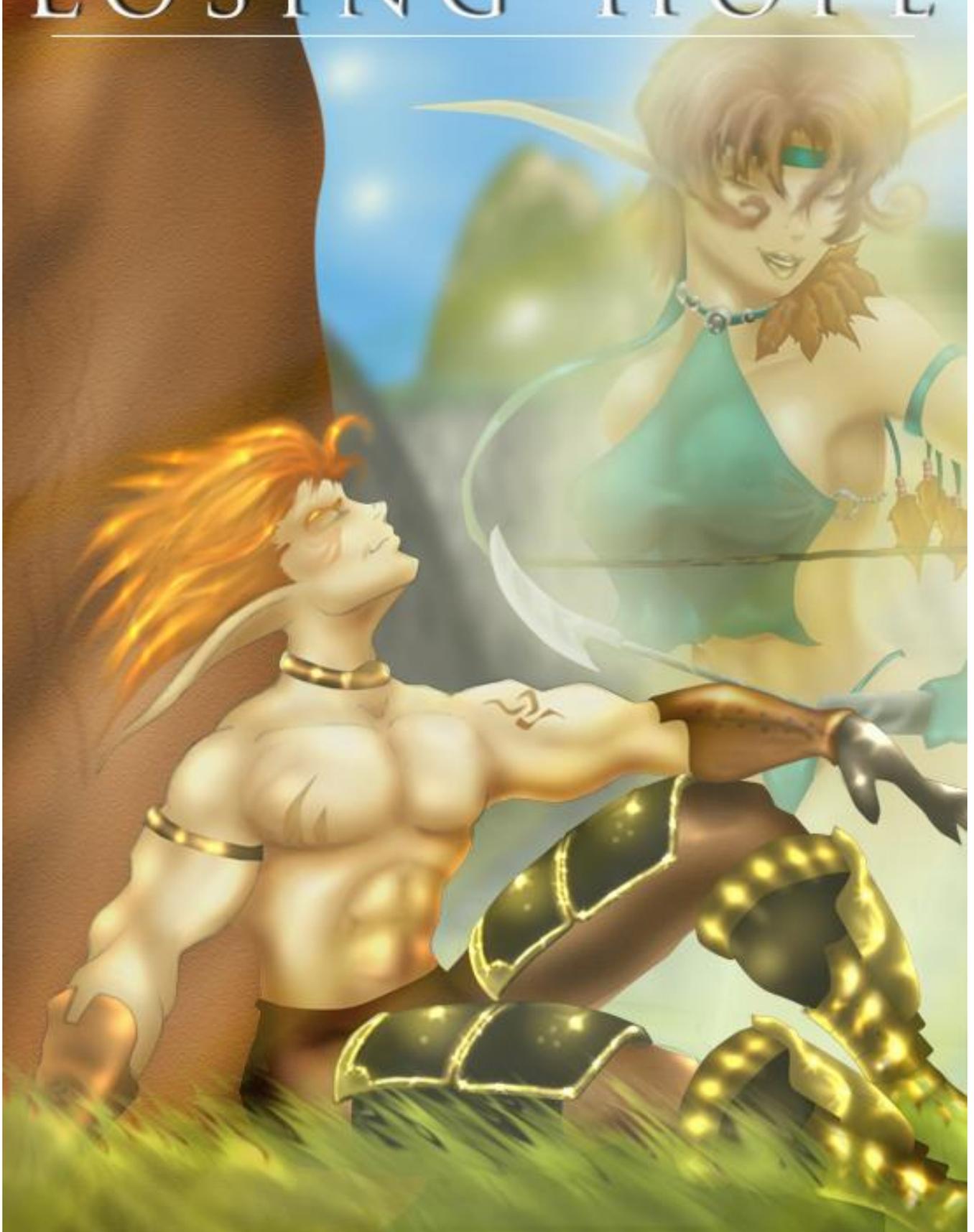


TATIANA CALDWELL
LOSING HOPE



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A Short Story



Slate went to the spot at the river where they always used to meet. It did not feel quite as comfortable now. A single leaf floated down from the sky, causing the slightest of ripples as it hit the water's surface. Hope would have gone into the water to swoop up that leaf, just because.

He remembered the way she would hold up her bow and aim an arrow, one eye closed and the other eye glittering like a green emerald in her concentration. How many times had she aimed at him and mischievously threatened to shoot if he did not behave?

He could picture Hope there in the river, with her touchable tan skin and mousy brown hair, standing knee-high in the water.



So full of life, grace, and beauty.

He could not believe that he had lost her.

“Just come to the tavern and sing for us tonight, Slate!” they kept saying to him. But every time he opened his mouth, nothing would come out.

He could not bring himself to play his instrument now, even alone in his favorite place to be. He moved his fingers to pluck at his lute. They trembled and fumbled over the strings.

How was he ever supposed to make music again without Hope?

A month had passed, and still every day he came to this spot. Healing potions and the ministrations of priests did not ease his pain. His friends told him that time would heal all, but as the days came and went his pain seemed to deepen as his loss became more and more real. The void in his life grew larger. Every day it grew more difficult to rise from bed.

It was hopeless to try to live without her. To try to pretend that he would really be okay.

If only Slate had trained to be a fighter instead of a musician. He should have been there to protect her. He would have gladly traded his life to guard hers. Hope had been on post, fighting to protect their elven village from hostile human invaders. While he was on stage plucking songs from his strings trying to ease the worries of the elf citizens, Hope had been out in battle plucking arrows from her bow string, trying to defend the benign elf citizens.

Hope was stabbed in the heart by a callous human. Slate's heart may as well have been pierced, too.

What was he going to do without her?

What a terrible night that had been. The moment Hope's heart had ceased to beat, so did Slate's. He cut his song short and dropped his instrument before dashing out into the night. His heart stilled and his breath held as he raced to the guard tower atop which she had been posted. And to his horror, he found her lying there, just a few feet away from the body of the human filth who had inflicted a mortal wound upon her just before she was able to return the favor. Slate cradled her lifeless body in his arms and rocked as he sobbed uncontrollably.

Hope was gone.

Now Slate backed up against a tree and slid down to the ground. He leaned against the trunk and closed his eyes. Tears ran down his face as his body shook silently with his loss.

Music was hopeless now. Life was hopeless now. He felt so empty inside. As if half of his soul, half of his breath, half of his life was missing. After centuries of peace, now that the humans were continuously infringing up elf territory, he doubted that his people would ever be at peace again.

And without Hope, Slate doubted that *he* would ever be at peace again.

"Hope, I miss you!" His powerful voice cried out into the forest, his agony drowning in the sounds of the open wilderness.

The wind actually seemed to answer. A large gust whipped around him, picked up his hair and tossed it playfully. It seemed to surround him, caress him, kiss away his tears. "I am here," the wind whispered.

"Where are you?"

"With you. I will always be with you."

Warmth rushed over Slate, making his heart swell and his pulse race with joy. He could do nothing but close his eyes and smile as tranquility swept through him.



He was not certain if he had actually heard her voice, or if he had just imagined it. Either way, a great weight was lifted from him.

Slate grabbed the neck of his lute and slowly stood up. He took two long, drawn-out deep breaths as he faced the village. Taking great effort at first, he put one foot in front of other, until at last he was moving forward with a sure stride.

Now he knew. At least, he knew. He could do this. He could carry on. Regardless of whether he could see her or not, he knew.

He still had Hope.

**** The End ****

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