

Zelia

by Zora Marie

Zelia

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Author's Note:

Sometimes the most outlandish stories come from real life and sometimes real life forces the creation of high fantasy, or at least that is how I found things to be. Zelia may seem strange to some, but she has been a part of me for many years. Though her name has changed and origins shifted, the essence of who she is and her life has always stayed.

I have so many friends to thank for their help over the last few years, many new and a few old. This would not be nearly as well written were it not for all of you and I cannot thank you enough. A special thanks is due to my fellow Knights of the SciFi Roundtable, where the welcome wagon is known for taking squires for trips where they are warned of the dangers of our 'ship'. While our Captain does not bite, the Master Engineer might, so watch your step for the Pukahs' glitter bombs.

With that said, I hope you enjoy Zelia's story, just do not stray too far as Mineria is full of dangers.

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Chapter One

Beginnings

“They know what is coming.”

Zelia was climbing among the upper branches of her home when she froze at the sound of Eleanor’s anxious voice. Leaves brushed her cheek as she crept closer to the high platform. Eleanor was the closest Zelia had ever known to a mother. She had been with Eleanor and Eadon for half a century, but she was not herself an elf as they were. Zelia was... well, she didn’t know, but she’d hardly grown any older in all that time and still looked like a young child, barely the height of Eleanor’s waist.

“Why do they not help us fight this war? The elders of all the peoples should be willing to stand up and fight against the darkans, is that not why these powers were given in the first place? The fight against the darkans and the war against the gods to come are the only reasons-”

“Ssshhh. They may hear you. You know what they say about the gods, especially Lumid, he can hear everything,” Vainoff warned.

“Not here. You know I keep this place hidden, especially with her here.”

Who here? Zelia wondered. The things Vainoff said never made much sense to her, but he was the most frequent visitor the elves had. Before Vainoff and Eleanor became members of the Wizard Guild, he had run messages for Eleanor in exchange for magic lessons as he had already outgrown what could be learned on his own. Zelia was always curious about his travels and loved the stories he told of the day Eadon saved him from a group of darkans at their borders.

“I know you do, just as you know the elders have their reasons. It is best to leave them be, they still outnumber us if you do recall.”

Vainoff and Eleanor fell silent, the only sound came from leaves and limbs as they rustled in the main entrance to the high platform. Zelia took the chance to move closer, her thoughts quieted so Eleanor wouldn’t sense her nearing as she pushed her way through the leafy limbs.

“An urgent letter from Kion.”

Zelia recognized Eadon's voice, but it seemed strained as if he dreaded the news they were about to receive. She climbed closer and parted the leaves so as to have a clear view. The tiny scroll Eleanor held was spotted with blood and her elven glow visibly dimmed as she skimmed the words.

"What does it say?" Eadon asked.

Eleanor did not move as Eadon took the open scroll from her and read it aloud, "We have won, but at a grave cost. Queen O'Fell asks for her gift to put the King and ..." his voice trailed off and the scroll slipped from his fingers.

Eleanor's lip quivered for a moment before she spoke. "Get Zelia and Alrindel, we leave at once."

Leaving? But I never get to go anywhere.

Eleanor turned and stared straight at her.

"Zelia. I hear your thoughts, come here. We must leave, Kion needs us."

Zelia pushed through the branches and stepped onto the twisted branches that were woven together to form a platform, similar to that which formed many of the other homes. Eadon was so distraught by what he had read that he did not even scold her for eavesdropping.

"Eadon?" she asked.

He knelt to her level, as if about to give her some tragic news, but he found no words. She hugged him tight, returning one of the many loving hugs he had given her over the years. She could feel him quiver as he exhaled, still unable to speak.

"It will be okay," she said, not really understanding what was wrong.

With a silent sigh, he leaned back from her hug and brushed the leaves from her curly hair.

"Would you go find Alrindel and tell him to pack a light bag for me?"

"Where are we going?"

"To the Kingdom of The Mountains," Vainoff replied. "Now go on, dear, and pack a bag of your own."

Zelia cocked her head. She didn't fully understand, but was excited at the thought of going on a journey away from home.

“Saria!” Zelia ran up to the female elf with close to one hundred years more than she, she was a close friend of Alrindel’s as were most elf children. “Have you seen Alrindel?”

“I just left him. He was on the other side of the pasture; I can get him for you if you like.”

“No. Starjaina can take me.”

Zelia hopped on the fence and let out a long and pretty whistle, something she was proud to have finally learned to do. A beautiful white horse galloped across the pasture and pranced as she slowed to a stop.

“Zelia! Hello dear. Here for a ride again?” Starjaina neighed.

“Eadon asked me to get Alrindel.”

“Well come on, I’ll take you to him.”

Zelia climbed onto Starjaina’s back from the vine fence.

