

Chapter One

The bowstring flexes and fights against my calloused fingers.

In one quiet sweep, air rushes into my lungs and waits, floating and expanding like spores in the Feywood. I grip my bow, draw it and ready it, tilting the weapon diagonally. Then I wait. Wait and watch the rotunda from my perch -- a gryphonic gargoyle protruding from the north window, concealed in the shadows.

Three dragonborn soldiers barge in through the huge metal doors beneath me, cursing and growling in nasty draconic phrases. Miserable snakes. Their speech is wicked, all shallow and raspy; guttural, like they're stuck with a dirty cough. Two of them -- one a sickly blue and the other a mossy green -- are bickering, all garbled and mostly arbitrary. The third hasn't spoken. I assume he takes most of the argument as hearsay. For the most part, the two have been shouting obscenities at each other while the other silently paces the room, around and around, pausing every so often to glance at the map laid out on the table.

Behind me, tiny warm breezes flow through the hopelessly shattered window. The air outside is somewhat tepid, humid at times, the sky sprinkled with dots of light that shine pointlessly bright. Most of the city district is filled with small glowing flames or bluish white orbs, all magical commodities. In the outlying regions, near the Red Fields and the Feywood, the moons govern the night, and even now, they share a little piece of brilliance on the face of my hood. It almost feels cool, breath-like. I've always assumed they contain some sort of deeper magic. Though it isn't terribly normal for half-elves or even elves alike to pay much attention to lunar occurrences, I find studying the moons to be a relaxing diversion from the rest of this world.

"I'm only gonna say it once more. He. Fled. HERE!" A greenish claw pierces the parchment. "The smithing quarter is naught but barren. We can act quick. This outsider has nowhere to hide."

"Are you joking? What we need to do is shut the garrisons, lock down the district and get ev'ry stinking soldier down guardin' the council. Did you not count the losses? Twelve. TWELVE good soldiers, all dead. Slit their throats and gone. After something, or someone probably, and not gunna quit 'till he's got 'em. Whoever this is, 'e's not an idiot like you." He speaks truth.

"Why, you scum-sucking bog imp!" They face each other, and for a hopeful moment, it looks as though a duel might unfold. I would love that -- but it never erupts like I hope it will. Their leader finally speaks.

He is a gorish creature, worse than most, and remarkably sizeable next to his subordinates. Red from head to toe, his draconic features seem slightly more demonic than most dragonborn, with horrible black-tipped horns lining the sides of his face, and eyes that glow dimly scarlet. I don't know much about this particular target, save that his malcontent could equal the ferocity of even the angriest bearhound. To compromise my position now would be death.

"I've heard enough! Do either of you two bigots think I care at all how you catch this brigand? Find him and end him, or suffer the consequences -- at my hands."

I shift my standing and slide onto the terrace of a hopelessly broken window. Climbing up into this building would have been impossible; four guards at the north entrance, one guard on every other side -- west, east, and south. The only way into the window was from the top of the dome, and the only way to the top of the dome was from above. A difficult task, but not unthinkable.

"Am I clear?"

Crystal.

The two underlings glare at each other once more, nod, and shuffle out the north door, leaving the commanding officer with himself and, unbeknownst to them, me. The bowstring is unruly now. Arrow nocked and bow set, I breathe in, lean forward and take aim.

Thwack!

Yes! The arrow whizzed through the trees and stuck the creature right in the neck. It fell, hind legs crumbling like parchment. Elk makes a hearty meal.

"Oh come on, Arelus. Now you're just showing off." I turned around. A pair of slim-booted legs dangled off the edge of a branch, soon joined by the equally-slender body of a young elf-woman. Her fingers wrapped around the branch as she hung there, swinging back and forth, staring at me, almost quizzically. After a few seconds of toying with my thoughts, my fiance dropped down with a thud.

She was short, or at least, shorter than I. Her face was naturally pale, with light hazel eyes, yielding a stark contrast with the dark auburn hair that fell beyond her shoulders, billowing around her cornered ears and landing somewhere above her waistline, shimmering in the daylight. She had never cut it - not to my knowledge anyway. And, in spite of her rich and considerably eloquent heritage, she preferred the simple cloth dresses and leather garb of the humans. Unusual for her kind; not unusual enough for her. A longbow was slung across her back, and her quiver displayed an impressive array of arrows, many of them enchanted. Enchantment was a sort of wild hobby of hers, picked up from her grandmother, I suppose. She especially loved lunar enchantments, though they served no real purpose.

