



“You’ve got to be joking, Lianthorn…”

“Nay, I’d lament the day I ever favored lies over truth! Every word I speak rings true, my dearest Nimiel, and you may trust in each one wholeheartedly.”

Nimiel’s expression was incredulous. “So this man…he really believed the chicken to be a seer? Truly?”

The setting was the Frostbitten Foxhole, a cozy tavern in the heart of Frostholm. It was a chilled December evening where the crackling fireplace warmed even the most frigid of hearts. Well, most of them, anyway… one glance at the colonel sitting beside her made it clear that Vaeril was feeling far from toasty. Disregarding his friend’s glower, Lianthorn continued with a theatrical wave of his hand, his voice passionate.



“Indeed he did! This strange wanderer—a Wood elf, tall and broad-chested—held in his arms a simple bird; nay, mere poultry! And yet he insisted upon granting it access to a crystal ball! Said the thing was a fortune-teller, an all-knowing seer of the world beyond. Now, keep in mind, darling, that it was just a chicken. Far better fare for a feather duster than otherworldly visions.”

Nimiel couldn’t resist snickering at the ridiculous story. “He just…showed up at the shop with a chicken? Was it in a cage?”

Lianthorn shook his head, a gleeful smirk upon his lips. “Not a cage, Miss Nimiel, but a *papoose*. Swaddled like a babe! I tried most earnestly to assist him without letting it trail feathers throughout the shop. It was a considerable ordeal to repudiate his requests to use a crystal ball…but I managed to steer him on the course of feather-divination instead. We parted quite

amicably, though I do hope the pleasure of meeting again will be postponed... ideally to an indefinite degree.”

Through a fit of lighthearted laughter, Nimiel shook her head. “Okay, there’s no *way* that’s true. Colonel, do you believe this? No self-respecting Wood elf would truly...”

“It’s true.” Vaeril was frowning at the table.

“*What!?*”

“It’s true. That whackjob is a part of my unit. Or *was*, anyway...” He trailed off, but seeing as both Lianthorn and Nimiel were staring at him with wide eyes and rapt attention, he sighed and begrudgingly continued.

“You must understand, the environment in the military is different from that of a civilian-owned shop like Lianthorn’s. We can’t afford disruptions. So a private insisting that we follow the visions of his “wise seer” while the rest of us are just trying to complete a mission... It’s not a great scenario.”

Lianthorn looked thoughtful. “I do wonder what Sir Haemir would’ve thought of such a thing,” He mused.

Vaeril chuckled in a way that seemed wistfully nostalgic. “Ahh...Haemir would’ve laughed his ass off, no doubt about it. But he’d be a lot more lenient than me, would probably try and include the chicken somehow just to make the guy feel less ostracized. He was kind to a fault.”

Nimiel tilted her head at the colonel inquisitively, unfamiliar with the foreign name. “Haemir? Who’s that?”

Vaeril did something unexpected then—he smiled. A soft, fond smile that held the faintest hint of sadness to it. “Haemir was my comrade in the army. We both served in the three-hundred year war. A country hick, really...he grew up on a farm. Weirdo was always talking about how much he missed his livestock.” Another chuckle, and he took a small sip of his ale.

“I had just denounced my claim to the throne. I wanted to completely distance myself from the royal lifestyle, and so I joined the military. Haemir and I were in the same training group. He was the sort that everyone liked—naturally cheerful with a knack for jokes. A ray of sunshine... and of course, this disgusted me. I was expectedly shunned for my heritage, so I spent most of the time alone to avoid being picked on. Haemir was so liked that I couldn’t help being jealous of him.”

*‘You’re awfully gloomy, you know that?’*

*‘Huh? Why do you care?’*

“He approached me after a particularly rough bullying incident. I was a bloody pulp at that point, bruised to all hell. He offered me a handkerchief with this infuriating look of pity on his face.”

