

Fallen Prince

By Tess Williams

PART ONE

Cry alone, I've gone away

No more nights, no more pain

I've gone alone, took all my strength

I've made the change

I won't see you tonight

--I Won't See You Tonight Part 1, Avenged Sevenfold

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIA:

If I closed my eyes I could feel the excitement of battle building below. The pounding of hearts in wait. The ringing of steel, sharpened but yet to be tested. The threat of goblins hiding in the trees. The fires they'd built within the forest rose up in smoke and lit the silver sky with pink. It required no stretch of my mind to imagine a flying beast silhouetted against the scene, its slick dragon's tail swept back into a curl, the feathers of its eagle's torso rustling with wind, the soft fur of its lion's head rimmed with light. And best of all its harness of silver, where I, princess of Shaundakul could ride, leading my

father's army into battle. A shining emblem in the sky, prepared to cast the goblins down with not one but two swords and the ability to call upon the skies for bolts of lightning, and the sun for balls of--

"I can tell by that look on your face that you're thinking something ridiculous," said the boy on the wall beside me.

I had my chin rested on my hand and nearly fell sideways for the shock of his voice breaking into my vision.

In a moment I was back on the wall of Uldin Keep, high above and far away from the battle--so far that the soldiers were nothing but dots, and their cries nothing but distant echoes.

"Let me guess," he went on, "you were imagining yourself riding Kraehe into battle right alongside your father."

I finally acknowledged the boy, perched as he was on the supremely unsafe position of a ledge beyond which there was a thousand foot drop. He had his dagger out and was sharpening it, with his legs stretched out in front of him, one hanging over the wall into the air, and his back against a pillar.

"Cyril, you know I can't ride Kraehe yet," I snapped in rebuttal, "She's too small."

Kraehe was my dragon, and while we were bonding well and would one day be able to fly together, now she was only a child.

"Something worse, then," Cyril mused. "You were riding Sarx with Scholar Padril?" While he considered he continued to sharpen his dagger. Suddenly he laughed; the tone of it made me scowl. "No," he said, "You had your own chimera, and you were shooting your fire-bolts and balls of lightning at the goblins."

“There’s no such thing as a fire-bolt,” I snapped indignantly.

He continued laughing.

“And how can you make light of it?” I asked. “You want to be down there as much as I do.”

A burst of wind rushed past us--as it tended to do at this height. It blew my long hair wildly and rustled Cyric’s in a way that didn’t seem to bother him at all.

“Do not,” he said simply.

I eyed him. “Cyric Dracla, master of sword and shield, would rather be cooped up in a tower than fighting in the largest battle Shaundakul has faced in half a century?”

“I’d rather not be where I’m not needed,” he said. He slid his dagger back into his boot and looked down at the battlefield. “Or wanted.”

His features were so grim that I frowned. Instead of arguing I turned my attention down below.

While I had spoken true that it was large battle, that was only in numbers--the actual threat was minimal. In Shaundakul we usually fought goblins in small skirmishes, but at the recent suggestion of our allies, the Akadians, my father had agreed to try a large-scale battle this time. They had come with plenty of reinforcements after all. That the battle was at the very doorstep of our capitol, Uldin Keep, didn’t matter. My father was confident that the greedy, weak-minded goblins would be easily cut down.

“You know they only kept you out of the battle because of me, Cyric,” I said.

“Sometimes I think you’re the only reason they keep me around.”

“That’s not true.” I felt a knot in my gut, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I had actually asked that he be the one to stay with me during the battle. Someone had needed to...

He shrugged. He was gloomy, more than I’d realized he would be over missing the fight.

I lifted my finger. “How would you like to hear what’s going to happen in the battle?” I asked proudly.

“Like you know?” He swung his other leg over the edge and sat up straight.

I ignored him. “Yes. I had to sit through all of the war meetings, remember? I am going to be queen someday. I have to know how to lead a battle.”

“They don’t send you to the war meetings so you can learn how to lead a battle. They send you so that you can win over the ally generals with your pretty face.”

“I will too lead a battle,” I argued.

He scoffed, shaking his head back and forth.

