

OATHBREAKER



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“By the Angels, this is awful,” I gasped in between sneezing fits. I took a small sip of water from the canteen on my hip, trying to wash the taste of dust out of my mouth. I spat it over the side of the wagon before taking a deeper drink. It still tasted like dust.

“Aw, come on, Kratt, don’t be like that,” Higgs replied with an easy smile. “Could be worse. At least we got to spend a few days in the capital while they got the supplies for the fort in order.”

“Oh yes, a whole two days being nagged at by my mother. It was magical,” I replied dryly.

“That’ll happen,” he said, wincing in sympathy. “Well, at least it’s a beautiful day.”

Higgs liked to look on the bright side of things.

There hadn’t been a good rain in weeks, and it was so hot that wearing leather armor was miserable. Or it would be, if we still wore it.

I launched into another sneezing fit, this one so violent, I slammed into the unyielding backrest. Higgs winced, then slapped at a bird-sized mosquito on his arm.

I squinted at him through watering eyes. “Oh sure, we’re living the dream right now.”

He boomed out a laugh, and a grin spread across my face.

Still smiling, he cast a critical eye at our horses and twitched the reins to encourage them to pick up the pace. Instead, they slowed further, ears flicking back and forth, broadcasting their unease. I scanned the tree-covered hills on either side of the road, but saw nothing to cause alarm. It was quiet.

It was *quiet*.

My eyes widened, and I placed a hand on my sword hilt, the feel of the worn leather comforting. “Higgs,” I said softly, “When did the birds stop singing?”

“Dunno,” he replied just as quietly.

The corporal pulled the horses to a full stop, the overarching branches of an ancient maple casting dappled light and shadow across us. He reached behind his seat and pulled out his crossbow.

The larger draft, Rufus, stomped a front hoof and snorted, while Zoe shook her mane and pinned her ears. For the placid drafts, this was the equivalent of a full-on outburst.

The piercing cry of a hawk cut through the oppressive silence, drawing my eyes upward reflexively. I caught sight of the bird just before it dropped below the tree line, fleeing a much larger predator. I sucked in a startled breath.

Higgs followed the direction of my gaze. “What’s a birdman doing all the way out here?”

I reluctantly tore my eyes away from the Angel in flight. “I don’t know, but I don’t like it. Put your armor back on.”

“Best idea you’ve had all day,” he agreed absently, still staring up at the unusual sight.

I snorted. “You said the same thing when I told you to take it off.”

“You know I’d take it *all* off for you, Kratt,” he replied automatically, but his leer was halfhearted at best as he strapped on his armor. Despite what the Angels had done for us, seeing one this far from the realm gate was alarming.

“I don’t think I’m missing much,” I shot back, giving Higgs a dismissive once-over as I hurriedly jerked the reinforced leather cuirass over my head and tugged the side straps tight.

I shrugged a couple of times to settle my armor into place. It hugged my body like an old, trusted friend, exactly as it should. There wasn’t much to do at Mountain Home outside of drink and train, and there was only so much beer to go around.

“Let’s get gone, Higgs.”

“You got it,” he said, no trace of his smile remaining. He flicked the reins and got the horses moving again.

I cleared my throat. “So, when we tell everyone this story, how about we leave out the part where we were hauling supplies without armor?”

The corporal snorted. “Do I look dumb to you? Billings would have us *both* running laps. In full gear.”

“Glad we understand each other.”

* * *

We didn’t stop until we reached the Willow River. The horses nickered eagerly as we unhitched them and led them down to the bank for a much-needed drink.

“Not too much now,” Higgs cautioned. “We don’t want them cramping up on us.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Higgs, believe it or not this isn’t my first time—”

I froze. Tucked under the bridge, out of sight of the road—or the sky—was a man curled up on his side. I elbowed Higgs. He hefted his crossbow, narrowed eyes scanning the trees.

Bandits loved the injured-man ploy.

With Higgs guarding my back, I soundlessly drew my sword and stepped closer. The poorly wrapped injuries were real enough. He looked like he’d been through hell. It also looked like he was out cold. I signaled to Higgs, and he walked up behind me, peering over my shoulder.

“Are you seeing what I see?”

“Is that really...” Higgs trailed off.

“Angel armor,” I confirmed.

“The Angel army only takes the best of the best.”

I rolled my eyes at the awe in his voice. “You mean the most powerful. They don’t care if you have the fighting prowess of a potato so long as your magic is strong.”

“Doesn’t look like it did this poor bastard any good.” Higgs frowned in concern. “Think that Angel was looking for him? What if he’s a deserter?”

“Does it matter? We can get his story later. Right now, he needs our help, so move it, Higgs.”

Higgs hustled back to the horses as I stepped closer to the wounded soldier.

I lightly kicked his boot. “Hey, buddy, I don’t know if you can hear me, but I’m here to help.”

When there was no response, I sheathed my blade and crouched down next to him. I reached out and touched his arm. Before I could blink, I was flat on the ground with a dagger to my throat. The soldier crouched over me, teeth bared in a wild snarl. His face was filthy, and ten years older than when I had last seen it. It didn’t matter. I’d know him anywhere.

“Michael,” I gasped.

His snarl faded as his eyes widened in recognition. “Nora?”

Then his eyes rolled up, and he collapsed on top of me. Heavy bastard.

“Higgs!” I bellowed.

The corporal skidded down the bank at my shout. He swore and sprinted over, grabbing Michael’s shoulder to pull him off. I stopped him with the one arm I had free.

“Wait! Look at his face, Higgs!”

“Murphy? But how?” His eyes narrowed. “It could be an Elven trick.”

I shook my head. “It’s really him, Higgs. He knew my name. Now help me get him to the wagon.”

Higgs sucked in a deep breath but picked up the smaller soldier without arguing further. He settled him in the back of the wagon, and I hopped in after, moving supplies out of the way to make room.

