

## Praise for *Prince of Bryanae*

*“Prince of Bryanae brought me back to that special place I haven’t visited in a long time ... where the author’s energy and love for his or her magical vision is pure and fresh. ... It’s the world-building that makes Prince of Bryanae truly sing; it’s so obvious that Jeff Getzin has spent years living in this world, learning this world, falling in love with this world and making this world a place where he can share with us so many wonderful adventures”*

— New York Times Bestselling author R. A. Salvatore

*“Getzin makes you feel like a part of the intricate and fascinating world he’s created. This is solid storytelling and spicy yarns. Once inside, you won’t want to leave.”*

— Mike Freeman, author of The New York Times  
notable book *Bloody Sundays*

*“This is a splendid book full of adventure and a sympathetic character in Willow. The story has heart and excitement. I’d recommend it to anyone who loves a rollicking good fantasy. Jeffrey Getzin is a writer to watch”*

— Billie Sue Mosiman, author of *Legions of the Dark*

*“I recommend [Prince of Bryanae] to anyone who enjoys a good story with nonstop action and suspense, combined with strong, memorable characters and an imaginative setting.”*

— Scotti Cohn, author of *Liberty’s Children*

## More praise for *Prince of Bryanae*

“What struck me most about the book was the insight Getzin seems to have into the bitterness of dysfunctional relationships and the way our past can scar us even into our adulthood. Who Willow is at the beginning of the book, and why she is the way she is becomes glaringly clear at the end. It is painful to read through at times due to its graphic nature but Getzin’s treatment of the worst is well done without resorting to gratuitous violence. In the end, Willow grows. How Getzin treats that growth process is innovative, tender and honest.”

— K. R. Schulteis, author of *Calling*

“I haven’t seen a fantasy heroine that I admired and respected this much since reading Elizabeth Moon’s *Paksenarrion*.”

— Rebecca Kyle, Amazon Top 500 Reviewer

“The combat sequences are shocking, fast, and both convincing and filled with moments of awesome.”

— Ryk E. Spoor, author of *Phoenix Rising*

“Every once in a while a book comes along that can make you both laugh and cry, and keeps you turning page after page on a journey with the characters as the story unfolds. Jeffrey Getzin has created a masterpiece with his debut novel *Prince of Bryanae*.”

— Sabrina O'Malone, author of *Prayers for the Working Mom*

PRINCE OF BRYANAE

*Also by Jeffrey Getzlin*

Shara and the Haunted Village

A Lesson for the Cyclops

King of Bryanae

# PRINCE OF BRYANAE

Jeffrey Getzin

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For Kate and our menagerie





# BOOK ONE

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## PRINCE OF BRYANAE

## CHAPTER 1

Discipline. It was the most important word in Willow's vocabulary, the pivot upon which her world spun. It dominated her every waking thought. It permeated her soul.

(... 117 ... 118 ... 119 ...)

You could accomplish anything if you had the will to achieve. You could make a weak body strong, overcome insurmountable obstacles, attain seemingly impossible goals.

Take now, for instance. Some might have thought it impossible for any woman, let alone an elven one, to do a hundred and fifty pushups. But Willow did so every day, dominating her fatigued muscles and extracting great things from them.

(... 139 ... 140 ... 141 ...)

The sweat dripped from her face onto the darkwood floorboards of her office, but she would not relent. The cloying cheerfulness of the sun shone through the window to bake her in a pool of brightness and heat, yet she paid it no mind. Her entire being was focused on the maintenance of the hardened weapon that was her body.

Her rapier lay sheathed within arm's reach. Like her rapier, her body was hard and agile. Like her rapier, her body was lethal and beautiful—not beautiful in the vapid conventional sense of other women, but beautiful in the manner of a perfectly designed and tuned instrument.

And like her rapier, she was nearly ageless. Someday, she might break against a deadlier weapon; someday, she might be discarded by a fickle liege. But until that day she would retain her keen edge.

Her arms screamed at her as she did these pushups, begged her to

quit, but she would hear nothing of it. She would yield neither to the pain nor the exhaustion. Hell, it had been pretty much more than century since she had yielded to anything at all. If her arms were too stupid to realize the inevitability of the task, well, that was their problem.

(... 144 ... 145 ...)

Yesterday's inexplicable failure of her willpower would *not* happen again. The mere thought of the Incident caused her bile to rise. Cowardice and inaction had hitherto been unknown to her and she would die before she would look upon those failings again. She had put them behind her now, and she would never look upon them again.

(... 146 ...)

She was in control of her body.

(... 147 ...)

And she was in control of her mind.

(... 148 ...)

She would never fail again. Failure was for the weak.

And ...

(... 149 ...)

... she was not ...

(... 150!)

... weak.

Willow collapsed to the floor, her cheek pressed against the wood. The sweat began to pool around her face, so she rolled onto her back, her chest heaving. She dragged in gasp after burning gasp of delicious air. Her arms felt like wet rags. The tang of her sweat mixed with the scent of oil to form a pungent musk.

Discipline.

Images from yesterday's disgraceful battle flashed before her eyes: the feral blood-stained snarl on the fur-clad barbarian's face as he lifted Private Drin from the ground with a single hand. Private Ritchell's head split by an axe. And she, paralyzed with fear, helpless as a

babe while her men were massacred.

Her willpower clamped down on these images, banished them from thought. Yesterday was the past. You could not change the past, only the future. She would not think on these images again. They served no purpose. She would think only purposeful thoughts.

Purposeful thoughts. Purposeful thoughts.