I cleared my throat and pointed downwards. “See the Shaundakulians are the blue and purple ones closest to us, beginning the circle. The half-circle is completed by the Akadians, just there beside the north pass; they’re red and yellow.”

“Red and yellow. Is that the official term?” Cyric broke in.

I went on, “The goblins are in the forest, and... there, you can see them beginning to make a line right in front of it. Just like my father predicted. Once the goblins advance, the archers will shoot two rounds of arrows, then Scholar Padril will lead the dragons out.”

“What about the behemoths?” Cyric asked.

“Behemoths?” I repeated.

He nodded.

“Umm... what are those?”

Cyric snorted. “Behemoths, you know, the Akadians’ granted animal? Or do you only have room in your head for the Yanartians’ chimera?”

I glowered. Every country of notable age had a granted animal: a species of creature native only to their land and said to have been handed down as gifts at the beginning of time. Shaundakul had dragons. Yanartas had chimera. The Akadians had behemoths, as Cyric had said, but I certainly hadn’t forgotten about them. “I know the Akadians have granted animals. I just forgot what they were called because I’ve never seen one.”

“And you’ve seen so many chimera?”

“The Yanartas and Shaundakul people have a very special alliance, Cyric. Tied by the bond of our rideable, flying animals. We are the only ones that can even reach the Isle of Yanartas. When I become queen, I will--”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’ll get to ride Kraehe to go to Yanartas and meet the Warriors of Cirali. One problem with that.” He lifted a single finger, but he still looked down at the battlefield instead of me. His legs swung back and forth.

I narrowed, unable to think of a single possible thing that could keep me from my dream and birthright.

“And what is that?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

I watched the corners of Cyric’s mouth lift up; he turned to me when he spoke. “You won’t become queen unless you can get someone to marry you,” he said.

The space grew very silent between us. The wind continued to race around.

I considered that I should be angry, but my features were lacking their strength to scowl. My crossed arms loosened and my mouth started to twitch.

We both laughed, I much harder than him, then he held out a hand for me to come up beside him on the wall. I reluctantly complied. He started laughing anew at the trouble I had climbing up in my dress. He straightened the fabric himself after I'd swung my legs over. I had to readjust my crown. Then we both leaned back on our hands. I gave the ground a wary look.

"I'd think you'd be used to the height after all your daydreams," he said.

I punched him in the arm.

"Ouch." He rubbed it. "Not bad for a princess."

"You're weak for a soldier," I said.

He mocked a bow.

I turned my attention to the battlefield, content that I had improved the mood which most affected mine.

From where we were, to the left I could see the dragon stables where Scholar Padril waited mounted atop Sarx, his male dragon. The two other honored riders of Shaundakul flanked his sides on their smaller female dragons. My father's blue dragon, Noxus, waited close to be called. And poor Kraehe was cooped up safe inside like me.

"I've got an idea," Cyric said, a little distractedly.

"For what?" I asked.

In the pause it took him to answer, I looked over. A knit brow betrayed his other calm features when he said, "To get you to Yanartas."

I blinked in consideration. Then my eyebrows dropped even lower than his. “What are you--”

A loud screech drowned out my voice. I jerked back, but Cyric had me steadied with his hand. Staring down I saw what must have been the maker of the sound. A flying beast, black, and bat-winged, emerging above the forest where the goblins were collected.

“What is that?” I asked Cyric.

Before he could answer, another shriek sounded. We both covered our ears. Three more of them flew up out of the forest. Cyric released his ears to jump down off the wall, and then help me down. We turned our attention back below.

“Cyric?” I urged.

“Wyverns,” he answered. “I think. They’re really rare.”

“They’re wild, aren’t they? What are they doing here?”

If he had an answer for me it was lost when the front row of the blue and purple mass launched a volley of arrows towards the flying beasts. I caught my breath. To attack a granted animal, was the worst sort of sacrilege. I was almost glad when the beasts twirled and dipped and the arrows missed them completely.

One rose high to escape; near enough that I could see a gem-encrusted harness on its back, clearly goblin-made. Sure enough there were two goblins riding on it.

