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IT WAS ALMOST ONE YEAR TO THE DAY AFTER SHE BEGAN her search of the Elven histories that Aphenglow Elessedil found the diary.

She was deep in the underground levels of the palace, sitting alone at the same table she occupied each day, surrounded by candles to combat the darkness and wrapped in her heavy cloak to ward off the chill. Carefully she read each document, letter, or memoir in what had taken on the attributes of a never-ending slog. It was late and her eyes were burning with fatigue and dust, her concentration beginning to wane, and her longing for bed to grow. She had been reading each day, all day, for so long that she was beginning to think she might never see Paranor and her fellow Druids again.

It was dark each day when she began her work and dark when she ended it, and aside from an occasional visit from her sister or her uncle, she saw almost no one. She had read through the entirety of the histories, including their appendices, and had moved on to the boxes and boxes of other writings donated by prominent families over the years. These papers were intended to supplement, embellish, or correct what was considered the official record of a history that stretched back thousands of years. She had found little that she didn't already know or was in any way useful, yet she had persevered be-

cause that was how she was. Once she started something she did not give up until the job was finished.

And now, perhaps, it was. A diary, written by a young girl, a Princess of the realm living in the age of Faerie, had caught her eye just as she was on the verge of putting everything aside and going off to bed. It was buried at the bottom of a box she had finished emptying, small and worn and stiff with age, and she had glanced at the first couple of pages, noted the girlish writing and the nature of the entries, and been prepared to dismiss it. But then something had stopped her—curiosity, a premonition, a quirk in the way it was written, and she had paged ahead to the final entries to find something unexpected.

### 23, MONTH 5

*Something both terrible and wonderful has happened to me, and I can tell no one.*

*Today I met a boy. He is not of our people and not of our moral and ethical persuasion. He is a Darkling child of the Void, but he is the most beautiful boy I have ever seen. I am hopelessly in love with him, and even knowing that it is wrong of me to be so and that nothing good can come of it, I want to believe that it might be otherwise.*

*I was down by the Silver Thread, deep in the woods seeking bunch lilies and ardwed seeds for the shelter, when he appeared to me. He came out of the trees as if born of them, a lovely mirage given substance and form. So striking was he, so perfect. Blue skin (I have never seen such a depthless blue), golden eyes, hair of midnight black and stars, his voice as soft as the ending of a summer rain when he greeted me. I loved him at once, in that first moment. I could not help myself.*

*Even when I knew what he was and that he was forbidden to me, I could not turn away from him. I like to believe that there was something more than physical attraction that drew me to him. I had enough presence of mind to be able to warn myself against what I was doing. But after we talked and I heard what he had to say about himself and his people, I knew I could not change things. It is said that the most ancient of our race frequently found love at first sight and seldom*

*through lengthy consideration. Perhaps I am a throwback, for that is what happened with this boy and me.*

*We sat in a quiet glade and talked for hours; I cannot say for how long. By the time our encounter ended, twilight was approaching. I left him with a promise to meet again. No plans, no details, but I know it will happen.*

*I want it to happen.*

## 26, MONTH 5

*Today, unable to help myself, I returned to the forest to try to find him again. I was not back in the glade for more than the half split of an hour before he reappeared. Again, we sat and talked of our lives and our hopes for the future. I feel so free with him, so able to be open about my life. He is the same with me, and I am reassured that the love I feel for him is not built on a foundation of false expectations but on real possibilities. While the prohibitions cannot be changed, I see no reason why they might not be ignored for a time. So I tell myself. So I am persuaded.*

## 28, MONTH 5

*We met again today. Our conversations were of ourselves, but also of the strife between our peoples and the terrible toll it was taking on all our lives. He told me he did not see all of his people as bad or all of ours as good. It was not so simple in his eyes, and I was quick to agree with him. The war is ongoing, centuries old, a struggle that has its roots in the beginnings of all our Races and of the world itself, and it will not end in our lives. We are its children, but we feel so apart from the war when together and alone. If only we could keep it that way. If only we could shelter what we feel for each other so that no one could ever destroy it.*

*Before we parted, he told me how he had come to find me. He was delegated by his elders to spy upon the city from the particular vantage point into which I had ventured. He was not to interfere, only to observe and report. He hated what he was doing, but it was his duty and his parents would be shamed if he failed. Yet when he saw me, he found*

*he no longer cared about anything else. He had to reveal himself. He had to talk to me.*

*By now I am no longer thinking of anything but how to hold on to him, how to make him mine forever.*

**2, MONTH 6**

*When he came to me on this day, our first day of meeting in the new month, I gave myself to him. I did so freely and with great joy. We did not speak while it was happening, did not even pause to consider. We simply did what we had wanted to do from the first time we had met. It was so wonderful, and the feelings I experienced while in his arms are with me still and will be so forever. It was my first time, and he is my first real love. I could not ask for anything more wonderful. I have been made happy beyond my wildest expectations. Now that I have taken this final, irrevocable step, there is no going back, nothing more to consider.*

