a comforting bolt hole for any animal that might be passing by. But... nothing else. It seems to the naked eye to be an entirely dead end. Dark and covered and 'safe' yes, but not an entrance of any sort.

And yet, the Dark Elf steps into it anyways and once again disappears into the shadows, reappearing a moment later fifty feet beneath the earth in a dug out cave with magical lantern light. Only once she's down there does the Dark Elf remove her mask, pulling it off to reveal a pitch-black face just a couple shades off from her pitch-black armor. Lips part to reveal pristine white teeth as she lets

out a sigh and rolls her shoulders before heading further in, making her way down the tunnel.

Finally, she arrives at her ultimate destination... only to be ambushed right outside of it.

“Sevvi.”

Stopping, the Dark Elf levels an unimpressed stare in her second’s direction.

“Gruda. Any problems with the girls while I was gone?”

The other Dark Elf shakes her head.

“Nah, no issues. Patrols have gone well. Everything is quiet as can be. They’ve been playing some dice games to pass the time... and of course, Liselle is still trying to domesticate the giant spiders for their silk.”

The now-identified Sevvi of House Vairath rolls her eyes at that last part.

“Of course she is. As long as she doesn’t get herself eaten, I don’t care. She can do whatever she wants. And it sounds like the others are keeping themselves busy too... which begs the question of why we’re having a conversation, Gruda. If nobody is getting antsy, what’s the matter?”

Gruda grimaces, shifting from foot to foot. It’s obvious there is a problem, Sevvi just needs her right hand woman to get around to spitting it out. Of course, when Gruda finally does so... well, she has reason to wish the other Dark Elf hadn’t said a word.

“... It’s your mother.”

Sevvi’s nostrils flare and her long knife-like ears twitch expressively at that.

“You told her I was busy, right? It’s not even a lie; I was literally out on business.”

“Yes, of course. She understood, I think. However, she also told me to tell you to contact her as soon as you got back.”

Sevvi grunts at that, rolling her eyes.

“Well... maybe I’m not back yet. Maybe I’m still ‘out’ for another day or two...”

Gruda winces.

“She... also said that if you didn’t contact her within the next day, she might send someone to check up on us.”

... Damn it. Sevvi groans and runs her gloved hands over her face for a long moment.

“That old hag really doesn’t know how to leave well enough alone, does she?”

Gruda gasps at her words, but Sevvi doesn’t care. She’s too pissed off to care at this point. You try to strike out on your own, you try to cast off the shackles of society to make something of yourself, and even though you leave it all behind... you still can’t fucking shake family, can you?

Grumbling, Sevvi jerks her head in a nod.

“Fine. I’ll go now. Just... keep the girls in line or something, Gruda.”

Gruda nods hurriedly, clearly not wanting to get on Sevvi’s bad side. Hmph, they said you should never blame the messenger and Sevvi tried her best to follow that line of thinking... but damn if she wasn’t tempted to take out her frustration on her second for a moment.

Instead, she makes her way deeper into her gang’s hideout, past a few other Dark Elves who either nod at her or toss her sloppy, salutes. Smirking, Sevvi nods back in turn, affecting a certain air of... casual disregard and calm. Best not to appear too nervous or agitated, you never knew who was looking out for a sign of weakness, even among her little band of ‘rebels’ so far from home.

Finally though, Sevvī reaches her own personal quarters, outside of which sits a certain communication orb whenever she's away on business. Snatching it up, she takes it inside of her room and drops down heavily onto the edge of her bed before shaking the damn thing to start a 'call'.

The other end of the orb is about a thousand leagues from here, so deep in the Darkwoods that human eyes have never beheld it before. It sits nestled in the heart of House Vairath's power, always close at hand for her mother... and so Sevvī isn't surprised one bit when she receives an answer rather quickly.

"Sevinarya, FINALLY! I was just wondering if I was going to have to send someone out to check on you, darling. You mustn't make your mother worry like this!"

Sevvī, or rather Sevinarya of House Vairath, rolls her eyes in response, speaking through gritted teeth.

"I'm fine, mother. You don't have to worry; I have everything under control. There's no need to always be checking up on me like this."

Her mother huffs.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're my daughter, and you're away from home for the first time, nearly on the edge of the Darkwoods themselves! The need is because I care about you, Sevinarya."

Care about her, or about her value to the House? Sevvī can't help but scoff. If she weren't holding the damn orb, her arms would be crossed right now.

"Yeah, right. Look mother... I'm out. Like you said, I'm as far away from the Capital as I can be. I'm done with all that nonsense. I ran away for a reason!"

The instant the words are out of her mouth, Sevvī twitches, feeling like she'd said the wrong thing. 'Ran away'... tch, running away from home made it sound

so childish. But she wasn't a child. She was ninety-six years old. She was full grown by Dark Elf standards, even if she was a little young still.

And yet...

"Sevinarya, you are my thirty-first daughter. You are currently fourth in line to inherit the throne. You are a Princess of the Royal House of Vairath. You don't just get to 'run away'."

The now properly identified Princess Sevinarya of the Royal House of Vairath, Thirty-First Daughter to Queen Klynirra and Fourth in Line for the Royal Throne, grimaces at that.

"I don't want it. As I've told you a dozen times before. Take me out of the line of succession mother. Let one of my sixty younger sisters move up the ranks without me having to die first for once."

Her mother the Queen lets out a tittering laugh at that.

"You know that's not how it works my dear. So long as you live, you remain in the line of succession. And that means I need to keep a close eye on you no matter how far away you are. Look, I know you needed your space... I let you go, didn't I? I let you run away with all your little friends, absconding from society to go live like base, lesser species out on the edge of our civilization. You're practically goblins, the way you're living out there."