By the time the wyvern swung back down to the battle, a chorus of cries was beginning below that sounded from this high up like an airy pounding. The black line of goblins ran forward. My eyes darted to the front line of Shaundakul soldiers, expecting the first round of arrows, but they didn’t come. My panic increased; I realized that the

archers had already fired their arrows at the wyverns. A few went off, but sorely un-united, and they did little to diminish the goblin horde.

One of the wyverns swooped down and toppled a row of Shaundakul warriors. Faces flashed before my mind, of the men it might have been. I reminded myself, as I'd been taught, that this was a natural cost of battle.

To my great relief a familiar call rose up loudly. Scholar Padril's dragon, Sarx, flew into the battle, heading straight for the largest wyvern. The two females came after him, and then my father's dragon, Noxus. The latter three clashed into the line of approaching goblins. Though my breath was held I felt fresh confidence that this battle would be over quickly with only minor casualties.

"It looks like it's going to be fine," I said to Cyric.

Fishing for consolation as I was, I looked over at him when he didn't answer. His anxious features troubled me more than anything I could have seen for myself. I followed his gaze below. It wasn't on the battlefield; it was on the north pass heading away from Uldin Keep. The pass was filled with small dots of red and yellow. The Akadians.

I looked from it to the battlefield, back and forth a couple times. The mass of black that marked the goblin horde had not yet reached the warriors of Shaundakul, but they were close. And now the hoop that had been formed to encircle the goblins was half its size. All the Akadians had left it.

"Where are the Akadians going, Cyric?" I asked. I tried to convince myself that I was calm, but my voice was high and tight.

"I don't know," he whispered distractedly.

The mass of black drove on like a wave, and it didn't end; they just kept pouring out from the trees.

"They make up the entire cavalry," I said, "will they come around another way?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

"No," I muttered. "They couldn't. There's no way back through the pass. How will they get back? Cyric?"

"I don't know."

The Akadians made no sign of turning round. The goblins had almost reached the Shaundakul warriors. The wyverns and dragons battled in the skies.

"I don't understand, Cyric. Why are they leaving? What's happening?"

"Ellie. I don't know. I don't know anything. Stop asking me questions."

His shouting made my throat stick. I saw three of the wyverns crowd around Alete, one of the female dragons. She was much larger than them but they drug her down. As she tried to whip them off something shot up from the ground out of a metal contraption. It struck her wing and pulled her towards the earth. The wyverns screeched in success. I looked for the other female; I couldn't find her.

"I have to help," I whispered to myself. The line of black was yards away from the warriors.

"I have to help," I repeated. I turned around. I started racing for the tower door.

"Ellia, wait," I heard behind me, but I didn't stop. "You can't!"

I ran faster.

"You can't go," he called. I tried to evade him. His arms wrapped around me. "You can't go," he repeated.

“Cyric, stop, I have to.” I struggled, but he held me tight.

“You can’t. You know you can’t.”

“I have to help.”

Suddenly a loud cry rose up from below, much louder than anything we had heard from the wyverns.

Cyric and I both dropped to the ground to cover our ears. He turned around. I felt my heart drop in my chest.

“Sarx,” I said.

“Ellie don’t.”

I ran back to the ledge. I threw my head over, swallowing.

My eyes found Sarx immediately, surrounded like Alete had been by a swarm of wyverns. The wheeled contraption on the ground was connected to him by a chain, but he was still airborne. He flapped his large wings, but one of them was shot through--the chain kept yanking him down. I started crying. Another harpoon shot up from the ground and struck his torso. He threw his neck back and cried. I screamed. I felt hands cover my ears and a body brace behind me. Sarx plummeted to the ground in a spiraling twirl. Any hope I had left that Scholar Padril might survive disappeared as a rush of goblins swarmed the body.

I watched the wyverns croon their necks back to cheer, but couldn’t hear their cries. I could hardly see anything through my tears.

“Cyric, please,” I cried.

He didn’t respond. He held me tight against the wall.

I watched as the goblins engulfed all that was left of the warriors. I watched them break down the door of Uldin Keep. The Akadians were long gone through the pass. I did nothing as the goblins destroyed all there was of my world.