*‘Your nose. Here.’* “He shoved it into my hands. I realized then that my nose was bleeding profusely... I’d expected him to leave, but he sat down next to me. Started blabbering about this and that, anecdotes about his animals and little sister. He’d done this for her, he said, to give her a better life. My perception of him began to change. He wasn’t some happy-go-lucky

idiot...at least, not completely. He had depth to him. In a way, that made me jealous too. Why did *he* get to have a perfect family, something to fight for other than selfishness? At first, I hated him. He represented everything I wanted but could never have.”

“As time went on, he insisted upon visiting me during free time, eating meals with me and pestering me endlessly. I don’t know when I started tolerating it, nor when that tolerance turned to an active desire to spend time with him. He saw me for more than my upbringing, and I began to see his cheerfulness as a strength. It felt like he was there to catch me whenever I stumbled. I had to grapple with feelings of inadequacy—how could I possibly deserve this kindness after abandoning my kingdom?” He put his glass down and sighed.

“We rose through the ranks side by side. Tensions began to escalate on multiple fronts; a dwarf army to the east and tribes of Dark elves up north. Scuffles broke out in neighboring kingdoms. We were dealing with enemies on all sides. I remember in the very heat of it, Faelyn was crowned. I don’t know why this bothered me more than the violence ever could, but it did. I felt sick.”

*‘Y’know... my Pa used to say something that’s always kinda stuck with me. In every sunset, there’s a promise of a new dawn. It sorta applies here, doesn’t it?’*

*‘That’s sappy.’* “I couldn’t help the frown on my face.” *‘How so?’*

“Haemir hesitated. It was the first time I’d ever seen him pause about something.” *‘Well... you seem convinced that your story is over. With Faelyn ascending to the throne and tensions rising between the kingdoms, you’ve been acting as though you feel there’s nothing left you can do. But... I think your influence here is far from over. You’re going to do great things some day, Vaeril. I just know it.’*

“We stood in a field of wildflowers. The sun was setting, and I remember being stricken with how very similar Haemir was to that blinding sun. His aura, his smile... It was all-encompassing. Cliche as hell, but it stuck with me.”

*‘See? You’re smiling! You know I’m right.’* “He grinned at me. The sight was indescribable. I remember thinking that I never wanted this light to go out. I’d do whatever I could to protect it.”



Nimiel's gaze shifted over to Lianthorn, who appeared atypically somber. "An incandescent soul, truly." He murmured as he watched the ale in his glass bubble. From the way they spoke about him, it was clear that something had happened to Haemir. She almost didn't want to know, though a part of her had already figured it out. That was what war did to people. She knew that better than anyone.

"Years passed. Haemir rose to the title of general, and I was promptly promoted to a colonel. Despite our paths splitting somewhat, we didn't drift apart. In fact, it felt like we were just growing closer. The more the battles raged on, the more bonded we became. We'd visit those fields whenever we each had the time, laughing about stupid shit and talking about our hopes for the future. He said he couldn't wait to see his sister, to embrace her. He wanted me to meet her."

Vaeril's smile fell. He clenched his fist, staring at the table. "We reached a truce with the dwarves. It felt like all of the fighting had paid off, years of battle finally coming to a peaceful end. At the treaty signing, everything was going well...almost deceptively so. *Too* well. I was careless, I didn't anticipate needing much backup. Haemir was ecstatic, and his happiness was infectious. I just...wasn't thinking. That's all it was. A momentary lapse in judgment. One that would alter the course of my life."



*'You've gotta keep going,'* "He said to me, riddled with shrapnel. It had been a trap. The Dark elves... they'd planted mines. By sheer luck I avoided the blast, but Haemir...didn't."

*'What the hell? Don't talk like you're gonna die, idiot. C'mon, we'll...'*

*'Vaeril.'* "His hand brushed away the tears on my face I didn't even know were there, and the fragility in his voice startled me." *'You've gotta keep going, you hear? Find your purpose. Find a nice girl. Have a bunch of bratty kids. Don't you dare give up.'* "He was fading, and

rapidly. I had my hands on his torso... I could feel the life seeping out of him. Nothing I did would stop the blood. There was just too much of it..."

