

Elkind

by

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CHAPTER 1 – AN UNTIMELY DEATH

If Lariel hadn't spent half the night sneaking around the king's personal library, she might have woken in time to dress for the assassins headed her way. As it was, mid-morning sun poured through her windows by the time she finally sat up in bed. Her neck and shoulders complained from hours of hunched reading, so she set a plan to get a rubbing salve from the physicians after she'd had something to eat.

Without warning, her bedroom door opened.

Her tutor strode in, dragging her childhood friend like a cat plucked from an unwanted bath. Talia's pouts were decidedly effective on the men around her, but old Master Grady was categorically immune to protestation.

"Good heavens," he said. "You're not even up yet."

"Tell him, Lariel," said Talia. "Tell him we don't have lessons today. It's Sunday!"

Grady eyed the plunder at the foot of Lariel's bed, with titles ranging from *Mystical Applications of Garden Variety Herbs* to *Designing Mechanical Release Devices* and *Ancient Elvin Lore*.

"The king will burn me alive if he sees this mess!"

"Then don't show it to him," said Lariel. She slid from her covers, sending books avalanching to the floor.

"Mistress, please—" said Grady. "Some decorum while you hurry." He emphasized 'hurry' with an earnest grumble.

Lariel wrapped a blanket around her nightdress so the grizzled man wouldn't have something to ogle while she went to the wardrobe. The moment her father discovered she'd been taking books again, he would lock them away forever. His determination to separate her from anything adversely influential was directly related to her level of interest in it. If she didn't pretend to loathe riding and archery lessons, he would take them away too.

"It isn't fair," said Talia. "Matthias Ravil was going to take me to Half Moon Lake after church. He brought a whole team of stallions back from Edditay last month, each horse as white as snow and as tall as the city gates. It'll be a marvelous spectacle!"

The gold flowers embroidered on the girl's gown personified her plight. Without a husband, her sole enterprise was to dote on the Tallen heir. Her father's position at court ensured her an appropriate

marriage, but like Lariel, she didn't want to be sold off to the first prune-faced, spindle-legged peacock to thrust a well-endowed purse under her father's nose.

"Tall as the gates, my auntie's hairy chin," said Lariel. She rifled through the wardrobe looking for something remotely appealing.

"Ladies, please," said Grady. "The king said to *hurry*."

Lariel continued, "The only spectacle would be Matthias Ravil leading a team of horses. The man can't sort out his bucklers from his boot straps, let alone command a carriage."

Talia folded her arms, enhancing the impact of her low neckline and spiraling black curls. "That's the spite talking."

"You know as well as I do Matthias Ravil is a money-grubbing, grasping little weasel. Father told me so just the other day." She frowned at her selection of dresses which appeared to be as limited as the conversation. "Where's my white sun-dress—the one that goes with my striped parasol?"

"How should I know?" asked Talia.

"Heavens give me patience—" Grady snatched a blue gown from a hanger then shoved it into Lariel's hands. "Lieutenant Hammel is waiting."

"I can't wear this," Lariel said, ready to explain the difference between day and evening attire, until it struck her that Lieutenant Hammel never attended the royal family. He was a regiment soldier. "Wait—what?"

Talia mirrored her confusion. "What is this about?"

"Some sort of trouble with that new commander—Bradek something or other."

"Balteq," said Lariel.

Her stomach twisted at the mention of Graenid's family name. She wasn't ready to be a wife but at least the captain was handsome and sharp-witted, unlike the rest of the sycophants stalking the corridors lately, leering at her every chance they got. If she wasn't careful, she would end up married to a two-headed toad croaking poetry between mouthfuls of insects.

"Bradek— Balteq—Bumbling buffoon," said Grady. "I don't care which. But may the king spare my head if I don't get you to the horses."

Shouts erupted downstairs, and then a woman screamed.

Lariel started for the door.

