

Heath

By Rawly Rawls © 2025

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Also, all characters in sexual situations are 18 years or older.

Chapter 1

"It does go on forever, doesn't it?" Philip Vrendeling stood in the tower room with his mother and father, looking out the window at a vast expanse of brown grass and sparse shrubs. In the presence of his father, the count, he kept his spine straight. That posture crested his head just above his mother's, but several inches below his father's. At eighteen now, Philip doubted he would ever catch his father's tall stature. "I see no flowers."

"They *are* out there." Count Breddex Vrendeling stood with a more relaxed posture than his son. "Our people are harvesting as we speak. We'll have much to show the elves when they arrive."

"Elves and humans working together." Lady Rachel Vrendeling frowned. She smoothed her flowing dress with her hands and moved closer to her husband, but not so that their bodies would touch. "This is what the emperor wants?"

"This is what the emperor wants." Breddex nodded gravely.

"They know the heathland better than anyone. It makes sense to bring them in." Philip nodded and rubbed his chin as if pondering the issue.

"Back to your studies, Philip. Your father and I need to talk." Rachel gave her son a thin smile, watching him obediently leave the tower room. "He's young and strong. But not wise. He doesn't see the tempest we're in."

"He has you guiding him. He will become wise." Breddex smiled.

She turned to her husband and nodded. "What preparations do you wish me to make, My Lord?"

"I wish your bodice off and your body in my arms." He laughed and swept his wife off the floor, holding her and pressing their lips together.

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"The priestess is looking for you." Gorm popped out of his hiding place just as Philip passed in the hall.

"Oh, you startled me." Philip jumped and spun. He looked down at the goblin with a stern frown on his young face. "I was looking for you, actually."

"Oh, you were, Lord Vrendeling?" Gorm lifted his eyebrows. A moment of silence passed between them. The attack was swift and sudden. Gorm was little more than half the human's height, but he struck at the boy's knees with his fists, and then went for a blow to the cock. The lad had a large one, making it a prime target to quickly incapacitate him.

Philip turned his hip just in time, stumbling back from the flurry of blows. "Gods ... you're quick." He bent as he was trained to do against a smaller opponent, blocking the incoming strikes, and trying a few jabs of his own. The fight took no more than thirty seconds. At the end of it, Philip was huffing and puffing. "I wanted to see you ... about training."

"Well, mission accomplished. I recommend next time you try Balladuci's Defense. This hall is somewhat constricted." Gorm smiled up at his human pupil. "Oh, and I should say something wise. There is nothing as likely to succeed as what the enemy believes you cannot attempt. Lesson over. Go find the priestess."

"You are the strangest creature." Philip kneeled and pulled the goblin into a hug. "I'll find the priestess now. More training later."

"Very well, My Lord." Gorm gruffly pulled himself from the embrace and marched away down the hall.

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"Have you been keeping up with your studies?" Hera lifted herself from her seat by the fire and walked slowly across the room, appraising Philip as she walked.

“Yes, Sister.” Philip nodded, aware of the older woman’s eyes doing their best to dissect him all on their own. “I’ve even been doing extra reading. The baladeen flowers are very interesting. Did you know –?”

“Quiet, My Lord.” Hera held up a finger. “You do not lecture the Sisterhood. It is rightfully the other way around.” She put a finger under his chin and turned his face so that she could examine him from all angles. “The feme covert has told you what is expected of you now that you are eighteen?” She turned and walked back to her chair. Sitting, she waved for Philip to come stand by the fire.

“My mother told me there would be a test.” Philip nodded, walking over to a spot near the woman’s chair. There, he stood with his hands behind his back and his spine very straight. “A test I mean to pass.” His voice was steely.

Hera laughed. “It is always true with lads of your age. So much puffery, and yet you know almost nothing about the world.”

“I have paid attention to my studies.” Philip worked to keep his expression unreadable.

“A thimbleful in a lake.” With those words, her face turns wistful. “I miss the water. If only we had stayed in our ...” She shook her head. “Time for today’s lesson. Continue to pay attention, My Lord.” With that she launched into a monologue on the second goblin war.

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“Is this really necessary?” Breddex stood naked before Doctor Urdess in his bed chamber. He shivered. Urdess was a dryad, so the hearth in the bedroom was dark. The creature abhorred fire.

“Let her do her work, My Lord.” Rachel also stood naked. She was shivering, with goosebumps on her flesh. “We don’t want Philip to be alone forever.”

“Hold still.” Urdess, the only one clothed in the room, bent low and hefted the count’s testicles. She carefully weighed each with her fingers and massaged them, looking for the hundredth time for any blockage that might be inhibiting the conception the Vrendelings so desperately wanted. “You are not erect.”

“Of course not.” Rachel gave the dryad a cold stare.

“In his younger years, he would often get erect during my examinations.” Urdess gave the woman a pleasant smile.

“That’s enough, Urdess.” Breddex frowned. “Rub that potion on them and let me spend time with my wife.”

"As you command." Urdess did as instructed and left the chamber.

“There it is!” As she went to kindle some other wood in the hearth, Rachel pointed fondly to her husband’s rising member. She made sure to bend at the waist, showing much of her rear end to her beloved. She hoped she could still inspire his penis after all these years. When the fire was going, she turned around and saw that he was ready. “I still make your garden grow, don’t I, My Lord.” She gave him a curtsy, making sure her heavy breasts bounced and flopped for his entertainment.

