



Ravenward

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by
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CHAPTER ONE

Thea the Loyal

The moments leading up to a battle were usually worse than the battle itself. Thea's plate mail armor glistened in the early morning sun. Laying behind a short rock wall, she held up an eyeglass, studying Nightfall Meadows.

"Well?" Kade Ravenward asked. "What do you see, *ma'am* knight?" He crossed his arms.

Thea focused on some activity near the clearing's edge. "I see a farmhouse with a dock on the Fadyhl Waters. It seems to be just on the edge where a boat can safely cross over from Etrana."

The strong, blond-haired man scratched his chin. "We can't have that; they could trade with the Vulwin Elves without paying taxes," Kade said.

"Shut up, you greedy goblin," the youthful man with long brown hair said as he approached them from behind. "Focus, people; we only get one shot at this."

Thea unsuccessfully tried to hide the smirk making its way onto her face. "Sire, it seems like the reports were right. The Feral Orcs are raiding the farm for food."

Kade brushed his shoulder-length blond hair away from his eyes. "Galín, do we need her? She's stating the obvious here. Besides, we don't know what they're doing. If they are a raiding party under the Darkstriders, this is far more than merely hunting for food. They could be establishing a beachhead for a major attack."

Thea rolled her eyes. "With all due respect, my lord, that's not possible. Where's their siege equipment? Why aren't they building bigger docks to handle larger ships to bring more troops on shore? No, my lord, they aren't establishing a beachhead."

Galín grinned as Kade's face grew redder. "Kade, relax. She's right, and you know it. True, they may want to establish a beachhead, but they are a long way from doing that," Galín said. The king put his hand on Thea's shoulder. "Ready?"

Her stomach twisted. This was her first battle. After years of training, would Thea cower in the face of a real opponent? She'd heard about knights who were viewed as the most honorable, but fled at the first sight of battle. Would she be that way? Would she run away as they all expected her to? "I won't let you down, sire."

"I know you won't." Galin motioned Kade's pyromancer to come forward. "Beldroth, I need you to give us some cover, or at least a diversion while we cross the field. The orcs knew what they were doing when they burnt down everything within six hundred yards of their camp."

"The farmhouse, you mean?" Beldroth asked.

"Yeah, I think that's where their camp is. Feral Orcs will flee once their leader is dead."

The sensual woman with flowing, long brown hair smiled. "With pleasure, my lord." Beldroth reached under her red cloak and pulled out a pouch of cedar chips. "I can only maintain the barrage for at most twenty seconds." She sat down behind the rock wall with the farmhouse in full view. Beldroth pulled out her spell book and began to prepare for the assault.

Thea the Loyal pierced the ground with her sword. Kneeling behind it, she placed both hands on its hilt and closed her eyes. A circle with a blindfolded man carrying an ax in one hand and an olive branch in the other entered her mind. Thea prayed to the God of Justice. "Lord Ramir, grant us the strength and courage to carry out your judgment upon these creatures. Amen."

"Ready, Thea?" Galin asked. After she nodded, he turned to Beldroth. "Light them up."

Beldroth held the cedar chips in her hands a few inches above her lap. "Den nrad nier." Her dark eyes turned red. White smoke rose from the cedar.

Thea stood up, waving at her men to follow her. One by one, each lightly armored man rose with sword and shield in hand.

"Den nrad nier; Den nrad nier."

Thea gasped as a cloud formed above the tiny farmhouse. Not a white or even a black cloud, but a cloud that glowed like the embers in a fire. At first it was small, and then it grew and grew. Thea waved her knights forward. She was slow at first, increasing her pace with every step. In front of her, the Feral Orcs were scattering in fear

as the menacing shadow expanded over them.

"Ramir is definitely with us today," Thea said to herself.

She raised her hand, giving the signal to stop.

It started with a single ember falling like a meteorite from the cloud. It slammed into the ground right by the farmhouse door. The two orcs hiding behind the woodpile exploded into flames. Then came another, and another. As soon as one ember crashed to the ground, two more appeared.

The foul stench of burning flesh began to overtake her, forcing her to taste breakfast for a second time.

Beldroth's blood-curdling scream could be heard across the field. As soon as the first sound left her throat, the rain of fire stopped and the cloud vanished.

Thea blinked. "Sire, are we attacked from behind?"

"No, but we lost our cover," Galin said. He turned towards his men. "Follow —"

"Follow me!" Kade shouted as he charged into the disorientated Feral Orcs.

"That bastard," Galin muttered. "Come on, Thea, before he takes all the glory."

With nothing left to fear from the sky, the orcs regrouped, forming a line. Most carried two weapons in their powerful, over-sized arms. Some used axes while others used short swords, and the rest used some combination of the two. There was only one exception; the one who carried a great ax and was twice the size of the others.

Thea raised her sword, pointing at the orc line. "Charge!"

Two hundred yards.

The largest of the Feral Orcs yelled something. He charged towards Thea with his clan close behind him.

Yes, that one must be the leader. If we kill him, it's over, Thea thought.

One hundred twenty-five yards.

Thea was nearly at a sprint, roaring as she passed Kade.

"Damn you."

Seventy-five yards.

The orc leader raised the great ax above its head. After giving a thunderous roar, the orc line sprinted towards Thea.

Fifty yards.

As the greenish monsters came closer, her body wanted to flee. She needed to prove herself. This was it. If she turned now, that

bastard Kade would be right. Thea gritted her teeth. A fierce cry bellowed from her lungs. "Follow me!" With her shield raised and her sword overhead, Thea charged directly at the huge orc.

With its great ax raised in the air, the massive creature barreled towards Thea.

Great axes are powerful, but slow and clumsy. Pulling her shield in tightly into her body, she raced towards it.

Ten yards.

An orc cut in front of their leader. It leaped into the air and spun like a top, with two axes hacking anything in its path.

Judging where it would land, she stopped quickly.

The creature missed its mark, burying one of the axes into the ground.

Her eyes met the orc's as she slammed her shield into its face. With a full adrenaline rush, she dropped her sword like a curtain. Thea's broadsword severed the Feral Orc's head from its body, splattering its green blood across her face. More...she wanted more. Greedy, wicked eyes bored into the leader's inhuman soul.

The large creature took a step back, flailing the great ax in Thea's direction.

"Thea, he's mine!" Kade shouted as he hacked another orc, making his way to her.

She didn't hear him. More...she wanted to spill more orc blood. Who cared about orders or status? She'd tasted glory for the first time. It was orgasmic; no, it was better than that. Thea rammed her shield into the orc's chest, forcing it to take a step back.

Kade pushed Thea aside as he charged into the huge orc, knocking her down.

The great ax slammed into Kade's shield, throwing him back into the melee. It grinned at Thea as it raised the mighty weapon into the air.

I am going to die! Rolling over on her back, she braced behind her shield.

The massive weapon split Thea's shield in half. As it reared up for another attack, she swung her sword at its legs.

The leader quickly sidestepped and kicked Thea in the face in one fluid motion.

"Thea!" Galin charged towards her, slicing orcs as he went.

The king! How could she be rescued by the king? Nothing would be worse than Thea tossed away what was left of her shield. The broadsword her adopted father

gave her now lay across her hands like a shield, protecting her body.

The leader raised the great ax again, sending it towards Thea's chest with all its might.

She was nearly blinded by the glint off the great ax. The broadsword's flat side was braced to take the full force of the weapon. Was this it? Was her first battle going to be her last? As the ax crashed into her sword, the blade snapped like a dried twig.

Thea dropped the broken blade. While holding onto the hilt, she did a half-roll to the left. With the orc leaning over her, a small area just below the ribs was exposed. Her iron grasp on the hilt with a partial blade could not be broken. She held onto it as if her life depended on it, because it did. With every ounce of strength, she thrust the partial blade's jagged end into the leader's torso.

Screaming in agony and surprise, the huge orc fell on top of Thea, pinning her to the ground.

Thea struggled to push the behemoth off her body.

"Thea, watch out!" Galin screamed as he charged toward her with his sword raised.

What is he talking about? I already killed the leader. She quickly looked around for her new foe and saw another orc charging at her with two axes. What could she do? Her sword was broken and she was pinned to the ground. Sweat poured down her face, stinging her eyes. "Can someone help get this thing off of me?" Her bloodshot eyes opened wide as the orc leaped towards her.

In mid-air, Galin slammed his shield into the orc's side. The cracking of its ribs was deafening. Before the creature hit the ground, Galin's sword pierced its heart. He knelt down next to Thea. "You all right?"

Thea smiled. "Just a little squished by this fat thing. Some help please, sire?"

As he pushed the hulking creature off her, Thea saw the king's army rush past them. "What's going on?"

Galín extended his hand to help her up. "After you killed the leader, the rest of them fled back to their boats. Thank you, Thea. You did the kingdom a great service today."

Thea blushed. "No, sire, I owe you my life. I swear to you that your family will be on the throne as long as I live, even after you're gone."

"You don't have to do that," Galin said.

Kade chuckled as he joined Galin.
"Especially since he has no children. He has no heir to the throne."

Galín smiled. "Fair enough. What's our status?"

"We overran them. Every orc still here is dead. Some escaped on the boats, not a lot, but enough to warn their tribe to stay away from my kingdom."

"*My kingdom, you mean.*"

"Of course, *sire.*"

Thea rolled her eyes at the squabbling brothers. Whoever would have thought that twelve seconds would have made such trouble between fraternal twin brothers? She wiped her sword on the dead orc and returned it to its sheath. "I can manage the cleanup here, sire."

Galín nodded. "Very well." His gaze lingered over towards Kade. "I guess you missed another chance at the throne."

Kade stared at his brother walking away from the battlefield. "True, but it won't be long," he muttered.

Thea frowned.

CHAPTER TWO

Spoils of War

As the army entered through the gates of Staerdale Castle, Thea broke away from the formation. Being the only female knight, she was granted some minimal privileges, such as changing in her own quarters rather than in front of her fellow knights. Merchants holding up chickens and other bobbles rushed up to her as she trotted down the street. That ride never seemed to get old. It was still the same as when her father would bring her to meet with the king, Galin's father, Galin III of Ravenward. People seemed to beg more now than she remembered, but she was only a child then. What child paid attention to the poor? Certainly not her. Her horse stopped in front of a modest house with a thatched roof.

"Great job today, Dena," Thea said as she hopped off the horse. Dena's large, dark-brown eyes complemented her brown mane with white stripes along her back. Thea loved Dena, her only true, loyal friend. "Be back in a minute." She tied Dena off to the hitching post outside the door.

Thea entered her quiet home. It was a simple two-room house, where the smaller room had an unkempt bed next to the window. The larger room had an oversized fireplace with a single rocking chair in the middle of the room. Along the far wall were shelves so crude that any artisan would have hung himself if he had made them. Thea was strong-willed and believed she could do anything. Over in the corner was an armor stand made by her father. She walked up to it, tossing the plate mail armor pieces onto the dirt floor.

Thea frowned. She spent so little time at home that it became unkempt and disheveled. In the castle or in front of her fellow knights, no one was more organized or neater than she. So much so, in fact, that they occasionally accused her of being the 'knight's nanny.' The first time she heard it, Thea broke the surprised knight's nose.

Things will be different now. No longer was she the only knight not to see battle. No longer was she going to be the object of every joke in the Great Hall. She'd proved herself.

She rubbed her lower back, which was sore from the long ride from Nightfall Meadows. The battle with the Feral Orcs was over, but the war against the Darkstriders continued. Even though they won the battle, the toughest fight today was not on the field, but in the king's court. Today was her first battle, but this would not be her first time in court, which can be far more dangerous than two armies of orcs. She paused at her door. Court would be different this time because now she was a participant rather than an observer. She already had a title, wasn't that enough? No, *real* knights are landowners, as well as great fighters. What was her leverage? She killed the Feral Orc leader, which was the turning point in the battle and the Galin knew it. After taking a deep breath, she headed for the castle.

Thea strode the halls of Staerdale Castle as if she owned them. As she approached the Great Hall's two large solid oak doors, she

took a deep breath. No more wishing, wanting, or telling others what she *would* do; it was time to do it. The resolve on her face masked her anxiety as she passed through the doorway into the Great Hall.

A faint fragrance of rose petals invaded her senses. They may have been thrown about the marble flagstone floor only to mask the lack of plumbing in the castle, but they did far more than that for Thea. With each step, the aroma bolstered her confidence. The hall was twice as long as it was wide. Instinctively, Thea glanced at the catwalk nearly eight feet off the ground all along its the walls, just below the windows overlooking the castle gate. The red tapestries with gold fringe had a dark-blue triangle on the top half. Below the triangle, a colorful embroidery depicted the Ravenward family history. Everything from great battles to the most famous kings the royal family had ever produced. In front of the tapestries, in between large support pillars, was a single line of chairs and benches.

Thea's breath grew shorter as her stomach twisted into knots. There he was, the one who seemed to hate her the most, Duke Kade of Ravenward, standing right next to

Beldroth. Thea loved Galin like a brother. The king's father took Thea in when her noble parents were murdered by a band of orcs. After their death, her family's lands were dispersed and divided among the neighboring lords, leaving her with nothing. She stepped up onto the dais along with several other knights, Duke Kade, and a few old men who continued to serve as advisers to the king. She gazed over at the two empty thrones along the wall at the far end of the dais. "When are they supposed to arrive, my lord?" she asked Kade.

"Soon; my brother is late already," Kade replied. He pulled out a small parchment from his flowing green robes.

"What's that?" Thea asked.

"My province's list of expenses for the war effort. My dear, war is very expensive, and I'm tired of paying my brother's bills."

"You mean the king's bills."

Kade pointed at the door to the left of the larger throne. "The king has to realize that time wasted can be more costly than war. In order to pay his bills, I have to nearly starve my people. Don't think he's an angel because he saved you today. Oh no, you'll be paying

that debt the rest of your life at a far greater cost."

Thea wanted to hit Kade. How could someone, especially the king's own brother, hate him so much? How could anyone lie like that and get away with it? Her eyes narrowed. "You're just jealous of him."

Kade laughed. "Of what? His wife's ugly, and they don't have any children."

"Your twin brother is the king, and you're not. That's why you're—"

"Enough!" Galin bellowed as he and Queen Nina passed through the door behind the thrones. "Thea, you know better than to challenge my brother."

She lowered her eyes. "Sire, I apologize." Thea looked towards Kade. "My lord, please forgive me."

Kade threw his hand up in front of Thea's face while he turned towards Galin. "Galín, what were the spoils from the battle today?"

Galín helped the seventeen-year-old queen with fiery red hair to her throne. She sat down slowly, keeping one hand on her belly. "Kade, must you always talk about money?" Nina asked.

"It's all right, Nina," Galín said as he assumed his position on the throne. "The

Feral Orcs brought gold and – what did you call the other items, Beldroth?"

Beldroth's long blond hair was let down, contrasting with her black robes. "Material spell components. The ones found were not for neutral or light magic; they could only be used for dark magic."

"Darkstriders then?" Kade asked.

A young girl carrying a tray came out the same door the king and queen had used earlier. "Tea, sire?"

"Please," Galin said as he took a cup from her. "Thank you, Sally."

"Do we have to be interrupted now? This is important, Galin," Kade said.

After Sally had given Nina her cup, she assumed the place of the Queen's handmaiden behind the throne.

Thea elbowed Kade. "My lord, the king was speaking."

"It's all right, Thea. My finance minister tells me the gold and magic components are worth nearly 250,000 crowns," Galin said.

Kade passed Galin the small parchment he'd kept under his robes. "That's great news, Galin. Ithsein province has been the greatest contributor to the kingdom of

Axain. We've supplied weapons, food, and men to confront our enemies..."

Thea rolled her eyes. Was it just her, or could Kade flip his attitude like a copper coin? The king wouldn't fall for this, would he? Kade, along with his pyromancer, Beldroth, was an expert on manipulating the royal court. Sometimes, she wished he would just shut up.

"...I provided you a list of the people's needs to compensate them for their sacrifice. Galin, my people are going without basic needs to protect the kingdom." Kade glanced over at Beldroth with pleading eyes.

"Sire," Beldroth began, "its worse than my lord is saying. If we don't cut our taxes, the people could revolt. That would endanger the *entire* kingdom."

"Let me see," Galin said as his eyes lowered onto the parchment. "You're asking for lands from Axain, gold for armor, weapons, castle construction, the building of a wall, and livestock imported from the Vulwin Elves." Galin straightened up. "You want tax exemption for the use of Port Eldham? Is there nothing here for the people? Seriously, Kade, this list seems more

like a royal slush fund rather than taking care of the people's needs."

"Galín, I—"

Galín raised his hand, silencing Kade. "Thea, what do you think?" he asked as he handed her the parchment.

Thea's fingers trembled as she took the paper from the king. This was her chance, but she didn't want to make things worse with the king's brother, either. Her stomach danced and twisted. Should she say what she really thought or what the king wanted to hear? What did the king want to hear? Thea's eyes darted from Galín to Kade and back again. Arguing is one thing; accusing Duke Kade of trying to swindle the king out of much-needed resources was quite another. No, she was a knight sworn to be honorable. "Sire, I think *all* the spoils should be reinvested into the kingdom's security."

"What about my people? Will you be there if they rebel?" Kade demanded.

Thea turned towards Kade. "Are your taxes that high because of the king's demands or yours?"

Kade's mouth opened, but nothing came out. "He—I—the king's, of course."

Beldroth's eyes glistened and her face darkened. "Careful, young one," she whispered.

Galin tried to hide his snicker by sipping his tea. "I think the young knight has it right. What do you think, my dear?"

Nina handed her cup to Sally. "I know she does." She smiled at Thea. "You did all the women in the kingdom proud today."

