

DAUGHTER
of the
SUN

PREVIEW

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DAUGHTER OF THE SUN

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*To my children, without whom this story would never
have been what it is today.*

To Alisa—your support made a world of difference!

C H A P T E R

1

If for no other reason than the nightmares that came this time each year, Elena hated her mother.

She woke with a start, sitting up fast enough that her head swam. Brushing the damp hair out of her eyes, she took her bearings, and buried the fires of her dreams in the comfort of the stone walls. The tallow bubbled in its iron vat, filling the air with the rancid odor of boiling fat. A dozen long wicks draped over the dipping shaft, waiting to be smothered, shaped, and brought to life.

She crossed the small room, the cold stone floor waking her. She shoved the window lattice open and inhaled the moist breeze and the afternoon sun. Closing her eyes, she forced her shoulders to relax. Nothing happened last year. There was no reason to think today would be any different. Just force yourself through the motions and everything will be okay. Nodding, she pulled the lattice shut. She shook her entire body, trying to relax muscles that seemed to be made of the same mountain that her shop had been carved from.

Reaching under the bed, she withdrew a small wooden box. Intricate patterns shimmered along the sides. She set it on the counter, and then dropped her hands to her sides. She did not know why she forced herself to do this every year. Brushing the dust off the box, she turned it around and traced the patterns of the mysterious symbols carved in its sides. Small cracks split the box from the heat of the shop. None were wider than a hair, but they hammered home the fact that her mother had died eighteen years ago.

She eased the lid open and pulled the chain out, dangling the amulet at eye level. Too large for a proper necklace, it smothered her palm. The thrumming started at once, flowing in waves through her arm, her shoulders, and out through her entire body. The amulet's heart tugged at her. She dropped it back in its box and slammed the lid shut. One finger of chain lay trapped between the wood, hanging over the edge.

How could she leave me like that? By the Mother, I was just a little girl. "Push through, Elena," she said. "No answers here."

Leaving the tallow to boil, she flipped the curtain aside, left the workshop and entered the store proper, past the half-dozen shelves of candles and the register table. One leg skewed out at an awkward angle. She made a mental note to fix the table, knowing that she would never find the time. There never was enough time for the little things. Between running the shop, raising Jocelyn, and ducking Johan, she was lucky to find time to sleep.

Grabbing the feather duster, she took to the shelves, lifting bees-wax pillars and thick tallow rounds out of the way. Not enough dust had settled from last night's cleaning to make it necessary. She cleaned it anyway. She had to do something. Her fingers slick with the oily waxes, she raised the last tallow round. It slid through her fingers. The solid thud as it slammed into the rough stone floor jolted her from her thoughts.

"Father's beard," she cursed. As she bent to check the damage of the candle, the rising tide of voices outside shattered the silence. None were loud enough to understand yet, but they grew louder as she listened, hand hovering over the broken candle.

She moved to the front door and cracked it open. She had no idea what could be driving such a commotion this close to Tax Day. Everyone should be getting ready for inspections, cleaning and making as many last minute sales between friends as they could. It was a small town, buried as it was in the crook of the Nightsrift Mountains, and no one liked to see anyone taken away to work off their debts. "Except maybe me," she thought. Very few, if any, of the villagers had forgotten what her mother was, and they held the mother's sins against the child. Now they came to her in a writhing mob that swarmed up the wide mountain road, dragging little Derk in tow.

She wondered if her mother had felt this cold fear. "Does not matter," she said as she forced herself out of the stone building to await the mob with some semblance of dignity. She stuffed her shaking hands into the pockets of her worn breeches.

Stefan Slater moved to the front of the line. His wedding ring glinted on his hand, though his wife had been dead these three years. Behind him, Maerna the herbalist waddled along, dragging Derk by his collar. By the redness of his left ear, it was obvious Maerna had not used his collar the entire way. Fifteen others followed, arguing in small groups.

Her breath caught. In the back of the group, the black tipped spears of the Duke's soldiers swung in perfect unison. Her mind churned furiously. They were never early. No matter how hard she tried, she never managed to stay out of the notice of the other villagers, and small arguments seemed

the norm on market day. Yet she had done nothing to draw the attention of the Duke. Unless the peddlers carried rumors away, calling it news.

“Elena,” Stefan called out as he neared. “We be needing your expertise.”

Mastering her voice, she said, “What would you be needing with candles this time of the day?”

Stefan started to answer, but a shout from the rear of the mob interrupted. “We’ve need of your mother’s knowledge. She’s dead, so here you be.”

Stefan shrugged, as if to apologize for the man’s lack of tact, but did not correct him. Instead, his narrow eyes watched her like a hawk following its dinner.

Her anger bubbled hot but she clamped it down. Now was not the time. Later she would picture their suffocating faces as she dipped the wicks into the boiling fats. “What do this be about?”

Stefan motioned for quiet as Maerna shoved Derk to the front.

“Derk poisoned the Duke’s soldiers here,” Maerna said.

“That be a problem for the Prefect. Why do you be bringing him here?”

Cries of *Chaya* rang from the crowd, and Stefan nodded. “He be accused of trying to kill the guards by using the Breath to poison their water.”

Elena could not help herself. She laughed. “Derk? A *Chiy’el*? Where would he be learning this evil?”

The crowd went silent. No one wanted to be the first to accuse. They shifted from foot to foot, looking around to see who would voice their thoughts. Maerna broke the silence. “Your Mam be *Chiy’el*, dear.”

Elena forced a smile, though she ground her teeth hard. “My mother died before Derk be born. Her secrets be buried with her.”