“So, what did Alrindel do this time?” Starjaina asked as she cantered across the pasture, the other horses parting for her as she went.

“Nothing, we’re going somewhere.”

“I hope you are taking me with you.” She bobbed her head as she slowed her pace.

Alrindel was running around a tree, chasing and being chased by playful foals.

“I’m sure we are since I believe that Eadon is going with us.”

Alrindel stopped playing with the foals and stroked Starjaina’s forelock. “What are you two talking about this time? Not stirring up trouble now are you?”

“No. Eadon sent me to get you. We are to pack a bag.”

“Pack a bag? There’s a war going on. Where are we going?”

“The Kingdom of the Mountains, I think something has happened.” She scrunched her eyebrows together and lowered her gaze. “I’ve never seen Eadon so ... broken.”

“Well, come on then.” Alrindel swung himself onto Starjaina’s back and nudged her to start back across the pasture.

“Come Zelia, you will ride with me,” Eleanor said.

“But I wanted to ride Starjaina.”

Eadon picked her up, his long silky black hair tickling her cheek as he lifted her onto his horse.

“Then you may ride with me until dark, but then you will have to ride with Eleanor.”

He sprung on behind her and they rode off. Eadon had called many of the healers he had taught over the years to ride with them, some were from the trees right next to theirs and others were from places sprinkled within the inner kingdom but all were familiar faces, even if she did not recall their names.

One by one, they passed under the waterfall and into the outer ranges of Elyluma. A single tree root bridge connected the river locked landed to the outer reaches of their home.

Alrindel was allowed to carry his bow and ride on his own for the first time on such an occasion. The elves were unusually quiet as they rode and the silence unsettled her. Even with the war going on, they were always cheerful, singing under the stars each night, but today there was no singing and even the other elves they had passed were silent.

“Starjaina?”

“Yes dear?”

“Have you heard any news of what has happened?” Zelia asked her in the language of the animals, knowing the time wasn’t right to ask Eadon or Eleanor.

“The King O’Fell is dead and many elves, including...”

“Leena?”

There was a catch in Starjaina’s stride and now Zelia realized the reason for Eadon’s reaction. Her aunt, his sister, had died in the battle. Zelia swung her leg over Starjaina’s neck and buried her face against Eadon’s chest.

“Starjaina told you?”

Zelia nodded.

“Told her what?” Alrindel asked.

Eadon wrapped his arms around Zelia, almost as much to comfort himself as to comfort her.

“Le-” his voice caught, “Leena has fallen.”

“She fell trying to save King Skalary O’Fell. We go to release the souls of all of those fallen to the stars,” Vainoff said.

Zelia turned a bit to see that Vainoff’s gaze rested on her and she wondered what her part in all this was to be.

“What will happen to Auntie Leena’s soul?”

“Leena is an elf so her soul will rest in the stars with our elders until she chooses to be reborn.”

“When will that be?”

She stared up at him and waited for his reply.

“Our souls are bound to our lovers.”

“So, she will wait for Kion?” she asked.

Eadon nodded and kissed the top of her head. “You should get some rest now. We will not stop until we get there.”

Soon his humming and Starjaina’s step rocked her to sleep.

Kion met them at the edge of a row of newly constructed pyres, the others continued on as Eleanor, Eadon, and Alrindel’s horses slowed their pace.

“I’ll go ahead with the others.” Vainoff nodded towards Kion and urged his horse on.

Zelia was struck by Kion’s forlorn gaze; she had never seen him so solemn. He usually glowed brightest among the elves, but now his glow was gone. Blood stained the tips of his long silver hair and parts of his clothes.

Zelia didn’t even wait for Starjaina to stop, she slid from her back and ran to Kion. Kion knelt and caught her in his arms, holding her as if she could slip away and leave him in the dark at any moment.

“Thank you for coming so quickly.” Kion’s voice was quite next to her ear.

“Kion, you are family, there is no need to thank us,” Eleanor replied. “I am so sorry for your loss.”

Zelia opened her eyes as Kion nodded to see the young and fair Queen Orania O’Fell’s approach, her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, at her side. She had met them once before, but she remembered little of them.

“As am I sorry for your losses. I hate to ask at such a time, but Eadon we need your help.”

Kion started to pull away from Zelia’s hug, but gave her one more squeeze before standing.

“She is expecting,” Orania nodded to Elizabeth, “but she is losing him.”

“How far along?” Eleanor asked.

“Only a month or two, maybe less. He’s all I have left of-” Elizabeth glanced back at the long row of pyres.

“May I?” Eadon asked, gesturing towards her abdomen.

Princess Elizabeth cringed as Eadon’s hand pressed against her. She started to double over in pain, but pushed away from him.

“I- I need to get back to helping our people.”

