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The Atara-Orn

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"Atara?" the girl cried. Her large ice-blue eyes searched through the dark trees, frantically shifting from one area of dense underbrush to another. "Mother?" Her heart pounded, sounding out like a large drum in her elongated ears. She forcibly willed away the tears welling up in her eyes. It’s no use getting upset, she told herself, Atar says that the calm helps more than human-like impatience. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and held it, intent on listening to her surroundings.

Beyond the ambiance created by the nightlife of the indigenous creatures among her, she heard small, tinny voices whispering in a dialect she could not quite make out. Her eyes snapped open. The faeries! Of course! She secured her bow to her back and ran for the large withered willow tree to the North. The Mother-tree, the Elven Atara-Orn, would have answers.

As the girl neared the tree, she noticed several balls of glowing blue fire following her approach. She slipped a smile, despite her increasing anxiety in her search. She stopped and leaned down to stare at one. Inside the circle of floating blue light hovered not fire at all, but rather a tiny humanoid figure, smiling while its small wings fluttered like a hummingbird.

"Ask the Mother," it whispered in a strange language that the girl had to slowly translate as she mentally sifted through the languages her father had taught her. Sylvan, she thought, it is the language of the forest, why wouldn’t the pixie speak it?

“But how did you...”

The pixie grinned at her and flew up higher to meet the girl on eye-level. “Childe, the Mother knows all that happens in her forest,” it explained in Elvish. “She will know of the one you seek.” The blue pixie giggled, emitting a sound like dropping coins into a pool of water, deep and yet incredibly sharp. It
buzzed in a loop around the girl's head once and flew off toward the willow tree.

The girl nodded her thanks and continued forward. The Atara-Orn sat upon a short incline, barely enough to be a hill, roots covered in tall deep-green grass. The dirt path the girl followed soon turned into an elaborate walkway with smoothed down ground lined with river-polished rocks. Her feet crunched on the dry earth as she continued. The withered face of the tree was gnarled with holes in the pattern of a very rudimentary and old face. The tree's smile sent a shiver down the girl's spine. Is this really going to tell me what I need to hear?

She kneeled into a reverent bow and waited for the Atara-Orn to acknowledge her. A great rumble sounded from in front of her and a husky voice, in the same strange woodland dialect as the pixie, called out: "What seems to be troubling you, Childe?"

The girl took a heavy breath before beginning to speak. "Mother of my father...of all," she replied in the tree's dialect with a slow but carefully imitated tongue, "I seek those who disturb your Elven children. Those who would wish to control your forest..."

"Is that...what you truly seek, Saffron?"

The girl's head flew up and she faced the withered tree. "I..."

"Childe, I see and hear all in this forest..."

"They took my mother," Saffron replied, cutting off the willow's long-winded speech. She did not have much time.

The air around her grew frigid and the gnarled face of the tree seemed to frown. "To the East," it whispered. "Tread lightly and run quickly, daughter of Sunbow. Anoron's time grows faint."

Saffron's ice-blue eyes grew wide as she sat for a moment, stunned.

"Now!" The ground underneath her gave a slight shake, and she wasted no time jumping to her feet and running to the East. Saffron's long, wavy blonde hair flew behind her as she dodged around one tree and jumped over the low branches of another. She took no notice when the locks found themselves entangled in small branches. She kept running, taking the foliage with her.

Saffron neared a small clearing in the darkened wood and slowed her pace. As she slowed her breathing, she detected faint voices, and the creak of a bowstring. She unfastened her own from her back and slid an arrow out of its quiver and aimed toward the noise. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the voices.

"This is where we finally say goodbye, Anoron," a deep, delicate voice spoke in Elvish. Mother? What is going on? she wondered. Saffron heard the bowstring draw tighter.

Furrowing her brow, she released her arrow. Its dull wet thud was received with a startled scream. Saffron's eyes fluttered open and she ran forward. Upon entering the small clearing, ground glowing silver from reflected moonlight, her jaw dropped and she fought back tears. On the ground lay a sputtering elf, gasping for his last breaths, sucking in air to fill the void around his pierced heart. A heavy amount of blood had begun to pool around the wound. Saffron's face scrunched and she quickly looked away. On the other side of the clearing she spotted two dark figures running into the wood for cover. Her fingers on her bow twitched, but a cough from the nearby ground distracted her. Looking further to her side, she recognized the prone body of a short female elf, her dark hair splayed on the ground haphazardly. The woman lay on her side, clutching a large gaping wound in her groin. Blood pooled and had begun to congeal on the ground beside her. Anoron Sunbow lay, seized into a fetal position, skin growing pale from anemia.