*I am his.*

**3, MONTH 6**

*We met again today. I couldn't help myself. Nor, I think, could he. We are so in love. We are so happy.*

**5, MONTH 6**

*Again. Another sweet time.*

**12, MONTH 6**

*Such agony! Mother kept me busy all this week with studies and housework, and I could not go to him even once. Today was our first time together again in an entire week. He says he understands, although it is hard for him, too. I will not suffer such separation again!*

**15, MONTH 6**

*Even three days is too long. I was in such despair, and he was so wild with worry and so in need when we met. Oh, how I love him!*

**17, MONTH 6**

*Just when I think matters have returned to normal and we will be left to our regular meetings, something else has intruded. I must go to visit my grandparents in the city of Parsoprey across the Dragon's Teeth and down onto the plains of the Sarain and so will be gone for two entire weeks. I cannot go to him to let him know—we are to leave at once! I think I shall die!*

**2, MONTH 7**

*Home again at last. I went straight to the glade and took him to our home and into my bed. It feels so right to have him there. I told him everything of where I had been and what I had been forced to endure and he, sweet boy, told me he understood and forgave me. He worried that I had forsaken him and would not return. But I would never do that. He must know this, I told him. I will love him until the day I die.*

**22, MONTH 7**

*I take him to my bed at every opportunity, no longer content with our time in the forest glade. I want him close to me. I want him with me always and constantly, but I must settle for what I can have. I choose times when I know the house will be empty. I live for those times. I am consumed by my need for them. I want them to go on forever.*

**10, MONTH 8**

*Today I did something that may have been foolish. I spoke of the magic that keeps the Elves safe. I revealed too much of what I knew in an effort to impress—though only after he had done so first, speaking of the magic that keeps his own people safe. We spoke in general terms and not of specifics, but I am troubled nevertheless. We spoke of magic in the course of our frequent discussions on how the war between our peoples might be brought to an end. If there were no magic, there might be less cause for fighting, we reason. He sees it as I do, and so we speak of it openly. It is only talk, and nothing much could come of it. When we are together, what does talk of magic and conjuring and endless conflict matter anyway? Nothing matters, save that we are together.*

*But now I wonder. Because even though we spoke mostly in generalities, I did once speak in specifics.*

*I told him about the Elfstones.*

“Aphen, are you still down there?”

She looked up quickly from the diary. Her uncle. “Still here,” she answered.

She shoved the diary under a pile of papers and took up something else as if she had been looking at that instead. She did so out of habit and instinct, aware not only that was she forbidden to remove anything from the archives but also that she was constantly watched in her comings and goings and never certain who it was that might be doing the watching. Mostly, it was Home Guards stationed at the top of the basement stairs, but it could be anyone. She liked her uncle and was close to him, but to the larger Elven community she had been a pariah for so long that she never took anything for granted.

A candle’s dim light wavered its way down the steps from the level above, and her uncle appeared out of the darkness. “The hours you keep, dear young lady, are ridiculous.”

Ellich Elessedil was the younger of the two brothers who had been in line for the throne many years ago and, to her mind, the one best suited to the task. But his older brother, her grandfather, was the one who had become ruler of the Elves on the death of their parents. Now her grandfather’s son, Phaedon, was the designated heir apparent and, as her grandfather continued to weaken from his chronic heart and lung problems, increasingly likely to be King soon. Aphen-glow’s mother was Phaedon’s much younger sister, and her refusal to become involved in the business of the court allowed Aphen-glow to remain comfortably clear of family and state politics.

Not as far clear as she would have liked, however. Her choice to become a member of the Druid order had put an end to that.

Her uncle took a seat on a stool she was using for stacking notes, moving the papers aside without comment. Though he was actually her great-uncle, Aphen found the designation awkward and called him simply Uncle, mostly as a term of endearment because they were so close. He was tall and lean and as blond as she was, although his

hair was beginning to go gray. "It's getting on toward midnight, you know. Whatever's keeping you here could wait until morning."

She smiled and nodded. "Nothing's really keeping me. I just lost track of time. Thank you for rescuing me."

He smiled back. "Find anything of interest today?"

"Nothing." The lie came smoothly. "Same as always. Every morning I think that this will be the day I discover some great secret about the magic, some clue about a lost talisman or a forgotten conjuring. But each night I return to my bed disappointed."

He looked around the room, taking in the shelves of books and boxes, the reams of papers stacked in their metal holders, the clutter and the scraps of documents and notes. "Perhaps there is nothing to find. Perhaps all you are doing is sorting documents that no one but you will ever read." He glanced back at her. "I'm not trying to discourage you, not after all the work you've put in. I am only wondering if this is a fool's errand."