She rose to her feet in a single fluid motion and then dragged the towel through the pools of sweat with her foot. Her mind thumbed through the list of her tasks for today. What had to be done today? Purposeful thoughts.

Tamlevar. It was about time she did something about Private Tamlevar. In fact, it was long past due.

His commander was weak and stupid. He should have disciplined Tamlevar months ago. The private was becoming increasingly rebellious. He seemed to regard being in the Guard as some sort of game, reacting to orders from his superiors with something bordering on amusement and paternal indulgence. That was something Willow would not tolerate in her company. If Lieutenant Marcus were unable to discipline Tamlevar, then as Captain of the Guard, she would have to do it.

Discipline was her specialty, after all.

Elidon's son or not, Tamlevar would learn to march in time with the others or he would march right out of the King's Guards and back into civilian life.

Discipline had to be maintained.

## CHAPTER 2

Willow walked along the noisy streets of Bryanae noting, but uninterested in, the changes that had seemed to explode around her. If she wished, she could recall the days when the King's Guard wore heavy plate armor, the occasion of King Edmund's coronation, the

arrival of the sorcerer Fyrelord, and most recently, the adoption of the Szun Steam Engine.

The Szun engine was a technological marvel whose potential had barely been touched. It flooded the palace with light even during the darkest nights, pumped water from deep underground, and powered tools that enabled the carpenters for the royals to saw wood at an amazing pace.

So much change in Bryanae and only Willow was constant. As she headed towards the barracks, it occurred to her that she had walked these exact same steps many, many times. Figure twice a day for a hundred and seventy-seven years, that would be, what ... over a hundred and twenty-nine thousand times.

A hundred and twenty-nine thousand times. What had it all been for? When was the last time she had enjoyed something she did? For that matter, was she even capable of enjoying anything had she the inclination?

Her thoughts were straying to useless matters again. She needed to remain vigilant. There was no telling when there might be trouble.

“Look, there goes the mighty Willow!”

Like now, for instance.

Willow glanced over her shoulder without breaking stride. Captain Eric Snyder lolled against the outside wall of Company A’s barracks, surrounded by a flock of his fawning admirers in the Guard. His handsome devil-may-care face held no allure for her. She felt only contempt for Company A and its captain.

Rich snobs, all of them. An embarrassing relic of the days when the wealth of one’s family determined one’s military rank. Soldiers in Company C died just as easily and stayed just as dead as those in Company A.

“Don’t worry, boys,” Snyder called out to snickers. “She’s normally much braver than what we saw yesterday. I’m sure she’ll *never* fail like that again.”

She slowed her pace a moment, stunned by the public affront. Snyder had never liked her, but he usually restricted his attacks to political backstabbing. Willow's hands balled into fists, knuckles cracking. But then discipline prevailed and she resumed her march.

Later. She would deal with Snyder later.

"I never thought I'd see the day when the legendary elf Captain Willow would stand cowering while her men were slaughtered. For all her posturing, she's just a spineless coward. It just goes to show that she's only human, after all."

That stopped her. Heat rose to her cheeks, and her rapier had half-cleared its sheath before she could stop herself. She heard the alarmed whispers of her antagonists. Snyder waved their concerns away with a single gloved hand and then swept his long, dark locks from his face. His white teeth shone as his eyes dared her to respond.

Dammit, she thought, don't make a spectacle of yourself. Show some self-control.

She squared her shoulders and then marched into the Company C barracks. The laughter of Snyder and his cronies followed her in.

"A-ten-tion!" Corporal Eddings shouted, and the men of Squad One leapt to their feet. The rows of bunks were expertly made and all gear had been stowed. At each man's side was his rapier.

"At ease," Willow said. Squad One wasn't the problem. She gestured towards the door on the other side of the room. "Corporal, is Lieutenant Marcus with his squad?"

"Yes, Captain." Eddings's eyes remained forward, but she sensed his urge to glance at her. She had failed Eddings yesterday, just as she had failed all the members of the Guard. And they knew it.

"As you were," she said.

She passed through the room and into the next. Squad Two came to attention exactly as Squad One had. Squad Two was not a problem, either.

She heard Marcus's voice in the next room. That was where the problem was. Squad Three.

"I say," she heard Marcus squeal, "this is absolutely wizard! Now be careful."

She walked to the adjoining doorway. What she saw shouldn't have surprised her, but it did.

Lieutenant Marcus was sitting in a wooden chair, grinning like an idiot. Private Tamlevar was holding that chair high above his head, gripping a single leg of the chair in both hands. He was attempting to set the chair leg onto the top of his head. Sweat dripped down his black face from which a dazzling smile beamed.

The rest of Squad Three watched the spectacle enrapt. Various nervous titters and muted shouts of encouragement filled the air.

"Quit squirming," Tamlevar said, his muscles bulging. "This next bit's quite tricky."

"I say, you will be careful, won't you?"

"Of course. Now *quit squirming*."

Willow overcame her shock and a cold fury set in.

"Lieutenant Marcus!" she shouted.

The chair came crashing to the ground, and Marcus came crashing down with it. The members of Squad Three scrambled over each other to fall in before their bunks. All of them, that is, except Tamlevar. He knelt beside Marcus, who lay sprawled among the splintered wreckage of the chair.

"Are you all right?" Tamlevar said, his voice raised half an octave by anxiety.

"Yes, yes," Marcus said, crawling to his feet. He dusted himself off, smiling broadly. "I'm fine. But I say, that was absolutely wizard, why I—"

"Lieutenant Marcus!"

