

Strifeshadow: The Second Fall



- 1 - Faerie Coast
- 2 - Valley of Lights
- 3 - Great Forest
- 4 - Aetha Lien
- 5 - Burning Hills
- 6 - Old Forest
- 7 - Northern Dragonspines
- 8 - Southern Dragonspines
- 9 - Plateau of Gobhrum
- 10 - Trading Coast

- 11 - Spice Isles
- 12 - Djina
- 13 - Forest of Colors
- 14 - Brock's ancestral keep
- 15 - Fallwick
- 16 - Gira Desert
- 17 - Galloping Plains
- 18 - Moorwatch
- 19 - Ruins of Sanduuram

Chapter 1 – The Unweaving

Part 1

Lieutenant Ric Laret stood before the east gates of Aetha Lien, regarding the towers along the massive city wall as deadly threats. The line of travelers entering the Elven capitol moved forward, and Laret pulled slightly on his two horses' reins, moving them forward. When they stopped again, Laret uttered a small prayer to Stana, goddess of spies and thieves, asking her to keep the humans in the wagon concealed and reminding her of the sacrifice they'd performed that morning. For their part, the men remained as still as they could under the hay covering them, using cloth masks to keep dust from causing sneezes.

Keeping to wild and uninhabited areas, the ten human raiders had made it across vast expanses of Elven territory, all to reach the famous wealth of the city before them. Their first contact with Elves had come that morning, when the men rode their horses out of a gully next to the main east-west road and killed the trader who had once owned the wagon they were now hiding in. Their detailed plan only had one real sticking point, getting past the city walls.

Laret had been chosen as the officer for the raid because he knew some Elven. Having practiced the language intensely before picking his men, he hoped it would be enough to convince the city guards he was from the Trading Coast or some other distant part of Elven lands. Of course, that was assuming the headband and cowl he wore would hide the fact he was human and did not have pointy ears.

The line moved forward again, and suddenly Laret was standing before a tall Elven guard. Wearing a chain mail tunic, studded leather greaves, a functional iron helmet, and two swords strapped to his back, it was obvious the guard was a well-trained warrior. Laret's left hip, where he usually wore his sword, felt suddenly naked. The Elf did no more than glance at Laret before pulling a charcoal pencil out of a small pouch hanging at his waist, the guard's hand already black from using the writing implement. Another guard came trotting back from the gatehouse, handing the Elf standing before Laret a shale slate and paper. Once he did that, the second Elf took off his helmet and sighed.

"Ah, good to take that off. Thanks mate, I'll tell Mari hello for you." Laret tried to estimate the young Elf's age. He'd guess somewhere between seventy and a hundred years old. It was hard to tell with Elves, who had an average life span three or four times longer than a human's.

"Don't forget you owe me a shift!" The first guard turned to Laret. "Sorry about the wait, what's your business?"

"Deliveries to three inns." Laret really didn't want to try pronouncing the names of the inns, although he did know the names of three inns in Aetha Lien just in case.

"Right. Deliveries of what?"

"Hay."

The guard nodded and walked past Laret's horses to the wagon, looking in side. The human sweated, thinking that the chances of him and his men making it back to their mounts were close to zero if the Elf decided to inspect the wagon's contents. The guard didn't do anything more than look before walking back to Laret. "Nice and fresh, your clients should be pleased. Now what were the...," the guard paused and looked down at the horses. "Hey, that's interesting. Your horses are shod in the human fashion. Haven't seen that since my troop was on patrol near Gobhrum and we bagged ourselves a few raiders."

Laret couldn't think of a reply, so he stood silently, his heart pounding furiously. For the first time, the Elven guard looked at the human closely, examining his face. "Trading Coast, right? That explains the accent. You Elves over there have way too much interaction with half-ears." Laret shrugged, indicating indifference to contact with humans. He was too relieved that his disguise was still working to take offense at the insult. "Well, what inns are you visiting?"