CHAPTER TWO

CYRIC:

When the goblins started rifling through bodies, I made Ellia move away from the wall. Because the wyverns were still flying around in the sky, I kept us hidden in a corner. It wasn't easy stopping her from trying to go down, especially once the Akadians came back. They passed the goblins in the field and entered Uldin Keep. Soon after the men, women, and children of Shaundakul that hadn't been in the battle were led out and loaded up on wagons to who knew where. Carts of precious valuables from Shaundakul went with them.

We stayed there the whole night--freezing as it was. As dawn broke I studied what I could see of the battlefield through the trees. Lots of still smoking piles of bodies, but not many goblins. I woke Ellia and we began the long descent through towers and causeways to Uldin Keep.

When we reached the final spiraling staircase the smell was repulsive. The doors along the way were broken or bashed in and I saw bodies--not the first we'd seen--inside. I tried not to let Ellia see these, but there were so many there wasn't much I could do. I put a hand up in warning as we neared the bottom of the staircase.

Light glowed from torches. I craned my head around the corner and saw an empty hall; large, familiar, but stripped of all its decorations. I didn't rest long on this; I waited a moment to make sure that no one would appear, then took Ellia's hand and pulled her behind me.

My aim was to get outside. From the rate Ellia was walking, spinning around, and peering into rooms I was pretty sure her aim was to find someone alive. I knew better. If there was anyone alive in this place, they weren't someone we wanted to run into.

We'd almost reached the end of the room when footsteps echoed through the hall. There was no way to tell where they came from. I pulled us into a side room. Luckily it led to another. We snuck through a series of rooms until a pair of voices stopped us.

"...gotten more than what we promised," the first said. "You should be cleared out of here already." It was a deep, commanding voice, and clearly human. But there was no doubt the next voice belonged to a goblin.

"But there's much more here than you said. We want more. We want the gold. We want the silks."

"Don't be foolish. What would goblins do with silk?" The human laughed.

I heard Ellia's feet scuffle beside me. I looked over to see her prepared to pounce on one or both of the speakers in the next room. I put a finger to my lips, making it clear that she needed to be quiet. She may have been careless, but she wouldn't disobey me.

"We want silk," the goblin continued. "We want all. You--you did nothing. We fought. We deserve all."

“If not for us, you never would have been able to overtake the Shaundakul, Garagos. They would have shot you down from their towers like they always do.” He chuckled.

“Their dragons would have torn you apart. If not for the wyverns we provided...”

“We keep wyverns.”

“Yes, you keep the wyverns. You’ll need them when we call for you again.”

There was a moment of silence; I wrapped my head just around the corner. The goblin was kneeling before the man, its body draped in jewels and gems. The man was two-times his height, and large around; he faced away from me. He wore full-plate armor, with a tunic of red and yellow draped over it.

As the goblin rose, I pulled back into the room.

“And Garagos,” the Akadian said. “Remember if any of the kingdoms find out what happened here, from the horse-lords of the Katellian plains right down to the trolls of Lotos Mountain, you will be held personally responsible. You know what that means.”

“We do not tell. We do not talk to trolls. We do not talk to humans. We serve only you, great Akadian.”

I heard a gasp.

It took me a second to realize it had come from Ellia. I gave her a savage look, then pulled her quickly back the way we’d come. We made a different turn along the line. We reached the servants’ kitchen and took a back exit to the stables, where the farm animals were kept.

She didn’t even wait to check around to make sure we were alone before she started shouting at me.

“It was the Akadians!” she screamed. She wrenched her hand away.

I shushed her. “Ellia, be quiet. There could be goblins anywhere.”

“Goblins?” she repeated, “or humans? Men. Our own race. Our allies. Betrayers!”

“Yeah betrayers, and they won’t hesitate to kill us if they find us. Shut up.”

She fumed and stomped her feet.

I held out my hand. She hesitated, then gave me hers. I led us into a half-torn chicken coop nearby. I pinched the slats open and peeked through.

We were on the edge of the battlefield; the famed trees of Shaundakul stretched up high above us. Piles of bodies littered the forest floor, burning not nearly as hot as they should have been. It stank so bad that I would have rather kept my nose inside the chicken coop, only I was pretty sure Ellia was probably crying in there and I didn’t want to see that again. It was obvious that goblins weren’t big on clean-up.