Ignoring the male elf's hacking death rattle, she rushed to the bleeding form of her mother. She kneeled down and took her mother's body into her arms. "Atara, you're bleeding," she whispered.

The older elf in her arms smirked before her face contorted momentarily with a light groan. Her eyes slowly opened, and Saffron noticed that they had started to glaze over. Can she even see me? Does she know who came for her? Saffron pondered.

"Saffron, I never intended this for you," Anoron said with a weak sigh.

"Intended what?" Saffron asked off-handedly as she searched for her mother's wound. She found her mother's hand clutching at a puckered hole from what she assumed was a
brushed her mother's hand away and replaced it with firm pressure from her own, hoping to stop the flow of crimson liquid.

A hand lightly stroking the side of her face distracted her for a moment and she looked back at her mother's face.

"Saffron, you cannot save everyone. Death is a natural part of life, my darling tinu, and it is simply my time to face the opposite gift."

Saffron stopped trying to hold back her tears. "Atara, who did this?"

Anoron smiled at the question and shook her head. "Concern yourself not with revenge, Saffron. It does not become our kind."

"Anoron?" a voice cried in the distance. Saffron instantly recognized it as that of her father.

"This way, Atar!" Saffron called back. She heard footsteps through the dense underbrush of the West. A few moments later, a tall blond elf emerged; although he looked older than his daughter, his face revealed no age.

The elf's eyes widened at the sight of his mate in his daughter's seemingly frail arms. He knelt down in the same fashion as Saffron on the opposite side of his dying lover. Worry was etched around his large blue eyes as he stared in mute horror. "Anoron... what happened?"

The female coughed and reached up to her husband's face. Her right hand, the one formerly clutching her own side until Saffron had dutifully replaced it, left a deep red stain upon his cheek, but he noticed not and reached out to grasp it in his own as it fell back down to the moonlit grass. "The anger we thought we left behind when I ran away from my family never ceased, Faran."

Saffron sat back, holding her mother until her father nodded and took Anoron into his own arms. Salty tears left trails down her face as she watched, helpless, her mother fade. "Anoron, they can never be forgiven for this," Faran replied, hugging the female's increasingly limp body to his own.

"They must be," she gasped. "No more fighting. There has been enough blood spilt tonight."

Faran looked up from his wife to Saffron, almost pleading for a different answer. Saffron's eyes never left the ground. "Anoron, you cannot mean that..."

Her free hand rose and she pressed a finger to his lips. "Stop. I love you both far too much to see this continue," she answered with a forcible cough. A light smatter of blood graced her paling lips. She clenched her face in pain and Faran pulled her closer. Saffron sat silent.

A heavy sigh escaped Anoron's lips and her body went cold. Saffron stood as her father placed the body lightly to the ground. A tear fell as he whispered, "Amin meli, and rose. "Atar..." Saffron whispered, "I couldn't... she..."

Faran Sunbow's head rose as he directed attention from his mate to his daughter. He walked over to her and clutched her into a tight hug. "Tinu, this was not your fault."

"Then why does it hurt so much?" she asked, muffled by the embrace.

Faran's gaze rose from the crest of his daughter's head to the body of the male elf that lay at the edge of the clearing, arrow still protruding from his heart. "You did what you could, Saffron. That is all anyone could ever ask of you."

My mother died forty years ago. Over half of a human lifespan. The pain never really healed, but I suppose things like that hardly ever do. I had been too young to understand at the time, what my mother's death really meant... what death itself meant. My father took it much harder than I did. He, unlike his sapling of a daughter, understood the finality of death, and the mortality it represented. Faran Sunbow, son of the hunters of the Swallowed Oak Forest, and his family were supposed to live in the halls of his ancestors for ages beyond recognition, untouched by such human emotion. But his plan had been ruined by one thing he did not intend.

Safety was never a guarantee.

