

CHAPTER 1

The rain slashed down from the clouds, filling the ruts left by the carts and wagons until they overflowed and became small streams that slowly washed the road away. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled across the landscape, periodically driving back the thick darkness and shaking the ground as if mighty giants were marching by. A stiff wind drove the rain, bending the trees and making them sway and crack as if they were dancing to the rhythm of the storm. But despite the heavy rain, the town burned. The flames flickered and sputtered, causing eerie reflections in the puddles of water. Roofs sagged and groaned until they collapsed as support beams gave way, sending showers of sparks up into the air, and everywhere could be heard the moans and cries of the injured and dying.

Uram Benran lay on his side in the muck, his clothes stained with blood, both his and his enemy's. The chain mail beneath his leathers was split and battered, as was his body. Every movement hurt. His sword was lost. He tried to crawl off the road towards the shelter of the trees, but succeeded only in drinking of the rainwater that was washing over him. "Surely I must be dead," he thought to himself.

Suddenly a booted foot landed in front of him, splashing him in the face with mud. "Where is it?" a thickly accented voice demanded in the common tongue. Uram shakily forced himself to look up at the Kendar warrior. Broad and barbaric, their helmets all resembled skulls and their brutality was legendary. He stood over Uram, his ugly sword just inches from Uram's face.

"I don't know," Uram managed. "Gone." Uram forced a smile. "Tell your master you failed!"

The Kendar warrior grunted and kicked Uram in the face, sending him into unconsciousness and stalked off to join his fellow Kendar as they went hunting.

The cart rumbled roughly across the hard packed road, which at times was little more than two ruts or a dry riverbed. The horse labored to pull the load, which was not heavy, but their pace had been hard and long. "We have to stop and water the horse, miss, or the poor beast will collapse."

From the back of the cart the young mother looked up at the driver and nodded uneasily. "Not too long."

The driver nodded and stopped the cart next to a stream and tended to the horse. The young man sitting next to his sister looked at her. "Durick is right, Elsa, it would not do to kill the animal."

"I know, Kel, but I'm afraid."

"We must be at least a day ahead of the Kendar," Kel said reassuringly, "and they travel on foot. Surely we will gain more and more distance on them." Kel smiled and hopped out of the cart. He looked at the boy in Elsa's arms. "Still asleep," he said of the five year old. The boy's hair was quite blonde as was Kel's and Elsa's, but his skin tone was a beautiful bronze like his father's and his eyes were almost black, also like his father. By contrast, Kel and Elsa both had skin as fair as milk and eyes as blue as the sky. "You should get out for a while."

"I don't want to disturb him."

"It might do him good too."

Else nodded and nudged the boy awake. He rubbed his eyes once and then sat up. "Stopped?" he asked.

Kel laughed and reached for the boy who immediately jumped into his arms. "Yes, Benar, we've stopped. Come, run with me in the field." Elsa watched as her younger brother and son romped through the grass. Two years his elder, Kel was no longer her little brother. He had grown strong and agile and handsome with a cheerful demeanor and optimistic outlook, but also wise of the world. She shuddered to think where she would be had it not been for Kel. Elsa sighed and made her way off the cart. Thin and beautiful, she had been accustomed to riding in fine coaches. She was stiff and sore and her legs tingled. She walked slowly to the stream and saw her reflection in the calm part of it and groaned.

Durick, who was sitting a short distance away with the horse, chuckled. "Have no fear, miss. This is only temporary. We'll have you to safety soon."

"I have no doubt, Master Durick."

Durick shook his shaggy head. "No, miss. I'm no master, just a farmer. Leastwise, I was."

"I'm so sorry, Durick. And I thank you so much for your aid."

Durick smiled. "It's my pleasure to aid you miss." Durick returned to petting the horse. Elsa watched him soothe the animal and listened to the gurgling water and the squeals of laughter from her son and brother. It seemed so tranquil, so peaceful. But so had the ride the day before, until the Kendar had attacked them. Without warning they had charged out of the forest. Her guardsmen immediately responded and her coach driver whipped the horses, but well placed arrows brought down the driver and horses, spilling the coach. It was Kel that had gathered up his sister and nephew and led them into the woods away from the fighting just as the rain started to fall. Running blindly they had emerged from the forest and burst onto Durick's fields. They stopped only long enough to survey the area, before running across the predominantly neglected fields to the small farmhouse from which emanated a warm glow. The rain had turned the ground to mud that sucked at their boots. Kel had Benar in his arms and Elsa by the wrist, leading them to the house where he pounded on the door.