“Look, I know you’re not going to like this,” I said, “but we gotta get out of here. I think we should head west to Brenham. We can get food and figure out what we’ll do next. Do you have gold with you?”

She didn’t answer me. The forest looked deserted enough. I sighed and turned back to her. “Ellie, we can’t stay--”

My voice cut out. The only other thing in the coop with me was a chicken. I looked back through the shutters. In a second I saw her, trudging in her dress onto the battlefield.

I tore out of the coop, barely checking my surroundings. I hiked to catch up to her, leaning over once to pick a sword up off the ground. When I reached her we were surrounded by smoke and trees.

“What are you doing, Ellia? Are you crazy?”

“I have to find my father,” she said.

“I don’t care what you have to do. Don’t run off without telling me.”

“You wouldn’t have let me go,” she said. She kept walking; she wouldn’t look at me.

“That’s because it’s stupid. Ellie, listen to me. We need to get out of here.”

“I have to find my father, Cyric.”

“He’s dead, Ellia.”

She stopped, spun, and glared at me, her fists balled.

“Or else the Akadians have him…” I backtracked quickly.

“If there’s any chance he’s here I have to look for him,” she said. She shook her head and started walking again. “You wouldn’t understand.”

I stopped short. I thought she paused a second before continuing on, but even if she did regret her words, I wouldn’t welcome the pity. She was right; I couldn’t understand. Her father was the king. The day my father had died, all of Shaundakul celebrated. There had been no chasing after him, no burying the body. The very people that surrounded me now wouldn’t have allowed it. And now they were dead.

Ellia distracted me from my wallowing thoughts with her tripping and poor attempts at inspecting bodies.

I ran after her, grip tight on my sword and gaze watchful. If there was one thing I’d learned well in my lifetime, it was that there was no changing a princess’s mind about getting what she wanted. Ellia certainly wasn’t surprised when I started helping her.

“We should look for Noxus,” I said. “Your father would have gone to him.”

Ellia caught her breath, but nodded.

The smoke was a blessing and a curse; it kept us hidden, but it made it difficult to find the dragon’s body. When we finally did, Ellia dropped her head in her hands and ran

towards it. It was a gruesome sight that I wouldn't be forgetting anytime soon, and I became certain that it accounted for most of the smell.

They hadn't burnt it--pretty obviously because they hadn't wanted to damage the skin, from which they'd removed the bright sparkling scales that had once speckled it.

Stinkin' greedy goblins.

I turned my back on Ellia who was crying and rubbing the dragon's neck. I flipped the sword in my hands and walked up a nearby hill.

That's when I saw him; such a familiar face. I really hadn't expected to find him there. I really had thought it was possible that the Akadians had taken him prisoner.

My mind brought me back to a few days ago.

I was in the great hall of the palace. I stood in a line of a dozen other soldiers, most of them older than me. Because Shaundakul was a small, peaceful kingdom, it didn't have an actual war-room. The great hall was used whenever allies were involved. The place buzzed with activity. The other soldiers and I waited for one of the generals to give us our orders for the battle.

"So, whose going to be in the cavalry?" one of the soldiers beside me crooned, rubbing his hands together.

"Not you, that's for certain," replied another.

"How will we have a cavalry?" asked a young one. "There are hardly any horses in Shaundakul."

"Right. But the Akadians have come. And they have horses."

"Horses they'll be riding."

The soldier beside me shook his head. "I heard that the best Shaundakul riders will be chosen to go with them."

"Well then you certainly won't be picked, Slark."

Slark gave him a sharp look.

"No one will be picked," I said.

They all looked at me.

"Only the Akadians will ride. If we're lucky we'll get bows, otherwise it's swords for us."

"And what makes you so sure, Dracla?" Slark asked.

I gripped my jaw. The nickname might not have bothered me that much, if Slark and the others didn't always make it so clear that they meant it as an insult.

"Did you sneak into the war meeting again to watch your precious king?"

"No. It was probably the princess that told him. They're always playing friends." A few of them laughed, just the goons that followed Slark around.

