

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Sevvi and Qyvern!

-x-X-x-

Over a dozen men and women, humans all, crouch in shadow at one end of the training yard. They wear black armor and concealing black masks, making identifying them all but impossible. Each holds at least one blade in their hands, with a few holding two.

Sevvi observes them from the sidelines, her arms crossed over her chest as the man standing beside her calls out.

“Again!”

In an instant, every single human shadowsteps across the length of the training yard, appearing at the other end where numerous target dummies are set up. Not enough for one apiece however, meaning some of them have to double that.

That shouldn't be a problem. Nor should 'killing' their targets considering they're both stationary and can't fight back. And to their credit, every single one of the humans manages to drive a blade home into one of the targets, so at least they can do that much right.

The problem lies in how slow they all are. They arrive at the end of their shadowsteps as lost as newborn babes, forced to spend a precious second and a half reorienting, checking their surroundings, and making sure they're not going to stab each other before going for the kill.

A whole second and a half that in a real battle would easily mean the difference between life and death. A whole second and a half that any one of her sister's warriors would use to kill them dead.

“Too slow.”

Spymaster Qyvern looks over at her words, silent for a moment before letting out a grunt of agreement.

“Reset! You all need to be faster!”

There are some groans from the assembled, even as they dig their blades out of the massacred training dummies and trudge back down the field. Funny, back when they'd started this training, half of them were using their Gift of Shadow to shadowstep back to the starting line after each go, showing off and being so very cavalier about things.

Now though... their exhaustion is starting to show. Good. The best progress is made when you find yourself pushing past your limits, at least in Sevvi's experience.

Soon enough, everyone is back in their places. The tension fills the air as they all hold their breaths, waiting for Qyvern to speak. Finally, he chops his hand down once more.

“Again!”

And again they go, stepping through shadow, appearing behind their targets, slashing and stabbing and lashing out. To the unpracticed eye, they probably look quite skilled, even. To your average noncombatant on the street, they would certainly be a terrifying sight to behold.

But to Sevvi, they're simply not good enough. Its unacceptable... but of course, she's not truly in charge here. She's merely here to advise. Fortunately, the man who is in charge shares her opinion.

“What the fuck is this?! Are you all grown men and women or are you toddlers? You think on the battlefield the Dark Elves are going to give you time to catch your bearings after every step you take? You think you're going to be able to slow down and get a view of the scenery?!”

There's some shuffling and shifting from foot to foot at that. But there's also some bristling. Sevvī tenses up as one of the trainees steps forward with a growl.

“Oi! We're fucking doing it, aren't we? We've been drilling this shit for hours! I'd say we're doing pretty damn good!”

Silence reigns for a long moment as the Royal Spymaster stares at the other man. Things are just starting to get awkward when Qyvern *moves*. Faster than any present save for Sevvī herself can track, the Spymaster throws out a blade. It whistles through the air, slicing past the malcontent's head by a hair's breadth rather than burying itself in his masked face.

At the same moment, Qyvern vanishes, shadowstepping forward and reappearing next to the target just in time to catch his own blade and slam it down into the top of the 'head'. He does the entire maneuver faster than any of these idiots have been able to do the far simpler step and stab so far today.

... It was rather needlessly flashy though, wasn't it? Sevvī wrinkles her nose, glad for her own concealing mask at this point. She's not wearing her maid uniform right now after all, but rather a brand new set of armor that matches the all black leathers that Qyvern and their trainees have on.

Her Dark Elf armor has been... put away for the time being, since it was considered 'needlessly provocative'. Suffice to say, Sevvī didn't mind... she wanted nothing to do with her people or her family at this point anyways.

Regardless, Qyvern isn't done. He points to her next, beckoning her over. Understanding what he wants, Sevvī shadowsteps to his side... and a moment later the two of them disappear together, only to reappear on the other side of the room. Then, just as everyone is starting to register their new location, Sevvī shadowsteps them again... this time into the air over everyone's heads.

They come down together on top of two of the training dummies, blades buried in their 'necks' and the dummies themselves fully taken to the ground, broken off of their bases.

Truth be told, she wouldn't have been able to do that quite so easily if Qyvern didn't also have the Gift of Shadow. However, she was getting stronger by the day and could now reliably shadowstep herself and Thomas at least three times back to back to back before her actions caught up to her.

Still, the showing is once again a bit flashy for her tastes... but it has the effect Qyvern is looking for all the same.

“Shit...”

“Fucking insane...”

“They moved so quickly...”

Murmurs rise up from the trainees, Sevvi's long ears twitching as she picks up their words. They're so easily impressed... but then, that was rather the point wasn't it? They needed to know what they were up against, what they were training for. Qyvern agrees, because he doesn't hesitate to back up his actions with a speech.

“I'm faster than all of you. And our resident Dark Elf is faster than me. So how fucking fast do you think our enemies are going to be?”

Absolute silence meets his question, but to be fair Sevvi is pretty sure it was rhetorical because Qyvern continues on after a rather short pause.

“I know half of you don't even want to be here. Pulled from your fucking cells just this past week. Maybe you're even thinking about running away and fleeing. You can certainly try... you might even succeed. Not because we couldn't catch you, but simply because you aren't worth the trouble.”