Marcus blinked twice and then leapt to his feet.

"A-ten-tion!" he said.

At last, the squad came to full attention. Willow fought back her rage. The air puffed in and out her nostrils.

“Ah, Captain Willow,” Marcus said. He began to twirl his mustache nervously. “I’m ... ah! ... glad you’re here. Private Temvelar and I—”

“Tamlevar,” Tamlevar corrected.

“... Tamlevar and I were just—”

“Marcus,” Willow said, “*shut up!*”

Marcus’s eyes registered the pain of his humiliation. It was a bit like kicking a puppy, really. Poor Marcus. It wasn’t his fault he was so weak and stupid. He just didn’t belong in the Guard.

“Marcus,” she said, taking the edge away from her voice. “Wait for me in my office.”

She pointed her finger at Tamlevar like the Sword of Justice.

“But you I want to see *now*. Outside.”

She spun on her heels and left the barracks, Tamlevar in tow.

### CHAPTER 3

“You’re looking especially beautiful today, Willow,” Tamlevar said as they walked around the outside of the barracks. Willow headed towards the alley between the barracks for Companies B and C. Across the street, Snyder noted her presence and pointed her out to his cronies. The snickering resumed. Willow ignored them.

“Be quiet,” she said, not even slowing her step.

“I can’t help it,” Tamlevar said. He skipped ahead of Willow and then rested his hand against the wall, blocking her way with his arm. He beamed at her. “It’s love.”

Their eyes met. Tamlevar was one of the few people in Bryanae taller than she. It was a weird sensation, looking up at someone.

Willow tried to move his arm out of the way, but it wouldn’t budge.

She glared at him and clasped the hilt of her rapier. Tamlevar shrugged and moved his arm out of the way.



“It’s love,” he said, as though it were obvious.

“You are not in love with me,” Willow said, resuming her march.  
“Now shut up and do what I tell you.”

“Anything. I would do anything for you.”

“Then be quiet.”

“Of course. Because I love you.”

They had reached as private a spot as they were likely to get. The alleyway was shaded from the sun by the adjacent buildings. At the other end of the alley, a horse-drawn wagon clopped by. She detected a hint of spices in the air, wafting from the tavern down the street.

Willow closed her eyes, her teeth clenched. How to do this?

“Can I kiss you?” Tamlevar said.

Her eyes snapped open and her face turned red.

“No, you bloody well may not!” she said. Tamlevar’s smile fell.

“Listen,” she continued, “how you feel about me is irrelevant. That pathetic display in there with Marcus was just another example of a serious lack of discipline. You have made a mockery of the Guard, and have set a bad example for the other men at a time when we need a company of well-trained and disciplined soldiers.

“Now, you *will* act like a soldier and a representative of Bryanae and of Her Majesty the Queen, or I will personally set you on the road to Panineth and you can explain to your mother what happened.”

Tamlevar’s ebony face paled to a dark gray. “But—”

“No buts! Yesterday afternoon, foreign invaders attacked Bryanae on her own soil. That’s the first time in over a century that has happened. The attack was likely a probe, a test of our strength. It may be followed by a serious invasion.

“What the officers must do now is prepare a defense. We need to compose a set of strategies. We need to train. We need to drill. We need to be ready.

“What we do *not* need is to have to worry about a spoiled Illuminatus who can’t keep his mind on the defense of Bryanae and his

pecker in his pants.”

“But—”

Willow prodded Tamlevar’s chest with a dagger-like finger.

“Such a spoiled individual is what we call a liability. Liabilities are things that one abandons or sacrifices, because they add no value and expend valuable resources. Am I making myself clear?”

“But—”

*“Am I making myself clear?”*

“Yes,” he said, his eyes moist.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Captain. You have made yourself clear.”

“Very well,” she said. “While you are in the King’s Guard, I expect you to obey orders without question, and to act in a manner befitting the uniform you wear. If you are unable to do so, I’m sure there are plenty of others who would do anything for the honor of wearing it.”

She turned away, and was about to walk off when he interrupted her.

“It wouldn’t fit,” he said.

Willow fought to keep the smile from her face and won. Her aspect remained as impassive as ever.

“I’m sure we could find a tailor,” she said and walked from the alley.

“Captain Willow?” Tamlevar’s tentative voice followed her.

She stopped but didn’t turn to face him. Her voice was a study in control.

“What is it?” she said.

“Why *did* you freeze up yesterday? That wasn’t like you. What happened?”

Her face contorted as the memories flashed through her mind, of yesterday, and of events that occurred centuries ago. Horror, rage, and anguish fought to make it to the surface. She suppressed the memories

and emotions without mercy.

Discipline. Control. Willpower.

She waited until she was certain her voice was under her command once again.

“Not your concern,” she said, and walked away.

## CHAPTER 4

Marcus. Now she had to see Lieutenant Marcus. Assuming he hadn’t gotten lost on the way to her office, he’d be waiting there for her now. She’d taken care of Tamlevar, so Marcus was next on her list.

The sound of jeers and laughter caught her attention as she emerged from the alleyway. Captain Snyder again.

Her mistake. One task remained before she could get to Marcus.

Willow crossed the street and headed for Snyder. His acolytes fell silent, but Snyder’s smile was untouched. He smoothed his moustache with his index finger. He wore over one of his eyes that ridiculous glass monocle that he liked to wear. As far as Willow could tell, it served no other purpose than to make him look like an idiot.

“May I help you, Lady Captain?” Snyder said with a mock bow. “More Barbarians, perhaps?”

