

Keeper of the Jewel



“**We** should just lay siege to his castle and be done with it.” Khae Wys held the King of the Elves’ stare without blinking. It had been a long day deliberating grievances with the inhabitants of South March. A few involving a certain, rogue duke.

The king raised thin eyebrows. “Really?”

A slow smile dimpled Khae’s cheeks, her pale skin and pure white hair marking her as an elf as surely as the pointed ears securing her husband’s spun gold tiara in place—a diamond-shaped piece of dragon ivory resting in the centre

of his forehead. “No, not really, but some days I find myself wondering how to deal with him.”

Disappointment registered on the king’s features.

Khæ rose from the Willow Throne, cupped his gaunt face in her hands, and kissed him deeply, thinking all the while, *May the faeries keep this elf of mine*. Her precious husband would do anything for her. If she asked him to fall on the rapier hanging from his belt, he would do so without a second thought if it meant her happiness. If only her brother would be so noble and utilize his own sword in the same manner.

For some reason her brother, Orlythe Wys, had always strayed from the norm. Growing up, she never thought much of his strange ways. Named after their father, the original king of South March, Orlythe was older than Khæ and her twin sister, Odyne, by several years. She had idolized him as an elfling. Admired how proudly he bore the family name. But, according to elven law, Orlythe had to be content with the fact that when their parents’ rule came to an end, it was the eldest female who ascended the throne.

Not that she had wanted it. As far as Khæ was concerned, Orlythe was welcome to the burden of spending the rest of his life appeasing the masses—a thankless task if ever there was one.

Khæ had been quite content during her parents’ reign. As South March’s chief practitioner of nature’s essence, her duty had required her to be in tune with the subtle nuances and shifts in the environment—seeking out and analyzing portents that might become problematic. There weren’t many elves adept in the workings of the delicate magics to call themselves practitioners of the art.

Her brother, on the other hand, was a natural leader. His skill with the broader magic at his command, and indeed, his

prowess with his rapier, separated him from the regular fighters of the land. In Khae's estimation, Orlythe's biggest downfall was his vocal support of those who desired to bring the dragon community to heel. He had been heard more than once saying that a dragon rider was worth ten warriors on horseback.

But as history recalled, that hadn't always been the case. The attempted assassination of the great, blue dragon known as Grimclaw had fleshed out that false supposition. Many dragons had died at the hands of the skilled horse riders from the north. If the elves weren't careful how they dealt with the dragons who had remained loyal to South March, Khae feared the majestic beasts would follow Grimclaw into the wilderness beyond the cities of man. An act she genuinely believed would lead to dragonkind's extinction in generations to come. She could feel it in her bones. Something she sensed while communicating with the Fae. But that was a long time ago.

Khae released her husband's face.

His curious frown considered her. "You're up to something."

"Ha!" Khae spat.

Dear old Hammas was too smart for his own good. She placed a delicate finger on the tip of his nose and ran the pointer finger of her opposite hand across his clean-shaven chin.

Deep, green pools of intelligence stared back.

She smiled. That's why her parents had fostered their marriage. Although a valiant swordsman in his own right, Khae's mother had picked up on Hammas' intellect long before he had reached adulthood.

Independent to a fault, Khae had never balked at her parent's intervention. She and Hammas had been friends

their whole lives. Her earliest memories as a wee elfling included Hammas and his family.

Court life had been a pleasant occasion back then, growing up oblivious to the concerns of the bigger world. If not for the rift that had developed between certain governing factions in South March regarding their attitude toward dragonkind, her life would have known nothing but happiness.

She cupped Hammas' chin again and lifted it to accept her kiss. "Nothing to trouble you, my sweet. At least not yet. Something's amiss, but I can't put my finger on it."

She smiled and tapped his nose. "Perhaps it's nothing more than a shift in the seasons."

Hammas gave her a skeptical look. "Or perhaps you're not telling me everything, hmm?"

She raised her eyebrows twice in quick succession, the corner of her plush lips turning up with the mischievous smirk he loved so much. "Time will tell."

Her hand trailed off his shoulder, down his arm, and lingered for but a moment in his palm before she skipped away, tossing her voluminous hair to one side. She paused to look over the thin shoulder strap of her white dress and winked. "Or perhaps not."

Exiting the throne room, her gaze fell on a life-sized painting of a small elfling sitting on the neck of a green dragonling.

She smiled. Maybe someday.



The polished white marble floor slipped beneath her thin leather boots as Khae made her way through the royal residence of Borreraig Palace in the northern city of Orlythia. Centuries ago, her mother had commissioned dwarfs from a land northeast of South March to erect the new home for the elven monarchy. Once built, they had vacated their original seat in the coastal city of Urdanya—the carnal city ironically named after the sorceress who had nearly prevented Grimclaw’s birth. If not for the intervention of the Dragon Witch, South March’s skies would never have been graced with the creatures who had brought with them a higher level of consciousness to the realm.

