

Amber Strongblade
THE EAGLE

FREE SHORT STORY

The situation has gone awry: the princess is left with no throne, the impostor took over the city and soon the world. What is left of the army still follows me, but for how long? And the people I call my friends, the ones I rescued from the impostor's brainwash, how much longer will they believe? We told them that we would protect them, that we would take their homes and families back from his grasp. But can we? I am afraid, as if the twenty years I spent in the army meant nothing when faced with the unknown. Still I know what must be done. Soon, we will be reaching the city, or what remains of it. Then there will be no more time for second thoughts, no turning back. I will take my responsibilities as leader of the Free Forces to ensure the safety of all the innocent soul I am sworn to protect. My life is but a small price to pay to save our beloved Venhall.

The man who called himself Eagle had been a dedicated member of the army for many years, and its leader for many more. Soldiers admired this tall, muscular man whose armor always shone as bright as his ice blue eyes. His will was unbreakable and his might was fierce. That is what they all thought. But Eagle was a mystery to them all, and no one could see through the walls he had built around himself. When his hair had turned white during his second year as general, nobody knew the reason. And when the Kerans invaded the city of Venhall as he was celebrating his forty-first birthday, and that the light in his eyes had faded away, nobody knew the struggle that was taking place in his mind.

Now, sitting in front of the campfire with his comrades-in-arms, looking inside the flames with a grim stare, Eagle was accepting his fate, embracing it. When the time came to rest, he guarded the camp all night long, unable to sleep but filled with renewed will.

“If you had to pick a word to describe yourself, would you choose fearsome or charismatic?”

Jenna, the youngest recruit of the army, was seating in front of Eagle, smiling.

“It's not really my place to decide,” he answered without looking up from the tea he was brewing.

“Charismatic sounds appropriate,” Princess Helen said as she took place next to the general, who

quickly made space for her. “What is this for, miss Jenna?”

The young woman hesitated for a second. “I’m trying to tell our story in a tale, Majesty. I thought it would be interesting to have a written account of what happened here.”

“A worthy goal,” the princess answered with a kind smile. “And what word did you pick to describe me? I’m curious now.”

“Delicate,” Jenna replied without hesitation. “There could have been no other fitting word.”

Princess Helen left out a soft chuckle which made both Eagle and Jenna smile.

“I would have picked well-dressed, personally, but no one ever listens to what I say,” the general joked.

Eagle was the only one who permitted himself to speak so casually to the princess. He had known her since birth, and had been responsible for her protection for years. They were close friends, and therefore did not always comply with the rules of politeness and good manners when they were together.

“Well-dressed? Not today then,” Helen said with a doubtful look at her rough leather pants and large linen shirt.

“For a hunter, it’s not so bad,” Eagle laughed. “Or a pirate.”

“You look perfect whatever you wear, Majesty, and soon you will get your rightful place back,” Jenna declared as she got up. “If you’ll excuse me.”

The young recruit left the two leaders to head back to the soldiers’ tent.

“So what is our plan, Eagle?” Princess Helen asked while filling her glass with tea.

The man sighed. “We will reach the edge of the forest in a day or two and settle there, so that we can see them but they cannot see us.” He paused.

“And then?”

“Then we split in two groups. I will lead some of our forces into Venhall while the rest remains in camp to protect you.”

“And what if we fail?” the princess whispered.

Eagle turned to look at her. “We won’t. *I* won’t. I promise.”

Helen could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. Determination, but also fear and sadness.

“What makes you so upset?” she asked.

“Nothing.” The general got up and looked at the camp. “I am not upset, princess, I am ready. But we have to move now.” He looked down at her. “We must hurry before things get worse.”

Eagle then walked towards the tents, shouting orders. Princess Helen quickly emptied her glass and went to help the soldiers buckle their armors.

“*He’s right,*” she thought, “*they took my city, but they won’t have my kingdom.*”

The forest was thick and damp. The trees and the grass were of the same deep green color as Princess Helen’s eyes. Eagle was walking ahead of the Free Forces, his very diverse group of survivors and resistants. Blacksmiths and bartenders were standing alongside trained soldiers with the same will to protect their home. When the Kerans had arrived, in the middle of the night, they

had immediately begun to brainwash the inhabitants of the city with their leader's strange magic. Eagle had not been able to save everyone. In order to help the ones he had found in time escape, he even had to kill some of the very people he was supposed to protect. Once again, he had failed.

