

A woman with red hair and pointed ears stands in a forest. She is wearing a white dress with green accents. The background is a dense forest with tall trees and a soft light filtering through the canopy.

H. L. Watson
WORLD OF
RYYAH

Book One in The Elven Age Saga

Birth of the Half Elves

*Birth of the
Half Elves*

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*Birth of the
Half Elves*

by

H. L. Watson

Two Harbors Press

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ISBN-13: 978-1-937293-43-7

Distributed by Itasca Books

Cover Design and Typeset by Karen Kilker

Printed in the United States of America

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A new start



Chapter One



The small village nestled on the banks of the Salmon River just south of the Wood Elven Forest was buzzing with excitement on that bright and sunny morning. It was the time of the salmon run! Hundreds of thousands of red-bellied salmon had begun their arduous journey upstream to spawn in the calmer waters at the Twin Rivers Bend, and every able-bodied fisherman was on the river that day, hoping to fill their boats. Clusters of cheering children sent the men off, and every woman was preparing for the festivities and feasts that would go on deep into this first night of the salmon run. Of all the people in that village, few were more excited than twelve-year-old Donovan.

Donovan's father, a metalsmith who built and repaired tools for the villagers when not fishing, had been preparing for this morning for weeks, stocking his small boat, mending nets, and building the drying racks and smoker. Donovan had helped eagerly, sharpening his father's knives and hooks and dreaming of the day when he, too, would join the triannual event.

"This is the year that will make all of our efforts worthwhile," his father had told Donovan and his mother that morning.

"You'll have fine cloth to make new clothes," he promised his wife.

"And perhaps we'll have enough to send you to an apprentice school in one of the free towns so you can learn a better-paying trade," he had said to Donovan. "The salmon will make all this possible, and more. You'll see. It'll be our best year ever!"

Donovan's family had moved from the free town of Benten, which lay about 100 leagues southeast of the village, when he was four years old and they had settled in the small village in order to be closer to the spawning grounds. The red-bellied salmon spawned in only one place on the whole planet of Ryyah, and only once every three years, making them one of the most valuable trade items to take to the free towns. A good catch would make living in this remote place—so far from other human activity—and all their other sacrifices worthwhile.

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When the boats moved out of sight, the children began to drift back toward the village. Donovan lingered at the riverbank until most were gone, then turned toward the forest. Immediately, his best friend, Akenji, was beside him.

Akenji gazed in the direction of the departed boats and said, "In three years, when the salmon come again, we'll be on the boats, and children will be cheering for us!"

Donovan grinned at him. "Not me," he replied. "I'll be a guard in the Grand Duke's army, defending Benten from the Barbarians and the Wood Elves." He brandished an invisible sword and slashed the air around his friend as they walked away from the river and headed toward the edge of the forest.

Akenji laughed. "Sure you will! You'll be mending harnesses for the rich shopkeepers in some free town and charming all the ladies," he teased.

"Ah, I'm looking forward to going to one of the free towns," said Donovan. He smiled as he thought of all the things they could buy there—new tools, colorful cloth for his mother, blankets, weapons... "And we can go to the carnival," he added, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Do they really have such a thing?" Akenji asked, a frown of doubt wrinkling his smooth, dark brow for a moment.

"Yes, I remember it," answered Donovan, although, in fact, he remembered very little about his life in the free town and mainly had pictures in his mind of the carnivals from the stories his father told him.

"There is music, food, and games," he told Akenji, gesturing wide with his arms as though to show his friend all of these amazing things. "You can play the games and win things! I will be the best in the archery game and win a real bow and arrow!" This time, it was an invisible bow that he drew back and let fly an invisible arrow high into the air. Both boys "watched" as the arrow arched and descended into the trees ahead of them.

"I think you just killed a Wood Elf," exclaimed Akenji, punching Donovan's arm.

"Of course I did," bragged Donovan, resisting the urge to rub the spot where Akenji had just punched him. Akenji was surprisingly strong for his age. "The Wood Elves fear the name *Donovan* and run before my bow and arrow!"

Akenji snorted and looked over at his friend with admiration. Donovan, a year older than Akenji, was already beginning to show

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signs of manhood. His slender arms were beginning to thicken with muscle and his body moved with a natural coordination that made the younger boy, who was taller and more awkward, somewhat envious. Akenji tended to imitate Donovan and strove to keep up with his friend in all their many adventures.

Now, he turned to face the forest and said, "I dare you to go into the forest to find the Elf and retrieve your arrow."

The confident smile faded slightly on Donovan's face and he glanced sideways at Akenji. "I would," he said, "but mother is waiting for me."

Both boys looked into the gloom of the forest, silently, and shivered slightly.

"Ya," whispered Akenji. "We should get back."

Just then, the sound of a high-pitched whistle reached them, and before they had taken ten more steps, they heard a scream. It was coming from the village. Then more and more screams—frantic, horrible screams. Both boys froze, terrified. What could be causing the women to scream like that?

"Mother!" yelled Donovan, snapping out of his daze. "Come on, we have to help them!" he cried, taking off at a dead run.

In the nearby forest, a Barbarian scout had been watching the villagers. As the fishermen drifted out of sight, he smiled and thought, *So many pretty women, left all alone. They will fetch a good price at the slave markets.*

He stroked the feathers of his hawk and adjusted his pet onto his forearm. He tied a note to the hawk's talons and threw the large bird into the air.

Moments later, the bird flew down and landed on the thick forearm of the Barbarian leader, Boric the Knife. He removed the note from the hawk's talons and read it quickly. *Everything is in position, all clear, proceed with plans.*

Boric whistled and about fifty men began moving toward the village.

By the time Donovan and Akenji reached the edge of the village, all hell had broken loose. Boric's men had surrounded the perimeter of the village and were systematically moving toward the center, charging, yelling, and driving the children and womenfolk ahead of them.

"It's slavers," whispered Donovan. He and Akenji were crouched behind a hut at the edge of the village. The screams and cries of the women put shivers up Donovan's spine and he couldn't

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stop the trembling that was taking over his whole body. He peeked around the edge of their hiding place, just as one of the Barbarians dragged an old man from a nearby hut, sliced his throat, and threw him aside. Donovan gasped and lurched back beside Akenji.

“We have to get our fathers,” whimpered Akenji. “We have to go back.”

They had barely stood, preparing to head back to the river to get help, when a man—the same man who has just killed the elder—rounded the side of the hut and grabbed them both. The boys struggled under the man’s iron grip, but they were soon being dragged along, helpless to defend themselves. As the man moved them toward the growing crowd of captured villagers, they saw many bodies strewn around like ragged, discarded toys. Anyone who offered a token of resistance was ruthlessly slaughtered.

Donovan scanned the group of frantic women for his mother. When he finally spotted her, the terror in her eyes made it hard for him to breathe. She was like a wild, cornered animal and the keening sound that arose from somewhere deep inside her when she spotted him brought tears to his eyes. Unashamed, he ran to her and for a moment they clung to each other, instinctively knowing that the worst was yet to come.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” he promised her.

“You’re only a child, Donovan. Do as they say or they’ll kill you. Keep yourself safe!”

The men began shouting for quiet and soon only whimpers and muffled moans could be heard throughout the crowd. The captives were pushed and prodded into the closest huts, with threats of death to any who dared to make a sound. The doors were barricaded and guarded. There was no hope of escape.

Boric’s men quickly set up an ambush for the men who had left that morning, expecting to return to celebrations and a feast. In one of the huts, Donovan and his mother sat in a tense silence, praying for something, or someone, to help them.

The fishing boats came into sight by midafternoon. The men were singing songs of the salmon and trips to the free towns as they drifted downstream and closer to the village. As they drew near the shore, their songs faded. No one was there to greet them and apprehension spread through the group.

“Where is everyone?” wondered one of the men. “It’s like a ghost town.”

“Where are my boys?” shouted another man. “Come help haul

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the fish, my sons!” There was no response.

No longer laughing and singing, but quiet now with a strange dread, the first of the men pulled their boats to shore and began to make their way toward the village in search of their loved ones. They never made it. Boric’s men attacked them and cut their throats before they even had a chance to cry out. Within seconds, the shoreline was flooded with Barbarians and the surprised fishermen were quickly cut down. Not one was spared during the bloody attack. The Barbarian warriors wasted even less time rifling through the dead fisherman’s pockets, searching for any valuables.

In the village, Boric shouted orders to bring out the women and children.

“Women and female children on this side,” he commanded. “Male children over here. Get rid of the infants.”

Everything happened quickly then. Donovan’s mother dragged at him and screamed his name as the Barbarians forced them apart. Tears ran down his face, but he made no sound. All around him, children and mothers cried their anguish as families were torn apart. The worst was the sound of the mothers with infants. Donovan knew that the sound of their wails and desperate begging and screaming, as their babies were torn from their arms and slaughtered before their eyes, was a sound he would carry with him forever. He fought waves of nausea as the smell of blood filled the air, and the sight of the dead was almost more than he could bear.

“Take these women and girls to the southernmost free town slave market and sell them off,” Boric ordered his second-in-command. “Answer no questions. Keep it quiet and do it as quickly as you can.”

A group of men were selected to escort and guard the distraught women and girls. As they began herding the females toward the riverbank, mothers tried to run back to their sons, snatch up their dead babies, or reach for their husbands as they passed the bodies of the fishermen. The guards ruthlessly beat the frantic women into submission and were finally able to get them into the fishing boats among the treasured salmon that had been caught that day.

Donovan stood beside Akenji, numb and dazed, along with all the other boys left behind, listening as the wailing of the women gradually faded. He could feel his friend shaking and crying silently, but could not move to offer any comfort. The youngest boys cried openly for their mothers. Donovan looked at them as if from a distance. He had never felt so helpless or lost. It was like an unimagi-

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nable nightmare.

The boys fell into an uneasy silence as the leader of the slavers approached them, followed by some of his Barbarian warriors.

“Who here is thirteen years or older?”

Several boys glanced nervously around the group and slowly raised their hands.

“Stand over here,” ordered Boric, pointing to where he wanted them to move.

“If you are younger than eight years, join those boys,” barked the fierce leader.

When the boys had finished sorting themselves, Boric looked over the remaining boys. He pulled a few boys out of the group and pushed them toward the cluster of older and younger boys. His eyes rested for a long moment on Donovan.

“How old are you, boy?” he demanded.

“Twelve, sir,” Donovan answered nervously.

“And you?” Boric gestured to Akenji who, although a year younger than Donovan, was taller than him.

“Eleven, sir,” said Akenji, his voice trembling with fear.

The fierce looking man sized them up, seeming to try to decide about them. “You’ll be able to work hard,” he finally growled, moving on. When he had inspected each boy and seemed satisfied with the groups he had made, he swept his arm toward the boys who had been separated, and shouted, “Do it!”

The Barbarian warriors swiftly moved into the group and sliced the throats of every boy. Within minutes, not one boy from that group was alive. If Donovan had been numb before, now it seemed that all feeling had left his limbs. He struggled to remain standing and his heart raced in his chest. He felt Akenji, beside him, collapse to the ground, heard his sobs. He saw boys try to run, overcome with panic, only to be sliced down in their flight. His mind, deep in shock, couldn’t make sense of all that was happening. His mother, his father, his friends and neighbors...all gone. The blood, the screams, the horror of it all was too much for his young mind to comprehend. He slowly sank to the ground beside Akenji and sat there, staring straight ahead, just trying to breathe.

He wouldn’t sit for long, however, as Boric called out to his men to tie the children’s hands together with rope and prepare to move them.

“We’ll head southwest, following the river,” he ordered.

It was a sorry-looking group of boys who were prodded and

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pushed before Boric's men that afternoon. Parched with thirst, exhausted, blood-splattered, bruised and battered, they stumbled along in a daze of shock, knowing nothing of where they were going or what was to become of them. The warriors showed no mercy, and were quick to land a harsh blow to any boy who lagged behind or fell. They marched along in this state until they came to a juncture where the river flowed directly south before curving around to flow southwest again. Here, they stopped and allowed the boys to drink from the river and rest while Boric decided their route.

Boric calculated that he could cut several hours off their journey if they left the river and cut through the forest. The river route was treacherous along this bend and would be slow and long. They could move through the forest with much greater ease and speed. His men shifted restlessly and eyed the forest with nervous glances and mistrustful frowns, although none dared to speak out against their leader's idea.

Sensing their unease, Boric added, "The Wood Elves are not likely to patrol this far south. If we move quickly, we will reach the other side before sundown and we can camp by the river on the other side for the night. Be on guard and do not linger. Let's move!"

The men and their captive boys moved swiftly and silently through the forest, on alert to every snapping twig, rustling bush and whispering breeze. The boys had been raised to fear the forest and the Wood Elves who controlled it. Stories were told of disobedient children who ventured in, never to return, and of the fierceness and magic of the Elves. There was little that the villagers feared more, as the Elves were well known to have little tolerance for humans. Unlike the Barbarians, though, they did not openly engage in attacks against humans unless the humans invaded their territory.

They marched on for hours with no sign of trouble and as they neared the end of the journey, fatigue and relief began to make Boric's men complacent. They had less than four leagues to go, and their focus now was on keeping the exhausted boys moving. Little did they know that they had been being trailed by a Wood Elf scout for the last three leagues.

The Elven scout whistled for one of the forest wolves, and tied a message around the beast's shaggy neck. "To Alayna, on swift feet," he requested. The wolf turned, without hesitation, and loped into the forest.

The Barbarians urged the boys on, eager to leave the gloom and threat of the forest. Night was falling and they were only a few

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leagues away from a meal and rest.

The sound of a long, low whistle brought them to a standstill. The warriors drew their weapons, alert and tense. The boys huddled together, terrified, and the men surrounded them, prepared to defend their prize. The forest revealed nothing, made no further sound, and finally Boric gave the signal to start moving again.

Suddenly, arrows were whistling through the air, striking the warriors down where they stood. The Elven Rangers were deadly accurate, and within moments, not one man was alive. The children were huddled together, weeping and begging in a language unfamiliar to the Elves. The Rangers notched their arrows and took aim, ready to complete their duty.

“Stop!” shouted a woman’s voice. Donovan’s eyes searched the forest in the direction that the voice had come from and then widened as he watched a slender, beautiful Elven woman stride into their midst.

“Lower your arrows,” she commanded, and the Rangers complied. “These are mere children,” she said, her brow furrowed with concern. Donovan, watching her, could not understand her words, but sensed that she was trying to protect them. All of the children were still, their anguished eyes riveted on her face.

“Lord Aden has ordered us to kill any human trespassers,” one of the Rangers reminded the woman. “These children are human, which makes them a threat to our kind. You know the laws as well as we do!”

“The law was put in place to nullify direct threats. Look at these children. Do they seem threatening to you? What have we become, Shadow Elves? Killing children and spilling so much innocent blood are the actions of evil beings. Is that what we are? These children were forced here. They are no threat to us.” There was no reply and she knew she had won the argument.

“I will take full responsibility,” the woman assured them. “As your leader, I order you not to harm these innocents.”

“As you command, Alayna,” said one the Rangers.

“Shall we leave them here, then?” asked another.

“They would not survive the night,” Alayna replied, her eyes on the children. “We will set up camp here and attend to their needs tonight.”

Murmurs of protest rippled through the Elven group, but stopped immediately when Alayna raised her hand for silence.

Alayna pointed to one of the Rangers. “You, head back the way

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they came and find their village. If there are survivors, we will lead the children back to their home.”

She pointed to another. “You, take word to Lord Aden, explaining the situation. Request further orders about what he wishes us to do with the children.”

To the group in general, she said, “We will need food, shelter, water, and fire. Make camp!”

Alayna turned her attention fully on the boys. A feeling of safety and relief swept over Donovan as he looked up into her delicate face. Her red-gold hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing long, slender ears that pointed at the tips, and her eyes were a deep turquoise. When those eyes rested on him, he sensed that she was sharing his sadness and was somehow connecting with his mind and with his heart. His eyes began to blur and tears fell onto his cheeks.

She wrapped her arms around him and said, “Child, it will be okay. I can see that you have witnessed great horrors this day. You will not be harmed further.” He looked up at her, surprised to hear her speak human words. She smiled at him, looking more like an angel than a flesh and blood being. “I am Alayna, of the House of Dorandal. I am sorry for your loss,” she comforted. “Cry if you must. It is good to mourn those who have passed. I am here with you tonight.”

True to her word, she sat with the traumatized youngsters all through the night, comforting those who cried out in their sleep, holding the ones for whom sleep would not come and watching over them all. None of them could know just how important this woman would become to them, or where their lives were heading. For now, all they knew was the soothing lull of her melodic voice as they struggled to get through this first long night as orphans.

Chapter Two



It would be a full month before Lord Aden sent his orders to the Elves regarding the human children. It was not entirely surprising that he had not made their dilemma a priority but, for most of the Elven Rangers, the wait was deeply annoying. Many an argument had been raged over that month. Some Rangers suggested taking the children to the outskirts of a human village, or one of the free towns, and leaving them to the mercy of their own kind, but others argued that they had already seen and heard too much. They were now a serious threat. Many were in favor of simply doing away with the little ones, as they should have from the start. Only a deep respect for their leader, Alayna, restrained them, as she had formed an unexpectedly strong bond with the boys and refused to consider any option other than to protect them and wait for Lord Aden's orders.

During their long wait, the boys slowly regained their strength and natural curiosity, as only children can, even in the face of great tragedy. None of the boys would ever be the same. A seriousness had replaced their youthful playfulness of the past, and a few remained quiet and withdrawn. But the spirit of youth was on their side and they were soon exploring and helping with the daily running of the camp, eager to learn the ways of the Wood Elves.

Alayna had become very fond of the children, especially Donovan. He was a quick thinker and a fast learner, very much like her youngest son whom she had recently lost in a minor border skirmish. She was a mother of nine children—four boys and five girls. Three of them were dead. The loss of each one had been a crushing blow, but her youngest had been the hardest to come to terms with. They had been very close; he had reminded her strongly of her bonded mate, who had died defending the Wood Elven capital city from foreign invasion. He was a great man and she missed him, and her son, terribly.

Alayna was about five hundred years old, give or take a hundred years. None of her fellow Rangers could ever pinpoint her exact age, and Alayna wasn't planning to tell them anytime soon. All of her surviving children were grown and had bonded mates and children of their own. Having these boys around her made her

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realize how much she missed the young ones and how she wished she could have had more of her own. She was a fierce warrior and a highly respected Ranger, but her heart was that of a mother.

As she watched the boys, one afternoon, struggle to solve the problem of building shelter as efficiently as they had seen the Rangers do it, she sighed, not for the first time, as she remembered her son's first attempts at the skill.

Hearing her sigh, Donovan looked up to see a sad, wistful expression cross her face and he looked at her, quizzically, until she laughed and said, "No need to look so serious, young Donovan. I was just thinking about how much you remind me of my youngest son. He was quick to laugh, just like you, and he was intelligent—a skilled problem solver. When he died, he was on his way to becoming a great warrior. I believe, given enough time, he would have become one of the elite guards of the high lord. But, it was not to be."

"Elves can die?" Donovan questioned. He, like most humans, thought that the Wood Elves were immortal, with some kind of magic that prevented them from being killed, or a magic that brought them back to life if they were fatally wounded.

Alayna looked puzzled, and then her face cleared with understanding. "We were once immortal," she explained. "In the times of the Elders, before the source stone exploded. Those powers died during the Time of Darkness. Although we do live very long lives, we can, alas, be killed." A shadow of pain crossed her face as she spoke these final words and Donovan was surprised to learn that Elves also loved and missed their families, just as humans did. Before he had met Alayna, he had never imagined them as anything but fierce creatures to be feared.

His sharp, adventure-loving mind was buzzing with questions about the Elders and the source stone and the Time of Darkness, but for now, as he looked into her sad, turquoise eyes, he held his questions and said, "I'm sorry I upset you, Lady Alayna. You've been so kind to us. I didn't know you had lost family, too. Is there any way I can make it better?"

Alayna laughed and replied, "I am not a lady. That title is reserved for the nobility, and no, child, there is nothing you can do. I will carry this pain, as you will yours, for all of my life. We simply need to find ways to live as best we can and accept what life gives us to bear."

"That seems very hard," answered Donovan thoughtfully. "When I think of the look in my mother's eyes, and hear the screams in my sleep..."

"It will get easier," promised Alayna.



The orders, when they came, were far from satisfying. The Rangers had been expecting an order to leave the children and return to their usual duties, but instead, they were instructed to move the children to the Ranger's base of operations, Weeping Tree Outpost, and await further orders there. They were pleased to be leaving this temporary camp, and looking forward to refreshing their supplies at the outpost, but most were disgruntled about having the burden of young children—and human children at that—slowing them down.

It took over a month to reach the outpost, traveling northwest through the forest. The boys were quiet as they moved farther and farther from human settlements and from the life they had known. The days were long, and the nights less than comfortable as they made quick, rough camps to allow the children to rest. The youngest boys needed to stop far more often than the Rangers would have liked, but Alayna was insistent that the children's needs be met.

When they finally arrived, Donovan and the others were taken by surprise. They had been walking straight toward the outpost all day, but somehow hadn't seen it until they were almost at the gates. The encampment was well camouflaged in the dense forest and surrounded on three sides by high wooden walls. Guards opened the gates for them, and Alayna led them past storage buildings and training yards where Elves were practicing with bows and arrows, to a large building at the center of the camp. Elves stopped their activities to stare at the strange procession as they made their way to the large building and the boys huddled nervously, staying as close to Alayna as they could.

They stopped outside the building and Alayna turned to them with a smile. "This is the officer's quarters and this is where you will stay until we have word from high Lord Aden. I know you will quickly learn the ways of the Elves and show respect to those who are providing for you during your stay. I will help you, of course, and you will help each other."

She addressed the Rangers. "I thank you, my friends, for your assistance with this most unusual situation. I will require only a few of you to remain to help with the daily care of our charges. The rest will be free to return to your usual duties until we hear from the high lord. For tonight, though, I order you to rest, relax, and enjoy your first day back at the outpost!"

A small cheer arose from the group of Rangers and they had

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soon dispersed, more than happy to follow those orders. Alayna soon had the boys fed and settled and when, at last, she retired to her own quarters, she was deeply grateful for her bunk and the small moments of privacy that she hadn't enjoyed for quite some time.



Three months later, Alayna watched as the gates to the outpost were swung open to allow a large procession through. She was surprised to see the high lord's standard flying above the heads of the guards. It could only mean that Lord Aden was amongst them, which would be a rare event indeed. As she made her way toward the procession, she saw the central guards part, and Lord Aden step forward, demanding to speak with the commander.

Alayna walked up to him, gave the traditional salute and asked, "How may I serve you, high Lord?"

Lord Aden studied her coldly for a long moment before speaking. "You are the commander of the Wood Elven Rangers?" he finally asked.

"Yes, my Lord," she replied. "I am Alayna, of the House of Dorandal."

"I wish to speak with you in private," he said, and his tone made it clear that this was an order and not a polite request.

Alayna led the way to her command office and invited Lord Aden inside. "We are not to be disturbed for any reason!" she instructed the guards.

There was a tense silence for a moment as Alayna waited to see if Lord Aden would speak first. He did not, but stood staring at her as if she were something most unpleasant. Finally, she offered, "Would you like any refreshments, my Lord?"

"I highly doubt that you would have anything to my liking out here in this godforsaken wilderness," he replied.

Alayna took a deep breath and asked, "Well, my Lord, may I be so bold as to ask why you have made the journey so far from the capital?"

The high lord's eyes narrowed with anger as he answered, "It was not my wish to come this far out. But you have put me in a very difficult situation and since you do not seem capable of solving this problem in an appropriate manner, as I was hoping you would, my personal attention is now required. Where are these human children that you have allowed to live amongst us all these past months?"

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“Some are currently in the barracks, sir, and a few are playing in the woods nearby. Some are fishing at the pond and...”

“Yes, I’m sure they’re roaming all over the place as animals tend to do,” spat the high lord in a scathing tone. “Please explain to me why you did not simply leave these children where you found them, or disposed of them in the first place, as was your duty. It was not your responsibility to see to their care or their needs. You have created an enormous problem!”

“High Lord, with all due respect, sir, if I had left them there, they would have died.”

“Human children are not our responsibility or our concern,” growled Lord Aden. “You don’t take baby animals home with you after killing their mother, do you?”

“We did not kill their mothers, sir,” explained Alayna, barely concealing her impatience. “They were murdered and the children were in great distress...”

“You will return these children to their village and leave them there. This cannot be recorded, which is why I speak to you in private, Commander, but this is a direct order and you will obey it! I will not spend viable Elven resources on such useless life forms. It was a mistake for you to assist them in the first place. For all we know they could be spies sent by our enemies.”

“These children are not spies, my Lord. They are innocent victims of a horrible massacre. If we take them back and just leave them to their fate, we will be sentencing them to die a slow and painful death.”

“That is not our concern. If you had done your duty and killed them when you first found them trespassing, this wouldn’t be a problem now, would it? Besides, for every one that dies, a hundred more will take their place. The human population grows ever stronger.”

Alayna was not ready to give up. In a determined voice, she said, “Sir, if I may offer an alternative solution that does not involve the murder of innocents.”

“I don’t care for your insolent tone, but make your suggestion,” allowed Lord Aden.

Alayna spoke carefully and with absolute respect. “My Lord, if your primary concern is the expense of raising these children to adulthood, then it might please you to know that they are about half grown already. As you likely know, humans reach maturity much faster than Elves—in less than twenty years, in fact. And, if you are correct in thinking they may be spies, then would it not be to our benefit to keep them close at hand and out of contact of the humans?”

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Would it not be better to train them and use them as scouts for our own purposes? We could set up an outpost even further south than any we've had so far."

"Now you're asking me to raise *and* train these children," shouted the high lord, his face darkening with angry red splotches.

Alayna went on quickly, before he could become too infuriated to listen. "Yes. Once they're trained, they could prove very useful in areas where manpower is needed greatly, and if they die in battle, what's the difference? No one will miss them and they would then be out of your hair."

Alayna paused, letting the idea sink in for a moment. She could see he was uncertain, that he might go either way, and this was her only shot. She needed another angle and quickly. Suddenly, she had an idea. "With all due respect, my Lord, this may also be a chance for you to silence some of your more vocal critics who say you lack compassion. What could be more compassionate than showing mercy to children? It would be certain to put you in a favorable light in the eyes of the Wood Elven people."

Lord Aden smiled slightly and said, "You are clever. I like the way your mind works, but who would we get to train them? I don't want to spare precious Elven resources on something I consider to be a pointless endeavor."

"High Lord, if I may volunteer my services. I am a skilled trainer in both archery and the Elven sword tactics. I could teach them and form them into a fit command that any Elven commander would be proud of."

"I doubt that," Lord Aden scoffed, "but I will grant your wish on the condition that you, and you alone, will perform this task. I will provide you with food, weapons, and supplies for thirty days and no longer. You will be responsible for building the outpost, and after the thirty days are up, you will be responsible for providing their food and training. Are these terms acceptable to you?"

Alayna saluted and replied, "Yes, my Lord, I accept your terms most gratefully."

Lord Aden and his procession, eager to return to the capital, departed the very next day. Alayna spent most of that day composing a letter to her family, telling them she would be away for a few years fulfilling a task for the high lord. She could not offer them any more details than that, but she promised to return safely when the task was completed and told them she would carry them in her heart until she could see them all again. Although she was excited for the task ahead, she sealed the letter with a heavy heart.

A new start

She spent several hours writing an inventory of all the supplies they would need, and then gave orders to several of her Rangers to organize the items for their journey.

That evening, she gathered the children together. “You must rest well tonight,” she told them. “Tomorrow we will travel south once more—much farther south than before. We will be setting up a new outpost there, just for you.”

“Are you going to leave us there?” asked one boy, his voice high and anxious.

“I am going to stay there with you,” Alayna explained, and smiled as she watched relief wash over the boy’s face. “There will be much work for us to do, but I will teach you how to hunt and build and provide for yourselves, and later, I will train you in the fighting arts.”

The boys all began to speak at once, excited by the prospect of being taught the Elven arts. Alayna raised her hand to quiet them and continued. “The high lord has decided that he could use your services when you are grown and trained. You should be honored and strive to become great soldiers. He has given you a chance to survive and go on to great things. I will do all I can to help you reach this goal.”

Most of the boys were thrilled at the prospect of becoming warriors and good-natured arguments soon began breaking out about which boys would be the greatest warriors. Alayna laughed at their exuberance, knowing that reality would set in soon enough. “I am sure that all of you will be very proficient scouts at the very least,” she assured them, “but to become a warrior is not an easy path. You must learn patience, concentration, and diligence. This will not come overnight and it will not be easy, but with my help, you will be as strong and skilled as you are able to be.”

The boys were rounded up once more the next morning and, after a hearty breakfast, they split the load of goods amongst them and turned to the south. As Alayna said her goodbyes to the other Elves, she was questioned over and over about the wisdom of this task. Were a bunch of human boys worth being exiled to the far south? Why was she offering years of her life for these worthless children? Many wondered if she had lost her senses. One look at the group of youngsters, though, with their tousled hair, dirty faces and haunted eyes, and she knew she was not wasting her time. They needed her. They needed a chance, and she would give it to them.



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Chapter Three



Ten Years Later

In the small, northern town of Eldergate, the Elven folk were preparing for the celebration of a lifetime. The seventh and youngest princess of high Lord Aden and high Lady Alousia would be arriving in two day's time to select one hundred lucky Elven maidens to be bound for life into her service during her coming-of-age ceremony.

The town had never hosted such an elaborate occasion—in fact, few Elven towns had. Coming-of-age binding ceremonies were rarely performed outside of the capital city of Alderwood, and common Wood Elves were seldom selected to serve the royalty. The coveted positions were usually filled by the offspring of those already in service. However, Lord Aden had been unusually prolific by royal standards, and had out-bred his servants' ability to provide suitable servants for all of his children, so the youngest had to choose her servants from among the lower classes. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for the maidens of Eldergate, a chance to bring honor and status to their families; and every eligible girl was preparing for the big day.

Princess Brandela was far less excited. Not only was she being forced to travel into the wilderness, to some remote and unfamiliar town to “come of age,” but her mother, high Lady Alousia, would not be in attendance. The princess and her procession were traveling a hundred and eighty leagues southeast of Alderwood. The journey, which would have taken an Elven Ranger only a week to complete, was a tension-ridden forty day expedition requiring a large contingency of servants to travel ahead and have camp ready for the princess' arrival, dozens of guards and an obscene number of Elves to tote, fetch and care for Brandela's every need and desire. By the time the princess reached camp on the final night of the excursion, she was not in a happy mood!

“We're almost there, my Lady,” Brandela's nursemaid, Nina, declared cheerfully.

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“Almost to the middle of nowhere,” Brandela retorted bitterly.

“Oh, come now, cheer up. Think of this as an adventure. None of your siblings had the chance to select their own servants. This is a very special opportunity. You’ll be bringing new blood into the servant lines—goodness knows we need it—and servants selected by your own hand will surely bond more strongly than normal.”

“None of my siblings had their ceremony leagues from home without their mother there,” scowled Brandela. “It’s not fair!”

“My Lady, you know your mother would want to be with you for this occasion if she could. She’s very fond of you and very sorry that she couldn’t make the journey with you,” scolded Nina with a kind smile.

Brandela knew Nina was right. It wasn’t her mother’s fault, but still...it hurt to know that her mother would not put aside her other duties to be with her for her coming-of-age ceremony. She had made an effort for all of the others. But then, none of the others had been forced to search for their bonded servants outside of Alderwood.

“She could have come if she’d really wanted to,” Brandela sulked, not yet willing to give up feeling sorry for herself. “If I live to be 800 years old, like her, I’ll never treat any of my children—especially my youngest one—with such inconsideration.”

Nina chuckled. “If you live to be 800 years old, like your mother, you’ll be wise enough to know that things don’t always go the way you want them to. You’ll forgive her then...or hopefully, sooner. You’ll be a high lady running a noble house by then. You won’t have time for all this self-pity.”

Brandela blushed, knowing full well that Nina was right again. She was being pitiful and self-pity was not one of her strong points. She was the descendent of five Western Wood Elven high lords, she reminded herself. She had the blood of strong leaders and great Elves coursing through her veins, and they had dealt with much more serious issues than coming-of-age ceremonies.

“I will be a wise and responsible ruler,” she said out loud, lifting her chin and straightening her back. “Thank you for reminding me, Nina.” She bestowed a quick kiss on the nursemaid’s cheek before climbing out of the palanquin. She was not happy with the situation, still, but she quickly fell into the natural rhythm that was so familiar to her, and was soon giving orders and organizing her procession. She was young, impatient, and perhaps a little spoiled, but Brandela was a born leader.

The procession left early the next morning to ensure that the princess would arrive at Eldergate before nightfall. Scouts spotted

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them during the final league of the journey, and by the time they reached the outskirts of the town, most of the townsfolk had poured into the streets to cheer their welcome.

At the town center, Brandela left her palanquin and was immediately approached by the town's governor.

"Welcome to Eldergate, my Lady," gushed the governor, who was red-faced with excitement and smiling broadly. "I trust you had a comfortable journey?"

Brandela glanced at Nina, who quickly looked down to conceal her knowing smile. Brandela smiled and answered, "Yes, quite comfortable, thank you. We are looking forward to having a chance to freshen up though, if you would be so kind as to show us our quarters."

"Oh, most certainly, right away, Your Highness," the governor replied. "You will find that we have set aside our best accommodations for you and your companions—the best in all of Eldergate!"

"I'm sure they'll be quite sufficient," Brandela assured him.

Suddenly he leaned toward her with a conspiratorial smile and said, "To be truthful, Your Highness, this is the biggest event we have ever had in our town. We are very pleased that you have chosen Eldergate as the place to celebrate your coming of age. It truly is an honor."

"The honor is all mine," replied the princess, graciously, while continuing to avoid looking at Nina, who knew better than anyone how much she resented being there. "I look forward to meeting the eligible maidens," she added.