Khae had barely been old enough to walk that fateful day a ghost ship had appeared out of the fog bearing its priceless cargo and those sworn to keep it from the wrong hands. The dragon crystal had been transported high into the virtually unreachable heights of the Dark Mountains and deposited into the Crystal Cavern at Highcliff.

Most of that long ago time was a blur, but she remembered hearing of the titanic battle that had been waged at Highcliff. Somehow, amidst the chaos, Grimclaw had been born, and the world as they had known it was forever changed.

The thought of Grimclaw and many of his followers deserting the elves took the spring out of her step. If only she had acted sooner and informed her mother what her nature’s essence had told her, the outcome might have been different. She sighed. What a legacy to leave behind. To be known as the one who had allowed such a travesty to occur. It was almost too much to bear.

She turned off the main hallway and descended a long flight of marble steps that led beneath the shoreline of Ors Sea, dropping into the ground so deep that it ran below the dungeons; the access tunnel built for servants to circumvent

the longer, winding route to the eastern wing of the palace above. Not many people cared to venture so deep into the earth only to have to climb up the long stairwell at the passageway's far end, but she enjoyed the cool air and silence the underground route offered.

Faerie lights winked into existence in the darkness ahead—their faint light enough to see by. Not that she needed it. Her dark vision rivalled that of a cat. Besides, she had travelled this way hundreds, if not thousands of times before. She mused that it was a wonder her passage over the years hadn't left a rut in the floor.

Two side tunnels branched off the main corridor at its midpoint, their routes dropping into caverns that delved leagues below the sea bottom. Though the enormous caverns were wondrous to behold, the side tunnels were little more than treacherous chutes formed through ancient volcanic activity. Many elves had gone to explore the deep places and were never heard from again.

A shadow passed in front of the faerie lights floating in the central junction.

Khæ stopped and gasped, looking around. "Who goes there?"

Muted silence answered her. So complete, it was as if she had gone deaf.

She swallowed. Never in all of her time living in Borreraig Palace had she ever felt threatened. Deep beneath the northern edge of Ors Sea, her mind raced with visions of every possible creature that might be down here with her—real or imaginary. Of things that may have crawled their way up from the bowels of the earth.

The path behind her had gone dark—the faerie lights flitting ahead to light the way. Had she been able to concentrate beyond the misgivings twisting her stomach, she

might have communicated with the sprites and asked them to take her back the way she had come, but her irrational fear prevented her from doing so.

Although it was basically a straight run back to the stairwell that had brought her down, something ominous about the darkness prevented her retreat. In her heart, she knew she had to go forward.

A nervous chuckle escaped her. She shook her head. She was being silly. It was like she was an elfling again. Her imagination had gotten the better of her. Some of the faerie lights floating ahead must have winked out of existence. The lively sprites weren't blessed with a long lifespan in the mortal realm—mere moments in the life of an elf.

Swallowing her nerve, she started forward. As silly as it seemed now that she thought about it, it took everything she had to step into the space comprising the intersection of the three tunnels. Inhaling deeply, she dared to look sideways into the black abyss of the two side passageways; their ominous thoroughfares branching off at forty-five-degree angles from each other.

Nothing stirred. She shook her head, embarrassed—thankful that no one was there to bear witness to her folly. Unconcerned about being overheard, she said aloud, “You see? Nothing to be worried about, silly. There’s no one down here but you.”

She had no sooner spoken than the faerie lights flickered and began to disappear. Starting from those farthest away, one by one, they winked out of existence—a wall of inky darkness trailing on the edge of their diminishing light.

Wild-eyed, she looked every which way at once. Heart racing, she thought she had known fear before, but the tremors shaking the floor informed her she hadn't known how absolute that terror could be.

Not easily frightened, the ground lurching beneath her feet instilled a cold dread into the depths of her soul. Oddly, she didn't fear what a physical confrontation with whatever occupied the tunnel with her meant to her own well-being. Her concern lay with the safety of those inhabiting the palace above. Her husband and daughter first and foremost.

Without having to see whatever was responsible for drastically lowering the temperature in the passageway below the sea bottom, her innate ability to sense its intent shook her to the core. Bereft of all light, her eyes were nearly as blind as her mind to what could possibly exude such a malevolent presence.

It brushed up against her—its cold touch eliciting a silent scream. And then it was past her.

She staggered against the wall and slid down its smooth surface to sit on the cold, stone floor, afraid to breathe.

She sensed, rather than saw, the outline of a wispy apparition that appeared to be cloaked in ratty, black robes. Before she could gather her wits, it ducked into one of the side tunnels and drifted away.

Just as she thought it had gone, an icy tendril wiggled its way into the darkest recess of her mind—the place where she kept her most sacred fears. The angelic face of her dear, sweet daughter jumped into her thoughts.

The revelation chilled her to the bone.

The phantasm had come for Ouderling!