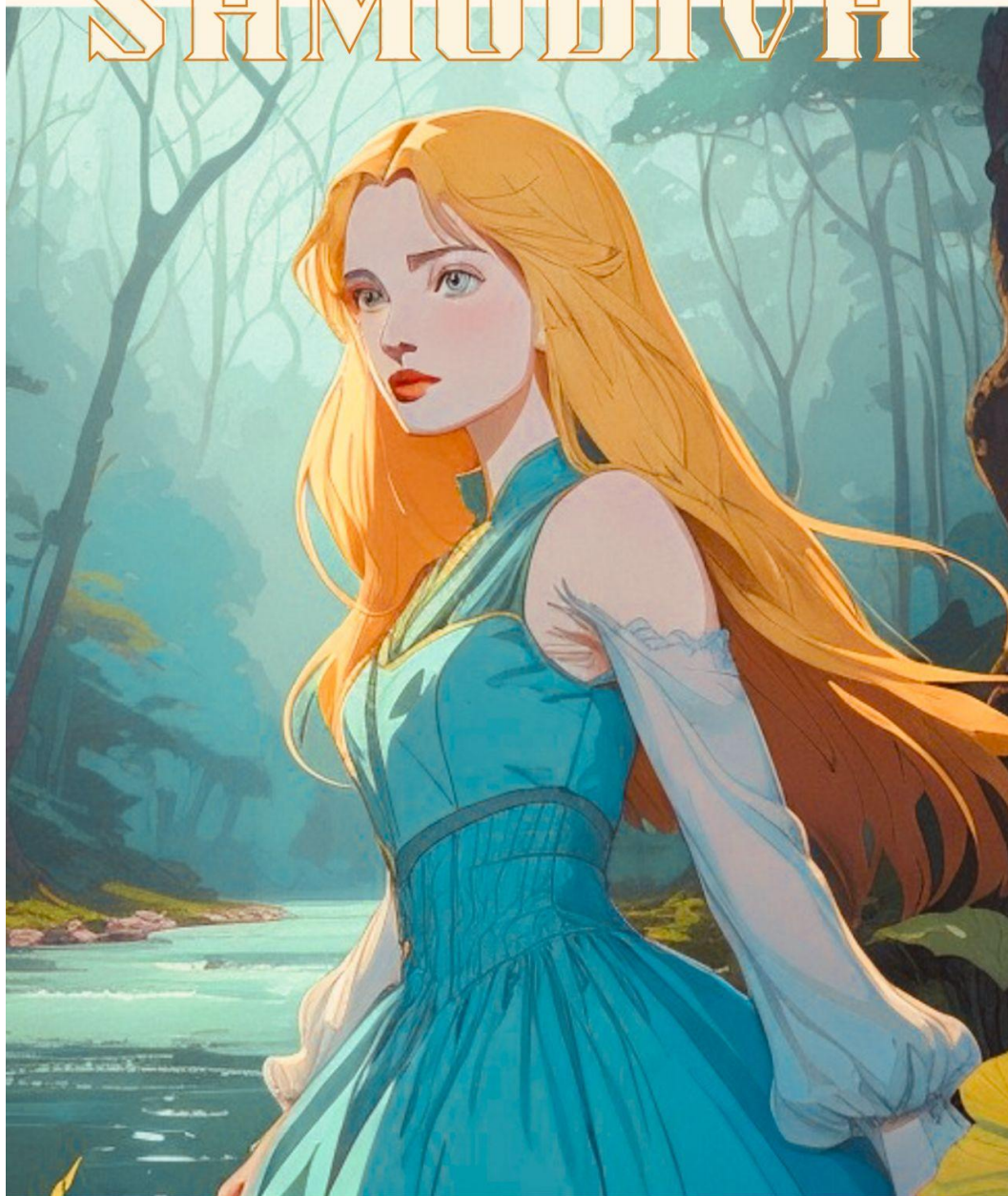


THE ELVEN SAMODIVA



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Once upon a time... in a magical land far, far away, there was an old village.

One morning, a nice little girl appeared in it, alongside a peculiar scarecrow. She came with the peaceful waters of the shallow river, claiming that she couldn't remember her past. Only that the scarecrow was able to walk and talk to her.

Of course, the people in the village didn't believe the girl and they even laughed as hard as they could. All they were able to see was a little girl with wild imagination dragging an old dirty scarecrow with her. Yet, they were familiar with some myths so they decided to use the scarecrow by putting it on the coast nearby - in order to prevent the sea demons from coming into their homes.