“Aye, but the entire village knows your candles have a little somewhat special about them,” Maerna said. A sly smile crept across her sagging jowl.

Forcing herself to meet the soldiers’ eyes, she asked, “Do there be truth to this? Do one of you be sick?”

The three soldiers looked to their Captain, a good-looking man with a peaceful smile and eyes the color of the summer sky. “They say this must be what happened,” he said, shrugging.

“Don’t be slipping the knot,” came another yell, followed by others accusing her of poisoning the soldiers herself.

“Hang her,” a voice called out.

“Like mother, like daughter!”

“Taerana nearly destroyed the outpost!”

“Hang her!”

She called for silence but the mob was moving, thrusting toward her, the calls growing louder and angrier. She looked to the soldiers, pleading, but the Captain motioned his men back, then leaned against the cliff wall to watch things unfold.

The scent of tabac floated on the moist breeze. Hope beat back the worms in her stomach. Johan would stop them. He may treat her cruel, but he would never stand by and let her die.

The crowd parted, their voices dying as he shoved his way through. His gait was uneven and he swung his arms wildly, yelling with slurred words for quiet. Once in front, he turned his back to her and confronted the gathered mob.

“Father’s Beard! Whose wool-headed idea be this?”

The villagers listened. Some still remembered that he had been a hero.

“How many of you scholars truly be thinking this wee lad capable of this? From the stories you cowards feed the children, he’s probably frightened to death of the bastards.”

The soldiers tensed, but the Captain motioned them still.

Elena waited, afraid to breathe.

“Stefan—how many times did this boy be helping you fix roofs? Katrin, he be running more damn errands than your workers. All for free. This child be innocent, so take your fool ideas away.” He shook his head in disgust, and grumbled quiet enough that she could not make out the words. She did not think that anyone else could, either.

A voice rose above the growing murmurs, “Elena, then. We know she’s *Chiy’el*.” A handful of others murmured their agreement, but many seemed to be getting nervous.

Elena’s breath burst free in a cloud of barely-leashed rage. The sheer nerve of these people and their accusations forced bile into her throat.

“Be thinking, Charles,” Johan said. “What harm do she be bringing? She holes herself up in this fortress post and makes her candles. She never hurt no one. Go away.”

Maerna spit on the ground at Johan’s feet. “I don’t much care how you say it, nor what you might be doing years ago. The stories say she Breathes those candles. Heard plenty, myself.” She smiled a greasy, gloating smile, the last directed at the soldiers.

“You old hag. This ain’t no time to be spreading lies to slaughter the competition. Get out of here.”

The expressions on the crowd faded from red-hot anger or fear, to guilt and shame. Within a few long breaths, the crowd started to disperse. Derk broke free of Maerna's grip and dashed down the pathway.

Johan kicked a rock after them and spit. He started to lose his balance, but caught it before falling. The spit landed in his beard.

She looked to the cliff that bordered the path and found the soldiers waiting. The Captain watched her, his brow furrowed. The others whispered among themselves. Panic gripped her again. They should not be here. Not this early.

Smoke drifting on the breeze snapped her out of her reverie. She turned to see thin blue-gray wisps floating out of the rear windows. She ran through the doorway, almost ripping the door from its leather hinges. The dampness of pre-rain mixed with the smoke rising from her mother's box. Small tongues of blue and green flames caressed its sides. She shook her head. She had to learn to control her temper.

Grabbing a bucket of water, she doused the box. Steam billowed out, forcing her to step back. It filled her sight, blocking the rest of the room from view and . . .

. . . fires raged, pulled from the beacon fire in the nearby tower to surround the woman standing in the midst of a dozen soldiers. The men danced in and out, searching for an opening to grab her. She stuck her hands in the flame and then pulled them out, a small ball of fire in each palm. She threw them at the Duke who sat on his horse, watching, a smile on his narrow face. He doused them with a jet of water that . . .

. . . sent the steam into her lungs, the moisture forcing a coughing fit. Tears streamed down Elena's cheeks, tracing clean lines through the layer of dirt and steam that covered her face.

"Why mother? Why?" She almost choked on the words as the sobs fought for control.



"So, wife," Johan said. "Do the rumors be true?"

He said it with an angry calm. His slur was barely audible. He stood in the doorway to her back room. Her sanctuary. The simple question transformed the pain from her mother's death into arrows of rage that she spat back at him.

“Do there be any truth to the candles? Is that what you be asking?” She stomped towards him, both hands reaching to grab his tunic and shake some intelligence loose. “How long do you be knowing me? Still you have the balls to be asking me that?” Her hands shook, her fists turning white, as much from the rage as from the fear of what he might do to her in return.

Johan stood his ground, his eyes holding hers. For a breath, she saw the old hero behind the eyes. “I’ve been gone lately. I don’t know much of what you be doing with Joss up here.” He shrugged, as if it was all right.

“Aye,” she said, “If you’d pulled your ass out of the bottle anytime since Rickward’s death, you might be figuring it out. Instead, you be trying to drink yourself to the grave while I spend my entire day trying just to pull enough money together so your daughter can eat.”

The peal of the temple bells echoed up the stone path. It would ring five more times, signaling the end of Third Quarter. Jocelyn’s school was out.

“I want you out of here, Johan. This be my place. I earned the land rights. I repaired it. Made it work. Not you. Out. Now.”

She stared him down, ignoring the reek of sweat and ale that hung so pungent around him. He said nothing, but considered her for a breath and then nodded.

“You be right.” His breath escaped in a half laugh, half sigh. He turned from her and stumbled out of her shop. With each step, his shoulders dropped a finger width lower.