Galin shook his head. "No, she was not a female knight. Today, she *is* a knight." He stood up, addressing everyone in the room. "For those of you who don't know, Thea was instrumental in winning the battle today. She slew the Feral Orc leader, which was the turning point of the day." His eyes veered towards Kade. "One of us tried to do everything possible to take all the glory for himself, regardless of the outcome or who it would hurt..."

Where's he going with this? Thea thought.

"...True nobility derives from the burning desire to help and serve others, not lining one's purse."

Kade's face reddened. "Galin, what are you—"

Galin smiled. "Thea, you did a great service to our kingdom today. I want to

repay my debt by giving you your family's land back and 150,000 crowns to make it productive again."

"What?" Kade demanded. "Those are *my* lands!"

"They're *Thea's* family's lands, not yours."

"I won't do it."

Beldroth gave a sharp elbow to Kade's ribs. "He didn't mean that, sire."

Galin's calm face twisted in anger. "To pay for the 150,000 crowns, I will levy a new tax on all goods entering Axain destined to be traded with the Vulwin Elves, in addition to the port tax."

"That will break me, Galin. You can't do that! I'll have to raise taxes again!" Kade said.

"You're not king yet, Kade, which means I can."

"You haven't had a son after how many years of trying? I'm the heir to the throne, Galin. You know that. My loyalty is to our father, and when I promised to keep our family on the throne, I meant it. Did you?"

Thea moved in front of Kade, blocking him from the king.

"We're done here." Galin helped Nina up from her throne. With Nina and Sally in tow,

Galin headed for the door behind the thrones.

"Sire, thank you so much," Thea said.

"You deserve it."

Thea watched the door close behind them.

CHAPTER THREE

Big News

Thea barely noticed the slight breeze on her face as she rode Dena over the cobblestone road. Marlie's Bakery filled the air with the fragrance of freshly baked sweetbread, causing her stomach to rumble. One day, her manor would be like this...someday. Now that Galin had given her land and a lot of money to get started, she was truly on equal grounds with the other knights. What kind of bakers or merchants should she have in the square just outside of her manor? Maybe then she'd find someone to love. Children...yes, she wanted children. But, who had the time? She certainly didn't. Always on Galin's short leash, Thea had to be ready to leave for

months at a time. Despite all that, she wanted a child.

Clop. Clop. Clop.

Thea strained her eyes as she turned the corner, putting the setting sun directly in front of her. She squinted to keep the sun's attack at bay. There it was, the clanging of a blacksmith hammer on raw steel over an anvil. Could he repair her sword? If so, he was a better blacksmith than Thea thought. She knew Brock Feran from his failed attempt to become a knight. Unlike Thea, Brock was not born with noble blood. No, he was a commoner through and through. The only thing not common about Brock was his skill with a bastard sword.

Clop. Clop. Clop.

Smoke from his forge pierced her nostrils. With the sun recoiling behind the mountain, Brock's Blacksmith Shop came into focus. Like its owner, it was simple; a wooden building with a thatched roof. The completely enclosed portion was Brock's home. A long wooden roof extended from the right side of the house parallel to the main street. Street side, there were three support columns made from oak. Attached to the farthest column from the house was a

weapons rack filled with daggers and short swords. An athletic man with a well-developed upper body stood over the anvil in the center of the room. The forge, facing towards the anvil, shared the chimney with the house in the center of the wall.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

As Thea got closer, her nose began to itch from the smoke. She dismounted Dena, tying her off to the hitching post next to the small weapons display. Carrying what was left of her sword, she stepped inside the open-air shop. She couldn't take her eyes off him. Brock's arms had grown enormously in just a few years. Thea licked her lips.

Brock tossed the ball peen hammer down on a small table and placed the steel he had been working on back into the forge. He looked up at the rack hung between two columns and grabbed a brown towel that was hanging on a long nail. Brock paused, as if in thought, and kept his back to her.

Was he ignoring her? Is he still mad after all these years? "Brock, I need some help."

"What?" Brock asked with his back still turned toward Thea. "What do you want now?"

Yup, he was still bitter. How long can one man hold a grudge? "My sword broke when we fought the orcs at Nightfall Meadows."

Reluctantly, Brock faced Thea. "Let me see." He took the broken sword from her. "There's only about eight inches of the blade left. I can make a dagger out of it if you want. Fix it? No way. I could make you a new blade and attach your hilt to it."

Thea smiled. "Good, I need it in a couple days."

"Days? I'm not one of your subordinate knights anymore. I don't take orders from you. I'll get to it when I can. Remember, you're not the only knight at Staerdale Castle." He tossed the busted sword onto the small table, hitting the hammer. "Check back with me in a few weeks."

Her face reddened. How could he talk to her like that? She may be a woman, but she was also a knight and of noble blood, unlike *him*. Brock was the best—and the only—blacksmith at the market. "Brock, are you mad at me? I haven't been down here for months."

Brock sighed. "I'm sorry, Thea. It's just that the anniversary is coming up again. All I can

think about is everything I've lost because of *him*."

Thea leaned against a column. "Do you actually keep track of the day you were removed from the knighthood? Seriously, Brock—"

He picked up Thea's sword and brought it over to the workbench on the other side of the anvil. "Yes, I do. Seeing you here today only makes it worse. I was a good knight and beat nearly all of them. Until—"

"Until you fought Kade," she finished.

"I whooped him, and he knew it. It was because of him that I'm no longer a knight; no one else. Now look at me, I'm just a glorified whetstone." Brock popped the pommel from her sword. "The king gave me permission to become a knight after the work my father did for him. If Kade didn't rouse the other knights against me because I was the son of a blacksmith, I wouldn't be here right now."

Thea rolled her eyes. "Here we go again. Brock, you aren't a noble and your family line decides that, not the king."

Brock slammed down the small hammer. "How can you side with him? That *same* king

made an exception for a woman to be a knight. Why not a commoner?"

"You're better off here," she said under her breath.

"What did you say?"

"You—you've got no idea what the life of a knight is like. It's nothing like we thought it would be, not at all. We fought for honor, right?"

Brock nodded. "Yeah."

"There's none after you become a knight. Until today, I wasn't treated like a knight at all. I had no real title, money, or land. Every time I entered a conversation, I had to be better than everyone else just to keep their respect." She felt her blood race towards her face.

"Was that because of them or you?"

"I—please, just fix my sword." Thea abruptly turned and started towards Dena.

"Thea, wait a second." Brock laid his tools down and sighed. "You're right; *both* of us shouldn't have been knights. When the king gave me the choice, I chose to leave."

Thea stopped short. "You did what?"

"The king said it was up to me, but it would be best for the kingdom if I left. He gave me this shop and enough crowns to get

started. My father was here before he died of the fever that winter. I learned about being a blacksmith all my life, except for the brief time I was a knight. So yes, I chose the honorable thing by putting the people ahead of myself. That's something Kade would never do."

Did he leave by his choice? She didn't know that, nor did anyone else. When Kade told the trainees that Brock was thrown out, he gave the impression that he was dragged out, fighting the whole time. "I'm sorry, Brock."

"It's not been all bad. The truth is, I wouldn't have met Sally if I was still a knight." Brock smiled as he resumed removing the hilt from Thea's sword.

"Sally who?"

"Sally Healy, she's the queen's handmaiden. I love her."

"Does she know it?" Thea asked.

Brock started to pry the guard off the sword's tang. "I haven't told her, if that's what you mean. I'm loyal to the king's family, and his son who sits on the throne now. They were both good men."

Thea nodded. "After the king saved my life, I pledged myself to his family, not just him. When can I have my sword?"

He smiled at her. "Give me a week; some of the other knights can wait a little longer."

"Thanks, Brock." Thea grinned as she climbed on top of Dena. "I'm heading home. Maybe we can go to the tavern sometime — with Sally, of course."

"Why not tonight?"

"The queen has some big announcement tomorrow. I have to dress up for it and act like a lady."

Brock grinned. "Good luck with that."

After the next sunrise, Thea fell out of bed. The small room was barely big enough for the bed, but she still managed to fall onto the floor. The single item hanging on the wall was a small cracked mirror. She was still wearing the torn red tunic from last night. Reaching for a hairbrush, Thea raked through her hair, tearing out every knot. Why did it matter, anyway? She was a knight, not a lady. Bags drooped from her eyes, a strong reminder that she *shouldn't* have stopped at the tavern last night on her way home. Sure, Thea had every reason to

celebrate, but was it a celebration or an escape?

She tossed her rancid tunic onto the floor. Thea couldn't afford to have her own private bath, until yesterday. Add that to the list of things she'd buy for her manor house. Land, title, and crowns all came with a heavy price; her constant involvement in the king's court. She would prefer to ride out and see her new land and begin to spend her newly found wealth, but the king's court demanded her attention. Queen Nina was making an announcement today – unusual, but not unheard of.

Thea walked into the main room, looking for the washbowl. She smiled as her eyes zeroed in on the small piece of cracked pottery sitting on the counter underneath the southern window. Cupping the warm water in her hands, she washed her hangover away. Dabbing her face with the small brown towel next to the bowl, she decided. Today was the day. Once her court obligations were fulfilled, she *would* see her new lands and the peasants who would serve her. After she was completely dried off, Thea put on fresh tunic. After throwing

on her cape, she mounted Dena and headed towards the castle.

Duties at the king's court were the worst part of being a knight. No glory, no honor, just a bunch of sniveling old men fighting over table scraps.

As the double doors opened, the Great Hall was displayed in all its grandeur. Lords, ladies, knights, and members of the Ravenward clan bustled around the dais. Who did she want to mingle with first? On the queen's side of the hall stood Kade and Beldroth; she'd rather have a tooth pulled than talk to them. Lyonus, the treasury adviser, was obviously engaged with Coala, the high priestess; no point even trying that one. Her eyes were drawn back to her old spot in the corner, where the other *real* knights gathered. It was near Kade, but she could stand his vileness for a few hours. Besides, he never even seemed to notice her anyway. Thea spied the only knight younger than herself and smiled.

"Sir Robert," Thea said as she made her way towards him. Kade looked over and turned back to Beldroth in disgust when he

saw Thea. Ignoring Kade, she reached out and took Robert's hand.

The handsome young man smiled. "Good to see you, too. Why'd you leave the tavern so early last night?"

Thea shook her head. "My body this morning told me I stayed out way too late. If I'd stayed longer, I'd never have gotten out of bed."

He grinned. "You're right." Robert looked toward the throne. "What's keeping them? The king's never this late."

"No idea." Thea's father told her many times that the best way to defeat your enemies in the king's court was to listen more than to speak. Maybe the queen was rehearsing her speech or planning how to deal with the sharks that would certainly try to take advantage of whatever she announced today. No one fit that category more than Kade. Her eyes shifted towards him, standing next to his servant, Beldroth.

Robert stared at Thea. "It's been nice talking to you when you were paying attention. I've got to go."

"I'll see you soon," Thea said.

Kade leaned into Beldroth and lowered his voice. "What could be so important that they had to call us back to the castle?"

Thea strained her ears to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Beldroth's lips curled. "Maybe to give you the throne, my lord." Her lifeless, nearly black eyes twinkled. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not. I'm just tired of waiting for my turn."

She took his hand and caressed it.

"Patience; you need to learn patience."

"That's easy for you to say," he retorted.

"You only have to wait because you *choose* to," Beldroth said.

Thea swallowed hard. What did she mean by that? Obviously, Kade wanted to be king. The only way he could ever be king was if— if Galin died. No, even Kade wouldn't murder his family. What kind of monster would even think of it? Women have enormous persuasion over men. Thea had the necessary looks and knew how to use that ability, but chose not to. Was Beldroth as honorable? She was leading Kade on, but why?

Kade lowered his eyes. "I won't kill my own brother," he whispered.

"If you want to be king, you will," Beldroth replied. "And I will be your queen."

"Enough of that talk," Kade snapped.

Thea grimaced. Wasn't that treason? *Who am I to accuse the king's brother? A mere lowly knight who openly dislikes him.*

Silence fell over the small crowd as the ornate door behind the thrones opened. Galin led Nina out into the Great Hall. All heads followed the queen as Galin sat her down.

Galín's failed attempt to hide a smile was obvious to everyone. He sat down on the throne, lowering his head to regain his composure. "Lords, ladies, and knights, thank you for coming so quickly. Your queen has some news that affects the whole kingdom."

Thea's eyes darted towards Kade. His face twisted as if he'd discovered her grand announcement.

Grinning, Queen Nina stood up. "The court knows that the king and I have no children, despite trying since I was sixteen years old..."

"I was right," Kade muttered to himself.

"Quiet," Beldroth said.

"...I began to believe that I was barren..."

Kade rolled his eyes.

Thea focused her attention on Kade, rather than on Nina. How desperate was he to get the throne? How far would he go?

"...The goddess Odella blessed me last night when I found out that I was carrying Galin's child." Nina's grin broke free. "I'm pregnant. We're having a baby."

Cheers and clapping drowned out what Beldroth whispered to Kade. But Kade's face gave away his *true* feeling about the news.

Galin stood beside his loving wife. "As you can imagine, we have a lot of things to do."

"Sire," Coala began, "what if it's a girl? Who will be your heir then?"

Kade's ears perked up.

"She would, of course. If a woman can be a valiant knight, why can't a queen rule?" Galin asked. "We're only in our twenties. I think we'll be having more children." Smiling, Galin and Nina left the Great Hall, disappearing behind the thrones.

"I—I can't believe it," Kade said. "I'm forever cursed to be a servant for my brother's family."

Thea attempted to filter out the other conversations in the room to listen closer.

Beldroth licked her lips. "All is not lost, my lord." She placed his hand around her lower back. "Maybe I can take your mind off things."

Vomit crawled up Thea's throat, only to be pushed right back down. She was obviously more than a servant.

Kade's eyes lit up. "What do you mean? Are you finally going to say yes?"

"We'll talk about solving your problem and satisfying me away from here," Beldroth said.

Thea watched Beldroth lead Kade out of the Great Hall like a pony. His problem? What problem? It couldn't be—yes, that's it. It had to be. They were going to kill the king's family. *Should I tell him now? No, I can't. I need evidence before I accuse the king's brother of anything.* What kind of evidence can you get before a crime is committed? The *plan*. She needed to hear the plan. Thea hurried after Kade and Beldroth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Secrets

Thea rode Dena down the cobblestone street. Merchants, beggars, and the smell of freshly baked bread surrounded her with each step, but she was focused. Her self-appointed mission was clear; she had to protect the king. Thea's eyes never left her target, Kade, only a hundred yards in front of her.

Beldroth, riding next to him, kept moving her head as if they were talking. Kade raised one hand above his horse as if responding to a question or something.

Was it happening now? Thea asked herself. For a moment, she inhaled the pleasant aroma emanating from the nearby bakery. Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten all day.

Kade and Beldroth stopped in front of the Drow Inn and Tavern. He tied both horses to the hitching post just outside the door.

Thea smiled as she recognized the disappointment on Kade's face as they went inside. "I guess they're only talking tonight," she said to herself.

Thea tied Dena off on a different hitching post, away from Kade's and Beldroth's horses. Surely, Kade would recognize Dena. She opened the worn saddlebag and pulled out an old, dark-green hooded cloak. She hadn't worn that cloak for at least a year. The cloak was dirty, torn, and it stunk. Kade would simply turn away in disgust and disregard her just as fast. Breathing through her mouth, she threw the cloak over her shoulders and pulled the hood down.

"Here we go," Thea muttered. She opened the door and stepped inside.

Unlike Thea's usual watering hole, the Rusted Feathers, the Drow Inn and Tavern was quiet, with only a few patrons sampling the brew. True, it was in a shady part of town, but it was still within the castle walls. It couldn't be that bad, could it? Candles mounted on the walls beat back the darkness of the night. Twelve chairs surrounded a

long oak bar, but only three were occupied. Small tables with four chairs each were sprinkled throughout the rest of the tavern. Her eyes scanned the room, looking for Kade. Her stomach twisted when she saw them.

Am I paranoid? Thea thought. *I could get into real trouble for spying on the king's brother. Do I think he wants the throne? Yes, no question. But is he willing to kill his own family for it?*

"Can I help you?" asked a young woman wearing an apron and holding her nose.

"I'm hungry, what do you have to eat?" Thea asked in a gruff voice.

The woman frowned. "I'm sorry, but we don't serve beggars here. You have to leave."

Thea reached into her pocket and pulled out a crown. "I can pay for it."

"We have a chicken dinner and pale ale."

"That'll be fine."

"Please find a seat and I will bring you your ale," the young woman said as she scurried away.

She thinks I either stole it or killed someone for it, Thea thought. Kade and Beldroth were sitting at a table along the wall, near the corner. Thea went to the corner table, close to the couple. She was close enough to hear

them and dirty enough to be ignored. Why would the king's brother be threatened by a commoner anyway? To most people, it didn't matter who was on the throne.

Kade sipped his ale. "Why do you always tease me like that?"

Beldroth grinned. "Because it pleases me, and you have something to look forward to."

"Sure," Kade replied. "If you weren't a critical part of my army, you'd already have serviced me, or you'd be dead."

Beldroth reached across the table, caressing Kade's trembling hand. "What are you going to do?"

"Griping about not being on the throne is one thing, but usurping the throne is something else. I can't do that to my brother."

"You owe it to the people. You're so honorable, caring, and kind to all your people; not just the nobles, unlike your brother," Beldroth said.

Kade smiled. "You always know how to cheer me up." He took another sip. "He is firstborn, which makes him king. There's nothing I can do about it."

"By twelve seconds," Beldroth reminded him. "You're twins, remember that. You're

both firstborn children to your father, he just came out first."