The general stopped for a second and looked at a small piece of sky between two pines. He was wearing his heavy armor, and the warmth was unbearable. As was his guilt. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and restarted walking with a sigh. They would reach the edge of the forest before nightfall.

In the group behind him, Helen was silently walking next to Jenna. She was remembering the time when she was barely three years old and that Eagle would take her to the highest balcony of the palace, make her sit on the balustrade while holding her with one arm for her not to fall, and show her the kingdom, pointing with his free arm and recounting tales and legends. His hair had not been white back then, and she could only remember him with a smile on his face. She wondered what had happened to him. They had known each other since she was born, and she was now twenty years old. How could she know so little?

The princess turned to Jenna. "Tell me, miss Jenna, what is it like to have Eagle as your mentor?"

The young soldier raised her head, her brown eyes glistening. "It's an honor, Majesty. He is demanding, but also just and loyal. He puts his values and his duty above all things. General Eagle is a model to us all," she said enthusiastically.

Princess Helen smiled lightly. Yes, this was a good description of the man she knew.

"You know, Majesty," Jenna continued, "when I asked to join the army after my seventeenth birthday, no one would even listen to me. I was too short and too fragile. But the general let me have my chance, he trained me himself though he didn't have to." She took a deep breath. "I wouldn't be here today if he hadn't done all this for me."

"Did he ever tell you why he did?" the princess asked.

"Not directly, but I remember that he once said that if someone was passionate about something and willing to dedicate their life to it, then nobody should be allowed to stop them from doing it. No matter the time it may take, if you are willing to make come true then you will, what others tell you mean nothing, that's what he said."

Helen nodded slowly. These words sounded familiar to her. Did someone tell her the same thing before? Was it Eagle? She could not quite remember.

"It surprised me when he told me that, Majesty, I must confess. It sounded almost too idealistic for him," Jenna added with a soft laugh.

The princess laughed with her. The young recruit had talked a lot, and it was far from being a habit for her. She was afraid, but Helen could still feel the strength inside her. She felt proud to have people such as Eagle and Jenna in her army.

The sun was beginning to set when Eagle reached the edge of the forest and saw the city of Venhall in the distance, so close and yet so far. The white stones of the royal palace were still

shining in the fading sunlight. A young scout halted next to him and asked if they were to set up camp. The white-haired man nodded silently without looking away from the city. The scout waved at the group behind them and left Eagle to his thoughts. The general sat in the emerald-colored grass and rested his arms on his knees. The city was dark, lifeless. The Kerans had imposed a curfew. A curfew in the bright city of Venhall, jewel of the Maelerien Kingdom. His home.

He heard a crack behind him through the rumble of the camp but did not move. After all these years serving the army, he could recognize people from their pace alone.

“You shouldn't look, Helen. Venhall is suffering,” he said in an absent whisper.

The princess sighed. “You're the one who shouldn't be looking, Eagle.”

The general left out a bitter chuckle and nodded. “I guess you're right.”

He got up and turned to face the brown-haired woman, smiling at her with difficulty. “We should head back before it gets too dark,” he declared with a gesture towards the camp.

Princess Helen nodded and locked arms with Eagle. “Are you sure that you're okay?”

The man took a couple of seconds to think on it. “Do not worry, Majesty, I am fine,” he replied.

And this time, he was not lying.

The reunion of the soldiers had gone well. Eagle had made Jenna stand near him as he had detailed the plan one last time. He had trained her for this very moment, though he had never expected it to come so soon. But he was certain she was ready to take his place. The young girl had been the most talented warrior he had seen in twenty years, skilled with a blade and clever tactician. She was obviously born for this, unlike him. There was nothing to worry about. Jenna would do well next to the princess.

The white-haired general turned around to look at Helen, who was sleeping outside the tents. The moon was high now, it was time for him to go. He had traded his heavy armor for a lighter set of cloth and leather. Eagle quietly grabbed his dual-bladed staff and left the camp without looking back. There was only one way to fight back the leader of the Kerans' magic, and he had to do it alone. Everything was in order, and he trusted Jenna and Helen. They would be alright, even without him.

The sun began to rise early, that morning. As the first ray of sunlight touched Princess Helen's eyelids and woke her up, Eagle was reaching the top of the stairs leading to the royal palace's front where the leader of the Kerans, a muscular man even taller than the general, was already waiting for him. The mage looked at Eagle with his glowing red eyes, tightening his grip on the two swords he was holding.

