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## Kingdom of Fear: A Dark Fantasy Novel

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## Kingdom of Fear: A Dark Fantasy Novel

Katie Borley

### Excerpt: Chapter 1

“Mikthor, if you want me to find your wife I will need *absolute* silence,” Niniel said. The peasant man was practically groveling at her feet, but he wouldn’t stop muttering nervously under his breath, staring intently at her every movement. The two of them sat cross-legged on the floor of the carriage. He watched, wide-eyed, as her son Mikem tottered up behind her and pressed a handful of herbs into her hand, disappearing back outside. Niniel took Mikthor’s hands in her own and screwed her eyes shut, feigning deep concentration. She muttered words in a foreign tongue - simply reciting a recipe for elven stew, but to him it sounded like an ancient incantation. Behind her, leaning against an oak tree and crossing his arms, Galron snorted in laughter but didn’t interrupt.

This was how their lives had been ever since Niniel fled Lair’ul with baby Mikem clutched in her arms and Galron watching over them. They traveled from one run-down hamlet to the next, helping peasants with their mundane problems - Mikthor happened to have one of the more interesting cases they’d seen in a while. Usually it was “find my missing sheep” or “cure my daughter’s fever” or “where has my barn cat gone?”

“Do you see her?” The man whispered fearfully, bringing Niniel out of her thoughts. Her eyes snapped open in surprise.

“Not yet, Mikthor. Do be patient,” she said, closing them again and taking a deep breath. Truth be told, this kind of magic came quite easily to her, but the peasants would hardly be willing to pay fistfuls of silver for her services if they knew that. It was Galron’s idea to create these elaborate fake rituals. Random handfuls of useless herbs, muttering mundane phrases in Elvish, and complicated dances around a fire were usually enough to convince the commoners that her efforts were worthwhile. They ate up how otherworldly it all seemed, and were more than grateful for her help. Not that they were grateful enough for a thank-you most of the time.

“I see her now,” Niniel announced. “Yes... I see her...”

“What is she doing?” Mikthor cried out. “Is she with someone?” He leaned forwards until he was inches from her face, as if he was trying to see the vision reflected in her eyes. She subtly leaned back before responding.

“She’s walking home from the market. I see a figure walking beside her, but it’s difficult to make out who it is.” They had only been in this hamlet for a few days, so she hadn’t gotten to meet everyone yet. The visions were often blurry and slightly out of focus, like staring at one’s reflection in a pond.

“T-tell me what you see and maybe I can figure out who it is,” the man pleaded. His grip on her hands tightened reflexively as he hung on her every word.

“The figure is slightly taller than her. And wearing a dark cloak. It looks like... velvet. The color of the sea at night.”

“That color, and velvet? Are you sure?” Truthfully, she could only guess it was velvet without being able to touch it. But the peasants mustn't have any doubt in her abilities. Niniel opened one eye and fixed it upon the man's face.

“You would question my skills?” She spoke calmly, but already she could see panic mounting in his eyes.

“No, never! I-I'm sorry... I just wasn't expecting it, that's all.”

“I see what I see. The visions are true.”

“I believe you, of course... what else can you see about him?”

Niniel shut her eyes tightly. This time she didn't have to feign a deep focus; the vision was getting harder to cling to. She reached blindly out in front of her and grasped the wife's shawl that Mikthor had brought, concentrating on the rough fabric between her fingertips. The vision began to come back into focus.

“Actually, Mikthor, it's not a man at all.”

“Oh dear,” he responded. “You think my wife is going to leave me for another woman? I always feared - ”

“Now, hold on. How can we be sure they're together?”

“Well, what are they doing?”

“You *must* let me focus,” she chastised. He sighed in defeat, but managed to keep his mouth shut.

Even beneath the figure's cloak Niniel could plainly see that it was a woman walking beside Mikthor's wife. As the room around Niniel grew quiet, she began to release her perception of the physical world, and stepped into this new one. She concentrated on the sound of carts being pulled down the dirt roads, the smell of pigs rolling in the mud, and shafts of sunlight streaming through trees overhead. Soon she could feel dry grass crunching under her feet, and she was there.

Niniel followed the two women down several narrow roads as they strolled at a leisurely pace. She strained to make out what they were talking about; whenever she shifted like this, it was difficult to hear clearly enough to follow conversations.

Even though she was unable to understand the words being spoken, she could tell enough about the tone to know that it wasn't amorous. On the contrary, they spoke in a hushed, serious tone, almost like they were arguing. However, their body language remained casual and open, avoiding suspicion from passersby.

Just as Niniel began to subconsciously lean in, the cloaked woman paused and turned to the side, almost as if she'd caught Niniel's eye. *But that should be impossible.* As unsettling as the sensation of being watched was, Niniel pressed on, as she had done hundreds of times before, until the two of them were mere inches apart. But the conversation had stopped.