"What am I supposed to do?" Kade asked.

"You need to..."

Thea jolted back as a large mug of ale was placed in front of her. "Your dinner will be out in a minute," the young woman said.

"Thank you," Thea replied.

"...I'll never do that," Kade said.

What did I miss? Thea thought. Was that the proof she needed? Lost by some wine wench.

"Kade, you have to. Please, for the sake of your people, you need to take the throne now," Beldroth said. "If you don't, you'll be serving his snot of a child until you die."

Kade shook his head. "That would require me to kill my brother's family. I won't do it."

Thea's eyes zeroed in on Beldroth's left hand. A ring with a strange marking on the face began to glow as Beldroth pressed her hands against Kade's wrist.

"Yes you will...you have to," Beldroth said soothingly.

"I—I—" Kade shook his head. "No, I won't. There has to be another way to get what my people need."

Beldroth frowned. "I see. What if your way doesn't work? Should your people suffer because of your...fearfulness?"

Thea blinked. How can that pyromancer talk to the king's brother like that? Why does he let her do it? She'd seen Kade behead men and women for *far* less.

Kade's face reddened. "How dare you talk to me like that!" He slammed his fist on the table, nearly knocking over his ale. "You have no right!"

"My apologies," Beldroth said as her fingers traced the face of her ring. A soft glow radiated from its face, capturing Kade's eyes. "Please forgive me."

"Of course, I'm sorry, too."

Beldroth pulled her hands back as the ring's glow vanished. "My teacher told me that sometimes, we need to look into the darkness to find the light."

"What does that mean?" Kade asked.

"Who else wants Galin off the throne besides you? There may be other ways for you to take your rightful place on the throne."

"Allies? That's treason." Kade stood up, glaring down at Beldroth. "I have everything

under control. Good night." He stormed out of the tavern.

"You'll come to my friends soon," Beldroth said softly. She dropped a few crowns on the table as she stood up. A smile worked its way onto her face. Beldroth tossed a crown on Thea's table. "That's so you can take a bath, *Thea*."

Thea nearly choked on her ale. "What?"

"I hope you got what you needed."

Grinning, Beldroth strolled out of the tavern.

She knew; she knew the whole time. Why didn't she say anything before? Was Beldroth going to tell the king's brother that she was spying on him? Thea took another sip of ale. No, not likely. "So much for my disguise," Thea mumbled. She dropped two crowns on the table. What would she tell the king? Should she? Tell him what? That Kade's pyromancer wants him to take the throne, but he refused. Shaking her head, she stood up and headed for the door. *I swear that King Galin and his child will remain on the throne for as long as I live*, Thea thought.

Beating the morning sun, Thea rode Dena to the knights' stables, just outside of the training grounds near the northern castle

wall. She got off her horse. The sun yawned as it crept over the castle walls. There was no tavern stop last night; well, not for fun anyway, and she felt good.

Staerdale Castle had been her home ever since her parents died. The previous king was close friends with Thea's father, who was desperately trying to have a son. A band of Feral Orcs raided the market in Nightfall Meadows, killing everyone, including her parents. The king took Thea in, raising her as his own. She showed skill in the art of war, so the king broke with tradition and made her a knight. Galin and Thea practically grew up as brother and sister, but she never forgot her true place.

Thea walked out onto the training grounds' practice field, where Galin was already waiting. "I wanted to get some sparring done before my council meeting this morning," he said. The twenty-three-year-old man's blue eyes twinkled in the morning sun. "Up for a match?"

It felt like they were kids again. She half-expected to see Galin's father cheering them both on from the edge of the circle. "Of course, sire, if you don't mind losing again." She walked over to one of three weapons

racks along the edge of the practice field. Every weapon had its edge ground off for sparring. Thea looked over the assortment of swords, axes, hammers, daggers, and spears. "Which weapons?"

Galin smiled. "Let's keep it simple; grab a sword." He grasped the hilt of a training sword and moved to the center of the field.

"Should we put armor on before we start?" Thea asked.

"You think you'll lose that badly?"

"I was just thinking of you, sire." Thea flicked a long sword from the weapons rack into her other hand. Should she tell him anything? This would be her best chance. No one else around and he was in a great mood.

Galin began to sidestep around Thea. "Ready?"

Thea nodded. "Your move, sire." Her eyes watched his every muscle, looking for that small twitch, telegraphing his attack.

His front foot started to move towards her.

With her sword already in the attack position, Thea sidestepped.

Galin lunged forward, thrusting his sword at her midsection.

Thea batted his attack away. She hit his butt with the flat side of her sword as she

stepped by him. "You can do better than that, sire."

He moved forward another step and whirled around. Galin raised his sword. His shoulders jerked downwards.

She stepped forward, raising her sword into a blocking position.

In a single motion he pulled his foot back, changing the trajectory of his sword. Instead of slashing straight down, it slammed into Thea's side, just below her sword.

Even a dull bastard sword delivers a crippling blow. She felt the air rush out of her lungs. Thea dropped to the ground, gasping for air. "You got me."

Galín extended his hand. "I didn't think you'd fall for that feint."

Thea smiled. "I did. What can I say?"

"Again?" Galin asked.

"No, I'm good. Thank you, sire." She walked over and placed her training sword back into the weapons rack. "Obviously I need to practice more before I can take you on again."

Galín rolled his eyes. "Thea, stop it." He returned his weapon to its proper place in the weapons rack. "Is everything all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nina tells everyone that we're having a baby and my adopted sister runs off without saying a word. Are you mad at us?"

Thea winced. "No, not at all. I—I'm worried about you." She said it. There was no turning back now.

"About what?" Galin asked. "I'm in a castle surrounded by knights and stone walls. What are you afraid of?"

"Sire, I overheard Kade and his pyromancer in the Great Hall talking about how he deserves the throne over you."

"Kade? Please, he has many faults, but he'll never go that far. It's been that way even before father brought you into the family. As he got older, Kade always seemed to keep the welfare of the people in mind."

"Is that why your father gave him the entire Ithsein province? Because he's caring?" Thea asked.

Galin laughed. "Hardly; he gave it to him because Kade wouldn't shut up about how he deserved to rule over me."

"Has he said anything recently to you, sire?"

"Nope, nothing. I'm sure he was just blowing off steam, especially after hearing that Nina is pregnant. That ensures he will

never be on the throne." Galin started walking towards the knights' stables. "That mage, however, might not be as honorable as Kade."

Thea stopped him. "What if she is the one plotting something?"

"If she is, my brother will take care of it. I trust him."

"Sire—"

Galin waved her off. "Sorry, I have to get to my council meeting." He trotted off towards the castle entrance.

She watched him disappear around the corner. "I'll make sure you and your family are safe, even from your brother." She climbed on top of Dena and rode towards her modest house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Port Eldham

A full growing season had past, and Thea had given up her suspicions long ago. With her family's land restored, she began building a manor suitable for a knight in good standing. After collecting her first round of taxes, Thea understood how the nobles could think so highly of themselves and completely disregard the people. The temptation was so strong. It took immense effort, but she did not give in. Soon, she became known as an honorable lord, just like her father.

The wind lifted Thea's hair off her shoulders as Dena trotted towards the sea. She glanced over at her companion. "Brock, ready for some good food?"

Brock patted Lyonus' head as he pulled ahead of Dena. "I'll beat you there."

"Like hell you will!" Thea said. She cracked the reins and Dena took off, pulling away from Lyonus.

"Show off," Brock muttered.

The salt air brought a smile to Thea's face. Port Eldham was a great walled keep surrounded by villages filled with merchants and artisans. She pulled Dena's reins back, stopping the horse.

After a few moments, Brock stopped Lyonus next to her. "You didn't have to wait for me."

She laughed. "Really? I'm escorting you, remember? Let's go."

Brock smiled. "I can't wait to see Sally." Brock followed Thea towards the port.

Like all great keeps in the realm, the entrance was elaborately decorated and fortified to withstand the best siege equipment of the day. Thea and Brock passed underneath the raised portcullis. Her stomach grumbled as the aroma of freshly cooked fish invaded her nostrils. As they continued down the cobblestone street merchants approached them, holding up

their wares. Thea waved them off. What was once flattering became annoying at best.

"I think that's it," Brock said, pointing straight ahead at the raised deck near the dock.

Thea squinted. "This is my first Winter Festival with the king. Brock, are you sure?"

Brock nodded. "Aye, facing towards us you have some knights standing guard behind the head table, and the banquet is on the raised deck."

"Okay, follow me." Thea turned Dena towards the hitching post near the raised deck. She got down from her horse and tied her off. "Ready, Brock?"

"Aye."

The raised deck was completely roped off, except for the small entrance near the edge of the water. As Thea stepped up onto the deck, she was ambushed by the sweet smell of roasted lamb. Facing the water was the head table, filled with dignitaries, minus the king and queen. In between the head table and the water were rows of tables and chairs. "Where do we sit?" Thea asked.

"I don't know," replied Brock. "Sally never told me."

A young man waving his hands grabbed Thea's attention. "That's Robert. Want to sit with him?" Without waiting for a reply, Thea cut through the crowd towards him, right in front of the head table.

"Thea, good to see you," the young knight said. He pulled out a chair. "Please, sit with me."

"Thank you, Robert." She looked over at Brock. "Do you know Brock?"

"Of course, he's the best blacksmith in the kingdom," Robert replied.

"I'm not the best, but thank you," Brock said.

Thea sat down as Robert pushed her chair in. She looked up at the head table to see Kade and Beldroth sitting directly above her. "Great, I managed to avoid him for nearly nine months and you get me to sit right under him. Thanks a lot, Robert."

Brock waved to Sally, who sat right next to Beldroth. "I think these are great seats, Thea."

"I can see why you would." Thea waved over the wine wench. "How's that going, anyway?"

"Well—"

"Excuse me, lords and lady," the young girl said as she handed Thea and Brock a glass of red wine.

"Well," Brock began, "things are going great. I love her, Thea. I really do. But she spends so much time with the queen."

"She's the queen's handmaiden. That's expected."

"I know, but I don't like it. Soon, every minute she is not with the queen, she'll be with me."

Thea blinked. "Are you sure?"

Brock nodded. "Aye, I'm proposing to her after the feast today. I already have her father's blessing."

She smiled. "I'm happy for you."

"Anyone ask you yet?" Robert asked.

"No, I haven't even been courted," Thea replied.

"She's married to that sword of hers," Brock said.

Kade stood up. "My lords, ladies, and knights, the king and queen will be here any moment. Please be ready to show them the utmost respect, as tradition dictates."

Brock snickered. "That must have really hurt him to say that."

It must have, Thea thought. Nine months and the sky never fell, nor did Kade murder his brother's family. She was wrong about him. Besides the typical family feuding, they seemed to be happy with each other. Since the hostilities with the Feral Orcs had died down, Thea spent most of her time at the manor, away from Staerdale Castle and the king's court.

It started at the head table. They turned their heads towards the back entrance of the deck, through the line of both the human and elven knights. The lords, ladies, and knights sitting at the tables became silent like a wave running across the ocean. The only sound coming from the deck was a small bird nesting underneath.

Wearing a flamboyant robe, Galin, with the queen at his side, walked towards the head table. He pulled the chair out for his overly pregnant wife.

Thea could see how uncomfortable Nina was. Galin, her adopted brother, smiled at her. After all, it was at his insistence that she would attend the festival.

Once Galin sat down, a tall and deeply tanned elf with long blond hair and green eyes made his way to the head table.

Unusually muscular, for an elf. He had a golden dove tattooed on his neck, small but noticeable.

Galin stood back up, standing proudly next to the newcomer. "Thank you all for coming this fine day. Every year at this time, King Faeler," Galin said, pointing at the elf, "and I renegotiate our trade agreements, just as we have always done for the last one hundred years."

Faeler stepped forward. "King Galin the Fourth, my people extend our deepest gratitude for your aid in the war against the Darkstriders. My Dark Elf brothers take advantage of lesser creatures for their own selfish ends. The Vulwin Elves appreciate everything you have done. In the past few months, there has been no Darkstrider activity in our territory, and we owe that all to you." Faeler extended his hand. "Take my hand as a long-lasting ally."

Galin took his hand and shook it vigorously. "King Faeler, as long as a Ravenward sits on this throne, you have an ally."

Is that better for them or us? Thea thought. Allies are always good, but sometimes one side fares better than the other. She'd fought

alongside the Vulwin Elves, but they never spoke to human knights before. She always thought they were more than just a little snobbish. As Faeler sat down, he glanced over at Beldroth, and a strange expression came over him. It was not in admiration of her beauty, rather unconscious fear. What did he sense that she didn't? No matter what he thought, Faeler was obviously not entirely sure either. It was almost as if he recognized something...or was she at it again?

Galín clasped his hands together. "Now that the war with the Darkstriders is over and their Feral Orc minions are driven back into their caves where they belong, it is time for us to rebuild." He lowered his head as if trying to choose the right words. "War is expensive, and we've all paid a heavy price. In war, trade routes, villages, farmland, and trading posts all get burnt to the ground. The economic means for our two kingdoms to survive has been disrupted. We have to rebuild."

Thea saw Kade's blank stare at his brother. *Does he know where this is going?*

"As a temporary measure, we have to raise taxes until the coffers are replenished. The port tariffs will increase to ten percent of the

products' value which, of course, is mirrored at King Faeler's port on the other side."

"That'll bankrupt us," Kade muttered.

Ignoring his brother, Galin continued, "Additionally, I am instituting a fifteen percent tariff for all products entering Axain."

Kade abruptly stood up. "The Axain kingdom or the province?"

"I'm sorry, Kade. I meant the province," Galin replied.

With his mouth hanging open, Kade slowly slid back down into his seat.

Thea rubbed her chin. Her manor was just inside the Axain province so that tax wouldn't affect her, but it would destroy Kade. If he wanted to trade with the Vulwin Elves, he would have to pay a forty-five percent tax before his goods were even purchased.

"How long will this temporary tax be in place?" a noble asked.

"A few years, I think. You've got to remember, we are paying for ten years of war," Galin replied.

"Sire," Kade said as he stood up again. "You can't tax goods coming into Axain. Ithsein is largely made up of artisan, who

support the rest of my people through their taxes. Once they hear about this new tax, they'll leave Ithsein and move to Axain to avoid it. That will destroy the province our father gave me. You can't do that!"

"I'm sorry, Kade, it's done. Now sit back down," Galin said.

"Do you even care about your people, brother? How many people will starve because of your deal with *them*?"

"I said that's enough. Now, sit down."

Ignoring his brother, Kade turned toward Faeler. "King Faeler, I bid you farewell." With his face reddened, Kade bolted off the raised deck, with Beldroth in tow.

"King Faeler, please forgive my brother," Galin said as he sat down at the table.

Following Galin's lead, Faeler took his place at the head table. "It's all right, Galin. We all have family problems that we have to *deal* with."

Thea rolled her eyes. *I guess Kade hasn't changed*, she thought. He always wanted to show up his brother, but this time it was different. It actually seemed like he cared for his people. Was that for the audience or had he really changed? She refocused on Nina. Her face was contorting while grasping her

lower back. Was she having the baby? Thea pointed towards the queen. "Sire."

Galin's eyes widened as his wife's face twisted in pain. "Nina? The baby?"

Nina nodded.

"I—King Faeler..."

"Just go, have your heir," Faeler said after taking a sip of wine.

"Thea!" Galin cried. "Escort us back to Staerdale Castle, now."

"Yes, your majesty." Thea and Brock raced to their horses as the knights led Galin, Nina, and Sally towards the royal coach. After the royal family was inside, Thea took charge of the king's escort. "I want two as rear guards and two flank guards, fifty yards out on all sides. Bottom line, we're going fast, and we're not going to wait for you, so keep up."

Brock laughed. "I feel like I'm a knight again."

Thea cracked her reins on Dena's back. "Follow me." She charged down the road, leading the royal coach to home.

"She's been in there for hours," Galin grumbled while he tapped his fingers on the arm of his throne in the Great Hall.

"I'm sure everything is all right, sire," Thea said. *Did I sound convincing?* She was just as unsure as Galin. How would she know, anyway? To make matters worse, once Kade got word that Nina was *really* in labor, he and Beldroth both showed up at the Great Hall to welcome the new child into the world. Being stuck with those three in a small room was the worst kind of purgatory. Brock was the only ray of hope in the room. Too bad he preferred Sally over her.

Galín walked over to Kade and extended his hand to him. "Kade, I'm glad you came."

Beldroth's thin lips twisted like a vine. "We almost didn't get the message."

Ignoring Beldroth, Kade took his brother's hand. "Of course I came."

"You care a lot about your people, don't you?"

Kade nodded. "Don't you?"

Galín returned to his throne. "Of course I do. What was that supposed to mean? I'm the king, you need to start respecting that."

Thea rolled her eyes. "Sires, do we need to do this now?"

Brock grabbed Thea's tunic. "Better stay out of this," he whispered.

"I respect the throne, not the *thing* that's in it. Our father said that a true king looks after his people before his own desires. If you hurt the people, no matter why *you* think it's justified, you're no longer a good king. Those are father's words, not mine. Your rules have no place in *my* province," Kade said.

Galín looked away from Kade. "Brother, what have I done to hurt you so badly? Would you rather split the kingdom of Axain in two? My son—"

"What if it's a girl?"

"...Or daughter, will rule over the entire kingdom, not just a slice."

Kade frowned. "You'd go against our traditions? You'd prefer that your daughter take the throne rather than your own brother?"

Galín nodded. "Some traditions are foolish. Thea proves that. Besides, father disobeyed them and the sky never fell, did it?"

"What do you want from me?" Kade demanded.