In the Free Forces' camp, the young recruit Jenna walked out of the soldiers' tent holding a letter written by her mentor. On it, three words: “Continue as planned.”

Helen and Jenna looked at each other with worried expressions.

Eagle took a step forward, strengthening his position as the leader of the Kerans ran towards him,

raising his two swords. The general held his dual-bladed staff to block the blades and quickly pushed the Keran away as he staggered back. Taking advantage of the sect leader's surprise, Eagle lunged forward and hit him with the lower edge of his weapon, carving a wound in his arm. The tallest man almost fell to the floor, but recovered in time. The white-haired man jumped backward with agility, watching his opponent straighten his back and get ready to attack again as if the blow had meant nothing. When the sect leader saw his blood on the floor, a twisted smile appeared on his face.

The Free Forces had reached the great gate to the city. Despite Jenna's objections, Princess Helen had decided to slightly change their plans and to lead them all to Venhall. Only a few soldiers had stayed at the gate with the princess while the others had entered the city. The plan was to kill only to defend, and to keep as many inhabitants as possible busy fighting. Jenna had not understood why at first, but her mentor's sudden disappearance had made it clear.

She unsheathed her longsword and readied her arm, standing in front of Helen to protect her. How long would the fight last? Why did Eagle leave on his own? Questions were twirling inside the young recruit's head as someone shoved her violently. She fell only a few steps away from the princess and hastily pushed on her elbows to see her attacker. The man was wearing the simple clothes of a farmer, but he was holding a dagger. Jenna raised her sword to block what could have been a killing blow and used the farmer's strength to get back on her feet.

"Please, Eagle, hurry up," she thought as she forced the man to step back.

The white-haired general was down to one knee under the Keran's smile. His leather coat had been torn to pieces, and his linen shirt was soaked red. The wounds on his arms and chest were deep, but it was all he needed. The sect leader walked towards him, confident.

Too confident.

Eagle drew strength from his blood, the same way the Keran had done moments before but did not move, waiting for him to get closer. He was not a mage as the leader was, and he could not use the same tricks as him. When the Keran reached the general and raised his swords for one final blow, Eagle hit him in the chest with the wooden handle of his staff, forcing him to stagger back. The white-haired man sighed then lunged forward and went through the sect leader's chest with his weapon, blade first. He smiled as the warm blood of the Keran dripped on his hands, even as he felt the burning pain of two swords in his lungs. The general took a second to watch the red glow fade from the mage's eyes, then pulled his dual-bladed staff out of his body with a single move. The leader of the Keran fell back and hit the paved floor, dead.

Silence fell on Venhall as Eagle took a few steps back and leaned against a column, blood dripping from his mouth.

"*It's over,*" he thought.

The two swords of the sect leader were still plunged into his chest.

The farmer Jenna was fighting suddenly fell unconscious on her. The metallic noise of swords faded all around as the leader of the Kerans' magic disappeared with him. Princess Helen, standing by the great gate to the city, had not looked away from the palace's front court. From where she was, she could not see anything. As Jenna got back on her feet next to her, the princess started running towards the stairs. The handful of soldiers who had been standing with her moved to follow, but the young recruit stopped them with a gesture.

“I got this, take care of the people,” she told them as she walked away.

The princess was still running, blind to what was happening around her. She climbed the stairs breathing loudly. When she reached the top, she did not even spare a look at the sect leader's corpse. Eagle had slipped down the column, and he turned his head to look at her from the floor. Helen fell to her knees next to him, a hand on his cheek as tears dripped from her eyes onto his chest. The white-haired general smiled weakly. Slowly, he put his hand on Helen's and whispered his real name to her.

Then he closed his eyes and let his head fall back as he died.

The princess let out a scream as she rested her head on Eagle's chest and cried. Behind her, the young recruit Jenna, shocked, fell to the floor.

Six months after Eagle's death, life had restarted as before in the city of Venhall, though the invasion of the Kerans had left its mark. Queen Helen, whose hair had turned white shortly after the burial of Eagle, was climbing down the stairs to reach the city's streets when she stopped and turned around, raising her head. Next to her, her new guardian Jenna followed her gaze.

In the middle of the royal palace's front court had been erected a statue of Venhall's hero, Eagle. But it was his real name which was carved into the stone base of the statue.

Helen and Jenna smiled through their sadness, knowing that the name of Yevan would never be forgotten.