"Tell us Dracla," Slark went on, "What is a princess's interest in the son of an exile anyways?"

I felt my fists tighten, but before I could respond a hand landed on my shoulder. It belonged to one of the older soldiers in line beside me.

"Watch it, Slark," he said, with a sharp look in the young man's direction.

Slark put his hands up in apology and the others lost their smiles.

"All in good fun, Matteus," he replied.

The elder soldier let his hand fall. Luckily in the next moment the general decided to call my name. I stepped forward.

It took a while for him to fumble with his papers. Then he raised his brows. He pulled a letter from the bottom of his pile, and handed it to me.

“Read it,” he said. “Alone. You are not to show anyone. Understood?” Before I could nod, he waved me off.

I walked a few feet away and ripped open the seal. I should have known before I’d read it.

It was detailed with instructions of when and how and where I was supposed to take Princess Ellia on the day of the battle--so that she, while all the other soldiers were fighting, would be kept safe and far, far away.

I heard Slark behind me, receiving orders to shoot in the first line of archers.

I crushed the letter in my hands. My eyes found a table in the corner of the room. I hadn’t needed to look to know it was where King Savras stood.

I started walking.

As I approached, the captain he’d been talking to bowed and walked away. King Savras met my eyes. They were grey, like storm-clouds but for me much more harrowing.

I paused a half-step, then regained myself, moved forward, and bowed. “King Savras,” I greeted.

“Young Cyric,” he said. “How goes the life of a soldier in wartime?”

I sort of smiled, then answered, “Very well, Sire. I... I mean, no. No. I have a problem.”

He frowned.

“It’s my, orders,” I said. I held the letter up, until I realized it was a crumpled ball. I hid it quickly.

“Have you found them dissatisfactory?” he asked.

The look on his face made it impossible for me to get the word “yes” out. Instead I cocked my head a little, “Well...”

“You know that some soldiers,” he interrupted, lifting a small figurine off the round table and examining it, “have been given orders that they aren’t supposed to speak to others about.”

He met my eyes. He set the figurine down on the table, distinctly where a picture of the highest tower of Uldin Keep was shown. “Not many, but I do value their ability to do their duty and say nothing else about it.”

My brow dipped a little; I felt my determination crumbling.

“Do you agree, Cyric?” he asked.

I tilted my head. It started rolling into a nod.

He immediately grinned. “Good lad.”

He picked the figurine up off the table and handed it to me. I opened my mouth to respond but he was already walking past me. My eyes followed after him, then I looked down at the figurine in my hand.

I held it now. And his body lay before me, but the life was gone from it.

I shoved the figurine in my pocket, then turned towards the dragon.

“Ellia,” I called. She was still kneeling beside it. I called her again and she stood up. When I saw her face all covered with tears over Noxus, the last thing I wanted to do was point out her dead dad, but thankfully she spoke first.

“Cyrlic? Kraehe.”

Maybe not so thankfully.

My eyes threatened to lull into the back of my head. I realized too late that I never should have suggested for Ellia to find Noxus. In fact I never should have let her come onto the battlefield at all.

“Ellie? No,” I replied.

She shook her head. “Look what they’ve done to Noxus. We can’t let them do that to Kraehe. It’s an abomination. I’ve no right to leave her.”

“Yes you do,” I said. “Your life is more important than hers. She’s an animal.”

“She’s a granted animal,” Ellia pleaded. “There are hundreds of humans. She could be the last dragon.”

“There aren’t hundreds of you,” I countered.

It sounded so dumb that I had to look away.

I shook my head and stuck the sword in my belt. “I’m sorry, Ellia. I have a job to do.”

I walked towards her.

Her eyes grew wide. She lifted her finger. “Cyrlic, no.” She backed away. “Cyrlic.”

I scooped her up easily. At least at first, until she started kicking and punching me.

“Ellia, stop.”

“Cyrlic, let me go. Let me go.”

“Stop screaming. You’re going to get us killed.”

“I don’t care. I order you to let me go. Let. Me--”

She stopped at the sound of an unsheathing sword.

My head shot in the direction it had come from. Another sword was drawn.

“Over here!” someone shouted through the mist.

