

CHAPTER 3



HEATH

# FICTION

## Rawly Rawls

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Illustrations by Eronautics

Written by RawlyRawls

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“Lady Rachel! I think we’re being attacked.” Urdess was crouched, hiding near the baking ovens. When Rachel swept into the kitchen, a jeweled dagger in her hand, Urdess unwound her body a little.

“Good evening, Doctor Urdess.” Rachel frowned with pity at the cowering dryad. *She’s never useful for anything outside of her specialty.* Rachel thought of her barren womb, and doubted how useful Urdess had been even for that. “The elves stole in through a secret passage. The count will fight them off.”

“It sounds like we’re losing.” Slowly, Urdess stood and left her hiding place. “You’re looking for Lord Philip? He may need a doctor when you find him. Should we go to his chamber?”

“I’ve already been there. There were three dead elves and no Philip.” Rachel clenched her jaw. “But I’ll find him. Can’t you summon wooden daggers or something? You’ll need a weapon.”

“I have little power when encased in stone as we are in here.” Urdess walked over to the kitchen supplies and removed a cast-iron pan from the rack. She hefted it as someone’s scream echoed into the kitchen. “This will do for now.”

“Fine. Come along then.” Rachel nodded. “In our old castle, I always told Philip to head upward in the event of an emergency.”

“There are several towers here.” Urdess followed the lady out of the kitchens.

“We’ll have to get lucky, then.” Rachel kept her dagger up, ready for an assault. So far, she hadn’t met any elves. But that would surely change.

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"Philip ... another one ... watch out!" Gwendolen threw her candlestick. It was a lucky toss, catching the elf right in his helm. There was a wet clanking sound, and the elf went down.

"Thank you!" Philip looked around him. There were three elves lying motionless on the ground. He'd taken out two with his candlestick, wielding it as Grom had taught him to use a cudgel. The bronze improvised weapon dripped blood to the floor. He tossed away the heavy thing and picked up an elven blade. It was short, but much better than a hunk of blunt-force metal. "Grab a sword. You may need it."

"Very wise, My Lord." Gwendolen curtsied, letting her lips twist into the barest smile. "I shall forever be by your side."

Philip smiled back at this beautiful woman who was both his friend and more than his friend. As he was searching for something clever to say back to her, a hiss passed by his ear. His mind went blank for a second as his eyes tried to process the horror before him. An arrow took

Gwendolen through the side of her blond hair. She was dead before she hit the ground. "Nnnnooooo! Gods ... no." Philip knelt to help her, even though her sightless eyes told him it was useless. Another arrow whistled over his head. "Gwendolen ... get up!"



A jolting shock walloped his shoulder. He looked to see an arrowhead jutting out just below the outer part of his clavicle. He stumbled to his feet and ran as another arrow passed him and snapped on the stones. His mind burned with revulsion at a world that could so suddenly turn on those he loved. He rounded a corner and headed for the closest stairs. It occurred to him he'd left the swords behind. He felt like he'd left everything behind.

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"We're being overrun. We need out of this castle. We need to retreat." One of the count's captains addressed his lord while standing at attention. At his back were the sounds of a fierce battle. "We'll cut a path out the back gate. Women and children first."

"Retreat to where? The heath is all around us. And so are the elves." Breddex's lips pressed together in grim determination. "We retake this building, or we die."

"Yes." The captain saluted and turned back to the melee just out of view.

"Gorm, go to the south passage and make sure they don't come at our backs." Breddex could see the goblin wanted to challenge him. "Go now." He was grateful when Gorm gave him no more backtalk than an eyebrow raise. He watched the goblin go. *At least I have only one front to worry about.* "Now, let's see about that barricade. I..."

The sound of hoofbeats clattered from the unseen fight ahead. The stones under Breddex's feet shook. A chorus of screams echoed around the corner. The first thing Breddex saw were several men tossed into view. After them, arrived charging, demonic reindeer with elves on their backs. The beasts were clearly out for blood. "Come men ... we stop them here!" Breddex raised his sword and charged the foul creatures.



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"He went up there."

"Do we want him alive?"

"Our choice."

A group of three elves stood at the foot of the stairs to the Eastern Tower, talking among themselves. Rachel and Urdess watched them from the shadows.



"They're chasing my son. I know they are," Rachel whispered.

"If Philip's up those stairs, those elves are in the way." Urdess tried very hard to keep her tall frame unseen in the shadows.