This had been assured by my mother Anoron, daughter of Snake Forest elves, and her uncharacteristic impetus to escape with my father to his homeland. She was "safer" there, away from the crime, the disease, the poverty, and the squalor caused by men who dared to call themselves elves—men who gave up their immortality and ethereal roots for greed and power. Elves do not care for power; we care about peace.
At least, that’s what my father had always taught me. Bloodshed is not appealing. There is life in everything, and life itself is to be cherished. This I understood forty years ago. However, my life had never been touched by death, except in the necessity of the hunt. And that was all that hunting was: a necessity. Death of intelligent life, humans, and especially elves, seems to hit harder. The food chain only reaches up so high on a very rare occasion. My father, however, had witnessed the death of his own sire, though under more natural circumstances than my dear mother. He knew that with the hunt, the prey would fight back. And the predator was not always the victor.

My mother told me once that she could hear my father’s voice on the wind. I told her that he wasn’t dead and that couldn’t be possible, but she simply smiled and told me that I would understand with time. He whispered tales of love, longevity, and family... everything my mother had always wanted and never had witnessed. I understood why my mother adored her husband. But what had attracted him to her—the daughter of elves no longer caring for the roots he so firmly believed in and fought for—still continues to perplex me. I never have asked. I understand that he still pines over her, and he wanders his forest, forever lonely, gripped evermore by the pain of losing nearly everything he loved. Perhaps it had been her beauty and innocence among such squalid conditions, but only in part. I think it was more likely that he wanted to save her, like he strove (and still does) to save everything.

My mother told me that night that I couldn’t save everything. There in that one moment lay her contrast to my father’s everlasting wish. Had they ever had the same conversation? Undoubtedly. But I also doubt that Faran had seriously listened. He longed for ideals and Anoron represented the discouraging fact that his visions were simply that. Ideal.

My father’s beautiful, ethereal face forever hardened that night, some 40 years ago, and he never truly recovered. The glow waned. He played the role well, but I suppose that if life is to be everlasting in his forest, so will the grief that follows his ideal’s antithesis. Anoron had been Faran’s brilliant dawn. He was her hunter, the protector of his personal sunrise—her Sunbow.

And Saffron, well, she represented the golden glow that
the forest itself, finding ways in which to hide more efficiently, track more carefully and accurately, and finally when all else failed, to seek the advice from the trees themselves.

His jaw nearly fell to the ground when I told him about the Atara-Orn.

Apparently, as he told me that day when I informed him of this, speaking that immediately to so powerful an entity was a rare gift. “Blessed” is what he called it.

“Saffron, you need to calm your breathing more before you take a shot. It’s throwing your arrows off center,” Faran lectured, standing behind his daughter as she drew her bow.

She gave a slight nod before taking a deep breath and slowly releasing it. She released the arrow. About fifty yards ahead hung a makeshift target in a large oak tree. The force of the arrow sent it swinging wildly back and forth, but one thing was apparent to Faran. Saffron’s arrow pierced the center.

He smiled and squeezed her shoulder as she exhaled and lowered the bow. “Better. Remember to take your time with your targets when you can. Patience is what separates us from the hasty lives of mortals.”

“Atar?” Saffron asked, turning around and staring her father in the face. His thin aquiline face was etched with puzzlement.

“What happens when I don’t have time for patience?”

He smirked. “Then you make real use of those eyes I gave you.”

She looked up at the elf whose features resembled hers in a nearly identical manner. “But what if…”

Faran laughed. “So many ‘what ifs!’ Tinu, trust your instincts, that’s what they’re for.”

Saffron smiled slightly, but the look of confusion remained.

“But what do I do when eyes, and ears, and nose alone are not useful?”

“Saffron, they’re always useful.”

She nodded. “I understand that, Atar, but the senses can be betrayed.”

He smiled. “You’re picking up quickly, Tinu. What you should hope then is that you’re not fighting alone.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Faran sat down on a large rock next to his daughter.

“For ages it had been the duty of our family to protect those who may not be able to protect themselves, Saffron…”

“Lot of good that did…”

Silence was held in the stagnant air for a moment before Faran replied. “Saffron, that was not anyone’s fault. Your atara died because of the malicious intent of men posing as elves. We did what we could. One event should not skew your morals so. I know you wish you could have saved her, just as I do, but the past is unchangeable. Hold her in your memories, but do not let this overshadow you.”

Saffron nodded. “Yes, Atar.”

Faran nudged his head back to the now still target hanging in front of the pair. “Now I want you to try it again.”