While she waited for him get far enough ahead, she dipped her hands into what water remained in the bucket and sprinkled the tallow fire. She did not want to put it out completely, just dampen it enough to keep the fats from burning and wasting. It spat and hissed at her, but she knew it would obey. She would finish the candles when they returned. Joss would talk about the day’s gossip, hands waving every way and, if Elena was lucky, tell her what she had studied today.

She surveyed the room, found the amulet’s box still soaking on the bench, and shoved it back into place behind the wax and berry stores. Another quick glance confirmed everything to be in its place: nothing would burn, blow, or melt away before she got back.

Jocelyn would be waiting for her at the Temple, which meant Elena had to wind her way through the village. Not a prospect she was looking forward to today. If she could keep away from the soldiers, she just might survive.

C H A P T E R

2

The sun was just peaking over the top of the Nightsrift Mountains, though it was hard to tell. The sky reminded the Duke of a cauldron of burning blood. It was a bad omen, but he could not say for whom.

Duke Gideon Kaebal looked around, pulling on his white lace gloves, so tight they fit like a second skin. He hated this town, and everything it stood for. The village was already awake, peasants scurrying around him, their filthy tunics and cloaks flapping in the crisp fall breeze. Without a fault, every piece of so-called clothing he looked at had ragged edges and stains they had not bothered trying to remove. Their hair was the same: rough cut and dirty. Not a pure head of hair to be seen.

He lifted a hand, two fingers signaling to the soldiers behind him. He did not bother looking. They knew their jobs. They would not be here otherwise.

He paid no attention to the rutted lane in front of him as he ordered his thoughts. What would the Overlord say about the time it was taking him? Could he get more time, or was he already pushing it too far? He had not found the woman, yet. He did not even know her name, but knew that he would recognize her when he saw her. She was his passage to the throne. She just did not know it yet.

“Hector,” he said to his Lieutenant who marched a single step behind him. “Any word of the Red?”

Hector cleared his throat, nervous. “No, milord. Nothing yet. We expect riders from Harts Haven today or tomorrow.”

“How hard could it be to find one redheaded woman, ten to fifteen years past childbearing age?”

Hector was a good soldier. He always followed orders, often anticipating Gideon's requests. He was a brave man, a loyal man. It was a pity his parentage had left him stained with that dirty blond hair. The Blood could use someone like him to strengthen the line. It would be a shame if he had to die.

In the center of the village, amidst sweaty children, and scared villagers, was the well. Its stone wall was crumbling, like half the buildings in this pit.

The thatched roof - big enough to cover a dozen people from the rain - had bare patches that would not keep a rat dry.

Gideon strode to the well, bending over the edge and peering at the water. It was hard to tell how clean it was, in the dark morning light. He expected to smell mold and the Father knew what other diseases, but found that it smelled fresh enough. It would have to do.

Taking a step back, he turned to Hector and nodded his approval. The soldiers ringed the well, their backs turned to him so they could watch in all directions. He needed to be undistracted for this.

“The bucket,” he said.

Hector had already started towards the wooden crank, and reached it at about the same time Gideon asked for it. He turned it, his arms flexing as it found resistance near the top of every circuit. The bucket crawled closer, water spilling over its edges as it rocked back and forth to the beat of Hector’s strokes.

Gideon leaned over the edge of the well, but not on the stone wall. He could never trust the structural integrity of any building in a shambles of a town like Rockport Ferry. Holding his right hand over the center of the well, he flexed his fingers. A blue globe of light formed in his palm. It was not bright enough to light the entire well house, but supplied enough light that he could see the entire face of the water without any harsh reflections. Several small chips of stone broke loose from the wall, hitting twice before diving into the water. Smooth waves slipped through each other in rings, lapping against the walls. With a wave of his left hand, the water stilled. Clouds of dirt settled to the bottom in a breath.

He nodded. It would have to do.

He gathered his concentration and pulled power from the patches of grass around the well. They wilted, passing from the green summer life through the ravages of fall, and finally, into the rusty color of death. The thick smell of decay lingered for a moment before floating away on the hot summer breeze.

“Father. I am here.” He mouthed it, letting the words resonate through his mind. A pulsing of pressure let him know the Overlord had heard, and would be waiting.

Pounding footsteps shattered his concentration. He turned, rage brewing a storm in his gut. They knew better than to disturb him in the mornings.

Hector stepped through the ring of soldiers and intercepted the young woman running towards them. She cradled a small child in her arms. The child's head flopped back and forth unnaturally, more rag doll than child.

"The Duke is not to be disturbed," Hector said. He planted his hands firmly on his hips. "You may bring any supplications you may have to the Black Moon Inn after breakfast. He will be pleased to see you then."

She thrust the child in front of her with both hands. He was young, not more than two years old. Boils marked his face, many of them open and oozing. His head rolled on his shoulders as she shook it.

"He did this," she screamed. "He killed my baby." She stood on tiptoes, holding the child over Hector's shoulder for Gideon to see. Her voice dripped with venom. "Child Killer. Murderer."

The soldiers tensed, hands settling on their weapons. They knew what could happen; they had seen it before. One crazed villager could start a riot that he could only stop by spilling blood.

Sidestepping, Hector blocked her view, and grabbed the child. Holding it at arms length, he turned it around slowly, examining it. "You must be mistaken, ma'am," he said. "This child clearly died of some disease. The Duke is only a man. He is not the Father, capable of punishing children for disobeying their parents."

The mother's eyes widened, bloodshot and crazed. She lunged past Hector, stopping just short of the ring of swords. She pointed one long, bony finger at Gideon, and then yelled. Her voice was rough with the twin fires of anger and rage. "You're a monster. No better than the fiend you call father."