“My garden is in your womb. I’m only the humble farmer intent on tilling fertile earth.” Breddex swept her off her feet and carried her to bed. Soon, he had her on all fours, and he was indeed plowing her garden from behind. He held her hips and admired her ripe body. She was not the same young creature he’d once married. But she was all the more beautiful for the years that had passed. “Get ready ... ugh ... ugh ... ugh ... here it ... comes.”

"Yes ... yes ... yesssssss ... My Lord ... My Looorrrrddddd!" Rachel shuddered as her husband flooded her. She prayed to the gods that *this time* they would have good fortune.

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“Any luck with our lady’s womb?” Hera stepped up next to Urdess, her voice pitched at a whisper.

“The feme covert’s womb isn’t at issue. It is the count that struggles with fecundity.” Urdess stood in the shadows of Philip’s training room. She watched the young lord spar with Gorm. “As so happens, your sisterhood already has one of their offspring. Are you not satisfied?” She smiled as Philip made an adroit sidestep to send Gorm off balance.

“He isn’t the one. We need another.” Hera frowned as Philip was easily tricked by a feint and ended up on his back with a wooden sword at his throat.

“Have patience then. I’m sure the count’s blockage will resolve itself. You shall have your second child in time.” Urdess sighed and rolled her eyes.

“What time do you think we have?” Hera glanced at the dryad with disdain. She had always thought the count’s inclination to trust other species foolish. *If only he’d brought along a real doctor.* “Have you not noticed that we were moved to a desolation? That our

own emperor sends our enemies to our door? That the flower production has been sabotaged?"

"Those elves are coming to *our* home. Their honor should protect us." Urdess smiled thinking of the uptight little creatures. "And if that fails, I trust Master Gorm and our swords."

"Just ... have the count put a baby in the feme covert." Hera turned. "And do it quickly." She walked briskly from the training room.

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"Good day, Lord Vrendeling." Gwendolen stopped and curtsied in the hall. "My ... you're all sweaty. Isn't that enticing?"

Philip stopped and wiped the perspiration off his forehead with a rag. He tried not to smile at the girl. She was his own age, and they had known each other forever. "Good day, Gwendolen. I was training with Gorm."

"Would you like to do some training with me?" She gave him her most alluring smile. "I promise I'll be a lot more enjoyable than that crusty goblin."

"I don't know, he's very enjoyable." Philip shrugged.

Gwendolen unfastened her bodice and exposed her breasts. It was drafty in the hall, making her pink nipples stand at attention. "I said *enjoyable*, My Lord." She leaned forward, dangling her breasts under her.

"We shouldn't keep doing this." Philip looked around, but the hall was empty. He glanced back at the glory of his friend's chest. "Oh, very well." He strode forward, seized her hand, and dragged her to a nearby storage closet. Ten minutes later, Philip was sitting on a crate while Gwendolen was bobbing her mouth on his cock. He wrapped his fingers in her golden curls. "Gods ... Gwen."

"Mmmmppphhhhhhhhhh." She looked up at her lord with adoring eyes. With one hand still on his cock, she reached the other into a pocket in her skirt. She fetched a small vial of oil and held it up in the palm of her hand. Without losing suction, she raised her eyebrows at him.

"Yeah ... okay." Philip nodded.

Gwendolen lifted her mouth off his member and smiled. "Only in the butt, remember. We can't be having children. Not yet." She handed him the vial. "Oil that big boy up. I still can't believe the whole thing fits in me." She turned around and finished

undressing. Soon enough, she was riding Philip in reverse with gusto. She had to put a hand on her mouth to keep from making enough noise to draw attention.

“Ugh ... ugh ... ugh ...” Philip, always in control, managed to mute the volume of his grunts. He stared at his friend’s wonderful, rippling ass. It was amazing how her allure could get him to disobey his parents again and again. But how could he wait until marriage when this beauty threw herself at him? He leaned forward and smelled the roses in her hair. He reached around and took heaping handfuls of her breasts.

“Oooohhhhhh ... mmmmmmmmpphhhh ... ooohhhhhh.” Gwendolen whimpered into her hand. She was so lucky to have such a wonderful friend like Philip. Her eyes rolled back, and an orgasm had her. It was so spectacular, she could have been flying. She bounced to two more climaxes before she heard his grunts become more urgent. “Yes ... yessssss ... fill my butt ... My Lord ... plllleeeassseeeeeeee.”

“I’m ... ugh ... ugh ... going to finish.” Philip erupted up her backside.

Five minutes later, they exited the closet. Both were looking a little sheepish. Gwendolen tried to fix her hair with her hands. “Good seeing you, My Lord.” She curtsied and turned down the hall.

Philip watched her waddle away. He loved the tentative way she walked after they humped. It was so delightful, that he almost wanted to pull her back into the closet. But he had studying to do. He wouldn’t let down his parents.

Chapter 2

"I've never seen elves before, Gorm," Philip stood in the back of the welcoming committee. His father and mother were, of course, at the front. Gorm was close enough to whisper at. "They're shorter than I thought they'd be. And dandy-looking. They don't look very formidable."