Laret pronounced the names carefully. "The Dancing Faery, The Mountain-Climbing Merman, and South Aetha Lien Inn."

The guard added the names to the rest of the information on the tablet, then addressed Laret. "You've probably been here before if you're trading hay, but take East Gate road all the way to the second canal and turn left on South Market Street. I know the Anaka Street route is usually quicker, but some idiot mage reversed the support spells on the street's canal bridge when he was supposed to be strengthening them." The Elf waved to another guard standing under the actual arch of the East Gate to indicate Laret was free to pass and moved on to the next wagon.

Laret walked forward, leading his horses through the gate. Very grateful for the guard's directions, he traveled along the wide road. The thoroughfare obviously wasn't meant for normal city traffic, being devoid of storefronts and fountains. A good number of wagons and deep ruts made it clear the road was used almost exclusively by wagons and carts. Laret marveled at the size of the city, looking at row after row of two and three story buildings. Passing over the first canal was almost as much of an experience, the underside of the bridge appearing to be made entirely of a shrub with interwoven branches, dirt packed on top of it. Covering the canal was a thick layer of water lilies, slightly different than the ones Laret had seen in the wild during his travels. Laret had heard the Elves beautified their city just because they could, but walking over the bridge felt surprisingly special to him. He was sorry when the wagon was back on solid land. Soon, the raider vowed, soon humans will be able to afford this extravagance.

After almost a half an hour in the city, Laret turned left onto the cobblestone street just before the second canal. Far superior to packed dirt roads if it had rained in the city any time recently, the stone streets made Laret wince anyway, knowing the bumpy ride his soldiers would have to endure. It was much slower going here, Laret having to be careful of Elven pedestrians and the bustle around stalls placed at intersections. Most of the merchants here sold some sort of food, the residents of Aetha Lien only traveling to the markets to purchase more permanent goods. Laret marveled at stands selling more types of fruit than he knew existed. Even more surprising to the human were the many different colors the Elves wore. Everything they wore seemed to be dyed, from light green to deep orange. One elf was even fully outfitted in an outrageous red. It was with shock Laret realized his plain brown robe probably stood out in the crowd. Treant-dyed robes were only worn by the filthy rich in human lands. Laret had never dreamed they could be so common. Keeping a closer watch as he traveled, he consoled himself with the fact that no Merfolk Purple or the deep blue dyes the sea people made were in evidence. Those at least he could still count on as rare.

Stopping before another crowd of Elves crossing the street he was on, Laret waited impatiently. It wasn't until he noticed just how many Elves were milling about before him that the human realized he had just reached the Southern Market. Looking at the stone building he had stopped by, Laret's heart jumped when he saw the symbol of a scale below a name the illiterate man ignored. The market's money-changer and weigher was next to him. Laret grinned at his luck. Calming the horses, he walked around to the edge of the wagon and knocked on the wooded side three times.

None of the busy Elven crowd seemed to notice as the human soldiers struggled out of the hay and hopped out of the wagon. Laret pointed to the market and gave an 'all set' hand sign. The men broke up, each heading off on pre-assigned tasks. Laret's three best swordsmen charged into the crowd, driving screaming Elves before them. They threatened with their swords, but didn't really want to clutter the square with injured or dead bodies. Their main goal was to attract and kill any city guard or soldiers in the market. Two more men took off with sacks and ran by the stalls, stopping only when something particularly light and expensive, like spices or jewelry, could be stolen. One man looked for the money-lender's door while taking the wagon in the wake of the first three and sat it in front of the building Laret charged into with the last four of his soldiers, wielding a sword one of the men had handed him.

The five humans burst into the stone building, shocking eight Elves doing business and weighing currency there. "Anyone who moves, dies!" Though it was accented, Laret's Elvish was clearly understood by everyone. One of the employees of the shop, a large Elf, inched back towards the stairs leading to the second level of the building. Laret stabbed him in the gut and pulled his sword out. The rest of the Elves froze, ceasing even the most minute movements. Seeing them hold still, Laret waved the three strongest of his men into action, keeping watch on the Elves with another swordsmen. The men picked up all the gold and silver they could see, and quickly opened a store room with more coins and precious metal dust inside. Running, they carried as much as they could out the front door and into the wagon.