"Oh, yes! We have prescreened and listed all of the applicants between the ages of eighty and one hundred years." He held out a long list of names, which she took and stared at in surprise. *There must be over 1,000 names here*, she thought. She struggled to compose herself before looking back up into the eager man's face.

"Thank you," she said weakly. "I'm sure there are many fine applicants."

"Yes, yes," the governor beamed. "I'm sure you will have no difficulty finding one hundred suitable servants from the young women of our area. And now, here we are," he said, gesturing toward a beautifully decorated building where the princess and her contingency would reside during their stay.

"Thank you very much for your assistance," Brandela said, eager to get to a private space where she could think in peace. "If I require anything, I will be sure to contact you."

"With anything at all, Your Highness, day or night!" And

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bowing profusely, the governor left.

Later, settled in her room and refreshed, Brandela picked up the list of names again, began to read, but then threw the list on the table in frustration.

“What’s the point?” she grumbled. “These are just names. I don’t know any of these women. How am I supposed to choose?”

Nina whisked by with a fresh dress spilling over her arms. “I suppose you’ll have to meet them in person, my Lady, one by one.”

Brandela sighed deeply. It seemed like such a daunting and impossible task. If only her mother were there to help her. Except... she could hear her mother’s voice in her mind. “This is a choice you must make on your own. These young women will be with you for life, caring for you, advising you, and helping you run your household. You must choose carefully and wisely, for once the choice has been made, it cannot be undone. Look for those who can be trusted, and who are smarter and wiser than the common Elves, so that they may bolster your own abilities of leadership. Strive to surround yourself with intelligent and wise people because they will help you make intelligent and wise decisions in your future household.” Brandela understood the importance of the decision, but she wished she could speed up the process and get out of Eldergate and back where she belonged as soon as possible.

Well, she thought, if I must do this, I will do it right. I’ll give the townsfolk the spectacle they’ve been hoping for, and I’ll meet with these young ladies immediately.

“Nina, please send a message to the governor, requesting that all of the applicants submit themselves in the courtyard tomorrow,” she instructed.

By midmorning the following day, the streets of Eldergate were swollen with expectant citizens. Never before had an event of this magnitude enlivened their town. Curiosity brought out even the most reclusive Elves, but for the many families with maidens hoping to be chosen, much was at stake on this day. By the time they reached the town square, these poor girls had been advised, primped, bullied, and fussed over until they were so nervous that meeting the princess seemed a formidable terror.

To earn a place as Brandela’s servant would bring great honor to their families and, more importantly, allow them the possibility of being bonded to the most suitable mates in the kingdom. The Wood Elves considered bonding and breeding well to be among the highest honors any Wood Elven male or female could attain, as great importance was placed on the family in their culture. To be chosen

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by Brandela, and later by a high-ranking mate, would ensure their status now and their children's status in the future. This was more than a job opportunity. This was a life opportunity!

Brandela and her procession were greeted by the frightened, staring eyes of over 1,000 Elven maidens and the cheers of three times that number of Elven citizens, who were blocked off by town guards from getting too close to the selection area. The Elves watched in fascination, for they had never before seen royalty in person, and Brandela was an exceptionally beautiful royal person.

She was dressed in a white, silk gown with rich, hunter-green borders. The gown was heavily embroidered with vines and leaves of the same green—a very common fashion amongst the Elven nobility, symbolizing their Wood Elven heritage. It was stunning.

Her reddish-gold hair was the perfect shade by Western Wood Elven standards, and she wore it in a courtly, coiled braid, entwined with silver ribbons. Nestled in the coils was a thin silver crown engraved with Elder rune crystal. At the center of the crown were three teardrop-shaped, white pearls—one pointing to the right, the other pointing to the left, and the middle pearl pointing straight up.

Brandela had the petite bone structure of her mother and her eyes were an extremely rare and very beautiful shade of bluish green, often compared to the rare, bluish-green diamonds that were found only in the lands to the north. Her complexion was a lightly toned, golden brown that the Western Wood Elves prized and were so commonly known for. She was absolutely stunning and everyone in the crowd was mesmerized by her beauty.

One set of eyes amongst the thousand widened at the regal sight of the princess, and then lowered, sadly, as the owner saw in an instant everything in Brandela that she, herself, was not.

Kerala had been plagued with doubt ever since she had arrived in the town two days earlier and had turned a corner from the marketplace to the governor's office to behold the longest line she had ever seen in her life. At least three hundred Elven maidens stood there, waiting for the chance to be screened as an applicant. Kerala hadn't realized that the competition would be so tough. It was all she could do to make herself step into that line with so many other girls whose prospects seemed so much better than hers.

I should have known it wouldn't be easy, she scolded herself. One of the Elven Elders' Proverbs came into her mind: *Things that come easy, when examined through the lens of time, often prove to be of little importance and are worthy of even less regard.*

This would not be easy, but it would be worth it if she were to

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succeed. It might be her only chance to help her family regain the social standing that her father lost when he chose to marry an Eastern Wood Elf instead of one of his own kind. Her chances of finding a mate within her own community were slim. She had inherited her mother's looks—the pale, white skin, auburn hair and hazel-green eyes typical of the Eastern Wood Elves and considered less than attractive by Western Wood Elven standards. Even worse, freckles covered the bridge of her nose. Even though her parents were constantly assuring her of her beauty, she knew better. To Western Wood Elven males, she would never be considered an acceptable mate...unless she could prove herself in other ways. Becoming one of Brandela's servants would be a good start!

Five hours later, she was accepted as one of the many hundreds who would be presented to the princess. Just as many were turned away to face the shame of returning to their families. She was relieved and her hopes rose a bit then. But now...

Kerala sighed and lowered her eyes from the view of the beautiful young woman before her. *This is pointless*, she thought. *Whatever made me think that the princess would even look at me, the daughter of an outcast farmer, and an ugly one at that? She is so far beyond my station..., I'm fooling myself*

With a heavy heart, Kerala did the unthinkable. She turned her back on the princess and began to walk away from the area set aside for the applicants.

From her position above the maidens, Brandela saw, from the corner of her eye, the small agitation of movement as Kerala turned and pushed through the crowd. In the space of a second, surprise and annoyance at the girl's odd behavior turned to curiosity. Who better to start the interviews with than one who had caught her attention right away?

Brandela lifted her hand imperiously and pointed to the young woman who was walking away. In the most regal voice she could manage, she called out, "You there, stop and present yourself to me. I, Brandela, seventh princess of the House of Oendale, command you."

Kerala stopped dead in her tracks, afraid to move as much as her head to see if it were she that the princess was addressing, as she feared. A girl beside her poked her hard and whispered, "You must go back!"

She hadn't thought when she turned to leave, but now she realized that her actions may have been perceived as an insult. How on Ryyah would she be able to salvage the situation?

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Kerala turned slowly and made her way to the front of the crowd. She presented herself directly in front of the princess and curtsied as low and as dignified as she could muster. On rising, she gave the traditional salute and the expected, "How may I be of service, my Lady?" She was careful to keep her eyes respectfully lowered.

Brandela was surprised by the woman's proper manners and knowledge of protocol. It made her earlier mistake even more curious. "You can begin by explaining yourself. I am not familiar with the customs of this town, so please tell me of what custom of respect is it to walk away from someone before being properly introduced?"

Kerala's pale face flushed and she raised her eyes to the princess earnestly as she replied, "My apologies, Your Highness. There was no intent on my part to insult my Lady. I simply realized upon seeing your beauty that I am not worthy to serve you and did not wish to waste your time with my interview."

The princess found herself surprised, yet again, by the girl's humility and honesty, and was genuinely intrigued by her unusual looks. She was not about to let her off the hook now.

"What is your name and occupation and what skills are you trained in?" Brandela asked.

It was Kerala's turn to look surprised. She had expected the princess to send her away immediately for her rude mistake, and yet here she was, extending her inquiries.

"I am Kerala, of the House of Vanthrail, Your Highness, and I am an apprentice scholarly priestess. My skills consist of the study of magic and its broad uses. I am also well-versed within the Proverbs of the Elders, as well as many other scholarly books and titles."

"You appear to be well educated," observed Brandela.

"Yes, my Lady, although I still have much to learn. I am particularly interested in the use of source magic for protection and healing."

"Skills of these kinds could be very useful to me," noted the princess. To herself she thought, *I could definitely use someone of her intellectual capacity.*

"How do I know you're telling me the truth about your abilities?" queried Brandela. "After all, anyone can say they are trained in the scholarly arts."

Kerala lifted her chin and looked the princess in the eyes. She was pure confidence now, as comfortable in her scholarly element as she had been self-conscious and uncomfortable in the physical element. She began reciting one of the quotes of the high queens. "One

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of the greatest gifts of the Elven Elders to their children was the gift of the bonding spell, for our forefathers knew and understood that a stable family unit is the foundation of any society. If the family unit decays over time for any reason, then the greater society will surely follow.”

Brandela smiled. “I find you immensely interesting,” she said. “I cannot imagine why you would think yourself unworthy of being in my service. I doubt if I will find a more worthy girl here today. I am going to offer you the position of head maidservant. It is a big responsibility but I am sure you are more than up for the task. Will you willingly accept my offer?”

Kerala’s voice quivered with emotion when she answered, “Of course, Your Highness. I would be more than honored and thrilled to have such a distinguished position within your household. It is more than I had hoped for and far more than I feel I deserve.”

“I have a strong sense that our destinies are closely tied,” said Brandela in a hushed, serious tone. It was true that from the moment she had seen the girl, she’d felt drawn to her. Perhaps it was simply that they were close in age, but Elven wisdom told her there was more to it than that. She trusted in the bonds of the heart, and she knew there was a special reason this girl had stood out for her. Only time would tell.

Brandela placed her hand on Kerala’s shoulder. “If we are to work together, I command you use my first name, Brandela.”

Kerala shook her head, and her face flushed with anxiety. “My Lady, I couldn’t...”

“You and I are more alike than you may think,” insisted Brandela. “I have not yet bonded with a mate, which means that I am not an Elven mistress worthy of respect. My position of status is as tenuous as yours.” She smiled down at Kerala’s incredulous expression and added, “You will help me, and I, you. For now, we are equals. You will call me Brandela.”

Kerala humbly agreed and curtsied low once more. She knew the princess’ words were sincere, but... equals? The princess was the most desirable Elven female in the Western Woods. How could she possibly compare their positions of status? It was all Kerala could do to contain a laugh as she thought of this. Still, Brandela had chosen her! She could hardly believe her good fortune.

Chapter Four



The encounter with Kerala put Brandela in a better frame of mind for her daunting task and, by the end of the day, she had selected her hundred maidens and was feeling genuinely pleased with her choices. The town was humming with energy and rejoicing, and preparations were in full force for the ceremony and feasts that would take place the following day.

The next afternoon found the Elven citizens gathered once more at the town center, mesmerized as they watched Princess Brandela standing before her handpicked maidens, including Kerala. The Elven maidens were all attired in hunter-green dresses and each wore a small headpiece with a veil covering their faces as a symbol of their humble station. As the crowd watched, Brandela moved to the center of the courtyard and the girls formed a large circle around her. At a signal from Brandela, the maidens supplicated themselves before the princess, with their foreheads touching the ground.

As one, they lifted their heads and began reciting the pledge of loyalty. "My will is yours. My loyalty is yours. My body is yours. Command me as you will, Mistress, for I am your loyal servant in battle and your faithful counsel in times of war and peace. Do with me as you will."

As the maidens spoke in unison, Brandela began to recite an ancient, magical enchantment and turned, facing each of the girls for a moment before turning again slightly to face the next. Her chanting became louder and stronger as she pulled life energy from each of the maidens and drew it into herself. By the time she had completed the circle, she was impassioned and the crowd was responding in like, with cheers and hoots of excitement. A final recitation sealed the binding spell between Brandela and the young women, and they rose, drew back their veils, and came forward to kiss the princess' hands in gratitude and joy.

The cheers of the crowd were barely settling down when the governor announced the start of the feast, throwing the townsfolk into a fresh frenzy. The guards held them back until the princess and her contingency had been seated and served in the area reserved for

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them, and then the commoners flooded in. Venison, goats, calves, and pigs turned on spits over fires that hissed with dripping fat and blood. Tables were heaped with fresh breads, fruits, berries and vegetables, and tempting treats of all sorts. Wine and mead flowed as freely as the music that filled the air around them, and it seemed to all that Eldergate had never seen such happy times.

Unbeknownst to the Elves, the town was being watched by a scout of the largest slaver army ever put together. They were led by Garock the Strong, a fierce Barbarian warlord and leader of the largest group of nomadic Barbarians in the Wildlands. More than 3,000 men were under his command, on a mission to capture and enslave as many female Wood Elves as they could manage.

Elves were highly prized on the slave market due to their long lives and unparalleled beauty, but rare due to the almost impossible task of entering their forests. Garock had a deal in the works with empires in the West that he hoped would fund an army large enough to allow him to capture one of the free town settlements. This, along with the control he already had over the Wildlands, would make him a king in his own right and highly powerful—not to mention rich! He was confident that these small Elven settlements would be easy pickings, but he had no idea of the goldmine he had just stumbled upon.

Garock and his men had entered the Wood Elven forest, undetected by the Rangers, with the use of a magical rune artifact that allowed them to make use of near invisibility. Where nomadic Barbarians would have gotten such a rare and powerful artifact was a mystery, but with it they had been able to head north from Garock's encampment, through the forest and to Eldergate. His scouts had reported an unwalled settlement in the north with a large enough population to make the trip worthwhile. Garock decided that this would be their first conquest.

The message that arrived from the scout pleased Garock. Most of the Elves had gathered at the town center for some celebration and the timing was perfect. He knew from experience that taking the Elves by surprise ambush was the best tactic. They would be no match for his army in hand-to-hand combat, especially since few of them would be armed. It would be over before they knew what hit them. He smiled in anticipation. *It's been far too long since I've had an Elven whore in my bed*, he thought. His spirits were high as he gave the signal to his army to surround the town.

The attack, when it came, was swift and sudden. Never before, in its long history, had the town been attacked, and it was the last

thing the Elves were expecting on this celebratory evening.

At first, most of the Elves assumed the commotion on the outskirts of the town was being caused by over-exuberant youngsters and they laughed in memory of their own foolish days of old. But it soon became evident that something more serious was happening, and by the time word spread throughout the crowded streets, chaos had taken hold. As Garock predicted, the Elves had little time to react before his men were already well engaged and moving into the town.

Garock's men had encircled the town and were systematically working their way toward the center, slaughtering anyone who crossed their paths and capturing as many of the Elven females as they could find. To their credit, the unsuspecting town guards had regrouped quickly after the initial onslaught and were doing their best to slow down Garock's army. But they were no more than a nuisance obstacle to Garock's men, and it was not long before the raiders were breaking through the guard's lines and moving toward the center of the town.

As word of the attack reached Princess Brandela and her entourage, panic began to break out. Brandela, however, was calm...puzzled, really.

"Are you certain?" she questioned the man who had been sent to warn her. "There is no way that non-Elves could have made their way unnoticed and unstopped this far north in the forest. The Rangers are quite skilled at protecting these forests. That was the reason this town was chosen for my journey, in fact. What you are saying is quite impossible!"

"It would seem so, my Lady," replied the man apologetically, "but I assure you, the town is most certainly under attack and I beg you to seek shelter immediately."

"This is ludicrous," Brandela insisted. "I demand to see the governor at once."

The governor, when he arrived moments later, confirmed the report and strongly encouraged the princess to take shelter in his own offices.

"We were able get a messenger past their army lines," the governor informed her. "He will reach one of the northern outposts within a day or two and they'll get word to the capital. Help will be arriving soon. The town guards are leading a counterattack at this very moment and slowing down the enemy army and every able-bodied citizen has been called upon to assist. We will be able to hold them off until your people arrive, but it would be best if you were not so

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visible. Please, Your Highness, I beg you to go into the offices.”

At that moment, a small group of Barbarian warriors who had managed to break through the Elven town guards’ defensive perimeter stumbled into the courtyard. They stopped short at the sight of Brandela and stared, with gaping mouths, at the most beautiful Wood Elf they had ever seen.

“She is wearing the royal crown,” exclaimed one of the men.

A lewd grin spread over one of the men’s faces. “Ol’ Garock’ll be surprised to find out there’s royalty visitin’, won’t he? No wonder they were havin’ such a grand party!”

The group was quickly driven back by Brandela’s personal guards, but there was no doubt that more would soon be following.

“Please, my Lady, move yourself and your maidens to the offices. I must go. Your guards will be better able to protect you once you are safely inside.”

Brandela frantically turned her thoughts to the safety of her newly acquired servants. They were her responsibility now and she must do what was best for them first. But what was the best thing to do? If only her mother had come. She would know just how to handle such a situation!

She scanned the courtyard, desperately seeking a way to gather and calm the scattered and frightened girls, when her eyes fell upon Kerala. Kerala stood in the midst of the chaos, patiently watching the princess and waiting for her command to action. She, alone, appeared focused, attentive and prepared to serve. Brandela felt stronger the moment their eyes met.

“Kerala, you must take the maidservants into the governor’s offices and barricade yourselves inside until you receive further instructions,” Brandela ordered.

Kerala frowned at hearing this and replied, “What about you, my Lady? We should see to your safety first and then we can worry about your other maidservants.”

“No, I will stay and help you find them all,” Brandela insisted. “I have my mother’s personal guardsmen to protect me. Believe me, I am sufficiently safe. They, and you, must get to safety first. If the situation worsens, I will take the necessary actions but, until then, you have your orders. See to the safety of my servants, Kerala.”

Kerala nodded her head humbly and obeyed. She had soon rounded up a large number of the other maidens and led them to the governor’s building. Once they had all been herded into the inner offices, she instructed them to barricade the doors and to not open them for anyone until help had arrived. Then, without hesitation or

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thought for her own safety, she ran back out to the courtyard to find Brandela and the others.

Kerala paused on the stairway to see if she could locate the princess. Her heart began to pound as she took in the scene before her. The Barbarians had broken through the town guards perimeter barrier and were now flooding the courtyard. Bodies lay strewn in the streets, and many of the Elven females had been captured and were being forced into a small building at the edge of the courtyard.

Suddenly, Kerala spotted Brandela on the other side of the courtyard. Brandela's guardsmen had formed a protective barrier around the princess, but as Kerala watched, the Barbarian slavers charged and began a viciously brutal attack. The Elven guards were no match for the men and, within minutes, it was clear that Brandela was in serious danger of being captured.

Kerala became frantic, searching desperately for any guardsmen who could help Brandela, but the few that remained were already engaged in a losing battle with the Barbarians. Kerala felt for the rune crystal pendant she always wore around her neck. It was small, but it might help. She quickly rummaged through her reticule to see if there was anything there that would be useful. She found only her Elven dagger and three small acorns.

She looked down at the small items in her hands with a worried frown, then looked back up, just in time to see one of the raiders grab Brandela and knock her unconscious. Kerala's face tightened with anger and determination and she began to move toward the men. She had no experience in real combat but she was not going to let that stop her from saving her mistress. After all, they were linked now, along with the lives of ninety-nine other innocent women. She would not allow her mistress to be killed or taken off, even if it cost her life.

She palmed the acorns in her left hand and gripped the dagger in her right. She wished she had a rune crystal staff like the ones the Arch Mages used in the capital city, but she would have to do what she could with what she had.

As she approached the fleeing men, one of them hoisted Brandela's body onto his shoulder like a bag of wheat. Kerala felt her anger building as she watched the princess being treated in such an undignified way, but she quickly calmed her mind, knowing that she would need all of her concentration if she were to succeed. She focused, instead, on the pendant around her neck, pulling energy from it and preparing to put it to use.

"Let go of the princess," she shouted as she drew nearer to

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the raiders. The closest man turned and lifted his sword to meet her as she rushed toward him. Kerala channeled some of the pendant's energy into one of the acorns in her left hand and tossed it at the man, just as he brought his sword down. As soon as the acorn made contact with the man, it exploded and a flurry of wiggling roots quickly engulfed him. He fell, screaming in pain and panic as the roots constricted around him, tighter and tighter. Kerala stepped aside and approached the next target.

The Barbarian slaver who was carrying Brandela hesitated for only a moment before rushing ahead to break through the remnants of the guards' barrier. His compatriot did not follow, but turned to face Kerala with a smug smile. Kerala, trying desperately to keep Brandela in sight, did not notice the man at first, until she tried to follow. The warrior stepped in her path and swung his sword, narrowly missing Kerala's slender neck as she leaped aside. She turned her full attention on him then, her eyes blazing with anger.

Kerala stood her ground as he charged toward her with his sword upraised, and focused hard on channeling the pendant's energy directly onto one single spot in the man's path. The instant his right foot touched that spot, it was sucked into the ground as if he had stepped into quicksand and deep roots secured his leg, firmly. The Barbarian struggled furiously, but he could not remove his foot from the ground.

When Kerala was certain that the man was securely immobilized, she darted behind him and thrust her dagger into a well-aimed spot on the nape of his neck. The man ceased struggling almost immediately. She shuddered as she pulled the dagger away, but turned in search of Brandela's captor without hesitation. She ran in the direction she had last seen the man, and soon caught sight of him far ahead.

With renewed determination, she began to pursue them, but was forced to use her second acorn on another raider who attempted to stop her. She had barely escaped him, when she found herself surrounded by five rank Barbarians, who grinned and leered at her with lust-filled eyes.

Kerala had only one acorn left and she knew it would not be enough to defeat five opponents. She slowly backed away from the men, trying to give herself more time and space to work, but the men followed, clearly enjoying the prospect of a cat-and-mouse chase.

Kerala knew she was in serious trouble. The energy stores of her rune crystal pendant were nearly depleted and would be of little help to her against so many men. She had only one option remaining

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to her and if she was not careful it would kill her.

She began to focus on drawing out her own life energy and concentrating it on the ground the five men were walking toward. She sensed an abundant store of small grass roots that she could use and she poured her energy into these roots, closed her eyes and began calling on the powers of the Elders for assistance. She continued her prayer until she heard one of the men yell out.

Kerala opened her eyes and watched with great fascination as all five men were pulled, screaming and struggling, into the ground by overgrown grass roots. As the men disappeared beneath the earth, an overwhelming wave of nausea and fatigue hit Kerala.

“Brandela,” she whispered before she fainted, completely and utterly exhausted.



Survival



Chapter Five



Just over two weeks later, a lone scout rushed into the compound of an outpost far to the south of Weeping Tree. He was the last in a network of Wood Elven runners who had been carrying an urgent message from outpost to outpost, until this runner finally reached the intended destination—the only human outpost in the forest. He asked to see the commanding officer and was taken immediately to Alayna’s office.

“A message from the high lord,” reported the scout, holding out a sealed paper to her.

“Thank you,” she answered, taking it from him. “Now please, go join the boys for a hearty meal and get some rest. I will be sending a reply shortly.”

Alayna stood for a moment, looking at the royal seal on the note. What would it be this time? Every order from high Lord Aden meant the loss of a few more of her boys, although the ones who had survived until now were skilled warriors and no longer boys at all.

Alayna had tried to prepare the boys as quickly as she could, knowing that Lord Aden would be eager to be rid of them, but he had started using them in raids and to police the forest far too early. In the early years, they lost so many boys due to inexperience and lack of training, and she had taken every loss as a personal tragedy. Alayna had become a surrogate mother to all of the boys, but she knew if she refused Lord Aden’s demands, he would close the outpost and destroy the boys for what she had already taught them. The best she could do was train them hard and do her best to have them ready for anything he put them to.

She was mother, teacher, and commanding officer to the boys and she spent much of the early years teaching them the Elven language and the skills of survival, hunting, and archery. As they had grown and improved, she taught them battle tactics and Elven swordplay.

It saddened her to remember how savagely the high lord had misused them in the early years, but even the youngest of the surviving boys were now skilled veterans, each having killed dozens of trespassers and participated in many border skirmishes. She had

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watched them grow from traumatized young boys to competent and skilled soldiers, and she was proud of them all. She was especially proud of Donovan, who had remained one of her favorites through the years, and whose archery and Elven swordplay was the best Alayna had ever seen, even amongst her own people.

She had been thinking, for a long time now, about a way to get them out of the Wood Elven forest before the high lord could manage to get them all killed in battle. Now as she stood reluctant to open the note in her hands, she wondered if she were too late.

Lord Aden's message was short and brisk. *Head directly west and cut off any enemy retreat.* He did not say who the enemy was or how large a force they might expect. And it didn't make sense. The Rangers patrolled the western forest heavily. How could an enemy force of any size be traveling there without already being detected? She frowned and read the short note again, hoping to puzzle some clue from the words, but then sighed and set it down. The message was clear enough; there was nothing to do but follow it.

Alayna went in search of Donovan, who was her second-in-command, and Akenji, who was her third. She had taught all of the boys the importance of the command structure, no matter how big or small the command, and none had ever questioned her choice in making Donovan and Akenji her leaders.

Donovan, now twenty-two years old, was six feet tall, with a lithe build and a natural athleticism that served him well on the battlefield. He was a good-natured and fearless young man, and a natural leader. His light-brown eyes always held some hidden amusement, and Alayna was very fond of him, treating him as her own son.

Donovan was rarely found without his childhood friend, Akenji. Akenji, at twenty-one years, had grown up to become the largest of all the remaining human Rangers. Towering over the others at six foot seven, he commanded attention without even trying. His brown skin, piercing gray eyes and black hair, which he kept very short at all times, added to his formidable appearance. His father, Deonock Stonehorn, was one of the twelve great chieftains of the Eknockoharry tribes, the ferocious rhino herders of the Kshearry plains, far to the south. Akenji was descended from a long line of warriors and he looked the part in every way. The two were like brothers and looked out for each other at the outpost and in battle.

Donovan and Akenji wasted no time getting the thirty-two other Rangers ready for combat, starting with a trip to the small weapons armory that the Rangers had collected and built up over the past ten years. The amount of weaponry they had been able to

obtain was quite staggering as there was always some sort of misfit or rogue slaver trespassing into the high lord's domain. Over the years, they had collected the weapons of their dead foes and used them for themselves since the Elven-made weapons did not always meet with the combat skills that they were now capable of as adult human warriors.

The most commonly made Elven sword was the saber, with blades that curved at the tip. They were fine weapons, but required more speed and accuracy than most of the human Rangers were capable of. All of Alayna's boys were properly trained in the use of these Elven swords, but many chose not to use them in battle, preferring the heavier weapons they had obtained from their enemies.

Most of the Rangers armed themselves with the long swords that were most commonly used amongst the nomadic slavers and in the Wildlands. A few, including Akenji, preferred a double-bladed dwarf-made ax, which he used in combat with brutal efficiency. Almost all of the human Rangers carried Elven-made short swords and daggers as their secondary weapon, and they were all skilled in the use of the Elven-made bows. Wood Elven bows were the finest bows in all of Ryyah, capable of greater distance and accuracy than those made by any other nation in existence.

Donovan's choice of weaponry was a bit different from his comrades. Like the rest of the Rangers, he opted for foreign-made weaponry, even though he could use the Elven sabers with greater speed and accuracy than most Elves. His preference was a dwarf-made, two-handed broadsword made of dwarf steel and about five feet in length. Donovan was savagely efficient in the use of this weapon in battle. He also carried an Elven-made short sword with a two-foot long, thin, curved blade, a Wood Elven-made short bow and an Elven-made dagger on him at all times.

Thirty minutes after Alayna gave the order, the men were armed, supplied and ready to begin heading west.

They had been moving west for nearly two weeks when they came upon the first signs of a recent, massive movement of men.

After studying the boot prints in the torn forest floor, Donovan announced, "These are not Elven males. They are human... and there are a lot of them. We're dealing with a human army, most likely slavers."

Akenji agreed. "They're heading southwest," he added.

"We'll follow them," ordered Alayna. "We must move quickly. If they have Elven prisoners, we need to find them before they reach the Wildlands."

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Alayna and her command closed ground on the larger army until, five days later, the slavers were in sight. She ordered the men to fall back and await her orders while she, Donovan and Akenji crept forward and spread out for a closer look.

Donovan frowned as he looked over the large clearing where the slavers had set up camp for the night. *There have to be at least 2,500 men here*, he thought. It was a troubling sight. It was the largest slaver army he had ever seen. They seemed to be getting more organized.

When he spotted the prisoners, an old anger burned deep in his belly and he was surprised to find himself trembling. Most of the Elven females had their hands bound. Many bore the bruises of recent beatings and mistreatment and several of the women had their clothing torn. It was their faces that bothered him the most, though. Most seemed to be in a state of shock, their eyes sad and glazed with fear. How long had they been on the move? They were clearly exhausted. Looking at them brought back the voices of his past, the animal terror in his mother's eyes that day, the screams. Donovan tore his eyes from them and spotted Alayna several yards away.

Donovan gave her the Elven hand signals for 300 prisoners and over 2,500 fighting men. Alayna nodded and signaled for them to back off. Back with the command, she ordered her scouts to get a message to the high lord that they had located the enemy army and that their numbers were at least 2,500 strong. *We will continue following but will not engage until your arrival*, she wrote, then signed and sealed the message and sent it off with her scouts.

Two days later, the scouts returned with word from the high lord. *Direct order. Royal Army one day north, closing ground. Engage enemy and slow them down until army arrives.*

Alayna frowned as she read the order. The high lord had issued them a death sentence, and they both knew it. There was no way her small command could engage so many soldiers without being destroyed in the process. To engage would mean death by the enemy's hand. To disobey a direct order from the high lord would be treason, and would ensure their death as traitors. She would rather die fighting. She crumpled the note and began to formulate the best strategy she possibly could.

She had her soldiers split into groups of ten, each group led by a commander—Donovan, Akenji, and herself. The two scouts were given the duty of reconnaissance. They were to follow and keep the rest of them apprised of the enemy army's position at all times.

“You two, take your commands further south and set up sepa-

rate ambushes along the trail. We'll ambush from a distance and withdraw into the forest as the enemy moves to defend itself. Draw as many soldiers as you can into the forest and deal with them there. Do not engage the army directly. Am I clear?"

"Aww, I was looking forward to giving these halfwits a taste of me," teased Donovan.

Alayna didn't smile. "Promise me, both of you," she insisted, and it was a mother's plea more than a commander's order. "Do not engage this army unless it is absolutely necessary."

Donovan looked at Akenji and back to Alayna, all playfulness gone from his expression. He had rarely seen her so anxious. Both "boys" nodded their understanding and turned to the south. Alayna took her band of ten and moved in on the army from the rear.

For the rest of that day, the human Rangers and Alayna ambushed the enemy army and then disengaged, fleeing back into the denser woods beside the trail. Many enemy soldiers were killed as they followed the mysterious assailants into the forest, and Alayna's goal of slowing the army down while keeping her boys safe was working.

All was going well until the enemy commander gave orders to refrain from engaging or chasing the Rangers into the woods. Instead, they were to use their shields to endure the harassment and allow the archers, who he set up behind the soldiers, to fire at anything suspicious in the trees.

It was Alayna's group who ambushed next, and she watched as two of her young soldiers were slain due to the change in enemy tactics. She quickly sent word to Donovan and Akenji to fall back and rejoin her. She needed to make a serious change in plans. Her tactics would have given the Royal Army time to draw nearer, but it would likely not reach them until the next morning. They needed to stop the enemy army before it could reach the Wildlands..., less than a day away. On open ground, the Elven army would be sure to suffer much greater losses than in the forest. It was time to engage them full on!

By the time Akenji and Donovan made it back to her, Alayna had her next strategy planned out.

"One group will engage the enemy from behind," she told them. "The other two will flank each side and attack from a distance. This way, we should be able to break the enemy formation and slow them down long enough for the Royal Army to reach them in time."

"I will lead the engaging command," Donovan volunteered, understanding that whoever went in would not be coming out.

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Alayna smiled at him and sighed. “I decline your request. I am pulling rank on both you and Akenji. I will lead the assault. Then, perhaps, some of us will make it back.”

Donovan and Akenji both began to argue with her.

“I am the most skilled warrior here,” said Donovan angrily. “If I am in the assault group then it will have a better chance of success.”

Akenji agreed. “Yes, that makes sense. If we make a group of our best warriors—myself, Donovan, and some of the others—then the group that engages will have a better chance of succeeding. With you leading the others from the side, we’re sure to break them up and slow them down. It could work,” he insisted.

Alayna listened patiently to their arguments, but would not budge in her decision. The assault group would not come out alive, and she would not stand on the sidelines and watch her “sons” die.

“We’re doing it my way,” she finally commanded. “And I will accept no dissension!”

Donovan and Akenji were not happy with the decision, but knew there was nothing more they could do to convince her.

“We’ll cover you as best we can,” promised Donovan.

Alayna chose only five men to accompany her in the attack. “We’ll be more maneuverable that way,” she lied. The others went with Donovan and Akenji to get in position on the flanks of the slaver’s army.

When they were in position and ready to attack, Alayna turned to the five men she had chosen. “You are brave, my boys, and I am sorry for having to lead you to your deaths, for none of us are likely to come out of this alive. I am so proud of you and your lives will not be lost in vain. Those Elven women will have you to thank for their freedom and their lives, and so, hopefully, will your brothers. Be strong. Fight hard. This may be the greatest battle of your lives.”

With that, Alayna ran into the enemy lines, swinging her Elven saber with deadly precision. Her five Rangers, inspired and honored to serve, attacked as though they were possessed, and Donovan and Akenji’s groups opened fire, picking off soldiers as they tried to encircle Alayna and her men.

As Alayna had hoped, the soldiers were completely caught off guard and disarray quickly spread throughout the ranks. Men scattered, unsure of who to attack first, or even where the side attacks were coming from. Alayna knew their advantage wouldn’t last long and called out for her men to fight hard while they had the chance.

Word of the attack eventually reached Garock the Strong and, assuming that the Royal Army had caught up with them, he swiftly gave orders for the soldiers to reform and hold their ranks. He walked

back to the rear lines and saw that it was not the Royal Army causing all the problems after all, but a mere handful of pesky Rangers.