"I—"

Crack! The door behind the thrones slammed into the wall. The queen's slender, blond-haired handmaiden rushed into the

Great Hall. Everything stopped. All eyes zoomed in on little Sally Healy. "Sire, forgive me," she said as she knelt before Galin.

"Get up and tell me," Galin said. "Is Nina all right?"

"Yes, sire, she has your *son* in her arms as we speak. My lady has requested your presence."

A son, Thea thought, more like an indisputable heir.

Galín glared at Kade. "You love your people, brother, but it's time you loved your family. When we present him to the kingdom, I'm going to declare you as his senior adviser..."

"See, my lord, already his son has you under his boot," Beldroth muttered.

Thea glared at her.

"...when he comes of age, you will train him to be a great knight and to always remember the people first, like yourself..."

Beldroth's ring began to glow, just like in the Drow Inn and Tavern. Was Thea the only one who saw it?

Galín continued. "...If my son takes your best qualities and mine, he will be a great king that would make our father proud."

"Sire, the queen's waiting for you," Sally said.

"I won't train someone to be my master, not any more than you would," Kade said.

Thea stared at the ring. It was glowing even brighter. Was Beldroth doing something to Kade?

"You have to. Obey your king, Kade," Galin said.

Beldroth leaned into Kade's ear. "If you'd listened to me you wouldn't have this problem. For the sake of your people, you need to take action now."

Thea grabbed Beldroth's arm, pulling her away from Kade. "What did you just say?"

"Give my best to Nina, *brother*. When you're ready to act like a real king, I'll support you. Like father said, the people don't exist to serve you; you exist to serve the people." Kade pushed Thea off Beldroth. "Come on, let's go."

Thea watched Kade and Beldroth storm out of the Great Hall. What did Beldroth say? She looked over to see Galin with his face in his hands. "Sire, the queen," Thea said.

"He's lost it."

"Sire?"

"Kade, he's lost it. Our father never said any of that." Galin rushed out of the Great Hall to see his new son.

If their father never said that, Thea thought, then who did?

CHAPTER SIX

Darkstriders

The wooden floor creaked as Kade paced around the small inn room. "I can't believe he said that to me."

Sitting on the corner of the bed, Beldroth's licked her lips. "Galín said it to you because he thinks you're weak, nothing more. Why else would he declare that you're his son's servant before he's even an hour old?" She rubbed the ring's face and it began to glow.

Kade's eyes were tempted by Beldroth's provocative figure. His heart beat faster. Was he in love? Why did he wait so long to have his pyromancer? He shook his head. "I'm not sure what to do." He sat down next to her, hoping to see her true feelings for him.

She lifted his head until her eyes met his. Her ring was glowing a bright orange color,

unseen by Kade. "You have to kill them. The whole family. Before it's too late." She pulled him in closer and kissed his cheek.

For a second, he stopped breathing. He opened his mouth, inviting her tongue to explore its depths.

She pulled back. "Well?"

His heart thumped faster. Parts of his body showed its excitement towards her.

"I—I think you're right. It's time to take what is rightfully mine." Kade pulled her in close, passionately kissing her. His hands went up underneath her cloak.

Losing herself, she forced him down on the bed.

He sat up and pulled off her cloak, tossing it to the floor.

She pushed him back down again. The passionate beast straddled his waist like a horse as she tore off her shirt.

This was like a dream come true. After years of waiting, Kade was finally going to have his pyromancer. He pulled himself up, nuzzling against her chest.

She ripped the shirt off his muscular body, throwing him back down. Beldroth threw herself on top of him, kissing his ear.

Kade felt his manhood trying to burst through his trousers. Her smile told him everything he needed to know. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her.

Her lips moved along his neck. Her hands slid down his chest. "Close your eyes," she said.

Kade slammed his eyes shut. Feeling his belt being ripped from pants, his breaths got shorter and his heart raced. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"Keep your eyes closed, my love."

He felt the wetness of her kiss on his chest. Her hand wandered. Her warm body mounted him like a rodeo rider. *I have to see*, he thought. *I want to look into her eyes as we make love together.*

Kade's eyes opened in gleeful pleasure, only for a moment. Pointed ears with blue skin and long, flowing black hair replaced the beautiful Beldroth he had always known. She was a Dark Elf! He shut his eyes again, trying to imagine the woman he saw on top of him just a moment before, instead of that *creature*. What had he done? Jumping out of bed, Kade pushed her off him. "You're a Dark Elf!"

The sensual blue creature only smiled.
"We have all the necessary human parts, just like any elf." Beldroth slid her pants back on.
"You weren't supposed to see me like this. My people have the ability to make ourselves look like any other sentient creature. But, it takes enormous concentration, and passion destroys it."

"I should turn you in," Kade said.

"What would they do to you? Sleeping with a member of the Darkstriders and having her at your side for years." She tossed Kade's clothes at him. "Galín would think hanging is too humane."

Kade swallowed. "Now, I'm a traitor *and* a servant. How could this get any worse?"

"My lord—"

"I'm not your lord. Stop calling me that."

"Kade, we want you to get the throne. It's better for you and us. Think of your people. Do it for them," Beldroth said.

Kade buttoned his shirt. "If I do it, what's in it for you? I can't believe that you're doing this out the goodness of your heart."

Beldroth's thin lips twitched. "You're right. We just want to be left alone, and no interference when we have disputes with our Vulwin Elf brothers. They started the war by

exiling us. Humans need to stay out of *elven* affairs."

"What do I get out of it? I could very well get the throne without your help."

"Negotiating?"

"Always."

Beldroth smiled. "I don't have the authority, but there's someone here who does. I'll get word to him and we'll see him tonight. Okay?"

"Sure," Kade replied. "How do you propose we take down my brother?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Kade and Beldroth rode down the dark cobblestone road towards the best tavern in Staerdale Castle, the Rusted Feathers. Whenever they were at the castle, the couple always came by to sample their newest brew. Kade saw an old man ejected out the door by an overweight bouncer. "Looks like he had too much." His eyes bounced from one shadow to the next. During the hundreds of times he'd made this trek, there was never anyone there, but this time he had to be sure.

"Stop that," Beldroth said. "You look paranoid."

Paranoid? No, paranoid is only when you *think* someone will be looking for you. "I'm not paranoid." Kade lowered his voice. "Why are we meeting here? This place is always full of commoners, knights, and nobles."

Her thin lips twitched. "Where else can you talk about the ills of the kingdom and fit right in?"

Kade laughed. "You're right. If they charged everyone who wanted to take over the kingdom after a few beers with treason, we'd have no one left to rule over." He pulled back on the reins, stopping his horse next to the hitching post near the corner of the tavern. "No precautions then?"

"I didn't say that," Beldroth said as she tied off her horse. "Don't worry, I've got it all under control. Follow me."

Kade smiled. "I think you're enjoying this too much."

Cigar smoke hit Kade smack in the face as he stepped through the door. Music...how he loved the music! Kade didn't care for the fiddle, but the fiddling here was different. It added a certain playfulness to the Rusted Feathers' already pleasant atmosphere. He grinned. "At the bar?"

Beldroth shook her head. "No, are you out of your mind?" She motioned over towards the only Vulwin Elf in the Rusted Feathers, the bartender. "Fi saved us a booth." She trudged through the wall of patrons in line for another ale.

Instead of following Beldroth through the crowd, Kade veered away from the bar on the left wall. The main floor was sprinkled with small tables with four simple chairs around them. But tonight, there was not one table with only four patrons. "Excuse me," Kade said as he pushed his way through the sea of people. *Where did she go?* Kade thought. He should have listened.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Kade's breath shortened as his eyes bounced from woman to woman, trying to find his escort. Why was he so scared? On the eve of achieving his lifelong goal, he was behaving like a—*commoner*, not a king. Continuing in the general direction, Kade finally broke free from the mass of people. *There she is*, he thought.

Beldroth was standing on the far end of the rectangular-shaped bar, on the opposite end from the door. It was the farthest booth to the left, right next to the stairs going up to

the second floor. The only one that may hear them was the bouncer who had played toss-the-drunk earlier. Would he care? Doubtful. What about the next booth? The one that shared a high-backed bench. One lone girl sat in the booth. Surely, she would hear them. He moved in close to Beldroth. "What about *her*?"

She pulled out a small pouch and set it on the table. "She won't see anything; neither will anyone else."

Kade slid into the booth next to Beldroth. "Good."

"May I get you a drink, sir?" the beer wench asked.

After a nod from Beldroth, Kade said, "Please, a pale ale for each of us. Thank you."

"Just be a moment." The young girl scurried off.

"What will that do?" Kade asked.

"You'll see. But we need to wait until we get our drinks." Her right hand slithered along the table and grasped Kade's left hand.

Beldroth's eyes softened when she looked at him and he knew it. Kade pulled his hand away. "Did they have to travel far? I'm surprised they could meet so quickly." Kade

shrugged. "I'll be amazed if they can even get into the castle."

Beldroth grinned. "You're in for a real surprise."

The brown-haired beer wench plopped two large mugs and a pitcher down on the table. She looked directly at Beldroth.

"Ma'am, Fi said he'll put tonight's tab on your account. Is that okay?"

"Yes, but we'd like some privacy. If we want another drink, we'll get it ourselves," Beldroth said.

"Thank you, ma'am, enjoy." After a quick curtsy, the beer wench moved on to the next table.

Kade poured the ale up to the rim in both mugs. He slid one over to Beldroth. "Do you burn the bag or something?"

Ignoring him, Beldroth's eyes focused on the small bag. "Med rolva efolto terolta."

Kade couldn't take his eyes off the bag. It glowed. It glowed a bright green. His head pulsed with pain. Kade gasped; he couldn't make out his hands. Were his eyes failing? Was she betraying him?

"Med rolva efolto terolta."

He clasped his eyes shut as hard as he could. "I can't see," Kade muttered.

Throbbing pain morphed into a dull ache. The veins on his face visibly pulsated. He could almost hear his heartbeat. "Beldroth, you have to stop this."

"Med rolva efolto terolta." She closed her eyes in a prayer to Methos, thanking him for his dark powers. "It's over, Kade. Open your eyes."

The pain had gone. His heart settled down. Slowly, Kade opened one eye, staring at Beldroth. There she was in her true form, a beautiful Dark Elf. "Won't they see you?" Kade asked as he opened both eyes.

Beldroth shook her head. "Anyone within five feet from the bag is protected by the illusion. As a side effect, you can see the true forms of *all* the Dark Elves in the room."

"All?" Kade turned towards the line of patrons waiting to get another ale. His mouth opened, but no words came out. There were Dark Elves in line and sitting at the tables. He looked over at the bouncer. No wonder Beldroth wasn't worried about being discovered *here*. "So many. Do you have people in the castle itself?"

"Of course; we'd be stupid not to." Beldroth sipped her ale. "Here they come."

Kade saw two Dark Elves approach their booth. "Can they see us?"

"Nope, I just told them where we were sitting," Beldroth replied. "Once they get within five feet, they'll see us."

The pair of Dark Elves appeared to be nearly opposites. The one on the left was tall and built like a heavy infantry soldier, where the other elf was not. They slid onto the bench, opposite Kade and Beldroth.

"Are you sure he can be trusted?" asked the taller and bald elf.

Beldroth smiled. "He has no choice, now." She pointed at the larger elf. "This is Ryul. He's the commander of one of our Feral Orc Regiments." Pointing at the smaller one, she said, "This is Tanyl. He is the one I told you about. Tanyl is the only Dark Elf here that has the authority to negotiate on behalf of the Darkstriders."

Kade extended his hand to Tanyl. "Pleasure to meet you."

Tanyl's pointed ears twitched. "We already know each other and frankly, I don't like you."

"I—"

"But I'm here on behalf of the Darkstriders, not myself." His dark-blue skin glistened in

the candlelight. "You understand the plan? No questions?"

Beldroth opened her mouth to speak.

Tanyl glared at her. "I was talking to Kade."

Kade's hand shook as he saw the utter fear in Beldroth's eyes. "No, questions. But, I do want to know what I get out of all this."

"Besides the throne?"

"Yes."

"How can we help you?" Tanyl sneered.

"Gold, and lots of it. Also, I want free and open trade routes with the Etranan continent," Kade said.

"You'd have to talk to your Vulwin allies for that, but when we control that port, your wish will be granted." Tanyl looked over at Beldroth. "Is that why I was summoned? For gold and trade routes?"

Beldroth bowed her head. "No, my lord. He wasn't going to do it unless he talked to you."

They need me more than I need them, Kade thought. "That's not all, Tanyl. After I solidify my power in the kingdom, I want an ally to annex Leonga to the north."

"Why stop there?" Tanyl asked. "Once you control the Gnome and Dwarf kingdoms, you'd have the whole continent."

Kade leaned across the table. "Who said I'd stop?"

Ryul grinned. "He sounds like a Dark Elf."

"Anything else?" Tanyl asked.

"I want Beldroth to be my queen," Kade replied.

Tanyl raised an eyebrow at Beldroth. "Did he even ask you?"

"No, my lord, he didn't."

"Kade, I like your ambition. Curious, how you can know someone for over two years and never realize the true darkness in his heart," Tanyl said. "I was given reports concerning your grumblings about the throne for years, but this goes way beyond every one of them."

Ryul's head whipped around as the sound of a shattering mug came from the booth behind him. "She can hear us."

Tanyl rolled his eyes. "The commoner in the next booth? Unlikely; she probably just had too much to drink."

"Maybe you're right." Ryul faced Kade and Beldroth. "Our armies can help you with

your ambitions, but we need the king's permission to do so."

"I wasn't talking about now. I don't even have the throne yet." Kade sipped his ale. "Tanyl, can you give me assurances that the Darkstriders will be my ally under my terms?"

Tanyl rubbed his chin. "Wait, you haven't heard my terms yet."

"Your terms?"

"Surely, you didn't think this would be one-sided did you?"

"I suppose not."

"Good." Tanyl leaned into the bench's high back. "Your alliance with the Darkstriders will be public—"

Kade's mouth dropped open. "I can't do that."

"Don't worry, we'll give you all the evidence you need to prove it was the Vulwin Elves. Also, my people will walk freely among yours. If we are to guarantee trade routes, we need to learn to work together, wouldn't you agree?"

"I—"

"Good. My last condition is that you have a Dark Elf as your High Consular. This one is non-negotiable," Tanyl said.

"What if we fail?" Kade asked.

Beldroth's warm hands embraced his. "We'll take you in. You're a true friend to the Darkstriders."

Tanyl scowled at Beldroth. "Only because you have proven yourself to be a great commander of troops. If you fail, I'll give you an army."

Kade nodded. "That sounds good."

"Do we have a deal?" Tanyl extended his hand towards Kade.

"We do," Kade said as he took Tanyl's hand in friendship. "I—"

Ryul stood up as the girl in the next booth bolted out of the Rusted Feathers. "I told you she heard us!"

"Leave her," Tanyl ordered. "You'll cause more problems if you go after her."

"He's right," Kade said. "If we're going to do this, we have to do it quickly."

Tanyl nodded as he stood up. "I'll have everything ready in four days."

After Tanyl and Ryul left the Rusted Feathers, Beldroth placed her hands over the small bag. There was a quick flash, and then it was gone.

Kade saw the Dark Elf he grew to admire instantly turn into the woman he loved.

Every Dark Elf in the bar looked *human*.
"Beldroth, let's go to my keep. We've got a
lot of items to work out."

"Of course—your majesty." Beldroth
followed Kade out of the Rusted Feathers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Secret is Out

Thea took another look around her old small house inside the Staerdale Castle Walls. It was nearly empty. Her modest furniture was already given away to some of Brock's friends. All that was left were a few sacks filled with nearly ten years of memories. *Poor Dena*, Thea thought as she strained bringing a heavy sack outside and tossing it into the cart. Her heroic, honorable horse was reduced to pulling a cart. Maybe she cared more than the silly horse did? Moving into the manor was the right and proper thing to do. In fact, she had wanted to do this all her life. But wanting to do something and actually doing it are two entirely separate things. She'd lived here ever since her parents had died. You can't

govern your lands from a distance though, and she knew it. Thea sighed and headed back inside.

"Thea, wait!" Brock yelled.

Thea smiled at Brock and Sally as they raced towards her. "I appreciate you coming to see me off."

Sally shook her head. "I'm sorry, but that's not why we came."

"Thea," Brock began, "We need to talk inside."

"Sure." Thea led the other two inside her empty house and closed the door behind them. For the first time, Brock actually looked *scared*. Sally's eyes were puffy and her cheeks were red like she had been crying all night. "What's wrong? Are you two all right?"

Brock grasped Sally's hand. "We're fine. In fact, she said yes."

Thea smiled. "Congratulations. When is the wedding?"

Brock shook his head. "That's not why we're here." He glanced at Sally. "You'd better tell her."

Tell me what? Thea thought. As long as she had known Brock, he'd never behaved like

this. She'd seen him upset, sure, but never scared like this. "Well?"

"They were everywhere," Sally said. "I was at the Rusted Feathers in one of the booths along the back wall."

"Who was with you?"

"No one, I was alone." Sally's eyes widened. "Lord Kade and his pyromancer sat in the booth behind me. I thought nothing of it. Frankly, I can't stand either one of them, and the last thing I wanted to do was to talk to them."

"Did they see you?" Thea asked.

"No, I don't think so." Sally glanced over at Brock. "Are you sure? She'll think I'm crazy."

Brock put his arm around his fiancée.

"Magic is involved, Sally, and Thea has seen what it can do. She won't think that."

Thea smiled at Sally. "You know I won't. Please tell me what you saw."

Sally swallowed hard. "Okay. I was there to meet Heather. You know, the baker's daughter?"

"I know her," Thea replied.