Grady spun her about. "Quickly now—"

He dragged her across the room with her blanket tangling her feet. She abandoned it halfway to the window rather than let it pull her

to her hands and knees. Meanwhile, downstairs in the foyer, something metal skipped crashing across the floor—an ornamental platter or the perfume bowl warming in the entry, by the sound of it. Its tinny echo ricocheted up the hall in sharp contrast to the boots pattering the staircase.

There had to be at least a dozen men coming.

Grady popped a panel in the window casing to release a lever. A gear cranked over, spooling a length of iron chain into the gardens below. When she saw the rusty handholds interspersing the smaller links, Lariel realized her teacher meant for her to climb down.

“We’re three levels up!” cried Talia.

“Out you go,” Grady said. He heaved Lariel over the sill without waiting to be sure she had hold of one of the links. She sailed free until her weight tugged her shoulders with a sharp twinge. She hid her face in her arms as she slammed against the wall. Her dress wafted away like a fancy blue bird.

“Now you,” said Grady.

“Not on your life!”

Lariel barely had a chance to scramble to the next handhold before Talia’s feet swung past her face. The girl’s scream pierced the sky.

Boots thundered into the bedroom then a deep voice bellowed, “Where is she?”

“Beyond your grasp,” said Grady.

The whip-crack of an open-hand strike was distinct.

“She’s in the tunnels,” growled Grady. “She’ll be halfway to Calladin before noon.”

A soldier stuck his head out the window. “Out here!”

He tried to pull Talia back inside.

Lariel clung to the poor girl’s ankle. “Climb, Talia. Pull him down!”

“I can’t!”

All three of them would fall to their deaths if Talia actually let go. Fortunately, the girl slipped and caught her foot in the link beside Lariel’s nose. The chain swung, scraping them across the wall. Lariel nearly swooned from the effect of the landscape pitching back and forth.

The soldier disappeared back inside.

After a quick shuffle, Master Grady pitched backward out the window, arms flailing, robes flapping on the wind. He landed beside the hedgerow with a dull thud, perversely twisted and flung out like yesterday’s wilted greens.

“Climb!” screamed Lariel.

This time Talia obeyed. They scabbled over each other, fighting for handholds, stepping on fingers and pinching feet, but the soldiers couldn't reach them in their armor. They would have to make their way through the interior of the palace to the side gates.

The drop from the bottom of the chain was farther than Lariel expected and she twisted her ankle upon landing. Fear kept her from shivering in her nightdress as she wriggled her toes in the cold, prickly grass.

She studied her teacher's vacant expression, eyes rolled back, veins blown out and bloodied. If she had eaten breakfast, it would've been all over the lawn.

Talia landed beside her with a pained squeak. She ducked behind Lariel, concertedly avoiding looking at Grady. “No—no—no—no—What now?”

Lariel had no idea where to find her father or Lieutenant Hammel, so she led her friend down manicured rows of autumn foliage to the retaining wall. Only a select few knew about the iron door ensconced in a blanket of vines.

With a final, foreboding clunk, they locked themselves out of the palace grounds. They would have to make their way around to the front gates if they wanted back inside.

Grady had said south, so they ran north along the river, keeping to the trees. At the first sign of a riverboat, they broke from the waterfront to follow more isolated woodland paths. But eventually the paths ran out, choked by trees and opportunistic brush.

Their run slowed to a trot to a brisk walk then ultimately a trudging march. With the colors of the leaves turning, it was like walking through a mammoth fire.

“Where are we going?” Talia said eventually.

Lariel didn't respond. She had nothing to say. She only knew she would fall apart the moment she stopped moving. So she plodded along in stunned silence, unable to shake the image of Grady's ruined face. Her friend began swatting at low-hanging branches and ripping yellow leaves off of trees.

She let the girl's tears pass un-consoled.