"Do you judge me by my size?" Gorm grinned up at the eighteen-year-old lord.

"No ... but you're a goblin." Philip grinned back. "And you don't look ... dandy."

"Elves are more vicious than goblins." Gorm bared his teeth and tugged at his dress uniform.

"I also hear that they have keen ears." Gwendolen wasn't supposed to be part of the welcoming committee, but she'd found a way to stand quite close to Philip.

"Noted." Philip gave her a warm smile. "The elves look very regal indeed," he said in a slightly louder voice. He lowered his voice again, "You may be the master at arms, Gorm, but let's not start any wars just to keep you busy."

"If there's a war, I won't start it." Gorm wiped the grin off his face. "But I surely will finish it."

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"Queen Nonn, what a pleasure it is to have you here." Rachel sat at the end of the table with the other ladies. She glanced down at her son and husband at the other end. They seemed very far away. The count was handling the elf king well. They were engaged in lively conversation. Rachel certainly hoped it was going better for Breddex than it was going for her. "I said, it is a pleasure to have you here, Queen Nonn." The queen sat across the table from Rachel. Rachel was quite certain the queen had heard her. Elves were known for being keen of hearing.

"She will not be addressed directly by any woman of your standing." Lady Rezzle sat next to the queen, fixing Rachel with a cold glare.

"My husband is –" Rachel began.

"He is not your husband, is he? You are his chattel, not his family. His feme covert, as you say." Rezzle's smile was chilly. "I do not doubt his decisions. Marrying one of your religion is fraught, is it not?"

“The Sisterhood is not ...” Rachel stopped herself. The queen might not address her directly but seemed to be enjoying the conversation. Rachel did not care for the queen’s sly smile one bit. Rachel took a deep breath. “Please ask the queen if she requires anything of me.”

“She does not.” Rezzle turned to her side and addressed the elf next to her.

Apparently, the conversation, such as it was, was over. Rachel glanced at her husband again. She prayed things were going better for him.

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“They hate us, dear.” Rachel was in her bedchamber, slowly undressing. “Are we safe?”

“Tonight went that badly?” Breddex watched his wife closely. Her alluring hourglass figure never disappointed him. If perfection could have been poured into a human form, it would be Lady Rachel. “I had a productive conversation with the king. He had several insights into increasing the baladeen honey production. If only the flowers were more –”

“Sure, they understand the flowers. This was their castle for centuries. It’s practically their home turf.” Rachel stood before him in her undergarments, frowning. “Which brings me back to my earlier question. Are we safe here?”

“We are surrounded by my best men, led by Gorm. All, close at hand.” Breddex gave her a reassuring smile. “The elves are in their tents on the other side of the castle wall. Even if they decided to attack, we could hold out against a siege for a very long time. Certainly long enough for the emperor to send his troops. We’re very safe.” He motioned with his hand for her to continue undressing. “You are ever beautiful, even with a frown on your face.”

“You can’t possibly want to do it tonight. There’s so much ... pressure.” The lines in Rachel’s face deepened.

“Pressure ... no pressure ... war ... death ... nothing could make me want to deny myself another try at a baby with you.” He rose and quickly disrobed. “Our new child will be a sign of fecundity and hope for all in this desolate land.”

“Oh ... Breddex, you have a way about you ...” Her frown disappeared. She removed her undergarments and tossed herself on the bed, rolling onto her back. She opened her arms and legs in welcome to her husband. *He is my husband, I don’t care what the queen’s lady says.*

“I love you, Rachel.” Breddex mounted her. She was wet and ready for him.

“Uuuhhhhh ... I love you ... my count.” Rachel circled her arms around his shoulders and held tightly as he humped into her. Despite the threat of the elves, all felt right when her husband was inside her.

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“It’s late, Doctor Urdess. Did the feast not sit well with someone?” Sister Hera stopped in the hall to get a good look at the dryad. *How can the count trust such a strange creature?*

“No duties at the moment. But the elves do not take kindly to dryads. I missed the banquet while hiding myself away.” Urdess gave the woman a faint, polite smile. “I thought I might stop by the kitchens now that the elves were gone.”

“And the feme covert’s womb?” Hera stood very straight, her face still as stone.

“Ha! You certainly do have a one-track mind.” Urdess let herself laugh, feeling the tension ease from her taut muscles. She stepped to the side as three guards passed them in the hall. “I have no news of that. Of course, the couple continues to try. It shouldn’t be long before ...” Urdess stared past Hera toward the intersection at the end of the hall. “I see not all the elves have gone. Perhaps I better return to my chambers with an empty stomach.”

Hera turned to look, but saw only shadows on the wall. Whoever had passed had already gone out of sight. “There are no elves in the castle, Urdess. You must have made a mistake.”

“Oh, I know an elf when I see one.” Urdess shrugged and turned to head back to her room. She barely noticed as Hera broke off into a run in the other direction. Humans were always doing strange things, like rushing when it wasn’t called for.

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“We shouldn’t be doing this ... ugh ... ugh ... in your room ... we could ... get caught.” Philip rode Gwendolen. She was on her belly, with her butt in the air. It was a splendid sight. He wiped sweat from his brow and let his hips continue at their frantic pace.