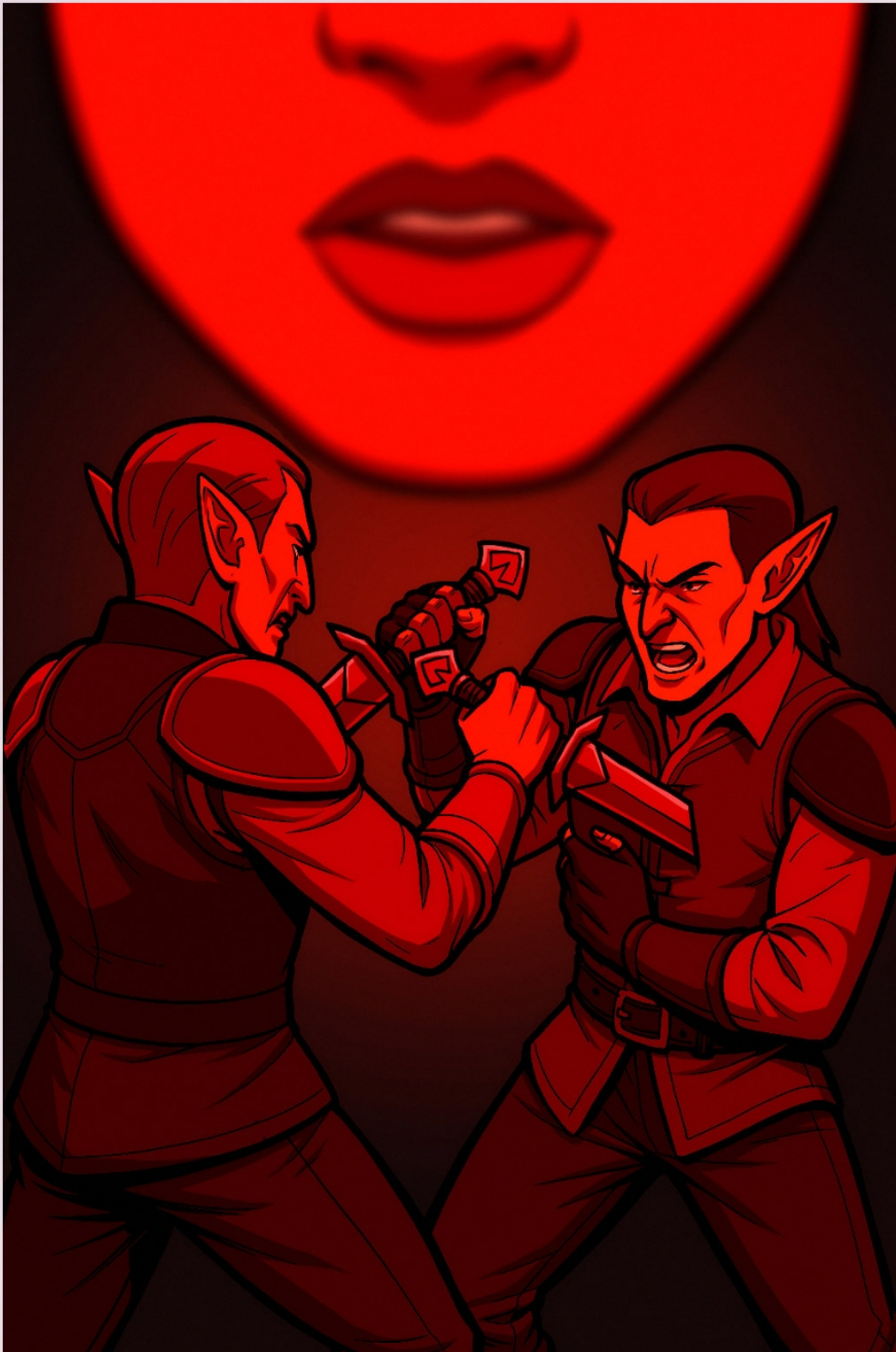
Rachel nodded. "Stay here until I'm done with them." She slipped out into the hall, light on her feet, moving like a dancer. The closest elf saw her several feet before her dagger could reach him.

"The witch! Kill her before she speaks!" The elf was too slow to lift his sword. Rachel crouched low as she spun, the jewels on her dagger sparkling in the lamplight. The elf gurgled and fell, his throat slit.

Before the two other elves were upon her, Rachel let out a controlled breath and spoke her command at the same time. "Be still and tell me who you're chasing."

"A teenager," said one.

"We think he's the count's son," said the other.



Rachel inhaled, held her breath, and let it out slowly again, saying, "Kill each other."

Without a moment's hesitation, the elves stabbed each other through the heart.

"You killed them all." Urdess had snuck up to Rachel when it seemed the woman had things under control. She held her iron pan at the ready, in case one of the elves returned from the land of the dead.

"Goodness, you move quietly for someone as tall as a tree." Rachel looked up at Urdess. "Technically, I killed only one of them. Come on, it *was* Philip they were pursuing." She leapt up the stairs, Urdess right behind her.

It didn't take them long to find Philip. He had collapsed in the stairwell, an arrow still lodged in his shoulder.