Her face flushed and she clenched her jaw.

“May I have a word with you, Captain Snyder?” she said between her teeth.

Snyder gestured with a flourish. “By all means. I am ever at your service, Lady.”

Willow ground her teeth.

“I meant in private.”

“No can do, Willow. The Royal Family’s out and about, and I’ve been assigned to stand watch.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed. “Then perhaps you’d better go find

them.”

He grinned, showing his perfect teeth.

“No need. They’re right there, across the street from the barracks.”

Snyde was right. She spotted the entourage of members of the King’s Elite outside a jeweler’s shop. Presumably, the Queen and the Prince were within.

“What’s she doing in there?”

“Her Majesty didn’t see fit to tell me,” Snyde said, and his cronies snickered. “Perhaps you should go and ask.”

“I might just do that,” Willow said, “but there’s something I need to do first.”

“Oh?”

Willow reached into her belt, and pulled out the pair of gloves tucked within. She slapped Snyde across the face with one of them.

Snyde’s face went crimson, and his audience gasped.

“Rapiers,” Willow said. “Sunrise tomorrow, by the water tower.”

“You’re joking!” Snyde said, his monocle popping out. “Duels are forbidden. We’d be court marshaled.” A sly grin crept onto his face. “I’d never be able to explain your death.”

“You should re-read your regulations. Duels are forbidden among the enlisted. You and I are officers.”

Snyde’s grin fell.

“But ... but ...”

“Did you have something else to add, Captain Snyde?”

“But—”

“You’re repeating yourself.”

“But I can’t fight *you*.”

“And why not?”

“Because you’re ...”

“I’m what?” she said, her eyes like twin drills.

“You’re a woman,” Snyde finished lamely.

Willow turned and walked away.

“Then you should be able to defeat me with ease,” she called over her shoulder.

Terrific. Yet another task beckoned before she could deal with Marcus. Just as well. The wait would probably do him good. Give him time to form a coherent thought.

The Queen and Heir were abroad at a spectacularly bad time. The barbarians had attacked once. Who was to say they wouldn’t attack again? It wasn’t safe for the Royal Family to be traveling, especially with so light an escort. The King’s Elite were all deadly fighters (after all, she had trained them), but there were only four in sight. A well-planned ambush could mow them down before their swords cleared their scabbards. The Chancellor was an idiot to let Her Majesty and His Highness travel with so flimsy an escort.

The four Elite saluted Willow as she approached.

“Are they inside, Lieutenant Smize?” she asked, addressing the senior Elite.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Any Elite inside with them?”

“No, ma’am.”

Willow’s eyes scanned the street. It was too open. Too many places from which an attack could originate. Sure, the barracks were almost directly across the street, but by the time they’d heard the commotion, grabbed their weapons, and made it outside, the assassination or abduction could be over.

Of course, there was Snyder and his sniggering associates, but there was no telling how much use *they’d* be. Snyder had moderate skill with the blade, true, but he was also unpredictable, hence unreliable.

“You go inside with them, Smize.”

“I’m sorry, Captain. Her Majesty told me to wait outside.”

Willow arched an eyebrow. “Did she?”

Smize nodded, revealing for a moment the bald patch on the top

of his head. All creatures aged except Willow.

“Very well,” Willow said. “I’ll have to speak to her about that.”

Smize’s eyes widened, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Tamlevar!” Willow shouted. Across the street, the chastised Tamlevar had been walking in a desultory march towards the barracks. He halted and looked her way, his expression suddenly hopeful.

“Remain there until I come out,” she said. “Keep alert for signs of an ambush.”

The tall black youth looked puzzled, but he nodded. Good lad. Maybe there was hope for him after all.

That caught Snyder’s attention. He and his cronies stopped loitering and looked about. If something were to happen, it was clear they didn’t want to be caught napping when it did.

Willow entered the shop.

Standing in the doorway, Willow spied the Royal mother and son. Prince Vazerian was in his early twenties. He was like an ornate but flimsy chair upon which you dared not put any weight. He would already have been king if he weren’t so weak and undisciplined. Instead, power remained where it had been since King Eric had died: in the hands of Queen Tiranda the Fair.

Darting from display case to display case was Hamen, the shop’s owner and the only jeweler in the region to have obtained Master Jeweler rank. Hamen was short and roughly egg-shaped. He wore a seemingly unnecessary white smock that accentuated the ring of white hair that circled his otherwise bald skull. A wide, obsequious smile was plastered upon his face, and whenever either of the royal family spoke, he would bow with his hands pressed together, bobbing almost in time with their words.

“I tell you, mother, it’s too garish,” the Prince was saying. He pointed at a display case fashioned entirely of transparent glass.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” the Queen said. “The

design you have in mind is totally inappropriate. It would be an insult to the Princess and an embarrassment to me.”

Even in her fifties, the Queen had lost none of her strength. Her fiery red hair was fading with streaks of gray, but they were bold streaks, and the Queen left them un-dyed. Go ahead and challenge my appearance, her hair said. I dare you.

“But mother ...” The Prince’s voice was a petulant whine.

“Look, Vazerian, do you want to marry this woman or not?”

“Well, now that you mention it ...”

“*Do you?*” The menace in the Queen’s voice was palpable. Even Willow half-flinched at the sound of it.

“Well, I—”

Willow cleared her throat. “Excuse me, Your Majesty, Your Highness.”

“Ah, Willow!” Vazerian cried out, his dimples deepening as he put on his pleased-to-see-you smile. “Good. Good! Excellent timing. Come over here a moment.”