And as for the girl - some of the peasants invited her to live with them. They decided to call her Aflumina. Being kind to her at first, later these same people changed their behavior and even started treating the girl as their servant. The reason was that through the years Aflumina's ears got slightly pointed, giving the impression that she was of an elven origin. And everybody in the village detested elves.

But even if rejected by the society that once embraced her, Aflumina never stopped being a sunny and kind child. As the time passed she became a beautiful young woman with blonde hair, pale green eyes and rose red lips. Astonishing beauty who made many other girls in the village envious. That's why one day they decided to trick her.

During sunset before her 18th birthday, they sent Aflumina on the same coast where the old scarecrow was still standing against the sea breeze. They lied that they had a surprise - but they were actually planning to throw her in the waters. So, the naive young maiden went there and that's when something miraculous happened. The scarecrow talked to Aflumina - for the first time since the day of their arrival in this village many years ago.

"My dear girl... young princess Aflumina... You must run and save your life. Evil forces are coming for you here - and even more evil ones are expecting you on your upcoming path. But you will prevail. I was once sent to look after you until you are ready to meet your destiny. And now you are. So run. Follow the stream of the same river we came with and go deep into the forest. Search for the magical Cave of Changes and for the light. Then never look back."

Aflumina's faith in the old scarecrow was unconditional - it came straight from the depths of her soul. So she listened to it and followed the stream - deep into the woods. She kept running until the next morning - the morning of her 18th birthday.

This is when Aflumina started crying. All she once wished for her birthday was to find out who she was - but everything got so complicated. The tears of this lovely young girl were so pure - like a morning dew. But somehow these same tears were also magical - and they made her pale green eyes to become bright green - as the leaves of the trees surrounding her. This is how, among the blur of her sorrow, Aflumina suddenly saw something she wasn't able to see before.

A cave. And a shining light.

The young maiden was scared - but she still had that faith in her old scarecrow companion - so she once again listened to its advice and went straight into the light.

The light was a portal to another forest. Much different and quite astonishing forest where the trees had white stems and mostly green leaves but at the same time the ground was covered by so many other leaves of red colour. A mystical setting through which Aflumina took some steps while her soul was full of curiosity. Then... she suddenly stopped as between the leaves and the branches, a nice doe with red fur appeared and talked to her:

“Hello, my dear little sister! Don't be scared! I am so thrilled that you are finally back here! I know that you probably don't remember me but we two were inseparable in our childhood- before I got turned into a doe and you were sent outside of our world. But let's not talk too much. If you are here this means that you are finally prepared to go into the castle and save our bigger sister from the dungeon she has been locked in. Just keep going forward on that way. And be brave, my sweet darling.”

While being excited to meet the kind talking animal which claimed to be her sister, Aflumina felt that she had to listen to the doe and continue her strange journey. So she started wandering through the interesting woods. But with each step the young girl realised more and more that something in this forest was in fact even more unordinary. For an unknown reason some of the components around started changing their look from time to time, keeping only the main setting the same. Even more strange was that Aflumina herself felt like something in her own appearance changed too.

But what also changed were her thoughts - because suddenly she saw a giant, magnificent castle. It was so close, yet so far away because of the waters of the lake surrounding it. But just when Aflumina was wondering how could she pass to the other side, she heard a deep and somehow magnetic voice of an young and handsome dark-haired man who had just approached her:

“Hello, you beautiful young lady... Are you waiting for someone to take you across the lake? Then I am your man.”

“Oh... are you the boatman?” Aflumina said as she blushed.

She immediately fell in love with this charming young man - and he fell in love with her too. That's why he said to her, as his appearance also started slightly changing in the same magical way that was not that unfamiliar to Aflumina already:

“Yes, I am the only boatman who is allowed to take people to the castle. Who is, actually, *forced* to do it. Usually passengers give me a coin, but you, young lady, seem so kind and are so tender, like the most lovely flower. So I could take you there for free.

Aflumina quickly accepted the young boatman's generous offer. Soon they got on his small wooden boat and went straight to the castle. While approaching it they had a short talk, starting with the young man's question:

“What is one so adorable and shining beauty like you looking for in a cursed castle like this? Usually only poor and miserable people ask me to lead them there.”

“To be fair, I don't even know myself. I was sent here by an old scarecrow I have always had faith in. And also by a kind doe who I met in the forest and who claimed to be my sister. I

think I am meant to save our other bigger sister who is locked in the dungeon of this castle. But I didn't even know that the castle was cursed.”