Elizabeth fled towards the gates, one hand holding her abdomen as she went.

“Elizabeth!” Queen O’Fell called after her, but Elizabeth didn’t stop. “They found her on the battle field covered in blood cradling Skyral. She refuses to talk about it and she won’t let anyone check her out. That’s the closest anyone has gotten to her.”

“She was out there during the battle?” Eadon asked, shock and concern in his tone.

“I saw her myself. When she refused to return to the women and children, I tried to get her to promise to stay close. She refused, saying she would fight alongside her husband and his father. We-” A tear ran down Kion’s cheek as he stared across the pyres to the ones that stood a little taller at the center.

“Kion, you and Leena did all you could to save them. We all know you did.” Orania cupped his hands in hers. “And we will never forget the sacrifices made.”

“Eadon, would you go after Elizabeth. I’ll get Zelia ready, but Elizabeth needs you now,” Eleanor said.

“Get me ready for what?” Zelia asked once Eadon had gone.

“We would like you to do the honors of lighting the pyres dear.”

“Why me?”

There was a glance exchanged between the adults and Kion sighed.

“Because Leena loved you as a daughter.”

“And we thought there would be no one better to honor our fallen. Zelia, would you do us the honor of freeing our loved ones to take their place amongst the stars?” Queen Orania asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. Now if you will all excuse me, there are things I need to attend to before tonight.” Orania leaned in and whispered something to Eleanor before walking away.

“Come Zelia, let us see what we can help with and clean up for this evening.”

Eleanor held out her hand for Zelia to take, but she couldn’t help but see the distant look in Kion’s eyes.

Zelia glanced between Eleanor and Kion, then took his hand in hers. His hand was clammy to the touch and he didn’t look down at her until she moved in front of him.

“Kion, would you do me the honor of helping me tonight?”

She stared up at him, patiently waiting for his response. She wanted to help him and this was the only thing she could think of.

“I think Aunt Leena would want you to Kion. Come on, let’s go get you cleaned up.” Alrindel grabbed Kion’s other hand and together they pulled him along.

When they came to the third highest pyre Kion stopped following along. He stared at the thin cloth that covered a slender figure.

“Alrindel, take Zelia and go inside. See if there is anyone the two of you can help, we will catch up with you here in a few,” Eleanor said.

Alrindel nodded and took Zelia’s hand. She watched Kion over her shoulder until they passed the big stone gates and she was forced to look at her surroundings. Great stone buildings rose around her, their

make of Dwarven quality. She ran her hand across a smooth wall as they walked, there was not a single seam to be felt. Alrindel stopped the first guard they saw.

“Where are the wounded being treated?”

“Why?”

The guard stopped, but favored his right leg.

“Because we can help. We are children of Eadon,” Zelia replied.

“Vainoff and our healers have gone ahead of us, we are to assist them,” Alrindel added as he stepped in front of her.

The man looked them over for a moment before pointing down the widest path.

“Follow the path to the stairs, there will be another guard to direct you the rest of the way from there.”

“Thank you.” Alrindel nodded, then pulled Zelia along.

“You’re not an elf and people will recognize this. Not everyone will be our friend here.”

“I know, but I’m going to light the pyres so won’t everyone learn of me then?”

“Maybe or maybe not, I’m not sure what Eleanor is planning to do. For now, let’s go see if we can put that first aid training to work.”

He tapped her nose as they came to the bottom of a set of stairs. Two guards stared down at them, their hands on the hilt of their swords.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

“I am Alrindel. Queen Eleanor has sent us ahead of her to give aid to the wounded.”

“And who is she?” The man nodded towards her and she felt compelled to step closer to Alrindel.

“She’s with me. Come on you two, I could use a couple extra set of hands.” Vainoff appeared at the top of the stairs and waved them to follow.

The guard who had asked gave her a curious stare as they passed.

“Where are Eleanor and Eadon? The two of you really shouldn’t be on your own.”

“Eleanor is with Kion and Eadon is ... busy. Eleanor told us to go help where we can and that she would catch up.”

Vainoff nodded, his lips pursed for a moment. “Yes, Kion needs her. Well come on, we’ll find you someone the skills of a young bowmen and a Zelia can help.”

Vainoff winked at her and turned down a hallway lined with doors. Moans and cries came from behind most and whimpers came from those who sat in the halls. Women and a handful of elves moved from place to place, doing what they could. Vainoff stopped in front of the warrior who appeared twice her age and held a cloth to his side, there was a trail of blood down his front and he was extremely pale. When he opened his eyes, his gaze first met Zelia’s.

“Here, let me take a look.”

She dropped Alrindel’s hand and gently pulled the top of the soaked bandage from his side.

“It’s not deep, but it does need stitches.”