My muscles locked. Ellia’s body went limp in my arms. I glared at her. She had, of course, nothing to say now; she just stared at me with wide, frightened eyes.

I set her down and took her hand. We ran in the opposite direction of the cries. I thought perhaps we were gaining on them--it was impossible to see with the smoke--when forms appeared ahead of us. They hadn’t seen us; they were loading up a wagon. I stopped us short and swung us behind a tree. It was wide enough to easily hide both of us, but the other soldiers were still coming quickly.

“What will we do, Cyric?” Ellia asked me.

I could hear their racing steps getting closer.

“What will we do?” I repeated. I grabbed Ellia’s shoulders. “It’s a little too late to...”

My eyes went wide in horror.

For the first time today, I saw Ellia not as I normally did, but as an enemy soldier might. Her braided hair. Her velvet dress. Her earrings and jewels. Her silver shoes.

“You need to take your dress off,” I said.

We heard another call.

Ellia narrowed. “What?”

“And your jewelry.” I reached for her necklace.

She slapped my hand away.

“Ellia.”

“Stop it.”

I caught her wrist before the next slap. “Ellie, I need you to trust me. Right now.”

Her brow went taut. The soldiers turned to shapes in the mist. I felt my body pounding. She nodded.

I tore off her necklace. I threw it far from us. I wasted one pointless moment considering how to properly remove the dress, then just helplessly reached for the top of it and pulled.

“Get the back,” she said indignantly. She turned around. It was a maze of strings. I started to untie them then took my sword out and cut down the whole line. She whimpered in complaint. I pulled the dress down and she stepped out of it. She wore a long slip underneath.

“Take you earnings out,” I said, walking off a ways to toss her dress into the woods. “And your shoes.” She kicked them off. Her silent obedience told me she was probably starting to understand the issue.

I moved between her and the soldiers.

“There!” one shouted, pointing at us. Two followed behind him. They were still yards off, but the smoke no longer hid us.

“Done,” Ellia said.

I looked back at her to see that she had gotten everything. Her eyes were filled with tears, but my gaze wasn't on them; it was on the crown resting on the top of her head, bright and silver, and the exact hue and color of her eyes.

Her gaze shifted behind me.

“Stay where you are,” a soldier commanded. “Do not move.”

I didn't obey.

I stepped towards Ellia and reached for the crown.

Somewhere between holding her head steady and trying to block the soldiers' view of her, my lips were touching hers.

I was kissing her.

A part of my mind told me it wasn't a necessary position, but that was far, far back. Ellia didn't resist. I pulled the crown off her head, slipped it into my sleeve, then I held her head with both my hands and kissed her again.

Something grabbed a chunk of my hair and pulled me backwards.

The world came back into focus in a harsh way.

Ellia screamed.

"Think this is your chance for a good time, boy?" the soldier asked. He spun me around to reveal three other Akadian swordsmen standing before us. "I said, don't move."

He threw me down. The other men laughed. I pushed myself off the ground. Feeling my blood rushing hot, and maybe a little high, I grew a wide grin.

"What's there to smile about, Shaundian?" the one at the front asked. "The goblins got all the fun, and my blade is hungry."

I unsheathed my sword. I understood the Akadian's feelings well enough.

"All the better for me," I hissed, then swung at him. He parried once, but I'd clearly surprised him and when I came around for a second blow, my hilt hit the side of head.

Ellia screamed. He fell to the ground. The two remaining swordsmen stared at me, wide mouthed. Then their vision cleared and they charged.

I ducked both and got a swipe in at one's arm. Before they'd even regained themselves, I yelled and charged the uninjured one and knocked him to the ground. I had him pinned, then I got distracted at the sight of more men running up from the wagons.

He struck me and spun me on my back. He straddled my sides to cheering. "I'll show you the might of Akadia," he shouted, then raised his fist up in the air. I got a grip on my sword handle before he could hit me, and stabbed it up through his side.

The warriors made exclamations of shock. I felt Ellia's crown shaking loose in my sleeve. I had barely a second to tighten it against my forearm, then they all came at me. I had to shove the injured man on top of me into an approaching soldier to fend off a blade. I stood, swung my own sword and made contact with another. I lost sight of the forest around me. They came one after another after another. A man stabbed at my arm. I used the hilt of my sword to strike his face. He fell backwards. I lifted my blade to another.