"We were going to discuss the wedding. I got there a little early to start writing down some ideas for the reception. Thea, I didn't even have an ale that night." Sally's lips

began to tremble. "From the booth where Lord Kade and Beldroth sat, I heard strange words. Couldn't understand them, but I *felt* them. My head hurt and I couldn't see, only for a second. When it passed, I saw some people I thought I knew transform before my eyes. Their skin turned blue and their ears were pointed, like an elf."

Thea blinked. "Dark-blue skin? You're describing a Dark Elf. You can't be right, Sally. We'd know if they were here."

Sally grabbed Thea's wrist. "Nearly half the people in the tavern were Dark Elves. As soon as this happened, I pulled my cloak over my face. Even Lord Kade was surprised—"

"How do you know?"

"I heard him. Beldroth told him that she cast a spell to prevent people outside the bubble—I don't know what else to call it—from hearing their conversation. She also said that anyone within it can see through the Dark Elf illusions." Sally recoiled to Brock's side. "That's when *they* came in..."

Was Sally crazy? Thea had seen magic hundreds of times, but nothing on this scale. How could Dark Elves walk freely among the people without anyone even knowing? If

what Sally was saying was true, Thea probably drank and played Knucklebones with the *enemy*. That can't be true. Infiltration on such levels could only mean—

"...Two elves walked straight towards Lord Kade's and Bedroth's booth, right behind me. One was significantly larger than the other. There was something familiar about the smaller one. I can't place him; it was just a feeling." Sally tore her eyes away from Thea. "I—I—what happens if they find out I know who they are? Brock, what will happen to us? Our families?"

Brock gave Sally a hug. "What happens to us if what they said comes to pass? The children we're going to have; what will happen to them if we do nothing?"

"Sally, please tell me. You're both beginning to scare me," Thea interrupted.

Sally nodded. "They were discussing terms, negotiating the spoils after—" Her eyes welled up and the dam holding back her tears burst.

"After what? Come on, Sally." Thea advanced on Sally. "What is it?"

Brock pushed Thea away from Sally. "Take it easy."

"Brock, tell me."

"They're going to kill them," Brock said.

"Who, the king?"

Brock shook his head. "No, his *whole* family, including their baby. They were deciding how to rule Axain after Kade usurps the king. Dark Elves will rule side by side with Kade, breaking our alliance with the Vulwin Elves permanently."

"You do realize you're talking about the Darkstriders?" Thea asked.

"And Kade's in league with them," Brock replied.

"I see. Give me a minute." Thea began to pace around the small room. This was no accusation of jealousy or sibling rivalry, it was treason. How do you tell the king that his own brother is plotting with the Darkstriders to kill his entire family? Thea thought. If she brought it up, wouldn't the king liken it to her earlier accusations? Probably. "Sally, did they say when they were going to attempt it?"

"No. I ran out before they left." Sally looked away. "I was scared."

"Did they see you leave?"

"Probably, I can't be sure," Sally replied.

If she was going to overthrow the king and her plans were discovered, what would

she do? If you abandoned them, you're more likely to hang for plotting against the king. If you're a prominent member of the court and depart suddenly, you would lose everything. No, the only option that made any sense was to accelerate the plan. With so many Dark Elves among people, a coup would not be that hard to pull off. Thea glared at Sally. "Sally, this is very important. Did they say *how* they were going to do it?"

"I'm sorry, but if they did, it must have been after I left." Sally clung to Brock. "Please do something, Thea."

Thea nodded. "I'm going to tell the king."

Would I believe me? Thea thought as the quick, rhythmic pounding of her feet onto the Staerdale Castle's floor grew louder with each step. Sure, Galin had been surrounded by magic all of his life and would easily believe that magic could conceal the Dark Elves. But, Kade, a traitor? A tiny bead of sweat rolled down her cheek. *Yes, he has to believe me*, she thought.

Outside the decorative double doors stood two well-muscled knights. The larger one held his hand up, blocking Thea's path.

"Sorry, Thea, the king needs his privacy tonight."

The doors were normally only closed when the king was meeting with the war council. Was the council convened? Did it matter? If the war council was convened, this was the perfect time to tell him. Surely, the others would help Galin see reason. She swallowed. "I have to see the king."

"Sorry, you know the rules. The king can't be disturbed when the door is closed."

"Is the war council convened?"

"I'm not sure."

Thea frowned. "Jason, who's with the king?"

The smaller one pushed Thea aside, knocking her to the ground. "None of your damn business. Now get lost."

"That was uncalled for, Kevin," Jason said as he pushed the smaller man into the wall.

"Thea, you can't go in. I'm sorry."

She took his hand and pulled herself up. "Jason, the king's life is in danger. I have to see him."

"No," Kevin said.

Jason glared at his partner. "Is it serious?"

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't. He'll thank you for letting me pass. Trust me," Thea said.

Jason nodded. "Okay."

"What? You can't do that!" Kevin said.

"The king's life is more important than some stupid regulation." Jason opened the double doors. "Make it fast."

Thea smiled. "I will." She grinned at the defeated Kevin as she strolled through the door.

Her eyes focused on the long table in the center of the Great Hall. Galin sat at the head of the table surrounded by his four top advisers. *Here we go*, she thought. Thea's pace quickened. Her eyes never left Galin.

Galín looked up. "Thea, what are you doing here?"

"Sire, forgive this intrusion, but I have reason to believe you're in danger. I need to speak with you," Thea said.

"In danger?"

Thea nodded.

"Gentlemen, that will be all for now. Please give us some privacy."

After the advisers had left the room, Thea sat down next to the king. "Sire, there's a plot

to overthrow you and kill your whole family."

"How do you know?"

"Sally—"

"Nina's handmaiden?"

"Yes. She told me about a meeting she overheard in the Rusted Feathers." Thea swallowed. "Sire, there were Dark Elves *in* the Rusted Feathers."

"Not possible."

"In the booth behind her, she heard a spell being cast. Then, she saw many people in the tavern transform into Dark Elves."

"Transform?"

"They only appeared human because of an illusion. The spell allowed anyone in the bubble to see through it."

Galin frowned. "How is it we didn't know they could do this before? Beldroth has been with Kade for years, surely she'd have noticed something."

Thea lowered her gaze.

"What?"

"She's one of them. Sally saw her without her illusion. No question, she's a Dark Elf."

"Does Kade know? Is my brother in danger too?"

Thea shook her head. "Sally also saw your brother with them."

"Them?"

"There were two other Dark Elves and one of them claimed to be a commander for a Feral Orc Regiment. I—"

"No, Kade would never betray us like that. I know he's been jealous about the throne for years, but this? He'd never go that far."

Galin's face twisted and his gaze hardened. "You've been telling me that Kade was going to kill me for some time now."

"I—I suppose I have," Thea said.

"You were wrong all those times because nothing ever happened. Why should I believe you now?"

"Sire?"

"Every time the accusation was worse than the one before, isn't that right?" Galin asked.

"I—"

"Why do you hate my brother?"

"I don't, sire. He hates you," Thea replied. "You have to believe me. You're like a brother to me."

"And you're like a sister to me, but the question still stands. What's their plan? You said Sally was there," Galin said.

"She didn't hear that. It was more like a negotiation."

"Negotiation?"

"Yes, Kade was negotiating terms for the Darkstriders to help him take the throne."

Galin laughed. "That actually sounds like Kade."

"I think—"

"But, that's it. Thea, I don't believe your story. You've come to me many times about the same matter and he never tried to kill me once. Wish me to die in battle? Sure, but murder my family? He's too duty-driven for that. Kade learned that lesson better than I did."

"Sire, can you just take precautions?" Thea asked.

"I should have both you and Sally flogged for accusing Kade of treason."

"Sire—"

Galin stood up. "Ever since I gave you your family's land back, you've been on a vendetta against my brother. Get out."

Thea's heart sank as Galin turned his back towards her. This is what she got for trying to save his life? She knew it would be difficult, but this? She never expected to be

thrown out. "Yes, sire." She curtsied and headed for the door.

"Tell those two idiot guards to get in here on your way out."

Thea exited the double doors as Jason and Kevin hurried inside. *I'm sorry*, she thought.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Queen Nina

Thea patted Dena's neck as she rode her down the cobblestone street. Why didn't Galin listen to her? He had no problem believing in magic, but not his brother's betrayal. Thea's grip tightened on the reins. This was going to be a bad day.

"Thea, hold up!" shouted a voice behind her.

Thea spun around in the saddle. "Robert, what do you want?"

The handsome young knight smiled as he approached. "More like, what did you do to piss off the king so badly?"

"Told the truth," Thea replied as she nudged Dena to move on. "What do you want? I just want to be alone."

"Talking does help," Robert said. "Besides, just because the king won't believe you doesn't mean I won't." He smiled. "Besides, who am I going to drink with if you leave the castle?"

Thea grinned. "It's only three in the afternoon."

"Yup, and we're both off duty. Sounds like a date to me. Unless you're too busy."

"Sure. You're buying the first round."

"As long as you buy the rest," Robert replied. "You're the one that's rich, remember. Rusted Feathers then?"

"No, not this time."

"Why not?"

"I—I'll tell you when we get to the *other* tavern," Thea said.

"We're not going to the Drow Inn and Tavern, are we? That place is a dive."

Thea nodded. "Yeah, and it's private. I'll tell you what I said to the king when we get there."

"Okay." Robert followed Thea to the Drow Inn and Tavern.

Thea's nose wrinkled as the vile odor of vomit ambushed her as she entered the tavern.

"What's that?" Robert asked, holding his nose.

"The usual end result of a whiskey-slammng contest. The loser always heaves on the floor," the old man said as he finished wiping up the vomit. "Can I get you two a drink?"

Thea look around at the empty tavern. The solid oak bar on the left wall only had two patrons sitting on its stools. "Is that—?"

"Who?" Robert said, following Thea as she moved closer to the couple.

"Brock? Sally? What are you doing here?" Thea asked.

Brock turned around with his mug in hand. "Sally wanted to relax, but not at— what's he doing here?"

"Who? Robert?" Thea replied.

"I don't think he's one of them," Sally whispered to Brock.

"If you're going to whisper, Sally, you need to be quieter. Besides, I'm here to help Thea. The king threw her out today. He was pretty upset," Robert said.

"May we join you?" Thea asked.

"Sally?" Brock asked.

"It's okay. We're friends, after all," Sally replied.

The old man appeared with two mugs of ale. "Here you go," he said as he slid the mugs across the bar to Thea and Robert.

"Thank you," Robert replied.

Thea and Robert sat side by side next to Brock. "The king—he didn't believe me," Thea said.

"Which part?" Brock asked.

"Hold on," Robert interrupted. "I thought you were going to tell me, Thea. If I'm going to help, you have to tell me what's going on."

"You're right," Thea said. "Last night Sally overheard some Dark Elves negotiate with Kade to help him overthrow the king."

Robert's face froze as if every muscle was unable to move.

"Sally didn't hear the actual plan, but it's clear that Kade intends to kill the king."

"I see," Robert said.

Thea's eyes focused on every muscle in his face, looking for that sparkle in his eye, but it was gone. "Robert, we can't let that happen."

Robert stared down into his ale. "No, that's not right."

"What?" Brock asked. "Sally was there. She heard them."

"Thea, do we know how they'll attack the king? Do we even have a guess?"

Sally took a sip of her ale. "Kade and Beldroth were meeting two Dark Elves. I didn't see them, but one introduced the other as a commander of a Feral Orc regiment."

"Anything else?" Robert asked.

"Well, I'm not sure."

"Go on, Sally," Thea said.

"I was so scared." Sally looked around. "That's why I insisted on coming here, even though the ale is awful. I—I heard them say the Dark Elves need to be open allies with Kade and they would ensure we thought the Vulwin Elves were responsible. I don't know how."

"You didn't tell me that before." Thea took a swig of her ale. Was she being played by a scared girl looking for attention? No, she'd known Sally far too long to believe that. Why the self-doubt? For the first time, she was doubting Sally. Why? What's different? She just went to the king to tell him about the plot, and now she doubts it? Thea ran her fingers through her hair. Rubbing her eyes, she saw a faint glow. So faint that normally she would've missed it. "Robert, what's wrong with your ring? It's glowing?"

"My ring?" Robert covered up the decorative ring with his family's coat of arms

on its face and laughed. "Maybe the ale here is worse than I thought."

She struggled to focus on that ring. As the glow faded into the shadows, so did her doubts about Sally's story. What just happened? Thea concentrated on Sally. "Did they say what evidence?"

"No," Sally replied.

Robert rubbed his chin. "If they did this, they would have to kill the king's entire family, not just him."

Thea nodded. "Especially, the new baby."

"Right. But, the only real way to get past the king's knights is to—" Robert's eyes widened.

"To draw them out," Thea finished. "That can be done only one way."

"Aye, they have to attack, and there is only one place besides Port Eldham where they can cross the sea from Etrana: Nightfall Meadows."

"They wouldn't even think of attacking Staerdale Castle itself, the siege would take too long. The outlying garrisons would attack them from behind and Kade would be found out," Thea said. "It would have to be Nightfall Meadows."

"Kade can only appear to be the legitimate ruler if the king dies on the battlefield," Brock said. "What about the king's family?"

Thea shrugged. "The queen will be kept in the background and his son is too young to rule. Kade could deal with them at any time. The farther away from the king's death, the less suspicious it would seem. Who's to say otherwise if Kade tells the kingdom two years from now that they died from a fever?"

Robert grinned. "That's a brilliant plan."

Brock took another swig. "How do we stop it?"

"Simple, we keep the king away from the battle," Thea said.

"How?" Robert asked.

Brock looked over at his fiancée. "When you want a man to do something to protect himself and he refuses, tell his wife. She'll *make* him take precautions."

Thea jumped from her stool. "I'm going to tell the queen." She tossed a few crowns on the bar and rushed out the door.

She must believe me, Thea thought as she plowed down the corridor towards the Queen's antechamber. She swore to keep the Ravenward family safe, and she wasn't

going to let them down. Why should the queen believe her? She practically grew up with the king and he didn't. What would cause a wife to take seriously a tale that her husband had discarded?

A guard was posted outside the large, ornate oak door. He smiled as she approached.

"Thea, how are you?"

Thea returned a false smile. "Good. I have important news for the queen; it's urgent."

"Sure." He moved off to the side while opening the great door for Thea.

"Thank you," Thea said as she moved past him.

As she stepped into the doorway, fresh roses invaded her senses. Oak floorboards creaked under her feet with each step. In the center of the floor was a small rug with the Ravenward coat of arms. A small breeze hit the left side of her face. Thea saw a bird's nest in the corner of the stone window. This had to be the most peaceful room in Staerdale Castle.

"Thea, what are you doing here?" Nina asked.

"Sorry, my lady," Thea said as she curtsied. "I—There's a plot by the king's brother to stop your son from getting the throne."

Nina leaned back into her overstuffed pillow chair in the center of the room. "Galín told me about your ideas."

Thea swallowed and gave a quick glance at the two ladies sitting on either side of the queen. "My lady, that means he wants to kill the king, you, and your son."

Nina rolled her eyes. "Do you know how many plots I've been warned about over the years?"

"What does it hurt to listen?" asked the younger noblewoman on Nina's left. "Besides, if it's not real, it could be a good story."

"Clara, I don't know."

"Nina," said the other noblewoman, "she's trying to do her duty. What harm is there in letting her speak? This one may actually be true."

Nina motioned a handmaiden to bring her some tea. "Thea, these two noblewomen who came to your defense are Clara Gilford and Bonnie Lyons. They're both married to dukes in the kingdom. Let's hear how I'm in danger this time."

Thea sighed. "Kade and Beldroth had a meeting at the Rusted Feathers with some Darkstriders."

"Darkstriders?"

"Yes, Beldroth cast a spell to protect the meeting from being overheard."

Nina's eyes grew more intense. "Yes, magic could do that."

"Also, if you were inside the bubble you could see through the Dark Elf illusions. Apparently, the Dark Elves have an innate ability to conceal themselves as any other sentient creature."

Nina blinked. "How's this possible? Surely, the Vulwin Elves would have told us."

"My lady, I honestly can't answer that. I only know what the witness told me."

"Okay, continue." Nina took a sip of her tea.

"After the veil was lifted, there were several Dark Elves among the patrons, and Beldroth was one of them. The witness couldn't believe it—"

"They could be among us here." Nina set her tea down.

Thea nodded. "Yes, my lady. I believe so."

"Go on."

"Two Dark Elves sat down with them. My witness overheard them negotiating the spoils after Kade takes the throne. One claimed to be a Feral Orc regiment commander and the other said he spoke for the Darkstriders."

"Some kind of ambassador?" Nina asked.

Thea nodded. "That would be a good guess, my lady, but there's no way to be sure."

Nina took another sip of tea.

"After they discussed that they would kill your family, my witness got scared and ran out."

"How are they going to do it?"

"My lady—"

"You never said what their plan was to kill my family. What's their plan?"

"Um—I—I..."

Nina frowned. "Everyone get out. I need to speak to this knight alone."

Thea stayed silent until the door slammed shut. "My lady—"

"Now I know why Galin didn't believe you."

"But—"

"Where's your evidence? You accuse the king's brother of treason and have *nothing*? If

he didn't think of you like a sister, you'd already be swinging from the gallows."

"My lady—"

"What do you want me to do? Since we've been married, even before Galin's father died, we've received hundreds of death threats and warnings. None of them has *ever* happened. I—"

Thea shook her head. "I swore to protect your family and I am performing that duty now. What harm would it do to take some precautions? Yes, I know that my previous warnings of Kade's plots didn't turn out to be true. But, this one is different."

"Why?"

"Because someone both you and I trust witnessed it."

"Who?"

