

Festival of Lanterns

Rienle stuck out like a sore thumb from the people around her, even if she had toned down her look, during her travels towards the Lenorian village she was sent ahead to. She kept her long, dark hair in a braid with golden threads and light blue crystals woven into it and had also changed from her non-existing pieces of clothing to more covering options as the nights grew colder. She envied the body sorcerer's ability to control their temperature as she wrapped a heavy pelt around her shoulders.

She could still vividly remember her first steps into the foreign country. A small village barely across the border from her beautiful Javenna which was a key point for the traders going further into the warm deserts of her home land. She had looked upon the Lenorian's curiously as she had only caught glimpses of them before.

She had not been able to say no when Lasidaari had asked of her to join her in her travels and be her personal scribe. Not only was this a great opportunity, but also a personal favor from a rising name within the higher circles of her people. She would continue learning from one of the local diplomats in the town as well and get to follow Lasidaari like a shadow and bask in her glory. She had heard how her new employer tended to give priceless gifts to those she liked as well and the golden threads in her hair were proof of a good start between the two women. Still she had felt slightly nervous as she had left her home.

When she was about to embark on her journey further into Lenori she had, barely, stood eye to eye with one of the strangest of creatures she had seen so far. A hairy and sturdy thing, much alike the bjurgs described to her in her opinion, that was meant to carry her the rest of the way, as the forest would be too harsh on her feet. Its large, fur covered tail kept on wagging as she studied the creature. The excitement was all but mutual.

"What is that thing?" Rienle asked with her hand covering her mouth and nose due to the strong, musky scent the creature released.

"Oh! He's an Erug! We call him Ember. He's quite energetic, but he's a real softie deep down." A man shouted back while tying some goods to the saddle of another, almost identical Erug.

Rienle simply gave Ember a confusing look. As she turned to ask the Lenorian another question she could feel the thing inch forward, reaching out its warm and wet tongue to lick her cheek. She let out a light shriek at the sudden touch, as she didn't react quickly enough to distance herself from the creature. The men simply laughed at the young woman as Ember nuzzled his snout against her neck, oblivious about the woman's discomfort.

The travel had been uncomfortable, cold and a bit of an agony for the Javenian woman. The Lenorians quickly got fed up with her love of comfort and their laughs slowly turned into bitter resentment at the woman's complaints. Rienle didn't mind the cold glares and whispered ill words around the campfire, but couldn't help feeling the isolation creeping up on her as she got further away from everything she had known. At the end of the journey the only thing that still showed any kind of pleasant feelings towards Rienle was Ember and as they reached the village she had not spoken a word for several days.

A Javenian diplomat clad in mostly Lenorian styled clothing welcomed her with open arms and quickly led her inside to be warmed by the fire, offering her food, drink and a bath to wash away the hardships of the travel. She gladly accepted his hospitality, already longing for some real company after so many days.

She decided to wear a light, slightly see-through dress as she returned to her host. The small bells around her ankle sang softly as she walked across the room, catching the attention of everyone in the room as always, and enjoyed the astonished and slightly unsettled whispers were exchanged between the other guests.

"Enchanting as always, Rienle. I must apologize for the crudeness of my residence, but the locals aren't much for the luxuries of life and decadence, my dear." the diplomat said while not being able to take his eyes off the woman. "It has been so long since I enjoyed the pleasantries of my country..."

Rienle didn't hesitate when stepping into the stranger's embrace and taking a light hold of his chin. Her body still radiated with warmth after the bath and she could see a pleasant blush spread across the diplomat's cheeks as she pressed herself up against him.

"I will gladly remind you of the fine things in this world" Rienle whispered as her gaze scanned the rest of the people in the room. Her eyes caught the sight of a young boy who had just stepped out of what seemed to be the kitchen and almost had dropped the tray of warm meat he was holding at the sight of her.

Rienle let out a light giggle before taking a step away from the diplomat's warm embrace. "Let's not be rude, introduce me! I want to know everyone before the night is over!"