We were making the bimonthly scouting trip on the outskirts of Wrathwood, our lifelong home and the part of the Feywood that's tucked away in the southeast corner of the forest, bordering the Red Fields. The trip was usually a solo job; however, due to our recent growth in numbers, the Delegation thought it wise to send two scouts instead of one. So, naturally, Zara stepped up and motioned herself as second runner. Considering her avant-garde behavior at last year's stag hunt, the notion could have died altogether -- except her father was head of the Synod.

"Showing off, huh? Do you want to eat tonight?" I replied.

"You know, I could ask you the same thing."

"What?..."

She smiled, paused, and in one swift movement, unsheathed a throwing knife from her belt and hurled it over my left shoulder. "Whoa...Zara!" I swear, the blade cut the hairs off my ear lobe. I checked to make sure only that fact was true before I turned around.

Sure enough, Zara's knife was sticking straight out of the now-dead elk's eye socket. The arrow from earlier was still embedded in its neck, though it seemed a trivial feat compared to the pinpoint accuracy of that knife. In a matter of seconds, my kill became her kill. How the animal survived the first onslaught was a mystery.

I caught a small glint in her eyes when she threw that knife -- wild, exact. She stared at her prize, grinning, and looked at me with that face, the one that said "I know you tried, but I succeeded". She said nothing, but slipped past me and skipped down a bed of roots to claim the animal as hers.

Did it bother me that she stole my kill, and by extension a piece of my pride? No. Maybe. She was indeed a full-blooded elf, and elves are by nature more skilled in these things. Perhaps what seemed to me a perfect shot was to her little more than adequate, and she was just trying to make her fiancé feel like a lousy hunting partner. Either way, we ate well. The crackle of the fire kept us company in the cool of the night, while Zara sang of the many creatures that crawled along the ground and where they came from, and then about the arrival of the Fey, and then of the races and the wars of old, and then about Gorgolak the Brainless, who lost his mind in a tragic alchemy mishap. All in the traditional elvish tongue, of course.

Nature's nocturnes hushed while she sang, as if breaking her music was a sin. If she stopped, the noises of the forest arose in full force, sort of picking up where she left off. The woods will listen to the chorus of the elves. I would join her sometimes, but the magic wasn't the same with half-elves. So I would sit back and allow her voice to fill my ears and my head, watching her eyes gaze at the fire, then at the canopy, then at the stars and at the moon, then back at the fire.

She finished her last song, a short, sad sonnet about two lost dryads, and the forest returned. We sat there for a while, watching the blaze slowly wither into ashes, and it was a long time before either of us said anything. Sleep was obsolete. Elfish beings could go days, even weeks, without sleep. It was only the second night of our journey.

"You know, the Stormcrows are starting to get a name in Ionia." The embers were a glowing red. I rolled my eyes, sighed, and started marking in the ground with a stick. I didn't reply. I didn't want to reply. I knew what she would say. That I was too sharp to do menial tasks, too skilled to settle for a villager's life in the woods, too good not to fight (or start fights) for our homeland. And she would be right. To an extent. I love Wrathwood, always have. I grew up in the forest, always under the watch of the Fey, learning the ways of the elves, among whom I confidently count myself. But there was no official war between the Synod and draconic Ionia, at least not yet. And the Stormcrows weren't a political sect. They were a rogue militia, a feeding ground for thieves, bandits, swindlers, assassins and all manner of shadowy characters. Certainly not a noble movement by any means.

But Zara. She was an adventurous spirit. And she loved the Feywood, probably more than I did. It was understandable that she wanted to fight off any Ionian dragonborn that came rolling this way. She would do anything to protect her home and her family. I would too. But she was also mistaken.

"Zara, the Feywood is not in danger. It never has been. It has always been able to take care of itself when these things happen. We just haven't seen it for ourselves until now. Just wait. You'll see."

"Just wait? Haven't you heard anything? Only a week ago, they raided a village in Darkleaf. Two men died. A woman and her child went missing. War isn't a prospect, Arelus, it's here. Now. And I know you aren't the kind of man who would just sit back and let something like this come to pass." She threw a stick into the fire and turned her back. Sparks flashed up and fizzled to the ground.

I shook my head and kept looking at the embers - which were pretty much coals by now - while drawing circles and squares between my legs. I knew what had happened, what was happening now. I still had faith in the Fey, but I could not deny the blood. Yet I could not duplicate her recklessness. "The Synod will decide when we go to war. The Stormcrows cannot be the answer to our problem."

The coals were completely black. Not that it really mattered. Elves and half-elves can see as clearly in the dark as they can in the day, and after a brief moment of just being there, together, we gathered our things and continued in the night.