The door was quickly snatched open, and Durick stood there with a heavy wooden staff in his hands. Neither Kel not Elsa could speak for a moment as Durick looked them over, then looked past them at the ruddy glow that flickered over the treetops. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Kendar...attacked us," Kel managed. "The town..."

“Who are you?”

“I’m Elsa Bonraven,” Elsa gasped. “I was the handmaiden to the Princess Constance...”

“Please! We must get to Fairmont.”

Durick squinted at Elsa then nodded his head setting aside his staff. “Go hitch the horse to the cart,” he said to Kel, taking Benar from him. “Come inside, miss.”

Elsa sank into a chair and took Benar on her lap while Durick bustled about efficiently packing blankets, food, clothes and cooking supplies into crates which he set by the door. He loaded those onto the cart and put out the fire in his fireplace before snatching up his staff and helping Elsa into the cart. In only a few minutes they were off in the storm, riding hard as the sounds of battle diminished behind them.

Elsa was startled out of her memories by Durick standing over her, holding his hand out to her. “It’s best time we left,” he said. She took his hand, her small, dainty hand engulfed by his, and he easily helped her to her feet. They quietly got back in the cart and headed off again.

“Hungry!” Benar squealed.

“I’m sure you are,” Kel said. He pulled bread and cheese from their food and cut pieces for all.

Two slender figures, standing just over five feet in height and covered entirely in dark gray, hooded cloaks, surveyed the carnage caused by the Kendar. Each held an intricately carved bow with arrows nocked as their sharp eyes surveyed the scene of battle. There was no sign of any living Kendar in the area, though there were several bodies lying about. Those corpses were far outnumbered by the dead of soldiers and civilians. They passed among the dead, searching

but not finding what they looked for. They were not looking for survivors, necessarily, but they did find one.

The taller of the two looked at the man, a knight by his armor. "He's hurt very badly."

"But alive," the other said, her voice softer. "The only one."

"We don't have time; it will take both our skills to heal him."

"He's her champion."

The other sighed. "Very well, though we will learn nothing from him. We cannot wait for him to fully recover, we must move on."

"Agreed."

"Let's move him by the trees." The two dragged Uram out of the road to a dry spot under the trees and began to treat his many wounds.

It was early the next morning when Durick's cart crested a hill and Durick pulled it to a sudden stop. "What is it?" Kel asked, getting to his feet.

"Smoke. Pilgar is burning."

"What? How can that be?" But Kel saw it too. Thick bands of black smoke, many of them, were rising up into the sky. Going to Pilgar had been Durick's idea. A garrison of the King's Guard was there. They would protect Kel, Elsa and Benar and escort them to Fairmont.

"Maybe the garrison is still there."

"Maybe, but we can't take that chance," Kel said looking around. "Is there another way to get to Fairmont?"

Durick nodded. "Yes, but not with the cart. Miss Elsa and the boy can ride."

"No," Elsa said suddenly. "No, not to Fairmont. We must go directly to Thelsig."

"Thelsig?" Durick asked.

"It's too far, Elsa. We need help."

"If the Kendar have already attacked Pilgar, then they must expect us to go to Fairmont."

Durick nodded. "Ay, true enough, but why Thelsig, Miss?"

"I don't know why," Elsa said, stroking Benar's hair. "I just know we must."

Edgram Wrom stormed down the corridor, his robes swirling behind him, his face frozen into a scowl made more ominous by his hooked nose, pointy chin and pasty complexion. Those in the corridor quickly stepped aside and bowed as their King raged past them, only to resume their whispers once he was gone. Edgram was the fifth of six sons, far removed from the crown had he not manipulated fate. Two of his brothers drown. One died in a fire, another when he fell from his horse. Only his younger brother survived but lived far away, safe behind the walls of Lord Bonyun's Keep, their grandfather on their mother's side. Edgram did not care. His younger brother was weak and if Edgram should die, what did he care if the whelp took the throne? But the others, they were strong, handsome and popular. Edgram, it was rumored, was not really the King's son after all. He was supposedly the son of a man who threatened to expose the Queen's other transgressions if she did not cooperate with him.