"That's enough!" A voice loud and jarring broke through the other cries.

I turned on it, my sword raised high, and saw a soldier with his knife to Ellia's throat. Flanking him were six armored men with crossbows, all aimed at me. The Akadian swordsmen stopped approaching.

The man next to Ellia gestured to my sword.

My chest rose and fell. I could hear my own heart pounding. My fist tightened, then I dropped my weapon.

The closest swordsmen grabbed it, not without a wary glance at me.

The man with Ellia wore red and yellow Akadian armor like the rest of them, but the emblem and style of his tunic was different; obviously he was some sort of commander.

He was tall and larger than the other men by far, and Akadians were already big.

I was almost certain that it wasn't the first time I'd seen him today.

He frowned and lifted his dagger off of Ellia's neck. "I wasn't sure that that would work," he said. He stepped around her. "What kind of man fights so savagely yet stops to save a woman?"

I felt like laughing but coughed instead thanks to my panting. Why had he thought I was fighting in the first place? Idiot.

Instead of answering I looked at Ellia. She was gasping and swallowing; from the expression on her face I imagined I didn't look too good.

"Who are you?" The commander asked.

The other soldiers paced the edge in a circle around me--as if they were just waiting for the order to strike again.

"Are you from Shaundakul?" he asked. "Tell me what you're doing here." His voice was taut.

I realized that if he was the man I'd seen before in Uldin Keep talking to the goblin Garagos, his main concern would be the secrecy of Akadia's betrayal. He hadn't wanted any witnesses.

It hadn't been my plan to get caught, but now that we were, the best thing for it was to stay alive.

"We saw the fires," I answered. "We came to see what happened."

"Where are you from?" he asked. "There are no cities near Uldin Keep."

"We don't live in any cities. We're on our own."

He relaxed; my answer had obviously pleased him. "Ahh, runaway slaves then?" he guessed.

"Shaundakul has no slaves!" Ellia shouted.

All of the soldiers looked at her.

I made sure that I didn't, because I knew I wouldn't be able to keep myself from glaring and that would have only made it worse.

"We're not slaves," I said. "We're just runaways."

"You fight well for a runaway," the commander said. He turned back to Ellia.

"What's your name?" he asked.

At first she narrowed, and I had a pretty good feeling that she was going to say something like, "how dare you touch me" so I spoke first.

"It's--"

"She'll answer," he interrupted.

Ellia looked at me. I gave her a fierce expression that said: don't tell him you're the princess idiot.

She stuttered something.

"Speak louder," he commanded.

Her eyes rolled upwards. I wondered how hard it was for her to take orders from someone else. "It's Padril," she said. "Ellia Padril."

"Padril?" the commander tested.

Padril? I repeated in my own head. Old, wrinkly, senile Scholar Padril? That was the best thing she could come up with.

"And who is he?" the commander asked her.

I met her eyes. They started to pool with tears when she said, "He's Cyric."

"His full name?"

"Cyric Dracla," she stuttered.

My shoulders slumped. I felt suddenly deflated. Not because she'd told him who I was; we both knew that didn't matter. I couldn't think of why.

"Are you runaways?" the commander asked.

Ellia nodded.

"Then tell me--where did your friend learn to fight?" he asked her.

Ellia bit her lip, staring at me. She had this talent for making you aware of whatever she needed, and right now she was telling me that she was scared and didn't know what to say.

I felt weak; my body was beginning to rebel against the loss of blood and lack of food.

"Don't look at him, answer me," the commander said.

Ellia dropped her head and started crying.

I sensed the blade tucked in my boot. The closest swordsman was four feet from me. The bowmen were paying more attention to the commander and Ellia than me.

"Answer me now," he said.

I bent down and pulled my knife out, aimed, and threw it at the commander's unguarded neck.

He swiped his sword up to stop it.

The look that came after it was violent, and I was sure that I wasn't going to see another day. He made a gesture with his arm. I felt something heavy hit my head, and my world went black.