She walked in step with the thud of my boots, our gear softly jangling against the skin of our armor as we tread the heavy forest floor. My head lowered, my eyes narrowed, I noticed how much darker the green was here; the fuzz of moss on each tree root seemed to ever so slightly dip into the next shade of green, as if the ultimate goal of moss was to become only a musky grey of the lush green it once was.

The trees here were unnatural beasts, though not unfavorably; the roots, like the fingers of a spider, would twist upwards into the husk of the trunk, and stretch out into each convoluted branch. The leaves were there, but thin, papery;

the truly magnificent feature of these trees were its gnarly arms, which linked together under and over the arms of a neighboring tree, creating a kind of webbed floor of branches.

“Good for climbing.” She said, nodding toward one of the entanglements. Indeed it was. Though to climb it now would be fruitless, since we were hiking uphill, where there were less vermin and large rodents to worry about in these parts.

As we approached the top of the hill, it was near to hitting daybreak. We paused, not really for breath, but perhaps just for breathing. The air was cool and sharp, clear enough to see the glistening drops of dew on the leaves overhead, or the tiny salamanders in the grass around our feet. We looked out. The clouds were lit as the sun broke the horizon.

Fire. Death. Chaos. Zara. Those four words spun in my head again and again like a vortex as I sprinted as fast as my legs would carry me through rows upon rows of tall wheat grass.

We saw the pillar of black soon after we woke, and I did not hesitate to rush into the wild towards the smoke. Zara’s family villa is located almost directly opposite ours, on the other end of Wrathwood. An unfortunate condition for two lovers, but a dire circumstance at the present moment.

I cleared the fields and entered the woods again, slowing to more of a jog as I neared the menacing tower of black and grey. There could still be a few of them left, if not all of them. I feared what I would find once I made my way through the thick brush that made a sort of fence around Zara’s home. I pushed myself forward, tripping over roots and thickets and barbs in the undergrowth.

Finally, I made it to the clearing. I tiptoed as silently as I could over the small hill, the one that overlooked her household, until I could just see the damage overhead. What I found was relieving and horrifying at the same time.

The manor was indeed on fire, as were the surrounding buildings. I could see the once ornate doors, carved walls and beautiful awnings, all blackened and crumbling to dust. The animals they kept in pens were scattered about, some dead and slaughtered, some galloping into the forest and some just yelping where they were. Ash was everywhere, like snow at Frostfall. This land was beyond precious, and those lizards scarred it all. It was the truest form of chaos I had ever seen, and for a moment, I was paralyzed.

Only a moment, though. A shock propelled my legs when I saw her. There, slouched in front of the smoldering bricks and the burning roof, a young girl with pale skin and cornered ears, and dark auburn hair that spilled over her shoulders. And she looked exhausted.

I bolted down the hill, and as I neared the manor, I could see a few bloody, scaly bodies lying on the grass, dead. I collapsed beside her, instinctively placing my arm around her shoulders. We said nothing. She never looked up at me. I stared into the flames. I already knew. I knew the moment I saw the black swells from across Wrathwood. Only I thought she was part of it. And she wasn’t. So for the moment, I was thankful.

We sat there, staring, my arms around her, waiting for the flames to finally simmer and die out. She was badly injured; cuts, bruises and burns dotted her dust-ridden skin. I was not well versed in magic, let alone healing spells, but I did my best. I could tell she herself was drained of manna, probably from fighting off the remaining dragonborn who dared stay on her now ruined home.

Devastation. There really is only one word to describe the disaster. And she wouldn’t stop staring. We sat there for at least an hour after the fires stopped, (or was it multiple hours?), and she never took her eyes off of her house, which smoldered into a sad black. Her face was unnaturally dirty. I watched as she shed a single tear, after sitting motionless for hours on end. It was then that she finally spoke.

Still staring, halfway at her house and halfway at the ground, she managed three gasping words. “I’m so tired.” And she cried.

“One more time.”

“I was coming back from a hunt when they left. I managed to kill a few of those...those bastards before I heard one say to wait for the reinforcements. They’re coming back, Arelus, with double, or triple the amount of soldiers this time. And the damn Synod hasn’t prepared for this. We’re helpless. They’re going to suffocate the Feywood. And they started with my ho-.”

She choked and looked away. I grabbed on to her and held her. Snakes. They just did this as a warning. A single blast. Not crippling as a whole, but enough to send a shockwave out to the rest of the forest. They had apparently retreated to the south, probably to a temporary camp just outside Wrathwood’s borders. They had recruited mages, archers,

heavy-weapon soldiers – everything under the militaristic sun. And they had numbers well beyond ours.