The King, to his credit, never denied him or treated him differently. But his mother did. His brothers did, and so too all the rest of the Kingdom. When the King became ill, he knew he had to take action, and so he did, ultimately placing himself on the throne and his mother and younger brother in a sort of exile with his Grandfather. Everything was going quite well, except he wanted the girl that had been promised to his eldest brother.

Edgram burst into the throne room where scores of people were milling around. In the center of the room, standing in front of the throne, was the Captain of his Guard, awaiting his Lord's displeasure. Edgram walked directly up to the man and slapped him across the face, barely hard enough to cause the man to flinch. "Where is she?" Edgram screamed.

"The girl eludes us, my Lord," the Captain said quietly.

"Eludes you?" Edgram said mockingly, slinking into his throne. He snapped his fingers and a page brought him a goblet of wine. "Eludes you," he said quietly. "A mere slip of a girl and you can't find her, even with the help of the Kendar?"

"Those beasts will just as soon kill her as capture her, my Lord."

"Will they? I think not. But if you are so concerned, you had better find her yourself and bring her back alive or your life is forfeit!" Edgram threw his goblet at the Captain and stormed back out of the throne room.

The Captain stood a moment, drenched in wine. He had always been loyal to the Royal Family, serving Edgram's father with pride. But this one, he thought, is insane, and powerful. The Captain turned and marched from the deathly still throne room, determined to find the girl.

Uram found it difficult to breathe, but the fact that he was breathing was encouraging. He forced his eyes open and was blinded by the bright morning sun. He turned his head and found himself on the grass, covered by a blanket with another pillowing his head. Next to him lay his leathers and chain mail, and his sword and boots. A chicken pecked at the grass. A dog wandered the road which was now mostly dry, and birds arced through the cloudless sky.

Slowly Uram pulled aside the blanket. His chest wounds were covered with leaves and a gray paste, familiar folk medicine for cuts, but his wounds had been serious, and yet, he felt no

pain, only stiffness. Uram sat himself up but was met by a wave of dizziness that slowly passed. Next to him, opposite his clothes was a waterskin. He drank from it and felt better, then began peeling off the leaves. The wounds were healed.

“Bloody hell! I should be dead, I know it!” He looked around but saw no one. Slowly he got dressed, drank more water, wishing it were something stronger then stumbled around the battlefield. He found the coach. Found Kel and Elsa’s tracks leading in to the woods, but no Kendar tracks followed them. He sighed in relief. They had gotten away, which meant they were on their way to Fairmont. He found a horse and made for Fairmont.

Elsa was tired. Although riding the horse was preferable to walking, she was getting awfully sore and her arms were tired from holding Benar, who had fallen asleep again, and fending off tree branches. Kel and Durick led the horse through the forest using deer trails when they found them, but otherwise blazing their own trail westward.

“We’d better stop for the night,” Durick advised when they came to a small clearing. Elsa was never so glad to hear the word ‘stop’ in all her life. “We’re about a day’s ride from the King’s Highway.”

Kel reached up and took Benar from Elsa. Durick helped Elsa down off the horse, where she stumbled slightly and then limped off. “Sore, Elsa?” Kel teased.

She gave him a withering look as she sat down gingerly in the grass.

“My apologies for not having a proper saddle for you, Miss,” Durick said as he tended to the horse’s bridle.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” Kel joked.

“It’s not your fault, Durick, we were in a hurry, after all,” Elsa said, rubbing the backs of her legs. “I’m just not used to riding, is all.”

“Well, it’s a long way to Thelsig,” Kel pointed out. “You’ll be used to it by the time we get there.”

Durick tied the horse to a tree with green grass growing at its base and dropped the supply bags near Elsa. “I saw some wild potatoes,” he said. “I’ll go dig some up and we can have some soup.”

Elsa raised an eyebrow. “You cook, Durick?”