“Get us moving, Higgs. I’ll keep him alive until we get home.”

As Higgs urged the horses to their top speed, I grabbed the small healer’s kit and used every bit of it on Michael. He had a multitude of minor injuries, but it was the deep slice in his side that worried me. He groaned as I cleaned and bandaged, and I gripped his hand without thinking.

He was missing a finger.

I winced and tried to release his hand, but his remaining fingers tightened on mine. I didn't have the heart to pull away. It looked like an old injury. From what I could see without removing his armor, he had a lot of those.

"What have they done to you, old friend?" I murmured as I brushed a lock of black hair out of his sweaty, dirt-smearred face.

By the time Mountain Home's gray stone walls came into sight, I was reduced to softly encouraging Michael. "Hang in there, brother. We're almost home."

I steadied him as we ascended the final hill where the fort guarded Glacier Pass. The exhausted horses plodded through the gate, the back of the wagon barely clearing the portcullis before they came to a grateful stop with drooping heads and heaving, sweat-slicked sides.

There were a few soldiers in the bailey and up on the parapet, but the only one alarmed at our appearance was Brennan. "What did you do to my babies?" he demanded hysterically, stroking Zoe's neck soothingly.

"I need the healer out here *now*," I bellowed over his theatrics.

Brennan took one look in the back of the wagon and sprinted into the keep, horses momentarily forgotten. His heartfelt curses were enough to tell me he recognized our wounded soldier.

"Help's almost here," I urged Michael, keeping my hands clamped on his side. "Don't you *dare* quit now."

Higgs rushed to the back of the wagon and moved supplies out of the way. He was quickly joined by Billings, our sergeant. Built like a rock, the man gave the impression that if something got in his way, he'd simply go through it. The supplies never stood a chance.

Brennan charged back out of the keep, dragging the protesting healer with him. Pemberton had just enough Elven blood to give him a real talent for healing and more than enough arrogance to land him a posting out here with us. To give him his due, the healer stopped complaining the instant he realized he had a real patient.

He imperiously pointed at Brennan and Higgs. "Carry him to the infirmary. Keep pressure on his side. Quickly now!" He scanned me with a clinical eye as I scrambled out of the way.

"You are not injured?"

"I'm good, go take care of Michael..."

I trailed off, the healer already gliding away at top speed. I stretched my stiff limbs and slowly climbed out of the wagon, desperately hoping I wasn't about to faceplant onto the rough cobblestones.

"What do you need?" Billings asked.

That was it. No questions. No demands for an explanation. The man was worth his weight in beer, and I'd never been more grateful.

"Get this place buttoned up tight. Set a watch for Angels. If we see them flying, I want to know about it."

If Billings was confused by the unusual order, he didn't show it. He just nodded his bald head sharply. "Why don't you get cleaned up? I'll handle things out here."

I looked down and realized I had blood—Michael's blood—on, well, everything.

"Appreciate it," I replied with a nonchalance I didn't feel.

I marched across the bailey and ducked into the narrow entrance of the keep. The dark, claustrophobic passage, with its sharp turns and murder holes, never failed to motivate me to move faster. I didn't slow until I emerged in the crowded great hall.

I desperately wanted to go directly to the infirmary, but Billings was right. I needed to get cleaned up, then go check on the state of our defenses. As if anything we had could fight off even a single Angel!

I fought back a tidal wave of despair and frustration as I turned my steps to my room. Of all the places Michael could have gone for help, why did he head for Mountain Home? We weren't a combat posting. We were a single throwback company holding down a fort meant for a battalion.

What exactly did Michael think we could do?

An errant thought stopped me in my tracks. Maybe Michael hadn't been coming to *us* for help at all. But he'd looked relieved when he saw me. That had to count for something.

* * *

It took longer to clean my armor than to clean myself. Fully cleaned up and on a mission, I charged out of my quarters to hunt down my sergeant, only to nearly crash into the man himself.

"How do you *do* that?" I demanded.

Billings lifted an eyebrow. "Do what?"

I wasn't buying his innocent act. "How do you always know when I'm looking for you and find me first?"

“It’s a talent honed by all sergeants,” he replied dryly.

I rolled my eyes and briskly led the way back to the great hall. “How’re we looking?”

“I’ve got a full watch posted under lockdown orders, with Emerson in command,” he said as we entered the suspiciously empty room. I looked around in confusion.

“I also decided this would be a great opportunity for a barracks inspection,” he added nonchalantly.

Keeping everyone too busy to be overly curious about our unexpected guest. Scratch that earlier thought. The man was worth his weight in *whiskey*.

I arched an eyebrow. “Did you now?”

Billings flashed a grin, there and gone so quickly, I would have missed it if I had blinked. “Cadre are assembled and awaiting your orders.”

I snorted. “You mean, they’re hanging around and drinking.”

“Potato, potahto.”

I followed the faint sound of voices to our barracks. My cadre was spread out around the tables. Drinking.

“Nice of you to finally join us, Kratt,” O’Reilly called out with a grin and a raised mug.

I flipped him off and collapsed into the nearest empty chair. These people were family. I didn’t have to pretend to be anything other than what I was—absolutely exhausted.

Griff slid a full plate of food in front of me. I blinked up at him in surprise and got a scowl in return.

“Eat. You look like crap.”

“Oh good, you’re still a jerk. I was worried there for a moment.”

I grinned at his huff of exasperation and looked around the table, noting the empty chairs as much as the full. We were all that was left of the original throwback training class. The army promised they could bring out our latent magic. They never promised we would all survive.

“I filled them in for you,” Higgs said around a yawn.

“Good. Any word on Michael?”

Brennan leaned back and crossed his arms. “He’s stable, but Pemberton said to stay the hell out of his infirmary until he’s finished the job.”

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself that punching my healer in the face while he was in the middle of a healing was a bad idea. It took everything I had to stay seated when I so desperately wanted, no *needed*, to see Michael with my own eyes.