Laret waited until it seemed they were only finding silver, and the twisting in his gut told him not to press his luck with Elven response times. "Last load, boys!" The Elves cringed, not knowing what the human saying meant. This trip, all five of the raiders poured out of the building, keeping the wooden door shut behind them. Laret had to grin when he saw two fully loaded burlap sacks in the back, the two men he'd sent to the stalls looking very happy. Three bodies with swords were bleeding on the now deserted market grounds, only one of them human. Laret and all the surviving raiders but the driver jumped into the back of the wagon and sat on top of the loot. The driver whipped the horses, bringing them to a gallop in near record time.

The south section of Aetha Lien passed by in a blur, Laret was happy he managed to keep his teeth from cracking as the wagon raced over the cobblestone streets. The blur of the city was caused more by the rapid bobbing of his head because of the rough ride than by the speed of the wagon. No guards caught up to them, however, making the pain worthwhile.

Laret paid attention to his surroundings again when the ride suddenly became smoother, the South Market Road merging with one of the earthen thoroughfares that led to a gate. The guards weren't prepared for an attack from within the city, and Laret even felt a pang of guilt after jumping out of the wagon and cutting a path for himself and for his booty. Five guards were on duty, and the well-armed Elves killed two of the charging humans, a fact Laret didn't notice until he was back on the wagon, the horses foaming as they galloped away from Aetha Lien.

The guilt Lieutenant Laret felt from realizing the main duty of the guards that he had just killed was to give directions to travelers disappeared when the smell of spices and the shining faces of gold coins brought his attention back to the incredible wealth he was sitting on.

Part 2

"You are more beautiful than the day I married you." The Elven King smiled and fed his wife, Queen Anaka, another grape. "Thale, stop your flattery." Anaka was obviously pleased, if doubtful of the King's sincerity.

"It is true, my love. Your hair has grown, giving you a natural gown of silken gold. Your body moves as a Queen, sure and seductive in every action. Your eyes gaze at me not with uncertain hope for the future, but with wisdom and, dare I say it? Love.

Every moment you stand by my side as Queen gives me another moment to remember when I look upon you, compounding your beauty.”

Anaka couldn't help it. She giggled. “Ok, ok, I believe you. Hopeless romantic.” She muttered the last part, just loud enough for Thale to hear.

“Hopeless!” Thale pretended indignation, continuing the private ritual the couple performed every year. “For sixty years, I've had more than I could possibly have imagined.” Thale stood up and held his wine glass high, addressing the full banquet room. “Sixty years!” His stage voice boomed through the hall. “Sixty years of prosperity and peace! Our coasts safe and our lands fertile. Forty of those years blessed by the most gifted child I've ever known, my Marnia.” Thale looked fondly on his daughter, seated by her request at the head of a table filled with court nobles. She had been addressing them, but looked up when Thale spoke. She smiled when he spoke of her, taking the flattery as a matter-of-course. “To another sixty years!” The hall cheered Thale, some Elves and Gremlins banging their fists on the wooden tables enthusiastically, wisps weaving more quickly than usual between the branches and around the trunks of the Treants.

Thale tossed back his drink, the rest of the bipeds following his lead. He sat back down, and the hall returned to its merriment. The Elves were feasting, while servants poured the Treants specially flavored water onto the exposed sections of the floor meant for the leafy beings. The Wisps darted around the upper areas of the room, especially around the upper branches of the Treants, always animated at a party. Gremlins ranging from nearly black to light blue sat at the same sort of tables as the light-skinned Elves. Most of them were at uniformly Gremlin tables, considerably messier than the one Elves sat at. Gremlins were much more likely to throw things at each other.