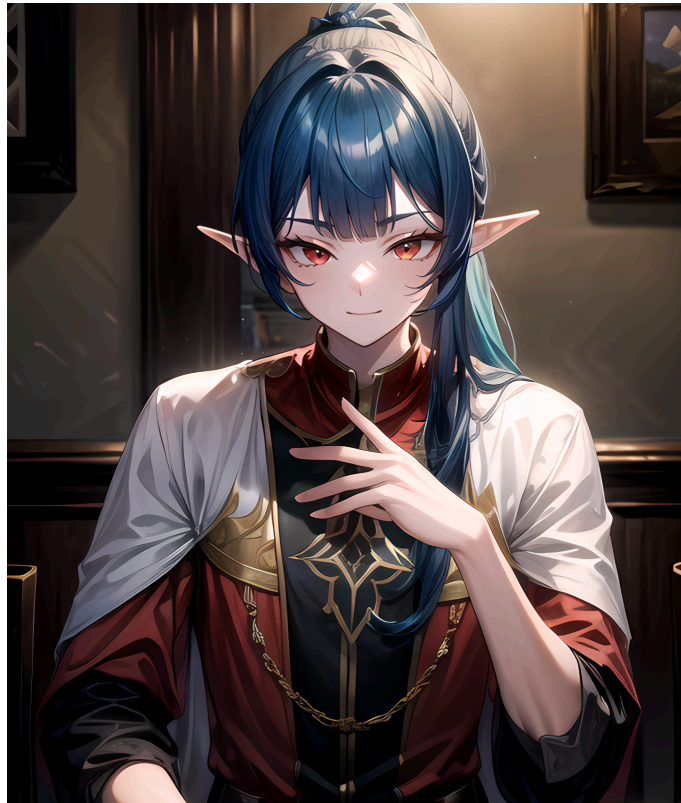
Vaeril's voice was trembling now. Nimiel was stunned. She'd never seen him like this before, gripped with so much emotion. Against her own permission, her eyes welled with tears. She scrubbed them away with one hand.

"We brought him to his farm, broke the news to his sister. There we had a funeral pyre, and I remember thinking as sparks rose into the sky that I'd do anything to exterminate the Dark elves. I hated them all with a passion I can't even describe."

She understood. She would too if she were in his shoes. She hated *herself* right now for daring to be born into such wickedness. How could she not? The sins of her people weighed heavily on her shoulders. They always had, even back when she was forced to do her father's dirty work. Each time, a little part of her died. How was there enough left now to love? How could she have expected Vaeril's feelings to change for her sole insignificant self? She stared at her lap, watching as tears dappled the fabric of her skirt. The silence was deafening.

"But..."

Nimiel flinched and lifted her head at the sound of Vaeril's voice.



"A certain little runt of an elf tried to kill me in my sleep one night. She was so god awful at it that I just had to take her in. She pissed me off at first, but over time... I came to like her." He reached out and grasped Nimiel's hand. "You paying attention, runt? You're not gonna get

any more sappy stuff out of me unless we get married...which we'll deal with when we get to it. This is it."

For the second time this evening, Nimiel was at a loss for words. Vaeril noticed and fixed her with a glower. Beside them, Lianthorn watched with a vaguely impish grin.

"And another thing!" He barked, face slightly tinged in crimson as he tried to avoid letting Lianthorn's smirk get under his skin, "Don't you go feeling all guilty, you hear? You haven't done anything wrong. I don't want you thinking I hate you. So—wait, why are you crying!?" The colonel was all of a sudden flustered and turning even redder. He was evidently embarrassed that his attempt at comforting her had elicited such a reaction.

"I do believe those are called 'happy tears,' Sir Vaeril," Lianthorn interjected in a way that would've been matter-of-fact if he weren't smiling so widely. "Miss Nimiel weeps because she is so overcome with relief, no?"