“Ooohhhh ... ooohhhh ... Philip ... you’re so big ... in my butt.” Gwendolen swam in pleasure. She would never grow tired of taking her sweet lord up her ass. “I love it ... uuuugghhhhh ... I love it.”

Philip was so engaged in spellbinding sex that he didn't hear the commotion going on in the hall outside Gwendolen's door.

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Gorm sprinted toward his lord's room. He was too late. The door was shattered inward by some dark enchantment. Sword out, Gorm vaulted into Philip's room. With a howl, he took down the first elf before the fellow could raise his sword. The second elf was blinded by the splatter of his comrade's blood. Before he could blink the crimson away, the elf was pierced through the heart by Gorm's sword.

The goblin parried the last elf's blade, pivoted, and punched the elf in the nose with the pommel of his sword. It didn't take long for Gorm to finish him. "How did you vermin get into my castle?!?" He spat at the dead elves and let out an anguished cry, turning his attention to finding Philip's body. It took him less than a minute to determine his lord wasn't there. "Very crafty, Lord Philip." Gorm whispered to himself. "Stay alive. I can't look for you now. I must see to our defenses."

His commanders needed him, so that's where he headed. Although, he did stop to kick one of the dead elves on his way out of his lord's chamber.

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"Sister Rachel ... Sister Rachel ... Sister Rachel ..." Hera said the words under her breath as a kind of mantra. She could hear fighting. Human voices were shouting 'the cellar ... the cellar ... there's coming from the -'

Hera knew that elves hated to be underground. Everyone knew that. Which was probably why this had come as a surprise. That and the count's spies had looked for hidden passages since the moment Breddex had taken control of the castle. They hadn't found any. But elves were clever. And now they were killing ... Hera came to a stop. Several human guards were getting pressed back by an onslaught of elves up ahead.

Changing course, Hera turned and ran back the way she came. She would have to take an alternate route to help the feme covert. The Sisterhood would be filled with rage if -

Something walloped Hera on the back. She staggered and leaned against the wall, her breath knocked out of her. She wasn't young anymore, but her breath took longer to come than she'd expected. Her face blanched.

It wasn't until she looked down that she realized an arrow had pierced her through the chest. She stared at the bloody head of the thing in disbelief. Her breath still did not return. Gasping, she turned around just in time to see another arrow speeding toward her. It caught her in the throat. She fell to the stone floor. She would have cried out to her sisters if she could. But instead, she gurgled for a moment and went silent.

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"Stay, Rachel." Breddex dressed hurriedly. "You'll be safe here." His guards waited for him by the door.

"There won't be any mercy from the elves. They came here under the emperor's parasail. You know what that means. Don't let them ensnare you." Rachel dressed, too. She had already bound herself in her most supportive undergarments. Now, she was searching through her wardrobe for her most utilitarian skirt and bodice.

"We *will* repel them. They don't stand a chance." Breddex gave his woman one last worried smile and turned from her. He was quickly out the door with his entourage.

"Stay here, indeed," Rachel hissed. How could Breddex think she wouldn't go after their son? She finished dressing, tying her boots tightly. She put a sheathed, jeweled dagger on her hip. She strode to the chamber door and threw it open.

"You can't leave, Lady Rachel." One of the guards moved to block her path into the hall.

Rachel exhaled slowly, using her breath as she'd been trained to. "I'm still in my chambers. You didn't see me."

The guard turned away, and she slipped past him and his companions, heading toward her son's room.

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"What's happening, Philip?" Gwendolen's jaw was set tight as she pulled her bodice over her head.

"Sounds like fighting." Philip looked around the room. Of course she didn't have a sword. And his were all back in his room or in the armory.

"Thieves?" She added a hopeful lilt to her voice.

“No, we’re under attack. Listen to that.” Muffled screaming came through the door. “You should stay here. You’ll be safe.”

“No way.” Gwendolen shook her head and planted her hands on her hips. “I’m not going to die alone in my room.”

“Very well.” Philip wished he could grin, but he was too worried for his parents and his friends. He blew out a nearby candle and hefted the candlestick. It would do. He watched her finish tying her boots. “Stay behind me.”

“What a turnaround. You’re usually behind me.” She offered what she hoped was a brave grin. Standing, she found her own candlestick and tested its weight. “Are elves as dangerous as they say? I feel like I should be able to take one of those tiny creatures in a fight.”

“You heard what Gorm said. They’re dangerous.” Philip nodded gravely. “Come on, we need to go.” He opened her door and peered into the hall. There was no one in sight. He could hear the clank of steel on steel echoing toward him. A man’s war cry warbled through the air to his right. It was quickly followed by a pained scream. “We go left, come on.” Philip darted out into the hall.

Gwendolen followed her man into danger, moving just as well as his shadow.

Chapter 3

“Lady Rachel! I think we’re being attacked.” Urdess was crouched, hiding near the baking ovens. When Rachel swept into the kitchen, a jeweled dagger in her hand, Urdess unwound her body a little.

“Good evening, Doctor Urdess.” Rachel frowned with pity at the cowering dryad. *She’s never useful for anything outside of her specialty.* Rachel thought of her barren womb, and doubted how useful Urdess had been even for that. “The elves stole in through a secret passage. The count will fight them off.”