Sitting back down, Thale took a few minutes to eat and observe Marnia. She was the center of attention at a table where the most of the Elves seated were young members of the nobility.

“She's doing quite well, isn't she?”

Thale smiled at a wisp that did a figure-eight above Marnia's head before going off to chase another of its kind. “Yes, my love. It makes me remember when my father would have banquets, before the Merfolk War, and I would bore everyone that sat with me. Marnia seems to be a bit more interesting.”

“Bore them?” Anaka looked suspiciously at Thale. “I've never known you to be boring.”

“Well, maybe I just put the male half of the table to sleep.” Thale put on his widest and most mischievous grin.

“Oooh,” Anaka scolded, poking Thale gently with her fork. “Never miss an opportunity to make trouble for yourself, do you?”

Thale winked, turning his attention back to Marnia. She was scolding a frightened servant, shoving a glass of red wine back at the terrified girl. After bowing twice, the server cleaned up the wine Marnia had spilled while angrily giving the drink back and left for the kitchens. Marnia renewed her conversation as if nothing had happened until the servant came back with a glass of white wine, which Marnia took without a word of thanks.

“Did you see that, dear?” Thale frowned at his daughter's actions.

“Yes,” Anaka sighed. “I've been noticing that kind of behavior in the last few months. She's grown up with everything given to her and everyone respecting her. She doesn't know what it's like to earn her way.”

“What should we do about it?” Thale mentally cursed the border raids that had taken up so much of his time lately. “And I mean we. I need to take the time to get to know my own daughter.”

Anaka put a reassuring hand on Thale's arm. “You're a wonderful father. I've already done a few things, like disguise a learned peasant as a minor noble to be Marnia's tutor. And I think I might have her go on the Rhenga pilgrimage into the Great Forest. She'd be forced to rely on herself a bit then, as well as interact with normal girls. Besides, Elthe could keep an eye on her.”

“True,” Thale looked down on Elthe, who was rooted near one of the Gremlin tables, fish sauce dripping from her branch closest to the Gremlins. Elthe was a Treant council member, and one of the royal couple's best friends, though currently unaware of their gaze upon her. She was lifting her sauced branch much more quickly than one would have expected, causing a wisp to careen through the slimy foliage. Thale had to cough to cover up a huge guffaw that would have drawn attention to him. Life was always more exciting near a group of Gremlins. “Being around Elthe is good for anyone.” The wisp flew around crazily until it managed to shake most of the sauce off, finally flying back to playfully threaten the Treant.

“Well, almost anyone.” Anaka laughed with Thale.

“Perhaps I could take Marnia on a tour of the city and the Gremlin farms nearby.” Thale got back to the issue at hand. “It could help her get in touch with the lives of our people, see where our food comes from, that kind of thing.”

“It sounds like a good idea, dear. Maybe during planting time.”

“Hmm...” Thale was about to agree, but became distracted by a palace messenger arriving with a note for Chancellor Surahl, who was seated next to the King. The message had a military seal on its envelope. Surahl had been Chancellor under Thale for two years now. Thale had found him to be an extraordinarily capable advisor and council member, though socially reclusive.

After skimming the paper, Surahl glanced up at Thale, not pleased. "Some urgent news, my lord." Surahl didn't suggest Thale leave the banquet or leave the matter to himself, knowing the King would judge whether he wanted to leave the banquet a little early without prompting.

Before Thale replied, Anaka laid a hand on his shoulder. "Go and take care of it," the Queen whispered in Thale's ear. Thale simply nodded and walked out quietly with Surahl.

Part 3

Jegg opened his eyes, regaining consciousness a few minutes after an Elven guard had hit the back of his head with the flat of a blade. Jegg brought himself to his knees, tasting dirt in his mouth. Looking through the gate before him, the human raider could just see the dust from the escaping wagon his comrades were in. Jegg swore. Pulling himself upright, and trying not to black out from the pain, Jegg removed his dented helmet. Feeling around, he didn't think his skull was broken or cracked, but he couldn't feel much under the blood-matted hair.