The Queen glared at Willow and their eyes met. So much history was shared between them; none of it was pleasant. The Queen lowered her eyes first.

Willow approached the Prince and saluted.

“Your Highness,” she said.

“Thank you, Willow.” He pointed a bejeweled finger at the display case. “Tell me, which engagement ring do you like better: this garish mishmash of metals and jewels that my dear mother has selected, or this simpler, more elegant one?”

It seemed there had been an ambush after all, just not the type she had been expecting.

## CHAPTER 5

Queen Tiranda the Fair fixed Willow with an evil smile.

“Yes, Captain,” she said with dry malice. “Do tell us which engagement ring you prefer.”

“I’m just a soldier, ma’am.”

The Queen wagged a narrow finger. In recent years, she had become increasingly gaunt and her finger seemed almost skeletal. “Oh no, you don’t get off that easily. Answer the question.”

All right. The Queen had forced Willow into this. “Then I agree with His Highness in that the design you have selected is ghastly, ma’am. However, —”

“How dare you!”

“However, I agree with you that His Highness’s choice is a pusillanimous one. It is the type of ring one might win at a carnival, and not one befitting a royal betrothal.”

“Now, wait a—”

“And since clearly neither of you has any sense of aesthetics where jewelry is concerned, might I suggest that you *ask the jeweler*? I’m sure his recommendations will surpass yours and mine as well.”

Master Jeweler Hamen froze in mid-bow, and his smile became strained. His shoulders hunched and his hands fluttered, as though to say, *Heb heb, don’t elves just say the darnedest things?* He flashed a grin that was at once both solicitous and sheepish.

The Queen’s eyes bore into Willow’s, but it was an old game. If the Queen were to have dominated Willow, she would have done it decades ago. It was too late to hope for a sudden reversal of fortune in her declining years. Willow was the most accomplished officer in the Guard, and despite her humiliating failure yesterday, her place was inviolable.

“Anything else?” the Queen asked, her voice dripping with acid.

“Very well,” Willow said. “You might want to ask His Highness



how he feels about being betrothed to the Princess Sherrilou. Judging by his hesitancy, he is not eager to be wed to her.”

The Queen turned her piercing gaze onto the Prince, who blanched.

“Well?”

“Mother, I—”

*“Well?”*

The Prince quailed beneath his mother’s withering eyes. But he wasn’t as strong as Willow, and probably never would be. Not unless he somehow managed to break free from his mother’s shadow.

“Mother, I—”

Willow cleared her throat.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, Your Majesty, I have duties to which I must attend. With your permission, I’d like to post one of the Elite in here. Bryanae was attacked yesterday—by a small force, true, but attacked nonetheless. I think it best if you have a guard beside you at all times.”

“Yes, we’ve all heard about your performance during that raid, Captain.”

Willow couldn’t prevent the blush from reaching her face, and it infuriated her.

“Nevertheless, Your Majesty, I think your current security arrangement is inadequate and should be bolstered in light of the increased threat.”

“Nonsense, I’m perfectly safe as long as you’re not—”

“Captain Willow!” came Tamlevar’s cry from outside. “We’re under attack! It’s—” His shout was cut off by a gurgling noise.

Willow reached the door in two strides. She opened it a crack and peered through. The street was crawling with marauders: enormous hairy men wielding axes. They wore furs and skins, and their hair was long and knotted. Feral grins were pasted on their faces. Now that the element of surprise had been lost, they began to howl like wolves.

The Guard scrambled from the barracks like an army of bees. Their rapiers flashed and their blue cloaks swirled about them as they rose to the Queen's defense. Their spirit was strong, their skill with the blade formidable, but the enemy was more than their match. For every barbarian that fell, two or more guardsmen were also slain.

Tamlevar lay face down in the middle of the street, a pool of blood beside him.

"What is it, Willow?" the Queen said, only the slightest trace of apprehension tinting her voice.

Willow just gaped at the barbarians. So soon, she thought, without understanding why. They've found me so soon.

"Willow, what *is* it?"

When Willow didn't answer, the Queen shoved her aside and peered out the door. Willow stumbled into the corner of the room and stood there shivering like a helpless babe. So soon, she thought. Just like before.

Ancient images, long suppressed in her mind, flashed before her. Axes, ships, screaming babies, and geysers of blood.

After a moment, the Queen slammed the door, her jaw set.

"Vazerian," she said, pointing past the display case. "Hide behind the counter. Don't get up until I say so, do you understand?"

The Prince nodded. "Yes, mother," he said. He ducked behind the counter with the jeweler.

"Willow," the Queen said, "Can you find out if—?"

Willow could only stare. She couldn't turn her head or even blink. Just like before, she thought. Just like before. She mentally pounded at the walls that encased her, but to no avail.

"Willow!" the Queen shouted, but to no avail. Willow heard her, but the sound didn't register as meaningful words.

The Queen yanked Willow's rapier from its sheath and her eyes darted about the room until she spotted a floor-standing display case. She dragged the case; it moved in fits and starts.

“Willow, help me—oh never mind!” She pointed at the jeweler cowering beside the counter. “You! Help me get this case down.”

The jeweler’s pallor was ghostlike, but he ran to the Queen’s aid. Together, they heaved the case across the room. It toppled, and a fortune in jewelry spilled to the floor, and the glass top of the case shattered into a thousand sparkling fragments.

“Wedge it against the door,” the Queen said. The jeweler whimpered at the wreckage, but nevertheless did as instructed. Together they pushed the case against the door.