“Hold formation,” he ordered again, and he began walking through the lines and handpicking fifty of his best-trained men. Garock personally led the men forward through a fearsome barrage of enemy arrows. At the order to charge, the fifty men roared toward Alayna and her five men. It wasn’t long before the first of the five Rangers went down.

Forty minutes later, Alayna was the only one remaining. She was surrounded on all sides. A soldier attacked from behind; she quickly twirled aside, bringing her saber up around her and thrusting it into the eye holes of the soldier’s helmet. She dropped his limp body in the path of her next attacker, causing him to stumble. The man regained his footing, then lifted his weapon above his head and swung it downward, aiming for Alayna’s head. At the same time, another soldier lunged for her. Alayna timed the attacks and deliberately walked into one, reaching up to grip the attacker’s wrist with one hand, while jabbing her saber underneath the man’s helmet and slicing into his unguarded throat, twisting the blade and ripping it out. She twisted the man’s body into the path of her other opponent’s blade, and while his blade was embedded into the dead man’s body, she skillfully sliced into her enemy’s exposed neck.

Alayna looked around her to find that all the other soldiers had fallen back. She took advantage of the lull to catch her breath and prepare herself for a renewed attack. A giant of a man made his way toward her, armed with a shield and a double-bladed ax. A fresh wave of arrows rained down around him, but he fended them off almost casually.

“You must be the commander,” he growled, eyeing her coldly. “It’s a shame that you’re such a skilled warrior because now I have to kill you and I’d really much rather have you in my bed. But I guess we can’t always get what we want, can we?” He gave her a grotesque smile.

Out of nowhere, he began swinging his blade in a furious, chopping fashion, leaving her no choice but to spend all of her energy defending herself, dodging his blows and twisting out of his path. She was tiring and knew that if this went on much longer, she would die. A small part of her welcomed death and the chance to join her mate, but she didn’t want to go this way, at the hands of this monster who had brought so much misery to her people.

With renewed determination, she began to back step and circle around towards the other men, putting them on her flanks. The sol-

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diers tried, as she hoped they would, to capitalize on the opportunity for a quick kill. One soldier charged her from the side; Alayna stepped back and let the oncoming man occupy her former space. The man stepped in just in time to meet a furious barrage of blows from Garock's ax.

When Garock realized what he had done, he cursed the bumbling fool's idiocy. A moment later, he was blocked again by another soldier, and then another and another. He threw his soldier's bodies off of him furiously and yelled out, "Enough! She's mine."

This Barbarian has a modicum of intelligence, thought Alayna, and she knew this was not to her advantage.

Garock rushed at her again with a ferocious shield slam, knocking her to the ground. He followed through with an ax blow that narrowly missed her. As she rolled away, she twirled her legs, kicking Garock in the shins and causing him to lose his balance. She hopped to her feet, now on the offensive again, and began a flurry of thrusting sword attacks to his momentarily unguarded flank. Garock recovered his balance and shifted his shield just in time to meet her oncoming attack. He hit her with another shield slam that flattened her to the ground, then brought the rim of his shield down on her head, leaving her dazed and wobbly.

Alayna began to fight frantically, then. She had blood in her eyes and could not see clearly. Garock's shield slammed into her, knocking her down once again. She rolled away and barely missed being hit with yet another crushing blow, and kicked Garock's shin again. This time, though, he had braced himself and her efforts had no effect. Garock countered, bringing the shield rim down on her sword arm, causing her to drop her weapon. Garock tossed his shield aside, picked Alayna up as though she were a child, and head-butted her with his helmet, instantly breaking her nose.

Alayna was knocked nearly unconscious, but began fumbling around for her dropped blade. She knew she was about to die—she just wished that it didn't have to be by this creature.

Garock towered over her with his ax and said, "You know, it doesn't have to end this way. I'll spare you if you promise to be my personal whore. It would be a shame to waste such a pretty and feisty little thing like you."

Alayna looked up at him and remembered one of the Elven Proverbs she was taught as a young girl. "It is better to die doing what one loves, then to live doing what one hates," she quoted. Then she spit in defiance at Garock's offer and closed her eyes to avoid seeing the final blow as it came down on her and severed her head.

Chapter Six



Donovan and Akenji held their ground for as long as they could, taking out many of Garock's soldiers as they helped Alayna from the sidelines. Her plan was working. The slaver's army was not just slowed down; it had come to a grinding halt. But when they saw Alayna engage with the big Barbarian, they knew she was in serious trouble. They rapidly reorganized their men to start a counterattack and entered the fray head on. As they began working their way toward Alayna's position, it became clear that Alayna was losing the fight.

Donovan fought savagely through a line of attackers, trying to cut his way to Alayna in time. He knew if he didn't get to her soon, she would die. Desperation drove him to fight as he never had before, and adrenaline gave him mighty strength, but Garock's soldiers severely outnumbered them. It was a credit to Alayna's training that they lasted as long as they did. Thirty minutes into the fight, more the half of the human Rangers were dead. Donovan fought on; getting to Alayna was his only goal.

In the distance, Elven battle trumpets began to blow. It wasn't long before a legion of Elven swordsmen charged into battle. As the fresh Elven forces flooded in, they quickly surrounded and engaged the Barbarian army. The fierce and bloody battle lasted for two hours and the Wood Elves spared no one in the enemy ranks.

When, at last, the final man had fallen, Donovan began searching among the bodies in the area where he had last seen Alayna. It wasn't long before he found what he sought. Weeping openly, he unpinned his cloak and gently covered Alayna's battered corpse. Akenji and the remaining "boys" soon joined him.

"This shouldn't have happened to her," moaned one of the youngest Rangers. "Not to her."

Donovan looked up and saw that only a handful of the original thirty-two remained. "She wouldn't have had it any other way," he said, his voice shaking with emotion. "We would all be dead if it were not for her skill and bravery."

"I would take her place if I could," said Akenji, not trying to

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hide his tears.

“We all would,” replied Donovan as he carefully wrapped Alayna’s body in the cloak and ordered a couple of the men to take her to their camp. He then began to search through the bodies again, this time looking for the big Barbarian who had been fighting Alayna when he last saw her. The search was futile, and Donovan grew increasingly angrier as he realized that Alayna’s killer had somehow gotten away.

“I must see the high lord,” Donovan told Akenji. “I will find that Barbarian if it’s the last thing I do in this lifetime. I will avenge her death!”

High Lord Aden was looking over the first reports of casualties and losses to his army when he noticed one of the human Rangers heading his way. He frowned, irritated to see that any of the humans were still alive.

Without raising his eyes from the reports before him, Lord Aden commanded, “State your business, Ranger. I’m very busy here.”

Donovan struggled to control his anger, and his voice was taut with emotion when he spoke. “You knew this was going to happen,” he accused the high lord.

Lord Aden continued to ignore him and Donovan forgot his rank, forgot his respectful place, and lost his temper entirely. “Don’t pretend you don’t hear me. You knew that if you sent us against so many, it would get most of us killed and now Alayna is dead because of you.”

Lord Aden raised his eyes and looked at Donovan coldly. “Tough choices had to be made. I do not regret my decision or my orders—they were necessary for the success of the mission. Alayna was a soldier. She raised you to be soldiers, despite my misgivings. The fact that you are standing here proves that she must have done a decent job, and Alayna died a hero. Her family will mourn her passing, yes, but they will have comfort in the fact that she died an honorable death, saving many of her own kind in the process.”

Donovan, somewhat calmer and remembering his station, saluted the high lord and nodded his acquiescence. “I understand, my Lord,” he said. “It is a great loss to those of us who were raised and trained by her, as well.”

Lord Aden nodded.

“I have searched throughout the battlefield, sir, for the man who killed Alayna. He was a leader—possibly their commander. I was not able to find his body. It is possible that he may have escaped.”

High Lord Aden frowned at hearing this news. He immediately

called for his scouts and ordered them to seek out any tracks leading from the battlefield. Then, ordering Donovan to accompany him, he went to where the rescued Elven maidens were being inventoried and treated. He searched amongst the weary, frightened faces of the girls, hoping to spot his daughter, but she was not amongst them.

The scouts soon returned and reported having found the tracks of a small group, leading out of the forest.

“Brandela must be with them,” Lord Aden reasoned. “Gather twenty soldiers,” he ordered. “I will join the search!”

“I request to assist,” offered Donovan. “If Alayna’s murderer is with that group, I want to deal with him myself.”

“I don’t need human assistance,” retorted Lord Aden, coldly, “but come if you must. My daughter’s safe return is all that matters to me now. Let’s hope we both get what we desire.”

The men traced the small group’s tracks until they left the forest and disappeared far into the Wildlands. Lord Aden knew then that it was too late. Now it was a waiting game. The enemy would surely realize that Brandela was a princess, and he trusted that this, at least, would help to keep her safe for a time. They would come to him soon enough, seeking a ransom. Until then, there was nothing more he could do. With a troubled heart, he turned and led his men back to the forest. Donovan was equally troubled, for none of the tracks they had found were large enough to belong to the man who had killed Alayna.

Back at the battle site, high Lord Aden ordered his army to gather their dead. Half of them would head back to Alderwood with the dead and the wounded. The other half would accompany the Elven maidens back to Eldergate. Finally, he commanded the human Rangers to proceed back to their southern outpost and resume their previous duties.

Meanwhile, one lone figure moved stealthily—invisibly—through the forest, heading for the Wildlands and the men who had gone before him. Garock was furious with himself for letting those Rangers slow them down to the point where the Elven Army could catch up. He had become complacent and over-confident and had not worried when the rune crystal artifact had begun to lose its power, as he had been told it eventually would. They had come so close to leaving the forest! He clutched the artifact now in his enormous hand and cursed his grave mistake.

“How am I supposed to explain losing an entire cargo of Elven slaves?” he asked himself out loud. This whole expedition had been a waste of time and money, and he knew his suppliers would not be

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happy about it.

Still, he thought, if all has gone well for the men I sent ahead to the encampment, I do have one prize worth more than a thousand Elven slaves. He smiled wickedly at the thought of the princess. He had hoped to keep her for himself, but now it was possible that his suppliers would pay him even more for her than for all the other slaves he had lost. With renewed confidence, he headed south, soon picked up the trail of his men and began to follow.

As Donovan and Akenji began to prepare the other men for the journey back to the outpost, they were drawn into a conversation about their future.

“It’s going to seem strange at the outpost without Alayna,” said one young man.

“I hate the idea of going back without her,” replied another.

“I’m not sure I can stomach serving the high lord too much longer,” added Donovan, “but that’s something to think about another day. Right now, Alayna’s killer is still alive, and we need to think about how we’re going to avenge her death.”

Akenji regarded his friend seriously. “I understand your pain, my friend, but the high lord has given us a direct order. Disobeying would be treason. We can’t just go running off into the Wildlands on a hopeless mission.”

Donovan’s voice was sharp when he answered, “It’s not hopeless! I will not rest until Alayna’s killer is dead.”

“Not hopeless, then, but nearly impossible now that the slavers have made it out of the forest,” said one of the younger Rangers. “Would you put us all at risk of being killed for treason to do an impossible mission?”

Donovan’s voice was much calmer when he spoke this time. “No, I would not ask this of all of you. But if one of us was able to track the slavers back to their encampment, we would surely find Alayna’s killer amongst them. And if we also rescue the high lord’s daughter, it’s quite likely that he would pardon our actions afterward. After all, what other chance does he have of getting her back?”

Akenji grinned at Donovan as though they were discussing a childhood adventure rather than a highly risky rescue mission. “Yes,” he said, “that way we get to avenge Alayna’s death, and maybe even avoid the wrath of the high lord for once. Who knows, he might even reward us. Imagine that!”

Several of the young men laughed at that outlandish idea, but still they liked the whole plan.

Akenji added, “It’s a good plan, Commander. Which of us will

you have carry it out?”

“I will,” Donovan answered.

The grin vanished from Akenji’s face. “No,” he said, perhaps a little too quickly. “Choose someone else. Any one of us would be willing.”

Donovan looked away into the forest for a moment, and then back to Akenji. He had known that this news would be hard for Akenji to accept, but this was something he had to do, even if it meant never seeing his best friend—his brother—again.

“I’m the most skilled warrior here and, alone, I would have the best chance,” he insisted.

Akenji frowned. “You’re too important to the rest of us to risk this. If we lose you, the others may lose hope. You are our commander now that Alayna is gone, after all.”

“Yes, and you are my second-in-command, and an excellent leader. This is my decision and I will do it.”

Donovan clapped Akenji on the arm and turned to the other Rangers. “You won’t lose me that easily, boys,” he promised. “I’m a skilled scout. At the first sign of trouble I’ll disappear into the wilderness. Believe me, they won’t be able find me or track me. This is our best hope of getting revenge on Alayna’s killer. I will not fail!”

The young Rangers nodded their heads in agreement and returned to the task of preparing for their homeward journey.

“We’ll leave at first light,” ordered Donovan. But that night, when all the others were enjoying the first undisturbed sleep they’d had in days, Donovan slipped away into the dark forest and set out alone for the Wildlands.



The Wildlands



Chapter Seven



Donovan had been tracking the enemy in the Wildlands for almost eight weeks when he decided it was time to make a move. He'd had little difficulty tracking the group, but it had been slow work, mainly because he had needed to track them from a long distance. Unlike the Wood Elven forest, the Wildlands were made up of flat, grassy plains, making it difficult to get near without being seen. But Donovan was learning a little more about his enemy's habits each day as he studied their campsites and tracks, and he was beginning to devise a plan.

He was pleased to find the small footprints of an Elven female amongst the larger human, male prints. The princess was most certainly still alive and traveling with the group. He was even more pleased to find, from the depth and placement of her footprints, that she had a strong, steady stride. She was not hurt, which was a relief, as this would greatly improve their chances of escaping once he had rescued her.

Donovan studied the surrounding landscape carefully. Most of his training had taken place within the forest, and he knew he was at a strong disadvantage here on the open plains. He would have to learn to adjust his tactics, and quickly. He hoped to be able to free the princess before the slavers made it back to their encampment, because once they were encamped, they would gain the home-field advantage with greater numbers and fresh men and supplies, and his chances of success would be much slimmer.

There had been talk at the outpost of a large slaver encampment about four hundred leagues southwest of the free town of Bente, run by a Barbarian who had taken control of much of the Wildlands. Donovan was willing to bet that this Barbarian was the same man he was seeking and, judging by their rate of travel, he expected that they would reach the encampment within the next week or two.

"I will be successful no matter what the circumstances," Donovan told himself, aloud. "Alayna will not have died in vain, and the princess will not suffer the fate of a slave!"

All that day, he followed the slavers, noticing that they were

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heading into more scrubby land. The bushes would be helpful. The slavers were traveling about seven leagues each day, and setting up camp late in the afternoon. Donovan knew their patterns, knew how they laid out their camp, and he was ready.

Late that night, Donovan crept to the edge of the camp—closer than he had ever been—and observed one of the guardsmen conversing with a larger man. Donovan strained to hear their words, but was unable to hear them clearly, so he turned his attention on locating the princess.

Using the brush as cover, Donovan inched even closer and made his way around the perimeter of the camp. At the far side of the camp, he spotted the sleeping form of a woman who was being closely guarded by two Barbarian guards. The woman's clothes were dirty, but on closer observation, Donovan recognized the style generally worn by the hierarchy and Elven nobility. He could not see her face, but there was no doubt in his mind—this was high Lord Aden's daughter.

He studied her more closely and was relieved to find that her clothes, although dirty, were not torn or damaged, meaning that she had likely not been harassed by the men. This would further improve his chances of gaining her trust and helping her escape, as he would not be dealing with a traumatized hostage when he initiated contact with her.

Donovan turned his attention back to the guard and the large man who were still deep in conversation. He set his sights on a bush near to where they stood and, taking a great risk, he stealthily worked his way over and settled in to listen.

“But Garock,” the guardsman was saying, “if we sold her back to her people, we could raise another army. She would bring a fortune and her ransom...”

“You can't spend a fortune if you're dead!” spat the larger man, who was, apparently, Garock. “Our suppliers will already be spitting mad once they know we have failed to obtain the agreed-upon cargo. They wanted a cargo of Elven women, not just one. Although she is a very pretty one, I don't think she alone will justify our supplier's initial willingness to fund our raid on the Wood Elves. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I am certain that there was more to this than the money the cargo would bring in. They would only have been willing to lend us the rune crystal artifact if there was something more valuable at stake.”

Donovan was keenly alert. This was not just a casual conversation between soldiers. This was vital information about their plans

for the princess. He could hardly believe his luck!

Garock paused, frowning as he tried to imagine what he was up against, but getting nowhere. He sighed deeply and went on. “Now that we have no cargo of women and no plunder, the only option is to appease our suppliers. Hopefully, this princess’ ransom will be enough for them to spare our lives. This is why I gave the order that she not be touched.”

Garock turned serious eyes on his second-in-command and asked in a deceptively calm voice, “You did follow my instructions, I trust?”

“Of course,” said the other man. “I would not dare to disobey a direct order from you. I made it clear to the men that none of them were to so much as look twice at her. Even the bruises she had from her capture are mostly healed now. She will be fit for delivery!”

Garock nodded and replied, “Good. I knew there was a reason why I kept you around for so long.”

An unpleasant smile spread over his face and he sighed as he said, “She is uncommonly beautiful, even for a princess. I had been looking forward to having her for myself. If I had known how this was going to go, I’d have captured that Elven whore who I fought in the last battle instead of killing her. The sight of that feisty little thing made me ache all over.” He laughed out loud in a vulgar manner and added, “Oh, I would’ve had lots of fun teaching her a few lessons about her proper place in my bed.”

“You’d have been lucky to survive the first night with that one in your bed,” laughed the guard.

“Yes, it would have been a delightful challenge to break in such a strong one. Oh well, I guess I should just be glad I made it out with my life. If it hadn’t been for the artifact, I’d never have escaped once the Elven Army surrounded us. Luckily, it was still in my bag and I was able to activate it and get out of there without any of the Elves knowing I was ever there.”

Donovan growled low and had to control the urge to leap out and slay the man right there and then. There was the man he’d been hunting—Alayna’s killer—standing mere feet away. It took a great effort to quiet his mind and continue listening.

“The princess, along with the safe return of the artifact, should persuade our suppliers not to take this issue any further. If we are lucky and still have our lives, we’ll eventually build up another army, even larger than the one we lost,” suggested Garock.

Garock’s second-in-command hesitated, then replied, “If I may offer a counter suggestion, perhaps we should keep both the artifact

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and the Elven princess. We could use the ransom money to rebuild our forces and the artifact would be highly useful for future campaigns.”

Garock smiled and shook his head. “If only it was that simple. Unfortunately, our suppliers are powerful enough that I don’t dare cross them. I am fairly certain that they’re involved with the Shadow Elves and, if that’s the case, any double cross will be repaid tenfold.”

The guard’s eyes widened. “Shadow Elves! Well, that does change things. How do we know that they’ll be satisfied with the prisoner and the safe return of their artifact?”

Garock shrugged his shoulders and replied, “We don’t.”

There was a long silence between the two men. Donovan smiled. This might be easier than he had thought. The artifact from the Shadow Elves explained how Garock’s army had been able to get through the forest without being detected. And now, if he could take away their one hope of redemption by helping the princess escape, the Shadow Elven retaliation would wipe out the enemy encampment and Garock with it, without Donovan or any of the Rangers having to lift a finger. It was almost too perfect.

Donovan made his way back to his small camp and pondered the situation until well into the early morning hours. It didn’t sit right with him to not be the one to personally deal out the justice that was coming to Garock, but he was realistic enough to know that this was the most effective means he currently had at his disposal. Even if he involved the other Rangers, the Barbarian’s numbers were still too great and this way, the job could be done without risking any more of the human Ranger’s lives. He started to formulate a plan of action, but sleep finally overtook him. His last thoughts of that day were of Shadow Elves and Garock begging for mercy. If the rumors about the Shadow Elves were true, he would not die a pleasant death. Donovan hoped the Shadow Elves would be swift and brutal in their retaliation against the slavers.

Less than a week later, the slavers reached their encampment. Donovan had been following as closely as he dared and waiting for the right opportunity to act, but it had never come. The princess was very closely guarded and the camps were too exposed. He would have to find a way to get to her now that they were settled, and he knew he wouldn’t have much time before Garock made his next move.

Donovan spent the night of their arrival studying the encampment and he soon discovered that it was going to be a real problem. The camp was well designed, with high walls made of sharpened

tree spikes on all four sides. A series of platforms on the inside of the wooden walls allowed the guards to walk around the inner perimeter of the structure and keep a close watch for anyone attempting to approach the encampment from the surrounding area. All the shrubs and bushes within a hundred feet of the outside wall had been cleared away, making it doubly hard for an intruder such as himself to approach the encampment without being detected. Stealth was not going to work this time. He would need to find a way to enter this place directly.

With the dawn came a flurry of activity around the encampment, and the beginning of a plan for Donovan. As he observed, slaves began to move outside the encampment, emptying waste and filling water bags and buckets from a nearby creek. Several slave men wandered farther, scouring the scrubby plains for anything they could use for their fires.

Here, Donovan thought, is the weakness. If I could "convince" one of the slave men to assist me, I could find a way in. If I were wearing their clothes, I might be able to just walk in directly. It would be the perfect disguise.

For the rest of the day, Donovan studied the movements of the slaves and the Barbarians and formulated his plan, all the while hoping he wasn't too late.

Late that night, he bundled all of his weapons, save his Elven dagger, into his blanket and buried them underneath one of the scrub bushes where they could not be easily found. He lashed his Elven dagger to his lower leg with strips of his cloak, and headed back toward the encampment.

When he had made it as far as the hundred-foot clearing, he began darting carefully from bush to bush, until he reached the upper, northern point of the creek. Donovan silently slipped into the deep, cold water and swam to where the creek came closest to the encampment. The steep banks of the creek offered him some cover and he was able to watch the sentries as they patrolled the platforms. They seemed to focus their attention on other, more exposed sections of the clearing and rarely looked his way. Donovan decided that this would be the best place to rest and wait for daybreak.

Donovan was startled out a light doze the next morning by the sounds of the main gate opening. He moved back into the water without making a sound and hid himself beneath an overhanging shrub. He would need to wait for just the right opportunity. Luckily, he didn't have to wait for long.

Slaves came and went over the next hour, mostly women, and

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mostly in groups. It was difficult to wait, to know that every minute that passed might be one too late. But Alayna had trained him well and he forced himself to be still and patient and cleared his mind of everything but the task at hand. If he started to doubt his plan now, it would surely fail. He could see Alayna's patient smile as she consoled him after an unsuccessful hunt when he was a boy. He'd always had a hard time waiting, always moved too soon and startled his prey before the time was right. She had worked with him, long and hard, on control and timing, and that training had paid off many times over the years. Now, it was nearly second nature and would pay off once again.

Donovan spotted a man heading his way, carrying two water buckets. The man approached the creek slightly downstream from where Donovan hid and carefully made his way down to the water line, turned his back on Donovan and stooped to fill his buckets. When he straightened, Donovan was there, behind him, and quickly clamped his hand over the man's mouth.

Gradually, the startled slave ceased struggling and trying to yell, and Donovan spoke to him in the human tongue.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" he asked.

The man nodded.

"I'm going to release you," Donovan told him. "I mean you no harm and as long as you cooperate, you will be safe. Do you understand?"

The man nodded again, vigorously, and Donovan slowly released his hold on him. The slave turned toward him and stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"I'm looking for a very important prisoner," he told the man. "I'm here to get her back."

The slave looked around as though expecting more men to appear. "I don't know how you're going to do that by yourself—unless you have some kind of hidden army or something?"

Donovan smiled. "No, it's just me," he answered.

"Well, you'll never get anyone out of here on your own. It can't be done. And even if you did, you're hundreds of leagues from any free towns or settlement. They'd track and hunt you down before you made it three days away. It's impossible to leave here. Believe me, I know. I've tried it before—a few times." The slave looked at him sadly and added, "The best thing for you to do is to disappear back from where you came and forget about rescuing anyone. I would do this before they discover you're here, because if they find you, you'll end up a slave just like me, or worse—dead."

“I’m sorry, friend, but I just can’t do that. I could use the advice of someone with your experience though. What’s the best way for me to get into this camp without being detected?”

“I just gave you my best advice. Leave before you wind up dead!” repeated the slave adamantly.

“And I just told you that I’m not going anywhere. Now, how do I get into this encampment?”

The slave looked at Donovan long and hard, and finally replied, “Well, I know of a way to get out but I don’t know about getting in. Still, it seems to me that where there’s a way out then the same can be said in reverse.”

Donovan frowned at the man, his patience growing thin. “Speak clearly,” he warned. “I don’t like riddles and I don’t understand your meaning.”

“There’s a tunnel that runs underneath the encampment and out into the creek on the southern bank. The warlord had it dug out, secretly, by a small group of slaves. Once it was done, he slaughtered them all and buried their bodies within the tunnel.”

“How do you know about this?” questioned Donovan. “How is it that you are alive to tell about it?”

The slave looked down, the pain of old memories fresh on his face. He glanced around, nervously, and spoke in hushed tones when he told Donovan, “One of the slaves who worked on the tunnel was a good friend of mine. He told me what was going on down there and swore me to secrecy about it. He only worked on it for a couple of days, and then he was killed with the rest of them. Garock would kill me, too, if he suspected that I knew anything about that tunnel.” He paused for a moment as though to collect his thoughts, then looked at Donovan.

“Along the southern bank, there’s an opening to a cave of some sort—that’s the start of the tunnel. The tunnel comes up under the armory. I don’t know any more than that, but that’s likely your best bet for getting inside. The slaves are never allowed on that south side, so you won’t be disturbed.”

“Thank you, my friend. Is there any way I can repay you for your kindness?”

The slave grinned, showing his black and yellow, broken teeth. “There’s nothing you can do to help me,” he answered, “except, forget you ever saw me when they capture you. No point getting us both killed.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” joked Donovan. “I have no intention of getting captured, but if I do, you’ve got a deal. Be safe,

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and may the blessings of the Elders shine down upon you.”

The slave looked puzzled and said, “I doubt the Elven Elders would notice a lowly human slave like me, let alone shine down any blessings on me.”

“The Elven Elders were wise enough to know that we all have our roles to play in this world. I think no matter how desperate the situation or how unlikely it may seem, if you look to them, they will reach for you.” And with that, Donovan turned and headed across the creek, heading for the south side of the encampment.

Chapter Eight



Donovan worked his way south along the creek, searching for any sign of the cave opening. He pushed aside marsh grasses and water-strewn branches along the creek banks, not really certain of what he was looking for, but with an eye out for anything that might reveal a hidden entrance. He hoped he would not disturb any poisonous snakes in the reeds, or worse, alert the guards at the encampment. Mostly, he hoped he wasn't wasting his time on a futile search. It was possible, after all, that the slave had fed him a story and that there was no tunnel. But...something about the man had seemed trustworthy. He'd have to go with his instinct and hope he hadn't been duped.

The creek banks became steeper as the wide, deep stream meandered nearer to the encampment. At one particularly steep incline, Donovan suddenly noticed an odd crescent shape in the muddy bank. Had he not been looking specifically, he would have walked right past it, thinking it nothing more than a pattern in the soil from a recent rise in the water level. But something about it caught his attention and he waded over for a closer look. Sure enough, a closer inspection revealed half-submerged boards of wood supporting and covering a rough archway. The whole structure had been covered in mud in an attempt to disguise the presence of whatever lay behind.

Donovan felt around the board structure and noticed a cool draft coming from between the wood planks. This had to be some sort of entrance! Donovan pulled the dagger from its strap on his leg, and began to pry the iron nails from the boards with determined strength.

Moments later, he pulled the first board free and peered into the darkness. He was right. The morning light revealed a low, shallow opening—a cave of sorts—and, at the back, a tunnel, half submerged in water, running deep into the embankment. He pulled another plank free and could see that the tunnel was supported by wooden beams and planks along the top and sides, and that it was very low and narrow.

Donovan impatiently yanked two more planks off the entrance and crawled into the cave. The space was dank and cramped and he

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knew this would be a long, uncomfortable exploration. He chuckled, thinking about how hard it would be for Akenji to move his much larger frame through this space and the colorful language the attempt would likely produce. It was no picnic for him, but he was thankful for his more slender build at that moment.

As he moved into the tunnel, crawling through the muddy water, he found himself chuckling again at the thought of high Lord Aden's daughter, who was probably a sheltered, bratty Elven lady, crawling ahead of him in her fine dress on the way back out. The image was so amusing that Donovan laughed out loud. He could see her in his mind, floundering in the mud, hiking up her skirt to free her legs, grimacing, protesting, pouting, but having no choice except to obey him and move forward into the darkness. *Oh, Akenji would have enjoyed this part*, he thought, still smiling.

The smile was long gone three hours later when Donovan finally came to what appeared to be the tunnel's end. The air and the water were cold, making his limbs numb and his teeth chatter. The air was dank and humid and he had been moving through darkness so dense and complete that it came close to unnerving him more than once. His body ached from the cold and from being so long in such a cramped position. The impulse to go back was very strong at times. He put Alayna in his mind and kept her there, hearing her voice urging him on, replaying the scene of her death and using it to motivate himself to keep moving. He had no idea how far this tunnel would go, and time seemed to have lost all meaning. He began to wonder if the princess would even survive such a trip.

Suddenly, the overwhelming smell of decaying flesh filled the narrow passage, and Donovan fought his way forward, struggling for fresh air and light. He thought of what the slave had told him about the men who had built the tunnel being killed and buried within it. He knew he was passing through the burial site now; and, through the darkness, he could sense the presence of the dead all around him—in the water he crawled through, in the walls his shoulders brushed against. It took all of his mental strength to stay calm and keep moving forward.

His relief was great when, suddenly, the walls around him widened and he found himself in a well of sorts, able to stand and stretch. This was, he guessed, the end of the tunnel. He looked up and saw narrow slivers of light shining through what looked to be planked boards above him. *Had anything ever looked so inviting?* he wondered.

Donovan judged the distance to the light above his head to be

roughly fifteen feet. Without a rope, he would have to find a way to climb the sides of the walls. He began to feel around the walls and discovered that the space was rounded, smoothed with mud and sorely lacking in anything that might serve as foot and handholds. He cursed softly. *There has to be a way*, he thought. *I have no intention of going back now!*

Then his hand brushed against something rough. He groped through the darkness until he felt it again and his fingers wrapped firmly around a thick, knotted rope. He held his breath and gave the rope a strong tug. It held. He did it again, throwing all of his weight onto it. Again, it held, and he let out his breath slowly, relieved.

Donovan climbed the rope with relative ease. When he had reached the top, he held his body weight with his feet and felt along the boarded roof of the well with his hands. There was no latch or hinge to indicate a door. The opening had been boarded over. With a sigh, Donovan reached for his dagger. This certainly wasn't turning out to be easy!

After listening carefully for any sign of activity, Donovan slipped his blade between the planks and began working it back and forth like a saw. When he had cut completely through the end of one of the boards, he pushed up with all his strength and felt the nail give loose. Again, he stopped and listened, all senses on alert for danger, but no one came. He eased the board back into position and began working on the one beside it. It took over an hour to lift three boards in that way, giving him just enough space to squeeze through and lift himself out of the tunnel, at last.

The slave had told him that he thought the tunnel came up underneath the armory and, as Donovan looked around now, he saw that the man had been correct. Weapons of nearly every kind lined the walls. He lightly touched the long swords and the spears, then picked up one of the long swords and balanced it in his hand. *This may prove to be very useful*, he thought.

Donovan turned back to the opening in the floor. From above, it was easier to pry the planks free, and within a few minutes he had widened the gap by two more planks. This would make it easier if he had to convince the princess to descend later. He carefully placed the planks back in position and began to investigate the rest of the building.

Torchlight glowed at the far end of the long room and, as he approached, he saw that the torch was positioned near a door. He listened intently. Hearing nothing, he turned the door latch as quietly as he could. The door was not locked and silently swung open under

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his hand, revealing a hallway with torches set about every ten feet along the right wall.

With his newly acquired long sword in one hand and his dagger at the ready in the other, Donovan moved cautiously down the hall until he reached the end. Here, it split in a T-intersection, and from the left, the voices of two soldiers drifted to him, clear and close. Donovan moved into the shadowy right entrance and listened.

At first the men chatted and laughed over recent conquests of an intimate nature, but soon the conversation grew more serious, and Donovan listened intently, hoping for something that would help him decide his next move.

"I'll be glad when the new shift comes to relieve us. It's pointless to guard the armory now that we have way more weapons than we do men to use them, thanks to our fearless leader getting so many of us killed," growled one of the soldiers sarcastically.

"Quiet," warned the other. "If Garock heard you talking like that, he'd hang you upside down naked and skin you with a hot knife like he did that last guy."

"Don't remind me," answered the first soldier. "It took me a week to get the smell of burnt flesh out of my nose. It was disgusting. I wanted to walk away from it after about five seconds, but he actually made the whole army stay and watch it all."

"Ya, poor bugger. Tough way to go."

After a long silence, one of the men began to speak again. "Have you had a chance to get a look at that Elven prisoner we got from the last raid?"

"You get caught lookin' at that one, and you'll be hung up for sure. But, yes, when she was first brought in, I saw her. She's a real looker!"

The first guard laughed and replied, "She had better be, considering the losses we took getting her here."

"I've heard that she's a princess of the Wood Elves," said the second soldier. "We ought to be able to ransom her back for at least her weight in gold."

The first guard snorted. "You can forget that notion. Garock is pretty worried about the suppliers. Chances are, he'll probably offer her to them to save his own skin."

"That's a shame. The money she would've brought in would've of made the raid all worthwhile. And she is a beauty. I wouldn't mind having a turn at her myself," laughed the other guard.

The first soldier joined in the laughter and said, "It'd be a nice change from the useless whores we have around here. They just lay

there like corpses. It's no fun when they're not afraid anymore. I'll bet that princess has still got plenty of fight in her!"