"He's alive!" Jegg couldn't tell what the little girl screamed, but he knew hearing Elvish wasn't good.

Jegg swore again. Rising to his feet, he started stumbling towards several small houses near the gate, hoping to get out of sight. Jegg had just turned down one of the small alleys that made up the relatively poor neighborhood when the sound of running feet could be heard by the gate.

"Where'd they go?" Guards had arrived at the gate.

"He went that way!" The girl pointed to the street Jegg had run down. Rather confused that human raiders might run back into the city, the guards split up. Two ran into the gate tower to survey the road leading south from Aetha Lien, the other pair chased after Jegg.

Jegg forced himself to run when he heard the Elves reach the gate. Fighting through a haze of pain, he careened around a corner, almost running into a small group of Gremlin children. Cursing again, he ran down the small street as the children yelled and pointed at him. Turning down the closest small alley, Jegg looked around frantically, his chest heaving and his legs trembling. No Elven or Gremlin eyes seemed to be on him, and there wasn't a tree in sight, let alone a Treant. Jegg opened a door in the alleyway, hoping to hide in the rickety wooden building.

"Hello? Who's that?" An elderly Elven woman was sitting on the other side of the room, facing away from Jegg and grinding wheat into flour.

Jegg froze for a second until he realized the woman hadn't spoken loud enough for anyone else to hear. He walked across the room quickly as the woman got up to greet him. Grabbing her neck by both hands, he squeezed, preventing her from screaming or making any noise at all. Kicking backwards, the woman managed to hit Jegg in the shin. He let out an involuntary grunt at the painful blow, but simply squeezed harder. The woman soon stopped struggling.

Letting the corpse fall to the ground, Jegg went to the door and found the woman's unused lock. Picking up the wooden bar from the ground, he placed it in the metal holders set into the wall. With the door blocked, Jegg found his way to the dwelling's cot and collapsed.

Jegg grabbed a piece of stale bread from one of the many tables around him. It had been dusk when he woke up in the dead Elf's home, hardly any light streaming through the thick wax paper on the windows. He had taken a robe with a hood from the woman's wardrobe, despite it being too small, and left the building. Keeping to the shadows in the city, Jegg had tried to head west, towards the docks. He'd decided on that direction since sea travel would be the quickest way to leave Elven territory, but hadn't reckoned on not being able to find his way.

Eventually, Jegg had found his way to the large courtyard filled with benches and tables. The debris and remains on the tables made it clear a massive feast had been held during the day. The courtyard was within the inner walls of the palace, but all the gates had been held open for the feast. Jegg was grateful for the stale bread, not having eaten since just before dawn. Jegg was considering the palace as he chewed. Most of Aetha Lien had impressed him with its wealth and splendor, especially the vibrant beauty and plant life to be found even in the denser parts of the city. Other districts were nothing to be proud of, such as the one Jegg had slept in. But before him was the Palace. The building itself was much smaller than the human had imagined it to be, but his mind still filled its halls and storerooms with wealth beyond measure.

Jegg walked past the tables and to the palace wall, amazed no guard had stopped him yet, even if just for scavenging pieces of food off the public tables. He had been continuously amazed at the lack of security in the capitol, from the two guards he'd helped kill in the marketplace, who hadn't even been paired, to the response time at the south gate, and the lack of patrols at night. It was this as much as greed and a desire to have some bargaining chip to help him return home that got Jegg's hands and feet to move and bury themselves in the ivy covering the palace, pulling himself up towards the second floor.

The ivy was thick, and surprisingly easy to find. To Jegg's surprise, the most difficult part of the climb was keeping his face close to the palace wall, because the sweet smell of the vine was so strong. He was a good climber, having spent some of his

life campaigning in the rockier areas of the Gobhrum plateau. Working on the theory the best treasures would be kept in the more secluded higher floors of the palace, Jegg climbed as high as he could. Unfortunately, the vines became much thinner and less attached to the wall of the palace above the third floor. Reluctantly, Jegg climbed a few feet to the side and dropped onto a balcony below him.