"Sally."

Nina blinked. "My Sally?"

Thea nodded.

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"She's afraid of being sent to the gallows, my lady."

Putting her tea down on the small table near the window, Nina walked over to the bird's nest. "Do you know why I haven't had this removed?"

What? Where did that come from? Thea frowned. "My lady—"

"Do you?"

"No."

"Their singing reminds me that all the world is not dark like the hearts of men." Nina sat back down in her fluffy chair. "I'm sure my husband is doing the right thing, but there is no harm in taking some *discreet* precautions."

"I—"

Nina held up her hand, silencing Thea. "If that plot comes to pass, that means the king will already be dead. The next most important thing would be to get my son out of the castle."

"How?"

"Both the king's and queen's antechambers have a means to get outside the castle walls, and the king doesn't know where and how the door works in here. It was done that way intentionally."

"Why?"

"In case of a coup, the heir must be saved to one day take back the throne from the usurper. Those were the words of Galin's father. Only myself and my handmaidens know how to access this tunnel," Nina said.

"My lady, before we talk about our defeat, let's stop it from happening in the first place."

Nina nodded. "We have to keep Galin safe from himself." Her eyes narrowed. "What if you're wrong?"

"Nothing, and everyone is safe. I will retire my duties as a knight and take my post managing my new lands."

"Thank you, Thea. You may go."

Thea curtsied. "Thank you for listening, my lady." She turned and headed towards the door. How does she save the king from himself?

CHAPTER NINE

Attack!

Thea leaned over the battlement above Staerdale Castle's main gate. Her fingers swirled the tiny loose stones on top of the wall. Ever since the queen took her seriously, Thea was duty bound to stay and guard the castle. Most of the knights didn't believe her story. Why should they? If the situation were reversed, would she?

"Thea, are you still here?" a male voice said.

She turned and saw Brock carrying two steaming mugs with a sword dangling from his side. "Brock, why are you wearing a sword?"

"Sally convinced the queen to add me to her personal security guards while I am not

at the blacksmith shop." He handed her a cup of coffee.

Thea grinned. "You mean she tricked the queen to spend more time with you."

Brock nodded. "Aye. Sally has been at the castle every night for the past week, ever since you told the queen about Kade's plot."

"I hope I did the right thing," Thea said, turning back towards the world beyond the walls. "Haven't seen anything yet, and I'm beginning to wonder if I will."

"Sally overheard the king and queen fighting about Kade."

"On whether or not he's a traitor?"

"No, on what to do about it. Seems like there have been some reports backing up the warning you gave the king."

"What reports? Why haven't they told me?"

Brock shook his head. "No idea. Heck, I'm not even sure it's real."

"It doesn't matter anyway." Thea took a sip of her coffee. "I—"

"Look," Brock said, pointing far off in the distance.

"What?" Thea strained her eyes to see the faint flickering light. "Nightmare Falls?"

Brock nodded. "Could be."

If it were during the day, they would have never seen the fire far off in the distance, but they might be able to see the enemy soldiers. No screams; why no screams? Every time a village is attacked, there is always screaming. True, Nightfall Meadows is ten miles away, but surely screaming, fleeing peasants would run towards the castle. Unless—unless they were taken quickly. She glanced over at the warning bell hanging from the battlement to her left. Should she ring it now? What if she was wrong?

"Thea," Brock said, interrupting her thoughts. "We've got to tell someone."

"Not yet. We don't know if it's an out-of-control fire or an attack."

A bead of sweat rolled down Brock's cheek. "What do we do now?"

"Keep watching." Her eyes scanned every shadow, anticipating the worst. The darkness beyond the castle torches hid the truth from her eyes. Thea closed her eyes in a vain attempt to hear *something*. No sound or movement; there was nothing at all. "Brock, just in case, go below and let the sergeant-of-the-guard know what we saw and come right back up here."

"Got it." Brock rushed down the stone steps.

If Kade was attacking, the army might not come down to Staerdale Castle itself. At least, not at first. How would she attack the castle? Perhaps seize Port Eldham, Nightfall Meadows, and surround the castle outside of arrow and ballista range. Siege the castle for the next few months, starving them out. Yes, that's how she'd do it; but Kade was never that patient.

"A rider is coming from the north!" a guard on the northern wall called out.

Thea twisted her head left. Her eyes pierced the dark shroud at the end of the torchlight. A knight, one of Galin's knights, was slumped over on his horse as it galloped towards the gate. Her eyes widened as the arrow in his back glistened in the torchlight. "Open the gate!"

She rushed down the stone steps and bolted towards the gate. Thea motioned Brock to join her and he ran.

"Thea, what is it?" Brock said.

"Daniel, Sir Daniel."

The massive gate partially opened and closed immediately after the knight rode through.

Thea grabbed the reins, stopping the horse. "Daniel, can you hear me?"

Brock's massive arms pulled the wounded knight from his horse, laying him down next to a small pile of hay. "He's hurt bad."

"I know."

Daniel's blue eyes cracked open. "Where— where am I?"

"Your horse brought you back to Staerdale Castle," Brock said.

"I'm not going to make it, am I?"

Thea shook her head. "Sure you will. I—"

"You're a terrible liar. I'll see you in the next life." Daniel closed his eyes as if willing for a faster death.

"No, Daniel you have to tell us first. What happened?" Thea demanded.

"Vulwin Elves were leading the Feral Orcs in the attack."

"They're our allies!" Brock said.

"That's why they took us by surprise," Daniel said. "Thea, they're heading toward Port Eldham."

"Our only chance is—" Thea jumped up. "Brock, tell the sergeant-of-the-guard to tend to Daniel."

"Then what?"

"Go to Sally and protect the baby."

"Why? If they're going to siege the castle, we've got a lot of time."

"No, Kade's not that patient." Thea glared at Brock. "Now do what you're told, *blacksmith*."

Brock bolted inside the castle.

Time to tell the king, Thea thought. She sprinted towards the castle entrance.

I have to protect the king. Thea stormed down the corridor towards the Great Hall. Murmurs from the servants in the corridors couldn't pull her eyes away from the elaborate doors. Thea's eyes narrowed and her pace increased as she got closer to the Great Hall. As she approached, the two guards opened the double doors.

"Sire," Thea said as she stepped into the Great Hall.

"Thea, what's going on?" Galin asked.

Brock stood behind the Queen, next to Sally.

"Brock, I told you to guard the prince," Thea said.

Galin turned around. "Do what she says, both of you."

"Yes, sire," Brock said as he and Sally rushed out the door behind the thrones.

"Well?" Galin asked.

"Nightfall Meadows has been attacked by what appears to be Vulwin Elves. They're heading for Port Eldham," Thea said.

"Faeler wouldn't betray us. He made peace with us over a century ago."

Thea swallowed. "I believe it is the Dark Elves pretending to be Vulwin Elves. Sire, do you remember what I told you about their ability to look like any humanoid life?"

"I do. That would make more sense. But—we can't be sure, either."

"Sire!" Robert yelled as he ran into the Great Hall.

"What is it, Robert?"

"We sent some scouts to confirm Daniel's report about the Darkstriders movements."

Galin cocked one eye. "And?"

"They're almost to Port Eldham now. If they take it—"

Galin collapsed into his throne. "We may never get them out. I've got to stop them."

Nina reached over, grabbing Galin's hand. "Send your most trusted knights to lead the fight, but I don't want you to go."

His eyes dropped down as he gazed through Nina's eyes into her soul. "I have to."

"What about our son? It seems that Thea was right, at least in part. What if we haven't seen their whole army yet?" Nina asked.

"Any word on Kade?"

"No, sire," Thea said. "But, Queen Nina is right. If you are killed in battle, Kade will assume the throne until your son is old enough—"

"He would kill both Nina and my son," Galin finished.

Robert stepped forward. "Sire, for the sake of the kingdom, please stay here."

"Would Kade be patient enough to siege the castle? Would he? Would I?" Galin closed his eyes as if playing out different scenarios in his mind.

"Sire?" Robert asked.

Galin's eyes snapped open. "Robert, send for my war council and ready the knights. Once you're done, join Thea on the walls with some archers and pikemen."

"I'm not going?" Thea asked.

"No, I want you to command the defense of Staerdale Castle. If these are Dark Elves disguised as Vulwin Elves, they have to finish this before word gets back to King Faeler—"

"Which means they're attacking tonight," Thea finished.

"Yes, but they need the port first to prevent reinforcements from coming to our aid. Hopefully, my brother is not with them."

"Sire, I'll see to the castle's defenses," Thea said.

Galín gripped Nina's hand. "We'll be here."

"Yes, sire." Thea curtsied and bolted out the door.

Sweat rolled down Thea's back underneath her breastplate. Her fingers tapped on the battlement above the gate like a drum. After everything was ready to defend the castle against Kade's forces, she sat on the wall and waited. Staerdale Castle had the widest moat and its walls had never been breached in over one hundred fifty years. The odds were definitely on her side.

Port Eldham was too far to see how the battle was going, not that it would do much good anyway. All Thea could do was wait. She swallowed some water from her water skin.

"Didn't your shift end over an hour ago?" Robert said, walking up behind her.

"I am in charge, you know," Thea replied.

Robert leaned on the battlement. "I know, but you still have to rest."

"I can rest when it's over."

"The battle at Port Eldham could take days. You're better off getting some sleep now so you can fight harder when they actually attack."

Mental fog rolled in as she yawned. "I guess—" Thea caught something in the corner of her eye. A glow, a very faint glow on Robert's hand. "Why is your ring glowing?"

"What?" Robert snatched up his hand, gazing at his family's signet ring. "What are you talking about?"

Thea blinked as her exhaustion receded. "I guess it was nothing."

"Okay, no problem. Since this is *my* shift, I'll be checking the watchtowers."

"Sure." Thea's eyes continued scanning the horizon, vainly attempting to pierce the darkness. The sweat rolling down her back chilled her spine. The battlement became cold to the touch. Her breath became steam as it escaped from her mouth. "Robert—"

"I—I know," Robert replied as he ran to her side. "It's started."

Thea turned her head back towards the group of infantrymen beneath her on the ground. "Get down!"

High above the castle, twenty red lights appeared. Just for a second, they hung in space like a picture on the wall, and then they fell. Each fiery object picked up speed as it raced towards the ground. Each light split in two, making twenty into forty. Forty became eighty. Eighty become one hundred sixty fiery projectiles.

Thea pulled Robert close against the battlement. "It's Beldroth."

"I know."

When the first projectile hit the ground it broke apart, sending fiery shrapnel into the flesh of anyone within a few yards and set ablaze the hay on the ground. Then came the next one, followed by the succession of fiery deaths to those not under cover within the castle walls.

Thea clasped her hands over her ears, trying to keep the screams of people being burnt alive out of her mind.

Robert held onto Thea tightly. "We just need to hang on until they get closer."

Thea nodded. She looked up, only to see another wave being rained down upon

them. "I hope we last that long." She peeked over the battlement.

A Vulwin Elf soldier broke through the veil of darkness, followed by another, and another.

"I guess we don't have long to wait," Thea said. "It's them."

"What?" Robert looked over the battlement. "Vulwin Elves, it's true!"

"Dark Elves can look like any other humanoid, remember that."

"But that takes concentration. How can you fight and still keep your form?"

Thea blinked. "How do you know that?"

Robert shrugged. "Everything about magic takes concentration, and the mage usually can't do anything else. I've been around Beldroth a lot too, you know."

The deafening sound of another fiery wave of projectiles detonating on the ground caused Thea to cower against the battlement. After a moment, she stood up. "Kade's forces are attacking now!" Thea shouted. "Get to your posts!"

Brock ran up to the wall just below Thea. "How many?"

Thea looked back at the enemy line forming in front of the castle. "Can't tell yet."

She turned back towards Brock. "Tell the king, and then get to Sally and protect that baby at all costs. If Kade gets in, we have to save the prince."

Robert grabbed Thea's shoulder. "He won't."

"I hope you're right," Thea said as she watched Brock run into the castle. "Archers on the walls!"

Robert ran past Thea towards the watchtower. He directed the archers to their positions as they raced up the stairs.

Thea concentrated on the advancing threat. Her stomach tightened as a battering ram emerged from behind the line of Vulwin Elves. Is that how they planned to get inside the castle walls? Breaching castle walls was always a costly attack, but why start with that? Why not start with a trebuchet or a catapult to wear down the defenses? Something didn't seem right. Maybe—

"They're in position," Robert said.

"I don't suppose we have a pyromancer or a war mage here?"

"Sorry, they went to Port Eldham with the—"

Thea blinked. "It was a diversion. The whole attack."

"This isn't," Robert said, pointing at the line of Vulwin Elves. "Why did they stop?"

Why did they stop? Thea thought. The knights and infantryman stood to one side as if waiting for something. "Ready the archers!"

As Robert waved a red flag, the archers on the wall notched an arrow and steadfast, waiting for the command.

Hooded, gray-cloaked figures emerged without swords or bows or visible weapons of any kind. Thea's eyes focused on their hands. They were moving their hands like Beldroth did at— "Aim for the mages!" Thea yelled. "Loose the arrows before they finish casting their spell."

The archers loosed their arrows across the field. As they plunged to the earth, several elven knights, infantryman, and mages fell to the ground in agony.

Elven screams brought a smile to Thea's face. But, it was short-lived. The mages were still casting their spell. "Again!"

Another mass of arrows flew across the sky, taking down even more elves, but the mages didn't stop.

"I don't like this," Robert said.

A chill ran down Thea's spine. Her armor became cold to the touch. A loud crackling sound came from down below. A small patch of ice appeared in the moat and spread like a virus. "They're freezing the moat!"

"Aye."

"Watch for the siege ladders. They're going to try to breach the walls!" Thea yelled.

The mages moved forward, still moving their hands as if casting another spell. Elven knights and infantrymen moved slowly, keeping pace with the mages.

They needed to concentrate on those trying to climb over the walls, but the elves had no ladders. "They're not going over the walls or using the battering ram on the gate," Thea said. "They're—loose another volley! Kill the mages, quickly! Loose at will!"

Robert grabbed Thea's shoulder. "Even Beldroth can't do that."

"Maybe she was always on the other side."

Another mass of arrows flew across the sky. A woman wearing a red hooded robe ran out in front of the formation.

"That's Beldroth," Thea said. "She's casting something."

The arrows plunged towards the earth.

Beldroth moved her hands left and right.

The arrows accelerated towards their targets.

In a seemingly triumphant moment, Beldroth raised both of her hands towards the sky.

Thea's mouth dropped as the arrows incinerated in mid-air; not one hit the ground.

"Save the arrows," Robert muttered.

A familiar chill came over Thea. She looked up. Her heart sank as she saw more fiery projectiles appear above them. "Take cover!" Thea and Robert dove behind the wall and hugged the battlement for protection.

Screams rang in Thea's ears as the fiery projectiles crashed into the ground. She got up on one knee to look over the battlement. The mages were casting something, but this time the elven knights and infantrymen were charging.

The wall shook.

Thea was knocked down but quickly got back up. More screams made her turn towards the gate. Rubble was in the courtyard. The screeching of bending metal reached her ears. "They've breached the gate."

The distorted heavy iron gate crashed to the ground, crushing a vendor's cart.

Robert nodded. "Here they come."

The mass of Vulwin Elves flowed through the breach like a river, killing everything in their path.

"We have to get to the king," Thea said.

"After you."

Thea drew her sword and jumped down on the elf infantryman below her. He crashed to the ground, unable to raise his weapon. She slammed her sword into his back, taking his life. She should have run, but didn't. Something was happening to the elf. His skin turned into a dark blue and his ears grew more defined. "He's a Dark Elf."

"Doesn't matter," Robert said. "Let's go."

The two hundred yards from the castle walls to the castle entrance seemed more like two hundred miles.

"Follow me," Thea said.

Three elves charged at Thea. She parried away one, slashed another's stomach, spilling out his insides, and pierced another's heart, all in one fluid motion. They took a few more steps towards the castle. Robert and Thea fought back-to-back, slashing,

thrusting, and spilling elven blood on the ground.

Thea no longer felt anything except her drive to get to the king. Nothing else mattered. It was almost like her mind turned off and her body took over. Five, six, seven, eight, and more elves fell by her hand.

"Look over by the castle portcullis!" Robert said.

Humans from within the castle were pushing back against the onslaught, calling the survivors to join them.

"They won't hold for long," Thea replied.

"Come on." Robert pushed his way through the fighting crowd.

As they moved towards the tiny bubble of hope, Thea slashed more elves with nearly every step. "Almost there." Thea's world came crashing down as Robert's scream pierced her eardrums. Her sword followed her head towards Robert's assailant. With all her strength, she thrust her sword into the elf's eye, piercing the back of his skull. After he had hit the ground, Thea put her boot on his throat as she yanked her sword from his skull. "Robert!" She knelt down to pull him out of danger.

"Watch out!" Robert yelled as he flung a throwing knife right past Thea's head and into the elf charging at her.

"I'll get you out of here."

"No, get to the king. Save the kingdom!" Robert struggled to get up. "Hurry, before they kill you, too."

Thea saw the young knight charge into a crowd of elves, diverting them away from her and the castle gate. She bolted past the last few elves and the human perimeter. The clanging of swords and axes resumed with more human screams than elf. Instead of staying to fight, she ran down the corridor. Was she doing the right thing? She turned. The war cries charging at her weren't human. *They broke through*, she thought. If she went straight to the king, they'd find him that much easier. She had to lose them in the castle's maze of corridors first. Thea sprinted down the corridor to the right, just past the kitchen.

CHAPTER TEN

Usurper

"Sire, look out!" a Vulwin Elf yelled as he thrust his sword into a knight's gullet.