Higgs smiled, but it wasn't up to his usual standard. "Don't worry. He said he'd be done soon."

"Right before he kicked us out," Brennan grumbled.

Midnight approached with no word, but we all stayed. I zoned out, listening to the chatter with half an ear and pushing food around my plate. I snapped out of my exhausted haze when a frazzled Sergeant Emerson ran into the room.

"Healer Pemberton just rode out the postern gate. I'm sorry. I thought we had it locked down."

Brennan lurched out of his chair. "Which horse did he take?"

"I don't know." Emerson scowled. "Does it matter?"

"Hell yes, it matters," Brennan snarled and ran out of the room, a confused Emerson following behind.

Bitter recrimination slapped me in the face. I should have anticipated the healer running to the High Council. He desperately wanted a better post, and what better way to get one than to report a potential deserter. And from the Angel army no less.

Anders shrugged dismissively. "If he's a deserter, wouldn't we have to turn him in anyway?"

West smacked him on the back of the head before I could say a word. "We don't betray our own."

Griff shook his head slowly. "And you all say *I'm* an asshole."

"Well, he's not wrong," a new voice chimed in. "Though I prefer the word *escaped*."

I whipped my head around. Michael stood in the doorway, pale, but upright. The tight band around my heart loosened by slow degrees until I was finally able to take a deep breath again.

"You're alright!" said Higgs.

"Good to see you on your feet!" added West.

"You look like crap, Murphy," growled Griff.

I shot Griff a look of disbelief at that one, but he just shrugged and grinned.

Michael smiled at me and Higgs. "I'm alright, thanks to you two dragging me back here. And your excellent healer. Who, unless I'm mistaken, is heading to the capital to report me."

"That'll happen," Higgs replied with forced cheer.

I watched through narrowed eyes as Michael carefully sat next to me. He was still favoring his injured side.

O'Reilly slapped a full plate of food and a mug of what should be water—but was probably beer—in front of him. “Eat up, brother; you look like you need it.”

“Thanks.”

They briefly clasped hands, then Michael attacked the food like a starving wolf. I slid my half-full plate over to him and got a wink in return. I took the time to study him. He was physically fit, but underneath the armor and the scars, he looked worn thin. Haunted.

As Michael polished off my food, I gradually became aware of the pointed looks everyone kept giving me. I sighed and waited until he was done eating.

“Alright, Michael. Spill it. What the hell is going on?”

My old friend raised his head, and for just a moment, I saw a stranger. Then the ice thawed, and a rueful smile spread across his face.

“Blunt as always, Nora. You haven't changed.”

“You have,” I challenged. “Now, start talking.”

“It's better if you don't know.”

“How can we help you if we don't?”

Michael's hands tightened into fists. “I never asked for help.”

Everything hit me all at once. The exhaustion from the trip back from the capital. The fear Michael would die before we could get him help. The shock of Pemberton's betrayal. And now, Michael's pigheaded stubbornness. I exploded.

“Well, it's kind of hard to ask for help when you're dying in a ditch!”

Higgs coughed. “Technically, he was dying under a bridge.”

I ignored the scattered laughter. “Why come here if you didn't want help?”

“I wasn't coming here,” Michael replied shortly, irritation coating every word.

My heart sank. I knew it.

West raised an eyebrow. “Where were you going?”

“It's better if you don't know,” Michael repeated stubbornly.

He shoved himself up from the table, and his legs buckled. I lunged upward and wedged myself under his shoulder before he hit the floor. It brought our faces close together. Too close. I froze, staring into a pair of eyes that used to be as familiar as my own.

“I need to go, Nora,” he said, his voice softer.

I felt an old pain I thought long buried shiver to life, stabbing me all over again. It pissed me off.

“You need to sit down,” I snarled.

“The bastard took Ace!” Brennan shouted as he ran back into the room. He skidded to a halt and stared at us. “Awkward.”

Billings cleared his throat. “Son, I get that you want to protect your friends. I tried to keep your presence here quiet, but that ship sailed the second Pemberton ran.” The older man paused to make sure he had Michael’s attention. “Now, the way I see it, you’ve got two options left to you. Either accept our help, or convince us we can’t. And good luck with the second.”

A beat passed. Defeat and a hint of exhaustion broke through Michael’s stony mask, and he nodded once. I eased him back into his seat before retaking my own.

“How long do we have before Pemberton reaches the capital?”

Brennan paused in thought before slouching in the chair next to Higgs. “About six hours.”

“Six hours! It took us over twelve,” Higgs protested.

“With a heavy wagon and drafts. Ace is Elven-bred. He can do it in five with a good rider. Lucky for us, Pemberton isn’t.”

I glanced at Michael. “How long would it take an Angel to fly up here?”

I could see the struggle on his face, but at last he said, “An hour, maybe two.”

“Let’s go with six hours then,” O’Reilly remarked, then glanced at Michael. “Assuming the Angel is motivated.”

“Consider him motivated,” Michael replied grimly. “And I already said I don’t want your help. What I need to do is leave before the Angel gets here and kills you all.”

Sanderson, our best archer, frowned. “Mountain Home is a big place. Why can’t you just hide until the Angel leaves? You know we’ll cover for you.”

Frustration tightened his eyes. “You don’t understand. He can sense me if he gets close enough. I need to get through the pass and into Elven lands. He won’t be able to sense me past their barrier.”

Disappointment swelled. “So you *are* running,” I said quietly.

His head whipped around. “You’re damn right I’m running! Do you know how many of us come back from the Angel realm?”

“Not enough,” I admitted.

Michael bared his teeth. “Try none. Command keeps it quiet, but once you’re on the other side of the gate, you find out real quick that it’s a one-way trip.”

I tried to think of anyone I knew who had come back and came up blank.