"I know what you mean," agreed the second man, "but we couldn't get near her, even if we dared to disobey Garock's orders. He's got her locked up so tight in the main building that it's hard to get as much as a glimpse of her, let alone getting a chance to work some of that devilish charm you're so well known for."

The first guard laughed again and said, "Well, the ladies do love a man who knows what he wants."

Donovan frowned. So Garock was not going to ransom the princess back to pay off his suppliers. If he handed her over directly to the Shadow Elves, as it seemed that he was planning, then the princess' chances of survival were much slimmer. The Shadow Elves would likely not bother with her ransom. They would keep her as a political hostage until her usefulness ran out. After that, only the Elders knew what would happen to her. The Shadow Elves were not known for releasing prisoners.

Donovan knew that he had to work quickly. He was pleased to hear that the princess was still there and that he was not too late. But there was no telling when Garock's suppliers would come to collect. He needed to find some way of making it to the main facility where she was being held prisoner and hole up until darkness.



Princess Brandela stared at the locked door of her prison, wishing, more than anything at that moment, for a chance to get out and stretch her legs. It had been months since she had last seen her homeland and she really missed her people, especially her mother. The whole coming-of-age ceremony seemed like a strange nightmare; she could hardly believe the way things turned out. She had been disbelieving at first, then terrified. But as the weeks had gone by, and no real harm had come to her, her fear had turned to watchfulness and planning. She had no idea what the Barbarians were planning to do with her, but she knew she would need to call on all of her strengths to survive this ordeal. She was young and fragile in appearance, but she had over eighty years of training behind her and she would not go down without a fight. For now, all she could do was stay observant and bide her time.

The bruises on her face had healed, and the long daily marches, which had been so exhausting at first, had eventually served to make her stronger. She had feared the men at first, but to her surprise,

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they didn't touch or harass her at all. In fact, most of them seemed to go out of their way to avoid even looking at her. She thought that strange, considering all of the stories she had heard as a child about the nomadic slavers living in the Wildlands. It made her nervous, wondering just what, or who, she was being saved for.

Or, perhaps it was simply because she was a princess, she reasoned. She knew enough about politics to know that members of the royal family were sometimes kidnapped and held for enormous ransoms. Maybe they would ransom her. Maybe that's why her father hadn't sent an army outside of the forest to rescue her. He was waiting and would pay whatever he must to get her back. This was just another test to get through. She told herself these hopeful tales over and over each day; sometimes they were all that she had to comfort herself.

All of Brandela's life had felt like a test to her. Being judged on the standards of the high princesses was a way of life for her. Whenever she had failed to live up to these standards, her mother, Lady Alousia, would correct her with critical remarks, such as, "The Barbarian women in the Wildlands are likely more elegant and refined than you." She was constantly reminding Brandela, "You must always strive to do your best. As a high princess of the House of Oendale, you will always be judged by a different standard than others. It is not enough for you to do well at what you attempt; you must be the best at everything you do."

Brandela had tried her hardest, in the social arts, in magical studies, and in the political arts, but she always felt inadequate, especially when compared to her two brothers and six sisters. She prayed now that something of that training would help her somehow. She was slowly losing hope of being rescued. It might come down to her own cunning and skill in the end. She couldn't help but wonder if she would have what she needed when the opportunity came.

How much of a ransom would they demand for her, she wondered. How much would her father be willing to pay? The question disturbed her. Surely, he would be willing to pay anything or do anything to get her back. But he hadn't come after her. He had sent no army. Were they even missing her? Was she so important to them? Her mother hadn't come to her coming-of-age ceremony. Her father had left her in the hands of the Barbarians. She fought these thoughts of doubt, but they always crept back to her, insidious and painful.

Within Elven family units of the nobility, the youngest children are considered political pawns, used to strengthen alliances and

forge new ones with potential foes. She knew it was an important role that she held within her family, but was it important enough? It was based mainly around arranged marriages and bonding rituals, and she had always questioned the custom. Perhaps her protests had made her too risky and not worth the bother of getting back. Self-doubt plagued her every waking moment, and she turned her thoughts, now, to marriage—one of the highest goals of an Elven female—to try to lighten her spirits.

She knew that if she ever made it back to her people she would be forced into an arranged marriage. *A ransom of a different kind*, she thought wryly.

“Force” was not exactly accurate within Elven customs and culture, as it was impossible to force an unwilling participant to take part in the bonding spell. Brandela didn’t know the specifics of it, but she knew it had something to do with the heart of both participants. The bonding spell could be forcefully activated using rune crystal artifacts, but not forcefully applied. That came only with a willing supplicant, which was how most Elven households of the nobility operated when dealing with marriage. The bonding spells would be activated on both the male and female and they would be expected to do their part by willingly embracing each other and sealing the bond. It was not necessary for them to know each other, for once the bonding spell had taken effect, all desire to know others would disappear and they were left with the desire to know only their mate.

Brandela understood that even if she did not know her future husband, once the bonding spell had been activated and accepted, she would find herself deeply and emotionally committed to her chosen mate. Brandela had questioned her mother about this practice repeatedly. “Shouldn’t love be a matter of free choice and free will?” she had insisted.

Her mother had laughed at her naïve thoughts and had tried to guide her to a wiser path. “Child, whether you believe it is free will or slavery, it is all merely personal perception that separates the two. After all, is the person that says they freely choose because of an emotional impulse really superior to the person who makes a logical, sound choice based on reason, intellect, and guidance? Of course not. More often, the opposite is true. It is when we stray from the path of reason and intellect that questionable choices are made. No matter how the decision comes about, it becomes the participant’s responsibility to work through the inevitable difficulties that will arise throughout a bonded pair’s life journey, and the reasoning

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partner will almost always be better able to deal with these issues than his emotional counterpart. “

Her mother’s words made sense, but still something kept Brandela from buying in completely. During her studies, she had come across research that told of how the Elven Elders had once married amongst each other, but rarely used the rune crystals to forcefully activate the bonding spell. Brandela had not fully comprehended the accounts then, and she wasn’t sure she understood them even now, but they had drawn her and made her wonder if things could be different.

The account had spoken about how the bonding spell was supposed to work naturally—that when two willing participant’s hearts cried out to one another, the bond would seal naturally and was much more powerful than when activated by force. What did that mean, though? Did hearts really cry out for each other? And was her mother right—was a bond based on intellect better than an emotional bond of the heart?

She had given up on her sweet, romantic notions long ago, accepting her mother’s more practical approach as she had grown older and seen the limits of an Elven lifetime. Marriage amongst the nobility was not about emotional fondness, after all, but was used to form proper political alliances and unions, and to strengthen and stabilize society in general. There was a part of her, though, that still liked the idea of finding that someone whose heart cried out for hers, and she wondered if she’d ever have the chance to find him before a mate was chosen for her.

Brandela was drawn from her daydream by the click of the lock. Someone was coming in. It would most likely be the guard who brought her all of her meals, but she rose and watched, alert and tense, as the lock turned and the door swung open. It was the usual guard—a large, ugly man—who came in and leered at her while speaking to her in the strange human tongue that was commonly spoken throughout the Wildlands. She mentally reprimanded herself for not including this language as part of her early studies. Most of the Wood Elven houses did not negotiate or engage in diplomacy with any non-Elves, and on the rare occasion that they did, it was easy enough to find a translator among the lower classes.

Brandela may not have understood his words, but his tone and his vulgar grin made his message clear enough. She felt exposed and naked when he looked at her like that and more vulnerable than she had ever felt in her life. Nothing in her previous experiences

equipped her to know what he wanted, exactly, or how she could best protect herself, but instinct told her that the man did not have good intentions and was not to be trusted. In the Wood Elven kingdom, it was considered a serious crime for a commoner to make unwanted advances toward someone of the nobility, and in her sheltered world, she had never had to deal with the problem before now. No one from her people would ever dare such a transgression because to do so would mean their death.

The guard stepped toward her, and she moved away, frowning and shaking her head vigorously. The ugly soldier stopped, glanced over his shoulder quickly, then turned his eyes back on her. He glowered at her, frustrated and angry, and then purposely dropped her bowl of food on the ground and walked away.

Brandela sighed with relief and knelt to gather the precious morsels of food. *I need to get out of here*, she thought, *before that creature chooses to disregard whatever order is restraining him altogether*. Because once she wasn't able to stop him anymore, only the Elven Elders knew what might happen!

Chapter Nine



Donovan had to wait almost two more hours before the chance arose for him to get out of the armory building. When the new guards finally came to replace the previous ones, the four of them stood outside in the yard for a long while, chatting. Donovan darted across the entrance and into the left passageway. When he was sure no one had spotted him, he dashed to a doorway at the end of the long hall, seized the knob, and tried it. To his utter surprise, it turned easily and the door opened.

Donovan found himself standing in the midst of a food storage room. His stomach lurched alarmingly at the sight of dried and salted meat, bins of grain, a basket of some sort of squash that must have come from a recent raid, and—was it really there? A rack of freshly baked flat bread made of coarsely ground flour, probably waiting to be served to the soldiers at the evening meal. It had been many hours since his last meal, and the sight of all this food made him weak with hunger.

Donovan devoured two of the small loaves and stashed two more in the deep, damp pocket of his dark green Ranger tunic, along with several thin slices of smoked wild boar. He chewed on one of these as he inspected the room more closely and decided his next move.

On a wall at the farthest end of the room, he discovered a boarded-up window. Once again, his dagger served duty as a prying tool, and he carefully removed one of the planks, wincing as one of the nails groaned as it pulled loose. He froze, listening tensely for the sound of footsteps coming down the hall, but his luck held and no one came. He peered through the opening and saw that the window faced away from the main courtyard, toward the back of the building. There was no sign of movement and plenty of other buildings close by that he could use for cover.

He quickly removed two more planks from the window and lifted himself onto the ledge. It was a short jump to the ground, then just a few strides to the back of the building and an alleyway that led away from the armory. Moving cautiously and silently, he headed

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down the alley and past several small buildings.

He soon came upon a side room with an opened door. Donovan peeked around the door frame and saw an old woman washing laundry. He walked into the room and closed the door behind him. The old woman stopped her work and turned to face him.

“Who are you?” she asked, staring at him curiously. Her lack of fear surprised him.

“I am a friend,” he answered in a reassuring tone. “I mean you no harm. I’ve only come seeking clothing to wear.”

The old woman regarded his Ranger attire and nodded slowly. She looked him in the eye for a long moment, then shrugged and said, “Take your pick. There are plenty of uniforms here that would fit you.” She rummaged through a heap of dirty clothes that she had been about to wash and pulled out a pair of leather pants and a black wool shirt—the clothing Donovan had seen the soldiers wearing.

Donovan took the clothing and, turning his back to the old woman with a sheepish smile, he quickly shed his Ranger clothing and changed into the new outfit. He transferred the stolen food to the new clothes and made sure his knife was secure and hidden behind his back.

He turned back to the woman. “I would ask that you not speak of what happened here,” he said, his voice carrying both plea and warning.

The old woman shrugged again and nodded without looking up. “It’s not my affair who you are and what you’re up to.”

He stood watching her for a long moment as she bent over her back-breaking work. He knew he could trust her. He removed his leaf-shaped, golden pendant from his discarded cloak and placed it in the old woman’s work-worn hands.

“Thank you for your help,” he said softly.

The woman looked at the gift in her hand and then up at him. Her shocked expression soon gave way to a broad, toothless smile, and Donovan smiled back, positive that he had ensured her silence.

He strode out of the door and followed the alley until it met the inner perimeter of the wall. He casually climbed one of the platforms, as though he belonged there amongst the enemy soldiers. From the platform, he could see the layout of the camp. The largest building, which he assumed was the main facility, lay almost dead center and not far from where he stood. He climbed back down and walked nonchalantly in that direction. He passed a few guards on the way to the main facility, but no one seemed to notice or care that they didn’t recognize him.

When Donovan reached the main facility, he made his way to the back of the building and slipped through a doorway without being seen. Immediately inside the door, to the right, was a narrow stairway leading down to another door. Donovan headed down the stairs and tried the latch but found it was locked, so he took out his dagger and slid it into the space where the door met the wall. He slid his blade all the way in and began lifting upwards and soon felt the dagger catch hold of a piece of wood that was placed behind the door frame. He lifted the wood until it leaned off his blade and fell to the floor.

Donovan opened the door and found that he was in a storage facility of some sort. Wooden barrels were stacked on top of each other, and the strong smell of alcohol filled the dark space. At the other side of the room, Donovan noticed another set of stairs leading up. He closed the door and replaced the wooden latch before making his way, blindly, toward the other staircase.

He followed the stairs up, opened the door to take a quick look around and saw that the door came out onto a hallway with several other doors leading off of it. These doors were solid except for a narrow flap at the bottom, and each bore heavy hinges and locks. *A prison?* Donovan wondered. This could be it. With some kind of luck, he may have found exactly what he was looking for.

Donovan headed back down the stairs and into the storage room again. This would be a perfect place to hide until nightfall. He moved a few of the barrels around to make a well-hidden space, then settled himself with his back against a wall. Fatigue overtook him quickly. He thought about pulling a morsel of the stolen food from his pocket, but sleep was pulling him away before he could make his hands move. He had been trained all of his life to rest when and where he could, no matter how uncomfortable, and this was as good a place as any. Within minutes, he was out!

Donovan wasn't sure how long he'd slept when the sounds of someone moving one of the alcohol barrels woke him. He instinctively reached for his dagger, but the soldier was on the far side of the room and completely unaware of his presence, so Donovan waited, still as a mouse, until the man had rolled the barrel out and closed the door again. *Was it supertime or was the barrel meant for late night carousers?* he wondered. With no windows, it was impossible to guess. Still, people were out and about, so it wasn't time to make a move yet.

Donovan stretched his arms and legs and pulled a strip of cured meat from his pocket. He chewed slowly, savoring the smoky flavor

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and thinking about the hearty meals Alayna had always managed to supply her army of growing boys. They had worked hard for every meal, but they had, somehow, never gone hungry. He raised his strip of meat skyward, as though giving a toast, and whispered, "Thank you, Alayna. There will be justice. I promise!"

For the next few hours, Donovan drifted in and out of a dreamless sleep. The scurrying and gnawing sounds of mice woke him off and on, but a stomp of his foot sent them back to their hiding places. There were no further visits from the soldiers.

The early morning hours had settled over the encampment by the time Donovan finally stood and stretched his stiff muscles and moved toward the staircase again. He eased the door open, alert to any sounds, and slipped into the hallway, Elven dagger in hand.

Walking as quietly as possible, he checked each door and was surprised to find them all unlocked. The rooms were empty.

He came to an intersection where the main hallway crossed the hallway he was in. He stopped and looked left and then right. A snoring guard leaned against the wall to the right. Donovan crossed the intersection, keeping a close eye on the sleeping guard, and followed the hallway further, testing doorways as he went.

Near the end of the hall, he came upon another set of stairs leading up. At the top, he found himself in yet another hallway, and another intersection. The hallway to the left was dimly lit by torchlight, and when he peered around the corner, he saw a guard sitting before a large, sturdy doorway. The guard was struggling to stay awake, his head nodding occasionally before snapping up again. There would be no sneaking past this one! Donovan decided that a direct approach would be a better option this time.

Donovan strolled into the hallway as though he was supposed to be there and walked straight toward the guard. The guard stood immediately and Donovan began to whistle and smile to ease the man's wariness. The guard did not smile back.

"State your business," he demanded. "No one is allowed near the prisoner."

Donovan walked right up to the guard, smiling. He knew he had found the right place. "I'm supposed to be here, friend," he said, a trace of humor in his tone.

The guard put a hand on the hilt of his long sword. "I have orders saying that no one is to come near the prisoner's room without direct orders from Garock."

Donovan placed his left hand over the guard's sword hand and pulled out his Elven dagger with his right. "I don't take orders

from Garock,” he growled before slicing into the guard’s throat. He caught the guard and propped him against the wall, on the stool. He unbuckled the belt that held the guard’s long sword and strapped it around his own waist, then grabbed the keys and blew out the torch. He hesitated outside the door for just a moment. He knew how to deal with guards and soldiers. A frightened woman might prove to be considerably more challenging! He slowly turned the key in the lock, opened the door and walked inside.

The click of the lock awoke Brandela, and she was on her feet immediately, wary that the guard who brought her food twice a day had come for an unscheduled visit. He had never come this late at night before. She noticed the unusual lack of torchlight and began to think that her fears of the ugly man were justified. It seemed he was going to take what he wanted, as she had suspected he would eventually try.

Brandela frantically felt around for some sort of weapon she could use against him. All she could find was her bowl. She grabbed it and crouched in the corner. The door opened and the black silhouette of a large man filled the doorway. She wondered if she could somehow run past him before he noticed her. She was trembling so hard she wasn’t sure if she could run at all.

Then a voice came through the darkness, low and surprisingly gentle. Brandela felt herself calming as the voice washed over her. The voice seemed to caress some part inside of her and she welcomed its embrace. A shiver ran up her spine and her heart and breath sped up. The reaction surprised and confused Brandela. She had never felt that way before. This was not the ugly guard, but some other force to be reckoned with. She pressed deeper into her corner, silent and wary.



Escape



Chapter Ten



The voice whispered into the gloom of her cell, and into her core, once more. She held her breath, unsure if this foreign feeling, or this man who caused it, could be trusted. But then the words came again, this time not in the human language, but in the Elven tongue.

“Princess Brandela, of the House of Oendale, do not fear. I have come to help. I have come to rescue you.”

Brandela gasped. Who was this man who knew her language and her name? Had her father finally sent someone to free her? Or was this a trick?

“Who are you?” she demanded, despising the quiver that she could not keep from her voice. “How is it that you can speak my language? I don’t recall any of the soldiers being able to speak Elven.”

Donovan smiled. He knew from the sound of that frightened, regal voice that he had definitely found who he was looking for.

“It does not matter how I come to speak your tongue. That can all be explained later. All that matters now is that I have found you and we must escape. We don’t have much time. They will soon discover one of their dead comrades and the fact that you are missing.”

Brandela’s voice was cautious and hesitant when she asked, “You...you killed someone?”

“Yes, Princess, the guard at the entrance to your cell.”

Brandela was silent for a long moment before asking, “How do I know you speak the truth? My father would likely wait for a ransom demand before sending his men. Has a ransom demand been made then?”

Donovan struggled to keep the impatience from his voice when he answered her. “That has nothing to do with why I’m here, and with all due respect, Princess, if you stay here, you won’t be ransomed off. I have overheard some of the guards saying that Garock is planning to give you directly to his suppliers, which appear to be Shadow Elves. If this is true, you will likely never see your family again, if you survive at all.”

“That is troubling news,” answered Brandela thoughtfully. “I didn’t realize they were in league with Shadow Elves. My father

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will have to be told of this.”

Donovan sighed. “We will be telling high Lord Aden nothing unless we get you out of here. We really must hurry, Princess.”

“Then you do know my father?” Brandela asked, stepping forward eagerly. “How do you know him? Did he send you? That would be odd, for he has a strong distaste for humans.”

Donovan rolled his eyes in the darkness and did not even try to hide his irritation this time. “Look, I’ll explain everything to you later, after we’ve made it out of here in one piece. Right now, we don’t have time for idle chitchat. We have to go, now!” He grabbed her hand and led her into the darkened hallway. Brandela, taken aback by his sudden forcefulness, followed without further protest.

As they hurried down the hallway and down the stairs, Brandela noticed a warm tingling in the hand that was held in this strange man’s grip. It was a pleasant, safe feeling and she was almost sorry when they came to the lower floor intersection and Donovan let go of her to check if the guard was still asleep.

Donovan led the way down the stairs to the storage room and then gave her the Elven hand signal to wait while he checked the door on the far side to make sure it was clear. Brandela thought it very strange indeed that this man knew the Elven hand signals. The signals were only taught to Elven scouts, and the only reason she knew some of them was because she had thought it would be interesting to learn them when she was younger. The man was becoming a greater mystery by the moment.

Donovan found that the way was clear, so he returned to the princess, grabbed her hand again, led her out the door, and began running with her for the alleyway. When they reached the alley, Donovan pulled the princess into the shadows and listened intently for any sign that they were being followed. The alley and the surrounding buildings were silent. They moved into the moonlit alley once more and began traveling quickly.

Donovan stopped suddenly, next to one of the small buildings, and surprised Brandela by laughing out loud. She followed his gaze and saw a mound of clothing on the side of their path—a clean, folded pile of hunter-green garments. She looked up at him, puzzled by his mirth, and he grinned at her.

“The old lady,” he whispered, as though that should have been enough to explain things.

Donovan picked up the pile and held them out to Brandela. “Put these on,” he commanded, and she could see he wasn’t kidding.

Brandela held the pants in front of her. They were far too large.

She started to protest but Donovan quickly cut her off. “Put them on,” he insisted. “We won’t get far with you in that fancy gown of yours. You’ll need to be able to move fast and keep up with me. We’ll belt them up and roll the pant legs. Don’t worry about how they fit. Just put them on!”

Brandela looked around nervously. “There’s no place to change,” she protested. She looked up at him with her remarkably beautiful bluish-green eyes shining in the moonlight, silently pleading that he not make her do this. For a moment, Donovan’s breath caught. Those eyes...

He caught himself and raised his eyebrows in a gesture she would soon come to recognize as an amusement that never seemed far from Donovan’s surface. He grinned slightly, looked around, and shrugged. “Yeah, it kinda looks that way,” he said.

She frowned and he added, more seriously, “Princess, believe me, if there was another way I would use it, but there’s no time. I’ll turn my back. I promise not to look.”

Brandela moved into the shadow of the building and began to change. In a clipped, frustrated tone, she said, “I just hope you are an honorable person.”

Donovan chuckled. “Rest assured, Princess, your virtue is quite safe with me. I am not interested in some skinny, little, noble Elf who comes from a family that thinks Elves are the only honorable beings in this world.”

Donovan’s words made Brandela frown. There was an element of truth in what he said, and yet she felt somehow stung, as though he had slapped her. Were non-Elven beings capable of being honorable? Was this man? It wasn’t that she didn’t believe it...she’d simply never considered it before now. She glanced over her shoulder at Donovan, who leaned against a wall patiently, not peeking, and confusion washed over her again. She didn’t want him to look at her but at the same time she sort of wanted him to want to look at her.

As she struggled to adjust the oversized clothing, she struggled, too, with her own confused emotions. What kind of power did this man have to make her feel so...so strange? No man had ever spoken so bluntly to her before, and she wasn’t sure how to respond. He commanded her as though she was a child, and yet she felt no desire to resist him. Brandela sighed. She wasn’t making any sense. Nothing in her past experiences could help her understand the effect he had on her.

She smiled slightly, despite her awkward situation. He was rather handsome, with his raven black hair, light brown eyes, strong

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cheekbones and solid chin, and he had been sent by her father to rescue her. There was something a little thrilling about it all.

She turned to face him and hesitated for a moment, taking in his lanky, muscular frame before speaking. "I'm done. You can turn around now."

Donovan turned and looked at her appraisingly. She could not meet his eyes and he chuckled at her embarrassment. The pants hung, baggy, around her legs, and the shirt fell almost to her knees. Donovan nodded and smiled. There was something so endearing about her, especially as she stood there, blushing self-consciously. She almost looked like a small child—except for her long legs and her extremely feminine features. Donovan shook his head, resisting these thoughts. He could not afford to be distracted right now!

"That's much better," he said, then grabbed her hand and retraced his route back to the window of the food storage room. He was pleased to find that it had not been discovered and boarded back over. He peered inside, alert for any sign of activity, then hopped up onto the ledge. He quickly lifted the princess up beside him, surprised by her light weight, then turned and jumped down into the room. Gripping her waist, he lifted her down and felt a quickening of his heartbeat as he smelled her unique scent. It was odd that she should smell so good after her long confinement.

As he set her down, his own face burned hot and it was he who was finding it hard to look directly at her. He cleared his throat and said, gruffly, "Wait here."

Brandela nodded, too breathless to speak. In those few moments that she'd been in his arms, she had felt an overwhelming sensation of longing. She wondered, again, what was wrong with her.

Donovan made his way into the hallway of the armory. Two guards were stationed, as before, at the main entrance. They were talking to each other and sat on their stools, splay-legged and relaxed, backs against the wall.

Donovan entered the hallway and walked quickly and quietly toward them. He was only a few feet away when they finally noticed him and jumped up, reaching for their swords. Donovan rushed them and knocked one of the guards back into the other, causing the hit man to stumble and fall. Donovan rammed his Elven dagger into the first guard's heart as he landed on him, and scrambled back to his feet to face the fallen guard. Before the guard could regain his footing, Donovan pulled his long sword and launched a well-aimed thrust into the second guard's throat. The guard clutched his throat, gasping for air and trying to stem the flow of blood that was pouring

from his wound. Donovan waited until he had stopped breathing.

Brandela watched as Donovan dragged the two bodies into the food storage room. She was impressed by his fighting abilities. He had nullified both guards so quickly and efficiently. She waited until he motioned for her to come to him, which she did at once.

He guided her down the hall and through a long back room, then stopped to examine the floor. He found the spot quickly and pried up several of the floorboards, revealing a deep, well-like structure.

Donovan straightened and looked hard at the princess, and she understood that this was not the time to protest or complain. There was no playful amusement in his eyes now, and she knew this was the time she had been imagining during all those long days of captivity. She would need to find some hidden strength, some mental space that would help her get through this. She returned his look with determination and asked, "What do I do?"

"There is a knotted rope hanging on that left side. Grab it and use it to lower yourself to the bottom. I'll wait until you're clear and then I'll follow."

Brandela nodded and, taking a deep breath, knelt, and felt for the rope. Donovan helped her ease into the hole and she worked her way down to the well floor. Donovan followed once she was clear, pausing at the top to pull the floorboards back into place, hoping to disguise their route, at least for a while. The darkness was a shock after the moonlit night outside, and when he finally reached the bottom and felt for Brandela's position, her hand trembled in his.

"We will be traveling through a tunnel," he told her. "It's low and wet and, at times, very smelly. We'll have to crawl most of the way. You will go ahead of me and you must keep moving. I'll be right behind you the whole way, and I promise, we will get out of this."

She said nothing, but allowed him to guide her to the entrance of the tunnel. She knelt where he showed her and was instantly hit with a gust of putrid air. She pulled back, fighting a strong wave of nausea. When it had passed, she lowered herself again to her hands and knees in the mud and slime and forced herself, stoically, into the blackness of the tunnel.

Donovan was surprised and impressed by her determination and willingness to endure these conditions without a fuss. He had expected this to be the hardest part. As he moved into the tunnel behind her, he had to admit a grudging respect for her fortitude.

Chapter Eleven



Brandela moved steadily through the dark, wet tunnel, acutely aware of Donovan's presence behind her. Part of her was comforted, knowing he was with her and expecting her to keep moving. Sometimes that expectation was all that kept her moving. Alone, she knew, this coldness and darkness and dampness would be a much greater challenge. But a part of her was strangely uncomfortable, knowing that he was in such close proximity to her backside. This part of her was thankful for the darkness.

Suddenly, something slimy wiggled beneath one of her palms and she stopped and jerked her hands back with a gasp. Donovan, unable to see that she had stopped, bumped his head into Brandela's backside by accident, sending her forward over the unseen creature again. Brandela let out a most undignified squeal and scrambled forward several feet in a state of panic, before stopping and getting control of herself.

"I'm sorry, Princess. I'm truly sorry. I didn't know you had stopped. Are you all right?" Donovan could hear Brandela's rapid breathing up ahead, but she didn't speak. She hadn't made a sound since they'd started, in fact. Was it fear that was keeping her quiet, or the humiliation of her situation, or just simple concentration, he wondered. *It would be a little humiliating, from a princess' perspective, to have a strange man's head ram you in the behind,* he thought. There was a trace of amusement in his voice when he spoke again. "I really am sorry. It was just such an unavoidable target—I'm sorry."

Brandela, now recovered from her scare from the creature, was too shocked and mortified to reply. This man had actually touched her backside and was now joking about it! Accident or no accident, it just wasn't done to a Wood Elven princess, and he had no right to sound so amused about it, either! She was angry and embarrassed, but could not think of a thing to say to him. So, as well as she could manage in the confines of the tunnel, she lifted her chin, renewed her resolve, and started moving forward through the tunnel once again. It was still dark outside when they finally made their way out of

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the tunnel and onto the bank of the creek. They were both exhausted and shivering with the damp cold, but Donovan knew they couldn't rest for long. It would be daybreak soon and it wouldn't be long before Garock's soldiers discovered that their prisoner had escaped.

"Wait here and be very quiet," Donovan instructed Brandela, settling her behind a cluster of low shrubs. "Do not leave or call out for any reason. Do you understand?"

Brandela nodded and lowered herself to her grassy resting place. Her limbs were numb and aching. Staying in this spot seemed like the perfect idea.

Donovan left her there and went to retrieve his weapons and supplies. As he worked, he began to plan their escape. Garock would most likely assume that Brandela would attempt to get back to the Wood Elven forest, so he would probably send his soldiers to cut off any northern flight first. The best thing for he and Brandela to do, then, was to follow the creek further south for a couple of leagues, staying off the banks so the soldiers would find no footprints near the encampment that could help them track her. This would only buy them a little time, but every little bit counted.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when he returned to where he had left the princess. Her eyes were closed and she looked so peaceful that he was loath to wake her, but they had to get moving, so he gently called her name. Instantly, she was on her feet, wary and confused. The months she had spent as a prisoner had obviously sharpened her instincts.

"It's all right, Princess," Donovan soothed. "We must leave, though. It's back into the water we go, I'm afraid."

She looked at him through the semi-darkness and he could see her relax, trusting him, willing to follow. He reached for her hand and guided her back into the creek, then left her for a moment to cover any tracks they had made.

They waded, swam, and floated in the creek's waters for the next few hours, letting the stream carry them south for about two leagues. From there, they left the water and headed eastward, which Donovan knew would be the best way for them to avoid any of the pursuing soldiers. It would mean traveling for almost six months until they came to the Kshearry River, then making their way north again to the forest. Hopefully, by the time they were in the north country again, their pursuers would have given up—or better yet, be dead at the hands of the Shadow Elves.

Donovan sighed as he thought of the long journey ahead of them. "Princess Brandela," he started, about to tell her of his plan,

but he was stopped short. She turned to face him just as the sun broke the horizon behind her, casting her in radiant, golden glow. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life.

Donovan, caught off guard by her stunning beauty, completely forgot what he was going to say and stood, simply staring at Brandela.

Unaware of his turmoil, Brandela looked back at him, puzzled, then became increasingly self-conscious as he continued to gaze at her. She was suddenly, painfully, aware of her damp and rumpled, oversized clothes, her unwashed face and wild, tangled hair. She blushed and looked down, sure that he must consider her quite hideous.

She has no idea how beautiful she is, Donovan thought with amazement as he watched her fidget nervously and blush under his stare.

Finally, Donovan remembered himself and looked away, clearing his throat. "We'll continue heading east," he told her, and explained their route and his reasons for choosing this way back to the Wood Elven forest. "The journey will be long and difficult at times," he added. "I've estimated that it could take us almost nine months to get back, if we don't run into serious problems."

Brandela's eyes widened slightly at this news, but she could not fault his logic or reasoning.

"I am willing to put my trust in you, but I have one request," she said.

Donovan frowned. It would be difficult for him to get things for her right now. What could she possibly want? "If I can fulfill your request, I will," he offered.

"I would like to know your name," she answered, gently.

Donovan looked startled for a moment, then laughed out loud. "I apologize, Princess. I've known your name all along, but in all the urgency to get you away from Garock, I never thought to offer mine. I am Donovan, at your service."

Brandela smiled. "Thank you, Donovan, for getting me out of there. I shall make sure that my father rewards you generously."

Donovan's smile faded and he looked away. He would tell her the real story after they'd put some distance between them and their pursuers. Right now, she was tired and he needed her remaining energy focused on their journey. There would be time for confessions later! Now, he faced east and began walking again.

About the time that Donovan and Brandela began their eastward journey, Garock was being awakened by the persistent knock-

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ing of one of his men at his door. He removed the slender form that was draped over him, rolled over and sat on the side of his bed, groggily. Another loud knock sounded from the door.

"I'm coming. Give me a second," he growled. "This had better be important!" The girl on his bed stirred and gave him a sleepy smile.

"You stay there," Garock ordered. "I'll be back for you later." He smiled unpleasantly. *No time for fun right now*, he thought.

Garock opened the door to find his second-in-command pacing anxiously. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but we have a huge problem. The prisoner has escaped."

"What!" shouted Garock. He had been expecting anything but this.

"As you know, that's the first place I go when I start my inspections in the mornings. When I got there, I found the guard who was stationed to her last night, dead. Right away, I went in to check the prisoner, but the cell was empty."

"She can't be far. We must find her!" ordered Garock.

"I've already started the men searching around the encampment, sir. So far, there's been no trace of her, but the bodies of two more guards were found in the food storage room."

"The princess couldn't have killed those men," reasoned Garock. "She must have had help."

"Yes, sir. I have rounded up the slaves to question them about anything they may have seen, but none of them had any useful information. I then questioned some of the guards to see if they had noticed anything strange or out of the ordinary in the past day or so, and a few of the guards mentioned seeing an unfamiliar soldier. He was in our uniform, so they didn't think much of it at the time. We are still unsure how she managed to escape but I'm betting that the strange soldier had something to do with it. I rounded up all of the men soon after, to see if I could find this soldier, but I found no one new."

Garock frowned and asked, "Where did you say the last two bodies were found?"

"We found the bodies in the food storage room, in the armory building, sir."

Could they have used the tunnel? Garock wondered. He doubted it. He'd been sure to have everyone killed who knew anything about the passage, except a few of his closest soldiers. Still, it was possible...

Garock began to bark out orders. "Get three units together and

send them north. They are to cut off anyone they come across, and if they find tracks, they are to send word back to me immediately and keep following. If they do not find any tracks, they are to continue north until they reach the forest line. They will stop there and await further orders. They are not to enter the forest.”