Kade crashed down onto the stone floor just inside the castle, quickly popping back up to face his next adversary. Clanging of swords and axes rang through his ears. Screams from Galin's falling knights brought a half-smile to his face. Sure, he knew all of them, was even friends with some, but the throne was far more important. "Thank you."

Beldroth helped Kade to his feet. "The perimeter outside the castle is secured and we have a good foothold inside."

I'm really going to be king, Kade thought. "How about the tunnel exits beyond the walls?"

Her human form melted into her natural Dark Elf self. Beldroth pulled from her red robes a crystal sphere with swirling clouds in the center. She closed her eyes and held the crystal ball in her hands. "Sama an ninag to nikin. Sama an ninag to nikin."

Clouds within the crystal ball began to swirl faster and faster.

I hate it when she does that, Kade thought.

"Sama an ninag to nikin."

They swirled faster and faster.

"Sama an ninag to nikin!"

Kade covered his eyes as a bright-white light flashed from within the crystal. He swallowed as her malevolent eyes slowly opened. Her hands were empty, as if the crystal ball was used up in the spell. "Well?"

"I've cast a Clairvoyant Eye near the exits you showed us. They haven't come through yet, but I'll know if they do," Beldroth said.

"Why haven't you done this for me before?"

The corners of her mouth curled. "I have to be in my natural form to cast this spell."

"Can you find Galin with that?"

Beldroth shook her head. "No, I can only cast that spell once per day. Besides, I don't have another crystal ball."

The Vulwin Elf who commanded Kade's forces moved down the corridor towards him. "Are we safe to change?"

Beldroth nodded. "Yes, Ryul."

Ryul's skin turned a dark blue. His flowing brown hair disappeared underneath his scalp. "What about the humans? Will—"

"They'll know who their real allies are soon enough," Kade said. "We have to find the king before he escapes."

"I'll take some men and find them," Ryul said.

"Stick to the outer rooms, along the perimeter. I'll keep to the inner chambers. If you find him, send word *before* you kill him."

"Aye." Ryul grabbed twelve Dark Elf knights, motioning them to follow.

"Where to?" Beldroth asked.

Kade smiled. "Let's start with the Great Hall."

Kade wore his blood-soaked chest plate like a badge of honor. With Beldroth on his right and ten Dark Elf Knights in tow, Kade marched down the long corridor towards the Great Hall. He couldn't see the doors yet, only a few more turns to go.

"Traitor!" Three soldiers charged at Kade.

He sidestepped the lead soldier's lunge. Kade slammed the hilt of his bastard sword into the soldier's head. As the unconscious man fell, Kade effectively swung his sword at his opponent and his head rolled back towards his companions.

The soldier on the left wildly swung his sword at Kade.

Kade slammed himself against the wall, avoiding the blow.

Realizing his mistake, the soldier stepped back.

Seeing the fear in his enemy's eyes, Kade charged him.

The soldier raised his sword in defense.

Kade easily knocked it away. The soldier's eyes opened wide as Kade slammed his sword into the man chest.

Beldroth murmured a few words. Her hands were flexed, with her fingers pointed at the soldier on the right. Fire appeared in front of her palms. Faster than an arrow, it flew across the corridor, right through the soldier's chest. Upon impact, he exploded into flames. The dead man fell to the floor.

"Almost there," Kade said as he led them around the corner.

A few minutes and fourteen soldiers later, they were at the last corner before the Great Hall. "I think Galin's in there. There are too many soldiers guarding it to mean anything else."

Beldroth nodded. "He's bound to have a lot inside as well."

"Aye," Kade replied. "We need to surprise him. But as soon as we attack the guards at the door, we lose that advantage."

"I agree. As soon as they hear a fight outside the door, they'll just get the king out."

Kade peeked around the corner. "I see six guards outside the Great Hall. We can't take them down fast enough."

Beldroth stood up. "When I'm not in my illusionary form, my magic is at full strength."

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you my true powers. After I blow the doors in, charge inside and take out the guards."

"What?" Kade grabbed her robes. "Don't—"

Beldroth yanked her robes from his grasp. "Be ready." She moved to the corner, just far enough where she could see the door.

Pulling a small platinum ball from a pouch within her robes, Beldroth mumbled a barely audible phrase. She placed the small, rare metal ball in the palm of her left hand.

"Stein nim tsak srot."

A light pulsed from within the ball.

"Stein nim tsak srot."

The valuable metal ball vanished from her hand. The stone corridor walls cracked as if being pushed aside by some invisible force. The force stood still for a moment.

Beldroth's eyes focused on the Great Hall's elaborate double doors, ignoring the guards in front of it. "Stein nim tsak srot."

As if following Beldroth's gaze, the force cracking both sides of the corridor accelerated towards the double doors.

Realizing their fate, the guards turned and pounded on the doors.

The force flattened all six guards as it slammed into the heavy oak double doors.

"Stein nim tsak srot."

The guard's remains fell to the floor as if the force pulled back from the door.

"Stein nim tsak srot!"

In a split-second, the bodies were picked up and thrown into the Great Hall as the doors imploded.

"Follow me!" Kade yelled as he charged through the rubble.

Sword drawn, Kade emerged from the smoke into the Great Hall. The smell of charred wood pierced his nostrils. His right foot slipped on the slick floor. Kade looked down to see that he was standing in a pool of blood. Bloody pieces of armor were thrown about, with the soldiers still inside them.

Beldroth clung to his side, and the ten Dark Elf knights split up to cover both sides of the Great Hall.

Kade stepped forward, studying every body, trying to determine who was still alive. Then he saw them, the couple that stood in his way. Galin and Nina were thrown to the floor in front of their thrones amongst their unconscious advisers. "What happened?"

"When the door broke apart, the concussion from the blast stunned everyone behind it for fifty yards," Beldroth replied. "They'll come to in a minute."

As if on cue, Galin and Nina began to stir.

Kade motioned to the Dark Elf knights. "Quickly, secure them."

Two knights yanked Galin and Nina to their feet, dragging them in front of Kade.

"What about the others?" Beldroth asked, pointing at the advisers.

"Kill them. They'll just be a problem later if we don't," Kade replied.

The remaining eight knights moved from body to body, decapitating their victims.

Galin's groggy eyes cracked open. "Kade, stop this."

Nina opened her eyes. Staring directly at Beldroth's true form, she screamed.

"Easy, Nina," Galin said. He turned back towards Kade. "Please, we're family, Kade. Don't do this."

Kade stared at his brother, unable to speak.

Beldroth rubbed her ring and it began to glow. Her mouth was moving, but no words could be heard.

Galin stared at Beldroth. "What are—?"

"Where's my nephew, brother?" Kade asked.

"*She* did it. Kade, Beldroth is controlling you. You can resist, you must resist. Please, resist that evil thing!"

"I—" Kade stared at Beldroth. "I—"

Beldroth rubbed her ring again.

"I'll kill Nina if you don't tell me," Kade said as he raised his sword.

"Galin, don't tell him," Nina begged.

"They'll kill him!"

Sweat poured down Galin's face. "I can't."

"Wrong answer." Kade slammed his sword into Nina's chest, piercing her heart.

Galin's eyes widened as he watched his queen's lifeless body fall to the ground. "I hate you."

Kade kicked Galin's right knee, breaking it in two.

Collapsing in pain, Galin reached for his beloved. "Nina," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

Taking some pleasure from Galin's torment, Kade stepped on his broken knee. The more pressure he put on it, the louder Galin screamed, and the bigger his smile got.

"Kade, she's controlling you. For the love of the gods, please stop!" Galin said.

"Last chance," Kade said.

Galin bit his lip. "Never." He looked over to see Beldroth's ring was glowing even brighter.

"Suit yourself." Kade thrust his sword into Galin's stomach.

Galin's eyes closed as he rolled over.

Kade directed his attention towards the ten knights. "I want you to search the rooms behind the Great Hall for the baby."

"Yes, sir," said one of the knights. The Dark Elf knights disappeared into the door behind the thrones.

"He's not dead," Beldroth said.

Kade smiled. "Brother, let's try this again."

With her sword drawn, Thea entered the kitchen. No smells of fresh bread or recently cooked meat or even giggles from the servant wenches; there was nothing. A fire still blazed in the hearth across the long rectangular room on the far side of the solid oak island. A large block filled with knives sat on the end of the island's countertop. Just because she didn't hear anything, didn't mean she was alone. Placing her feet softly on the ground, Thea moved across the room, examining under every table and bench that lined the walls. Pausing, she listened. With Robert gone and Brock protecting the baby, she was alone in the war against the Darkstriders.

Metal crashed to the floor.

Maybe a fork? Thea thought. Her heart thumped faster and faster. Her ears became filled with her own heartbeat. *Come on, where are you? Utensils don't just jump off the counter.* She moved close to the end of the counter

and stopped. Peering over the countertop, Thea grabbed the chef's knife from the knife block. The springs in her feet were poised and her sword arm was itching to strike with each step around the island. Between the island and the counter along the wall, someone could be hiding under the island. Was she just being paranoid? True, sometimes things just fall down, especially at the wrong times.

She took another step.

As soon as I clear the island, I'm just going to thrust my sword under the counter, Thea thought.

Another step.

Stab so blindly? That's not me. What if it's a child underneath?

Another step.

What if it's not? Could the Dark Elf be baiting me to second guess myself?

Another step.

No more time now. May the gods help me.

In a single motion, Thea dropped in front of the island with her legs split and threw the chef's knife into the darkness. With both hands, she swung her sword under the island, hitting nothing but wood.

Thea sighed. *Nothing. Nothing but my nerves.*

"R zersh," a voice in the hall said.

What to do? She was too far from the door for an ambush. Thea had no bow to hit them across the knife block. She pulled the knife block underneath the island with her. In those close quarters, her sword would be almost useless, but not the knives.

"Noi ro, alsh r lm f r him."

Whoever is saying that is obviously the leader of—how many? What language is that? Dark Elf? Thea carefully put her sword down and grasped two knives. She closed her eyes, listening only. The soft steps of two elves made themselves known, each going around opposite sides of the island. The one on the other side of the island wouldn't see her until he came completely around it, but the other could see her much sooner.

The footsteps behind her sounded closer.

They're not as careful as I was earlier.

Overconfident? Wouldn't I be if it were three against one?

The elf moving between the island and the wall came closer to her hidden position.

Thea peered through the darkness. A muscular, dark-blue-skinned elf with razor-

like tipped ears and sword in hand was scanning everywhere for his prey.

If he sees me first, I'm dead. If I strike too soon, I'm still dead.

Both elves slowly moved in closer.

My only chance is to get them both at once.

Thea looked for at least one target. If she hit the elf on this side of the island, the other would be thrown off balance, right?

"You can't hide, Thea," the voice said.

Thea? They know me. That means— almost Thea threw the chef's knife at the elf on her side of the island, knocking him down, dead. She rolled from underneath the island to around the corner, staring up at her opponent. With a powerful upward thrust, she stabbed the elf on the inside of a thigh, severing his main artery.

Clanging feet from the armored elf rushing towards her rang through her ears.

Thea recoiled back underneath the island, knocking over the knife block. She grabbed a meat cleaver in her right hand and her sword in her left.

Clang. Clang.

Which way is he coming from? Thea closed her eyes for a millisecond.

Clang. Clang.

Only one shot at this. Spinning around, she flung herself against the wall. Thea smiled at the surprised elf. The cleaver sailed through the air like a bullet, embedding itself into his stomach.

The shear force knocked the elf back, disarming him as he hit the ground.

Thea leaped over the island, on top of her enemy, and raised her sword to finish him off.

"You're too late," he said.

What did he mean? Is the king dead? The queen? The prince? Am I doing this in vain? Thea stopped her sword from impaling his chest.

"Did you hear that explosion in the halls?" he asked.

"Yes," Thea replied.

A triumphant smile crawled across the elf's face. "That's my lady Beldroth killing your king and his family."

"You won't live to see the spoils of your war," Thea said as she slammed her sword through his heart. She yanked the sword from his lifeless body. Blood poured out of the new orifice. "Now for the king," Thea said as she ran out of the kitchen.

Thea found little resistance using the servant corridors leading to the Great Hall. The corridor walls leading towards the doorway were cracked, as if some force pushed against them.

"I want you to search the rooms behind the Great Hall for the baby," a voice said.

Was that Kade? Thea asked herself.

"Yes, sir," another said.

Thea peered around the door to see ten Dark Elf knights running through the small door behind the thrones. There was just Kade and Beldroth left, no security at all. Since Beldroth was an illusion the whole time, did she see all of her powers? Probably not.

"He's not dead," Beldroth said.

Who's that on the floor next to the king? Thea thought. *It's—Queen Nina!*

Kade stood over the king and smiled.

"Brother, let's try this again."

Thea looked down at a soldier's crushed corpse. *An ax. I've got to go now!* She grabbed the ax with her left hand and her sword was in her right.

Kade raised his sword over his brother.

"Just so you know, our father didn't die of natural causes."

Galin's eyes flashed over at Thea and stared directly into Kade's eyes. "Did you...?"

"Yes." Kade thrust his sword towards Galin.

Thea threw the ax at Kade.

Sensing danger, Kade turned his head. The ax nicked his hand, causing him to drop the sword.

Fear overtook Beldroth's eyes. She touched Kade's wounded arm. "Treherkis Lit. Treherkis Lit."

Thea charged at Beldroth with her sword out in front.

"Treherkis Lit!"

The bastard sword skewered Beldroth. Thea glanced over at Kade.

A light came over Kade, blinding everyone around him.

Thea blinked, and he was gone. Her face reddened as she twisted the sword inside Beldroth. "Where is he?"

Blood spewed out of Beldroth's mouth. "Safe from you." She reached for her ring while silently moving her lips.

"No, you don't." Thea pulled her sword from Beldroth's gullet and raised it above her victim. Her eyes focused on the ring hand. With one hard slash, Thea sliced off

Beldroth's hand, making the magic ring useless.

Recoiling in pain, Beldroth clutched her severed limb.

"Where is he?"

Beldroth only smiled. "Sa—saf—safe from—" She took her last breath, then she was gone.

"Thea—" a voice behind her gasped.

"Sire." Thea spun around towards Galin. "I must get you to a healer."

Galín shook his head. "No, it's too late for me. This wound is fatal."

She looked down at the dark blood spilling from his abdomen. "I see."

He grasped her arm. "My son, save—you've got to save my son, please, Thea."

"Where are they? I sent—"

"They're in the king's antechamber. Kade and I used to play in the secret passages throughout the castle all the time, so he knows most of them, but not these."

"Why not?"

"The royal escape passages were not told to us until Nina and I actually took the throne. You've—"

"Yes?"

"Got to get them out. Save my son. Fulfill your vow to me, please. I—I—" Galin's eyes went dark as he gasped his last breath.

Thea closed his eyes. "I won't fail you." She bolted through the small door behind the thrones.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Prince

The clanging of swords and screams from skewered soldiers echoed through the corridors. Holding her sword at the ready, Thea quietly and swiftly moved down the hall.

Almost there, Thea thought.

Her eyes bore down on the intersection ahead. Slowing down, Thea's steps were as quiet as a feather hitting the ground. With her back pressed against the wall and watching the opening on the opposite side, Thea took another step.

Come on, you bastards!

Metal striking metal became louder.

Thea's ears perked up. *Where are you?*

The clanging became faster, as if another sword joined the melee.

A human scream pierced her soul. *It's— it's behind me!* Raising her sword, Thea leaped around the corner.

Two Dark Elves just smiled at her. One pulled his sword out of the dead soldier's stomach. The other raised her sword and charged.

Thea braced. Her eyes bounced from the female elf to the male elf and back.

With his sword at the ready, the second Dark Elf charged in.

The female elf poised her sword, ready to thrust into Thea's chest.

"May the gods help me," Thea said. In one fluid motion, she dropped to the floor with her legs split.

Unable to stop their forward momentum, the two elves looked down.

Letting out a battle cry, Thea swung her bastard sword at the two elves. The female elf lost her foot as Thea's sword passed right through the elf's leg, just above the ankle.

The second elf attempted to jump back, but he merely stumbled.

Thea slashed his calf as he crashed to the ground. She jumped to her feet. They're not taking prisoners, why should she? Thea raised her sword above her head. The shiny

blade sailed through the air until it severed the male Dark Elf's head from his body.

"Please, please don't," cried the female Dark Elf. "I'll give you anything you want. Please, spare me!"

Thea grinned at the elf. "I already have everything I want." She slammed her sword into the elf's chest. Thea stared into her eyes until her life was gone.

A young woman's scream bellowed down the hall.

"Sally!" Thea ran around the last corner towards the king's Antechamber.

Clanging swords and Sally's desperate screams flowed through the wooden door, piercing Thea's soul. She bit her lip. She kicked the door in, knocking it off its hinges.

As the door crashed to the ground, three Dark Elves wrenched their heads towards Thea.

Seeing an opportunity, Brock thrust his sword into his opponent's chest.

Only for a second, she looked over at Sally with the baby in her arms. They had no obvious injuries. Thea charged into the room, getting between Sally and the elves.

One elf attacked Brock while the other lunged at Thea.

Brock parried then sidestepped.

Thea blocked the thrust.

The elf recoiled.

She faked a slash towards his head.

Her opponent moved to block.

Thea circled her blade underneath his sword and slashed his stomach open.

Surprised, the elf grasped his innards as he collapsed to the ground.

Brock parried another blow. Seeing Thea's opponent drop down, Brock sidestepped again.

The Dark Elf raised his sword.

Seeing the danger, Brock raised his blade to block the onslaught.

The Dark Elf's sword crashed into Brock's blade.