Just in time, too. They heard the last Elite’s dying scream, followed by a thunderous crash against the shop door. It buckled, and the display case slid back into the room. A muscular arm reached through the crack and groped for whatever was bolstering the door.

Willow watched in stymied agony. Why couldn’t she act? Where was her precious discipline?

“Dammit, Willow!” the Queen shouted. “Do something!”

But Willow was trapped in the prison of her suppressed past. She fought to keep from remembering. Tears streamed down her face. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

There was a crash in the backroom. The sound of a door slamming and footsteps running.

“Oh no,” cried the jeweler, who then slid into a supply closet and closed the door behind him.

“Damn the curl!” cried the Queen. “Is everyone a coward?” She pressed her back against the display case and brandished Willow’s rapier.

“Vazerian, stay down,” she whispered. “Don’t make a sound, no matter what happens.”

The door to the back room opened. The Queen tightened her grip on the rapier.

But through the door came Captain Snyder and two of his lieutenants.

“Your Majesty,” he said, his face flushed, his eyes darting. “Are you hurt? Where is His Highness? Has he been taken?”

“Snyde, thank the gods *you’re* here,” the Queen said, aiming the venom in her voice at Willow. “No, Vazerian’s safe behind the counter.”

“Stand clear from the door, ma’am,” Snyde said.

The Queen dove to the side, and the door burst open, sending the remnants of the display case flying. One of the barbarians stormed into the room, his axe whirling. He was enormous, his head almost touching the low ceiling. His arms were as thick as Willow’s legs.

Snyde was there. His rapier whistled and found its mark in the barbarian’s chest, piercing the leather hide and wounding him. The barbarian howled and swung his axe. Snyde side-stepped and the axe embedded in the floor beside him, sending up a rain of splinters.

Snyde lunged again and this time, he buried the rapier a third of the way into the barbarian’s chest. The wound was telling and the barbarian dropped, his axe sticking upright from the floor like a bizarre tree trunk.

“Willow,” Snyde said, “Wake up! There are too many of them. I need your help protecting the Royal Family.”

Willow simply stood there, shivering, holding herself. Not in front of Snyde, her mind begged. Please do *something*.

“Willow!”

No response. Snyde left the door unguarded as he crossed to her.

“Willow!” He slapped her across the face. The force of the blow snapped her head so that her ear nearly touched her shoulder.

She stared at him with wide eyes and then threw herself against him. She began to sob. Nonplussed, Snyde threw an awkward arm over her shoulder.

“Um?” he said, seemingly more terrified by her breakdown than from the attacking hordes. “Um, Willow?”

Another barbarian burst through the door and Willow shrieked like a child. She was aware at how appalling her behavior was, but she

was powerless to stop it. Tears of rage and frustration mixed with the terror she already felt. She felt betrayed by her mutinous mind and body, which refused to obey her orders.

Snyde shoved Willow off to the side and lunged at the barbarian's midsection. The barbarian parried his attack, his axe almost knocking Snyde's rapier from his grasp. He pressed Snyde back against the counter with a rapid series of axe chops.

"Willow!" Snyde shouted, fumbling to regain his grip on his weapon.

The Queen flanked the barbarian and drove Willow's sword through his ribs.

"Forget about her. She's useless."

Barbarians flowed into the room from the back. Snyde's two lieutenants engaged them, but were outnumbered. The first lieutenant managed to draw blood along an enemy's hairy arm, but his foe shrugged off the wound and decapitated him with a single swing of his axe. The other lieutenant caught an axe blade to the belly and dropped to the floor, his life's blood draining onto the priceless jewelry scattered there.

Snyde leapt to engage the largest of the group, but one of the others bashed Snyde's head with an axe pommel. The captain took one more step and then fell to the ground, convulsing in agony. Moments later, his eyes rolled up and he lost consciousness.

One of the barbarians grabbed the Queen by her shoulders. She sliced his leg with Willow's rapier.

"Willow! We need your help!"

The wounded barbarian yanked the rapier from her hands, tossed it aside, and then wrapped his hands around her throat. She gagged.

"Mother!" the Prince cried, leaping from his hiding place. He pointed a finger at the barbarian. "Don't you hurt her! She's a Queen; not some commoner that one rapes and pillages."

"Vazerian!" she croaked. "Run!"

Too late. The other two barbarians vaulted the counter and grabbed the Prince. After a brief struggle, they bound his hands and legs, trussing him up like a pig for slaughter.

“Mother!”

“Let go of him, you monsters! If you harm him, I’ll hunt down every last one of you!”

The wounded barbarian backhanded the Queen and she gasped. Tears streamed from her eyes. She slid to the floor.

“Mother!” The two were carrying him from the store. The wounded barbarian hulked over the Queen, guarding against her interference.

Willow stood in her corner, watching.

“Don’t hurt him.” The Queen was kneeling, supplicating. “Please.”

“Mother,” the Prince wailed once more, and then was gone.

The wounded barbarian flashed a contemptuous glance at Willow. He turned to leave.

“Bastard!” The Queen drew a small knife from her boot, leapt to her feet, and stabbed the Barbarian in the side of his neck. When she withdrew it, blood jetted from the wound.

The barbarian whirled on her, teeth bared, but in two strides his eyes rolled and he collapsed.

The Queen ran into the back room. In the dim recesses of Willow’s mind, she could hear her sobbing.

Just like before, Willow thought.

The Queen shook Snyder awake.