Her raised voice had drawn the eyes of the villagers that had been avoiding the Duke and his men. They stood at the edge of the village Circle, some nodding their agreement now that someone had been brave enough, or foolish enough, to voice it. Others shied away, slipping to the back of the crowd where they prayed they would not be recognized.

Gideon felt the villagers turning against him, and knew that only a show of his power could cower the crowd. Stepping through the ring of soldiers, he released the globe of light and took off a glove.

A man shouldered through the crowd and ran to the woman.

"Marla," he said. His voice was stern and low, a warning. He grabbed her shoulders, trying to pull her back. She wrenched free, screaming again, this time to the crowd.

"How many children will you let him take? How many before you've had your fill? He is as evil as the Overlord you despise and curse. He's a child killer."

The man grabbed her from behind and wrapped both arms around her in a bear hug. She wrenched from side to side, struggling to break free, but was unable to slip his grasp.

“My Lord,” he said, turning them towards the Duke. “Please forgive my wife. She's sick with grief and doesn't know what she's saying.”

He pulled her away, commanding a young boy to grab the dead child. Hector handed the child to the boy, wiping his hands on his leather armor, then turned to the Duke. Noticing the bare hand, he shook his head and spoke in a whisper to his Lord. “They are on the verge as it is. That would only lend proof to the woman's words.”

Several breaths passed in tense silence before Gideon released his gaze, nodding. They returned to the protection of the soldiers. Gideon shook his head in frustration as the crowd let out a collective sigh and spread out, each heading back to gossip in the safety of their homes.

“By the Father, Hector, you are a good man. If there is any of the Blood in you, we'll find it. First, though, find me that woman. It would do me good to get back to civilization.”

A smirk darted in and back out again as quick as it had come. Hector bowed deep. “She will be found, my Lord.”

Gideon turned his attention back to the well. He would have to explain the interruption to his father. The Overlord did not like waiting.

He bent over the well, the globe of light forming again in his palm, the other ready to start the Sending. Two cold blue eyes stared up at him through the water's surface. He cleared his throat, composing his thoughts. “I apologize for the delay, Lord. The peasants are becoming restless at the loss of their children.”

“I heard,” the Overlord said. His image wavered on the water's surface, but his gaze was steady. His voice was an ancient door creaking open, though it had never lost its cruel edge. “I trust that you can handle it.” It was not a question.

“Of course, my Lord. The preparations are going well. All will be ready.”

“Then you have all thirteen?”

Gideon shifted his weight to the other foot. “There is one remaining. She will be in our hands shortly.”

The Overlord started to speak, but erupted into a series of coughs that wracked his body, twisting his face in pain. When he regained composure, his eyes were colder than the peaks of the Nightsrift during mid-winter.

“My patience is at an end, Gideon. Any puss-sack of a child that still has life's breath will do.”

His hands crushed each other as Gideon struggled to keep his face calm. “Of course, my Lord. Yet there is one that we have heard of that may be especially pleasing. We will have her soon.”

“How so?” the Overlord asked, his bloodshot eyes searching Gideon’s.

“She is said to have hair the color of fire.”

“How can this be? My brother is long dead, and none have worn the Red since him. Is she *Chaya*?”

The tension evaporated from Gideon. He unknotted his aching hands, and allowed a brief smile to flicker across his face. “None of the stories claim it, Sire.”

“Good. Bring her to me. She would be worth the weight of the others put together. Send to me when you have her.” The image of the Overlord turned its wheelchair away, signaling the meeting was over. More coughs echoed up the well as his balding head spasmed.

Taking the bucket from Hector, Gideon held it over the well, centering it on his father's head. He dropped it. The man had lived too long already. If all went as planned, he would perish before the moon was full again.

“Gideon,” said the Overlord.

Gideon snapped out of his musing and grabbed the bucket's rope. Its sudden stop heated his hand even through the gloves. He smoothed his face and moved the bucket aside so he could see his father.

“Who is the woman you're so urgent to find.”

“Her mother.”

“Does she wear the Red, also?”

“I am not sure, my Lord. It is said that she has Breathed before. By all indications, though, she is unable to control it.”

“You will kill her,” said the Overlord.

“Of course, my Lord.”



Elena’s strides chewed up the path between her shop and the central part of town. She paid no attention to the cliff that rose thirty spans to her left, or the steep, rocky slope that fell away to her right. She did not notice the growing darkness that filled the sky, did not wonder whether the mines and smelting fires had been relit, or if another late summer storm was brewing, like she would have any other day.

Visions of her mother's fires filled her mind. She refused to imagine the rumors the villagers would be passing to the soldiers as truth.

The cart path, used once to bring supplies to the early warning post that was now her shop, ended near the last guard post, now unmanned. The square tower, built into the end of the cliff, reminded her too much of a prison. Today, it seemed the eyes of the Duke watched her from the dark arrow slits.

She hurried past. Her daughter still waited for her.

Even though the soldiers were already here, the villagers continued their yearly tradition of bleaching the stones and repairing the slate roofs and wooden porches. None of them looked at her directly, but she could feel their gazes bearing down on her as she passed, head down. As she neared the small temple at the center of the village, she wove through children rolling rusted barrel hoops down the streets with sticks. When they saw her, they stopped, their eyes wide. She ground her teeth and pushed through the Temple entry.

The Outer Temple was empty. Not one child waited for their parents. Not one acolyte cleaning after the days schooling. Nothing moved. Just the cloying scent of the incense and the soot of the torches.

The mob had held her too long.