“And then you find out why the Angels *really* gave us magic,” he continued, voice growing harsh with pain. “It isn’t so we can help them fight the demons. It’s so they can rip it out of us

when their own runs dry on the battlefield. I lost the only person I cared about because of it, and I'll be damned if I'll fight a second longer for those bastards!"

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

"Okay," I finally said, nodding briskly. "Then we get you to Elven lands."

Michael stared. "Just like that?"

"Of course," West said with a smile. "You didn't think we'd let you go alone, did you?"

"This is the most exciting thing to happen since training," Griff added as he grabbed a map and spread it across the table. "Look here. The smart thing to do is go east and round the tail end of the range, but if the Angel can track you, we don't have time for smart."

"There's always time for smart," Brennan objected.

"Not this time. It's Glacier Pass or nothing."

Dealing with the elves would be bad enough, but that was nothing compared to the monsters that hunted the pass. They were the real guardians. We were just window dressing.

Oblivious, Michael shook his head stubbornly. "I can't sense magic in any of you. With an Angel hunting me, it's too dangerous for you to help. I can get through the pass on my own."

I flinched at the familiar stab of hurt at the dismissal. As if lacking magic made us completely useless.

Griff snorted derisively. "You'll never make it through alone. We need eight—large enough to fight, small enough to sneak. And we'll need one of the dogs, which means Brennan has to go." He ignored Brennan's muttered curse and looked around the suddenly quiet room. "The question is, who else is going?"

Everyone's eyes landed on me. I looked back at my friends, my family, and fought a rising sense of panic. I mostly succeeded by replacing it with anger. "I hate you all."

Higgs grinned. "We love you too. Now, who's going on a suicide mission through the mountains to go visit the nice elves?"

"Fine! Let's skip past the part where you all volunteer. Griff, you know the mountains better than any of us, you're lead. West, Sanderson, you're my best shots; bring twice the arrows you think you'll need. Higgs, you're attached at the hip to Griff and West. If I don't include you, you'll just follow."

Higgs shrugged his massive shoulders but didn't deny it.

I hesitated, but I needed another basher. "Anders, you're up."

Anders smiled his happy smile, lazily pulling himself out of his chair. The man was an absolute beast and towered over all of us. "Been awhile since I punched a troll in the face."

Michael jerked his gaze to me. “Troll?”

O’Reilly narrowed his eyes. “That’s seven, including Murphy. Who’s the last?”

I smirked. “Me, of course. Billings, you have charge of Mountain Home until we return.”

I left the ‘or until they send up a replacement’ unspoken. He gave me a solemn nod. Once again, he had my back.

“Get ready. We leave in twenty.”

Michael grabbed my arm. “*Troll?!*”

* * *

Traveling in mountainous terrain at night, even with an experienced guide like Griff, was not something I ever wanted to do again. The drizzling rain did not improve the experience.

We had ascended well past the colorful leafy trees that gave the Firebrand Mountains their name and into the sparser evergreen forests when Griff called a break.

“We’re nearly to the middle of the pass. We need to wait for daylight before we go further.”

“Why?” Michael demanded.

Griff glanced back. “Trolls don’t usually hunt during daylight.”

There were no more objections.

We followed Griff under the drooping branches of a massive evergreen. Padded with a thick carpet of dried needles, it was large enough for all of us to sit if we were friendly. Best of all, it was dry.

I found myself wedged between Michael and Griff. Poor Sanderson had the misfortune to be stuck between Anders and Bear, Brennan’s massive German Shepherd.

“Brennan, did you *have* to bring the drooly one?” she complained as she swiped at her damp shoulder.

Brennan scratched Bear behind his ears. “Don’t you listen to her. You’re the bestest boy, yes you are.” He shot Sanderson a glare. “Nova’s senile, Dargo limps, and the two pups aren’t trained. Bear’s the best troll sniffer we have. Deal with a little drool.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t comment further.

Everyone ate quickly and settled down to get what rest they could. I bit back a smile at the sight of Sanderson snuggled up to Bear. I shifted around, trying to get comfortable, and noticed Michael was still awake.

I nudged his side. “Hey, you should get some rest,” I said, voice hushed.

Michael slowly turned to me, eyes haunted. “I lied. I *was* coming to you for help. But you, *none* of you, ever found your magic. You have to promise, if the Angel catches up, you’ll leave the fight to me. I’ve probably already cost you your command; I won’t have your death on my shoulders, too.”

I laughed, not bothering to hide the bitter note. “Do you really think they gave *me*, a throwback without magic, command of Mountain Home?”

Michael awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “I feel like there’s no right answer to that question.”

Griff snorted before slitting his eyes open. “What she’s trying to say is our illustrious commander, Sir Brookston, drank himself into liver failure last year and had to return to the capital for healing.”

West yawned and added, “Last we heard, his wife beat the crap out of him for drinking too much. He needed healing for that, too.”

“And even if I had command, I still would have helped you, dummy.” I gave him a mischievous grin. “I can still kick your butt, you know. No magic required.”

He grinned back, that dormant spark flaring in his eyes. “You think so? I’m willing to bet I’ve learned a few new tricks.”

Griff groaned obnoxiously. “Would you two quit flirting already? We’re trying to sleep here.”

I jabbed an elbow into his side. “Would you stop being a jerk for five minutes?”

I turned back to Michael, still smiling, but it faded at his look of raw grief. Oh. I knew that look.

“Who was she?” I asked softly.

He was silent for so long, I didn’t think he would answer. “Everything.”

I pretended I didn’t see the wet shine in his eyes.

We rested until the grey dawn light shone through the branches.

“Alright, listen up if you don’t want to die,” Griff announced with his usual tact. “Stick to the middle of the pass, and stay away from the rocks. The trolls blend so well, we’ll never see them coming.”

Once again, they all looked at me. I heaved a sigh. “Do you really need me to say *let’s move out?*”

Higgs smiled. “It makes us feel better.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled back. It was Higgs, dammit. I couldn’t help myself.