It had now been a while since that evening. Rienle sat, alone, in her room on the second floor, watching the people pass by underneath her. She had quite a lot of duties to accomplish before Lasidaari arrived, but it all seemed so boring, so easy. Men would fall at the mere flick of her hair and she had quickly grown tired of it, even if it kept her bed warm.

She sighed, stepping up from her seat and throwing a poncho over her shoulders. It was a gift from a trader and kept her warm as the breeze grew chillier by the day. It was of simple craft and felt rough against her skin, but the locals seemed to give her much fewer amused looks as she passed by in that way. The Lenorians seemed also to have grown used to her walking around the streets as she enjoyed much less attention from the men and women around her as the days passed, much to her dismay.

She didn't like the feeling that had started to take a hold of her. She was not the kind to feel alone and longing for attention. In Javenna she had numerous friends and more than enough lovers, but here... no one seemed to actually care about her. They had even started to call her "Flickerling" after the small and colorful flowers that appeared as summer arrived. When she asked about it from the diplomat he said that the Lenorians considered it a weed to some extent as it had little use besides being beautiful.

"Watch out!" a voice shouted from behind her as she absent-mindedly walked forwards. Rienle stopped for a second, only to feel how arms wrapped around her. She was pulled down to the ground as the sound of an arrow went past her with a hiss, barely missing her, as it broke one of the gold chains in her hair on its way towards the target not too far behind her.

Rienle turned around towards her rescuer. She felt out of breath as she watched the young man lean over her and met his blue eyed gaze met hers. He sounded furious as he started to reprimand her.

"Are you stupid or something? Even the kids around here know to not just walk out into the archery range! Is there nothing but fluff between those shiny ears of yours?!" The youngling said with a sharp tone.

Rienle let out a light "hmpf" as she heaved herself up slightly, holding her face an inch away from the youngling's. She opened her mouth to answer, but the man cut her off before she managed to utter a sound.

“Don’t you dare start talking back to me missy, I know your kind. You’re all honeyed words and silver tongues, but don’t know the first thing about how real life works. You just keep your head in the clouds and think your tricks and magic can fix everything in the world. You don’t care about anyone else but yourself, if you even think that far.”

Rienle simply laid against the cold ground as she listened to the harsh words being thrown towards her. Her gaze flickered to the people walking past, who even though they seemed surprised by the commotion and noise, didn’t lift a finger to stop the boy from harassing her.

For the first time in her life Rienle felt truly helpless. She didn’t like it, not one bit... but the worst part was that according to these people, the people whom she had to work with and try to understand to create a prosperous relationship with for her and her country’s sake, shared the thoughts this boy was throwing in her face. She needed to do something about that.

“Well, you haven’t given me much of a chance have you?” She shouted back at him, cutting off his berating and making him go quiet for a second.

“What can you do then? All you do is talk fancy with people and do *stuff* with them.” The youngling said firmly with a slightly embarrassed tone in his voice.

Rienle looked around, trying to find a way to escape the situation. In desperation she pointed at the young woman who was still holding the bow that had released the arrow in her hands. If children could manage archery she could probably too. At least good enough to fool the boy for long enough.

“You? An archer?” the youngling said with an amused scoff. “Why don’t you give it a try then? Show us how good you are!”

Rienle realized her mistake very quickly as she had taken place at the end of the archery range and was holding the bow in her hands. As she had never held a bow in her life she couldn’t quite figure out how to nook the arrow in place. She tried her best to keep her composure as she studied the bow and tried to draw it back. She could hear the children starting to snicker and giggle the longer it took her to try figure out what to do.

“Your bows look so different to ours... I am also slightly out of practice...” Rienle explained nervously as she finally managed to somewhat draw the bow and keep the arrow in place, but as she released the string the arrow quickly dropped and slid against the ground. The children burst into laughter and she could hear one of them even topple over and fall to the ground.

Rienle felt how her cheeks started to go slightly red out of embarrassment. She started searching for words as she stood there, trying to find something to say to save her dignity.

“Not bad for someone who has never held a bow in her life!” The youngling said as he stepped in close to Rienle while picking up a new arrow. “Let me show you how it’s done.” He continued as he took a light hold of Rienle’s hand, positioning it correctly on the bow and instructing her as he showed her how to hold the arrow properly. He assisted her as she drew the bowstring back. The arrow flew across the clearing and stuck to the very edge of its target. Had she been a kinetic sorcerer this would have been an easy feat, as her sigils were of no use on such short notice.