He mind churned, trying to remember how many of the black-tipped spears she had seen. In past years, a troop—no, that is not what Johan had taught her—a squad of five was the usual number. She had seen four at her shop. They could not have had time to beat her here, take Jocelyn and escape.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She dashed into the Inner Temple, normally off limits unless accompanied by an acolyte. Scanning the Temple, she saw no signs of her daughter.

Two acolytes spotted her at the same time, and headed her way, as close to a run as they were allowed. She shook her head, trying to fend them off, as she backed through the doorway, turned, and ran through the Outer Temple and out the main entrance.

Eight black boots stopped her in the threshold. They were standing still, pointing her way. The sun reflected off the spit-shined leather.

The soldiers were here for her. She scanned the crowds for a fifth soldier holding her Jocelyn, but found nothing. Mustering her courage, she examined their faces for any signs of aggression or guilt, anything that might let her know that Joss was safe.

The largest of the four sneered at her, lust flickering in his brown eyes as he ran a dirty hand through his short-cropped blond hair. His tongue ran across his teeth in a rude gesture that he must think would excite her. It disgusted her. The others paid her no attention, but scanned the villagers, keeping a close eye for trouble. They looked bored, their heavy-lidded eyes belying the coiled tension in their bodies. She had seen that same lazy look after Johan had first returned from the Rebellion. The Captain studied her. What he was looking for, she could not say, but it set her hairs on end.

Ducking her head, she slid past them.

“Excuse me, sir,” Elena said, loud enough the Captain would be able to hear her, but quiet enough not to draw attention from the villagers hovering nearby.

“You seem in a hurry, miss,” the Captain said. His voice was as smooth as crushed velvet, but her insides clenched into knots at the sound. She was sure they had all the proof they needed to drag her away without letting them know about Joss. Red hair was rare enough in one person, and seen as proof that one possessed skills they should not. The fact that her daughter also had red would be enough to send her straight to the gallows.

“I be sorry,” she said. “I should be watching my steps a bit closer.”

He said nothing and continued to study her. As the moment dragged on, she found the urge to flee harder to resist. A bead of sweat swelled on the ridge of her brow and then burst, trailing a lazy path around the ridge of her right eye. She dare not mop it, on the off chance that the Captain had not seen it. If he noticed, he would know the truth of her mother’s legacy, though she herself had avoided anything to do with the Breath.

“I be just . . .” she stammered. “I be looking for someone. Hoping to catch them before they left.”

“I believe your daughter ran off with two boys up that path, there.”

She felt the color drain from her face at the mention of Joss, and turned to look where he was pointing, though she did not need to. She knew where Joss would be. Should be, she corrected herself. There are only four soldiers here. Somewhere, there is a fifth.



Gideon paced like a trapped jaguar inside his tent. The wind smashed into the canvas, threatening to untie the straps that held the tent together. He would have to lash the servants responsible for putting it up. The tent was not big enough to think in. He would have another made when this

journey was over. He would have more servants at his disposal when he gave up his Duchy and made the Fire Palace his home.

“Do you think he knows?” Hector asked from his station by the door.

Shaking his head, trying to release the worry that creased his perfect skin, he stopped and stared at the slave girl lying by the foot of his bed, unseeing. “When we find the woman, she will destroy him for us. She will be found soon, I trust.”

Before Hector had a chance to respond the jangle of reins and the *harrumph* of a weary horse announced the return of a rider. Hector bowed to his Lord and excused himself.

Gideon focused on the slave in front of him. Many of his Counts preferred their women with rolls of fat layered on top of each other. They said it proved their worth, and their wealth. Gideon found it disgusting. It proved nothing but their lack of control and willpower. It displayed their weaknesses as rulers for all of their people to see. Besides, a man could get lost in those mountains of flesh before ever finding the treasure her body held. He preferred them sleek and muscular, showing dedication and hard work. Feorina had once been very nearly the ideal woman, but the months spent leashed at his side had left her without any definition, and skinnier than he would like. He was not one to waste good flesh, though, and he had spent these months training her to please him in every way.

He could tell by her sunken eyes and the way her ribs stuck through the flesh that she did not have much longer. It was a pity, such training wasted, but he would not miss her emaciated body. He would save her until they found the woman and her daughter. Draining the last of her life would be the perfect victory toast.

Hector returned, clearing his throat to announce his entrance. “Good news, my Lord. We have found the woman and her daughter. They will be here in the morning.”

Wiping the desire from smile, he turned. “Good news, indeed. Is there any chance that she will not be delivered on time?” His plans twisted too deep to leave anything to chance. Such finely wrought plans could unravel too quickly.

“None, my Lord. One of the leaders of the Rebellion has found a home there. The woman’s husband, actually. He is of no threat, though. He is too deep in the drink to have kept his instincts or skill.”

“It is a risk we cannot allow. Kill him before taking the women. Give your man a fresh horse and send him back with orders.”

“The Captain has already ordered it done, sir.”

“Well done. Have the men ready to ride at first light. We will depart for the Temple as soon as the women arrive.”

Hector bowed and left, shouting orders before the tent flap slipped back into place.

It looked like today he would have his victory drink after all. As he drew the slaves leash toward him, he made a mental note to grab the Mayor’s daughter from Rockport Ferry before leaving. There was none equal to her for miles around. Hector would come up with a suitable excuse. He always did.

After he forced the slave to strip and fold their clothing, he drew her close. Feeling her skin press against his he was instantly aroused. Her breasts had shrunk as her life had been spent, little by little, towards higher purposes, but they were still pleasant. He could ignore the way her ribs pressed roughly against his, and the way her hip bone stabbed at him. It would all be worth it in her final scream - a beautiful blending of pleasure and pain, perfectly timed with her last orgasm.