Thale closed the door to his chambers, frustrated by the recent turn of events. He had thought the increased border patrols had cut down on the human raiding. If they were determined enough to come all the way to Aetha Lien, he might need to authorize some of Surahl's more aggressive suggestions. Wondering at the low light in the room, Thale took an extra candle out of the drawer in his reading table. He lit the candle with another on a stand and turned to sit down, hoping the Palace banquet would finish soon and Anaka would arrive before he became tired enough to go to bed.

The end of the tall candle-holder impacting the Elven king's throat caused immense pain. Holding the improvised weapon by its base, Jegg lifted the improvised staff to hit Thale again. Thale instinctively tried to scream, but his crushed larynx wouldn't let the sound come out. His battle instincts honed first by war and later by practice, the king did manage to move a little to the side when Jegg swung again. The brass candlestick broke Thale's collar bone the downward sweep missing the King's head. Jegg stated to swing again, but Thale lurched forward, tackling the burly human, the roar that should have accompanied his charge only a grotesque hiss.

Taken by surprise, Jegg fell backward, his head hitting the wall. The re-injury made the human black out for the second time that day, but only for a few seconds. Regaining consciousness quickly, Jegg found Thale similarly incapacitated, a last-second twist causing the Elf to land on the shoulder attached to the broken collar bone, sending the king into shock. Jegg crawled to the candlestick, only to be stopped by Thale, who grabbed his foot with the healthy arm. The human tried to pull away, but Thale's death-grip prevented him from moving forward. Jegg almost panicked when he couldn't break the strong hold of the king crawling or pulling his leg with all its strength. When he finally looked back, the human couldn't believe Thale was already dead, smothered by the internal bleeding in his neck.

Jegg carefully pried the locked fingers off his leg, each one a struggle. Standing up, he grabbed another of the candle stands that stood about half his height, first taking the wax out of the top, wishing he'd remembered to pick up his sword when he fled from the south gate. Fingering the jewels and gold he'd found in the next room, Jegg considered his victim. When he realized who the purple robe and seal ring must belong to, the raider paled. Jegg didn't stop running until he reached the river and Aetha Lien's docks.

Part 4

Surahl sat watching the four robed Elves. He had never understood those who gave themselves over to the service of Earth and Wind. A life of dedication would have bored the chancellor to tears. The dedications finished their last chant, and the final viewers drew back from Thale's coffin. Queen Anaka had to pull Marnia gently to move her. The young woman cried gently in her mother's arms as the lid was closed.

The small gathering of the highest political elite in the kingdom in addition to Thale's personal friends began filing out of the Palace's inner courtyard. Most of the people whom Surahl had expected had appeared at the private funeral, including all of the council members from the leafy Elthe to the two unusually solemn Gremlins. Several other guests had surprised him, including a hermit from the wilds not far from Aetha Lien. Surahl wondered how the mushroom farmer had known to come.

There had been a public mourning as well, the tables set up on the Palace grounds for Thale's sixty-year anniversary had not even moved before the grieving made them necessary again. The King had been as well liked in Aetha Lien as he was in the other provinces of the realm. The Palace grounds had been filled for the better part of the week, despite the viewing of Thale's body being limited to those who had been close to him.

Surahl stood, wondering what Palace life would be under Anaka's guidance, and if he would even remain Chancellor. He didn't know of any reason for the Queen to hold him in disfavor, but he had no idea of knowing if she had a different favorite for the position either. As Elthe bent her branches and left the courtyard, Surahl considered himself very lucky that tradition mandated the Chancellor be Elven.

Walking to the exit, Surahl noticed he was one of the last to leave. Aside from the monks filing out of the funeral grove, only Anaka and Marnia remained. Surahl made his way to the pair, deciding to offer personal condolences again and possibly pick up some information.