“Oh... is it possible that you are the special girl who was once sent outside of our world? We've heard stories about you. If they are true, you are the one who could save us all from the dark magic of the evil sorceress who once conquered our marvellous kingdom and this castle. She lives in a special chamber in the highest tower of the palace and never goes out.”

“So when I go inside that castle I should not only save my sister but also somehow save this unusual kingdom in which somehow everything changes in a wonderful way from time to time? I don't know if I am that strong.”

“You are strong. And you will find the way. As for the kingdom - its nature is to change often, to never stay the same for a long time and to always find new ways of transformation - especially when significant events occur in it, as is probably happening today with your appearance here. The kingdom is unique and magical but you are unique and magical too, beautiful lady. The power of these lands will be with you.”

Enthralling and touching conversation. But as the two young people talked while sailing with the old wooden boat, they both didn't know that at the same time somebody was watching them. In a room with many mirrors, a tall slim woman with long, white hair was staring at the not very clear images of the boy and the girl which magically appeared on some of the mirrors. She stared at them and she talked with her expressive, yet sarcastic and malicious voice:

“Ah... when will they learn? These poor fighters with their tiny lives.... Lives... So many lives... so many leaves have fallen... And now she is here... more fabulous than ever... With the mission she was born with - to stop us. But she won't stop us.” As she said the last words she looked at one of the mirrors - with the realness of her own harsh, distorted reflection in it. “Demon spirits of this magical space of mine... Transform into flesh! Go and finish her!”

By saying these words the evil sorceress summoned the darkness from the room to form two demonic shadows in the air.

Ah, that poor young soul - Aflumina... She couldn't even imagine what was coming for her. Actually at the same time she was still under another spell - the one of the handsome boatman's irresistible charm. They both had just stepped out of the boat and were walking between the high rocks leading to a special entrance to the castle when the young man explained:

“Here is where our paths will have to part, precious lady. I am not allowed to enter the castle. The sorceress made sure that no one with the royal blood of my family would be able to ever visit it again and get to her.”

“Oh... you are... a royalty?”

“Yes. Once I was the prince of this castle. Until the evil possessed it and I was magically forced to serve as the boatman here. To lead all these ruined sad people who want to go near the sorceress and ask her for mercy and shelter. I've waited for so long for someone to appear and break the spell. And this someone is you - like in the legends. Save us, young beauty. Save us and give us the chance to live a normal life in this extraordinary kingdom again.”

He said these tender words as the two of them stopped in front of the secret underground entrance and the man started staring deep into Aflumina's eyes as she was already staring at him in the same way. They both felt so good being so close - and their lips yearned to touch each other in a wonderful kiss so badly...

But the young woman had a mission.

So this is why after the boatman's encouraging last words she went straight into the portal. After her first steps Aflumina realised that she was entering a very scary, dark place. It looked like an abandoned dungeon with an underground river passing right in the middle of it. The only light in this creepy place was coming from the other side of it, from a big window somewhere on the next level - so this is where the young maiden headed. But just before reaching the ruins of the old staircase, she suddenly heard a voice coming from one of the small side chambers:

"Oh... is it possible? Is that you, princess? So grown, yet with the same fairy soul?"

The voice was of an old man with long grey beard whose look was almost as of an ordinary human - it was only his mouth which was somehow part of his beard that made him this shockingly different. But Aflumina didn't get scared of him - he seemed like a kind person. But something in his words made her quite confused:

"You are the second one who calls me a princess?"

"Yes, my dear. Not many people remember because it was a long time ago but you are the daughter of my best friend, the king of elves. He and your whole royal family were once killed by that evil sorceress who also took over this castle and who now lives and rules us from up there, in the inner one of the three merged dungeon chambers of the highest tower."

"So... I really am of an elven origin..." Aflumina felt very excited. "But wait... What do you mean by saying that the dungeon is in the highest tower? Isn't this place *here* the dungeon of the castle?"

"This here is the ordinary dungeon. The one for miserable old fools like me who come to ask the sorceress for mercy but at the end get trapped in a palace of no changes where they are only her servants. The dungeon in the top of the castle is the special one where your oldest sister is locked and where that witch has locked herself too, in order to never be touched by the changes of the kingdom. This is where you should go, my dear - to free your sister and defeat that evil. To save all of us. But be aware - she has two monsters by her side, who she always sends to destroy others. Two dark creatures called bauks. They will try to stop you but you will pass through them with the power of your pure elven soul, I know."

So many strangers had such a big faith in Aflumina... and in so many strangers' pieces of advice she needed to have faith too. This is why the young elven princess once again continued walking on her path in the direction she was meant to go - the top of the highest tower of the castle.