“It sounds like we’re losing.” Slowly, Urdess stood and left her hiding place. “You’re looking for Lord Philip? He may need a doctor when you find him. Should we go to his chamber?”

“I’ve already been there. There were three dead elves and no Philip.” Rachel clenched her jaw. “But I’ll find him. Can’t you summon wooden daggers or something? You’ll need a weapon.”

“I have little power when encased in stone as we are in here.” Urdess walked over to the kitchen supplies and removed a cast-iron pan from the rack. She hefted it as someone’s scream echoed into the kitchen. “This will do for now.”

“Fine. Come along then.” Rachel nodded. “In our old castle, I always told Philip to head upward in the event of an emergency.”

“There are several towers here.” Urdess followed the lady out of the kitchens.

“We’ll have to get lucky, then.” Rachel kept her dagger up, ready for an assault. So far, she hadn’t met any elves. But that would surely change.

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“Philip ... another one ... watch out!” Gwendolen threw her candlestick. It was a lucky toss, catching the elf right in his helm. There was a wet clanking sound, and the elf went down.

“Thank you!” Philip looked around him. There were three elves lying motionless on the ground. He’d taken out two with his candlestick, wielding it as Grom had taught him to use a cudgel. The bronze improvised weapon dripped blood to the floor. He tossed away the heavy thing and picked up an elven blade. It was short, but much better than a hunk of blunt-force metal. “Grab a sword. You may need it.”

“Very wise, My Lord.” Gwendolen curtsied, letting her lips twist into the barest smile. “I shall forever be by your side.”

Philip smiled back at this beautiful woman who was both his friend and more than his friend. As he was searching for something clever to say back to her, a hiss passed by his ear. His mind went blank for a second as his eyes tried to process the horror before him. An arrow took Gwendolen through the side of her blond hair. She was dead before she hit the ground. “Nnnoooooooo! Gods ... no.” Philip knelt to help her, even though her sightless eyes told him it was useless. Another arrow whistled over his head.

“Gwendolen ... get up!”

A jolting shock walloped his shoulder. He looked to see an arrowhead jutting out just below the outer part of his clavicle. He stumbled to his feet and ran as another arrow passed him and snapped on the stones. His mind burned with revulsion at a world that could so suddenly turn on those he loved. He rounded a corner and headed for the closest stairs. It occurred to him he’d left the swords behind. He felt like he’d left everything behind.

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“We’re being overrun. We need out of this castle. We need to retreat.” One of the count’s captains addressed his lord while standing at attention. At his back were the sounds of a fierce battle. “We’ll cut a path out the back gate. Women and children first.”

“Retreat to where? The heath is all around us. And so are the elves.” Breddex’s lips pressed together in grim determination. “We retake this building, or we die.”

“Yes.” The captain saluted and turned back to the melee just out of view.

“Gorm, go to the south passage and make sure they don’t come at our backs.” Breddex could see the goblin wanted to challenge him. “Go now.” He was grateful when Gorm gave him no more backtalk than an eyebrow raise. He watched the goblin go. *At least I have only one front to worry about.* “Now, let’s see about that barricade. I ...”

The sound of hoofbeats clattered from the unseen fight ahead. The stones under Breddex’s feet shook. A chorus of screams echoed around the corner. The first thing Breddex saw were several men tossed into view. After them, arrived charging, demonic reindeer with elves on their backs. The beasts were clearly out for blood. “Come men ... we stop them here!” Breddex raised his sword and charged the foul creatures.

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“He went up there.”

“Do we want him alive?”

“Our choice.”

A group of three elves stood at the foot of the stairs to the Eastern Tower, talking among themselves. Rachel and Urdess watched them from the shadows.

“They’re chasing my son. I know they are,” Rachel whispered.

“If Philip’s up those stairs, those elves are in the way.” Urdess tried very hard to keep her tall frame unseen in the shadows.

Rachel nodded. “Stay here until I’m done with them.” She slipped out into the hall, light on her feet, moving like a dancer. The closest elf saw her several feet before her dagger could reach him.

“The witch! Kill her before she speaks!” The elf was too slow to lift his sword. Rachel crouched low as she spun, the jewels on her dagger sparkling in the lamplight. The elf gurgled and fell, his throat slit.

Before the two other elves were upon her, Rachel let out a controlled breath and spoke her command at the same time. “Be still and tell me who you’re chasing.”

“A teenager,” said one.

“We think he’s the count’s son,” said the other.

Rachel inhaled, held her breath, and let it out slowly again, saying, “Kill each other.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the elves stabbed each other through the heart.

“You killed them all.” Urdess had snuck up to Rachel when it seemed the woman had things under control. She held her iron pan at the ready, in case one of the elves returned from the land of the dead.

“Goodness, you move quietly for someone as tall as a tree.” Rachel looked up at Urdess.

“Technically, I killed only one of them. Come on, it *was* Philip they were pursuing.” She leapt up the stairs, Urdess right behind her.

It didn’t take them long to find Philip. He had collapsed in the stairwell, an arrow still lodged in his shoulder.

“Philip! No!” Rachel lost her steely nerve and dropped to her knees next to him. “Doctor him ... doctor, fix him ... Urdess.” She blinked back tears.

