

## Chapter 1

Angelica crouched low to the ground, pushing the hilt of her sword down to keep it from brushing against the ground. She was being followed, *again*. She caught sight of her two pursuers through the tangle of undergrowth behind which she crouched. One moved his hands, making a series of basic patterns that allowed them to communicate silently.

*"Did you see her?"*

*"No, but she can't be far."*

Then the first man flicked up his middle finger. Angelica smiled and, still crouched low, moved downhill, toward the lake. When she had gotten a good distance from the two men, she picked up a nut from the forest floor and tossed it into a patch of undergrowth. The men turned immediately and moved toward it. Step, step, step- "YARGHHH!"

Both men disappeared from view with undignified screams. Angelica laughed and stood up, moving slowly forward until she stood on the edge of the mud pit. Both men sat, dazed, in mud that covered their laps in their prone positions. That was until they spied Angelica, and both jumped to their feet. "You bitch, how dare you-"

"Howard, you can't speak to the princess like that." The second man tried to cut him off.

"Like hell I can't," Howard spat. "That little bitch doesn't deserve to be called a princess."

"Miss Angelica, we were just following our orders from your father to protect you."

"I know Rilen, but I've told him time and time again that I don't need protection. Not that I have anything against you two, I'd still prefer to not having people breathing down my neck every second of the day."

Howard just muttered something under his breath, looking around the pit for a way out. The walls were slick, and every attempt he made to gather a handhold was quickly thwarted. There were dozens of such pits on the hills surrounding the lake, and not even Angelica knew where they all were. Most people just stuck to the marked paths to make it to the lake safely.

"I'll send someone out after you once I get back to the castle." Angelica smiled.

Rilen just sighed, but Howard turned, his face livid. "Don't you dare leave us down here you damn bitch! Come back here! How dare you..."

Angelica was already making her way back up the hill toward the castle, leaving the two guards and their complaints behind. A little mud would not kill them.

The castle itself sat at the top of the large hill, on land that had been manually flattened with dirt that had been hauled up by hand. Down the hill in front of it, a town had grown up on a

stretch of flat (or as flat as it could get) land. Further down were numerous villages and farms spread out on the more vast stretches of land in the foothills.

Angelica made her way to the back door of the castle, pulling it open to move into the kitchen. No one gave her more than a glance as she grabbed an apple from a barrel, and headed through the steam and delicious smells. The chef was outdoing himself again, she thought as she saw a half-cooked turkey being basted in its own juices before being slipped back into the oven.

The young woman mounted the stairs, and came out into the halls of the castle. She took a bite of the apple and headed toward her room.

"You ducked the guards again," a voice said behind her.

Angelica turned, continuing to walk backward when she saw a tall guard with rich brown hair. He stepped after her.

"Well at least you don't sound surprised anymore." Angelica took another bite of the apple. She chewed and swallowed. "Oh right, and you might want to send someone to get Rilen out of that mud pit down toward the lake, and Howard too if you must."

Jasper shook his head slightly. "You certainly earn your nickname, 'Renegade Princess'."

"Thank you." She turned to begin walking forward again, falling in next to the level headed guard. "How did the uprising turn out? You didn't have to hurt anyone did you?"

"No, luckily the Choir was able to calm everyone down, but it's not looking good. People have been getting more and more restless."

"Yeah, well Father can't exactly stay on the throne forever. I mean it's been over twenty years." Angelica grinned. "I'm getting tired of all this princess stuff."

"You've been a princess all your life."

"Well that doesn't mean I can't get tired of it."

They were approaching Angelica's room now, but she espied a figure next to her door. Jasper must have seen her too, because he fell back to the other side of the hall.

"Father's looking for you," Angelica's sister said as she approached.

"Eh, no surprise."

"You were supposed to come home hours ago with the guards. Did you forget that Elder Gareth and his son are coming tonight?"

"Actually I did. No wonder the chef was outdoing himself. Thanks for reminding me, Nell."

Penelope smiled. "Because now you can get out of here before they arrive?"

"You know me so well."

Penelope was almost a polar opposite of Angelica. She was small and petite, even though she was several years older, and she was wearing a pleasantly exquisite blue dress as opposed to Angelica's mud stained tunic and leggings.

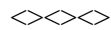
"Angelica, why do you insist on testing father so?"

"Because no one else is going to. The Choir hasn't been showing up as much recently." Angelica turned and hurried back the way she had come.

"Miss Angelica, your father would not want you to go out again," Jasper said quickly.

The princess turned, moving her fingers swiftly over silent words she knew Jasper would understand. *"My sister wanted to talk to you in private. You shouldn't miss this opportunity."*

She saw the resulting blush across his cheeks as he glanced at Penelope. Angelica laughed before taking off down the hall during the guard's moment of distraction.



Not more than ten minutes later Angelica was on the back of one of the palace's horses, a young black colt named Tricky, cantering away from the castle toward the north road. The sun had dipped lower in the sky as the day stretched on. She followed along the road for several miles before pulling Tricky off of the road and into the woods.