One by one, we crawled out from under the branches. Anders held up a hand before we got too far.

“Time,” he grunted.

I was fairly certain the man couldn’t count to a hundred, yet he possessed the inexplicable ability to mark time nearly as well as one of the fancy clocks in the capital. Our six hours were up.

We picked up the pace until the rocky high point of the pass came into sight. Troll hunting ground. Bear slowed, growling low and looking to his handler for reassurance.

Griff glanced over his shoulder, grim as I’d ever seen him. “Weapons out, eyes open, and pray to whatever god you hold dear the trolls hunted well last night.”

I drew in a deep breath, feeling the first twinges of doubt. But, unless we wanted to hand Michael over to an Angel, turning back wasn’t an option. Our only way out was forward.

Bear stopped abruptly and snarled, pivoting to his left, hackles raised high. We all froze, scanning the rocks. My hand turned white-knuckled on my sword hilt.

We were staring right at the troll and still didn’t see it until it was too late. A terrifying bellow ripped through the pass and then it was on us. Bear leaped in front of Brennan, snarling, but the troll swept him out of the way with a bone-crushing hit.

“Michael!” I screamed as the tail end of the blow sent both him and the dog rolling down a gully.

A sharp scream of agony jerked my head back around in time to see Brennan fall to his knees, his guts decorating the ground in front of him. I drew my sword with a curse and looked up. And up. The troll was fifteen feet tall and nearly as wide. It was as if a piece of the mountain itself had broken free and decided to go on a killing spree.

I hesitated. I *hesitated*.

Griff didn’t.

He charged right in, longsword gleaming in the rain. His first strike glanced off the troll’s stone-like skin, throwing him off-balance. The troll snatched him up before he could recover, one massive hand wrapping around his head, the other ripping his sword away. Griff tore at the troll’s hand, thrashing wildly as he was lifted into the air.

West desperately fired an arrow. It ricocheted off the bony ridges of its forehead, just missing the vulnerable eye.

Fear forgotten, I charged in from the left. I made it all of three steps before the loud crack of Griff's skull breaking brought me stumbling to a halt. I could live a thousand years and never forget the sound.

The troll snatched Brennan's body off the ground with his free hand and vanished into the rocks. The speed of the attack and its abrupt ending left me dizzy.

I stared at the pieces of Brennan the troll left behind and vaguely wondered why my sword was shaking. An errant breeze brought the stench of blood and gore to my nose. I doubled over and vomited.

West fell to his knees. "No."

Michael charged up out of the gully, blood trickling down the side of his face from a gash near his hairline, a sword in each hand.

Too slow. We were all too damn slow.

This wasn't a training exercise or an adventure. Brennan and Griff were dead. My fault. All my fault.

The sharp whine of a dog in pain brought me out of my shock. I stumbled over to the side of the gully and let out a shout of surprise. "Bear's still alive!"

Anders frowned. "We don't have time to save the stupid dog; we gotta get moving."

Higgs shoved past him, scowling. "It's what Brennan would have wanted." He slid down the slope, carefully cradled the wounded dog in his arms, and climbed back up. When he was close enough, Anders leaned down and offered his hand.

"Careful, his leg's broke. And his ribcage doesn't look right," Higgs warned.

"I've got him," Anders grumbled, taking the dog with surprising gentleness. Bear whimpered once and fell silent.

The sound of rocks tumbling, rising and falling in a distinct cadence, echoed off the sheer walls of the pass. Troll-speak. We tensed, expecting another attack. But the sound didn't repeat, and the attack never came.

"What did it say, West?" The archer didn't answer, face still slack with shock. I strode over and grabbed his shoulder. "West! What did the damn troll say?"

The archer swallowed a few times. "He said...the toll is paid."

Oh god. Brennan. Griff. I wanted to cry.

"Let's move out," I ordered hoarsely.

We marched single-file through the rest of the pass, weapons ready. But true to their word, the trolls didn't bother us again. We had paid.

* * *

The descent on the far side of the range took nearly as long as getting through the pass. I could practically feel the Angel breathing down my neck, but Michael assured us he would sense him before we could see him.

We slowed to a stop at a shallow creek. Elven lands began on the other side.

Anders stretched his back after gently setting Bear down. “Well, that was fun.”

“Fun,” West repeated in disbelief. “We just lost two of our friends, our *brothers*, and that’s the word you go with?”

Sanderson defended him. “He doesn’t mean it like that. He just sucks at talking.”

Higgs actually growled and stalked closer to Anders. “And thinking and pretty much anything that isn’t fighting. Speaking of fighting, where the hell were you back there?”

Anders looked down. “Back off, little man. Now.”

“Stop it!” Michael shoved himself between them, iridescent magic sparking off his fingers. “If you want to blame somebody, blame me. I’m the reason you’re out here.”

Higgs stepped back, shaking himself sharply. Anders flexed his fingers.

“Tingly,” he commented with a grin.

I pinned Michael with a hard look. “You’re right. We’re here because of you. Are you ready to tell us what we’re really doing out here?”

“I already told you—”

I stomped over and got in his face. “You told us a load of crap. The man I knew would never run from anything.”

Michael scowled down at me. “Maybe I’m not that man anymore.”

“Would you two get a room already?”

“Shut up, Anders!” Michael and I shouted in unison.

Higgs crossed his massive arms. “I think she’s right. You always were a bad liar, Murphy. Tell us the truth.”

Michael scrubbed at his face. “Like I said from the beginning, the less you know the better.”

I searched his eyes. “How can you still not trust us?”

“It’s not about trust,” he growled in frustration.

I threw my hands up. “Then what is it? Just tell us!”

“Griff and Brennan are gone,” West added softly. “You owe us that much.”

The silence stretched painfully, broken only by faint whimpers from Bear. Sanderson dropped to the ground and stroked his fur, murmuring nonsense words. Just like Brennan would have.

