

Home

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Lili smiled as the party reached the edges of the forest. Though she had been born in Landeschne and would always think of it fondly, Forahbainn was where she had been raised, where she had finally been allowed to be herself. This was the land she considered home.

Halting her horse, she leapt down, stripped off her shoes and socks, and stretched.

"Your maj- my lady," said Stephan, one of the guards her niece had sent back with her. "We're supposed to be keeping you safe. Shouldn't you stay with us?" The poor boy seemed to still be adjusting to the fact that she was no longer queen regent, she thought, then noted that the elves' sense of aging had rubbed off on her more than she'd thought. No doubt that had been helped by her own slow aging: she was getting into her seventies, but still had the body of one a third her own age. *Must come with being elf-born, I suppose.*

Eldrin, an elf of six-hundred and something whom King Adair had assigned as both her personal bodyguard – not that she needed one – and as an advisor, raised an eyebrow at Stephan. "You think Lady Lili of all people would need protection in this forest?"

Stephan frowned. "Queen Eleana said—"

"To keep me safe, yes, I know," she said, stowing her footwear in the satchel on her horse's flank. "But more to pacify those pious old fools than for actual protection, or did you forget why I grew up here?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, then looked away awkwardly. "I beg your pardon, my lady."

Lili dismissed him with a wave, then turned to Eldrin. "Tarian's party should be just south of us by now, right?"

Eldrin nodded. "Shall you run ahead to meet them?"

Lili grinned and turned. "Nope. Only him," she said, then sprinted off. The rough dirt of the foothills quickly gave way to a carpet of soft grass and crunching leaves. The humans – *Now there's an elven thought*, she laughed inside – could keep their stifling silk and velvet get ups, their stone castles, and especially that horribly stiff throne. All through her reign she had pined for cities of trees, the pervasive rustling of leaves in the wind, the sweet, crisp air of the forest that she now took a deep lungful of. *This* was home.