Garock then took a group of his most trusted men to the south side of the encampment. He inspected the creek banks personally and soon came across what he was looking for. When he saw that the wooden planks over the entrance had been tampered with and pulled down, he cursed. Someone had betrayed him! He would deal with that later; right now, he had to find the princess!

He ordered the soldiers who were with him to follow the creek north for several leagues, searching for tracks along the banks or tracks leading away from the creek. As an afterthought, he gave orders to the men to double back if they found no tracks, and search the creek for a few leagues to the south as well. If they found anything, they were to report to him immediately.

They could not have gotten far, he thought as he watched his men begin working their way north. “Wherever they are, I will find them,” he vowed. His life, and the lives of his men, depended on it! His suppliers were due to be here sometime next month. If he had nothing to present to them, there would be serious trouble. Perhaps he could convince them to extend him more time, but it was doubtful. He thought, not for the first time, that he should never have taken this deal. He never should’ve been stupid enough to deal with the Shadow Elves, and now, because of his lapse in judgment, he and his men would be lucky to survive.

Chapter Twelve



Donovan and Brandela travelled eastward for the rest of that morning without stopping. Their surroundings gradually changed from the scrubby shrubs and coarse grasses that had dominated the area around the encampment, to open fields of long grass and strange, bluish-colored sunflowers. Brandela could not recall seeing any flower quite as beautiful as these back in the Wood Elven kingdom and she was enchanted. *This wouldn't be so bad under different circumstances*, she thought. The world outside the kingdom was really very interesting.

Brandela turned her eyes from the landscape and rested them on Donovan's solid, muscular back. She had been following him for hours, and he had been silent the whole time. He had barely even looked at her. At first, she hadn't thought much about it, but as the morning dragged on, it had started to bother her. Did he find her so distasteful that he could not bear to lay his eyes on her? She frowned and thought testily, *So what? He is only a human. Even if he was interested, nothing could come of it.*

She sighed, fully aware of how foolish she was being right now. They were still in great danger—most likely being chased by a horde of Barbarian soldiers, and all she could think about was whether this human male found her attractive or not. She could feel the heat rise in her cheeks as she thought, shamefully, about the risks he had taken for her, and how terribly shallow she was being. His lack of attention toward her was reasonable, after all. He was focused on getting them safely out of danger. Why should he concern himself over her appearance?

Brandela supposed that she should be focused on their survival as well, but she couldn't help herself at the moment. She had never been alone for so long with a man who was not a direct family member—and no man had made her feel the strange things that this one did. Also, she had never before been this far south. Surely, being in these new surroundings and landscapes, guided by a man she barely knew, had to explain these strange thoughts and feelings. When she got back home amongst her people, things would return

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to normal, she hoped.

A new dress would certainly help me feel a little more like myself, she thought, glancing down at the ill-fitting, uncomfortable clothing that hung from her slender frame. Her strange outfit was the uniform of an Elven Ranger, and yet, in all the months she had travelled with the Barbarians, she could not recall ever having seen another Elven prisoner. She studied Donovan's frame and wondered again, as she had begun to along this morning's journey, if the clothes belonged to him. She would be willing to place a large wager on the fact that they would fit him; they were much too large for the average Elf. But it didn't make sense. He was a human. Why would he have Elven clothing? She decided she would find out tonight, when they stopped to make camp, exactly who this strange human man really was and why he carried Elven weaponry and owned Elven Ranger clothing.

Donovan stopped near a stream around midday and knelt to drink deeply of the clear water there. It took little encouraging for Brandela to do the same. She was parched! Donovan pulled strips of dried deer meat from his supply pouch and handed her one. "It's not much on taste but it will give you energy. Eat up and rest for a few moments. We can only stop for a short time. We'll have to travel hard for the next few days, then we'll get into more heavily travelled areas so our tracks won't be so obvious. If we're lucky and Garock hasn't figured out our route, we should be able to slow the pace a bit then."

Brandela watched his face the whole time he spoke, willing him to look at her, but he did little more than cast her a quick glance before looking away again. Brandela bit her lip with annoyance. She was not accustomed to being ignored this way. Why was he behaving so oddly?

"I understand," she replied, and something in her tone made him glance at her. When he looked away, she could no longer contain herself. "Do you find me so hideous that you can't even look at me for more than a few seconds at a time?"

Donovan, completely taken off guard by the question, looked startled for a moment, then burst into laughter.

Brandela's face flushed with anger and humiliation. Was it not bad enough that he found her so ugly? Must he now also laugh at her? "It was only a simple question," she protested. "I would never have asked it had I realized your manners were so lacking."

When Donovan had regained control of himself, he answered, "Princess, it is not that you're ugly. You are so very un-ugly."

Brandela's delicate brow furrowed. "What do you mean? You are making no sense. Would you prefer me to be ugly?"

"Yes, I would," answered Donovan, honestly.

Brandela bristled, confused and insulted. "Well, I'm sorry that you find me so unsuitable," she huffed, in a clipped tone.

Donovan looked over at the princess, equally confused by her strange behavior. *What had brought this on?* he wondered. Donovan had no experience dealing with women. The only Elven woman he had ever known in his life was Alayna and now she was gone. He sighed and studied Brandela's face. *She's very cute when she's angry*, he thought. He wanted to laugh again at the absurdity of her conclusion that he found her ugly but held it in.

He tried again. "The fact is, Princess, you are extremely beautiful, and your beauty is a distraction for me. It makes it hard for me to concentrate on my tasks; and right now, I need to stay focused. I need to get us safely back home to the Wood Elven kingdom.

Brandela smiled slightly at his compliment and mentally scolded herself about her own vanity. She then turned her thoughts to his final words.

"Get *us* back home to the Wood Elven kingdom?" she repeated. "Are you implying that the kingdom is also your home?"

"Yes, Princess, I have lived there most of my life."

Brandela looked doubtful. "My father is not in the habit of allowing humans asylum within the forest. Quite the opposite, in fact. How am I to believe that you have called the kingdom 'home' for all of your years?"

Donovan smiled and looked away. "He offered asylum once, about ten years ago."

Brandela frowned thoughtfully, thinking back. "Are you referring to the group of young orphans? They were mere children, so it was understandable why they would have been given sanctuary. It was an exception. But, what does that have to do with you?"

"That was ten years ago, Princess," he explained. "I am one of those children that were given sanctuary."

Brandela looked completely puzzled at this news and stared at him intently. "That is not possible," she replied. "You are clearly not a child, so how am I to believe that you are one of them?"

Donovan stared back at her, just as confused as she. Then it dawned on him and he smiled at her bewildered expression. "Princess, I am human, as you know, and humans grow faster than Elves. Ten years, by your standard, is not a long time, but for a human it is time enough to reach maturity. I am a man no longer a child. I

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was trained as an Elven Ranger, I speak the Elven tongue, and I know who and what you are and give myself to your service. Does that explain things sufficiently for now, because we really must get moving again?”

Brandela stayed quiet for a long moment, trying to straighten it all out in her mind. Donovan knew he had convinced her, so he said nothing more and chewed his deer meat in silence, watching her and waiting. Suddenly, she stood and began walking east again. He raised his eyebrows and jumped to his feet to go after her. This time, they walked side by side.



Garock's scouts returned to the encampment later that day and reported finding no tracks leading north, but they had found the tracks of two people leaving the creek about two leagues south of the encampment, heading east.

Southeast? So the bastard's clever, too, thought Garock, scowling. His desire to find out the identity of the soldier who had helped the princess escape was growing stronger by the minute. The man was obviously very skilled and highly trained to kill his troops without alerting anyone to his presence. And he was proving to be a formidable opponent in this game of cat and mouse. He would have to deal with this guy very differently, he suspected.

Garock secretly respected their decision to flee south and make their way eastward. It was the kind of move he would have made himself if in their place. Now, instead of being able to recapture them easily, he would have to go traipsing through the countryside, tracking them down for the next couple of days. And if they made it to the trade routes before he had a chance to catch up, his chances of success would be severely diminished. He had to find them before they reach the trade routes. He would find them!

Garock immediately gathered forty of his best men and personally took command. When they found the princess and the unknown soldier, he wanted to be there to deal with them, face to face.

“Prepare food and weapons for a long journey,” he ordered his men. “The prisoner is at least a day ahead of us. We will leave at dawn and we’ll be marching double-time. The princess can’t be traveling all that quickly. We’ll be able to catch up to them within a day or two.”



It was dark and the temperature was dropping rapidly when Donovan finally settled on a place for them to stop and make camp. Brandela stumbled into the hideout he'd chosen—a simple group of boulders in the flat, grassy landscape. She was so sore and tired that she figured she would probably be nursing aches and pains for years to come. She slumped to the ground near one of the boulders and watched as Donovan pulled more of the dried meat from his pouch. He held it out to her, but she shook her head, too tired to chew.

Donovan frowned. "You must eat," he warned. "You'll need all of your energy tomorrow."

Brandela groaned at the thought of starting all of this again tomorrow. All she wanted to do was lie down in a nice warm bed and sleep for days and days. "I'll eat in the morning," she answered. "I'm cold and tired tonight. I just want to rest." She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned against the boulder.

"I'm afraid we can't start a fire," Donovan told her, apologetically. He pulled a single, thick blanket from his pack and shook it out. "We'll have to share this for the next few days until we get far enough away to risk a fire."

Brandela's eyes were wide with shock when she looked up at him, but she could see that he was perfectly serious. He expected her to huddle with him in that blanket—touching! She was wide awake again now and shook her head vehemently. "No, thank you, I'll be fine."

Donovan looked at her even more seriously and shook his head. "Princess, trust me, it gets very cold at night on these plains. You won't survive without covering, and we can use each other's body heat to stay warm."

Brandela gasped, thoroughly shocked and offended by what he was suggesting. She stood up and moved, warily, to the far edge of the hideout. In a firm, sharp-edged tone, she insisted, "I will not compromise my virtue just to stay warm."

Donovan looked at her standing there like a stubborn child, her mouth set with determination and eyes that challenged him but were tinged with fear at the same time. What was he to do with such a creature? He was going to wrap her in a blanket and make her rest, that's what!

"Princess, believe me, before this night is out, you'll be grateful to be held in this blanket with me. It is going to get very cold! Try to remember, it's only temporary until we get far enough away so we

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can make a fire. I can't do anything about our current situation, but I can improve our chances of survival by taking these measures."

Brandela opened her mouth as if to argue, but he raised his hand and cut her off. "Before you say no again, let me help you understand something important. You don't have a choice. I am not going to let you kill yourself by trying to stay warm out here on your own. Now come and get in this blanket."

The princess regarded him for a long moment, undecided. If any other non-royal spoke to her the way this Donovan did, there'd be serious trouble. Who was he to order her around like this? And yet, she couldn't fault him on his logic or on his leadership. She *was* terribly cold and the blanket *did* look inviting.

Still, the idea of huddling up with him, with no chaperone near to keep a close watch over her virtue... a shiver ran up her spine and she began to tremble. She had never been touched by any man other than her father and her brothers. This was very unladylike and most unnerving. Her more rational mind knew that this was out of necessity and that she would have to make some difficult choices in order to get through this ordeal, but still...

Donovan cocked an eyebrow expectantly and held open the blanket. She sighed loudly and lowered her eyes, giving in. "Fine, have it your way," she grumbled. "But I warn you, I will not allow any liberties with my person. Do you understand me plainly?"

Donovan smiled back at her disarmingly and answered, "Of course, Princess. I would not dream of taking liberties with a princess of the House of Oendale."

This implied formality had the desired effect, and Princess Brandela approached him with as much dignity as her odd-sized clothes and chattering teeth would allow. Donovan stood waiting with the blanket draped over his shoulders. Brandela stopped when she was directly in front of him and lifted her beautiful, wide eyes to his. Her nervousness moved him. He was surprised by the surge of protectiveness that he felt as he looked at her. He had never felt that way about anyone before.

He opened his arms and the blanket and pulled her into its folds. He could feel her trembling, and knew that it wasn't only the cold that made her shiver. He began rubbing the cold and stiffness out of her arms and soon felt her relax ever so slightly.

Brandela hated to admit it, but she was already much warmer and an odd emotion of contentment was washing over her. She could feel her guard coming down, and wasn't quite sure if that was a good thing or not. Did this put her virtue in danger? To be honest, she

wasn't even entirely sure what her "virtue" was or why it needed guarding so badly. Right now, it hardly mattered. Right now, all she wanted was his warmth.

Donovan scooped her up in his arms and was rewarded with a very unladylike squeak from Brandela. Donovan smiled as Brandela wrapped her slender arms around his neck to keep from falling. He lowered himself, with Brandela still in his arms, to the grass near one of the boulders and leaned his back against it. He arranged the blanket so it covered both of them and wrapped his arms around the princess as she nestled onto his lap and laid her head on his chest.

It took a bit of wiggling and repositioning, but soon she had found a surprisingly comfortable resting spot with her head beneath his chin.

"Try to get some sleep. We have another long day tomorrow," said Donovan. His voice was husky and he was far from sleepy. This was going to be a long night! If she wiggled her body just one more time he was going to take his chances in the cold. She smelled so nice.

Brandela began to drift off within minutes of settling against Donovan's solid, warm body. His warmth was coaxing the ache from her muscles and sleepiness was washing over her in pleasant waves. As her eyes closed and she relaxed more and more, she smiled. This was the safest she'd felt in months.

Donovan squeezed her little closer to him and looked down at her dirt-streaked, peaceful face. She reminded him of a younger version of Alayna. *Alayna. I hope Garock is suffering tonight*, he thought as he settled back against the boulder. His eyes soon grew heavy and moments later he, too, fell asleep.

Chapter Thirteen



Donovan and Brandela were on the move again long before sunrise the next morning. Brandela was grateful for the semi-darkness and the early morning quiet. Somehow it made it easier to cope with the confusing and conflicting emotions that were coursing through her mind and body. Daylight would seem too harsh and overwhelming for such feelings.

She had woken, slowly and gently, wrapped in Donovan's arms and his warmth, and for a moment she had wondered if she were dreaming. It was so pleasant, and she had snuggled closer, breathing in his musky scent and reveling in the safety of his solid embrace. Then, as sleep had lifted and she realized what she was doing, shame had washed over her and she'd pushed away from him violently, waking him. She'd been unable to look at him since.

What were these strange emotions and how could they be so pleasant and yet so confusing and frightening at the same time? *It was only the warmth that I craved*, she tried to convince herself, but she knew it was something more. What was this strange attraction she felt toward this man—this human? Elves weren't supposed to be attracted to humans. In fact, her mother and the other noble ladies of her class had always spoken as if such a thing was quite impossible. What was wrong with her? She sighed, deeply disturbed by her thoughts and abruptly decided to put them out of her mind for examination at a later date.

As the sun lightened the horizon, she began paying attention to her surroundings and saw that they were leaving the grassy plains and heading into a lightly wooded area. The trees were not very big compared to the ones in the Wood Elven forest, but they brought a sense of comfort as they reminded her of home. As the trees gradually surrounded them, she could feel her spirits rising. *Once I get home with my people, everything will be okay*, she told herself, and as the sun filtered through the leaves and branches and warmed her skin, she began to hum.

"You're in a cheerful mood this morning," Donovan called back without turning around. The trees and Brandela's beautiful

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voice were working their magic on him, also, and he was relieved to feel the heavy tension of the morning beginning to lift.

“Yes,” Brandela replied. “It’s this place and these trees. It’s odd but, despite the fact that I haven’t had a chance to wash properly in weeks and I don’t have suitable clothing and I’ve never been so destitute in all my life, I’m still surprisingly happy. This scenery is very pleasing and it cheers me up. Nothing else seems to matter all that much right now.”

“You’re right, that is odd,” answered Donovan. “I would never have guessed that a princess would enjoy living like an outcast.”

Brandela smiled, and for a while they walked in a companionable silence.

“Donovan, when we reach the trade routes, do you think there would be any way to arrange to get me some new clothing? I believe these clothes I’m wearing would fit you a lot better than they fit me.”

Donovan chuckled. “So you noticed that. I was wondering when you would get around to asking about my Elven Ranger uniform.”

“Ah, so I was right,” Brandela exclaimed triumphantly, trotting to catch up with him. “I knew these clothes belonged to you!”

Donovan smiled at her and answered, “Yes they do. Your assumption was correct.” But there was sadness behind the smile and he walked on quietly, absorbed in his private thoughts.

Brandela, puzzled by his sudden shift in mood, asked, “Why do you look so sad? Was it something I said?”

Donovan sighed softly. “I was just thinking about an old friend who made me that clothing. She was like a mother to me.”

“Was this the Elven woman who raised you at the southern outpost?” asked Brandela. “I remember my father talking about her.”

Donovan frowned. “I’m sure he had little good to say about her,” he growled.

Brandela glanced sideways at him, surprised by the bitterness in his voice. It was true, though. Her father had spoken of the woman with great disdain. “He said she was an able trainer,” she offered, truthfully.

“She was a remarkable trainer. She saved my life and taught me everything I know.”

“What was her name? Perhaps I know of her,” asked Brandela.

“It’s doubtful that you would know her,” answered Donovan. “She was a Wood Elven warrior, not a noble lady, like you.”

Brandela hesitated, and then suggested, “Perhaps when we get back home, you can introduce me to her. We will be passing through the southern portion of the Wood Elven forest on our way to Alder-

wood, will we not?"

Donovan's voice was sad when he answered, "Unfortunately, Princess, she died in the raid on Garock's army soon after you were captured. Alayna was killed by the enemy commander, Garock, just before your father's army arrived and rescued the other maidens."

They walked in silence for a while then as Brandela absorbed this information. When she finally spoke, her words were hesitant and she was obviously troubled. "I am young by Elven standards, and I don't have much experience in dealing with loss, but I can imagine how difficult it would be to lose someone who was like a mother to you. This was the year I was most likely going to be married off to my future husband and I never expected for any of this to happen. I feel directly responsible for the loss of your friend, and for this you have my deepest apologies."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Princess. If there's anyone truly at fault, it's your father. You're not responsible for his actions."

"What do you mean?" asked Brandela, her brow furrowed. "Please elaborate further?"

"Your father knew that we were drastically outnumbered and would be unlikely to survive when he ordered us to attack Garock's army. If not for Alayna, none of us would have survived. Your father would have been quite happy to find us all slaughtered and out of his hair."

Brandela opened her mouth to protest, but no words came. She knew her father and his hatred of humans very well, and she knew what he was capable of. She was deeply troubled to think that he could have purposely caused Donovan so much grief.

"Why?" she asked, very quietly.

Donovan glanced at her, puzzled. "Why what?"

"Why would you risk your life to save the daughter of the man who caused you so much harm?"

Donovan stopped walking and looked down at his feet, weighing his words carefully. "To be honest, Princess, you were not the main purpose that brought me to Garock's encampment. Garock is directly responsible for Alayna's death. By rescuing you, I was actually disobeying a direct order from high Lord Aden, but to do so would cause the complete failure of Garock's mission, causing his suppliers to take revenge on him. His demise would serve as my revenge for Alayna's death."

"So, my father did not send you?" clarified Brandela, struggling against the sinking feeling that was overtaking her.

"No," answered Donovan, somewhat guiltily.

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Did my father send anyone? wondered Brandela. Out loud, she forced her voice into a confident, positive tone. “Well, with any luck we will return unharmed, both of us, together, and when we arrive I promise I will take up your cause with my father, directly. I will make it my purpose to see that you receive a full pardon.”

For a long moment, they stood there and stared into each other eyes, a bond of trust forming almost palpably between them. Donovan was the first to tear his eyes away and turn and start walking again. He was so tempted to do something stupid, something he knew he would regret in the end. She was so hard to resist!

Brandela followed behind him, blinking back tears of frustration. Her heart was pounding and her cheeks were flushed with confusion and—what? Desire? They walked on in a strange, tense silence and did not speak again for the rest of the day.



Garock bent down to feel the ground where the footprint was imbedded. The track was at least a day old. They had gotten further than he thought they would and, judging by the lack of signs of a camp or fire, it seemed that they were not bothering to stop and hunt for their food either. He cursed, realizing that this was going to be harder than he had hoped. Still, it had been a while since he'd had such a challenge. Under other circumstances, he would have actually enjoyed the hunt, but this time he could not afford to let his prey slip away.

“Sooner or later, you'll slip up,” he called to the unknown soldier, somewhere in the wilderness ahead of him. “And when you do, I'll be ready and waiting!”

To his second-in-command, he said, “It looks like they're headed for the trade routes. If they get far enough ahead of us, we could lose them. It's imperative that we catch up to them as quickly as possible; if we don't, we shouldn't even bother returning to the encampment because we're all dead.”

His second nodded his head, his expression serious and determined. “They can't keep up this pace forever,” he said. “The princess will slow them down, eventually. They're still at least seven days from the trade routes. We'll close the gap before then and catch them.”

Garock agreed. “I want the princess alive. As for the soldier, whoever he is—just kill him.”

His second saluted and continued following the tracks ahead of the main group.



Donovan and Brandela travelled steadily eastward for the next two days, taking few breaks throughout the days and sharing the blanket for a few precious hours during the cold nights. Brandela was exhausted, but determined to keep up with Donovan, who seemed tireless. He reminded her, several times, that Garock's men could have figured out their route by now and were probably trailing them. They must keep moving, as quickly as they could, to reach the trade routes. It was their only hope of losing their pursuers.

Brandela was surprised, therefore, to see Donovan preparing a fire when they stopped to make camp at the end of their fourth night of travel. He had left her, briefly, to rest, and had come back with two freshly killed rabbits. He figured they had gotten far enough away to risk a fire and their first decent meal in days.

Brandela's mouth watered as she watched Donovan turning the skinned, cleaned meat on the improvised spit he had made over the fire. Fat dripped and hissed in the flames and the aroma of the roasting meat was making her half-crazy with hunger. He grinned at her and seemed more relaxed than he had in days.

As she watched him, she found herself wishing that he was one of the Elven nobles. She would enjoy the prospect of a bonded mate a lot more if she could choose for herself someone like Donovan. She had gradually, over the past couple of days, come to accept her attraction to him, although she knew nothing could come of it. He had an inner strength that came from his unbending will and loyalty to duty and honor that had nothing to do with the master he served and everything to do with his character. She found his self-discipline immensely attractive, and he was reliable and confident in his abilities. It was only natural that she should be attracted to a man like that, she reasoned. Also, he *was* very handsome.

Brandela was startled from her thoughts by the sound of Donovan's voice telling her that the food was ready. She snapped to attention and looked at Donovan, startled and flustered. He looked back at her, amused and smiling. She blushed, wondering if he had seen some clue about what she had been thinking, but he said nothing—simply gestured to the spit and the juicy, waiting meal.

Composing herself as best she could, she stood and walked over to him. He held the stick of meat out to her and—she couldn't help herself. She grabbed it from his hand in a most unladylike manner and ripped her first bite of meat from the bones. She sank to her

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knees with a groan of pleasure and bit into the delicious flesh again.

Through a mouthful of rabbit, she mumbled, “This meat is so delicious. I honestly think this is the most wonderful meal I have ever tasted in my entire life.”

Donovan laughed. “Where I am from, we often say that hunger is the best seasoning to any meal.”

Brandela began laughing and soon lost all control. It was the first time Donovan heard her laugh, and the musical quality of her joy was enchanting. He chuckled and watched her with delight as he dug into his own meal.

When they finished eating, Donovan told Brandela that tonight she could have the blanket to herself. “With the fire going, I’ll be able to stay warm without it,” he explained.

Despite herself, Brandela frowned. Although she hated to admit it, even to herself, the last three nights that she had shared the blanket with Donovan had been more than pleasant. She would miss that sense of comfort and safety he unwittingly made her feel when he held her in his arms.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “It’ll still get cold enough for you to be uncomfortable. I don’t mind sharing.”

Donovan grinned at her in surprise and replied, in a teasing tone, “Princess, if I didn’t know better I would say you wanted me to cuddle with you.”

Brandela’s face flushed red hot. “I was only trying to be helpful,” she spat, outraged. “It’s not my fault that you’re too dense to understand my clear intent.” She turned her back on him and went marching off to the other side of the campfire, snatching up the blanket as she went. She huddled down near the fire with her back to him and settled herself for sleep.

Donovan knew he would hear no more from her for the rest of the night. He smiled and thought how very cute she was when she was angry. He knew he shouldn’t tease her like that but he couldn’t help himself—she was such an innocent little thing. He’d make it up to her in the morning. Right now, the meal and the warmth of the fire were making him drowsy. He was simply too tired to make the effort.

Chapter Fourteen



The long days, grueling pace and lack of food began to take its toll on Brandela, and over the next couple of days she was forced to stop and rest more frequently. She apologized over and over, but Donovan would have none of it. He was impressed by how well she'd stood up to the task already and they were close now to the trade routes. If she could just keep going for a couple more days, they'd make it. He encouraged her, coaxed her, let her rest when she needed it, but she soon began to notice that he was becoming more and more preoccupied with their back trail.

"Are you worried that Garock and his men may be catching up to us?" Brandela asked when Donovan had returned from back-tracking while she rested.

His face was more serious than she had ever seen it, and he nodded. "There are signs. They're too close for comfort. We're still a day and a half from the trade routes, if we go at top speed. We need to stop them before they reach us."

"How will we do that?" questioned Brandela.

"We won't," Donovan answered. He looked at her directly. "Princess, you and I are going to need to split up for a few days. You are going to go ahead at the best pace you can keep up, and I'm going back to disguise our tracks and try to mislead Garock's men. It's a little easier here. The trees will give you some cover and it's the perfect environment for me to set up an ambush."

Brandela's eyes were wide and fearful, staring back at him. "How long will we be apart?" she asked.

Donovan shook his head. "I'm not sure exactly. A few days. A week, maybe. It's the only way, Brandela. I know you can do this. You will take the remaining food supplies and the blanket and keep traveling east, toward the rising sun. There's enough food for a week, maybe more if you ration it carefully. I will catch up to you as soon as I've dealt with Garock's group."

Brandela did not like this plan at all but spoke in a deceptively calm tone when she asked, "What about you? You're not going to take any supplies for yourself?"

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“I need only my bow and my sword. I will be fine,” he answered coolly.

Brandela’s composure began to fray at the edges and her voice was tinged with barely contained panic when she added, “But you could be killed. There is no telling how many enemy soldiers are following us. You’re bound to be outnumbered. Please, Donovan, there has to be another way that doesn’t involve you running off and getting yourself killed.”

Donovan gave her the most intense look he could muster and she lowered her eyes in defeat. “Trust me, Princess, I will catch up to you. But, just in case I don’t, here’s what you must do. Continue heading eastward until you come upon a small, walled town. Bind your ears with a strip of cloth tied around your head and cover your head with my cloak so that no one discovers that you’re an Elf. In the town, it will be easy to blend in and stay safe for a while. If I don’t make it back within a month, I’m dead. In that case, find work where you can and wait a year, then sign up with one of the trade caravans headed north for safe passage. There will be some traveling between the northern free towns. Gather supplies for yourself and make your way north directly into the Wood Elven forest. Garock and his men should be long dead by then, but do not give up your true identity until you are safely home in Alderwood.”

Donovan held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Do you understand what you need to do?”

“I am to survive, with or without you,” she whispered.

“Good girl,” he praised. “That’s right. But you won’t be alone for long, Princess. A week, maybe a few days more. I *will* come back!”

Brandela nodded her head, then quickly turned from him so Donovan would not see the tears in her eyes. “If I don’t see you again, thank you for everything you’ve done,” she said in a shaky voice. She picked up the bag of supplies and faced the east. Without looking at him, she called out softly, “Be careful. I’ll see you in a week.” And she started to walk.

“In a week, Princess,” he confirmed. “Travel as quickly as you can.” He watched her walking away until he could no longer see her, and then headed back the way they had come to begin putting his plan into action.

He soon found a perfect clearing to set up an ambush. He worked all evening and late into the night, digging shallow pits and setting up sharpened spikes. At dawn, he carefully followed and erased Brandela’s trail to make sure the Barbarians could not follow her. Then he returned to the spot where he was setting up the ambush

and completed the job. He finished by midday, then found a suitable lookout spot and settled there to rest and wait.

The light of day was beginning to fade when Donovan, from his perch in a stout tree, spotted the enemy tracker. The man was dressed in the uniform worn by Garock's army. Donovan positioned his bow, notched an arrow, and lined the sites up to the enemy's silhouette. He held his breath and released the arrow, which flew true and struck its mark directly into the enemy's heart. The soldier screamed but, within seconds, the screams died away and he lay still.

Donovan jumped down from his hiding spot and dragged the body into the middle of the clearing that he had riddled with the traps. He then climbed back into the tree, resettled himself in his perch and waited.

Thirty minutes later, a second scout wandered into the clearing, calling to the first. When the new man spotted his fallen comrade and began walking towards him, Donovan released another arrow and the second enemy soldier collapsed to the ground.

Before another hour had passed, the main group made their way into the clearing—about forty men, lead by Garock. Donovan recognized him instantly, and his eyes narrowed in hatred. As he notched his next arrow, Donovan prayed that Garock would come within range. As much as he liked the idea of letting the Shadow Elves do their worst to him, having the chance to finish him off, then and there, was even better.

Garock, spotting the two bodies in the middle of the clearing, gave the signal to halt. This was a trap of some sort, he sensed. He gave his soldiers orders to spread out and ordered two soldiers to walk into the clearing and inspect the two downed men. Garock could see clear signs of where the dead soldiers had been dragged into the clearing. The two soldiers he had sent in would most likely be killed, but he wanted to see how it happened. What had been set up for him here? He watched and waited, alert and tense, as the soldiers began checking the bodies.

He didn't see the arrow as it flew out of the darkness and hit one of his soldiers in the neck. The next moment, a second arrow found its target in the second soldier's back as the man tried to run out of range of the unseen bowman.

So this is your plan, thought Garock. Lure us into the open and take us out one by one? He scowled at the growing darkness. They would need to act quickly before the cover of dark gave the enemy further advantage. They needed to overwhelm and overpower him—for he was certain it was only one man.

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“Regroup and prepare to charge!” he shouted to his men. As his soldiers lifted their shields and began to move, another arrow came out of the darkness, pinging off the shield Garock held in front of him. Furious, Garock yelled, “Charge!” and led his men straight into the clearing.

A soldier to the left of Garock fell into a ditch and landed on a sharpened wooden stake. As the men were pushed forward by the rush of men behind them, more fell and others stumbled over the fallen. Men scattered, trying to avoid the pit and the stakes and the impaled men, and chaos quickly ensued.

Donovan took brutal advantage of the enemy soldiers’ disarray, shooting arrows as fast as he had ever shot them before in his entire life. He shot at any target that presented itself, aiming to maim rather than kill. He shot frontline soldiers in the legs as much as possible, causing them to crumple and writhe, slowing and scattering the rest of the group.

Donovan watched as Garock’s soldiers approached his final surprise. They began climbing over a small hill, but once they got to other side and started making their way down, they tripped over a cleverly-placed, hidden vine, sending many of them tumbling down onto the sharpened wooden spikes he had embedded into a pit on the other side. Donovan grinned, pleased to see his plan work. *Akenji would have liked that one*, he thought. He jumped down from his perch and slipped away into the darkness, making sure to leave as many tracks as possible so Garock’s remaining men could easily track him at daybreak. Donovan ran about three leagues south, and then stopped to put his next plan into place. He rustled up a large mound of leaves, then backtracked his route for several meters and erased his tracks. He burrowed into the leaves, covering himself completely, and waited for daybreak.

By dawn, Garock had taken stock of the dead and the injured and found himself with a much smaller, and greatly shaken, group. He was furious at having been tricked. Whoever this strange soldier was, he would rue the day he was born if Garock ever got his hands on him! He would pursue and find him, and the princess, if it was the last thing he did on Ryyah.

He ordered his remaining, able men to split up and search for tracks. It didn’t take long before clear tracks were found, heading south. They followed the tracks until they came to an abrupt end. *He fled for the first few leagues*, reasoned Garock, *and now he’s trying to cover up and put us off. We’ll see about that!*

Garock split his men into smaller groups and had them spread

out to search for tracks again. Donovan, peering out from his leafy hideout, smiled. The smaller, scattered groups would be to his advantage, easier to manage. He noted the positions of any archers first. At the moment, there were none within range to worry about. He waited until one of the smaller groups passed close by and chose that moment to take them by surprise. He leaped out of the leaf pile with a roar and, with one mighty sweep of the sword's blade, he sliced one unsuspecting man nearly in half.

Donovan quickly yanked the sword out of the man's corpse and back-slashed at an oncoming enemy soldier. The blow glanced off the man's helmet, momentarily stunning him. Before the soldier could regain his senses, Donovan reversed his sword and jabbed the side point of the sword hilt into the man's eyes behind the eye guard of his helmet. The man began screaming frantically, clutching at his face. Donovan kicked the man away and left him to roll and grimace in pain on the ground.

Donovan began running, with two more enemy soldiers following close behind. Without slowing down, he grabbed a small tree and used his momentum to swing himself fully around to face his opponents. He kicked the soldier who was closest, then began a fearsome overhead striking combination that completely destroyed the enemy's wooden shield and knocked the man to the ground, exposed. Donovan stood over the fallen soldier and thrust his sword point into the enemy's heart.

He could hear the second soldier behind him, and without looking, swung his blade back across the enemy's legs. The soldier dropped his shield and sword and crumpled to the ground, clutching his right leg in pain.

Donovan took off at a dead run, avoiding the five new soldiers that were closing in on him. He ran directly south and slowed enough for the five soldiers to catch up with him slightly. When the first of the soldiers was directly behind him, he came to a dead stop and quickly rolled sideways to the left, simultaneously slashing his sword blade in a wide arc with his right hand. The blade caught the enemy soldier's chin full on, bringing him down in mid-stride, and tripping the other four as they charged forward at top speed.