“They’ve taken him!” she said, her oval face flushed red with anguish. “Find them!”

“Taken him?” Snyder rubbed the back of his head, dazed.

“Vazerian, you idiot! They’ve taken the Prince!”

Now his eyes began to focus. He clambered to his feet.

“Where?” he asked. He shook his head to clear it. “Which way did

they head?”

The Queen pointed to the rear of the store. “That way. Hurry!”

Snyde glanced at Willow. She tried to stare imperiously back, but her defenses were demolished. Instead, she averted her gaze, the shame burning in her cheeks.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Snyde said and then departed.

Willow started to follow, but the Queen clamped an iron grip on her arm.

“*Not you,*” the Queen said. “You let them take my son. I’ll see you hanged for treason.”

Willow clasped a hand to her chest. Her heart was pounding so hard, she felt it would surely burst.

“Your Majesty,” Willow said. “I—”

“Save it, Willow.” The Queen’s eyes blazed. “You’ve had this coming for a very long time.”

Willow’s thundering heart seemed to grow larger in her chest. She placed her other hand against the wall for support.

“You’re out,” the Queen said. “Out of the Guard. No, wait. Better than that: you’re demoted. Report to your new commanding officer, *Private* Willow. If I’m not mistaken, that would be Lieutenant Marcus.”

The Queen rubbed her hands together, her eyebrows furrowed, her teeth bared.

“And you’d better hope that Snyde finds my son and returns him alive. If anything happens to Vazerian, I’ll have you put in Fyrelord’s Blood Press; see if I don’t. You’ve gotten away with too much for far too long. Your time is at an end, Willow.”

## CHAPTER 6

Discipline.

Discipline is what kept Willow’s face impassive when everything

inside her was a raging torrent of humiliation and fury. Discipline is what kept her standing while her weak knees threatened to topple her into a pathetic heap before her Queen.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Willow said, and she was relieved at how calm her voice sounded. A mild quaver, perhaps, but not unacceptable given the circumstances. The Queen’s eyes registered surprise at Willow’s apparent indifference.

Not indifference: discipline. But oh, where had that discipline been when she had most needed it?

“You will of course need to have the Chancellor issue that order through proper channels,” Willow added. “Would Your Majesty like me to remain with her until she has conveyed her edict?”

The Queen’s eyes narrowed, studied Willow’s.

Discipline. Willow’s face would betray none of her anguish. Her life was over. She had destroyed herself. All that remained was to decide on the proper method of suicide. Nothing else could possibly redeem her.

“No,” the Queen said, her voice acid. “You’ve already been more than enough help. You may remove yourself from my sight immediately.”

Willow saluted. For one terrible moment, she felt her knees buckle, but she reacted quickly. As she fought to control her plunge, she swooped her arm to make her near-fall look like an insouciant bow and flourish.

“As Your Majesty commands,” Willow said, and then turned to face the door, her limbs numb.

The Queen’s voice stabbed Willow in the back.

“You’ll regret your insolence. And for your sake, you should pray fervently for Vazerian’s safe return. Your life depends on it. Now get out of my sight, *Private* Willow,” the Queen said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Willow’s hand fumbled on the doorknob. She saw her fingers



grasp it but did not feel its substance beneath her fingertips. Nevertheless, she managed to open the door and she stepped out onto the street.

Much had changed since she had entered. The corpses of a handful of barbarians littered the street, with almost twice as many members of the Guard mixed in. All four of the Elite posted outside the shop were dead.

And in the middle of the street, two Guards were kneeling beside Tamlevar's corpse. Willow's heart sunk into her chest.

*Elidon, I've killed your son!*

Discipline. She had to have d—

A sob bubbled up, but she fought to suppress it. No! She bit her tongue, hard, and the sudden pain washed away the emotion. Tamlevar was dead, and foolish tears would not bring him back.

Discipline.

She approached his body. One of the guards looked up. His face was pale, and his eyes red-rimmed.

"He's hurt really bad, Captain!"

Still alive! The smile pressed at the corners of her mouth, but she kept her face neutral.

"Any other wounded?" she said.

"No, ma'am. All the wounded are dead except Tamlevar here."

Willow knelt beside Tamlevar's unconscious body, examined the wound. She inhaled deeply.

His belly had been slit and she caught a glimpse of his entrails beneath. The pavement around him was crimson with his blood.

She tore a strip of silk from the undershirt beneath her armored jacket and its padding. Next, she fished the canister of Szun's Ointment from her belt and doused the wadded cloth in the pure alcohol. She handed it to the corporal.

"Put your hands *here* and *here*, and press the wound closed. You—" she addressed the private now "—use this salve to clean the wound

and then press on it firmly to prevent further blood loss,” she said. “Hold it there until the corpsmen arrive.”

She turned, but the corporal stopped her.

“But where are you going?” he blurted.

“I know someone who can save him.” Without another word, she marched calmly away from Tamlevar’s dying body as though she hadn’t a care in the world.

But as soon as she was around the corner and out of sight, she ran as fast as her legs could carry her towards the tower of Suel the Mage.

## CHAPTER 7

Suel’s Tower was the ugliest building in Bryanae. It resembled a charred piece of wood thrust into the mud at an angle and forgotten. It had looked like this when Willow arrived in Bryanae all those years ago, and it would probably look the same hundreds of years from now.