His canter slowed to a trot to navigate through the tightly packed trees. Angelica was less familiar with this area. Once the forest thinned and stopped, all that was left was flat farming country, and as such there was not much of interest.

She did, however, know that the road had been cut through one particularly annoying bunch of hills to avoid having it detour miles out of the way. She could easily spy on the procession bringing the Elder and his son, and they would never know she had been there.

When she arrived at the hill, she tied Tricky to a tree and continued on foot. The hill ended just a few feet in front of her, dropping almost vertically down to the road below. She looked northward along the road, but saw no trace of anyone.

Angelica crossed her legs and plopped down in the grass. She snapped off a stalk of grass and stuck the end in her mouth, chewing it as she looked back toward the castle. It was easily visible in the distance, its walls shone bright and solid in the late day sun.

Behind her, she heard Tricky snort, and whinny sharply. Angelica looked back over her shoulder into the shadow of the forest. "Hey, no complaining. They can't be that much longer."

In fact, it was not more than a few more minutes before Angelica caught sight of the procession over the nearest rise. She shifted her position, making sure she would be out of sight

of even the most watchful eye as they drew closer. It was easy to spot Elder Gareth, his bald head glinting spectacularly in the sun, made even more prominent by the dark purple tunic he wore. Next to him, and slightly behind, rode a younger man, his head fully covered in blue hair, with a matching blue tunic. The Renegade Princess easily labeled him as the elder's son.

"I'm sure my sister will love him," she commented absently. "His dark hair will compliment her blonde beautifully."

Surrounding the two noblemen were their guards, proclaimed loudly by the white and blue tunics they wore, the seal of House Hethal sitting on their chests. The Hethal Province was over a day's ride from the King's Province. She could not imagine riding so long in those uncomfortable dress outfits instead of riding gear. The expressions on the guard's faces showed that they agreed with her silent thoughts.

As they drew up alongside her hiding place, she tried to catch a better look at the Elder's son's face, but the height of the hill, and angle of the sun made it impossible. She imagined it matched his perfectly styled hair and impeccable posture. He was betrothed to Penelope after all.

They were passing by now, still intent on their destination. She had not been noticed. Angelica pushed herself back from the edge, looking up as she did. On the hill opposite her, she saw a large black creature, also watching the travelers.

*A wolf?*

The creature glanced up, looking straight at Angelica for the briefest of moments.

*No! A demon!*

"Watch out!" she cried out.

The demon had already launched itself down the steep hill, running fast enough to keep up with the gravity pulling him toward the ground. That momentum carried him into the horse and rider who had been unlucky enough to be in his path. The horse screamed as it crumpled under the demon, its rider flung away.

"What the...?"

"It's a demon!"

"Protect the Elder!"

"*Crue.*" Angelica swore, jumping to her feet, but her legs wobbled, and she stumbled forward, almost tumbling down the hill head over heels. Beneath her, she could see what was quickly becoming a massacre. The guards were doing what they could, but the creature was fast, and they did not appear to be doing any real damage.

Angelica gritted her teeth as she pulled out her sword and vaulted over the side of the hill. She had slid, half jumped down the slope, coming down exactly right to slice the surprised

demon's side. There was another screeching growl as the demon whirled toward her. She ducked under its horns to see a well-clawed paw lash out at her. Only well trained reflexes saved her from more than a shallow cut. The guards were attacking in the moment of distraction, but once their swords found their marks, they quickly pulled his attention.

"What's this? Angels falling from the sky?"

Angelica turned to see the man in the blue tunic standing a short distance away; a sword held in one hand, blood splattered across his fine suit. A smile graced his handsome face.

"No time to stare," she said more to herself than anything else, and darted back toward the demon. Elder Gareth's horse was rearing, striking at the demon, whose attention had turned to the panicking animal. The Elder looked like he was barely holding on.

Angelica sliced at the demon's back legs, catching it with a glancing blow. If she could cripple it somehow, then they could pick it off more easily. But the demon kept leaping away from its attackers, coming in from another angle with supernatural speed. Angelica was fleetingly glad that it was only a beast demon as she swung her sword with all her might to knock its horns away.

*"All consuming flame from the depths of the earth."*

Angelica panicked at the sound of a spell being cast and jumped back almost randomly. A ball of fire exploded underneath the demon, sending it straight toward her with a howl of pain. Once again her training took over, and her sword came up, meeting the demon's chest head-on as she stepped to the side. The demon carried her sword into the canyon wall, driving it firmly into its chest.

"It's dead," one of the surviving guards announced a moment later.

Elder Gareth had dismounted from his horse, which was being steadied by two other guards. Their tunics ruined with blood. There were only a half a dozen of them left.

"You..." The Elder pointed at Angelica. "Who are you?"

"I'd hazard a guess, and say the Renegade Princess." A voice behind her said.

Angelica brushed her hair back out of her face as she turned around. Elder Gareth's son was standing behind her. His hand rested on his sword in readiness, blood splattered across his clothes and face, but it did not hide his handsome face. Angelica could do nothing but stare for a few moments. She had not allowed herself the time for a proper look before.