Brock dropped his sword. He collapsed to the ground in a vain attempt to avoid the elf's blade.

Sally screamed.

The baby cried.

The elf raised his sword to pierce Brock's heart.

Thea swung her sword, knocking his head from his body.

As the headless elf crashed to the ground, Sally ran over to Brock. "Are you all right?"

Brock nodded. "Thank you," he said to Thea.

Thea extended her hand. "You'd have done the same for me." She moved closer to the baby in Sally's arms. For the first time, she looked directly into his blue eyes. "He's so—helpless."

Brock pulled the two women to the side, away from the open doorway. "We've got to get the prince out."

Thea nodded. "Sally, the king said you knew a secret way out, one that even Kade doesn't know."

"Yes, I do. Unlike the other escape tunnels, this one comes out on the southern end of the castle walls," Sally said.

"How do we get to it?"

"The queen's antechamber. It's—"

Thea clamped her hand over Sally's mouth. "Keep it to yourself until we get there, in case one of us doesn't make it."

Sally nodded. "Okay."

"Let's go." Thea led the small group out of the room.

With her sword at the ready, Thea moved towards the queen's antechamber. Her eyes peered ahead at the intersection, straining to

detect danger. Thea's steps became lighter the closer she got to the intersection. Hugging the wall, she looked around the corner. "Clear."

"Wait," Brock said. "Do you hear that?"

Thea closed her eyes. No sounds of clashing swords or screams from slain soldiers and elves; there was...*nothing*. "Did the fight move elsewhere?"

"Or we lost."

Sally tugged Thea's arm. "We've got to hurry."

"What's the fastest way to get there from here?" Thea asked.

"Take a right, then the second hallway on the left. At the end, there is a secret door behind the tapestry," Sally replied.

Thea saw Sally holding back her tears. Soon, they would all train the prince to retake his throne, but they had to get him out of the castle first. Remembering her oath to the king, Thea's eyes twinkled at the little prince. She would make sure he was safe, no matter the cost. "Come on."

When they reached the intersection, Thea led the trio silently down to the right corridor. Her steps were light and her eyes were sharp. Nothing was going to surprise

them. As the catlike trio approached their left turn, Thea held up a fist.

Brock froze in place.

Sally clamped her hand over the baby's mouth. Her feet remained planted as she hardly took a breath.

Thea closed her eyes and concentrated on hearing what was around the corner.

"Beb noi zu rim?" an elven voice asked.

"Fo, om beb'r," another replied.

At least two, Thea thought.

"Ozan, limo noil vaos," said the first elven voice.

Unable to understand them, Thea concentrated on their footsteps. She looked back towards Brock, motioning around the corner. Once he nodded, she knew he understood. The prince had to escape unnoticed. Otherwise, they would be hunted down like wild animals. That could only happen if no *living* Dark Elf saw them escape.

"Nu, zel," a third elven voice said.

Thea listened to the clanging of feet on the stone floor. A single pair of footsteps seemed to be going the other direction while two more were heading right towards them. The

elves no longer hid, nor walked stealthily down the halls.

If we're too noisy taking them down, more will come, Thea thought.

Clang. Clang.

Do we grab them before we kill them? Thea's heart raced.

Clang. Clang.

Too late. "Screw it." With her sword horizontal at chest level, Thea charged around the corner, with Brock close behind.

The two Dark Elves fumbled to pull their swords from their sheaths.

Thea drove her sword through the stomach of the elf on the left.

Brock slashed the other elf's throat as he came to Thea's side.

The Dark Elf grabbed Thea's sword as he fell to the ground. "Sev, vsoa zomoo sv iz!" he screamed. "Vsoa sev iz!"

"Shut him up," Brock demanded.

Thea yanked her sword from his gullet, spilling his entrails onto the floor.

"Look out!" Sally yelled.

Thea looked up.

A Dark Elf was standing at the end of the hallway. His eyes bounced from Thea to

Brock and to the baby in Sally's arms. "Ep foi ro valso!" he screamed.

Thea grabbed a knife from her belt.

He turned and started to run.

She threw her knife. It hit its mark, the middle of the Dark Elf's back. Thea watched him fall the floor, scrambling to pull the knife out. She walked up behind the terrified elf. Thea pulled the knife out, grabbed him by his hair, and slit his throat. Did she silence him in time?

"Come on, Thea," Brock urged. "We've got to go!"

Thea wiped her knife off on the elf's cloak. "Coming." She moved towards Brock and Sally, who were standing in front of the tapestry. *What was that?* She turned. More Dark Elves were coming towards them. Her mind raced from the prince to her oath to the king to the sounds of more enemy fighters heading their way. What should she do? How important was honor to *her*?

"Thea, come on!" Brock said as Sally opened the secret door. "We've got to go, now!"

If they all ran, would they be found? Yes. Kade would send every fighter he had to chase them down. The prince—the prince

was all important now. His survival and training *must* happen. "Brock, make me a promise."

"What? Come on already!"

"Promise me you will raise the prince to avenge his parents and retake the throne."

"We'll do that together. Thea, we've got to go!"

Thea shook her head. "You and Sally go, I'm staying."

"What's she saying?" Sally asked.

"None of us will make it if we all go. Kade will send everything he has to chase us down." Thea grabbed Brock's hand. "You know I'm right."

Brock bit his lip. "All right. After you get out, let's meet at—"

Thea shook her head. "No, I don't want to know where you're going or how you're even getting out. Just in case."

Sally gasped in horror. "You're not going to make it, are you?"

Thea looked away.

Brock put his arm around Sally. "Let's go."

"But—"

He gave her a slight push. "We've got to go, now."

I'm not going to make it. Thea watched them disappear behind the tapestry. She needed to create a diversion. Something big enough to keep the Dark Elf fighters in the castle long enough to give Brock and Sally enough time to escape. *Time to kill Kade,* Thea thought. But, how? Kade would be on the throne, his lifelong ambition, surrounded by Dark Elf knights. In the Great Hall, there was a catwalk from where she could shoot the traitor; its entrance was in the next room, not in the hall itself. She would certainly be trapped, with no chance of escape, but the prince would be safe. With Kade's pyromancer dead, all she would need is a bow. Thea headed towards the armory.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bittersweet

Thea crept down the hallway. She had to stay hidden and not fight every Dark Elf she saw. Her only chance to kill Kade and maybe get out alive was to take him by complete surprise. Her ears perked up as she froze in place. Voices, coming her way. If she fought now, it would have all been for nothing. Quickly, she looked for a place to hide. Behind the tapestry in the corner? No, too easily seen. The garderobe? She hated using it, let alone hiding in it.

The voices grew louder.

No choice now. Thea snuck through the door. As she closed the door behind her, the smell of feces and urine in the chamber pots assaulted her senses. The light...she needed to get rid of the light. Quietly, she moved

across the room and grabbed the torch from the wall.

The elven voices were closer, nearly outside the door.

Thea doused the torch in a full chamber pot. She started moving through the darkness back towards the door. Her leg brushed against an empty brass chamber pot. It crashed to the floor.

The elven voices went silent.

Her heart stopped. She hid in the corner, just a few feet from the door.

Creaking from the door cracking open echoed through the garderobe. Torchlight from the hallway pierced the darkness.

Thea stopped breathing. Her hand grasped the hilt of her sword.

"Zen," a female Dark Elf said.

"Fo," another replied.

"Iesz sso robler zez Sezo him."

The door closed and the elven voices moved on. "Thank Odella," Thea said to herself. She put her ear to the door and listened. Once she was sure the elves were gone, she went back into the hallway.

Nearly there, Thea thought to herself. Moving like a cat hunting its prey, she quickly moved down the corridor.

The iron armory door at the end of the corridor stood between Thea and the bow she needed for her plan. Normally, the guards maintained the keys. She half-expected the Dark Elves to place a guard here to prevent the human soldiers from getting more weapons, but they hadn't. Her plan revolved around the idea that the Dark Elves would have seized the armories first to reduce human resistance within the castle, *but that required an elven guard with the keys to be standing outside the door.*

She tried pulling on it, just in case. Locked, of course. *What now?* Thea asked herself.

Three sets of footsteps were turning the corner, coming towards the armory.

Thea drew her sword. There was no hallway to the left or right, and the door behind her was locked; she had nowhere to run.

They came closer.

I'll make my stand here, she thought.

Closer.

Thea was at the ready, poised like a lioness ready to pounce on her prey.

Three of them came around the corner and smiled at her.

"Robert!" Thea sheathed her sword and hugged her fellow knight. "I thought they killed you!"

"They nearly did. A healer took care of me before they killed her. There's nothing like magic healing," Robert replied. He looked down at his blood-soaked breastplate.

"We've been busy."

"Me too. Who are they?" Thea asked, pointing at the two soldiers with him.

"Thea, meet Karl and Ivan. We sort of bumped into each other."

Thea stepped back. "Why are you here, Robert? The armory, I mean."

Robert blinked. "We needed—a few bows. Kade is somewhere in the castle and we have to take him out. Did you see what they did to the king and queen?"

Thea lowered her eyes. "Yes, I did."

"We came earlier but couldn't get in. So we captured an elf and tortured him until he told us where the keys were kept, or rather who had them. So—"

"You've got the keys?"

Robert smiled as he pulled a key ring from his pocket. "Aye." He walked over to the iron door and slipped the key into the keyhole. He opened the door, revealing the rows

upon rows of swords, bows, quivers, and other tools of war.

Thea smiled as she entered the armory. "We may actually survive this yet." She picked up a bow and a full quiver.

"What's the plan?" Robert asked.

"We kill Kade and escape through one of the tunnels."

"No, Thea, we have to save the prince first. He is far more important than killing Kade."

"He's safe."

"How? Where?"

"Just trust me."

Robert looked back at his two companions, who nodded back at him. "All right, let's get some." The three men picked up bows and quivers as they headed out of the armory.

Thea grinned. "Follow me." She led them towards the Great Hall.

We may actually survive, Thea thought.

The entrance to the catwalk was next to the door behind the thrones in the Great Hall. If it were only her, the catwalk would be her best chance to kill him. The only downside was she would've been trapped, with no chance to escape. But with four of them, and the elves searching for the remaining humans, their chances greatly

increased. They could kill him and escape if they did it from the floor level.

Every turn and room where there were no Dark Elves, the more nervous Thea became. Where did they go? Why are they not guarding the very room where Kade would demand to control the attack from? Would he? Of course, his lust for that stone throne was his driving force; it always has been.

At last, they arrived at the two doors. The door on the right led to the catwalk, and the other was the Great Hall entrance behind the throne. Thea looked back at Robert.

He gave her a nod.

Thea reached for the left door.

Robert and the two soldiers poised, ready to rush inside.

She threw the door open.

Robert and the two guards charged in before the door slammed the wall.

Sword drawn, Thea rushed inside. Expecting to find at least a squad of fighters, adrenaline rushed through her veins.

"What the—? Kill them!" Kade screamed.

Two human soldiers stepped in front of Kade with axes in hand.

Robert and his two companions drew their bows, aiming at the humans' hearts. "Don't even think about it."

The human guards looked at each other and dropped their axes.

"Move against the wall," Robert commanded.

They bolted for the door.

Three arrows chased the human guards. Two hit one in the back and the third sailed through the other's neck. Both dropped to the ground, dead.

The three aimed their bows at Kade.

"You deserve much worse than this for murdering your own family for the throne," Thea said.

Kade slid back down into the throne. "If you kill me, who will take the throne? *You?*"

"No, the rightful heir. Galin the V of Ravenward."

"It's true," Robert said. "She saved the child."

Kade laughed. "You actually believe that? Tell me, Thea, where are they then?"

"I don't know."

"How then could you know that they're still alive?"

Thea looked at Robert. "I don't know where they are right now, but I can try to get word to them. I don't know the details because I—I thought I was going to die." Her eyes focused like a laser on Kade. "Let's finish this and get out of here." Thea raised her sword.

Kade held his arms up in an attempt to block the blade.

Thea slashed her sword down towards him.

An arrow pierced her right shoulder, forcing Thea to drop her sword.

What? Thea thought. She turned her head to see Robert's other companion with his bow aimed right at her.

Another arrow embedded itself behind her left knee.

Thea toppled over, clenching her wounds. "Robert, help!"

"What's going on?" Kade demanded.

Pain shot up through Thea's leg and shoulder. Her heart raced. Sweat began to flow from her pores. Tears of pain poured out from her eyes. "Robert, please!"

Robert just smiled at her. "Robert died many years ago."

Thea's eyes widened as he began to transform. His medium-length blond hair turned into short black hair. Robert's blue eyes flashed; as the flash faded, they became a resolute brown. Worst of all, his tanned skin turned a deep blue. "No!" Robert was a Dark Elf.

He moved in closer.

"Tanyl, is that you?" Kade asked.

"Be quiet, fool! You nearly blew the whole thing," Tanyl replied.

"Tanyl? Is—is that your name?" Thea asked.

"Where's the child? How were you going to meet up with them?"

"I wasn't. I expected to die here." Thea turned her head away from Tanyl.

"I see." Tanyl drew his sword and thrust it into her leg. "Where?"

Thea squeezed her eyes shut. *It hurts. I must resist, I must.* "I don't know."

Tanyl twisted the blade, opening the wound even more.

The pain begged her to say something. But what? She really didn't know anything, except what side they were going to come out of the castle. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

Her leg begged for the pain to stop. "Please stop. I don't know where they are."

"Your methods are crude and ineffective, Tanyl," Kade said. "Give my people a few days with her and we'll get anything we need." Kade stepped up to Tanyl. "I need this more than you."

Tanyl glared at him. In one swift motion, Tanyl backhanded Kade, sending him flying back into the throne. "This is not about you or your petty rivalry. Be careful, Kade. Your usefulness is nearing its end."

Kade's mouth dropped. "But—"

"If you want to be king, you need to do exactly what you're told, when you're told to do it. Got it? Or you'll be joining your brother."

Kade's face fell into his hands. "What have I done?"

Thea's eyes began to close.

"Oh no, not yet." Tanyl kicked the knee that had the arrow embedded in it. "Tell me!"

Pain, the pain was overtaking her. "I—so—nor—north side. The tunnel they used comes out the northern wall. We made no plans to regroup."

Tanyl yanked his sword from her leg; blood poured out of the wound. "Was that so

hard?" He motioned the other two out of the room. "We'll have them soon."

Blackness. Spots. Cold. "How'd you find me?"

"Our mages found you almost immediately, but we needed you to lead us to the child. We can't see him. He seems to have some magic ability in him."

Thea coughed. "Not...possible. Human males can't do...magic." Blood began to form a pool around her.

"The Prophecy of Axain is why we're here. Our seers, more than three centuries ago, warned us of a human king that would unite humans, dwarfs, and gnomes alike. He would be able to use magic to enhance his warrior skills. He would even convince the Vulwin Elves to turn on their brothers."

"You think that's the prince?"

"Yes, that's the only reason we helped this pathetic creature," Tanyl said, pointing at Kade. He drew his sword. "Even though we're enemies, Thea, I respect you. May you die in honor."

"The prince will kill you and retake the throne from the usurper. Even after I'm dead, I'll still win." Thea closed her eyes.

Tanyl's sword slashed towards Thea's neck, separating her head from her body. "Good-bye, Thea."

A few hours later, Tanyl was pacing in the Great Hall. "Why haven't they reported in?"

"Maybe Brock killed them," Kade said.

"Perhaps."

A Dark Elf rushed into the Great Hall and knelt in front of them. "Lord Tanyl."

Tanyl whirled around. "Find them?"

"I—I—No, my lord. There was no sign of them."

"What?!" Tanyl whipped a knife from his belt and flung it across the room.

The small throwing knife lodged itself in the elf's eye socket. His body crashed to the floor.

"Was that really necessary?" Kade demanded.

Tanyl's face tightened and his eyes narrowed. "I—we were outsmarted by a *female* knight."

"But—"

Tanyl held up his hand, silencing Kade. "We're going to tell the people that the prince is dead too, killed by the Vulwin Elves."

"You mean we're going to let them go?"

"No, we're going to hunt them down in secret."

"Why?"

"If more human armies arrive while we're searching the countryside for the child, our lie will be exposed and they will hang you." Tanyl started to pace around the dais. "No, we must have complete control before we tear this wretched kingdom apart looking for him."

"So, you *are* letting them go."

"For now."

Kade looked down at Thea. "What if he *is* the one?"

Tanyl smiled. "Then he'll come looking for us. Kade, with Beldroth gone, I'm your new consular." Tanyl extended his hand.

Still shaking, Kade shook Tanyl's hand. "Aye, this is just the beginning."

Brock pushed through the thick underbrush beyond the southern castle wall. They moved quickly and quietly across the pasture. Smoke from the castle burned his nostrils. *Just a little further*, he thought. They needed a place to hide until morning. But, where? As they moved past a cow and her

calf, a three-sided structure became visible.

"Over there."

Sally nodded.

Inside the structure were stacks of baled hay. Brock smiled. "Perfect." He shifted the square bales around to make a fourth wall with a peephole looking towards the castle.

"Sally, in here."

Sally followed her fiancé inside the makeshift shelter. She sat down against a wall, rocking the baby back and forth.

"This is our boy now," Brock said. "Will you still marry me, Sally?"

She smiled. "Of course I will." Sally passed the prince to Brock. "What do we do now?"

Brock held the young prince close to his heart. "We go into hiding, far from here." As he stared into Galin's blue eyes, Brock smiled. "Galín the fifth of Ravenward, I promise that we're going to raise you and train you to retake your throne from the usurper and his allies. I swear that someday, you will be the ruler of Axain and avenge the death of your family." Brock looked up at Staerdale Castle in flames.

"Someday...someday soon."

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Steven Atwood

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