By the time the sun hung low in the sky, Lariel's legs ached, and every rock in Tallen-country had taken a bite out of her feet. She prayed they would happen upon some sort of help before nightfall now that all semblance of Tallen's largest city was behind them. Considering all of their allies were in the south, their present course was regrettable, deadly even, if she didn't come up with a plan soon.

Talia's voice cracked when she finally spoke again. "Do you think our fathers are okay?"

"Of course they are," Lariel replied more harshly than she'd intended. "They're taking care of business. There's no point in us getting in the way and messing things up for them."

Talia stopped short, primed with fresh tears, her forehead scrunched, her lips trembling.

Lariel threw her arms around the girl, feeling like an absolute skunk. "I'm sorry, Tal. I didn't mean it like that." The girl wormed her nose into Lariel's hair, and she accepted the warm tears against her neck. She was a butterfly's breath away from a hysterical fit herself yet she needed to stay strong for both their sakes. "Hey, look over there."

Her friend followed her gaze. Though they couldn't see the lake from their vantage, water fowl wheeled overhead in the distance. As best as Lariel could tell, they had fully skirted the southern lakeshore. "I'm not Matthias Ravil, but I did get you to lake country today."

Talia wiped her face. "Ha—Hah—"

"We'll figure this out. I promise. We just need to find a place to hide until whatever this is blows over and our fathers can come get us."

"How much farther is that going to be? I'm exhausted."

"At least you're dressed." Lariel stuck out her filthy toes, and they shared a disgusted look and a laugh. "Come on—we need to keep moving."

They scaled the foothills of Clear Creek Bluffs, hoping to reach the battlements of the bridges before dark. It would be treacherous going otherwise, evading the cold and potential hungry predators. In the morning they could seek out a town or a farmstead.

The higher they climbed however, the more distinctly Lariel heard the bray of pursuers rising behind them. "They brought the dogs," she shouted, charging up the sloping ground with new fervor, fighting a slick carpet of leaves. Her friend struggled to keep up despite her boots and warm dress.

A horn sounded in the distance.

Then Talia tripped, falling on her knees. "Just go without me. I can't do this anymore."

"Stupid girl!" Lariel hoisted her up and dragged her on. "Their horses can't climb this mess."

They fell into the momentum of each other's stride the way they did when they were children, jumping gnarled roots, ducking branches, using the stronger ones to pull themselves along until the bark stung their hands.

They were actually gaining ground when Lariel veered too close to a copse of bushes and flushed a flock of birds screeching into the sky.

The horn sounded again.

“Don’t stop!” she hollered when Talia hesitated. Her carelessness just cost them the precious time they needed to reach the ramparts. She followed her friend over the hillcrest then down the other side.

“They’re coming,” Talia huffed.

“Not yet.”

The bridges stood black against the horizon. Lariel sensed the carrion birds circling the towers, seeking food in the brush and along the water’s edge. Their thoughts of hunting blended with her thoughts of escape. The wind rushed them, carrying them aloft, while her breath seared her throat. “You won’t be dining on girl today,” she cried.

Then something snatched her feet, and she fell hard, splayed on the ground.

“Mistress!” cried Talia.

Lariel pushed herself up, ignoring the new cinch in her side. “Keep going!”

She pushed on, pulling Talia toward the low rumble of water. She could smell the moisture in the air, and a fine mist coated her skin. Up ahead, a chasm cut a jagged east-west line across their path.

The bridges were Tallenbrook’s only access to the wilder north this far west of the Taihas. Her father no longer posted sentries at the stronghold, but she didn’t need his soldiers when his books explained how to release the foundation pinions on either side of the canyon. By the time Graenid’s men found another way across, she and Talia would be long gone.

She was flying at a dead run when something snatched her feet again. A mound of roots broke her fall, and pain blazed up her side. She inhaled the mossy musk of soil.

The braying grew intent behind her.

Talia clung to a tree with labored breaths, sweat beading along her bronze hairline.

“Go,” Lariel snarled.