"A fool's errand?" she repeated. Her blue eyes flashed. "You think I may have spent the last three hundred and sixty-four days on a fool's errand?"

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "That was a poor choice of words. Please forget that I spoke them. I don't know enough about what you are doing to be able to question it with any authority. I only ask because I care about you."

"You know why I am here, Uncle," she said quietly. "You know the importance of what I am doing."

"I know that you *believe* it to be important. But if there is nothing to find, if there is no magic to be found, no talismans to be recovered, then what have you accomplished?"

"I will have made certain of what you clearly suspect," she answered. "I will have eliminated the possibility that something has been missed. A lot of time has passed and a lot of history been forgotten or lost. We are an old people, after all."

He shrugged, leaning back on the stool. "Old enough that we are no longer the people we once were and probably never will be again. We have evolved since the Faerie Age. We do not rely on magic as we once did—or certainly not the same kinds of magic. We share the

world now with other, different species. The Faerie that served the Void are locked away behind the Forbidding. Now we have humans to deal with instead, a less imaginative people, and the need we once had for protective magic no longer exists.”

She gave him a look. “Some might question that. Grianne Ohmsford, for one, if she were still alive.”

“Yes, she probably would. After all, she was the Ilse Witch.”

“She was also Ard Rhys of our order after that, and she saved us all from the very humans you seem to think we no longer need protection from.” She sighed. “Listen to me, engaging in a meaningless argument with my favorite uncle. To what end? Let’s not quarrel. I have a job to do, and I intend to do it. Maybe I won’t find anything. But I will make certain of that before I return to Paranor.”

Her uncle rose, nodding. “I wouldn’t expect less of you. Will you take dinner with us tomorrow night? You might enjoy a real meal for a change. Besides, Jera and I miss you.”

Her aunt and uncle lived in a cottage just outside the palace grounds, preferring to distance their personal lives from his work as a member of the Elven High Council and adviser to his brother. For as long as she could remember, they had chosen to forgo the benefits they could have enjoyed as members of the royal family.

She gave him a warm smile, standing with him. “Of course I’ll come. I miss you, too. And I promise not to forget this time, either.”

He reached out and took her hands in his. “Whatever anyone else tells you, I am proud of the work you are doing with the Druid order. I don’t think you betrayed anyone by accepting their offer to study with them. The betrayal would have been to your own sense of right and wrong had you refused. I will say, however, that when this task is done, perhaps you will think about staying in Arborlon for good.”

He squeezed her hands once, and then turned and started back for the stairs, candle in hand. “Good night, Aphen. Get some sleep.”

She watched until the candle had flickered out of sight and sat down again quickly. Digging under the papers where she had hidden it, she retrieved the diary.

She opened it and began to read anew.

**14, MONTH 8**

*Something terrible has happened, something that changes everything. He has told me he has been ordered to return to his home in Rajancroft by week's end. His term of service as a watcher is complete. He wants me to go with him. He said it was necessary if we were to be together. My people might not accept him, but his would accept me. His Darkling clan is less disposed toward the exclusion of other Races, and I would become his bride and his people would embrace me. As I listened to him, I felt such a deep, abiding panic at the thought of leaving Arborlon and the Elves that I could barely breathe. I asked him not to speak of it again; I told him we must find another way.*

**17, MONTH 8**

*It seems I know him less well than I believed. He is proud and insistent, and he has refused to change his mind. I must go with him, he tells me. It is our only chance for happiness, our only way to make a life. We could not keep meeting secretly forever even if he were allowed to stay on. Someone would find us out eventually. His recall merely requires that we act sooner rather than later. I must delay no longer. I must go with him.*

*To my surprise and consternation, I found I could not agree to this. I want to be with him, but I cannot leave my home and my people. I told him so. I begged him to reconsider. I pleaded. If we could not be together as often, we would simply be together when we could. But even as I spoke the words, I could detect in his expression his refusal to accept this and I knew he would never be satisfied until he took me away.*

*What am I to do? I know I am going to lose him and cannot bear it. Please, let him see reason! Please, let him stay!*

**18, MONTH 8**

*I am ruined. I am the most wretched and miserable creature alive. I have betrayed everyone by my foolish, selfish behavior, and I cannot begin to imagine the price that others will pay because of it.*

*My boy is gone. My beautiful, wonderful lover and friend has abandoned me and perhaps worse. I do not know what I should do. I am reduced to writing down what has happened in an effort to under-*

*stand. But perhaps I only delay the inevitable recognition that in the end nothing can be done.*

*Earlier today, we met for the last time. I took him to my room and to my bed and spoke the words I thought I would never speak. I told him I could never leave my people and we must end our assignations and our hopes for a future life. What he wanted, I had already refused him. What I wanted, he would never accept. What point in continuing what was clearly doomed?*