Donovan sprinted south again. He would be forced to keep this hit-and-run tactic up for the next couple of days, picking off Garock's men one by one and luring them away from the princess. As soon as he could, he would start making his way back toward the trade routes. From there, he would have an easier time losing his enemy, and hopefully Brandela would have made it safely to one of the free towns.

Chapter Fifteen



A shiver of excitement surged through Brandela as she packed up her small camp in the early dawn light. She had made it through the long, lonely week, walking in a sort of daze for the first few days, feeling abandoned and vulnerable, sure that she would never see Donovan alive again. But he had promised to come back, and as the end of the week had drawn closer she had begun to hope again until now, on this morning, she felt sure they would soon be reunited.

She had reached the trade route on her fourth day of solitary travel. Her tracks were now blended with the many other footprints, wagon tracks and hoofprints along the way, but in the three days that she had been following the tracks, she'd seen no sign of other people. She had hidden her Elven ears with a scarf she had made using material ripped from Donovan's cloak, but so far, there was no one to hide them from. She was desperately lonely, but also relieved to get through each day without having to explain herself to other travelers.

She quelled the gnawing in her stomach with a small strip of deer jerky, but stopped herself from taking more. Hunger had become a focal point each day. She'd organize and reorganize her small stash of food, planning how much she would allow herself and when, and how long she could make it last if...if Donovan didn't come back. Today, she organized the precious meat so that it would last two people for at least another week.

As she travelled eastward that day, she found herself looking over her shoulder frequently, sure that she would see Donovan in the distance. Her heart sank a little more every time he wasn't there, and by the day's end, she was fighting tears of disappointment and worry.

For three more days, Brandela refused to think about what might have happened to Donovan after they had separated. She started out each day hopeful and watchful, believing in his promise to come back. But by the end of the third day, she could no longer fight the heavy doubt that descended on her every night. As she made camp,

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her mind was full of images of Donovan, captured by the Barbarians, beaten, tortured...killed. He had surely been severely outnumbered. He would have fought hard, she imagined. He would have died slowly, painfully. Did he think of her in those final moments?

Her tears flowed freely as she thought of all he had done for her, all he had sacrificed for her safety. This man—one of the finest she'd ever known of his race—had touched her deeply, made her feel in ways she never had before, and had become very special to her. She would blame herself, always, if something terrible had happened to him.

She opened the packet of jerky, but was too bone-tired and melancholy to eat. She carefully counted the remaining pieces of meat and, with a fresh flow of tears, estimated how long she could make them last her—just her, alone. She tucked the meat away, pulled the blanket around her slender shoulders and curled up against the grassy base of a young tree. How she longed to feel his arms around her again, his warmth enveloping her. She wished she could be stronger, more confident, more believing...but she couldn't control herself any longer. Giving into her grief, she wept until she was spent and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, Brandela woke to the sound of a familiar voice. "It's time to get up, Princess. We're still three days from the town and we must keep moving."

Brandela moaned softly, thinking she was still dreaming, but the touch of Donovan's hand on her arm snapped her from her sleep. She stood, still drowsy, confused and rubbing her eyes, then turned toward the sound of his soft chuckle. There, looking back at her was the most handsome face she had ever seen. She said nothing but held her hand over her mouth as tears of joy began streaming from her eyes. She couldn't believe he was alive and safe right in front of her.

For a moment, they stood there just staring at each other, relief and joy lighting their faces. Finally, Donovan broke the spell. "Come now, Princess. I'm starting to think you actually missed me," he teased.

Brandela's body began to radiate a strange golden light and her face held an expression that both pleased and puzzled Donovan. He wasn't sure what he was witnessing, but she was remarkably beautiful.

Before he could even consider what he was seeing, she ran forward and threw herself into his arms, sobbing into his chest with joy. For a moment, dazzled by the strange, beautiful light and startled by her emotional response to seeing him, Donovan pulled back from

her. But as she clung to him, weeping openly, he relaxed, wrapped his arms around her and comforted her as best he could until her tears subsided.

As she cried herself out, the strange glow began to fade. Donovan felt a pleasant tingling sensation in his heart that spread throughout his entire body. He didn't understand what he was experiencing, but he was reluctant to let her go, so he held the princess even after she had calmed and relaxed in his arms.

Brandela had also noticed the tingling sensation and now, as her head rested against his chest, she noticed that her heartbeat was matching pace and rhythm with his. It was as though their hearts were beating as one—as though they had bonded!

Brandela's eyes widened in amazement and she stepped back quickly and lost her footing. Donovan caught her and lowered her to the ground, gently. She stared at him with wide eyes, as though something had shocked her.

"Are you okay, Princess?" he asked.

She did not respond, but continued to stare at him with a look of awe.

"Princess?" he coaxed. He held her shoulders and shook her gently. "Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?"

Finally, Brandela snapped out of her stupor and replied in a shaky voice, "I'm fine. I'm sorry, it's just that..." She didn't finish, but gazed up at him again with the same look of amazement as she felt his relief, then confusion and a slight irritation. She could feel his subtle moods as though they ran through her own body. If she hadn't believed it when she'd felt their hearts become as one, now she had no doubt.

Brandela knew the Elven bonding spell had somehow taken effect. She was beyond shocked to discover that it could be activated or naturally applied to a human. But it definitely had, and Donovan was her bonded mate—her husband—now. She reeled at the thought, not even daring to imagine how her father would react to this news. But she would not worry about that now when they were so far from the Wood Elven kingdom. She had been trained her whole life to understand her duty, and her first loyalty was to her bonded mate. She belonged to him for life, and she could not bond to any other, even if she wanted to. She should be upset, she knew. She should be rejecting this somehow. But she was pleased...more pleased than she ever could have imagined.

"Oh, by the Elven Elders, I am married," she exclaimed.

"You're married?" Donovan asked, a feeling of disappointment

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taking him by surprise. Why had she told him earlier that she was expecting to be married off when she returned to her people? Why would she lie to him about that?

“You told me you were not yet married,” he reminded her. “Why do you say now that you are? Have you been untruthful with me?”

Brandela hesitated, then carefully replied, “I was being truthful. I told you that I did not yet have a bonded mate. But that has changed now.”

Donovan scratched his head, beginning to wonder if the days alone had taken their toll on the princess. She was making no sense at all and was still staring at him as though something amazing had just taken place. “What in Ryyah are you talking about?” he demanded, growing somewhat irritated by her odd behavior.

Brandela felt his frustration as though it were her own, and stifled a giggle at the wonder of this new ability. “It’s very simple to understand,” she replied coyly. “I wasn’t married then, but now I am.”

Donovan rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Fine then, have it your way. I don’t know what you’re talking about, but we have to get moving. We’ve wasted enough time here. I lost our pursuers several leagues back but they will guess our general direction and soon follow.”

Brandela’s tone was surprisingly formal when she replied, “Yes, my Lord, as you wish.”

Donovan frowned, thinking that she was mocking him, but said nothing and turned to gather their items for the next leg of their journey.

As they walked that day, Donovan recounted his adventures for her and, except for the unnerving way she kept looking at him, things seemed to be back to normal. Evening was nearly upon them when Donovan spotted a fat brown snake sunbathing on a flat rock beside their path, and killed it for their supper. Brandela beamed when he held it up for her to see. “Fresh meat, tonight!”

Later that night, when they had stopped to make camp, Donovan began to prepare the snake for cooking. As he pulled the skin from the creature, Brandela was suddenly beside him, taking it from his hands.

“It is my duty and responsibility to prepare our meals, my Lord,” she said. “Please, allow me.”

Donovan looked up at her with annoyance. “Why do you keep referring to me as ‘my Lord’? If it’s your idea of a joke, I don’t find it funny.”

Brandela looked deeply concerned. “I can feel your displeasure, my Lord,” Brandela answered. “But I beg you to allow me to attempt my duties.” She then did something that shocked him to his toes. She got down on her knees in front of him, lowered her forehead to the ground and began reciting the Elven Pledge of Loyalty in a calm, clear voice. *My heart is yours. My soul is yours. My body is yours. Command me as you will, Lord, for I am your consort in battle and your comfort in times of war and peace. Do with me as you will.*

Donovan was familiar with the Pledge of Loyalty, given by Elven supplicants to their Overlords, as he, himself, had pledged loyalty to Lord Aden, but he had never heard this version before. And why was she saying it at all? His irritation was quickly turning to anger.

“Have I done something to offend you, Princess, that you would mock me in this way? Have I not treated you with the respect deserving of a noble woman? The Pledge of Loyalty is not something to be taken lightly. Your behavior is very unsettling and I demand that you stop.”

Brandela remained prone before him and said, without looking up, “Is there a more appropriate name you wish to be called, husband?”

Donovan jumped as if he’d been stung and stumbled two steps away from her. “Get up and look at me,” he ordered, sharply. “What are you talking about?”

Brandela obeyed him and lifted her head from the ground. She looked directly into his eyes, and replied in a clear, sweet voice, “Please clarify what you are asking me, husband, so that I may obey.”

Donovan scowled and shook his head. “You know very well what I mean. You call me ‘my Lord’ and ‘husband’. Why? Why are you acting so strangely toward me all of a sudden?”

Brandela lowered her eyes again. “I am honoring and obeying my Lord—my husband—and treating him with all due courtesy and respect, as I have been taught to do since childhood.”

Donovan, more confused than ever, replied, “Great, but what does that have to do with me?”

Brandela sighed and glanced at him nervously. “It’s because you are my husband now,” she answered slowly. In response to his shocked expression, she stood and added, “Believe me, I was as surprised by this event as you are now, for I didn’t even know that humans could be bonded with..., until it happened this morning, that is.”

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Donovan frowned deeply at her words, but his eyes widened as he began to understand. “The golden light!” he whispered. “The tingling! That was...a bonding spell?”

“Yes, the Elven bonding spell engaged when you embraced me,” explained Brandela. “Now our hearts beat as one. You are my bonded mate for life.”

It was Donovan’s turn to stare in stunned silence, but his mind was on Lord Aden and the negative repercussions this was bound to cause. Akenji and the others would be in serious danger once this news was discovered. Lost in serious thoughts, Donovan picked up the snake and went back to his task, saying nothing more to Brandela.

Brandela put her hands on her hips. “Well?” she asked.

Donovan stopped what he was doing and looked at her, puzzled. “Well what?”

“What do you want me to call you?”

Donovan sighed impatiently. “Just call me Donovan, as you have been,” he insisted.

“As you wish, my Lord.”

“Don’t call me ‘my Lord,’” he growled through clenched teeth. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

Brandela smiled at him and reached for the snake. “Please, it is my duty as your bonded mate to prepare our meals from now on.”

Donovan looked at the bloody mass in his hands and shook his head. “This is not a task for a noble lady like you.” Brandela’s face fell, reminding him once again of a scolded child. He smiled, despite his mood, and suggested, “Perhaps you can cook it once I’ve prepared it. We can do it together.”

Brandela smiled and nodded, pleased with the arrangement for now.



*The Ewen
Bonding Spell*



Chapter Sixteen



Later, with their bellies full for the first time in a week, the small fire warming their skin, and exhaustion slowly taking them over, Donovan and Brandela settled into a contented silence, lost in their own private thoughts.

Donovan watched Brandela in the firelight and, despite his earlier annoyance, he was moved by her beauty and found himself smiling. It was more than just beauty. She had a delicate, childlike quality about her that brought something out in him—a protectiveness and deep affection like nothing he'd ever felt before. Now, as he watched, her eyes were growing heavy and her head nodded as she started to drift into sleep. It made him want to gather her up and hug her. She was so lovely!

Donovan stood and retrieved the blanket, and gently draped it over Brandela's shoulders. She was instantly wide awake again and on her feet at the feel of his touch. The months she had spent as a prisoner had developed that habit in her and it never failed to touch his heart. He wondered if she'd ever be able to fully relax in sleep again.

"It's all right, Princess," he soothed. "Take the blanket and curl up over here and get some sleep."

The sleepy confusion and wariness left Brandela's eyes at the sound of his voice, replaced by a small, affectionate smile. She shrugged the blanket from her shoulders and held it out to him. "I will not allow my bonded mate to be cold and uncomfortable throughout the night."

"Don't be silly," he said, pushing the blanket back into her arms. "I have the fire. I'll be fine."

A look of stubborn determination crossed Brandela's face. "My Lord will not be cold tonight!" she insisted.

Donovan considered Brandela for a long moment, knowing that she was not likely to give in easily. He'd seen that look before. Finally, he thought of something that might change her mind. "Fine, we'll share it then," he said.

For the briefest moment, he saw the familiar hesitation and ner-

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vousness flash across Brandela's face, but this time it didn't last. To his surprise, she readily agreed. He was too tired to argue and the idea of being warm, coupled up against Brandela's body, instead of fighting the elements as he had for the past ten days was more than inviting.

Donovan took the blanket from her and wrapped it around her shoulders again, then guided her to a grassy hollow not far from the fire. He lowered himself to the ground and pulled her down beside him, arranging the blanket over both of them and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close. Brandela snuggled into his chest, into the safety of his arms and his solidness and warmth. She could not remember a time when she had ever felt happier.

With her head on his chest, Brandela could hear Donovan's heartbeat. *I could listen to the music of his heart all night*, she thought contentedly. She listened as his breathing began to deepen, as his heartbeats matched her own, slow, steady, strong; and she felt his muscles begin to relax as sleep began to pull him under. For her, sleep was faraway, and she squirmed to find a more comfortable position.

Her squirming brought Donovan back to wakefulness and made him uncomfortable in a way that she would not understand. He willed her to stop her jostling, but said nothing. Brandela finally got situated with her body curled close against his. She lowered her head back to his chest, hoping the calm, steady beat of his heart would lull her off to sleep. She was surprised to hear Donovan's heart beating rapidly and a feeling came from him that she was unfamiliar with. What mood was this that she was feeling from him?

She wiggled in closer and soon found her own heart racing to meet his. She lifted her head in surprise and asked, "What causes your heart to beat so fast, husband?"

Donovan opened his eyes and looked deeply into hers. The feeling she had begun to sense from him earlier came over her in a rush and she knew they were feeling it for each other. This was a desire to be one, to come together in a way that would bind them physically, strengthening the heart-bond that the bonding spell had created.

Brandela knew it was her duty as a wife to provide physical comfort to her bonded mate, and she had been taught all about "mating," but she was a little scared because she had never before attempted anything along these lines and the feelings that he was provoking in her were so intense. This was not simply "duty." She wanted him as much as he wanted her. She decided to follow her instincts and lowered her head to surprise Donovan with a gentle

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kiss full on the lips.

Donovan pulled away, surprised and uncertain. “What are you doing?”

Brandela smiled invitingly. “It’s all right. We are bonded now. I know you desire me, and I desire you. This is permissible.” She leaned to kiss him again, but he turned away.

“No, Brandela, I can’t do this. You are the daughter of Lord Aden. This is going to cause...”

Brandela cut him off before he could finish. “I am also your bonded mate and I desire you now,” she shot back impatiently. Brandela did not understand these strange and powerful new feelings and emotions, but she knew, instinctively, that only he could give her what she wanted.

“Please,” she whispered. She stroked the side of his face and kissed him again. This time he did not resist. The kiss stirred strange sensations in her, and left her lightheaded and wanting more. They kissed, gently, for a long time, experimenting, exploring, both caught up in the seduction of this new experience.

Then Donovan did something that Brandela could not have imagined or anticipated in a thousand years. He licked her bottom lip and when she opened her mouth slightly, he slid his tongue into her mouth, teasing her tongue with his. The feeling that this provoked in her took her completely by surprise. Shivers coursed through her body and her desire to unite with him became nearly uncontrollable. Her kisses became urgent and she pleaded with him in incoherent tones that he somehow seemed to understand perfectly.

Donovan rolled over, still kissing her, pinning her slender body beneath his with her legs apart. Donovan stopped and looked at her for a long moment, until she questioned, “Why have you stopped?”

“I’m giving you a chance to back out of this. I won’t be able to control myself if we go any further.”

Brandela stroked his hair affectionately and replied, “I have never wanted anything more in my entire life.”

Donovan’s last remaining threads of resistance broke and he began to make love to his princess.

Afterward, spent and contented, they slept entwined in each other’s arms. As she drifted off to sleep, Brandela wished that this time she had with Donovan would last forever.

The next morning, Brandela awoke to find Donovan up and smothering the campfire. He was still nude from the waist up and her eyes traced the hard curves of his muscles as he performed his task, completely unaware that he was being observed. She remem-

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bered how good it felt to have his bare skin next to hers last night and felt heat rush to her face at the memory.

She sighed and began to rise, but suddenly realizing that she had no clothing on, she grabbed the blanket and covered herself.

Donovan saw the sudden flurry of movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to look behind him. Brandela stood, red-faced and clearly embarrassed, looking about for her clothing while trying to hold the blanket over her naked body. He smiled, somehow charmed by her modesty, even after what they had done last night. He didn't understand it. They were the only two people around for leagues, after all, but he found it rather endearing.

Donovan knew he should probably be a gentleman and turn back around to let her find her clothing without being scrutinized. But, her obtuse behavior the day before, when she purposely kept from him what she knew about them being bonded, deserved a little payback. So, with a playful cock of his eyebrow, he turned to fully face her and settled himself on the ground as if he was getting ready to watch an entertaining play.

Brandela noticed him watching her and glanced around nervously, clutching the blanket tighter to her breasts. When he continued to stare, she blushed deeper and finally said, "Donovan, do you mind giving me a little privacy while I find my clothing?"

Donovan grinned wickedly and replied, "Yes, I do mind."

Brandela stared back at him, surprised and confused by his unexpected answer to a reasonable request. "Donovan, please, I need to get dressed. I request some privacy!"

Donovan chuckled, clearly amused by her discomfort. In a teasing tone, he asked, "Did you not pledge your body to me yesterday? Did you not say 'command me as you will'?"

Brandela's eyes widened as she realized what he was playing at, and her nervousness began to turn to annoyance.

"I command you to drop that blanket and get dressed," he said, his eyes glittering with delight. He had every intention of giving in to her desire for privacy; he just wanted to play a little first. He expected her to protest and refuse, but to his utter surprise, Brandela straightened her back, lifted her chin with royal dignity, and dropped the blanket to the ground.

Donovan's grin faded as his eyes travelled over the delicate curves and soft, feminine features of her body. *How on Ryyah is this possible, he thought? How can this beautiful creature possibly be mine?* The sight of her aroused him again, leaving him breathless and speechless.

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Brandela, at first overwhelmed by her own feelings of embarrassment and humiliation, did not “feel” his reaction to the sight of her right away, but as his passion grew stronger, she felt it within her heart and met his eyes. Her shyness turned to surprise and then to a strange, eager excitement as she realized that he had every intention of making love to her again. She remembered her mother once telling her about Elven marriage and how Elven males typically expected to engage intimately with their bonded mates once or sometimes twice a year. Apparently, it was different with human males! She couldn’t really say that she minded.

Now, standing naked before her husband, feeling his passion coursing through her own veins, she smiled invitingly. He needed no further encouragement and did not keep her waiting a moment longer.

Two hours later, they were back on the trail, making their way towards the walled free town of Grendel. Donovan knew of the town from maps that Alayna used to share with him. From what he remembered of the maps, he estimated that they should arrive sometime tomorrow if they were able to keep up their current pace.

Donovan was looking forward to reaching the town. Their supplies were running desperately low, and having a few days to blend in with other people, to eat proper food and really rest, would be a real treat. He hoped to sell his Elven dagger or short sword to get some of the local currency and then he could renew their supplies and perhaps even have enough left over to find Brandela more comfortable clothing to finish their journey in.

He glanced back at her, striding out in her oversized Ranger uniform. She had never complained, and he knew it would please him as much as it would her to be able to give her a more feminine outfit. *Not that I need anything more to distract me*, he thought ruefully. Thinking about the past few hours, he shook his head, smiling. How on Ryyah had he let himself become so distracted from their primary goal, which was to get them home in one piece? How was it possible that this Elven maiden was now his wife? Akenji was never going to believe this! And neither would Lord Aden. Donovan frowned at the thought of Lord Aden. This was definitely going to be a problem when they got back home.

Brandela followed quietly behind, lost in her own thoughts. She could still feel Donovan’s fingertips grazing her skin, and was amazed by the gentleness of his touch. He was such a hard, strong, rough young man, but she had seen the truth of his nature from the very beginning. She knew that hard exterior was covering up a

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gentle heart and the power of the love she felt for him nearly overwhelmed her. She suspected that the bonding spell did not create love, but only enhanced the tender feelings that were already there in one's heart, for she had felt a strong attraction to him right from the first time she had met him, weeks before the spell had been activated.

They had challenges to face, she knew. Even if they survived, and even if her father somehow found a way to accept Donovan, there were other concerns. She knew, from her rudimentary studies of other races, that humans did not live all that long when compared to the Elves. What would she do without him when his time on Ryyah was done and she still had hundreds of years ahead of her? Bonding could only happen once in an Elf's lifetime.

In truth, she couldn't imagine being married to anyone else or allowing any other man to touch her in the way that Donovan did. These feelings and longings she had were for Donovan only and no one else. She did not regret what had happened because, however short a time they may have together, she could not imagine a life in which she did know him the way she did now. He was her lord, her husband, and she would stand with him no matter the consequences or what troubles would come in the future. She would make her father understand that, regardless of his feelings about the situation, she would always remain loyal and faithful to Donovan, no matter the cost.

Chapter Seventeen



It was late the next morning when the walls of Grendel came into sight. As Donovan and Brandela walked the final league, they began to pass more and more travelers—most on foot, some with rough carts pulled by slow-moving beasts of burden. Except for the odd, curious look, none of the people questioned them or paid them any attention.

A sign, hung over the main gates, read Town of Grendel. As they entered the town and walked down its main street, Donovan thought that “City of Grendel” would have been a more accurate name for it, for it was bustling with people of all shapes and sizes. The town, sitting out there in the middle of nowhere, had been built for the purpose of trading goods of all kinds, and had street after street of venders and shops, livestock yards and auction sites, and all the goods they could possibly imagine.

As they rounded a corner, they came upon a small group of Slavers herding a forlorn looking cluster of men and women, all bound at the ankles and wrists. One woman raised her eyes, ever so briefly, to glance at Donovan, and in that moment, in that frightened, hopeless look, he was taken back to the day his mother was stolen and his entire village slain. He could see the terror in her eyes and hear the horrible, animal sound of her cries again. *What had become of her*, he wondered? A wave of sadness washed over him and for a moment he could only stare after the woman as though she could somehow give him the answer.

Brandela felt his anguish as a deep pain in her heart, and looked up at him in alarm.

“Are you all right?” she questioned, taking his hand in hers. “What has hurt you, Donovan?”

Donovan pulled himself back to the present and started walking again, gripping Brandela’s arm tightly. “Trust no one,” he ordered. “Do not remove your scarf or hood under any circumstances. If these men find out you are an Elf, they will likely attempt to kidnap you. We must not let our guard down for a minute.”

Brandela nodded. Donovan’s sudden intensity had made her

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nervous and she walked close to him, hardly daring to glance at the people they passed for fear of giving her identity away. She knew from conversations she had overheard while with her father that Elven slaves were highly valued in the free towns because they were so rare. Elven females were worth their weight in gold because of their beauty and long lifespans. It was part of the reason her father guarded the Wood Elven Forest as strictly as he did and hated humans with such ferocity. She and Donovan had come here to seek shelter and safety, but Brandela had rarely felt so vulnerable in her life.

Donovan led them up and down several streets, pausing now and then at the shops of weapon-makers and traders. He seemed to be seeking something, but said nothing to Brandela. Overwhelmed by the jostling crowds and the noise, she clung to his arm and asked no questions.

Finally, he made his way over to one of the merchants, who was selling crude, iron-bladed weapons and tools. The merchant held out his hand in greeting, and as Donovan shook the man's hand, Brandela could feel a relaxation in her mind. Donovan had chosen to trust this man, she realized.

"Are you in the market for finely made weaponry, good sir?" Donovan asked.

The merchant laughed and waved a hand toward the coarse items he had on display. "A fine weapon would be of great interest," he replied, "at the right price."

Donovan drew his Elven-made dagger from beneath his cloak and placed it on the counter. He watched the merchant's face light up as he picked up the blade and examined it carefully. The man spoke in a hushed voice when he said, "Elven-made! It is a very beautiful piece. Many people would pay a high price for such a fine dagger. What are you hoping to get for it?"

"A fair price," answered Donovan simply. "I came to you because you seemed honest to me..., at least, more so than any of the others I met."

The merchant smiled and replied, "I am a straightforward man, just trying to earn my way. To be honest, I'm not sure I can afford to give you what this dagger is truly worth. It is an exquisitely made weapon. You usually see weaponry like this as an ornamental piece in the houses of rich noblemen. Rarely does something this fine come across our counters."

Donovan smiled. "I want to deal with you. How much can you offer me for this dagger?"

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The merchant picked up the dagger again and turned it in his hands while he thought. “The best I can offer is fifty gold pieces and three hundred silver coins. You could get far more for it at one of the auctions.”

Donovan studied the man’s face for a moment and saw no deception in his eyes. He offered his hand and said, “You have a deal, friend.”

The merchant smiled broadly and shook Donovan’s hand vigorously. “You’ve made a good deal, sir. Allow me to assist you with anything else you may need. I can see that you’re new to the town—perhaps I can offer information on what shops and innkeepers are the best priced.”

“Thank you, that would be most helpful,” answered Donovan. “Do you, by chance, know of a reasonably priced dressmaker in town?”

The merchant stroked his chin and frowned. Finally, he answered, “Yes, I can recommend someone, but... why do you need female clothing, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It is for my wife,” answered Donovan. Brandela, unable to understand the language Donovan spoke with the merchant, had been still and quiet beside him during the exchange, but now looked up at him, quizzically, as she felt a small thrill reverberating from his heart to her own.

What had thrilled him, she wondered, looking from his face to the merchant’s for a clue.

“Your wife?” queried the merchant, puzzled.

Donovan considered the older man carefully for a moment, then turned to Brandela. To her utter surprise, he lowered the hood of her cloak and turned her slightly to face the merchant. The man’s eyes widened with shock as he took in the woman before him. Although dressed in strange, oversized, men’s clothing and utterly dusty and unkempt, she was stunning. Here stood a prize that would fetch more than a dozen Elven-made daggers on the auction block. He understood, without asking any further questions, why her husband was keeping her so covered.

The merchant smiled at Brandela and was rewarded with a radiant smile in return. He reached out and raised her hood, gently, and looked at Donovan. “Keep her safe,” he warned.

Donovan nodded his understanding and waited while the man regarded Brandela, stroking his chin as he thought.

“I know a woman who can be trusted to help you,” he said, finally. “I’ll take you to her myself.”

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Several minutes later they arrived at the dressmaker's shop. After a brief, hushed conversation with the woman, the merchant left them. The woman closed her shop and locked the door, then returned to them with a gentle smile.

"Shall we get started?" she asked Brandela.

Brandela looked from the woman to Donovan, unsure of what was expected of her.

Donovan's smile was gentle and adoring as he looked at his new wife, waiting for his direction with so much trust. "She doesn't understand our language," he explained to the woman.

The woman took Brandela's arm and led her to a side room where reams of fabric were stacked, and dresses in various states of completion were hanging. The woman gestured to a row of finished dresses and held up one of them to Brandela as though to size it.

Brandela's face flushed with excitement when she realized what they were doing, and she rushed back to Donovan and threw her arms around him. Donovan laughed and pushed her away, back toward the woman. Her smiles couldn't have pleased him more!

Brandela picked out a dark-green walking dress that hung loosely on her slender frame when she tried it on. The dressmaker tucked and pinned, then set to work to make the necessary adjustments. When Brandela tried it on again, it fit her perfectly. *Perhaps too perfectly*, thought Donovan as he took in the contours of her figure beneath the lines of the dress. *This is not going to make staying focused any easier.*

Brandela changed back into her Ranger's uniform and the dressmaker wrapped her dress for her. On the way to the inn that the merchant had suggested, Donovan stopped at several vendors' stalls and restocked their supplies. All Brandela wanted to do was get to a proper room with a bath and a bed and real food. Donovan was looking forward to the same, but wanted to be sure they were ready should the need arise to travel again quickly.

Donovan and Brandela feasted on thick, hot, hearty stew and fresh bread that night, and Brandela spent hours soaking and scrubbing in the rough, worn tub that came with their room. While she bathed, Donovan dozed on the thin mattress of their bed, thinking he'd never felt anything quite so comfortable. The room was certainly not fit for a princess, but Brandela had never felt so blessed and spoiled in her life.

The next morning, as they walked about town, taking in the sights and gathering the last of the supplies that Donovan wanted, Brandela bubbled over with joy. "Thank you so much! I love this

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dress. It is so much more comfortable than your deplorable attire.”

Donovan looked over at her and raised his eyebrows in the teasing expression Brandela had come to recognize and love. She wore his cloak and hood, still, over the new dress, but her radiant mood was shining through. “Well, now that you’re not making use of my clothing anymore, maybe I can actually wear them again. That is, if you haven’t managed to stretch them all out,” he joked.

Brandela laughed and replied, “I am far too happy for my mood to be ruined by your odious conduct. I’m sure you’re clothing will fit you a lot better than it ever did me.”

Donovan smiled at her bubbly mood. “We have all the supplies we need now,” he told her. “So, we can get moving toward the river tomorrow and start heading north. It’s going to take us about four more months before we reach the forest.”

Brandela’s smile faded as she thought about going home. Things had changed so much since that awful night in Eldergate. She had changed. What would it be like to return to her old life and all the old expectations? And how would Donovan fit into that life? She looked forward to returning to the safety of the forest and seeing her family but, for the moment, part of her wished they never had to return.

Donovan continued talking, explaining how they would cross the river once they arrived and..., He looked up to find Brandela with a faraway, sad expression on her face.

“What’s wrong, Princess? Are you missing home?”

She regarded him for a moment, surprised that he would assume this was the cause of her mood. Was he not feeling what she felt? Did the bonding only work for her? Maybe that’s why he had been so unclear about it the day before! And that would explain his playful response to the scantily dressed woman who had made advances on him outside the weapon dealer’s shop earlier. Brandela had been genuinely shocked by this because, as a bonded mate, she felt no attraction for anyone but her mate. Perhaps bonding didn’t work on humans. This sudden realization startled her...; she needed time to consider what it meant.

To distract him from her true feelings, she scowled at him and said, “I was just thinking about that woman that you seemed to like so much earlier.”

“What woman?” asked Donovan, completely puzzled by this turn of topic.

“The one giving you the vulgar view of her cow-like breasts. Have you forgotten her so soon?” The more she thought about it, the

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more she allowed jealousy to take hold. She could see the confusion on Donovan's face and she could feel it within her, but she ignored it. They needed to straighten this out!

Suddenly, Donovan grinned as he remembered who Brandela was talking about. His smile only infuriated her more.

"Perhaps you like human women better!" she snapped.

"No, Brandela, what are you talking about? I didn't like her. It's just that..."

"It's just that one woman won't be enough for you? Is that it?"

"No, I just..."

"Just couldn't keep your eyes off of her body!"

Donovan sighed, defeated by this strange new side of Brandela. He did not understand her mind at all and suspected that he still had a lot to learn about women, no matter which race.



*The
Kshearry River*



Chapter Eighteen



Donovan and Brandela travelled for another month before finally coming to the Kshearry River. They could hear it long before they caught their first glimpse of it, and knew they were approaching a major body of water by the steady increase in vegetation in the surrounding landscape. Finding small animals for their meals became easier—hares, snakes and various birds were abundant—and Donovan occasionally saw signs of larger animals and pointed them out to Brandela. They knew it was close but nothing prepared them for their first sighting of the mighty waterway.

The Upper Kshearry River was almost a quarter of a league across, running deep and quiet in places, and ferocious and violent in others. It was the second largest river on Ryahh and an awesome sight to behold, even for Donovan who had seen, and crossed it, several times before. For Brandela, it was simply overwhelming, especially when Donovan told her they would have to swim to the other side.

“We have to cross *that!*” Brandela whispered. Her eyes, watching the river rage around boulders and toss fallen trees along as though they were twigs, were wide and fearful.

Donovan turned and smiled reassuringly at her. “Not here,” he assured her. “We’ll find a quieter spot, and I’ll be with you the whole way. I won’t let anything happen to you. Besides, you’re strong. I know you can do this.”

Brandela looked at him and he could see the trust in her eyes. She relaxed slightly and smiled at him. “What about our supplies?” she asked.

“That’s why I bought the wax-covered bags back in town. They’re waterproof and they’ll float. It will all be fine.” Secretly, Donovan was also worried about the supplies, but for a different reason. He didn’t know if he would be strong enough to guide Brandela across the river and carry their supplies across as well. It would require a lot of effort on his part to do both, for the river’s current was strong and he knew that if she couldn’t make it most of the way on her own, he would have to abandon their supplies in order to save

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her. It would be a major loss at this point in their journey.

But, Brandela was a lot stronger than she looked. She had proven that enough times and Donovan had genuine faith that she would be able to handle this. Donovan had experienced her strong will firsthand many times by now, and he admired that about her. He was proud of the courage his wife had shown over the months that they'd been traveling. Few other women would have handled the situation as well, he knew. She seemed to grow stronger with each passing day, helping him more and keeping up better. If any woman could do this, she could.

They had to follow the river upstream for about three leagues before they got above the rapids and found calmer waters that offered a more suitable place for them to cross. Donovan studied his chosen spot for a long time and finally decided that it was probably the best they were going to get the next couple of days. It was time to get this over with!

"You'll need to strip down to your underclothing," he told Brandela. "Once we get to the other side, we'll have a fire and get dry and comfy before nightfall."

Brandela undressed and folded her dress into one of the wax bags without a word. Her eyes never left the dark expanse of water.

"It's going to be all right," Donovan reassured her, taking her hand and leading her into the river. They stood, calf deep, for a moment, adjusting to the chill of the water. Brandela "felt" for Donovan, needing his courage and strength. She sensed his confidence and his readiness and her own fears eased. She gave him a small nod to indicate that she was ready.

"Here we go, then." He smiled and led her into the deeper water.