"I want to stay!"

"Come inside, Marnia dear. Sleep will do you some good."

"No!" The princess yelled loudly, surprising Surahl.

"Marnia!" Her mother snapped, suddenly looking old. Surahl could tell Anaka did not have the energy to anything more for the day.

"We all grieve so for Thale." Surahl spoke quietly to ease the intrusion into the conversation. "If Marnia wishes to honor her father's memory by standing with him, I could stay with her and perhaps offer the comfort of someone who wishes to listen to stories of the dear departed."

"I still want to stay." Marnia sniffed, her rage gone as soon as it flared. She obviously didn't care if Surahl stayed or not, but any chance to remain by Thale's coffin was appreciated.

"All right," Anaka relented. She hugged Marnia before leaving, crying softly as she entered the halls of the palace.

Surahl sat in one chairs in the first row facing the coffin. Marnia leaned against the coffin, idly playing with a new leaf, still soft in its young age.

The coffins of Elven Kings were hewn from two thousand year old great trees, and this one hadn't yet succumbed to the shock of being cut down and carved. The chancellor tilted his head back, looking at the few bright stars that could be seen through the torchlight in the courtyard. Most of the sky was hidden by the walls of the Palace or the branches of trees carefully grown for the enjoyment of the royal family. Surahl wondered what instinct had driven him to offer to stay with the princess. The wait could be interminable if she decided to remain by the coffin holding King Thale until it was planted the next day.

Surahl fingered an Ikon medallion in a secret pocket of his coat. The design was really quite simple, a representation of a dagger within a ring, the hilt and tip of the knife touching the edge of the circle. Considering Marnia in a new light, the heir to the throne, Surahl walked up to the intricately carved coffin, remembering the Thale's pale face and the reinforced high-necked shirt the dedicantes had used to hide his wounds.

"It was not his time to pass on." Surahl started with the obvious.

"The last time I saw him," Marnia's voice was very unsteady. "We were arguing about where I would sit at the banquet. He wanted me to sit by him, said he didn't see me enough. I asked him whose fault that was. Now I'll never have the chance to be with him again."

Surahl understood what Marnia was feeling. Regret for lost opportunities was common when someone close died. It didn't help him, though. "You did nothing wrong. It was the right time for you to be on your own. And you would have seen much of your father, he was planning long outings, but someone kept you from him."

"Why?" Marnia held back a sob. "Why would they do this?"

"He was inconvenient." Surahl had no idea why Thale had been killed. "The humans feared him. Everyone knows how he brought the war with the Merfolk to an end. The half-ears had taken Gobhrum and were raiding us. On the very night Thale was murdered, they raided the south market. Was Thale brave enough to go after humans, Marnia?"

"Of course!" Marnia responded to the implied insult just as Surahl thought she would. "He could have taken care of them whenever he wanted to."

"I know that. You know that. Unfortunately, the humans knew that, so they came after him in the dead of night, cowardly taking advantage of the holiday, your father's moment of triumph, and killed him."

Marnia was breathing heavily now. Anger, pain, and grief were all intermixed. "They can't be allowed to get away with this!"

"They've never had anything to contribute to this world." Surahl tried to sound like he was agreeing with Marnia.

"We will march on them! Push them far from our lands."

Surahl smiled, trying to make it seem one of appreciation. "You are wise, Princess. You are the one that can make it happen."



The ruler was regal, his tall and muscled body projecting an aura of power. His clothes were excellently tailored, created from the finest fabrics. Even the fine robe dyed with Merfolk Purple was worn as if it were no more than a raincoat. The ruler was holding a fine wine, the center of a grand court, hearing a plea from one of the most powerful nobles from the northeast lands. Emperor Brock was bored.

“So you see how a market administrator who does not speak the native tongues of the peoples I oversee must hurt trade, and your tax revenues.” Lady Rialt leaned forward in a slight bow, attempting to take advantage of her many physical charms.