“I’ve been on my own for a long time, Miss,” he said with a rueful smile, and turned and walked back into the trees.

“He’s a good man, that one,” Kel said busying himself by making a firepit with Benar’s help.

Elsa nodded. “Yes, we’re very lucky.”

“Very,” Kel echoed, “since neither one of us can cook!”

Elsa smiled. She sat quiet for a minute, watching her brother and son work on the fire. “How long do you think it will take us to get to Thelsig?”

Kel looked up at his sister and then tossed a stick into the pile. “Well,” he said, “there aren’t any decent roads from Brynlynn to Thelsig. We would have to go south first, then turn northwest if we were to use the trade roads. But that would take months.” He paused and thought about it for a moment. “No, I think we’ll make for Delf and then cross the Terrigon Pass. But we’ll have to hurry. We’ll have to be over the pass and a good ways down the other side before the snows come in. If we can beat the snowfall, we can be in Thelsig in a month or so.”

“A month,” Elsa repeated and shook her head. It seemed like a long time.

“Of course, I don’t know what we’ll find in Thelsig,” Kel continued. “Or where we’re supposed to go once we get there.”

Elsa sighed. “I don’t know either,” she admitted. “I just don’t know, but Dane was insistent.”

Kel nodded and struck steel to flint causing sparks to drop into the dry grass at the center of the fire. After a moment, a wisp of smoke curled up out of the center of the fire. Kel nursed the small flame and soon it was crackling cheerfully. He sat back on his heels and smiled at Benar, who was watching the flames intently. “He was pretty convincing,” Kel said.

“Yes,” Elsa agreed.

Kel sighed. “Too bad he didn’t give us more information.”

Elsa put her head in her hands and rubbed her forehead. “We can’t ask Durick to go,” she said.

“Go where?” Durick asked as he came out of the trees. He had a handful of potatoes and even a couple of wild carrots.

Elsa looked up at the big man. “Thelsig,” she said. “Kel wants to take the Terrigon Pass, but this is not your quest, Durick. You should go back home and take care of your farm.”

Durick smiled and went and knelt next to the fire and started preparing dinner. “It isn’t much of a farm, not since my Myra and Josh died of fever. I only grow enough to feed myself. It’s been a lonely life.” He paused and looked at Benar, who was still intently watching the flames. “If it’s all the same to you, Miss, I’d rather spend my time looking after you three.”

“As would we,” a voice suddenly said from behind Elsa. Elsa jumped to her feet and stumbled forward. Kel leapt up and drew his sword in one fluid motion, while Durick snatched up Benar. They all faced two slender figures covered entirely in dark gray hooded cloaks.

“Elves!” Benar squealed.

Fire rained down on Castle Penbrook as the Cortisian catapults launched volley after volley of burning coal and stones across the outer wall. A huge battering ram was being employed against the main gate which was showing signs of collapse, while two tall siege towers filled with archers prevented the castle archers from shooting at the men on the battering ram. The castle was ablaze, the walls were weakening and the living were knee deep in the dead.

“To the main gate! Fortify the main gate!”

“Ladders on the south wall!”

King Bales listened to his men give orders, orders which were barely audible over the din of battle. Cort had betrayed him. The alliance between Cort and Daumath had been forged to prevent the Kendar from invading Daumath. But that alliance had been forged with Bron Wrom, whom his daughter had loved, not the deceiver Edgram. His daughter had spurred Edgram's proposal and now Daumath faced both Cort and the barbarian hordes of Kendar.

“My liege, the south wall is overrun!”

Daumath could not stand against either foe, much less both. He had sent word to Brynlyn for aid, but no aid came. Most likely, King Bales thought, the messengers never made it, for they would have had to travel through Cort to get to Brynlyn.

"The main gate has fallen!"

The air was thick with smoke and it stung his eyes, but King Bales' tears were not caused by the smoke.

"My liege! The castle has fallen!"

His tears were for his children. If the messengers had not made it, what chance was there for them? Suddenly the soldier that had been standing beside him was cut down and King Bales stood face to face with three Kendar warriors.

"We surrender," King Bales whispered, knowing full well that the Kendar did not accept surrender.