“Yes, I’m here.” Urdess rolled him onto his back, careful not to jostle the arrow more than need be. She checked his pulse and lifted his lids. “I can heal him. Hold on.” She put her hand on the shaft. “I know this wood.” With a quick flip of her wrist, she snapped off the arrowhead. Then, the wood began to coil and flow, moving out of the eighteen-year-old lord and wrapping around Urdess’s wrist. “I wish I had my powerful salve.”

“Do you need me to get it? Just tell me where.” Rachel stood, her chin tightening with resolve again.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the stones are trembling. We’ve lost. You would not be able to go to my chamber and return.” Urdess reached under her dress and retrieved a small vial. “Of course, I always have my everyday salve with me. It will do, but he won’t heal completely until time takes its course.” She tore his tunic to expose the exit wound and poured the contents of the vial into the bloody opening. A sizzling sound filled the stairwell. She turned him over and did the same to the entry wound.

“Will he ...?” Rachel’s heart fluttered with worry and hope when she heard him cough and his eyes shot open. “Philip?”

“Gwendolen’s dead,” Philip croaked. “How’s Father?”

“Gods, Gwendolen?” Rachel thought the world of that young woman. That’s why she’d let her son tumble with Gwendolen when he thought his mother wasn’t noticing. “As for your father, I don’t know.” The trembling of the stones under Rachel’s feet grew more intense. “I don’t think things are well. We’re all trapped in this castle.”

“I can help you escape. But we must go up. And go quickly before daylight makes us a target for archers.” Urdess stood and helped Philip to his feet. “How do you feel?”

“Terrible. Shaky.” Philip reached for his mother, who put his arm over her shoulders.

“Up we go then.” Rachel helped her son ascend the stairs. “How are we going to escape from the top of the tower? There is no forest here to leap into, dryad.”

“We can’t leave Father.” Philip’s shoulder burned, and his stomach turned.

“We can’t help him now. Maybe Gorm will turn the tide. But I fear ...” Rachel tried not to clench her teeth. “Don’t think about it. Use the voice on me. Distract yourself with practice.”

Philip wasn’t good at his mother’s magic in the best of times. These times were not best. He exhaled slowly, saying, “Take me to Father.” He had never been able to compel his mother, but it was worth a try.

“I’m sorry, sweetness. We’re going up. Your father would demand that we do, isn’t that right, Doctor Urdess?” Rachel looked over her shoulder at the dryad who was bringing up the rear. She noticed that the dryad had discarded her iron pan.

“Yes, the count would want you two safe.” Urdess thought about saying more, but held her tongue. The harsh clash of swords echoed from behind them.

It took the trio a while to reach the top of the tower. There was a tiny roof garden with a few stunted fruit trees. Urdess used these to grow a barricade that locked the door behind them. It was just in time too, because only minutes after they arrived, there was pounding on the thick door.

“So, how do we travel from here?” Philip looked around. It was a cloudy night, and the only light came from fires billowing up from various parts of the castle. The heath was a vast sea of darkness.

“They’re using magic to burn through the door!” Rachel drew her dagger.

“I won’t be traveling with you, Lord Philip. We can’t let them through to pick you off with archers.” Urdess reached into the soil of the pots around them. Something grew from the floor of the garden, quickly filling up the small space.

“Wings?” Rachel frowned at the contraption that looked like it was built from leaves, vines, and branches.

“Makes sense. Flying is the only way.” Philip put a hand on the dryad’s shoulder. “But we’re not leaving you. It’s dark out there, they won’t see us. And it would be suicide staying on this roof.”

The door was now glowing orange with heat, the wood of Urdess’s barricade crackled and snapped.

“Very well, Lord Philip. We can go together.” Urdess lifted the wings, which were remarkably light, and fastened them to mother and son. “Now, off you go!” She shoved them off the roof.

“Urdess!” Philip was so shocked that it took him a moment to notice he was flying. He squirmed to turn around and look back at the dryad. She was clearly visible in the light of the fire that her barricade had kindled into. Her tall figure turned and faced the door. He could see her fashion long daggers for her hands. “Urdess!” The rushing wind swallowed his voice.

“Let her go, Philip. We need to figure out how to fly this thing,” Rachel shouted. The wings above her shuddered and rattled as a current of air hit them. They veered up and sharply left. She reached out and grabbed at branches she hoped were controls.

Philip’s body was pressed tightly to his mother’s, the wings holding them securely together. He tried to peer back, but could only see the light from the top of their tower. Suddenly, a great ball of flame rose from the tower and rolled into the dark sky. Grimly,

he turned his vision forward. His mother was right. They would need to learn to fly quickly, or Urdess's sacrifice would be for nothing.

Chapter 4

Unseen arrows whistled in the dark. Rachel banked them left. Fortunately, Urdess had created a winged contraption with intuitive controls. The direction of the wind changed, and the vehicle shook. Rachel clenched her jaw – and some other body parts – and turned them with the wind. “Are we hit? Can you see if an arrow pierced the wings?”

“I don’t think so.” Philip squinted at the branches and leaves that held them aloft. It was tough to see in starlight. “No hits ... I think ... but ...” He had to speak up to be heard over the wind rushing past their ears. Several leaves fell away from the wing and disappeared into the gloom behind them. “... maybe there is damage. Leaves are falling.”