Thirty minutes later, Donovan pulled Brandela onto the opposite bank. She was coughing up water furiously, but she was alive. Donovan had made sure of that. When they had caught their breath, he grinned over at her and said, "Well, at least you chose the end of the swim to get tired. I didn't have far to pull you."

Brandela open her eyes at the playful sound of his voice and scowled at him with mock annoyance. "If I didn't know better, I would think you wouldn't have missed me at all if I had been carried off by the current, never to be seen again."

"Oh, now, I would have missed you for at least a week..." he chuckled. As Brandela's eyebrows flew up in outrage, he added quickly, "...or two, or three maybe!"

Brandela leaped to her feet and chased Donovan along the riverbank, determined to punish her tormentor for his rudeness. Dono-

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van allowed her to catch him and when she ran into him, Donovan fell backwards, pulling Brandela down with him. She straddled his hips and pinned his chest with her hands. He waved his hands in mock surrender, laughing, until she pinned his hands to the ground.

“I surrender, Brandela. I am completely at your mercy.”

“Tell me that you would have missed me,” she insisted.

Chuckling, he teased, “Okay, okay..., a month then!”

With a growl, Brandela bit his neck and shoulders until he gave in, roaring with laughter, and told her he’d have been devastated if something had happened to her. It was true, and Brandela felt the truth of the words as he spoke them.

Brandela smiled down at him with delight. “Well, that deserves a reward. Perhaps I should have my wicked way with you.”

Donovan became suddenly, keenly, aware of Brandela’s position astride him. There was nothing between them but her wet undergarments. He placed his hands on her hips and felt her respond to his touch almost immediately. In a breathless voice, she laughed and said, “Not now! I swear, your appetite in this area of our marriage is insatiable.”

Donovan grinned at her and answered, “I’m glad you noticed, but I am merely a servant, humbly endeavoring to fulfill my husbandly duties.”

Brandela rolled her eyes and replied, “Well, my servant, it’s true that nothing would make me happier at the moment, but don’t you think we should set up camp first, and then worry about fulfilling your husbandly duties later?”

Donovan suddenly jumped to his feet, picking her up with him and throwing her across his shoulder. “A husband’s duties are never done,” he sighed.

Brandela laughed at his casual display of strength. He was as strong as a forest bear, although always remarkably gentle with her, as in the way he lowered her carefully to the ground now. He retrieved their bags, took her hand and led her to a nearby clearing where they would make camp for the night.

Later, with their camp in order and their passions sated, Donovan and Brandela cuddled before the fire and watched the sunset turn the river golden. Brandela sighed blissfully with the heat of the fire in front of her and the heat of Donovan behind her. She had never in her life suspected that it was possible to make love as often as she and Donovan did. His stamina was remarkable and she was, secretly, very pleased with the way this area of their marriage was going. It was far more fun than anything her mother had told her about!

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At moments like this, Brandela was overcome with love for Donovan, although she had yet to speak the words aloud. Ever since she had guessed the truth about the bonding spell, she had been plagued by doubts about whether he loved her in return, as she did him. She felt his affection, attraction, and protectiveness toward her, but was that love as she knew it? Tonight, it didn't matter and she pushed her worries aside. The main thing was, he respected and honored her with his actions and deeds and in this way he had already proven the depth of his caring for her. *He's a good man*, she thought as she began to fall asleep, wrapped safely in Donovan's arms.

Brandela woke the next morning, alone beside the smothered fire. She sat up to see where Donovan had taken himself and spotted him not far from the camp, peering down at something on the ground with a worried expression on his face. She dressed quickly and joined him.

"What is it?" she asked. She looked at the spot that he was studying so intently, but saw nothing of importance there.

Donovan lightly touched the ground where he was staring, and led her eyes to the lightly imprinted footprint of a large animal.

"What kind of animal do you think it is?" she asked.

Donovan frowned and replied, "I would say it's a kazzic wolf print."

"The wolves are trustworthy messengers," Brandela stated softly. "Are the kazzic wolves like our forest wolves?"

Donovan glanced at her, worried. She had no idea of the danger they were in. "The kazzics are not like our forest wolves," he told her. "They are much larger and they have no alliance to the Elven people..., or any other people I know of. I know of them only through rumors and stories. Some of the intruders we would repel from entering the Wood Elven forest wore hides made from these animals. They were massive, like the beast that made this track."

Brandela shivered, sensing the tension in Donovan with this new threat.

"It looks like he may have been here last night," Donovan added.

"Last night?" Brandela exclaimed. "You mean, while we were asleep?"

"Yes, this track is fresh. I would say the wolf came to the river to drink, scented us, and came to investigate. Perhaps the fire kept it from attacking, or it may have already fed, but I don't think we'll get as lucky a second time. Wolves grow bold quickly where an easy meal is involved. We'll have to keep our guard up from here on out."

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Brandela replied, "I'll do as you say, of course, but what if one does attack? Will we be all right?"

"The kazzic wolves in the Wildlands are solitary hunters, and I'm hoping this strain is the same. I can handle one, no matter what size it is, but we're probably safer to keep moving and leave this area as soon as we can."

Brandela nodded and answered cheerily, "Well then, I had better get us prepared to move on."

Donovan smiled at her. "Yes, you do that. I'm going to check around for more tracks. I'll be there to help soon."

Donovan followed the enormous tracks until he was in the deeper foliage. There, he found what he had hoped he wouldn't. The single tracks turn into the tracks of six or seven distinct wolves. The rumors he had heard about these kazzic wolves were true—they hunted in packs and could be a formidable and often deadly force.

They followed the river north for the next month, stopping only long enough to eat and rest briefly each night. Donovan built the campfires larger than usual. The threat of the wolves was greater than the threat of being seen by Garock now that they had crossed the river. In fact, Donovan had seen no sign that they were being followed for several weeks now. Perhaps Garock had given up. *No*, Donovan thought, *that would be a foolish assumption. Garock was not likely to give up such a lifesaving prize that easily.*

Although they were traveling at a difficult pace, Donovan and Brandela fared much better on this leg of the journey. Dehydration was no longer a concern, as it had been, constantly, on the plains, and food was far more abundant. Donovan was an excellent fisherman and often brought in a fat, red-bellied salmon for their evening meal. The meat was so tasty and rich—both Donovan and Brandela gained back a bit of lost weight and felt their strength renewed after a couple of weeks of this nutritious food supply.

As they feasted one evening, Brandela wondered aloud why they hadn't seen any sign of habitation on this side of the river.

"This area is used mainly by nomadic tribes," Donovan explained. "Most of their settlements are on the west side of the Kshearry River."

"I wonder why none of them settle here, with all this bounty?" Brandela held up a large chunk of salmon to make her point, then put the whole piece into her mouth in a most un-princess-like manner.

Donovan suspected that it had to do with the kazzic wolves, but he didn't want to alarm Brandela. He had watched for tracks every day, and it was clear that the wolves were quite aware that there

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were intruders in their territory and that they had been trailing them closely. Every morning, Donovan could see where the wolves had circled their camp, and every day it seemed that they dared to get a little closer.

For now, not wanting to discuss the wolves, Donovan suggested, "I suppose it has to do with trade routes. Most of the tribes are traders, and you can't do much trading if there's no one to trade with."

Several days later, Donovan decided that they would stop and make camp earlier than usual. They needed a day of rest. He had been pushing Brandela hard and he knew her well enough by now to know when she was beginning to show signs of fatigue. He planned to slow their pace for the next few days to give her a chance to recover, and then push on hard again until they had left this dangerous area.

As he started to gather timber to be used later in their campfire, he watched Brandela out of the corner of his eye as she headed to the river to "freshen up." He continued with his chores, gathering the wood, preparing a fire pit and lining their sleeping area with reeds. When he was finished, Brandela had not yet returned.

A twinge of concern pulled at his mind. Had something happened to her? Visions of her falling into the current, struggling until she disappeared beneath the dark surface flashed through his mind. Then, a picture of her kneeling at the side of the river, a kazzic wolf behind her, ready to attack. *He would have heard something*, he told himself. *She's fine*. But when she didn't return a few minutes later, he knew he couldn't leave it, and headed in the direction he had watched her go.

He was nearly jogging by the time he cleared the foliage and spotted her. So many horrible visions had flashed through his mind in the last few moments and relief rushed over him when he saw her. The live vision of her stopped him in his tracks and took his breath away.

Before him was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. Water swirled and sparkled in the quiet pool in which Brandela stood, bathing, without a stitch of clothing on her beautiful frame. Brandela's body glowed golden in the sun and her gleaming hair hung in a luxurious wet rope to her shapely behind. She was completely unaware of his presence as she hummed and cleaned herself in the river.

Brandela turned to find Donovan staring at her and she smiled at the expression on his face. She knew well what that look meant and she welcomed it. Donovan had been more distracted the past

couple of weeks, preoccupied and watchful. A bit of time for a more relaxing activity would do them both good!

She turned her back on him, pretending that she hadn't noticed him, and continued washing. This time, though, she slowly poured handfuls of water on her glistening body and bent and moved in what she hoped was a seductive manner. She didn't have to wait long to find out if she had succeeded.

Donovan couldn't take it anymore. He knew exactly what her game was and he didn't mind it one bit. He quickly pulled off his clothing and walked into the water, directly behind her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. She looked up at him with mock surprise and smiled innocently.

"I didn't notice you there, my Lord. How long have you been watching?"

Donovan growled his reply as he began nuzzling her neck. She had started using "my Lord" as a playful title when she was in the mood to be overpowered. The term that used to annoy him so much, now sent him into a fever.

He began caressing the parts of her that were most sensitive to his touch and allowed her to turn around and face him. He kissed her passionately, driving her senses to their breaking point, making her impatient for the release she knew he would give her. She took his hand and tried to lead them out of the water so they could make love on the shore, but Donovan held his ground, lifted her, and pulled her tightly against him. Brandela was shocked to suddenly, exquisitely, find herself astride Donovan. She was even more surprised when Donovan began making love to her right there in the river.

Chapter Nineteen



Later that night, as they cuddled in each other's arms and watched the flickering light of the campfire, Brandela twisted to look at Donovan and asked, "I've been wondering something. As your wife, what house am I now affiliated with?"

"What house?" Donovan repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, you know, like my father's house is the House of Oendale. When a maiden marries, she takes affiliation with her husband's house. What is your house name?"

"I don't have a house, Brandela. That's an Elven custom. Humans from the Wildlands don't generally have last names, unless they are earned through special deeds. I was too young at the time that I started living amongst the Elves to have earned a name."

Brandela frowned thoughtfully. "But what house will our children be raised under in the future? Elven citizens without a house are little more than outcasts."

Donovan said nothing to this for a long moment, then gently brought up the question she had invoked in his mind. "Brandela, four months ago, neither of us had any idea that an Elf could bond with a human. Are you sure that we're even capable of having children?" Brandela didn't reply right away. She had never really considered whether it was possible or not. She knew, from what her mother told her, that Elven maidens, once bonded to their mates, were able to become pregnant with their husband's seed. But what if the husband was not of the same race?

Finally, she replied, "I don't know. I've never really thought about it. But, even if we couldn't, I would count myself blessed to have you as my bonded mate."

They sat in thoughtful silence for a moment before she added, cheerfully, "Just in case we can, though, I want to be prepared. We should have a house name for our offspring and, if you don't have one, then we will just have to create one."

Donovan smiled at her enthusiasm. "Okay then," he replied, "what do you have in mind?"

Brandela thought for a long moment and then suggested, "Per-

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haps your house name should be the name of your kin.”

Donovan chuckled. “I guess, since I have no kin, that would make me Donovan, of the House of Donovan.”

Brandela laughed and readily admitted that perhaps it needed a little work.

Donovan kissed the top of her head and replied, “No, the House of Donovan isn’t a bad sounding name. It’s fine.”

Brandela was pleased with his response and glowed with Donovan’s approval. She snuggled closer to him and said, without thinking, “Donovan, I love you so much.”

A deafening silence fell between them and Brandela turned her face into Donovan’s chest to hide her embarrassment. Why had she let that slip? How could she ever look into his face again?

“I love you as well, my Princess,” he murmured.

Brandela lifted her head from his chest and looked into his eyes. Had she just heard what she thought she had heard? “What did you say?” she asked, incredulously.

“I said I love you, Princess.” He took a deep breath and laughed nervously as he exhaled. “I remember my father once telling me that love is not simply a feeling, but a choice. ‘You will know when you’re in love,’ he told me, ‘because some days you’ll want to kiss her and other days you’ll want to strangle her. As long as you want to kiss her more than strangle her, you’ll be fine.’” Donovan grinned at the memory and gazed intently at Brandela. “I haven’t wanted to strangle you once yet, so I guess, by my father’s standards, I’m in love.”

Brandela began laughing and tears of joy streamed down her face. “I knew I loved you within two weeks of knowing you,” she confessed. “I was so worried that you didn’t, or couldn’t, as a human, feel the same. I was so scared to tell you how I really felt, even after we had bonded. I still can’t quite believe this could be possible.”

Donovan smiled at her unabashed tears of joy and, as she poured her heart out to him, he marveled at the remarkable change she had undergone during their time together. The rigid and formal princess was now weeping openly, sharing all of her feelings and fears and joys with him. How fortunate he was to have a woman such as this who deeply loved and cared for him. She didn’t know it, but she completely filled the void of sadness that he had felt ever since Alayna’s death. He still thought about Alayna often and knew that Alayna would be pleased with his new wife if she could see what had become of him.

Brandela began kissing Donovan’s face, again and again and

again. She couldn't help herself—she was just so filled with happiness.

Donovan began to stir at Brandela's display of affection and she soon received the third shock of that day. Donovan's desire was burning yet again, even so soon after they had made love in the river. It was a fantastically pleasant surprise. She could think of nothing that she would rather be doing than making love to the man who loved her.

Donovan rolled on top of her with a wicked grin on his face and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his face to hers to kiss with all the passion she possessed. She couldn't possibly be any happier than she was at that moment with this man she loved with all her heart.



Several leagues north, up the Kshearry River, Garock stood, waiting. He was not in a good mood. He had been forced to abandon his encampment months earlier to avoid the wrath of his suppliers. All he had left were a few of his most trusted soldiers.

He longed for the time when he'd had thousands at the battle. How quickly everything had changed around him...and all because of one man. He never should've agreed to that deal, and now his only hope was to somehow get his hands back on that Elven princess. If he could get her back, there was still a chance that he could buy off his suppliers and, with some luck, he could get back to business as usual. He would rebuild and become even more powerful than he had ever been in the past.

His concentration was broken by the return of some of his men from their scouting mission south, along the Kshearry River. He watched in silence as they got off the floating log platforms, pulled the rafts to shore and headed towards him. They had found no signs of the prey so far, they reported.

Garock nodded his head and waved the men away. *They have to be heading north, he thought, and there's no way they would have gotten past this point yet. It's the only route through. Eventually, they'll come—and when they do, I'll be right here waiting for them.*

The man would die a slow and painful death; Garock would make sure of that, personally. He would get his revenge for all the trouble the unknown man had caused him. They would not escape this time; everything was in place. All he had to do was wait patiently and let them walk right into his hands.

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And this time he would not spare the princess. It had been months since he'd had a woman and he was in desperate need of one. He didn't touch her the first time, tempting as she was, because he thought it might hurt her resale value. But now, he didn't care. Times had been too hard and he doubted if his suppliers would care if she was damaged goods or not. Yes, he would have his way with her this time and it would not be pleasurable for her. He grinned as he imagined her pleading and her delightful whimpers and cries. *It's simply a matter of time*, he thought.



Downstream, Donovan and Brandela prepared to continue their northward journey, and Garock was far from Donovan's mind. Wolf tracks circled their campsite, closer than ever, and larger. Donovan had taken some comfort in the knowledge that most animals feared fire. As long as he kept the fire burning, he had felt confident that he could keep Brandela safe. But these wolves were growing rapidly bolder and he wasn't sure the fire would be enough for much longer. Sooner or later, he would have to confront the animals. It was time to make Brandela aware of the danger they faced.

Brandela was very quiet while she listened to Donovan telling her about the wolves. She listened to his words as he told her everything he knew and understood and guessed about the kazzic wolves' behavior and what they might do. And she listened to his heart and felt the deep concern for their safety, for her safety.

"I think the best course of action would be to confront them and scare them off. If we don't, they may become bold enough to attack us while we're sleeping. It wasn't a problem before as long as we had a fire going, but now I'm not so sure that it's enough anymore."

"When do you want to set this trap of yours?" asked Brandela, quietly.

"Tonight," answered Donovan. "Once we set up camp tonight, I'll hide well back from the fire. I'll disguise my scent with river mud and position myself downwind from you. I should be able to hear them once they start making their way toward the camp."

Brandela frowned. "And if they choose, tonight, to disregard their inherent fear of fire and come after me?"

Donovan smiled at her transparent attempt to discourage his plan. "I'll leave you my short sword and you make sure to scream as loudly as you can. It'll startle them and give me time to get to you."

Brandela did not reply immediately but looked at Donovan with

The Kshearry River

serious eyes. Her voice was barely more than a whisper when she asked, "And what about you? Who is going to save you if you get into trouble?"

Donovan laughed out loud. "I'll save me! Or have you forgotten that I am a highly trained warrior? As long as I have my bow and broadsword I'll be fine, trust me on this."

Brandela did not look placated by his answer. In fact, she was becoming increasingly agitated as he spoke. "I trust your skills as a warrior, but I would rather you did not go off risking your life," she said in a clipped voice.

Donovan raised his eyebrows, amused by her silly reaction. His expression angered her and she was nearly yelling when she said, "I'm serious, Donovan. I understand that you must keep us safe, but one of your duties as my husband is to stay by my side. How can you do that if you're deliberately putting yourself in harm's way?"

Donovan pulled her into his arms, trying to comfort her. He could feel her trembling and realized, finally, just how afraid she was. "It's all right," he soothed. "Nothing is going to happen to you, my love. I won't let anyone or anything hurt you. I promise."

Brandela pulled away from him and looked up at him with a wounded expression. "I'm not afraid for myself, you daft man. I'm afraid for you. I fear you may never return to me. If you get yourself killed, I'll never forgive you."

Donovan pulled her close again and rested his chin atop her head. She was being so sweet and foolish right now. He would never fully understand how her mind worked.

"Nothing will happen to me," he promised her. "I will always manage to make my way back to you."

"You'd better," answered Brandela softly as she squeezed him tightly.



Sacrifice



Chapter Twenty



By the time the sun set that night, Donovan was settled in his hiding spot in a dense thicket not far from the camp. He could see glimpses through the bushes of the fire he had built for Brandela, but he was too far away to see or hear her at the campsite.

The river mud irritated his skin and made it hard for him to remain still, although he knew that even the tiniest motion could alert any wild creature that happened to be close by. Alayna had taught him mind control strategies that he put to use now to help him ignore his discomfort and focus on the task at hand. He concentrated on the sounds around him, alert to the rushing of the river and the rustles and whispers of the grass and woods.

He sat that way—itchy and cramped but focused and alert—for several hours before he heard the faint rustling of grass to his right. It was different than any sound he'd heard up until then and instinct told him that it was time to move. He slowly and silently slipped from his hiding place and moved toward the sound, keenly alert and ready for whatever he might see. Still, nothing prepared him for the sight of the huge, black creature that came out of the shadows before him.

The wolf stood at least five feet at the shoulder and was certainly the biggest wolf Donovan had ever seen in his entire life. Its eyes reflected the moonlight and shone red. Donovan had faced fierce creatures in the past, had fought vicious foes in battles and had no fear of death, but in that moment, a shiver shot down his spine. He had never faced anything quite like this.

To Donovan's relief, the kazzic wolf had not yet noticed him, giving him a moment to steady his nerves and prepare his next move. Donovan notched an arrow into his bow and took aim. His bow made the slightest creaking sound as he pulled it back, but it was enough to alert the animal and it turned to face Donovan, fangs bared.

Donovan quickly released the first arrow and notched another. As the wolf charged toward him, Donovan released a rapid succession of arrows, each one hitting its mark accurately. The wolf stag-

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gered forward until it could go no further and crashed at Donovan's feet. Donovan felt a deep respect for the brave creature and was saddened as he watched the dying wolf gasping for its last breaths. In one swift motion, he pulled his blade and sliced the beast's throat, instantly ending his suffering.

Donovan heard growling behind him. He spun around with his weapon raised and was confronted by five kazzic wolves, almost as large as the one he had just killed. They began to circle him, spreading out to surround him. Donovan knew he would not be able to defend himself if he allowed so many wolves the chance to surround him, so as soon as the animal to his right began to leave his line of vision, he ran toward it, swung his blade down as fast as he could, and cut into the wolf's shoulder. The animal yelped in pain and dragged himself away.

Donovan sidestepped to avoid a wolf who charged him from behind, slashing his blade in an arcing motion and catching the wolf as it passed. He turned and thrust his blade forward at the next animal, but it backed up, just out of reach.

There were three wolves left now, circling, crouching, and growling. Donovan knew that the next attack would come from his unguarded back and he waited patiently for the wolves to make their move. He didn't have to wait long. Donovan sidestepped and slashed into the chest of the charging wolf, sending him sprawling and yelping in agony.

Immediately, the final two jumped at Donovan. He was able to get his blade up just in time to thrust it into the throat of one of the oncoming creatures, but the other wolf managed to snap down onto Donovan's arm. With a roar, Donovan pulled his blade from the dead wolf's corpse, struggling against the crippling pain as the final wolf tried to drag him to the ground. If he fell, he would never rise, he knew, and Brandela would be alone and vulnerable, and would never forgive him.

With a mighty effort, he raised the arm that the wolf was gripping, exposing the creature's tender neck. Donovan showed no mercy and thrust his blade deep into the wolf's throat. The wolf jerked back in pain, releasing Donovan's damaged arm. Donovan sank to his knees and watched as the wolf staggered across the clearing, trying to get back to its den, Donovan's blade still sticking out of its neck. It didn't get far and soon collapsed.

Donovan remained on his knees for some time, catching his breath and trying to block out the pain as it rushed through him in agonizing waves. Finally, he stood and made his way to the fallen

wolf to retrieve his blade. He used it as a makeshift cane to support himself as he walked back to camp and to Brandela, who had heard the commotion and was waiting for him anxiously.

Brandela watched, horrified, as Donovan made his way back to her. His shirt was soaked with blood and his left arm looked mangled beyond repair. She rushed toward him and helped support him. Blood poured from his arm. Beneath the mud, she could see that he was very pale and drops of sweat beaded his face. He barely made it to camp before he dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Brandela rolled him onto his back to check if he was still breathing. His breaths were coming fast and shallow. She ran for their jug of water and began to wipe the mud from his skin, checking him all over for injuries. When she saw that all the damage was in his arm, she sighed with relief. This, she could deal with!

She tore long strips of cloth from her dress, using the Elven-made short blade Donovan had given her. She positioned a strip on his upper arm, above the wound, and tied it as tightly as she could to cut off the circulation to his arm. The flow of blood slowed almost immediately. She cleaned the jagged wounds with clear water until she was satisfied, beginning to pray softly as she worked.

The chanted prayers, beseeching the Elven Elders for their aid and powers, grew louder and clearer as she set the water aside and closed her eyes, her hands hovering above Donovan's wounds. She drew upon the Healing spell, allowing her own life energy to flow into Donovan's damaged body, and she could soon sense him becoming more at ease. His breaths deepened and she "felt," inside her own chest, his heart slow into a more normal rhythm.

Donovan began to stir and slowly became aware of a warm, tingling sensation and a soothing heat in his arm. He opened his eyes and saw Brandela crouched beside him. Her lips moved silently and a white light glowed from her hands. The heat he was feeling was coming from that light, he realized.

He grew agitated, willing her to stop, but he was too weak yet to move more than his fingers. Alayna had used the Elven Healing spell on them often for their various wounds and had taught him enough for him to understand the danger Brandela was now putting herself in. She did not possess a rune crystal pendant, and without that she would need to use her own life energy to make the magic work. She was draining her own life away to save his. He called out, weakly, for her to stop but she continued chanting as if she could not hear him.

He felt his broken bones began to knit into place and his mus-

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cles began to repair themselves. Slowly, his strength returned until he was able to lift himself into a sitting position. He grabbed Brandela by her shoulders then and shook her, hard.

“Stop, Brandela. It’s enough. I’m okay.”

Brandela stop chanting and slowly opened her eyes. She was sweating profusely and looked dazed. When she was able to focus enough to make eye contact with Donovan, she simply smiled and said, “Good, it worked.”

It was the first time Donovan had felt angry with her and his voice quivered with emotion as he scolded her. “What were you trying to do, kill yourself? That was very dangerous, Brandela, what you just did!”

“It would only have been dangerous if I had continued,” Brandela answered calmly. “As I am no longer in the act of using magic, I am no longer in danger. And neither are you.”

Donovan frowned back and snapped, “Don’t ever do anything like that again. It was an unnecessary risk.”

Brandela stared at him, growing quickly annoyed by his tone. “You’re one to talk about taking risks,” she argued. “You were bleeding all over the place. What did you expect me to do, sit back and watch you die? I will obey you in many things, Donovan, but never that. I won’t let you die if there is something I can do about it. It’s no less than what you have done for me on many occasions.”

The color had drained from Brandela’s face with the energy it took to argue, and Donovan got up and fetched the water jug. He ordered her to drink and held the jug to her lips, refusing to take no for an answer. Brandela quenched her thirst and became very sleepy.

Donovan retrieved the blanket and gathered Brandela into his arms, with the blanket wrapped around both of them. Within minutes, they were both sleeping more deeply than they had at any time during their journey.

They stayed on at that site for several days, resting and regaining their strength, but soon they were making their way northward again, heading for the Wood Elven forest.

For the next two months, their lives became a steady pattern—rising and breaking camp in the early dawn light, traveling for most of the day except for small rest breaks, stopping to hunt or fish in the late afternoon, then continuing on until they found a suitable place to set up camp for the night. It was grueling, exhausting, and monotonous, but both Donovan and Brandela had grown to love it. They had long conversations as they walked—sometimes serious and sometimes silly—and often, their passion for each other flared.

They were happy having each other for company, and neither of them liked to think too much about what would happen when they made it back to Alderwood.

Then one day, Donovan spotted something on the river that changed everything. In the distance, upstream, was a raft carrying four men, men dressed in the uniforms of Garock's army.

Donovan pulled Brandela into the foliage and they waited there, silently, until the raft had floated past. So he had been right then. Garock *was* still looking for them.

"Garock's men?" asked Brandela.

Donovan sighed and looked at her. She was so beautiful, even after all these months of traveling through the wilderness. He would never let Garock get his hands on her.

"Garock's probably set up an ambush for us farther upstream," said Donovan. "He knows that there's only one main route heading north, and he knows that north is the only way for us to get to the Wood Elven forest. He'll have scouts out all over. We won't be able to hide our presence from him for long. We need to use an alternative route."

"But you just said there's only one route," questioned Brandela.

"I said Garock knows of only one route. Akenji and I were assigned a mission up here years ago; there is another way that only he and I know about. There's a canyon just beyond those foothills, there," he said, pointing to where he meant. "Akenji and I discovered an opening in the canyon that leads to a shallow river crossing. It'll mean traveling fast for a few days—we must reach the opening before they discover us, but I think we can do it. Once we cross back over, we've made it. The Wood Elven forest is less than half a league from the crossing."

"But how will we avoid Garock and his men until we get there?" asked Brandela. "We don't know where he has set up his ambush. What if we walk right into it?"

"We need to head inland for a while—northeast," explained Donovan. "The foliage is thicker inland. It'll slow us down and make it easier for Garock's men to track us, but if we can go quickly enough, we can get past them before they realize that we're there. We'll have to be as careful as we can, and as fast as we can."

Brandela listened intently and nodded her head in agreement. She knew that the best thing for her to do right now was to cooperate because there was no other course of action. It was all or nothing; they had only one chance ahead of them now.

For the next few days, they travelled only at night, taking turns

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at keeping watch for soldiers during the day. On the fourth evening, they found signs of an enemy camp. Donovan swore when he spotted it. The enemy was close and it would only be a matter of time before they were discovered. Donovan gripped Brandela's hand tightly and began to lead her past the camp.

Suddenly, two soldiers came rushing out of the shadows. Donovan shoved Brandela aside and brandished his broadsword. He parried one of the enemy's incoming blows and quickly sidestepped to the right, moving the engaged soldier between himself and the second soldier.

Donovan began to hammer blows into the first attacker's wooden shield, rendering it into splinters and soon leaving the soldier unguarded. Donovan slammed one mighty blow directly into the man's head, killing him instantly. Then he spun to face the second soldier.

Donovan and the soldier squared off for a long moment before the soldier turned and began to run away, shouting for his comrades. Donovan threw his broadsword towards the fleeing soldier, hitting him directly between the shoulder blades. The man dropped to the ground, dragged himself forwards a short way, and then collapsed.

When Donovan was sure that the man was dead, he removed his sword and looked for Brandela. He found her hiding in the brush with his Elven short sword in her hand, looking as if she were ready to use it if the need arose. She was trembling and he smiled at her reassuringly.

"Two less men to worry about," he joked, leading her out of her hiding spot. She continued to grip her blade tensely, looking around as though expecting more soldiers to appear.

"Put your blade away, Princess. You won't need it." Brandela did as he told her and followed him as he led her deeper into the bush, heading north. Donovan knew it was only a matter of time now before the enemy found the two dead bodies. Speed was essential now if they had any hope of making it to the canyon. From here on, they would travel day and night, stopping only when absolutely necessary.

They made it to the canyon late the next day. Donovan knew exactly where the entrance to the passage was and he hoped they could still make it into the passage before they were spotted. He knew Garock must be close though, and urged Brandela to run faster as they crossed the final clearing toward the canyon's passage. They were almost halfway there when Donovan heard a horn blowing in the distance and knew their time had run out. They had been spotted

and the canyon would soon be flooded with every soldier Garock had in the area.

They had made it into the passage of the canyon and were heading toward the river when Donovan pulled them to a stop. It took a few moments until they stopped gasping for breath and Donovan was able to speak.

“Brandela, we will not make it through to the other side before they run us down. I’m going to stay back and hold them off. I want you to continue making your way out of the passage and toward the river. You won’t have any problem crossing it on your own—it’s very shallow here. Once you’ve made it across, head northwest, into the forest. Don’t stop until you are safely within the forest. I’ll catch up with you once I’m done here.”

“No,” Brandela protested angrily. “I will not be separated from you again. Every time, I’m so afraid that you won’t come back to me. I will not leave you! We either make it out together, or not at all.”

Donovan sighed. They did not have time to argue. “I’ve always made it back to you, haven’t I? I have no intentions of dying here today. I have faced worse and survived. You must see, this is the only way.”

Brandela continued to shake her head, tears welling up in her beautiful eyes.

“I’m sorry, my Princess. They’ll be getting close. You must go.”

Brandela opened her mouth to reply but Donovan cut her off. “Brandela, please do not let my sacrifice for you be in vain. I love you. I would see you safe. No more arguing; there’s no time. I promise not to risk my life needlessly. If I can get out without engaging, I will.”

“I’ll be waiting for you, my Lord,” Brandela whispered, weeping openly.

Donovan wiped her tears with the pads of his thumbs and kissed her with all the passion and longing he possessed. Brandela did not want the kiss to end and when Donovan began to pull away, Brandela held him tighter. “I love you,” she cried. “I have never loved anyone as much as I love you. Please come back to me.”

She released him and without another word, turned and starting running toward the river. Donovan watched her go for a moment, then

positioned his Elven bow, notched an arrow and waited. It wasn’t long before the enemy soldiers started making their way into the passage and Donovan released his first arrow.

Chapter Twenty One



A half hour later, Donovan was out of arrows. He had managed to reduce the small army by eleven men and held off the others, giving Brandela a chance to get away. Now, he picked up his broadsword as the first of the remaining soldiers rushed toward him for a direct attack.

Donovan held his ground until the first man drew near, then stepped out of the soldier's path at the last minute, flicking his blade down toward the enemy's unprotected ankle at the same time. Donovan's sword sliced deep, through muscle, tendon, and bone. The man collapsed under his own weight and Donovan quickly took advantage, plunging his blade point directly into the back of the man's neck.

His next opponent came at him from behind. With a blinding burst of speed, Donovan twirled out of his way and clipped the man's foot while he passed. The soldier stumbled and lost his balance, giving Donovan an opening. Donovan swung his blade downward across the enemy's unprotected back, cutting deep.

Donovan turned and parried a sword thrust that had been aimed at his back. He batted the blows of his new opponent aside and, with all his strength, rammed his body directly into the soldier's shield, driving the man backward and causing him to stumble over one of his comrade's bodies. As the soldier fell, Donovan delivered a well-placed sword thrust into the man's throat. He twisted the blade and pulled it out of the enemy's now lifeless body.

Donovan spun around, seeking his next attacker, but found none. There were about a dozen men left, but they stood back, watching him and waiting. *For what..., or who?* Donovan wondered. He took advantage of the lull to catch his breath and refocus. He had a feeling that whoever they were waiting for would put him to the test.

Moments later, a giant of a man came marching into the passage. Donovan recognized him at once. It was Garock! Garock had a grin on his face, as though he expected to take great pleasure in what was coming. Garock charged towards Donovan without hesitation, his shield directly in front of him. Donovan knew exactly what

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he intended to do; Garock was going to try to ram him. Donovan smiled. Here, at last, was his chance to avenge Alayna's murder at the hands of this evil man. He, too, welcomed this battle.

Donovan quickly sidestepped Garock's attack and spun his blade downward, only to have it clip Garock's shield. Garock, although large, was remarkably agile, and had turned towards Donovan at the last possible moment. Garock began to hammer ax blows towards Donovan. Donovan sidestepped most of the attacks and batted aside the others. They were well matched and the fighting was fierce between the two men.