More shuffling and shifting about at that... along with some shared glances they think are 'subtle'. Sevvi holds back the urge to derisively snort. She knows of at least three of their so-called 'trainees' who want to desert at the earliest opportunity.

“Of course, the question becomes... where are you going to go? Thieves and brigands and criminals you might have been... but you know what you need for such ‘time-honored professions’ to exist? You need civilization. You need towns and villages and cities. You need *people*.”

He has their attention now.

“If the Dark Elves get their way, there won’t be anyone left. You can try running to the woods now. Might even survive. But this one’s sister isn’t just coming to wipe us all out. She’s coming to finish what she started. The Rotlands have already cut our Kingdom in half... once it encompasses everywhere humans have ever lived, what will you do then?”

Nobody has an answer for that. It’s something of an existential question isn’t it? This isn’t a war of conquest. It’s not a game anymore. Her sister isn’t playing to win at this point... she’s decided to wipe the board clean entirely. All because of Graelo.

Sevvi has to admit, even now she doesn’t fully understand Synestra’s fury. Oh, the results of it are plain to see... and she knows she seriously fucked up. But she doesn’t quite get why Graelo of all people is this important to her sister. Why is Graelo enough for Synestra to decide she was going to wipe out the humans altogether like this?

“I don’t expect you all to love the King and Queen or any of that nonsense. I don’t expect you to fight for loyalty to the crown. Leave that to the knights and the soldiers training under the King’s watchful eye.”

There’s some quiet chuckles here and there at that. At this point, everyone knew about what Sevvi’s Master was doing. Taking every man in the Kingdom that he could get his hands on and personally trying to oversee all of their training. It was an ambitious project, some said. It was foolhardy, others declared.

Of course, what they didn’t know was that Thomas was an Otherworlder and whatever he put his mind to, he would always get results. More than that, his

Gift had made him a good teacher all the way back in Last Hope. Now, with him trying his best with thousands... well, it was going to make him even better.

Unfortunately, he couldn't teach these idiots how to better use the Gift of Shadow. Not when he himself didn't know how to shadowstep at this point. Though there had been some promising results in their latest private training sessions together...

Regardless, Thomas had his hands full... which meant it fell to her and Qyvern to train these malcontents up instead. Sweeping his gaze over the lot of them, the Royal Spymaster grunts and brings his speech home.

"No, I don't expect you to fight for the Royals. I expect you to fight for yourselves. I expect you to fight for *survival*. Our enemies don't care if you were a thief, or a brigand, or a thug. All they care about is that you're *human*. And that's all you should care about as well. Because that's all we've got left."

Hm, bit of a somber ending there. Still, Sevvī can tell his words have had an impact all the same. After letting them settle for a moment, Qyvern waves his hand.

"Take a five minute break. Get some water. And then we're going to continue. And we'll keep going until you all can stab a stationary target without having to check if the laces on your breeches are undone first."

The assembled trainees disperse, all too happy to take advantage of the slight reprieve. Sevvī watches them go for a moment before looking to Qyvern. They've never really spoken, truth be told. Sevvī's Master and his new wife had assigned them to work together... and that was about it.

Tilting her head to the side as she observes the human, Sevvī finds herself... reflective.

"I apologize."

Qyvern looks to her, a touch of confusion in his gaze.

“You apologize? For what?”

“For the role I played in my sister’s actions. For your King’s death.”

That causes the human’s spine to stiffen.

“You bear no fault there. The King’s death was the fault of three individuals. The Dark Elf who wielded the blade. Your sister. And... myself.”

Sevvi frowns, prompting Qyvern to explain.

“There should have been no shadows deep enough for one of your people to traverse that close to the throne that day. But the King liked the pageantry of it all... of me arriving via way of my Gift and handing him the incriminating documents that you retrieved from the Godman Estate. That was the only reason the lanterns in the throne room were arrayed the way they were that day.”

Qyvern lifts up a hand, looking at it for a moment before curling it into a fist.

“More than that... I was there. I was *right there*. I was just too slow. The King’s killer was faster. And *you* were faster in avenging him than I could ever hope to be.”

Looking to Sevvi again, the Royal Spymaster grunts.

“I will do everything in my power to see your sister dead. I will do everything I can to help my Queen and King see the Kingdom through to safety. My King will be avenged in the end, one way or another.”

Sevvi takes that in, considering it for a moment... before inclining her head wordlessly. After a beat, Qyvern inclines his head back, equally wordless. They don’t have to say anything to each other. They understand one another perfectly well, in fact.

And Sevi isn't too worried about his pledge. Frankly, she's already come to terms with the fact that this likely all ends with Synestra's death. She *hopes* it ends with Synestra's death, because if it doesn't it means their mother has chosen to get involved.

Synestra and her army... Sevi thinks they might have a chance of defeating. It won't be easy, nor is it at all guaranteed even with Thomas' Gift... but they have a chance.

However, if Sevi's mother and the rest of their people get involved... the humans won't stand a chance. Not even Thomas will be able to turn the tide at that point. She can only hope this madness is settled once Synestra is dead and buried.

-x-X-x-

A/N: Gulp!

Please let me know what you think either on Patreon or Discord! Your feedback, suggestions, and ideas for this story are keeping the inspiration flowing in a big way!