Sevvi stiffens up, her nostrils flaring at the comparison. But her mother just holds up a hand, forestalling any objections.

"Don't try to deny it, Sevinarya. Gruda reports to me on the regular, after all. Your little underground hideaway is cute, but it's still barely a step up from the average goblin cave! You're a Dark Elf, sweetheart, you should be living in the tallest tree you can find, high above the ground and all of the lesser species that pollute it with their presence! Living underground like you are is beneath a Princess of your pedigree... literally!"

Bristling, Sevvī nevertheless stays quiet. There's no point arguing the point, not when her mother gets like this. Meanwhile, the mention of her second basically being her mother's eyes and ears... it just makes Sevvī want to go and find an excuse to punish Gruda even more.

When they'd all made their plans to escape from the Capital, run away from home, and live away from Dark Elf Society where they could get away from the politics and backstabbing and all that rot, Sevvī had had such high hopes. She was going to cast off her old identity as Princess Sevinarya of the Royal House of Vairath and she was going to just be Sevvī from that moment on, leader of a ragtag group of intrepid, independent adventurers!

That whole dream had been punctured rather ruthlessly about three weeks into their escape, just after they'd found this spot and started carving out their underground lair with magic. Gruda had come to her timidly... and revealed the communication orb, admitting that Sevvī's mother the Queen had known all along about their plans but had allowed them to happen anyways because she wanted her daughter to be able to 'find herself'.

The only price for Sevvī's freedom was that she really had no freedom at all at the end of the day. Essentially, Gruda reported on her to her mother... and when her mother called, Sevvī was expected to call her back. Utterly ridiculous. She wanted nothing to do with her mother, her place in the line of succession, or the politics of Dark Elf Society. Yet here she was, as far away as she could get... and she was stuck all the same.

"Really darling, when are you going to give up on this rebellious nonsense and come back? Don't you miss all of the creature comforts of home? It can't be that enjoyable roughing it all the way out in the boonies like you are."

Sevvī grits her teeth.

"Actually, it's great. I'm loving it, mother."

Admittedly, it's not all great... not really. There are a lot of things about her pampered life as a Princess that Sevvī misses from time to time. However, at the same time... there's a lot of things she doesn't miss. Not one bit.

"Hm... well, I still think we should set an end date for this little vacation of yours. You've had your fun Sevinarya. But I need you back here in the Capital, so I'm going to have to ask that you return by the end of the month."

Wait, what? Sevvī's grip on the communication orb tightens.

"I'm not... you can't do that mother! I'm not just going to come running at your beck and call!"

The look that the Queen gives her makes it clear that's exactly what she expects. Her next words however...

"Sevvī please... for both our sake's, let's at least try to maintain the façade that I can't just order all those girls you're currently with to truss you up and hand deliver to me right this moment. We know they would, but there's no point in making me prove it, is there?"

A shiver runs down Sevvī's spine, panic suffusing her being. Finally...

"I can't come back yet mother. I found something out here."

She speaks through gritted teeth, every word feeling like she's betraying herself. And yet, she gets her mother's attention all the same.

"Oh? Something interesting that far out? What is it?"

Squirming for a moment, Sevvī wants nothing more than to leave it vague and nondescript. However, she knows full well that her mother is not used to being denied... she is the Queen of an entire Empire, after all.

"... It's a man. A human man."

Queen Klynirra's eyebrows arch as high up on their forehead as they can at that, causing Sevvī to flush and scowl in response.

"It's not like *that*, mother! He's of interest because there's something special about him!"

Those same eyebrows furrow in incredulity.

"Special? A human? That seems rather... farfetched. They're barely a step above goblins my dear, both in lifespan and culture. What could this human possibly have that the others don't?"

"I don't know yet! But he's definitely different. Two months ago, he was nothing, a weak flabby thing with no strength, no training, and no power. Now, two months later, he's capable of going toe to toe with Dire Wolves and clears out entire goblin camps... by himself!"

That last part was a bit of an embellishment admittedly, but if Sevvī said that the Lordling had a Knight fighting alongside him, it would have been a lot less impressive. Even as things stand, the Queen is barely moved.

"And? Even your youngest sister could clear out an entire goblin camp by herself, Sevinarya. She could probably do it blindfolded!"

Bristling, Sevinarya grits her teeth and shakes her head.

"It's not about what he's capable of now, mother. He's accelerating. What will he be capable of next month? What will he be capable of three months from now? His growth is interesting... he could be an asset to the House."

The Queen lets out a tittering laugh at the very idea... and yet, Sevvī sees the glimmer of interest in her mother's eyes all the same.

"A human man an asset to the Royal House of Vairath. You are quite the delight, daughter of mine. Hm... very well, continue your little games. It's not like you're the heir... yet. But do know that I will expect further progress reports on this

human you hope to tame. And not from Gruda... if you don't want to be summoned back home, YOU will call me yourself at least once a week, unprompted. Do this and I will leave you to your own devices for a little while longer."

Fuck. Still... it's the best she's going to get. Sevvì just nods, wordlessly accepting her mother's stipulations. Queen Klynirra just smiles and ends the call a moment later, leaving Sevvì alone in her room with the communication orb in her hands.

After a moment, she growls and throws the thing as hard as she can at the far wall. It bounces off and rolls across the floor and under a table, unharmed. Stupid mother. Stupid Gruda. Stupid indestructible communication orbs...

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A/N: Poor Sevvì... heh, what'd you guys think of this first look behind the curtain at our 'mysterious elven adversary'? :P

Please let me know what you think either on Patreon or Discord! Your feedback, suggestions, and ideas for this story are keeping the inspiration flowing in a big way!