Unseen tendrils snaked around her body, as thick as rope and twice as strong, winding up her arms and legs, rooting her to the ground.

When her friend tried to come back for her, she yelled, “The other way, impudent girl! Don’t stop until you reach Vestige!”

Talia zigzagged away through the trees, picking up speed. Lariel waited to be sure she was lost in the forest before calling, “Rattak, I’ll see you burn for this!”

Her father’s top physician stepped into the open.

“Tut, tut, Mistress, that’s hardly lady-like.” He lifted her chin with his boot, giving her a glimpse of the red and gold runes embroidered along the hem of his long black coat. She wanted to strangle him with their cubic designs. Despite his posturing, she doubted the buffoon knew how to read them.

The Tallenfolk spoke of him stealing the coat from a powerful sorcerer and that reciting its incantation every night gave him eternal life. Others said he used it to summon the dead, but Lariel knew better. The man was a hack with more arrogance than brains, though his tendrils seemed rather effective at the moment. The more she struggled, the tighter they squeezed.

“Release me now.”

Rattak put a horn to his pudgy mouth and blew a long mournful note followed by two short blasts.

The soldiers adjusted their course.

“You best stop fussing, Mistress, or you’ll spoil that lovely gown.”

Lariel trembled in her thin layer of linen, more from anger than from cold. “Wait till father hears about this, Rat. I can already smell the pyre.” She never understood why her father suffered this snuffling pig, let alone favored him above the other physicians.

With a pincer grip that nearly wrenched her arm off, Rattak lifted her to her feet.

She growled defiantly to mask the pain.

“My, my, but we are in a temper,” he said.

His smile cracked his face, splitting his bulbous head in two. She thought he might actually swallow her whole as he pulled her close—close enough to count the pockmarks. His tendrils dug into her arms, pinning them to her body, holding her fast.

“There’s still time to strike a bargain,” he said.

Lariel pointedly surveyed his face then began to count.

“One—two—three—four—”

Red circles bloomed on Rattak’s cheeks.

“—five—six—seven—”

“Stop it.”

“—eight—nine—ten—”

“You cursed brat!”

“—eleven—twelve—”

“There’ll be nothing left of you!”

“—thirteen—”

He tossed her on the ground as if she’d sprouted fangs.

Lariel smirked, enjoying the familiar sheen of distress on his forehead. Even a child’s innocence couldn’t protect him. She had always found him contemptible. And she had taunted him this way since before she realized she could read people’s natures at will—like reading a book with her heart—reaching out and taking hold of whatever emotions comprised them. Her father called it intuition but she knew it was more than that. The information came too easily, and it was much too clear.

“That’s the last time you disrespect me,” he said. He crouched beside her, his eyes burning with murder.

“You can’t hurt me,” she said, refusing to betray her fear. “My father—”

“Your father is dead.”

“Liar—”

Broad-shouldered dogs burst through the trees to encircle them in snarling slaver. Lariel could hardly hear Rattak over the clamor, but the sorcerer didn’t seem to notice the dogs. He was intent on her, pressing so close she had to tip her head to avoid contact. She would have edged away if she could move.

“He wanted to go looking for the Elves, you see. Said we couldn’t be trusted with an amulet stone.” He barked a laugh. “We! Couldn’t be trusted!”

“What are you talking about? What stone?”

He stroked her tangled yellow hair, coiling it around his fingers with a contemplative look. Lariel’s stomach rejected his touch with a sickened lurch.

“Soon,” he said, “you’ll be dead too.”

Armored soldiers appeared then, to shore up her cage of growling dogs with steel. These men weren’t Tallenfolk. She had never seen them before. “I can smell the taint on your soul, Rat,” she said. “It’s as pickled as your breath.”

He pulled her to her feet by the hair. “Last chance to deal with me—”

She glared at him, her scalp straining, her feet barely touching the ground.