Her exhaustion increasing, Willow slowed her pace to a plodding jog. As she approached the tower, the plaque at its base came into view:

ON THIS SPOT DID KING ERIC THE STRONG GIVE HIS LIFE  
TO VANQUISH THE SORCERER FYRELORD, THEREBY SAVING  
THE GREAT CITY OF PANINETH.  
YEAR 37 / REIGN OF KING ERIC THE STRONG

Even now, Willow couldn’t help but be amused. One of the few advantages of living so long a life was getting to see how lies turned into legends and then into historical fact. For instance, very few people knew that the words on the plaque were almost exactly wrong.

She approached the huge double-doors to Suel’s Tower, out of

breath and her heart pounding in her chest. The mage was no doubt aware of her presence by now. If she were welcome, the doors would swing open on their own. That was what passed for Suel's sense of humor.

The doors remained shut.

Fine, she'd do it the hard way then.

Willow grabbed one of the door rings in both hands and braced a foot against the other door. Her muscles bunched. At first, the door didn't budge, but then it grudgingly screeched open.

The inside of the tower had changed little since the sorcerer Antalus Fyrelord had lived, and subsequently died, in it. A king's ransom in treasure lay scattered about the dusty hall that consumed the entire first floor. Suel, unlike his predecessor, had made at least a token effort to keep things clean and to protect the more valuable items: swords and armor were oiled, paintings and furniture draped with cloth, and so on. The effect was akin to entering a museum prior to its grand opening.

There used to be a staircase at the far end of the hall, leading from the main hall to the floor above, where Fyrelord's laboratory had been. But that staircase was gone.

After all, Fyrelord hadn't had wings.

Without a staircase, getting into Suel's laboratory would be difficult. Willow tried the obvious approach first. She cupped her hands to her mouth and called out to the mage. Her voice echoed throughout the hall, but there was no response. Oh well, it had been worth a try.

She eyed the opening in the ceiling above her. It was well over four times her height. Very well.

Willow searched the hall for items she could use as a makeshift ladder. She dragged a table to the wall under the opening and then hoisted a slightly smaller table on top of it. She found a large stool and placed it at the top of the pyramid. She dared not pile anything

higher. Every moment was one less moment Tamlevar had to live; if she fell, it would cost her more than just a few bruises.

She removed her boots and climbed with great care. Her sense of balance had always been keen and she wasn't very heavy. At the pinnacle of her scaffolding, she stood about a third of the way to the opening in the ceiling.

Now came the hard part. She fitted her fingers into the cracks between stones, lifted herself slightly, and then did the same with her toes. With excruciating slowness, she scaled the stone wall.

Her hands were already aching from opening the front door, but now the dull ache turned to dull fire.

Discipline.

Tamlevar lay dying. Every second she paused to collect her strength was a second robbed from him. His wounds were severe. He might have hours to live, or he might be dead already.

She climbed. Sweat dripped into her eyes. Each handhold was a sharp burst of fiery pain.

Discipline.

"Damn you, Suel," she muttered.

Almost there. Her fingers felt as though they were being filed away to raw meat. She kept her face an impassive mask out of habit, though there was nobody to see her. Discipline.

She reached the hole in the ceiling and pulled herself through onto the stone floor above. She climbed to her bloody feet. The wooden doors were in front of her. She pushed them open without knocking.

The stone chamber within was nearly as large as the floor below, but was dominated by wooden bookshelves that covered almost the entire circumference of the room, save for the doorway through which she had entered. The window behind the desk at the far end of the room revealed the sun approaching noon. Precious moments were slipping away.

At the desk, the mage sat, his head on its surface. He appeared to

be asleep.

Terrific.

“Suel,” Willow said.

He didn’t stir.

Perhaps he was dead. That was just what she needed.

“*Suel*,” she said, a little louder.

The mage snorted once, coughed twice, and then looked up at her.

“What the hell do you want?” he asked. Though bald from just above the ears to the crown of his head, he still wore what hair he had to shoulder length. He pushed this hair out of his eyes and glared at Willow.

“Elidon’s son has been seriously hurt. I need one of Fyrelord’s Elixirs.”

“Don’t have any,” Suel said. “Tough luck. Now if you don’t mind ...”

Willow took a deep breath and slowly released it. She had already humiliated herself in front of her Queen and was being demoted to private, so what *else* could they do to her?

She drew her rapier.

“I’m afraid I *do* mind, Suel.”

He glanced at the rapier.

“You know I could fry you to cinders, don’t you?”

Willow’s eyes narrowed.

“I know you could try,” she said. “But if you failed, the results would be ... unpleasant for you.”

Suel licked his lips, then sighed the lament of a great man besieged by an array of mundane indignities.

“Come here,” he said. “I’ll make you another elixir.”

Willow crossed the gargantuan hall. His eyes lit upon her bleeding hands.

“Ah good,” he said, “you’re already bleeding. That’ll make things easier.”





photo: Wai Ng



JEFFREY GETZIN graduated from Clark University where he won the Loring Holmes and Ruth Dodd Drama Contest for an original one-act play. He has a master's degree in Computer Science from the University of Pittsburgh. Jeffrey is a former employee at Google and now develops software for Flatiron Health and lives in New Jersey with his long-time girlfriend Kate and a seemingly infinite number of cats.

Jeffrey is a lifelong practitioner of various martial arts, and currently holds a purple belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu under Renzo Gracie black belt Jamie Cruz and has trained in Muay Thai under legendary fighter Kaensak Sor Ploenjit. He currently trains under Andy and Mike Main at Pure Mixed Martial Arts. He has competed in table tennis at the national level. Jeffrey is an avid film and home theater buff. Also, his mother says he is very handsome.

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