The watching soldiers began to place wagers on the outcome of the fight. Donovan knew that he was in the fight of his life. It was a fight he had every intention of winning. Still, he realized that even if he won this fight, there was no way he was getting out of this alive. The others would be much too eager to finish the job. For a moment, his mind went to Brandela. Could she "feel" what was happening? He hoped not. If only he could see her just one more time.

An ax blow narrowly missed his face, bringing Donovan back to the moment. He could not afford to let his mind wander. He put all stray thoughts aside and focused all of his will and energy on killing Garock.

Garock was impressed. Never before had he faced an enemy with so much skill, except for the Elven woman during that last fateful battle. He hated to admit it, but he wasn't sure he was going to come out of this alive. Garock knew he could not be matched in strength by any man, but this Ranger's speed and skill with the broadsword was like nothing he'd ever seen. Garock would attack with an ax blow and the Ranger would bat his blow aside or completely avoid it, and then counter with two additional blows on his shield. Without his shield, it would be much harder for him to fend off this Ranger's attacks, but he was confident that the iron-plated shield he was using would hold up against anything the Ranger could offer. It would come down to stamina, and when this Ranger tired out, Garock would have him.

Donovan was beginning to come to the same conclusion. His maneuvers were having little effect on Garock. He would have to come up with something more clever if he hoped to win this battle.

Donovan started to make his blows a little less swift and began to act as if he were tiring. Garock noticed the slight change in the speed of his opponent's attack and flew, full force, at Donovan, hammering ax blow after ax blow without letting up on Donovan for one moment.

Donovan stumbled, deliberately, and feigned signs of fatigue

and Garock came on even more fiercely, using every ounce of energy in his belief that the end was drawing near. But Garock was also tiring now and starting to get sloppy in his attacks, paying less attention to defending himself.

Finally, the moment came when Donovan saw his chance. Garock tried to ram Donovan up against the canyon wall, but Donovan had been reserving his energy for just such a moment. With blinding speed, he leaped aside, causing Garock to run directly into the wall. It stunned the man for a precious second, but that second was all it took for Donovan's blade to pierce through Garock's shield arm and thrust into his side.

Garock, now bleeding heavily, dropped his shield. Donovan knew it was only a matter of time now. With a roar, Garock tried, in one last, desperate attempt, to ram his body into Donovan, but found himself hitting nothing but thin air. Donovan stepped aside and brought his blade across Garock's upper leg. The giant man collapsed. Donovan swiftly thrust his sword into Garock's upper back, piercing straight through his entire body.

Donovan saw the other soldiers charging toward him, but he didn't care now. He had slain the man who had murdered Alayna and now he could die in peace. His last thoughts were of Brandela and how he wished he had more time to say goodbye.



Brandela ran frantically, as fast as she could. She cleared the passage and charged into the waist-deep water of the river. The water, pulling at her legs, slowed her down, but soon she was at the other side and picking up speed again as she raced for the tree-line. The Wood Elven forest—her home!

She was about half way there when she was stopped in her tracks by a sudden, heartwrenching sense of loss. She felt as if the fabric of her subconscious had been torn in two. She could no longer sense Donovan's presence. She fell to her knees and let out an agonized moan. Sobs wracked her body for several minutes before she was able to regain any kind of control.

She was brought back to her senses by the sound of someone splashing through the river. She turned, praying against all hope that she would see Donovan coming toward her. But the man close behind her wore Garock's uniform.

She stood and for a moment she was torn. What would her life be like now without Donovan? Was returning to the noble life what

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she really wanted? She didn't want to be a slave to Garock and his men—that she was sure of. She would not dishonor the memory of her beloved by letting his sacrifice be for nothing. She turned, and with a renewed determination, she began racing toward the forest line. She made it in, paused for a moment to get her bearings and began running in what she thought to be a northwesterly direction.

Garock's second-in-command was giving the orders now and he wanted Brandela for himself. Now that Garock was dead, he was the boss and he would do whatever he had to do to get the princess back. When he had her in his possession, he would use her as he pleased. And once he was done with her, then maybe he would ransom her back to her people and start a raiding band of his own. He watched as she slipped into the cover of the forest. She was so close. He couldn't let her get away now.

He hesitated at the edge of the forest for only a moment before he and his men followed. Surely, he could catch her before any of the Wood Elven scouts had even been alerted.

Brandela ran until she thought her lungs would burst. She knew she would not be able to keep up this maddening pace for much longer. Still, she continued to push herself, willing her body to take her deeper into the protective arms of the forest.

Brandela ran until her legs gave out, but as she was picking herself up off the ground, she could hear her pursuers closing in behind her. She couldn't escape them. They were much too close. Part of her did not care if they killed her. Now that Donovan was dead, she felt she had nothing else to live for. And yet, she would not let them take her as their prisoner again. She would fight with every ounce of strength she had left.

Unknown to Brandela or her pursuers, a large, cloaked figure was observing the chase from a distance. Akenji saw the moment when the trespassers entered the forest, and he watched now as the small group of men pursued their prey. His men were already in position and surrounding this whole area; all he had to do was give the order and all these intruders would die. He would wait, though, and see if they would leave peacefully when they had captured the one being pursued.

Akenji watched as the young woman was knocked down by a larger man, and dragged back to her feet by her hair. He didn't like what he was seeing, but he could not interfere with human activities. If they approached the humans, they would have to kill them. It was Lord Aden's rule. So, for now, he watched, ready to give the signal if it became necessary.

The woman was much smaller than her attacker. Something about her stature reminded him of Alayna and a jolt of sorrow ran through him. He wondered what had become of Donovan. Not a day went by that he didn't miss his friend and hope for his safe return.

Akenji was surprised by what the woman did next. She kicked the man between his legs, sending him to the ground in a crumpled, groaning heap. As Akenji looked on, the woman took out a thin-bladed short sword and began frantically hacking at the downed man. She slashed and prodded any vulnerable place she could reach. Soon, the downed man stopped moving altogether and, right at that moment, five other men crashed into the clearing.

When they saw their leader down and dead, they stared at the woman in shock. They couldn't believe that she had been able to kill such a skilled warrior by herself. Akenji couldn't blame them for their disbelief. He wouldn't have believed it himself if he had not seen it with his own eyes.

The woman turned to face her new attackers with her short sword raised. Her entire body was splattered with the blood of the man she had just killed and she had a furious, wild-eyed look on her face. Akenji thought she looked like she was ready to face her death. She had no fear.

Right at that moment, a gust of wind blew away the headscarf the woman was wearing and Akenji saw the pronounced, pointed ears. She was an Elf! He raised his fist in the air and gave out rapid fire hand signals to his watchmen to not harm the woman. He waited a moment longer, then gave the signal to attack.

The attack was swift, silent and deadly. Brandela didn't know what was going on. All of a sudden, arrows came flying out of nowhere and, within minutes, all five men were on the ground, dead or dying. She looked around frantically for the source of the arrows but could not see anyone at all.

Then a man appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, walking through the trees towards her. He was a large man and he wore a green cloak like that of Donovan. A Ranger! She was amongst her own people and was finally safe now. Before he could reach her, she collapsed with fatigue and emotional exhaustion. It would be late the next day before she regained consciousness.

She woke to the sound of a strange voice with an accent that was somewhat similar to the way Donovan spoke. She opened her eyes and saw the biggest man she had ever seen. He had brown skin and gray eyes and was human. She immediately thought she had been captured again by the Barbarians and she cried out in despair.

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But another man spoke, using the Elven language and said, “It’s okay. Akenji always has that effect on people at first. Don’t worry about him; he won’t hurt you—except if he’s hungry enough, he might eat you.” The other men in the room laughed, but Akenji gazed at her seriously.

In a deep voice, he told her, “You are amongst friends here. I am Akenji. I can tell from your looks that you are obviously a Wood Elf, but I don’t understand why you would be all the way out here in the wilderness, away from your people.”

“You are Akenji?” gasped Brandela. Donovan had told her so much about this man, his best friend. This must be Donovan’s band of the Elven-trained human Rangers. How could she tell them that Donovan was gone? She began to weep once again for her loss. She could hardly believe how much she already missed him.



The Return



Chapter Twenty Two



Akenji was puzzled by the Elven woman's tears. He had been raised in a society of boys—now men—and, except for the day that Alayna had been killed, he hadn't seen such an emotional reaction in years. He had no idea what to say or do to comfort her, so he said nothing and simply allowed her to lean against him and cry herself out.

When the woman had regained control again, Akenji gently prodded her for answers to his previous questions.

"I am Princess Brandela," she began, and gradually, she told them the entire story..., from the event of her kidnap, to the long months with the Barbarians, Donovan's daring rescue and their eventful journey across the Wildlands. She left out nothing and only hesitated once, at the end, when Akenji, impatient for news of his friend, asked, "And where is Donovan now?"

Brandela looked at him for a long moment, knowing her news would be painful for him, hating to be the one to cause that pain. Finally, she lowered her eyes and whispered, "I believe he is dead."

"Are you certain of that?" asked Akenji, his voice husky, almost angry. "Is there any possible way you could be mistaken?"

"No. As I told you, I had bonded with him. I could feel him within me and I felt the moment of his death. He died to save me. I'm so sorry." Once again, her eyes filled with tears, but Akenji quickly soothed her.

"This is sad news, my Lady. Donovan was my closest friend. But I am happy that you are safe. It is what Donovan wanted. You must not blame yourself. There will be an appropriate time to mourn his passing, but first we must finish the job he was trying to do and get you home to your family."

Akenji sent a runner to Weeping Tree Outpost with a message that high Lord Aden's daughter had returned to the forest. The runners there would take the message to Alderwood.

In the week that passed, as they waited for word from Lord Aden, Brandela grew to know the men of Donovan's world very well, and was once again surprised to find that humans were not

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nearly as horrible as she had been raised to believe. In fact, these men seemed to live by an honor code that nearly rivaled that of her own people. When the message finally arrived, ordering the human Rangers to escort Brandela to Weeping Tree Outpost, Brandela received the news with mixed emotions. As much as she longed to see her family, she knew that things would never be the same. She was no longer the innocent maiden who had disappeared. How would she find her place now?

Her maidservants would be sent ahead to prepare for her arrival and provide for her comfort, the message informed them. Brandela had often thought about that group of women and wondered what had become of them in the months since they had been separated. She hadn't even had a chance to get to know them. She wondered, especially, about the girl, Kerala. She had felt a particularly close bond with her and looked forward, now, to seeing her again. Lord Aden told them to expect his arrival about a week later, sooner if he could manage it.

At Weeping Tree Outpost, Brandela was overwhelmed to have so many people around her again, waiting for her every word and command, caring for her every need and desire. For so many months, it had been just she and Donovan. She had grown accustomed to the quiet and to taking care of her own needs, and taking care of another. What used to be so normal for her was now quite disconcerting.

The young woman, Kerala, whom she had appointed head maidservant, approached the princess at the end of Brandela's first day at the Outpost. Brandela sat in her room, staring out of the window, lost in memories of Donovan. Kerala, not wanting to startle her, stopped in her doorway and called to her softly. "Princess Brandela, may I speak with you for a moment, please?"

Brandela looked around and smiled when she saw who her visitor was. Such an unusual face, with her auburn hair and hazel eyes..., and those lovely freckles. Something about the girl was refreshing to Brandela and instantly made her feel better. She gestured for Kerala to join her, and Kerala approached, curtsied respectfully, and sat across from Brandela.

"Are you comfortable, my Lady?" began Kerala.

Brandela sighed, unable to put into words what was in her heart. She looked down at her fresh green-and-white dress and touched her hair, washed and bound in a shining ponytail. Physically, she was cleaner and more comfortable than she'd been in months. And yet...

"I am sensing a great sadness in you, my Lady. Is there anything I can do to help?"

“Not unless you can bring back the dead,” answered Brandela. They sat in silence for a while before Brandela continued. “I’m sorry to seem so melancholy at a time when we should be rejoicing. Coming home has somehow made what I have lost seem so much greater.”

Kerala listened patiently, her expression somewhat puzzled.

Brandela looked at her with eyes full of pain and confusion. “Kerala, have you ever loved someone so much that you felt you would never be whole again without their presence?”

“No, Mistress,” Kerala whispered.

“I just wish the pain of loss was easier to deal with,” sighed Brandela. “This pain is nearly unbearable tonight.”

Kerala remembered one of the Proverbs of the Elders and quoted, softly, “Things that come easy, when examined through the lens of time, often prove to be of little importance and are worthy of even less regard.”

Brandela smiled. “I chose well when I chose you, Kerala. You are a comfort. Thank you.”



Four days later, Kerala brought Brandela a message that her mother, high Lady Alousia, would soon be arriving at the Outpost. Instead of the excitement and happiness that Brandela had expected such news to bring her, she was suddenly nervous and anxious. How would she explain what had happened?

Later that day, Lady Alousia was led into Brandela’s quarters. In the few moments before they embraced, her mother took in the fatigue and stress in her daughter’s face, the weight she had lost, the sadness in her eyes. The months and all she had experienced at the hands of the slavers had taken their toll. Still, she was home!

Lady Alousia pulled out of their embrace and smiled warmly at her youngest daughter. “It is so good see you alive,” she exclaimed. “If it wasn’t for the fact that your servants were still alive, I might have given up hope of ever seeing you again.”

Brandela smiled halfheartedly, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m happy to see you too, mother,” she answered politely.

Lady Alousia frowned and placed her hand on Brandela’s forehead to check her temperature. She studied her face, searching, with a mother’s eye, for signs of illness that might explain her daughter’s lack of enthusiasm. She seemed physically well, so it must be something deeper.

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“You seem troubled,” she said, gently. “I expected that you would be overjoyed to be home after all these many months. Did the slavers harm you, Brandela? What happened? You seem very different?”

Brandela looked away and sighed. “I will explain everything once father arrives,” she said. It would be easier to tell the story just once and deal with their reactions then.

High Lady Alousia nodded, respecting her daughter’s choice to keep whatever it was that was bothering her to herself for now. She motioned for one of her servants to bring a small, heavily engraved wooden box into the room and, trying to change the subject and the mood of their meeting, she gave Brandela a conspiratorial smile and held the box out to her.

“I’ve been saving this for your safe return, my daughter. It’s a special gift.”

Brandela looked at the box in her mother’s hands and, with a knot forming in her stomach, gently took it from her.

“Open it,” urged her mother.

Inside the box, a small rune crystal in the form of one of the green rosebuds that were native to the Wood Elven forest lay nestled on a velvet cushion. Brandela knew at once that it was her bonding stone. The bonding stones were the symbol of an Elven matriarch’s authority and power within an Elven household. The Elven nobility used the stones in a system of procreation that they called “organized breeding,” used to produce a supply of the best Elven servants for their children.

Bonding stones were used as a medium to activate the bonding magic that every Elven being possessed within them. Elven servants could not be forced to marry, but they could be ordered to, and good Elven servants would not disobey the orders of their masters. Most of the time, they would allow themselves to be bonded to whom-ever their masters chose for them, and to have someone chosen for you was considered an honor, as it meant that you were considered worthy of producing new servants for the household.

Husbands were usually also handpicked for the daughters of the noble households. Mothers traditionally created the bonding stone for their daughters and presented it to them as a special gift when they came of age. The stones could range from quite simple to intricate and elaborate works of art. This stone was exceptionally beautiful. Brandela’s heart was pounding as she picked up the exquisite stone and held it in her palm. As she considered what it signified, it was all she could do to not burst into tears. Instead, she took a deep

breath and forced herself to speak. "Thank you, Mother. It is very beautiful. It must have taken you ages to craft something this fine."

Lady Alousia smiled and answered, "I have been working on this for you for two years now. Perhaps it will help you look forward to better times and leave this troubled time behind you. Soon, you will be married into one of the noble houses and running a household of your own."

Brandela frowned and set the stone back into the box and pushed it away. "Things do not always go as we expect them to," she murmured.

Lady Alousia frowned at that cryptic remark and waited for her daughter to continue, but Brandela said nothing more. Finally, she replied, "Whatever it is that's bothering you, we will work through it. You are home and for now that is all that matters."

She pushed the box into Brandela's reluctant hands. "It is a gift to you, daughter. I insist that you take it. I made it especially for you."

Brandela smiled at her mother, not wishing to hurt her, and took the box. "Thank you," she said softly.



High Lord Aden arrived three days later and, once settled, he summoned his daughter to his tent. There was no joy or excitement for Brandela in this meeting. Not only was she nervous about her parents' reaction to her news, she had also been harboring a deep hurt at her father's lack of effort to rescue her.

Their embrace was quick and formal and Lady Alousia, who had just arrived, was puzzled by the obvious tension between them. Brandela and her father had always been quite close; she couldn't imagine what had caused such a change in her daughter's behavior toward him.

"It is good to see you, Brandela," said Lord Aden. "I trust you are well?"

"I am," she lied.

An awkward silence fell between them for a moment while he studied her, trying to read her strange mood. Something about her had changed.

"So, tell us," he said finally, "how is it that you managed to escape the Barbarians? I was waiting for them to send some sort of a ransom demand for you, but one never came. Don't tell me you managed to escape by yourself and somehow make it back here alone."

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Brandela's voice was clipped and cool when she responded. "No, I was not alone, father. I was rescued by a very brave man who I, at first, assumed was sent by you. It turned out that you had sent no one, and he was acting on his own volition."

Lord Aden frowned, stung by her obvious accusation and puzzled by her story. "Who was this man?" he demanded.

"His name was Donovan, and he died saving my life," she began. Once again, she told the tale of her rescue and the weeks that followed. Her father grew increasingly agitated as she spoke of her human rescuer with obvious fondness, and exploded in rage when she informed them of the bonding.

"You bonded with a *human*, Brandela! You have dishonored me and all the ancestors of the entire house of Oendale! How dare you show your face in this forest?"

Lady Alousia gasped and began to protest, but Brandela replied calmly, "He was an honorable man, Father, and saved me from certain destruction."

High Lord Aden growled fiercely as her words sunk in. "Honorable man?" he roared. "There is no such thing as an honorable human. I took these creatures in and showed them kindness and look how they have repaid me."

"Showed them kindness!" Brandela scoffed. "I've heard all about the *kindness* you showed them..., sending them into battle when they were much too young, making them live hand and mouth all those years, under your thumb the whole time. Sending them and their commander—one of our people—to their deaths! Don't speak to me of kindness, Father. A kind man would have tried to rescue his daughter. A kind man wouldn't have left me in the hands of those Barbarians all those months."

"Silence!" ordered Lord Aden. "You do not know what you're talking about. The humans have obviously brainwashed you against me."

He snapped off an order to his head servant. "Tell the human Rangers that they are no longer welcome at my kingdom. I don't care where they go, but if they are not out of the forest in five days, I will slaughter every last one of them."

As the servant ran from the tent to do his master's bidding, Lord Aden turned his furious gaze back on his daughter.

Before he could speak, Lady Alousia cut in. "My Lord, perhaps the bonding was not of her choosing. Perhaps this man somehow forcefully bonded her to him."

Lord Aden considered this thoughtfully for a moment before

replying, "I can't see how that might happen, except that there have been rumors of the presence of Shadow Elves. Who's to say that this human didn't somehow learn or possess some devilish technique from them?"

Brandela stood and shouted, "Donovan did not force me into the bond. I gave myself to him willingly and I will not dishonor or betray my husband's memory with such talk."

Lord Aden's face flushed dark red with rage and his voice was low and dangerous when he responded. "Since you like these humans so much, then you can suffer their fate along with them. I decree you are banished! I order you to leave my kingdom within five days and never return. If any of my men see you again you will be killed on sight. Now, get out of here!"

Brandela turned her back on her father and walked out. Her mother followed close behind. Brandela went back to her quarters and ordered Kerala to prepare the servants for a long journey. "We must leave immediately," she told the stunned girl.

When Kerala had left, Lady Alousia stopped Brandela for a moment and said, "Just because your father does not want to hear the full story, doesn't mean I feel the same. Please, finish telling me all that happened, child. I want to know about the man who saved your life..., for I am grateful."

Brandela looked into her mother's eyes and saw only sincerity there. Her own eyes filled with tears as she realized that she may never see her again. Slowly, she finished telling the story, leaving out nothing and crying again as she shared the moment when she had felt Donovan's death.

Lady Alousia listened quietly. When Brandela was finished, she sat for a moment before smiling and saying, "I won't lie to you by saying I agree with your choices, but I do respect them. It is every noble Elven lady's duty to support her husband through whatever circumstances may arise. I am starting to wish that I hadn't trained you so well in this regard."

"Thank you for understanding, mother. I miss him more than I can describe. I must find a way to live a life that will honor him..., and you."

"You will," her mother answered, kissing her on the top of her head. "I will miss you, my daughter. I have always had a special fondness for you. I have never told you this but, as you know, every Elven woman can choose the sex of the child they are carrying. When I conceived you, your father ordered me to give him a boy child, as we already had so many daughters. I disobeyed him and

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made you a girl instead.”

Brandela’s eyes widened. She had never known her mother to disobey or to do anything improper. She had always seemed the perfect picture of an Elven matriarch.

Lady Alousia laughed at her daughter’s expression and replied, “Don’t look so shocked. I had given your father the exact gender of children he wanted all the times I had been pregnant. I knew you would be my last and so I would not allow him to take the choice of what you would be away from me. You were the only real thing I ever defied your father about. Oh, he was in a rage when he found out and didn’t talk to me for several weeks, but it was worth it. It’s also the reason I personally trained you in the ways of the Elven matriarchs..., because you were a child after my own heart.”

“If that is true, then why did you not attend my coming-of-age ceremony?”

Lady Alousia sighed. “I wanted to but I thought it best to go along with what was expected. I did not want anyone to know how special you were to me, for you are the youngest and within our culture, as you know, the youngest is merely a bargaining tool. I was protecting you as much as myself...; I hope you can forgive me.”

Brandela nodded and, for a long moment, no words passed between them as daughter looked at mother, seeing and recognizing love and kinship between two women.

Lady Alousia broke the silence. “Once you make it past the forest line, head northeast across the river to the Clan Lords of the Eastern Wood Elves. You have kinsmen there; they will take you in.” She smiled sadly and added, “Perhaps one day I will see you again.”

“I *will* see you again, Mother,” promised Brandela. “I will.”

Chapter Twenty Three



Early the next day, Brandela and her maidservants began their journey out of the Wood Elven forest. It was a solemn and silent procession of women. The news of their banishment, and the reason for it, had come as quite a shock to most of them. Many of them were frightened at the prospect of leaving the protection of the forest, and saddened by the fact that they would never see their families again. Only Kerala was excited. They were heading for the Eastern Clans—her mother’s people! She, alone, was looking forward to this adventure.

Brandela led the maidens out of the forest and along the river, heading eastward. As they travelled, she spent time with each of the young women, getting to know them and trying to boost their spirits. She spent most of her time with Kerala, who filled her in on what had happened to them all after she had been kidnapped.

“The slavers burned the village of Eldergate and killed a great number of the citizens before making off with you and the other prisoners. I had used all of my strength trying to stop them, and lost consciousness. I’m sorry...; I tried.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Brandela assured her. “None of us could have stopped them, I don’t think. Garock’s army was very strong, and he was being assisted by some clever Shadow Elven magic. No one is to blame.”

Kerala nodded and continued her story. “High Lord Aden arrived two days later, and it was I who informed him of your disappearance. He was furious and..., well..., let’s just say he didn’t share your view of whether we were to blame or not for letting anyone get to you. He sent us back to the capital to await your return, and that’s exactly what we’ve been doing.”

“Your mother, Lady Alousia, was very kind to all of us and set your nurse, Nina, to the task of training us in the serving arts. She also allowed those of us who wished to continue with our scholarly training. She arranged for me to study with some of the best Arch Mages. I’ve studied source magic, used for protection and healing, and practiced daily so that if..., when you returned, nothing like this

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could ever happen again.”

“When we heard that you had returned to the forest, your mother was overjoyed and prepared us to meet you right away. We are all so glad that you survived your ordeal..., even if it has ended badly for you.”

Brandela smiled at Kerala. “Strangely, it doesn’t feel like a “bad” ending. It feels more like an opportunity. I just don’t know to what yet, but I feel that you will be an important part of it. I knew from the moment we met that our destinies were intertwined somehow.”

“I suppose we’ll find out as we go,” suggested Kerala.

Later that day, Brandela noticed that the human Rangers were following them. She gave orders for her procession to stop and they waited for the men to catch up. While the rest of their groups rested, Brandela and Akenji walked along the river and spoke privately.

“Why are you following us?” asked Brandela.

Akenji replied in his deep, serious voice, “When I heard that you had also been banished, I figured perhaps you would need an escort to get where you are going. I saw no soldiers amongst you and I know Donovan would never forgive me if I let anything happen to his wife.”

Brandela smiled warmly at Akenji. “I am heading back to retrieve Donovan’s body, and then I was thinking about heading north from there to the Eastern Wood Elven Clan Lords.”

“I am at your service, my Lady.”

Brandela, genuinely touched, agreed and thanked him.

Over the next few days, Brandela began to experience signs of some sort of illness. She was easily tired and, at times, nauseous and weak. The group soon decided to stop and make camp for a week to give her time to rest and recover. At times, she seemed perfectly fine, but then the exhaustion would hit and she could do nothing but sleep. Food lost its normal appeal and often didn’t stay down when she forced herself to eat. Finally, at Kerala’s insistence, she allowed one of her maidservants who was trained in healing to examine her.

The maidservant said little to Brandela during the examination, but Brandela watched as the young woman’s face revealed concern, then surprise, and finally, a frown of worry. She looked at Brandela and then away, as though trying to decide what to say, or how to say it.

“Is something seriously wrong? Please, just tell me what’s wrong,” prompted Brandela.

“My lady, I believe you are...pregnant.”

Brandela's eyes widened and her hands went protectively to her stomach. One part of her was excited and overjoyed at the news. The House of Donovan would not die. They would have a son! But..., that son would never know his father's touch. With her joy came a renewed wave of great sadness.

Brandela looked up as Kerala and Akenji walked into the room.

"What is the diagnosis?" asked Akenji in his usual serious manner.

Brandela looked him straight in the eye and answered without hesitation, "I am going to have Donovan's son."

Akenji stumbled back on hearing the news and laughed very loudly and joyfully. "That's wonderful news," he exclaimed. "Donovan would be so proud!" He grew quiet and serious again then, and added, "Since my friend will not be able to do his duty as a father, I will take the responsibility for this child."

Akenji got down on one knee before Brandela and began to recite the pledge of loyalty. *My will is yours. My strength is yours. My loyalty is yours. Command me as you will, Mistress, for I am your sword in battle and your shield in times of war and peace. Do with me as you will.*

When he was done, he rose and kissed her head. "My men will follow," he promised. "I will have them give you the pledge as soon as you are feeling better. Your child..., Donovan's child, shall be protected."

Over the next few days, Brandela had a lot of time to think about her future as a mother and the leader of her household. She wished Donovan could be there to help her plan and to watch their child grow into a man, for she was beginning to form an idea that, at first, seemed outrageous but, as she thought more about it, was growing more and more appealing. Within a few more days, she had formulated a solid plan and called Kerala and Akenji to her for counsel.

"It is time to move again," she told them. "Time to start a new life for all of us."

Kerala protested. "We should stay here a while longer, my Lady, until you are feeling stronger. It is a long and difficult journey to the Eastern Wood Elven territory..., too far for you to attempt in your condition."

"We are not going to the Eastern Clans anymore. I have a new plan," Brandela announced. "Donovan and I passed through a wooded area with rich and productive lands on the other side of the river. My son will need good land to govern."

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She smiled at Kerala and Akenji's expressions as they struggled to comprehend what she was suggesting.

"Akenji, take a few men and go to the caverns. If there is anything left of Donovan's body or his belongings, bring it to me. I will be leading our people a few leagues southeast of the river bend. We'll be crossing the Kshearry and I will choose a site on the eastern shore to set up a settlement. When you return, you will be rewarded for your loyalty."

Akenji did not question her words, but bowed and left to gather his two best men. Brandela noticed the way Kerala's eyes followed Akenji's departure, and the wistful look that momentarily crossed her freckled face.

"Do you like him?" questioned Brandela.

Kerala looked surprised, then blushed deeply. "He is human," she said, as though that should explain every confused emotion, thought, and feeling that was running through her. Brandela understood completely. Her hands went to her belly..., to the proof that such a union could take place, and she smiled at Kerala, but said no more about it.

"Prepare the women to take down camp and move out in the morning," she instructed.

The next day, Brandela led her people across the Upper Kshearry River and headed towards the wooded lands southeast of the river bend. Donovan had pointed out the land on the eastern side of the river to her as they were traveling north. It was good land, he had told her. It would be a good place to start.

One week later, Akenji located their new camp and placed Donovan's remains in front of Brandela's tent. Brandela touched her husband's blood-stained sword and gazed down at his lifeless form, silently thanking him for his sacrifice and his love.

"Garock's remains were there as well," Akenji told her. "Donovan did what he set out to do. He avenged Alayna's death and saved you as well. He will be peaceful in death."

Brandela nodded sadly and ordered her servants to wrap Donovan's remains in silk cloth and make preparations for a burial service. She then turned her attention back to Akenji. "Thank you, my friend, for this service. It means more to me than you may ever know."

Akenji placed his hand to his chest and replied, "He was my friend as well. It will be good to see him honored and buried properly."

Brandela smiled then and said, "I seem to recall promising you

a reward when you returned.”

Akenji frowned. “No reward is necessary, my Lady. I was honoring my friend and doing my duty.”

“Nevertheless, I promised you a reward and you shall have it,” answered Brandela. She called Kerala into the room and was pleased to see the slightest smile reach the corners of Kerala’s lips when she saw Akenji standing there. Akenji’s eyes never left Kerala as she came into the room and knelt before Brandela.

Without looking down at Kerala, Brandela announced, “I give you my head maidservant to take as a wife for your reward. If you are willing, the bonding ceremony will be performed after Donovan’s body is properly buried.”

Kerala and Akenji stared at Brandela, both completely taken by surprise. “Are you certain that these are your orders?” questioned Akenji.

“This is my offer, not my order,” Brandela explained. “I am certain that the time has come for our races to live in peace, together. I am certain that I do not want my son to be the only one of his kind—half human and half Elf. He will need servants, friends, people of his own kind. The House of Donovan will be the house of the first half-Elves. With my knowledge of Elven organized breeding methods, I will grow him a kingdom that will bring together the best of both our worlds. I believe this is possible, and it will start with you two. Are you willing?”

Kerala and Akenji looked at each other, then turned back to Brandela. In unison, they answered, “Yes, my Lady, we are willing.”

“You and Kerala must have several children, for you are amongst the best stock I have. I know the survivors of your group are the strongest and most skilled men of your tribe, Akenji, and I have selected one hundred of the best Elven maidens I could find. My son will need capable leaders under him and your descendant’s will aptly suffice. There will be many weddings here in the next couple of months and some of your men may have more than one mate.”

“More than one mate?” questioned Kerala. “How is that possible?”

“Humans do not bond in the same way as Elves do,” explained Brandela. “Their bond is less stable. They may be distracted or attracted by another, even after being bonded to one woman.”

Brandela laughed as Kerala looked at her incredulously. “This is still all very new, of course. I don’t have all the answers and there will be some trial and error involved, I am sure of that, but we will

Birth of the Half Elves

figure it out. But I do suspect that the human males will be able to bond to multiple wives. Normally, I would not approve of more than one mate, but our numbers are small at the moment and we have a kingdom to grow. But first, I have a husband to bury.”

Brandela dismissed them and went to where Donovan’s body was being prepared for burial. “You will be a father soon,” she told him. “And your descendants will be kings and queens in their own land.” She hoped that he would be pleased with her course, for it was set in stone now and there was no turning back.



Brandela made good on her plans to build a new kingdom and the House of Donovan flourished. Little did she know that her actions would directly result in one of the largest civil wars the Wood Elves would ever come to know.

The End

Acknowledgments

I give thanks, first of all, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who provided me with wisdom and guidance throughout this entire process. I give special thanks to my editor, Judy Andrekson, whose expertise and knowledge were instrumental in bringing this book to fruition. Thanks for all your hard work and your encouragement early on. Thank you, Josh Addressi, for providing creative and vivid cover art. I send a very special thanks to my good friend and mentor, Daniel Clegg, who pushed me to write and provided encouragement throughout the entire project, from start to finish. Without you, my friend, I don't know if this book would have ever come into existence. Thanks for being you. And last but not least, I dedicate this book to the memory of Daniel's wife, Beverly Clegg, who died many years before I had the opportunity to meet her. I knew Beverly through the stories Daniel told about her, and I grew to love her character and personality, and felt a special bond with her despite having never met. What stood out the most for me was her integrity and fearsome loyalty to those she loved. Through Daniel's stories, his wife has lived on, been loved, and has had a profound effect on my own life. My images of Beverly played an intricate part in shaping the character of Brandela. I hope in some small way this honors Beverly's memory. Rest in peace, Beverly Clegg. You are missed.

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(The Elven Age Saga)*

*Thank you for
reading*



WORLD OF RYYAH

Twelve-year-old Donovan and his best friend, Akenji, are standing on the riverbank in their small fishing village south of the Wood Elven Forest, dreaming about their future when, suddenly, Boric's Barbarians invade and undertake a massive slaughter. The orphaned boys are kidnapped and face a life of slavery until an Elven commander, Alayna, and her Elven Rangers intervene. The boy's fate changes when the brave and good-hearted Alayna defies Lord Aden's orders to kill the human children. She instead obtains a begrudging permission to raise and train them in archery and sword tactics so they can serve as scouts for the Wood Elves. Under the nurturance of Alayna, the human boys learn that the Wood Elves are not the fierce creatures they had been taught to fear.

In the World of Ryyah, adventure and romance are intertwined when the highly skilled young man, Donovan, in a quest to avenge a brutal act of wrongdoing, risks his own life to rescue the Elven Princess Brandela. Embarking on a dangerous trek, each displays the loyalty, courage, and heroism praiseworthy of future generations. *World of Ryyah: Birth of the Half Elves* is the first book in the six-part epic, *The Elven Age Saga*.