Saffron nodded and turned around, drawing her bow.

My father taught me a valuable lesson that day. One does not have to fight alone, but I should always be capable to do so. And if there are not other people around, I could always rely on nature. Because of the longevity of elves, it was not uncommon for children to be put out on their own to complete the learning process of their trade, if this was necessary. There must have been an incredible amount of trust between my parents to have my father gone on so many quests as he was when I was very young.

It wasn’t long before my father sent me out on my own. He told me that I had learned all I could from him and our city for the time being, and that he thought it more beneficial to send me out alone for a few years. Upon the eve of my leaving, I walked into my bedroom and found his bow laid gracefully on my bed with a note.

“Saffron, my darling tinu, this is the hardest time for any parent, but I know that with this gift you’ll be much safer than with your trainer. The bow belonged to my father, and his father before him. This has been a tradition in the Sunbow family for centuries. It comes from a branch of the Atara-Orn and has been cherished among her children as a weapon against oppression. I trust you will use it well, Saffron, and that it will bring you home safely.”
That had been only thirty years ago, though it seems like an eternity since I've seen home. I hope Atar isn't too worried. Is he doing all right alone?

For years I wandered my own forest, living on my own hunting skills, and having conversations with the faeries. I kept hoping they would bring news of the same men, or cohorts of, who had been responsible for my mother's death. Despite my mother's chiding that day, my bow fingers itched at the thought of final vengeance. I couldn't ever call it lonely, per se, but I do miss the sunlit halls of my family home. I lived alone like this until one day (I suppose it was about five years ago) the faeries alerted me of a poaching expedition in the nearby wood of Firesbane. My father had told me it was my duty to protect those who could not protect themselves.

I was on a mission.

The bitter cold nipped at Saffron's skin through the gaps in her armor as she trekked through the frostbitten forest of Firesbane. She had run across a group of dead explorers that she could only assume to be the poachers that she had heard about from the faeries. Strung around the camp had been large amounts of strangely colored gray bark that Saffron recognized as matching the surrounding trees.

Was that what they had been looking for?

The bodies, Saffron noticed upon further inspection, had been torn apart at the neck, but were otherwise unmarred. She salvaged the unused arrows from their equipment and followed the light footprints they had made in the snow.

Several yards ahead, she saw a sawed down tree with much of its bark stripped. She nodded to herself, noting she had gone in the right direction. However, she noticed a second set of footprints that were too small to belong to a human. Paw prints. They soon met up with the long human strides, and followed the trail she had just come from.

Deciding to follow the paw prints instead, she changed direction. She ambled through the snowy wood and the bitter cold, finding it hard, even with her enhanced eyesight to make out much of her surroundings through an increasing white fog.

Saffron heard a low growl in front of her and she stopped. She dropped down on her knees, and through the fog, saw a feral gray wolf stalking up to her, still growling and baring its long white teeth, still dripping with fresh blood.

Saffron stared the wolf in the eyes. “Easy boy, I'm not here to hurt anything,” she whispered as it neared. She took a cautious half-step forward. The wolf backed away. Saffron frowned. Had it understood her? Remembering that Elvish may still have sounded foreign to the creature, she tried to recall the words in Sylvan, the language of the wood creatures, which might calm the creature down. “I'm not like the men,” she said. “I'm not trying to hurt anything.” The wolf cocked its head slightly and whimpered. It took a step closer.

Saffron smirked. “What's your name?” she asked the wolf. It took another step forward and buried its nose in the snow. Saffron reached out and petted it on the snout. It snuggled into her warm hand and she moved up to between its ears.

“Snow?” she asked it. The wolf didn't respond and only encouraged more of her coddling. Saffron sat down and continued to pet it. “How about 'Losse?’”

Losse shrugged off Saffron's hand and began to sniff around, and led her further into the forest. She assumed the wolf approved.

My father had been right. I didn't have to fight alone. Losse has accompanied me for the last five years, and does still, even now as I sit in this rented room in the port town of Stillwater. I arrived yesterday, traveling away from my beloved forests on a random tip that there may be elves here that could direct me to my mother's vengeance. Though, I'm coming to an increasing awareness in the last thirty years since leaving home that my father's “duty” to punishing the oppressive is far more appealing than hunting. But if I come across those pseudo-elves, I do not think that my morals will get the best of me. Mother's warning or not.