Michael glanced down at the dog, and his shoulders drooped. “Very well.” He pulled something out of his belt pouch and held it up for our inspection.

Anders scratched his head. “Uh, nice rock?”

We all stopped and stared at him for a moment. It was clearly not a rock.

“Seriously?” Sanderson muttered.

I rolled my eyes and studied the angular gemstone. Nearly translucent, it was crisscrossed with the faintest of lilac wisps that seemed to curl and twist in time to a beat I couldn’t hear.

I leaned closer, fascinated. “What is it?”

“It’s—”

An arrow buried itself in the ground next to his foot. We stared at the arrow for a split second before diving for cover as several more flew over the creek. Sanderson threw herself over Bear, protecting the wounded dog as best she could.

“Peace!” I screamed in passable Elvish.

Crouched behind the same tree, West shook his head. “Your accent is terrible.”

The archer called out something in Elvish and got a shouted reply in return. West took a deep breath and nodded at me. Together, we stepped out into the open. When we weren’t immediately shot, the others emerged from hiding as well.

On the other side of the creek, a trio of elves flowed out of the shadows. There could be dozens more hidden within the trees, or none. Impossible to tell.

West held out empty hands and spoke, the lyrical words spilling off his tongue easily.

The centermost Elf stepped forward with what could only be described as a pained grimace and cut him off. “I think it best if we speak in your tongue.”

Ha! Maybe his accent wasn’t any better than mine. My amusement faltered at the Elf’s unfriendly expression.

“Understand this, I am only speaking with you because of *her*.” He tilted his head at Sanderson. “You protected the animal instead of yourself. Bravery such as yours should be rewarded. So, I will hear your words.”

Sanderson faltered for a second when she realized he meant literally, then rolled her shoulders back. “We’ve come to request sanctuary for our brother. He’s being hunted by an Angel.”

The Elf snorted, already turning away. “Your people were the ones foolish enough to invite them in. Deal with the consequences.”

“If the demons make it to our realm, we will *all* pay for the mistakes of our ancestors!” Michael called out, urgency sharpening his words. “The Angels are losing their war. I’ve seen what happens when demons overrun a realm. We can stop that from happening, but I—we—need your help.”

The Elf turned back, eyes narrowed on Michael and the swirling purple gemstone he held out in his hand. “I recognize your armor. You swore oaths to fight the Angel’s war. And yet, here you stand, with the keystone to our realm gate.”

Michael met his gaze unflinchingly. “Sometimes, doing the right thing is more important than keeping your word. I don’t need sanctuary for myself, I need it for the keystone. Without it, the demons can’t reach our realm.”

The Elf raised a thin eyebrow. “And the Angels can’t steal away humans for their army,” he retorted. “Humans who would become powerful mages that would allow your kind to steal more of our lands. Why would we help you?”

“Because as bad as humans can be, the demons are so much worse. They’re like a plague, and they don’t stop until everything is laid to waste.”

The Elf snorted. “The same could be said of your people.”

“You said bravery should be rewarded,” Michael snapped, desperation seeping into his voice. “A lot of good people gave their lives to get us this far. But we can’t get any further, not with an Angel trapped on our side of the gate. He will never stop hunting the keystone, and I can’t protect it from him. But your people can.”

The Elf considered Michael and the keystone he still held outstretched for a long moment. “The words of an oathbreaker mean less than nothing.”

Michael’s hand slowly dropped to his side, shoulders slumping in defeat. The Elf sighed and leaped across the wide creek. He stopped a bare step away from my friend.

“Actions are what matter. I know nothing short of extraordinary effort could have wrenched a keystone from the Angels’ grasp.” Michael drew in a shaking breath and dropped the keystone into the Elf’s outstretched hand. “Know this. The demons have other ways to reach worlds. What you have given us is time, nothing more.”

Grief flashed across Michael’s face. “Sometimes, you’d give all you have for just a little more time.”

The Elf nodded solemnly as he tucked the keystone out of sight. He took a step toward the creek when Sanderson's hand shot out toward him. The other elves snapped their bows up, arrows ready to fly.

"Wait!" she cried, oblivious to the threat. "Bear was hurt defending us. Can you...can you take him with you? He'll die without a healer."

The leader looked at the wounded dog, and his expression softened. Then his head snapped up to the sky, searching the clouds. When he looked back down, his face was grim.

"Very well."

Sanderson gave Bear one last scritch behind his ears and rose to face the Elf. "Take care of him, please."

"Unlike some, we keep our word," he replied, not unkindly.

He gently picked up Bear and leaped back over the creek as if the dog weighed nothing at all. Then the elves were gone, and we were alone again.

There was a moment of silence, then Anders grunted. "Now what?"

Michael turned to us with an oddly peaceful expression on his face. The sight filled me with dread, though I wasn't sure why until he spoke. "Now, we say goodbye."

My pulse thundered in my ears until I could barely hear my own voice. "What?"

"The Angel is close. It's too late to run, and there's no hiding for me," he replied, gaze drifting upward, tracking something we couldn't see. "The keystone is safe; that's all that matters."

"You matter," I burst out. "What are you going to do when the Angel gets here? Tell him you gave the keystone to some random elves and just apologize?"

"I was thinking of telling him to go to hell," Michael said as he drew his twin swords, iridescent magic spiraling up the blades.

"Cute magic, Sparkles." Higgs snorted.

"Why not just tell him the elves have the keystone?" West asked, brow furrowed. "Maybe he'll leave you alone."

"One, the elves need time to get further away. I'm not sure their barrier will keep the Angel out, I only know it'll block him from tracking it."

"And two?" I demanded when he hesitated.

"Angels are all about rules, and I broke...a lot of rules. They like to make examples of rule breakers. Keeps the rest of us in line."

I nearly screamed in frustration. “And you expect us to hide in the bushes while he *makes an example* of you?”