On her way through the endless corridors and halls Aflumina found so much more darkness - even in the places with enormously big glass windows like those on the floor from where the forementioned light came... and those on the next floor... and on the next...]

But the scariest darkness appeared just when the young maiden heard a sinister growl and then she saw two beastly silhouettes in front of her eyes - two gigantic creatures with horns and mad faces. The bauks.

But after the first shivers that these two orcs brought to her body and soul, instead of being completely scared of the deadly menace as it approached her, Aflumina suddenly felt something different. A wild tremble of wishfulness for these two scary monsters to become calmer and to not harm her... As she wished that, suddenly Aflumina's green eyes started flashing, as her whole appearance became brighter. And then... completely surprising even for her, the two bauks did become calmer.

Aflumina stared at them for some time in order to be sure that they really didn't mean to hurt her anymore because now they were somehow compelled by her to let her pass through them. Once she became confident enough she continued on her path to the highest tower. With each step her body got more tired and tired but her soul kept her strong will alive. And at the end she saw it - a big gate. The portal to the special dungeon.

Aflumina took a deep breath and then didn't hesitate to go open it and pass on the other side.

She didn't expect what she saw then. The so-called dungeon in the tower was not dark and gloomy like someone would expect it to be. It was not even a room but a majestic place with wild, green forest nature and, yet again, a shallow river passing through it.

And there was she - the young woman who, even if with darker, brown hair, with blue eyes and with a more mature look, still had such a similar appearance as Aflumina that the elven princess immediately knew that this was her biggest sister. The next words of the unusual dungeon's prisoner proved it:

"Sister... My dear baby sister... Thank you for being so strong and brave. Thank you for coming here and saving me with the power of your remarkable radiant magic. And not only me. The whole kingdom has waited too long for this day. The day on which the purest samodiva ever born will defeat the evil sorceress."

"Samodiva? But I thought I was an elf?"

"You are both, my dear. The special child of the king of elves and our precious mother, the queen of Bright samodivas. They once had a forbidden love the result of which was the special girl who was later sent out of our world in order to be in a safe place until one day she gets old enough and strong enough to come back and defeat the darkness. As the first and only one of her kind... elven samodiva."

"These powers of mine... Are they what helped me to survive on my way?"

"Yes. They are the unique combination of your elven powers and your samodiva ones. They are what is enough to free everyone here from the prison the evil sorceress locked us in. You just need to look at us and the freedom will be ours. Probably now you are wondering who is the other one I am talking about? Just follow the stream, as always, my sister, and when you go to the three doors with no handles, let your heart choose the right one. The door to the last place you should visit before going to the witch."

“And what about you? Are you really free to go now? Just like that?”

“Yes, I am free. But I cannot go out through a door because I don't have your powers to see the doors. But now when, thanks to your presence I am no longer locked in this forest, I can finally turn into the bird I was always meant to be one day - and fly to our dear sister to reunite with her too.”

As she said this, the appearance of Aflumina's sister really changed. She no longer was a human-looking samodiva but now she was a beautiful bird with four wings who flew freely up in the skies, saying:

“And once you defeat the evil with your touch of fairy pureness, come to us, my dear sister. We will be waiting for you.”

Then she disappeared far, far away there, in the heights of her long-desired freedom. Aflumina looked at her with a smile, then the young samodiva princess went straight forward with the stream.

She didn't walk too long before between the trees she saw the three forementioned doors with no handles. A dark brown one, a green one and a blue one. But Aflumina's clever mind, alongside her faithful heart, easily chose the right one out of the three of them - it was the door with the blue colour, as she sensed that the dark brown one represented a portal back to the dark castle, and the green one was probably another path to the same fresh place in the forest where she met her sister minutes ago. But the blue one... it felt like something different. Something never used by her before.

And it really was something different, as Aflumina soon found by herself when she went on the other side. It was another forest with a shallow stream but now it was foggy. But even through that fog, Aflumina's special sight was able to see the man who was sitting on a stone bench among all the trees. He was an old and wise looking elf with a noble look. The way he talked to her once she approached him proved his remarkable self:

“Hello, young princess Aflumina. Hello. Probably at this time you are wondering who I am. And you think that you don't know me. But you do, my dear girl. I was once the first royal advisor of your father, the elven king. And before passing he and your mother, the queen of Bright samodivas, asked me to save you at any cost - for only you and your astonishing powers of existence would help our kingdom some day. A great responsibility which I took very seriously. This is why I took the hard decision to send you out of this world, even if I knew that it was possible that outside of it you may not remember who you are. But, in order to be sure that nothing will happen to you, I also sent with you someone - or something - to protect you.