"Philip! No!" Rachel lost her steely nerve and dropped to her knees next to him. "Doctor him ... doctor, fix him ... Urdess." She blinked back tears.

"Yes, I'm here." Urdess rolled him onto his back, careful not to jostle the arrow more than need be. She checked his pulse

and lifted his lids. "I can heal him. Hold on." She put her hand on the shaft. "I know this wood." With a quick flip of her wrist, she snapped off the arrowhead. Then, the wood began to coil and flow, moving out of the eighteen-year-old lord and wrapping around Urdess's wrist. "I wish I had my powerful salve."

"Do you need me to get it? Just tell me where." Rachel stood, her chin tightening with resolve again.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but the stones are trembling. We've lost. You would not be able to go to my chamber and return." Urdes reached under her dress and retrieved a small vial. "Of course, I always have my everyday salve with me. It will do, but he won't heal completely until time takes its course." She tore his tunic to expose the exit wound and poured the contents of the vial into the bloody opening. A sizzling sound filled the stairwell. She turned him over and did the same to the entry wound.

"Will he ...?" Rachel's heart fluttered with worry and hope when she heard him cough and his eyes shot open. "Philip?"

"Gwendolen's dead," Philip croaked. "How's Father?"

"Gods, Gwendolen?" Rachel thought the world of that young woman. That's why she'd let her son tumble with Gwendolen when he thought his mother wasn't noticing. "As for your father, I don't know." The trembling of the stones under Rachel's feet grew more intense. "I don't think things are well. We're all trapped in this castle."

"I can help you escape. But we must go up. And go quickly before daylight makes us a target for archers." Urdes stood and helped Philip to his feet. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Shaky." Philip reached for his mother, who put his arm over her shoulders.

"Up we go then." Rachel helped her son ascend the stairs. "How are we going to escape from the top of the tower? There is no forest here to leap into, dryad."

"We can't leave Father." Philip's shoulder burned, and his stomach turned.

"We can't help him now. Maybe Gorm will turn the tide. But I fear ..." Rachel tried not to clench her teeth. "Don't think about it. Use the voice on me. Distract yourself with practice."

Philip wasn't good at his mother's magic in the best of times. These times were not best. He exhaled slowly, saying, "Take me to Father." He had never been able to compel his mother, but it was worth a try.



"I'm sorry, sweetness. We're going up. Your father would demand that we do, isn't that right, Doctor Urdess?" Rachel looked over her shoulder at the dryad who was bringing up the rear. She noticed that the dryad had discarded her iron pan.

"Yes, the count would want you two safe." Urdess thought about saying more, but held her tongue. The harsh clash of swords echoed from behind them.

It took the trio a while to reach the top of the tower. There was a tiny roof garden with a few stunted fruit trees. Urdess used these to grow a barricade that locked the door behind them. It was just in time too, because only minutes after they arrived, there was pounding on the thick door.



“So, how do we travel from here?” Philip looked around. It was a cloudy night, and the only light came from fires billowing up from various parts of the castle. The heath was a vast sea of darkness.

“They’re using magic to burn through the door!” Rachel drew her dagger.

“I won’t be traveling with you, Lord Philip. We can’t let them through to pick you off with archers.” Urdess reached into the soil of the pots around them. Something grew from the floor of the garden, quickly filling up the small space.

“Wings?” Rachel frowned at the contraption that looked like it was built from leaves, vines, and branches.

“Makes sense. Flying is the only way.” Philip put a hand on the dryad’s shoulder. “But we’re not leaving you. It’s dark out there, they won’t see us. And it would be suicide staying on this roof.”

The door was now glowing orange with heat, the wood of Urdess’s barricade crackled and snapped.

“Very well, Lord Philip. We can go together.” Urdess lifted the wings, which were remarkably light, and fastened them to mother and son. “Now, off you go!” She shoved them off the roof.



“Urdes!” Philip was so shocked that it took him a moment to notice he was flying. He squirmed to turn around and look back at the dryad. She was clearly visible in the light of the fire that her barricade had kindled into. Her tall figure turned and faced the door. He could see her fashion long daggers for her hands. “Urdes!” The rushing wind swallowed his voice.



“Let her go, Philip. We need to figure out how to fly this thing,” Rachel shouted. The wings above her shuddered and rattled as a current of air hit them. They veered up and sharply left. She reached out and grabbed at branches she hoped were controls.

Philip’s body was pressed tightly to his mother’s, the wings holding them securely together. He tried to peer back, but could only see the light from the top of their tower. Suddenly, a great ball of flame rose from the tower and rolled into the dark sky. Grimly, he turned his vision forward. His mother was right. They would need to learn to fly quickly, or Urdess’s sacrifice would be for nothing.