I was terrified. I acted resilient and level-headed, though more for my sake than hers. She could see through facades like that. In all truth, I had no idea what to do. This wasn't supposed to happen. They weren't supposed to get through this far. What happened to the magical defenses that had protected these lands for centuries before? Was it all a lie? Or did the dragonborns find a stronger magic? Or maybe the Fey just abandoned us. Too many of these questions clouded my head; I had to focus. I wanted to focus. And I wanted her to focus, too.

"I'm not staying, Arelus."

Okay. Good. Because we needed to move. If they've only reached this part of Wrathwood, then the Synod doesn't know that the Ionians are still gathering more forces. We have time. We can evacuate, or use the old tunnel-root system. Or something.

"It's time for me to go, Arelus."

I admired her strength. "Then let's go."

"No, you don't understand. I'm not staying. Not here. Not anywhere. I'm going to the Harbor."

What is she saying? Surely not...

"You're just going to...leave? Just like that?" I was trembling, my heart shaking back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and-forth. My fingers were cold, head swimming, stomach boiling. We were supposed to get married.

"Arelus, there's nothing left for me here, don't you understand? All is soiled. We didn't act. They did. Wrathwood will burn."

"What happened to fighting them? Fighting Ionia, fighting these beasts? For the sake of our homeland? What happened to joining the Stormcrows?" I shivered, my thoughts disheveled.

She stared at the ground for a while, brows creased, and bit her lip. She never bit her lip.

"YOU happened, Arelus! I pushed as far as I would go with you, I told you this would happen, and you would not budge. I told you, Arelus. I told you, and you ignored me..."

Something sharp stabbed the insides of my chest. My voice seemed to get stuck in my throat. But then, this feeling gave birth to something else – an urge. A need for...something. For action. For vengeance. For death. For proof...proof that I could fight, that I wasn't just some onlooker toying with trivial affairs, hunting supper in the midst of massacre.

Zara looked at me with those pale, hazel eyes, still red from tears. She seemed to have to heave her next words out of her mouth. "Arelus...I love you. So, perhaps...perhaps you could come with me..." She cringed, her jaw shaking. Then her expression shifted, and despair turned into a narrow realization. I frowned, and stood to turn around. It began as a small, still noise. Like a hushed chorus of cicadas. It rapidly grew into a louder, much more terrifying sound. Battle cries. Draconic battle cries. And in a matter of seconds, the woods in front of us were flushed and devoured in a sweep of orange flame and silver scales. They found a dragon. Impossible.

I turned to face her, to grab her and run the other direction, to take her away from further destruction, from this unreal nightmare. But she had gone. My time was stolen. I could only listen to the helpless cascade of wood and fire and ash as I ran toward the only safe place left. Ionia.

"I know you're here."

I freeze. Impossible. It's pitch black where I am. Did he hear me? I say nothing, and just keep the edge of my bow locked on his gleaming red neck.

"I also know," he rolls up his map and slips it in his belt-pouch, "that I won't escape your arrow. See, I know how the Stormcrows work. The last thing they do is let a marked target live. And since you're obviously not going to do any talking here, I might as well take a shot."

I haven't moved.

"Let me ask you something. Do you know why the Stormcrows do the things they do?"

For knowledge, power, and influence. The bowstring is quivering.

"Do you know what their goal is?"

To take you and the rest of Ionia down with you. To rule it. I'm struggling to hold the arrow back.

"Allow me to ask a different question: Do you know what the Stormcrows will do once they've accomplished this?"

Take over the districts, and then try to take over the Feywood. The entire bow is alive.

"You see, we're really not that different from each other. Us and you Stormcrows. You all simply have no concept of public communication. Of true enforcement. Of true order. Nothing can be accomplished in the shadows, where the cowards hide. And as far as I know, the only real cowards in this great city are you gutless half-"

Shing!

The dragonborn commander falls to the ground. The guard who comes in to discover the lizard unconscious will find a small dent in his helm. A broken arrow rolls around on the ground next to the commander's body. Attached to the arrow is a note.

Your plans are compromised.
The Feywood is ours.
Give up or die.

By the time anyone reads it, I'm already to the edge of the district. I leap from building to building, longbow slung across my back with a quiver full of enchanted arrows. I climb the walls and slide down, fleeing into the fields to the north, into the Feywood, and disappear into the trees, with naught but the moonlight guiding me home.