“That would make sense.” Rachel’s jaw set even tighter. This was the only way. She would fly them as far as possible, and then they would walk their way out of the heath. “Use the everlasting spell to help Doctor Urdess’s magic.”

“I’ll try.” Philip closed his eyes and concentrated, muttering the memorized lines.

Rachel joined her magic with her son’s. His magic was always tentative and weak, but every little bit counted now. “It looks like it’s still holding together well enough. We’ll fly on.” No more arrows whistled past them. They were past the elven forces.

With his eyes closed, horrific images passed through his mind. “Gods ... Mother ... everyone in the castle.” His spell faded. He let it go. Pressed tightly to his mother’s backside, Philip looked over his shoulder. Due to the fires, he could still see their castle. It looked small. Almost everyone he’d ever known had died, or were dying, there. And soon, it would be a pinprick on the horizon.

“They would all want you to live, Philip.” She wished she could reassure him more, but her hands were busy at the controls, and her mind was occupied with the everlasting spell. “Let us focus on honoring their love for you by escaping. Turn forward and keep an eye on the wings. Let me know when they start to look precarious. Try your spell again.”

“Yes, Mother.” Philip did as instructed. Slowly, light grew in the East. That made his observations easier. It also revealed the purple of baladeen blossoms below them. They weren’t as high as he’d imagined. “Mother, there’s an outcrop of rocks ahead. Should we turn?”

“We’re going with the wind, sweetness. No turning. We’re high enough.” Although, as they grew closer to the outcrop, she felt more and more doubt about their course. Eventually, they passed over the outcrop with toes dangling mere feet above stone.

As the sun crested the horizon, a branch snapped from the wing and whistled off behind them. And then another. "Mother ... her magic is at an end." Philip watched a puff of leaves fall, leaving the latticework of the wing partially uncovered. He could feel his mother's everlasting spell fragmenting. His own spell had diminished for the last time some time before.

"Truth!" Rachel gripped the controls tightly as the vehicle pitched to the left. "We're going to land. Hold on."

Philip did just that, reaching around her and grabbing hip, breast, whatever was available. He watched in horror as the heath drew closer and closer to them. More of the wings fell away. "We're coming in too fast!"

"Truth!" Intuitive as the controls were, Rachel wasn't sure how to slow them down. "This is going to hurt."

Philip ran his hands along his mother's arms until his fingers could play with the controls, too. "We need to turn the wings more vertical. Here." He turned a smooth, wooden lever, and the wings indeed swiveled, cupping the air. Immediately, they slowed. The vehicle settled to the ground among the sparse vegetation and purple flowers. Moments later, it completely fell to pieces, leaves blowing away on the chill morning breeze. Mother and son fell to the earth and hugged each other tightly.

"Gods ... gods ... gods ..." Philip repeated.

Rachel quieted her body. She inhaled deeply, and then on the exhale she said, "We must be strong."

Philip stopped talking, and his trembling died down.

They embraced for a long while as sunlight grew around them. Eventually, they parted and stood.

"Mother, there's a package." Philip bent down to pick up something that had fallen from their craft upon its destruction. He lifted the bag, finding that it had a shoulder strap. Inside, there were two wooden canteens, a camouflaged tent, camouflaged cloaks, and two wooden daggers. "She made these for us." He showed her the bag's contents.

"Indeed. And they look like they'll last a good while longer than our air machine." Rachel nodded. "Are the canteens full?" She listened to them slosh when he shook the bag. "Well done, Doctor Urdess. I misjudged you." Rachel's smile was bittersweet. "Do me the honor of carrying the bag, Philip."

"Which way do we travel?" Philip slid the strap over his shoulder and scanned the horizon. He could no longer see the castle.

“We could cut east, head to our allies.” Rachel took one of the cloaks and put it on. She flipped up the hood.

“We’ve been going north with the wind. We should continue.” Philip rubbed his chin. “That would put more distance between us and the castle.” His mind rebelled at the horror that was contained in the castle that had briefly been his home.

“Yes, I agree. North, then.” Rachel marched off, her son threw on his cloak and fell in right behind her. They wended their way through the baladeen, heath, and other scrubby plants, heading farther and farther from tragedy.

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“The bees here are unusual.” It was midday, and Philip’s hood kept the sun off his face. “I hear their buzzing, but every time I try to spy on one, it seems to ... elude my vision. Like it’s flying just beyond the periphery of my vision.”

“Well, we are keeping up a brisk pace, My Prince.” Rachel didn’t look back at him. Her hood made it difficult to turn and glance at her son. But she could hear his feet treading the sandy soil. “And bees are small creatures. You can study them when we rest.”

“Will we rest?” He was impressed with his mother’s endurance. After the fight, the horror, and their stressful landing, they had marched all morning. Of course, it helped that they had no food and thus no reason to stop and eat.

“At dark, we can rest. I don’t want elves catching up with us.” Rachel held out her hand to the side, palm up. “Drink?”

“Yes, Mother.” Philip reached for a canteen and handed it to his mother. He watched her sip it on the move and pass it back to him. He drank and put it away. “But I won’t be able to observe the bees in twilight.”

“The bees aren’t important.” Rachel’s sharp tone nearly bit off the words. She hated snapping at her son. She took a deep breath and concentrated on the cadence of her shoes.