Tomorrow, he started training his new slave, his new daughter, and his new weapon. It was a grand day for celebration, indeed.



The twin monoliths of the Ladder stretched ten spans toward the sky. Covered in ancient symbols, they leaned over the top of the small pines in a giant ‘V’. Branches from taller oaks and maples waved just out of reach of the two boys’ hands. They stood on top of the granite fingers: Mark stood, recklessly sure of his footing and spitting insults at the girl below; Derk, on his knees for safety, waved her on and called encouragement down to her.

Jocelyn sat in the crook of the Ladder, two-thirds of the way to the top. Her breathing came in ragged gasps. Her legs screamed for her to stop. Her hands were a red to match her hair. She brushed it away from her eyes, but it did little good. The rain heavy wind whipped it back before her hand gripped the stone again.

Dark and ominous, the clouds threatened the worst storm of the season so far. The sun was halfway to dark, casting long shadows over the many sharp outcroppings. Yet she smiled big, baring teeth in a mix of frustration and joy. Today she would make it to the top. Mark would have to hold up his part of the bet.

“What be wrong, Salamander,” Mark called down to her, “Can’t make it? I knew it! No girl ever be climbing the Ladder. Never will.”

“Best be getting your lips ready, Mouth.”

She lunged up. One span closer to the prize. She pushed, pulled, and slid from foot hold to hand hold, but finally, breath coming in ragged bursts, blood pounding in her ears, she made it to the top. Pulling herself up next to Mark, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. Quickly, before he could react, she landed a bold kiss on his lips.

He lashed out at her arms, trying to break her grip. "Eew. Stop," Mark said, wiping his lips on his dust powdered arms.

"What's wrong?" Derk said. "Afraid you might like it?" He laughed hard, from the belly, and slapped his knees. His right foot caught a loose pebble, and slid off the side of the monolith. His laughter stopped, caught quick in his throat as his arms flailed for balance.

Joss spun around, one hand holding on to Mark for balance. Seeing Derk slipping, she acted without thinking. She leapt across to Derk's ledge, grabbed his arm and leaned back, pulling against his weight. For a moment, she did not think she could save him. She was sure they would both plummet to their deaths. As his weight jerked her to him, she leaned farther back.

They stopped moving, caught in the precarious balance of her father's toys: small iron figurines, their sharpened points balancing on wooden poles. They swayed for a breath before Derk managed to pull his foot up. They pulled in to each other, ending with arms wrapped around the other in silence. The stress melted in a shower of laughter as the three children tried to forget.

She stared into Derk's eyes, enjoying the safety of his embrace. She had never paid him much mind before. He was a friend, almost a brother, but she felt a unfamiliar comfort wrapped in his arms. He was handsome, with dusty brown hair and green eyes that shone like seashells in the sunlight. His smile was bright and genuine. Nothing like the bullies that faked a smile to try to get her alone.

She shivered as Derk's smile slid away and his eyes became steel. It was the same look Johan had when he was angry. "What's wrong," she asked, slipping her arms away so she could turn and look behind her.

At the edge of the brush, where the path opened into the Ladder's clearing, stood a soldier. Not just any soldier, she realized as she squinted for a better look, but the Captain himself.

She turned back to the boys, sat down and adjusted her legs until she found a seat that was close to comfortable. Mark and Derk exchanged a troubled look, but they sat too.

Mark's voice was a harsh whisper. "You don't think he'll be causing more trouble, do you?"

Derk shook his head and whispered back, “Nah. They didn’t be real interested. Just watched, and be letting it happen.”

“What do you two be talking about?” she asked. “Did he keep you? Is that where you be during lessons?”

Hesitantly, Derk told her the story. They glanced often at the Captain, but, just like in Derk’s tale, he just watched and waited.

“It be all your Mam’s fault,” Mark said. “Her and her evil powers.”

Jocelyn stood, leaning precariously towards Mark. Her voice was quiet, almost too soft in the wind that grabbed at her hair. “Don’t you ever be saying that again.” She stared at him, unblinking, as the rage welled up inside of her, threatening to boil over. “She never be doing nothing to hurt no one. Take it back. Now.”

Standing, Mark shook his head. “Everyone knows it’s true.”

She felt the rage spill over the rim, and she leapt at him, her hands in white fists.

Derk grabbed for her, but she ripped free.

For too many years she had been an outcast. The children teased her mercilessly, many times hurting her. She had heard her Mam and Gram called every name she knew, and countless originals. She would not put up with it anymore.

She landed next to Mark, swinging wildly. He stepped aside, ducking and she fell forward, hitting her knees and scraping her shins before plummeting through the air, her arms flailing for holds.



Elena burst through the brush as her daughters scream erupted in a wail of fear. She watched as Jocelyn’s knee smashed into the top of the Ladder and she fell. The boy was off balance, his arms wind-milling as he fought to find his balance, but lost. He fell backward, too shocked to scream. The second boy stood on the other stone, mouth open wide in shock, one arm still reaching out to grab the girl who was no longer there.

Elena reacted without thinking, some primal instinct overpowering her fears. She drew a deep breath, and felt a fiery energy fill her body as she willed the children safe.

Like a slap, the winds screamed past her, pelting her with limbs ripped from the brush. The grass parted in a hundred places as the wind flew to the Ladder. The damp scent of fresh earth assaulted her. Under the children, grass ripped free of the ground to spin in circles, faster and faster until they blurred into a single vortex of wind and vegetation. No sooner had the

mottled vortexes formed then the children slammed into their tops. Joss' scream stopped as she hit, but the boy finally found his voice.