“Rattak!” said Graenid.

The conjurer let go of Lariel so quickly she nearly fell back down.

Graenid Balteq strolled through the perimeter of soldiers with her father's black sword balanced on his shoulder like a parasol. Sweat darkened the strands of brown hair framing his face. His hazel eyes glowed in the twilight, yet it was the amber eyes of the serpent-head pommel that held her transfixed. The black blade practically hummed with energy.

"What did I tell you?" said Graenid.

When Rattak said nothing, Lariel interjected, "That pompous asses always burn first?"

One of the soldiers snorted.

The slimy fool didn't appear any happier with his new master than he'd been with Lariel's father, and she welcomed his dilemma; anything she could leverage for her life at this point.

He slipped his hand into his coat pocket, fishing for something. The dogs jumped at him, barking, while some of the soldiers leveled their weapons at him.

Graenid barely shook his head however, and Rattak obediently withdrew an empty hand. With a hunch that might have passed for a bow in this twisted new hierarchy, he slunk around to glower at Lariel over his master's shoulder.

"I see you've trained a new dog," she said.

Graenid ran a gloved finger down the black blade. "Like it? Your father battled an army of Dwarves to win this prize. All I had to do was kill a king."

Lariel flung herself at him, baring her teeth. Rattak sent new tendrils worming around her neck and cramming into her mouth until her cheeks bulged.

She screamed with rage as she fell.

Graenid caught her by the shoulders. "I don't need you," he said, steadying her back on her feet. "Tallen-country is already mine. Balteq-land has a nice ring, don't you think? Rattak—"

He stepped away so his pet could release the tendrils from Lariel's mouth. She worked her jaw, willing Graenid close enough to lash out again. Her father had trusted him, put him in charge of the Tallen armies, even acquiesced to a daughter's passions for a time, but this man bore no resemblance to the one she thought she might have loved. She didn't understand what happened. Her instincts never lied, not until now anyway.

"The Ivy Throne will spit out your bones," she said.

"No doubt," said Graenid.

He stuck his new sword in the ground so he could remove his gloves, then left it planted like a twisted black sapling when he came

back for her. She thought she saw the slightest tremor from the blade, as if it didn't want him to go, but she figured it was the blood pounding her skull.

He took her by the chin the way he used to when he meant to kiss her. The familiar smells were intoxicating—steel, horses and oiled leather.

Lariel looked into his soft expression as if no time had passed between them and this was all some horrible nightmare. Except—she wasn't asleep. She was a hostage on a hillside, cold, bleeding and barefoot in her nightdress. Her father must truly be dead.

Graenid came in for his kiss, and she shrank from him. He wavered a moment, sadness flicking across his face. "I suppose you're expecting a swift flight from pyre," he said finally.

He plucked a leaf from her hair, and she watched him grind it between his fingers with sinking panic. The orange-brown flakes sifted away like a sprinkling of seasoning for the land.

"Is that what you want—to join your father?"

Lariel needed to do something—succumb, negotiate, fight, plead—anything except leave the Tallenfolk to a man who knew nothing about mercy. Yet she stood rooted and shivering, unable to undo what was happening.

"Sergeant," said Graenid.

A tall, bearded soldier hauled Talia into their circle. Her dress was a torn, muddied mess. Her curly hair hung in her face, matted with leaves.

When she saw Lariel she fell to her knees and wailed, "I'm sorry, Mistress! I ran as fast as I could!"

"You're the daughter of a noble house," Lariel said. "Don't give them the satisfaction." She turned to Graenid, unable to conceive of what he might do next. "What do you want?"

She locked her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering.

The usurper army captain king smiled cruelly. "So, the Mistress of the Manor is eager to serve after all."

Graenid's sergeant pulled Talia to her feet then struggled to hold onto the girl while she kicked and slapped.

"Anything," Lariel choked. "Just—Please—"

"Please," Graenid repeated. He was so close his hair tickled her face. "Such forbearance from the would-be queen."