Mikthor's wife turned to her companion, asking her a question. The woman still hadn't taken her eye off of Niniel. Suddenly, her hand shot out, hitting Niniel squarely in the chest. The impact itself wasn't hard but it caught Niniel by such surprise that it knocked the wind out of her.

Back in the carriage her eyes shot open and she stood up in surprise, nearly banging her head on the sloped ceiling. Galron, who had heard her shout in surprise, was already at the entrance to the carriage, a spell at the ready in one curled hand. Mikem peered from around his robe, looking fearfully at his mother. The peasant man had scurried away from her when she leapt up, pressed against the wall opposite her.

Niniel let out a shaky laugh, embarrassed. She was perfectly safe, here in the carriage. She simply waved off her companions and took a seat once more.

Mikthor was clearly dying to know whatever had made her react that way, but he was dutifully silent, biting his lip to keep from breaking his promise.

Niniel cleared her throat and gave him a weak smile. "Nothing to worry about. Erm, about your wife..." But what could she say to him? She hadn't learned anything about who the other woman was, or if they were even having an affair, but she had no intentions of going back into that vision and risking being caught again. Would it be better if she said the woman was having an affair when she wasn't, thereby ruining a relationship? Or should she relieve his fears, potentially causing him to stay with a woman that he couldn't trust, harming her reputation as a seer?

"I'm sorry, Mikthor. Your wife isn't being faithful to you."

"Damn it!" Niniel sensed more hurt than anger in the man's voice. He stared somberly at the burning pile of herbs for a few moments before rising to his feet. "Thank you anyways."

She almost felt guilty hearing how broken he sounded, but not guilty enough to jeopardize the goals she'd been working so hard for. As promised, Mikthor pressed a few coins into her palm and a small jar of fruit preserves. He hesitated before releasing the jar.

"My wife made this jam for me." He seemed like he wanted to say more, much more, but the words didn't come. Instead, he turned and headed out of the carriage and towards the road, trudging back towards the village.

"Safe travels," Galron called after him, once again resting against the old oak tree. He chuckled. Something Niniel couldn't understand about him was the way he delighted in the peasants' suffering. Maybe the rumor about elves thinking they were better than humans wasn't completely false, after all.

Niniel felt a slight tugging at the hem of her shirt and looked down to see Mikem staring up at her with his big, dark eyes. "What is it, my love?"

"Will you still play with me? You promised," He said. Niniel looked at their surroundings. The village was generous enough to let them stay, but only outside the village. The only lights around were hanging on the carriage, quickly swallowed by the blanket of darkness as the sun sank behind the great mountains in the distance.

"I'm sorry, darling. That ritual lasted longer than I thought - see how dark it's getting? It's not safe to play right now." Mikem scowled, wrenching his hands out of hers and going to sit on a rock, facing away from the adults. Niniel turned to Galron, who was using magic to ignite some kindling. "You couldn't have played with him while I was working?" She hissed. He glanced up at her with that look on his face that she hated, the look of a disappointed parent who thinks he knows everything.

"He's not my son, Niniel. I'm sworn to defend you both til my dying breath - but I'm no parent. I offered to keep him out of trouble, but that's it. Besides, he doesn't just want to play, he wants to play *with you*." He emphasized his words by pointing an unlit piece of kindling at her. Niniel did feel slightly guilty for not having much time to devote to her son these days.

"Someday he'll understand why I'm doing this for him."

"And why are you doing this to him?" Galron said calmly, standing up and turning to face her.

"Because I - "

" - need to use my Knowledge."

" To help the citizens of Tharanil - "

" - so I can become the Seer, like I'm destined to be."

Niniel scowled as Galron finished each of her sentences, having heard them hundreds of times before. "Why do you even ask me if you know the reason why?"

"Because I hope that someday you'll see the flaw in your reasoning."

"There is no flaw!"

"Niniel, I know you think this is the right choice, and for the kingdom, maybe it is. You're certainly capable and I know you have a good heart. That's quite rare in times like these. But did you ever stop to think about whether it was best for your son?"

"Of course it is," she said stubbornly. In reality she knew she had no other choice; there was no point in worrying about whether it was the right one or not.

Galron sighed resignedly. "No matter what you end up choosing, I'll be here for you. Like I always have." He turned back to the fire. "But that doesn't mean I have to agree with it."

The three of them ate their supper in relative silence while Mikem scowled into the fire and Niniel tried unsuccessfully to cheer him up. As always, he was the first to fall asleep that night, holed up in the warm carriage under a thick fur blanket that was given to Niniel as payment by a noble who had hired her services last autumn. Niniel brushed the hair from his face and planted a gentle kiss on his forehead.

“Everything I’ve ever done was to protect you. Remember that, Mikem. Always.”