Nimiel nodded, laughing through her tears.

"Geez... you're such a crybaby." Vaeril muttered, looking away as he placed a hand on her head. Though he was gruff about it, his fingers stroked gentle movements through her fluffy hair. "I could never hate you, dummy. You're impossible to dislike."

"Here, here! A toast to Miss Nimiel's adorableness!" At first glance, one may think Lianthorn's chipper attitude was a result of alcohol consumption. But from what she knew of him, this was just par for the course. Giving another soft giggle, she raised her glass, nudging Vaeril with her elbow to get him to do the same.

"Here, here!"

— *an hour later* —

"Sir Vaeril, you are a terrible drunk. Did we not have this same discussion a month ago when you were lamenting over your bedroom predicament?" Lianthorn smiled grimly, putting a tired hand to his forehead as Vaeril downed another shotglass.

"I mentioned *marriage*, Lianthorn. *MARRIAGE!*" Nimiel had gone back to Vaeril's estate for the night, claiming tiredness and wishing he and Lianthorn a nice evening should they choose to continue without her. Lianthorn was content to head back to the shop, but Vaeril stopped him.

"Yes, and look how very happy it made Miss Nimiel! You did everything right in that interaction, and yet you still insist upon finding fault with yourself to the point of drinking. This is a nasty habit, my good sir, and you will be all the better once you forego it." His tone was disapproving, but he patted Vaeril's back sympathetically in spite of his distaste.

"I just... I love her so much..."

Lianthorn blinked. That was blunt. "Goodness me, this is the first time you've said the L-word out loud. And here I didn't think you capable. Good on you, Sir Vaeril!" He patted his back with a bit more force this time, beaming. "I know Sir Haemir would be proud of you, too. He told you to find a girl, yes? I reckon he's smiling at us from the great beyond—nay, I'm certain of it."

Vaeril seemed to sober up a little from that. He looked out the window, staring up into the sky just as Lianthorn was. "I sure hope so... It's already been a century since the funeral, huh? Time flies..."

The shopkeeper hummed thoughtfully. "I know so. He loved you, Vaeril, truly. He would be ecstatic to know you've found someone." He rested his elbows on the windowsill, sighing contentedly. "That she is someone with such a big heart, who openly wept hearing your story and can find goodness in even the grumpiest of souls, only adds to her allure. You are quite lucky, my friend. Do treasure her properly, now. You never know when you may lose her."

"Ah..." Vaeril's smile fell. He knew what Lianthorn was getting at. "...I suppose Clara is feeling the same, huh?" He mused. The shopkeeper nodded.

"Aye, my beloved surely watches us from above as well..." A pause. "...The life of a human is painfully fleeting, is it not?" Though he was smiling, his expression was unreadable. Who knew what he was thinking at that moment? He masked his emotions expertly.

"Yes..." And she had passed before he could create an immortality spell, dying of old age. Lianthorn had loved her through it all. Again Vaeril was reminded of just how *wise* Lianthorn was, and how much of that wisdom came from a place of loss and pain. To watch his beloved wither and die, unable to do anything to stop the cruel passage of time...it was truly tragic.

"Hey, uh..." He hesitated. "I'm sorry for calling you a lunatic all the time. I know you're secretly sagacious as hell, it just slips my mind because you're so..."

"Theatrical?" The mirth had returned.

"Yeah." Vaeril laughed.

They stared at the stars again, a silence falling between them for a time. When they ultimately parted ways, the sky had darkened into a great rainstorm, as though Haemir himself was weeping tears of joy from the heavens.

...or maybe he was just trying to get him and Nimiel together, Vaeril thought dryly, as he came home to find her curled up in his bed. How vexing.

"That scared of storms, huh?" He murmured softly, sliding her sleeping form to the side as gently as possible so he had room to get under the covers beside her. Once there, he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her forehead.

"G'night, runt." His voice was a calm whisper heard by no one, "Love you."