Michael scowled at me, his own frustration rising. “You have no chance against an Angel. None.”

Anders bulled forward. “Do you, little man?” he rumbled.

Michael didn’t answer.

Higgs drew his battle axe. “We already lost two brothers today. You’re an idiot if you think we’re going to stand by and watch another die.”

West stepped up beside him, absently checking his bowstring. “Stop trying to save us, Murphy.”

“Maybe stop being an idiot while you’re at it,” Sanderson added.

One by one, they all looked at me. Just like they always did. And I was done hesitating.

I lifted my chin. “West, Higgs, take right. Sanderson, Anders, left. Cover your archer, and if you see an opening, take it.”

I glanced at Michael, eyebrows raised. He actually growled. Then he stopped, staring at his blades.

“You’re all throwbacks,” he whispered. He jerked his head up and stared like he was seeing us for the first time. “You need to get to cover!”

Not that again. “We’re not hiding—”

“You don’t understand,” he interrupted excitedly. “Not to hide, to ambush! He can’t sense you if you don’t have magic!”

I blinked. “Well...crap.”

Everyone just stood there for a second, until Anders snorted. “How ‘bout we stop wasting time and *move*.”

“Wings and eyes. Those are your vulnerable points,” Michael called after them as they vanished into the brush. I stayed exactly where I belonged. Guarding Michael’s back.

He frowned at me. “What are you doing, Nora?”

“Something stupid, probably.”

Dread stamped his features, wiping out his momentary excitement and making him look years older. He needed a reminder of what we once were together, what we could be again.

A team. Even if it was only for one battle.

I held out my fist, offering a half-smile. “Never quit.”

An answering grin spread across his face, and he lightly bumped his fist to mine. “Never die,” he finished.

* * *

If I expected the Angel to make a dramatic landing or immediately launch a devastating attack, I was both disappointed and more than a little relieved. He lightly touched down next to the creek and slowly folded his massive wings.

I could see why some humans worshipped them. The Angel was so much more than a man with wings and shining armor. Power rose off him in near-visible waves, and his eyes shone with an inner light that was difficult to look at directly.

He was terrifying.

“Where is the keystone?” he asked mildly, attention locked on Michael. I was more than happy to be ignored. “You’ve hidden it somehow.”

Michael just stared back in grim silence, feet set and swords raised in a fighting stance. I stood several paces back on his weak side, my sword steady even though I was shaking inside.

The Angel considered us silently for a moment. I didn’t like how his eyes fixed on me, as if he saw me as a weakness to exploit.

“You will give me the keystone. We will reopen the gate and return *home*.” For a moment, emotion bled into his voice. I felt a twinge of compassion for him, cut off from his realm and his people. It died at his next words. “Where you will be executed for your crimes against the host.”

Michael finally broke his silence. “What about your crimes against humans? You steal our magic, our *lives*, for your endless war. If the High Council knew—”

The Angel drew back in affront. “Your leadership is fully aware of the cost of the bargain they struck. Magic for all humans in exchange for conscripts for our army, to be used in whatever way we deem necessary.”

Michael faltered, and my mouth dropped open in shock. No. They couldn’t—wouldn’t—have done that. Except...stuck between an invading orc horde and powerful elves, maybe they had.

“Normally, we just harvest the excess magic from your kind to bolster our own.” The Angel drew his broadsword with a rasp of steel and stretched out his free hand toward Michael, fingers open and grasping. “But in those sentenced to die, we rip it out at the root. Why waste it?”

The iridescent magic coating Michael’s blades stuttered, then streamed over to the Angel’s hand where it was absorbed without a trace. My old friend’s face stretched in a silent scream of

agony, and he fell to his knees in the mud, weak and shaking, where seconds ago a deadly warrior stood.

“Now, you’re as barren as she is,” the Angel remarked coldly.

Fury erupted, and I did something really stupid.

I attacked an Angel.

I think I surprised him with my idiocy, scoring a direct hit on his outer thigh before he responded. I held my own for a moment, but I was tired and slower than I used to be. The fight would have been over in seconds if Anders hadn’t engaged, nearly clipping a wing with his own broadsword.

The Angel spun away, protecting his wings, and I slammed a blow into his side. His armor held without so much as a dent, and the Angel completed his spin, smashing his broadsword into my smaller blade. The tip of my sword sheared off, and I felt the shock of impact as his blade glanced off the bone in my upper arm.

I should have died then, but Higgs was there, dragging me away from the fight. “Don’t worry, Kratt. I got you.”

I forced my eyes open—when had I closed them?—and watched as Michael staggered to his feet just as Anders was knocked aside.

Michael and the Angel raged across the small clearing, blades moving so quickly they were a blur. Arrows flashed out of the trees, slamming into the Angel’s wings.

His scream of pain was deafening, even from where I was propped against a tree. Higgs winced but didn’t stop wrapping my arm in a desperate bid to keep me from bleeding out.

The Angel screamed again, and power rose so thick, the air was choking with it. It built up until I could practically see it shimmer in the air around him. Then it detonated.

A silent wave of power rippled outward from the Angel in a perfect circle, knocking down trees and sending Michael and Anders flying. For a moment, even the rain stopped. The small clearing was suddenly a lot bigger. It left the archers exposed.

The Angel barked out a command and pointed his sword at West. He flew backward, slamming into the shattered remains of a tree. I could hear the crack of his bones from where I lay, but he didn’t fall. The jagged branches pinned him in place, driven through his armor. His head lolled, gone before he could even make a sound.

Higgs stared at West and gave a cry of pure anguish.

The Angel sent another blast of power at Sanderson, but Anders slammed into her, knocking her out of the way.

“Get off me, you dumb ox!” Sanderson yelled, the tiny sergeant pinned by his much larger weight.

Higgs rushed the Angel, battle-axe low at his side. I struggled to push myself to my feet, but I tried to use my injured arm. It didn’t go well.