Running toward them, she realized what she had done. The blood drained from her, leaving her weak and exhausted from fear and effort. She stumbled and fell to her knees, panting. Wide-eyed, she watched the vortexes, and her blood rushed back through her, bringing the chill.

"Mother, forgive me," she said. She would have wept but the tears would not come.

The wind died as suddenly as it had started. The debris inside the vortex exploded out in a final sigh. Both children dropped to the ground. The boy's scream stopped, and the silence was complete. Even the birds watched in fear, silent in the aftermath.

Concern for Jocelyn washed her fear away. Elena pushed herself off the ground, and then stumbled to her daughter's side. Jocelyn was laughing, a quiet, hysterical laughter. After a moment, the notes of excitement in her daughter's laughter sunk in.

"Joss, honey. Are you hurt?"

"Mam, you did it. You finally did it."

The terror resurfaced. She had Breathed. She was *Chiy'el*. No longer could she deny it. Her mother's curse had manifested itself in her.

"We must be getting home."

"Mam, you did it."

"Now."

Catching her mother's tone, Joss forced herself to her feet, her smile gone. For a moment they held each other's gaze, each trying in vain to reassure the other that everything would work out. Neither was successful.

Joss slid past her mother, kneeling by the boy on the ground. "Mark. You alive?"

He groaned, but he nodded.

"Joss. We have to be going." Elena grabbed her daughter's hand and pulled her away, heading down the path toward the shop.

Joss called out behind her, "He be fine, Derk."

His voice was strained and quiet enough that she could only just make out the words. "The Captain saw it all."

Elena started running, dragging her daughter behind her.

C H A P T E R

3

Elena looked behind her every few paces, but there was no sign of the Captain or his men. She knew she was in trouble. There was only one thing that she could think to do: find Johan. He would know how to keep both her and Joss safe.

The idea terrified her.

For the last twelve years, since the death of their first child, Rickward, Johan had sunk deeper and deeper into the bottle. His rages had burst from nowhere, and now they were all too frequent. She stayed away as much as she could, working hard at her candles to support the three of them.

The stench of whiskey was strong on his last visit. She knew he would be furious about the way she acted. Furious did not begin to describe how he would react after learning that she had Breathed. There was nothing else to do. If the soldiers had not arrived early because of the rumors of her, they would hunt her now.

Johan is the best-known hero of the Rebellion, the famed Protector of the Dead. He would know how to handle this. If only she could clear the drunken fog from his skull long enough to make him understand.

“Mam,” said Jocelyn. “How did you do that? I didn’t know you could.” Her voice quavered with the excitement of the young and foolish.

“I don’t know, honey.” She scanned the rock-hewn streets, hoping no one was around to hear. “Hush, now, Joss. No more questions. Not now. We’ve got to be getting home.”

Jocelyn’s hand jerked out of her mothers grasp.

Elena stopped running and turned to her, pleading. “I know, I know. We don’t be having any choices.”

“He’ll be hitting you for this.”

Searching Jocelyn’s face, she found no traces of fear. Instead, her round face was chiseled with determination. “We’ll make him see.” She forced a smile.

“You’re right, Mam. We will.”

They moved along the edge of town, skirting the main pathways through the old fortress. Johan's rules came back to her slowly. No longer did they run: it would draw too much attention.

She grabbed an old water bucket from the fortress walls. It was one of fifty or sixty scattered throughout town in case of fire. Another of Johan's rules: *Always be giving your enemy an excuse to forget you. If possible, that excuse should be doubling as a weapon.* The bucket was a sad excuse for a weapon, but it would give them a head start.

She pulled Jocelyn down an alley, hushing her when she protested. Filling the bucket with water from a rain barrel, she checked to make sure it would hold. There was a small leak, but if they moved quickly enough, any trail it left would be hard to find.

She forced herself to slow down as they exited the other end of the alley. They strode along the outer wall to what once served as a gate, the iron door now rusted open. She heard no sounds of pursuit, but refused to take any chances.

She dumped the water at the edge of the rocky trail, drowning the patchy grass. Ripping a branch from the closest tree, she stirred the water into the rocky soil. The branch broke twice before she judged she had enough mud. Jocelyn squawked in protest as she rubbed the mud into her hair, but Elena hushed her once more.

"We be the only Reds for miles. Maybe hundreds of miles. This won't be passing any close inspections, but it should be throwing them off long enough."

"Who?"

Elena stopped rubbing and searched her daughter's face. There was little trace of fear. Mostly her daughter was confused. She should be frightened.

"You saw the Duke's man at the Ladder?"

Jocelyn nodded, still not understanding.

"What I did to save you and the boy - I should be hanged for that. What stories the other children might be telling you are true. At least in parts."

"I know, Mam, but why run? I knew Gram could Breathe, so I figured you could, too. I've never seen you use it before today. Why not stand?"

"Stand?" Elena's laugh was harsher than she would have liked, but she could not help it. "Your Gram did stand, and look what it be getting her. Dead. She be leaving us with nothing but heartaches. I won't be having that for you. Now hush."

After finishing Jocelyn's hair, she covered her own, and then pushed her daughter back through the gate. "If anything happens, run to the shop and be getting what supplies you can find. Find your father. He'll be knowing what to do."

"Do his stories be true, too?" Her eyes were wide in a rush of excitement.

"They were once. If he is not in a state to be helping, talk to Catti at the Inn. She'll be knowing what to do." Catti and Elena had shared many stories and tears over cups of spiced cider. Catti knew more about the family than any other person alive. She had once helped to hide the Rebels. If Johan was too pickled to help his own daughter, Catti would find a way.