“I apologize.” Philip had a pit in his stomach. The image of Gwendolen’s fall haunted his mind. He tried to think of other things, but his brain moved from his father, to Gorm, to Urdess. All of them dead or captured. Dead was probably better. He couldn’t imagine what sort of torture the elves would devise.

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“Aaaaaahhhhhhhhh!” Count Breddex writhed. He was bound to a plank in a dank, windowless room. Above him floated an orb with several protruding needles. The nightmarish thing would swoop down at random, stick him, and fiery pain would fork through his nerves. “Aaaahhhhhhhh ... you’re not even ... asking me ... any questions.”

“Your people are all dead. The castle is ours. What questions should we ask?” Lady Rezzle stood near the doorway, an elf sorceress sat to her left, controlling the torture device. Lady Rezzle ignored her, focusing all her attention on the captive. “We only need one thing from you now. To suffer.”

“Aaaahhhhhhh!” Breddex hated to give these evil creatures what they wanted. But at the moment, he couldn’t deny them. So, he screamed in pain.

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“Why do the items in the package sustain, while the air machine fell apart?” Philip and his mother were setting up the tent. It was well-made and blended perfectly into the purple-blossomed surroundings. He marveled that Urdess had created it in her last, terrifying moments.

“She spent her magic sustaining these things because she knew we needed them. The machine was big and complex, but I suspect she put more of her energy into the contents of the sack you carried today. Magic that lasts isn’t easy. She was powerful.” Rachel stepped back and studied the finished tent. “That should do.” Her belly rumbled.

“I see berries on some of these plants. The books say they are edible.” Philip crouched next to a baladeen plant.

“Our men didn’t harvest the honey from these flowers, so they ripened. Your father was having issues with production. If we miss the honey and the plants create fruit, we’re not supposed to touch them.” Rachel shook her head.

“Why?” Philip turned to his mother. The temperature was dropping, and he hugged himself, rubbing his arms.

“The rhaveneen. Men who harvest the fruit are subject to mayhem.” Rachel looked up. The first stars were coming up. She was exhausted. She closed her eyes, and the image of her husband’s face came to her. She gripped her dress with white knuckles, tormented by what had happened to him and all their people. *His people.*

“My books said that rhaveneen are fictional. No one has ever caught one.” Philip shivered. “No one has ever seen one.”

“No one has ever seen one *and lived to tell*. We’ll only eat the fruit if we have no energy left.” Rachel unbuttoned her dress. “Undress and come to bed.” She turned her back to him and slipped out of her clothing. Hearing the rustling of his clothes, she looked over her shoulder. In the faint glow of the setting sun, she could see his soft penis dangling between his legs. *He’s bigger than his father. I can see why Gwendolen adores him. Adored.* Pride in her son and the sorrow of loss made an unsettling duet in her mind. “Bring everything into the tent with us.”

“Yes, Mother.” He watched his mother’s naked butt bend over. He gazed at her breasts, swinging under her as she crawled into the tent. She was beautiful, and he hadn’t seen her naked in years. Strange feelings turned over in his belly. He was grateful that the travails of the past day kept his penis somnolent. He didn’t want *that* shame on top of everything else. *I’m not interested in her. She’s my mother. I’m merely enchanted by vivacious beauty after all the death that has befallen us.* Those thoughts didn’t calm his belly. He collected his things and crawled into the tent. He found that his mother was already asleep under her cloak, her head resting on her rolled-up dress. Philip followed her example, and soon both mother and son slept.

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“Wake up, Philip.” Rachel shook her son awake, leaning over him inside the tent. “It’s time to rise.” When his eyes shot open and fixed on her dangling breasts, she covered them with an arm. *He’s at that age. But he should be better-mannered.* “Remember what I told you about staring at a lady’s ...”

“Yes, Mother.” Dutifully, he looked away. His stomach rumbled.

“Do you have the energy to march today?” She turned her back to him and pulled on her dress, having to contort in the confines of the tent.

“I can match you step by step, Mother.” Philip dressed himself, watching the mesmerizing curve of his mother’s spine disappear behind her undergarments. He was glad her back was turned, because his morning wood was particularly hard and swollen. He had to stuff it underneath his belt to get the thing under control. When he was ready, he followed his mother out of the tent.

They folded up their nightly habitat, sparingly drank water, and readied themselves for their trek.

Philip closed his eyes, trying to banish the nightmarish images that flashed, showing him his family and friends. He found that as quickly as he pushed one away, another sorrowful display made its home in his mind. Eventually, his spinning wheel of thoughts landed on the way his mother had looked, climbing naked into the tent. Finally, the grisly images were kept away. He took a deep breath. "North again?"

"It looks like you're fighting the memories ... of what happened." Rachel studied her son's face in the early morning light. His eyes were closed, and lines were drawn unnaturally deep on his eighteen-year-old face. "We will have time to talk about what happened. But first, we have to find safety." She watched his face relax, the lines fading. *He's responding to my mothering, thank gods.* "I will keep you safe, sweetness, I promise."

"And I will keep you safe, Mother." Philip opened his eyes. His cheeks flushed. He prayed she would never find out what he was using to keep the nightmares in his head at bay. "Ready when you are."

"Ready." She nodded and set off marching toward the north.