Across the clearing, Sanderson was still thrashing beneath a frighteningly still body. “Martin? *Martin!*”

Somehow, she pulled herself free. Her bow had snapped in the fall, so she drew her short sword and threw herself at the Angel. She was fast and drew blood, but the Angel instantly recovered and drove her backward. She stumbled. That small mistake was all it took for the Angel to drive his blade through her chest. She fell, half-lying across Anders.

Higgs roared, lurching up from the ground and throwing a handful of mud in the Angel’s eyes as he parried a strike from Michael. The Angel sent out another pulse of power blindly, catching Michael full-force. He landed in the creek and was still.

Higgs ducked the blast and came up swinging. But the Angel’s broadsword was there to meet the strike, and his axe blade shattered. For a moment, both man and Angel were still, their momentum checked. Then the Angel brought his hand up, rested it on Higgs’ chest, and blew out his heart.

Higgs dropped, his smile gone forever.

Michael slowly got back to his feet, stalking out of the creek one measured step at a time. Blood ran down from a gash in one arm, and his side was soaked. His old wound had reopened. He staggered and almost went down to one knee.

He pulled himself back up. He threw himself back into battle, dancing with the Angel once more, but there was no hope in his eyes.

I braced my back against the tree and pushed to my feet. I stalked past Sanderson and Anders, past West and Higgs, dragging my broken sword through the mud behind me. Blood soaked the hasty bandage and dripped in a steady stream from my fingers. I gritted my teeth and kept moving. They hadn’t quit. Neither would I.

I attacked from behind, aiming for those precious wings. The Angel spun before I could do any real damage. He knocked my broken blade aside with his armored forearm and hammered a blow to the side of my head. I slipped in the mud, my legs threatening to give out.

Michael snarled, his twin swords a blur as he drove the Angel back, giving me a chance to regain my footing. My head rung, and I could feel a warm trickle down the side of my face.

None of that mattered when the Angel landed a brutal hit on Michael's side, right over the open wound where his armor was already weak.

My old friend collapsed with a scream, and I didn't think. I attacked. The Angel snorted in contempt. In quick succession, he disarmed me, grabbed me by the throat, and jerked me into the air. I found myself eye to eye with the Angel, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking down at Michael, lying in the mud and blood. So much blood.

"Tell me where the keystone is, and I'll kill her quickly."

Michael grimaced through bloody teeth but didn't say a word.

The Angel unsheathed a small, razor-sharp dagger and shoved it into my side. Slowly. I gasped at the icy pain before gritting my teeth.

"Last chance, little mortal," the Angel hissed, twisting the blade. This time, I couldn't suppress my scream.

I saw the conflict in Michael's eyes, and the moment he wavered.

I struggled but could barely breathe through the grip the Angel had on my throat, let alone talk. My eyes filled with tears. If the Angel got to the keystone, this was all for nothing. Our friends *died* for nothing.

I jerked my eyes away from the Angel's implacable face.

They landed on the black and silver fletching of West's arrow, still buried in the Angel's wing.

"The keystone..." Michael coughed, blood flecking his lips.

It couldn't end like this.

I wouldn't let it.

I reached over the Angel's shoulder, grabbed the arrow, and twisted as hard as I could.

The Angel dropped me, screaming in agony, and I screamed with him. The dagger ripped free in the fall, and I lost my hold on the arrow. It didn't matter. The damage was done. Dark red blood soaked the beautiful white feathers, just like it soaked my side. I clamped a hand to my wound, trying to stem the flow.

The Angel fell to one knee, fingers clawing at his crippled wing. Michael threw himself into a desperate lunge and stabbed him in the eye with his dagger.

It should have been a killing blow, but the Angel just wouldn't die. I looked up in despair as the Angel ripped the dagger out of his ruined eye, tossing it aside in favor of his broadsword. Michael slumped back to the ground next to me.

We had nothing left.

The Angel towered over us, sword raised high, and I could only be thankful we'd angered him enough to kill us quickly. The keystone would be safe. Our *world* would be safe.

Without warning or fanfare, arrows flew out from the trees. From *beyond* the Elven border. Most ricocheted from the Angel's armor, but one sunk into his thigh. The Angel grunted in pain and leveled his broadsword at the hidden Elven archers. The ensuing blast of power didn't even ripple the leaves on the far bank. The Elven border held.

The Angel roared, frustration and rage battling for dominance. He swept his broadsword in front of his face, barely deflecting an arrow that would have taken his remaining eye. It wasn't until an arrow grazed his previously uninjured wing that he admitted defeat and fled the battlefield.

It was over.

I laid there for a moment, just trying to breathe. It was hard. A quiet gasp from Michael reminded me I wasn't alone, and I found the strength to crawl to his side.

"Is he dead? Did we do it?"

I watched the Angel escape and lied through my teeth. "We did it."

"Good."

I grasped his hand with fingers that were growing cold and held on until there were no more breaths. I was alone. It didn't hurt anymore though.

An Elf melted out of the shadows and knelt in the mud. He closed Michael's eyes with a gentle hand and turned to me. "No fear, brave one. We will never allow the keystone to fall into his hands."

I smiled through the darkness creeping into my vision. Good enough. I closed my eyes.

* * * * *

Melissa Olthoff Bio

Melissa Olthoff spent her youth daydreaming about riding dragons and slaying monsters. After joining the United States Air Force, she might not have gotten to ride any dragons, but she had plenty of real-world adventures over the years—including flying the T-6, becoming a certified Air Traffic Controller, and (her personal favorite) somehow surviving the shenanigans of her airmen. Eventually, she rejoined the civilian workforce as a responsible adult. Sort of. She now works as an accountant and is back to daydreaming of adventure. Sometimes those daydreams even make good stories. Melissa currently resides in Tennessee with her husband, two children, and two dogs. You can find her on Facebook and at melissaolthoff.net.