They went back to the main street, their red hair now a lumpy brown. She tried to act as if she belonged, but she had never belonged here.

Footsteps echoed along the walls in front of her. Not many. Maybe only one. That would be all it took, though. One trained soldier could overpower them both without breaking a sweat. She had to take him by surprise. Backing Jocelyn against the wall, they crept towards the corner.

He rounded the corner and stopped as he saw them. Dressed in rough, weathered leathers, he had a large pack slung over his back. Beaded into the leather coat might have been a large bird, talons out and wings back, but enough dirt and grime covered it that she could not be sure. He wore his earthy hair long, and braided in an unfamiliar style. His grass-green eyes twinkled with laughter and surprise as he examined her hair. The look in his eyes said she could trust him, but he smelled of travel, and the sword strapped to his back could only mean trouble. He was a stranger to this part, not a soldier, but who knew what sorts the Duke might hire to get her.

"Elena?" he said.

He knew her name. That was enough proof for her.

She swung the bucket with everything she could muster. She swung high, towards his head, and yelled for Jocelyn to run.



Johan gulped the last few swigs of whiskey, savoring the bitter smell of the fumes. It was not that he enjoyed the drink itself, just the effects. Too many ghosts of innocent, loyal men from the Rebellion haunted his dreams and his thoughts.

No ghost haunted him worse than that of his son, though, only two years old when Johan had given him to the cursed specter. Rickward had been hurt, near to death, and the specter had convinced him that he could

save his wife's life by giving the child to him. He had sought escape from those memories through hundreds of bottles, but never escaped the sound of his wailing son, or the sight of his wailing wife when he told her that her son was dead.

He threw the bottle into the forge, shattering it against the stone surface. Grabbing the towel from the counter, he wiped the beads of sweat from his face. The fire would need time to grow. He strode inside, his head hung low, his face and neck as red with shame as the forge fire.

The shock at finding the soldiers at Elena's shop had tied knots in his shoulders that a sailor would be proud of. They had done nothing to stir trouble, yet he could not shake the ice that crept the length of his spine. Something was going to happen, but he did not know what. He needed another drink. At the least, it would dull the worry and keep the shakes away.

Inside, he threw the towel on the pockmarked table, reached under the bed, fumbling about until he found the handle on the small, wooden crate. The crate was twenty years old, and carried clothes and armor while he was still in the Duke's army. The wood was still in good shape, though any luster it once might have had was gone, replaced by scrapes and bruises and the stink of mildew. There were no bottles of memory fogging whiskey in here. Only memories of a happier time. A braver time. Cursing, he almost shoved it back into its place. He did not want to remember. That time would come soon enough, but the sense of a promise to be fulfilled came upon him again, running a ghostly hand up his spine.

Instead, he heaved the heavy box onto the table. He stared at its dented latches and handle for several long breaths, unable to open it. He knew what he would find on top of the pile inside: Elena's wedding dress.

They had met after he struggled his way back to the village. Blood seeped from several wounds. He barely escaped alive when the Overlord's forces crushed the Rebellion. He found her washing clothes in the stream that marked the end of the wilderness and the start of the village proper. The last of his strength gone, he collapsed. She must have heard his fall, because he woke on the cot in her shop. She bandaged him and fixed some poultices and teas that restored his energy and healed most of his wounds in a few short days.

While he recovered, they talked about everything. She was hungry to know news from outside, but he soon realized she was nervous even leaving her own shop. He was drawn to her in a way he could not put words to. Her fear, intelligence, and the strength hiding under layers of weakness inspired

the protector in him. Maybe it was the loss of the Rebellion, the sense of failure, that led him to be her protector. He did not know, but he would have done anything for Elena. He still would, even though she did not understand the sacrifices he had made for her, the sacrifices he knew would be demanded for her protection. Serving her had given him more wonderful memories than he deserved.

It all ended the day he gave Rickward away.

A forceful knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie. He yanked the crate open, laid the wedding dress on the table with the reverence of a priest and his robes, and dug until he found his old knife. The deer antler handle was polished smooth from years of use. The blade was twice the length of his hand. Its edge was notched with wear, but he would still trust his life to it.

Another knock shook the door on its leather hinges. It was an impatient knock, and ignited a warning fire that burned through the whiskey fog in his head.

Tucking the knife in his belt, he strode to the door. His hand hovered over the handle. Few customers came this way these days. Those that did were too afraid his rage would be in full swing and knocked timidly. If he did not hear the knock, they could return later when he was not so deep in the bottle.

As the knock came a third time, he swung the door wide, ready to belittle at them for trying to bust his door down. The sight of the four soldiers stopped the words in his dry throat. He let the breath out with a cautious sigh. "Can I be helping you?"

The Captain was too young for his position. He probably received the rank more for the purity of his pure blond hair than any skill. Johan let a smile crack his rugged face. He knew the advantage was his in whatever this war of words turned out to be.

The Captain tucked his thumb into the front of his belt, a move that should have accentuated both the sword at his side and the ranking stripes on his shoulder. On the Captain, it looked foolish.

Johan's eyes stayed locked on the Captain, ignoring the subtle threat.

"As per the orders of our Lord and General, Duke Gideon Kaebal of Edrea, we have business with your wife, the chandler Elena."

About the Author:

Lonnie Ezell lives in Missouri, where the weather, like a good work of fiction, holds many surprises. To find out more about Lonnie and his upcoming novels, visit his home on the web at: www.LonnieEzell.com.

When he is not busy writing, Lonnie acts as co-host of the Dragon's Landing Podcast – a podcast doling out advice and ideas for tabletop role-players. Join in the fun at: www.DragonsLanding.com.