“The scarecrow... You are the one who made it alive?”

“Yes... and no. Because your magnificent powers were what helped you see behind the look of that old, dirty scarecrow. Your powers and your kindness to everyone - even to those who didn't deserve it or to those who didn't even seem like something more than a static object. But, to be fair, there was also one more reason that same scarecrow had a soul in it - and that is because I gave it part of my own soul by creating it. This is how I know everything that happened to you outside of our kingdom. This is how I was able to protect you from distance -

until the day of your 18th birthday on which you were destined to come back here, in this land of wonderful transformations. A kingdom which the evil sorceress once took over because she couldn't accept living in a world where everything could change so fast. And where changes often happen not only outside, but inside - like in the case of the samodivas who were once a symbol of cruel nature but with time passing many of them became good. Unlike her kind."

"Oh... the evil sorceress is also a samodiva?"

"She once was. And she was one of the most dangerous ones. She still is, of course, as we could all see the results of her malicious actions. But in the recent years, after she completely locked herself in the inner part of this magical dungeon, her doings became limited - and this is why when she has to do something outside of her dark chamber, she usually summons some evil demons to do her job. But this is the price she has to pay for refusing to live in a world of changes - and making even this once marvellous palace of the human rulers a castle of no changes."

"Oh... now that you said it. Yes, I really haven't seen any sensible transformations happening in this castle. Not like those outside of it, for sure. Maybe only some slight changes in my own appearance."

"And this is what makes you even more special. With your unique nature you can change yourself even here. With it you succeeded to remain strong all these years and this is what led you here. Because of your remarkable nature you freed your sister just by looking at her. And now you are helping me go free too - and to fully pour my soul in that old scarecrow, as is my wish after all that time of partially living inside of it there, on that coast in the outside world, looking at the beautiful sea. But what is most important now is that when you follow the stream for one last time and finally go in the inner part of the special dungeon, you will destroy that Dark samodiva just by looking at her with your eyes of an extraordinary girl who is able to bring changes everywhere - starting from the first moment of your existence where your creation unified the nations of elves and bright samodivas, and reaching this point in which you will once again help everyone on these lands feel united in freedom. But before going there, sadly, I should warn you that even your power won't be enough to keep you completely stable after facing that also very powerful witch. After defeating her in her own dark chamber of the dungeon, you will be too weak that you will fall asleep in a magical dream there, in the same chamber, but modified by your own senses. You will be alive - until one day the kiss of true love wakes you up. Are you ready to make this big sacrifice, my dear princess Aflumina?"

"Yes."

Even if filled with a little bit of sadness about what was yet to come for her own self, Aflumina, with her always kind and giving soul, immediately knew the answer. So she and the elven advisor parted ways as he disappeared in a shining light and his own soul fully transferred in the old scarecrow's body, and the brave maiden continued walking down the stream on her last path to the chamber of the evil sorceress.

At one point the stream turned into a magical underwater cave. Magical but also scary - especially if someone knew where this cave was leading to. Then the door appeared - the door to the chamber of evil. Aflumina reached it and opened it.

And in that same moment the whole world of the evil sorceress inside started dissolving. And her screams - they were hysterical:

“No! No, I can't believe! That girl... That power... That change...

When Aflumina entered this place nothing was the same anymore. Because now everything was changing like it should change. Including the evil samodiva who, once defeated by the magic of the young maiden's eyes, started shrinking until at the end she just disappeared in light...

This is when the surroundings changed. Aflumina was now standing alone on a top of a mountain with such a breathtaking view from it.

Literally breathtaking for the brave elven samodiva who immediately knew it was time for her to close her eyes in a magical sleep. Long but peaceful sleep.

Soon the whole now freed kingdom found out about the heroic sacrifice of the fairy princess. Including the boatman prince who was still so in love with her that he couldn't just stay here and be happy about this long-awaited day. So the handsome young man started wandering through the kingdom and all of these magical changes in it...

He searched and he searched... for days and nights... days and weeks... until one day he found her.

There, on the top of that mountain far, far away, Aflumina was still in her sleep of sacrifice. And she was still so enchantingly beautiful. The boatman prince went to her and then he gave her the tender kiss they both have been dreaming about. The kiss of true love. The power of which immediately awoke her.

Aflumina once again stared at the charming blue eyes of this dreamy prince and he once again stared at her literally magical green look. They smiled at each other and then kissed again. Ready to live happily ever after in their exquisite world of transformations.

THE END