Rienle smiled triumphantly, even if she had been assisted all the way through the badly aimed shot. “Hah! Did you see that? No tricks or magic involved.” she said confidently and looked at the Lenorian over her shoulder.

“You’ll need a lot of practice to be able to do it on your own though. Don’t celebrate too quickly Flickerling.” he answered with a grin. “Now go get ready, there’s a celebration tonight. You’ll probably need the rest of the day to prepare with all those fancy jewels and fabrics of yours.”

Rienle gave him a sly smile. “In that case you will see something I am much better at. Could you come get me when it’s time... Sorry, what was your name again?”

The Lenorian grinned and nodded. “The name’s Jarek. Just don’t think I’ll be a push over, Javenian.”

Night had already started to fall as Rienle finished touching up her makeup. She had chosen one of her more festive outfits for the occasion: a sky-blue silk dress that was loosely wrapped around her body and tied around her neck. Instead of a braid she had gone for an artistic up do with crystals and jewels embedded into it and long golden chains hanging down behind her ears and down on her chest. Her bare feet and legs were now covered in floral patterns that crept up under the hem of her dress, only reappearing as they ran down her arms.

A knock on the door to her room woke her up from her thoughts. She quickly got up on her feet and moved across the room, her hips lightly swinging from side to side as she went to open the door. As she opened it she felt her hands shake slightly. Why did she feel so nervous?

As expected it was the blue eyed Lenorian from earlier that had come to get her. He looked a bit cleaner and polished now though. His dark hair had been combed back and hidden under his

headwrap, a piece of bright green cloth with dark waves as a trim. He grabbed Rienle's hand without a word and started pulling her along after him.

"Hurry up, the others have already started." He said excitedly.

Rienle didn't really know whether she liked being the one pulled along or not for once. She was used to being the more active part who encouraged others, not the other way around. Sadly she had no idea where the festivities were held, so she had no choice but to follow the Lenorian.

The streets were already dark in the village as they rushed onwards. Their footsteps echoed off the walls as they made their way through the empty streets towards the edge of the village. As they got closer Rienle could hear music playing and a glow started to appear between the trees. The Lenorian stopped and stepped around Rienle with a wide grin as he covered her eyes with his hands.

"...what are you doing?" she asked with a giggle.

"It's not as fancy as the parties you are used to probably, so I'll at least try make it a surprise."

She could hear the youngling giggle behind her as he guided her forwards with light pushes and pulls. He kept a slow pace as the path they walked was quite uneven and roots crossed it quite often. She could hear loud voices and music getting closer as they slowly made their way forwards between the trees.

Rienle felt a slight warmth against her skin as they stopped. The sound of laughter and singing was overwhelming. The smell of smoke filled her nostrils, originating from a fire somewhere. The situation felt familiar, but still completely different to what she was used to. Even the atmosphere was different from back home.

"Alright. Let's see what you think of our traditions, Flickerling." The Lenorian said as he released his grip of her. "What do you think?"

As Rienle opened her eyes she was at first blinded by the amount of light in the small clearing. As she got used to it she started to distinguish what must have been hundreds of lanterns covering the whole clearing. A bonfire crackled warmly in the middle and a few smaller fires had been set up for cooking it seemed. People were gathered around tables, laughing and enjoying the company. Musicians stood on a makeshift stage at the opposite side and several people were already dancing in front of it. Rienle felt speechless. She could hardly believe these were the same people that she had seen on a daily basis. They were so happy, so warm and alive.

"This is unbelievable" she managed to mumble after a moment's silence. "...and very strange."

The Lenorian laughed as he stepped into the clearing, pulling Rienle along once again. Everyone seemed to greet them as they passed by with a wide smile. Rienle could feel the looks of everyone on her as her jewelry and body paint shimmered in the light that surrounded them, but for once she didn't feel any ill will from anyone.

“Now then, Flickerling, let's show you what true Lenorian hospitality is.”