She wanted to claw the satisfied smirk off his face.

"Rattak," he said, "show Queen Lariel what we do to traitors."

"No—Wait—" she pleaded.

Rattak pulled a fistful of gleaming green from his coat. Almost immediately, it began to glow sickly yellow, growing brighter until light glared off his face. Within moments, it submerged everyone in pulsing yellow ichor that made her want to vomit. She tried to hobble to Talia but Graenid dug his fingers into her shoulder.

The dogs cowered and whined.

She'd never seen this kind of magic before, yet she knew it wasn't right. All of her senses objected. Then Rattak pointed at Talia.

"Mistress," the girl cried. "Help me!"

The sergeant held her out by the neck as if she were a sack of vegetables. Then suddenly her friend was burning with strange, green-yellow flames. They leapt and licked, and ringed her and the sergeant both, until Lariel couldn't see either of their faces.

"Rattak," Lariel shouted. "Stop—Please—Wait!"

The aberrant fire swallowed Talia's cries along with a guttural howl from the sergeant. Then it died as abruptly, leaving only a charred, smoking patch of leaves.

Graenid charged Rattak, shoving him against a tree, "You unskilled moron!"

The glowing green tumbled from Rattak's hand and the yellow light winked out. The source of the perverse magic turned out to be a long, flat stone. One of its edges curled three times like water spilling over rocks. The other was curved like the bottom of a bowl. A depression along its flat surface was perfectly suited for the stroke of a thumb. It glimmered, deeper green than any emerald.

"That was my best man," said Graenid. "Did I tell you to kill him?"

"N—no, my lord," he said, recoiling into the tree's branches. "It was an accident."

Lariel searched the smoldering leaves for signs of her friend, eager to see Graenid's new pet pay for his treachery.

The rest of the soldiers stared at the burn mark too, shifting their feet as if deciding whether to avenge their companion or flee the hillside.

Graenid kicked the stone at Rattak. "Put that thing away before you burn this whole place to the ground."

The conjurer snatched it up, eyeing Lariel as he dropped it into his pocket.

Graenid watched her now too. She squared her shoulders to him despite an overwhelming urge to fling herself at the smoldering patch and follow Talia into whatever hell they'd condemned her to. He was a fool if he thought he could control his new pet for long. Not

when that pet just learned how to burn people into oblivion in an instant.

“He’ll burn you all,” she said.

Graenid swept in and clamped her throat. Pressure pounded her ears. Still bound by Rattak’s tendrils, she couldn’t fight the strangulation.

“You look like one of them,” he said. “But I would’ve had you anyway.”

She didn’t understand the accusation. Blackness pressed her periphery.

Rattak tugged Graenid’s arm. “M—my lord. We—I mean—you—need her to secure support.”

Graenid cuffed him across the face. “Why does the ruling class presume the rest of us want them to retain their status?”

The conjurer cradled his wounded nose.

Lariel’s blood thrummed her ears. Everything had grown quiet, distant. When Graenid finally loosened his grip she slumped against him.

He looked into her eyes with new interest.

“I’ve got your attention, yes?” She hung there, drawing slow, searing breaths. He was the only thing holding her up. “The dumbest animals understand about options. Yours are clear enough, yes?” He gave her a gruff shake.

“Ah—” she said.

“Yes?”

“I—”

“Come now, Mistress,” said Graenid. He looked to his men who snickered at this new game. Rattak anxiously wrung his hands. “It’s time to decide where your loyalties lie.”

“I—”

“Go on.”

She exhaled, “I would rather die than have your hands on me again.”

With a final shake, he tossed her to the ground. Then he kicked her in the ribs so hard she heard them crack. She rolled onto her side, rocking with pain, letting the tears slip freely down her face. Graenid plucked the black sword from the ground.

Lariel rolled onto her back to face her father’s blade.