*I did this in a misguided effort to change his mind, hoping that the prospect of losing me would be as painful for him as it would for me to lose him. I did so out of desperation but also with an understanding that when I told him I could not leave my home and my people, I was telling him the truth.*

*Amid tears of despair and hurt so deep I thought I would never be well again, we coupled a final time, and then he left me in my bed, sated and sleeping and thinking that perhaps I had won my victory and he would stay.*

*I was wrong. I had won nothing. He did not leave the house when he left my bed. What he did instead is the cause of my humiliation and despair. Because he was a Darkling, I knew he had use of magic. Because I loved him, I never asked its nature. It seemed irrelevant to our relationship and to our love. I knew it was there; I did not care that it was.*

*But when I woke later that afternoon, I found a note lying next to me. It read thus:*

*I cannot give you up.  
You must come to me.  
Use these Elfstones to find me  
And to reclaim the other stones  
Which I hold hostage.  
I love you that much.*

*Lying beneath the note were the three blue Elfstones, the seeking-Stones of the five precious sets.*

*I rushed at once to where my father kept the Elfstones hidden and*

secured, dreading what I might find. Releasing the locks embedded in the stronghold by using the words of magic with which they were imbued, I discovered to my horror that my Darkling boy had not lied. The Elfstones were gone—all but those three he had left me.

At first, I did not understand. That he was gone and asking me to come after him was clear enough, the rest less so. The implications of his wording were dark and dangerous; I was unsure of what conclusion to reach. Had he taken the Elfstones only for the purpose of persuading me to follow him, or had he stolen them for a different reason entirely—to aid his people, to give them the magic they lacked as servants of the Void? The first bespoke a rash and desperate act. The second was purposefully evil. I could not believe that of him. But if I were wrong, what then? What did he know of the Elfstones? Did he know that he could not use them—that none of his Darkling kind could? Did he realize that it required a true Elf to make the magic come alive? Did he know that the Elfstones must be freely given if they are to serve the holder?

What was the true reason he had taken them?

I had told him nothing of where they could be found or how to get to them. Of that much, I was certain. Yet somehow he had known. How much more did he know of which I was unaware? How much that I thought I knew about him was false?

I am made very nearly hysterical by my uncertainty. I cannot see how to resolve the matter in any way that is satisfactory. I cannot go to him not knowing the truth about his intentions. How can I be certain of what he has planned? Has he betrayed me or does he honestly think that this theft will bring me to him?

If he is the boy I think he is—the one I fell in love with—it is the latter. But why hasn't he trusted me if what he wants is for us to be together? Why has he resorted to this desperate act? Surely he realizes the position in which he has put me? Does he think I can escape the blame that will attach for his theft or do I no longer matter to him?

What am I to do?

## 25, MONTH 8

Days have passed since I have written here, my thoughts too poisonous to be recorded. I have told no one of what has happened. Those who

*need to know will find out the truth soon enough. But not yet, it seems, for I have heard nothing of the theft. I know where he has taken the Elfstones, but I cannot think how I should go about getting them back.*

*So I wait. I sit for hours thinking on what I must do. The longer I deliberate, the less clear my course of action becomes. In spite of what I feel for him, I cannot trust my emotions to guide me. I must find a way to set things right, and to do that I need to make certain that my failures of judgment will not bring harm to my people. It is bad enough that my parents should suffer for my transgression; it is unbearable to think that the Elven people should pay for my foolishness, as well.*

*Perhaps even with their lives.*

*I could not bear that.*

## 28, MONTH 8

*I know now what I must do. I have considered long enough. I must risk all and use the blue Elfstones to go in search of the others and of my Darkling boy. I must know the truth about him, and I must set right what he has made wrong. I leave in the morning with a small contingent of Elven Hunters, having given my father a false story of what I intend—a fresh transgression added to the others. But what is one more by now?*

## 24, MONTH 9

*I have returned empty-handed. In the course of my search, I found neither the Elfstones nor the boy. No amount of effort or use of magic could help me recover my treasures. It is as if they have vanished off the face of the earth. Inquiries yielded nothing. Someone may know what has become of them, but no one is saying. I have given the blue Stones back and admitted all. I am disgraced and undone.*

*Yet events conspire to make possible a chance for redemption, and I will take the chance offered. Perhaps history will remember me for doing what was right and so provide me with a measure of grace.*

*I beg your forgiveness, my dearest Mother and Father. Let no one accuse Meresch and Pathke Omarosian of not sufficiently loving and embracing their wayward daughter. Let it be known here, in these*

*pages, that I will treasure forever the life I have shared with you. If you should read this, as one day I hope you will, be not sad for me. Be happy that I have found peace. I have found my second chance and I go now happily to embrace it.*

*All Honor, Your Daughter Aleia*