"Yes, that is I." she allowed her trained manners to kick in. A pair of beautiful blue eyes complimented his hair perfectly. She felt almost as if she were looking at a deep mountain lake.

"And I must thank your mage, whoever he is." She added.

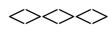
"That was I. Let me introduce myself. I am Young Elder Kenneth of House Hethal." He bowed politely, as was due to her station. She was glad to see his eyes did not leave her as he did so.

"Angelica, second Princess of Ryall," she said as she walked back to retrieve her sword. The demon was quite dead, she was happy to note, however her sword was now completely drenched in blood. She wrinkled her nose at the nearly overpowering smell. "If you'll excuse me, I need to tend to my horse. I left him up on the cliff."

"I'll accompany you. There could be another demon around," Kenneth said. "We will be back shortly, Father."

Elder Gareth nodded. "The rest of you, gather the dead."

Angelica nodded to the elder, and turned to pass by Kenneth. "You can come if you can keep up," she said with a smirk, and after finding a place that was not a sheer wall, began to climb.



Surprisingly enough, Kenneth did not complain about the strenuous climb, and actually was able to keep up with her swift ascent. Angelica moved into the trees to find Tricky standing just where she had left him.

"I'm sorry I left so quickly," she whispered into his ear. The young colt danced nervously in her grasp.

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine, but scared because I smell like a demon with this blood all over me."

"And are you okay?"

"Of course I am. This cut's nothing serious."

Kenneth moved closer. "I wasn't talking about the cut. You've been shaking ever since the battle ended."

"Right, of course I have. A woman can't handle a battle or the sight of blood, right?" Angelica said sarcastically. "I'm making a detour to the river so I can clean up."

"I still think I should accompany you."

Angelica shrugged. "As you wish, Master Kenneth." She took Tricky's reins and headed toward the river that flowed haphazardly through the hills before finally pouring into the lake.

"You really do earn your nickname. Sliding down the cliff like that, fighting a demon, you're not very much like a princess at all." Kenneth was following her.

"Well thank you for telling me that. I'm quite certain I never would've figured it out on my own."

The young noble did not seem annoyed by her response, but she almost thought she heard a chuckle.

Angelica glanced at him over her shoulder. "You know my sister is a proper princess right? Beautiful, polite, elegant?"

"I am well aware."

The river was closer than Angelica remembered, and she was thankful for it. She turned Tricky loose and waded straight into the river until it was up to her waist. The current washed around her, taking the blood with it, as she plunged her sword in, wiping away the lingering blood and then tossing it into the grass. Tricky came to the bank, slightly upriver from her, and took a long sip.

Angelica pulled off her tunic and dunked it in the water, scrubbing it together with her hands. Luckily the blood had not had enough time to dry since the battle, and it was coming out somewhat. Her chest bindings were going to have to be replaced, however. Of course those guards in their white outfits, spending time out there burying the dead; well they were going to look horrible upon arrival.

The princess was shivering now. The water must be colder than she had first thought, but she could not leave until she washed out her hair. She had lost her cap somewhere in the mad scramble, leaving her waist length teal hair free to be splattered by the blood. She spent the most time scrubbing and rinsing it, as she refused to allow her hair to be stained by demon blood.

Kenneth stood leaning against a nearby tree when Angelica finally climbed back out of the river. He had cleaned his hands and face of blood, but he had much less on him to start.

"So you're a mage, is that any fun?"

"It's not horrible, a lot of studying, and a lot of interviews with the Choir," Kenneth answered. "Of course my father decided it would make me more of an eligible bachelor when I got older."

"Ah, nice of him to plan that far ahead, and for him to think my sister is worthy of your greatness."

"Penelope is heir to the throne of Ryall. Whoever marries her gains all that."

Angelica just smirked. "Yeah, and for how long?" She wrung some water out of her tunic. It did not matter much to her. That fact that her sister was the eldest meant Angelica could do whatever she wanted. Her father did not care whether she was coming or going most of the time, as long as Penelope was filling her role. She slipped her tunic back on over her head.

"So you're telling me you don't care?"

"About?"

"The fact that you will inherit nothing?"

"I think that's too personal a question for you to ask me, seeing as we just met."

Kenneth took hold of her arm. "Yes, but I believe it is an important one."

Angelica looked at him, about to ask if he was attempting to flirt with her, but his beautiful blue eyes caught hers. His hair wafted gently in the breeze. *He's so handsome...*

"It doesn't bother me a bit." She tried to pull her arm free, but his grip was stronger than she had expected. Swordsman, mage, next in line to be Elder of House Hethal, he was very nearly the perfect man...

"Doesn't it?" he asked softly, leaning toward her, brushing her hair back behind her ear.

Angelica's eyes widened as she realized he was going to kiss her. No one had ever tried before, and the realization of it paralyzed her.

"Master Kenneth, are you there?" a voice called from the forest, shattering the atmosphere. Angelica wrested her arm free and stepped back.

"Yes, we're here," Kenneth called, though his eyes were still on Angelica. "My father must have wondered what was taking us so long."

Angelica smirked, taking up Tricky's reins. "Obviously."

It took most of the trip back to the castle for her heart to stop racing.