“I understand your concern, my lady. Indeed, I share it. But was it not just a fortnight ago I dealt with this same problem by sending an interpreter?” Brock had to respect the woman’s persistence.

“A decision I also thought wise at the time, great Emperor. But I have been proven wrong. Why, the extra words that must be passed back and forth and the mistakes that lead to difficult accounting might have made the problem even worse.” Brock decided not to embarrass the woman with his official’s latest enthusiastic report.

“I shall make sure I look into it in due time, my lady.” The emperor made sure his voice was stern in delivering the clear but polite refusal to the request.

“You are most kind.” Lady Rialt was not happy, but there was nothing she could do.

Emperor Brock took advantage of a brief respite from petitions to step out of the grand hall that held his court. Every day he worked in there, the palace in Fallwick seemed more like a prison. Brock figured he’d soon organize an expedition to the Trading Coast in order to remind the human cities there who their master was, or perhaps finish dominating the rest of the Kobold tribes in the western forest.

Brock took off his robe after leaving court, tossing it at one of the pages stationed to run messages for nobles. “Take it back to my chambers.” The boy ran off, struggling to keep from dragging a part of the massive garment. Brock nodded at Captain Eller, who was waiting for him. “Lady Rialt was at it again, trying to get one of her own people to run the market in the northeast. I swear the cursed woman thinks I’m too stupid to notice she’s trying to get her own man in the position so she can cheat on taxes. It was almost the same stupid excuse.”

Eller shrugged. “She knows you need her as a contact with the nomads. She’s hired them as mercenaries and guards for years, and they don’t like to deal with anyone else.”

Brock got to the issue Eller was there to update. “How go the raids on the Elven plain?”

“Poorly, just as we expected they might. The Elves finally started getting serious with patrols. The cursed Treants have our men so scared they won’t even go near a forest. And their Rangers are performing more and more forward patrols, in the foothills of Gobhrum, where the terrain is to their favor.

Brock frowned. “We need the money to fund the Liwetta bridge projects. Without mobility, I can’t reduce the army enough to allow for expeditions without risking unrest at home.”

Captain Eller paused, silent for a moment. There was bigger news he hadn’t told the Emperor, but delivering any kind of bad news could be dangerous. “That problem might be solved, sir.”

Brock raised his eyebrows in surprise. “That’s excellent Captain, how so?”

Eller took a deep breath. “I authorized a daring raid by one of my best officers. He snuck all the way to Aetha Lien, and plundered one of their richest markets. It was almost a surprise when the warship we sent along the coast managed to pick him up, but he’s coming back with almost a wagon-full of gold and valuable goods.

Brock nodded. “That ought to be enough to finish the most important projects. But you’re hesitating Eller, what went wrong?” Brock stopped suddenly, turning to face Eller square-on in the hallway.

The human captain swallowed nervously. “One of the men got separated in the raid. Actually, we thought he was dead. We haven’t heard from him yet, but there have been rumors. Our spies are reporting the Elven King, Thale, may have been killed.

The Emperor stood still, hardly breathing. Sometimes, despite his effort to convince the nobility otherwise, his rage got the better of him. The backhand flung Captain Eller against the wall, cutting the officer on the top of the cheek. Before the blood started flowing down Eller’s face, Brock had recovered. “The reason there’s not more, Eller, is that you run a good spy network. Find out exactly what happened, who did it, and by the gods, what the Elves are going to do about it!”

Brock stormed down the corridor, leaving Captain Eller to hold his face and wonder what might happen if he didn’t get the information soon enough for the Emperor.

If you liked this first chapter, you’ll love the rest of the story behind Strifeshadow. Strifeshadow is a multiplayer Real Time Strategy (RTS) game from Ethermoon Entertainment, an Independent Game Developer. Strifeshadow is due for release around Christmas of this year. Check <http://www.ethermoon.com> for more details!