She expectantly glanced back to Alrindel as he pulled off his pack. Vainoff stood behind him, a distant look in his eye as he watched.

“Well, I shall leave you to it then.” Vainoff gave her a nod and walked off, swinging his staff with each of his long strides.

“He’s acting weird today,” Zelia said as she wiped the blood from the boy’s side with a clean cloth.

“Of course he would, he was a friend of the King, and our Aunt,” Alrindel said. “Here, your stitching is better.” He handed her a thread-ed needle.

Zelia took the needle and watched the boy’s expression for a moment.

“This is going to hurt, but it will stop the bleeding. You’ll have to be careful not to tear the stitches out though.”

“Who are you?”

“Zelia, now hold still.”

She put her hand above the cut and pushed the needle through, being careful to do it as Eadon had taught her. Alrindel went on to the next person as she stitched the boy up and tied another clean cloth to his side.

“Now, keep it clean and you’ll have to have the stitches removed in a couple of weeks. Other than that, just take it easy so you don’t rip the stitches out.”

“How did you learn to do this?”

The boy held his side again, but now more for comfort than out of necessity.

“Everyone is taught this where I am from. I learned it, hm, a hundred or so years ago.”

“I’m sorry to pull you away dear, but we must get ready,” Eleanor said as she walked down the hall from within the castle. “Alrindel, Vainoff will fetch you when it is time.”

Zelia nodded then turned back to the boy. “You get some rest.”

She could feel the boy’s gaze as she followed Eleanor down the hall, but didn’t look back. When the latch of the heavy wooden door clicked, Zelia gained the nerve to ask Eleanor the question that had been bugging her.

“Eleanor, why do they want me to light the pyres? Shouldn’t one of their men do it?”

“One day you will understand, but for now, I want you to take this task with the grace I have seen you use as you dance in the starlight. If for no one else, do it for Kion and Eadon. I know you love them both and your Auntie Leena.”

Zelia nodded and nervously shifted her feet. *I love Auntie Leena, but why me?*

“Let us get you changed and then I want to show you something.”

Eleanor pulled a little silk black dress with edges dipped in gold from an armoire and held it up in the sunlight streaming through the open window. Its long sleeves glistened as the breeze swept through the room.

“I remember the day Orania wore this when she was about your size. She asked that you wear it tonight.”

Zelia washed the blood from her hands and slipped into the long black dress. It was tight across her shoulders as she had been working with a bow more than most women. Eleanor gave her a sad smile and

plated her hair back in a long braid.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve ever gotten you into an actual dress.”

“They’re not good for climbing,” Zelia said, turning to give Eleanor one of her mischievous grins. “So what did you want to show me?”

“Something special that you need to see.”

Eleanor took her hand and lead her through a maze of corridors, leading deeper into the stone castle. When they came to a large set of doors a guard nodded and pushed the door open for them. Orania stood at the edge of a platform staring down at the water falling beneath it. A statue of a man stood staring at the open sky above them, his hand on the hilt of his sword, and the brim of his helmet shading his eyes from the setting sun.

“Do you know what this is Zelia?” Orania asked.

Zelia shook her head, but Orania didn’t need to see to know.

“It’s a reminder of where the O’Fell family came from. Do you know the story?”

“They are descendants of Yargo, God of the Fallen Warriors. He hoped to unite the people by giving them someone they could follow. And this must be Lumid, guard of the bridge and keeper of the stars.”

Orania turned from the edge.

“That is right and you are going to release their souls to live with their ancestor, Yargo, among the stars. It is a tradition for a daughter of a fallen King to lay them to rest and since he has no daughter we have asked that you do it.”

Zelia nodded, but she still didn’t quite understand why they would ask her.

“Now, it’ll be getting dark soon. We should start gathering people outside.”

Men, women, and children had gathered on the walls and the field all around the long rows of pyres. Kion stood by her side with Orania, whatever Eleanor had done seemed to have eased Kion’s pain. Orania

had just finished her long speech and excused Elizabeth for not being there, saying the grief was too much for her to bear.

Orania gave Kion a nod and he handed Zelia a torch. As soon as she took it the flame grew brighter and an updraft pulled it higher into the sky.

“I’ll be right beside you the entire time,” Kion whispered.

She started with Skalary and Skyras’s pyres, but froze as she went to light Leena’s. Kion squeezed her shoulder as if to say it’s alright and she stuck the torch into the kindling. When the fire took off she stepped back and looked up at Kion, there were tears in his eyes as the soft light of the flames lit Leena’s face.

“You can stay here Kion. I’ll finish.”

She gave a light squeeze of his hand continued down the row. With each one she lit, she glanced back at Kion; the flames had grown, but he hadn’t stepped away. With everyone entranced by the flames, she moved from pyre to pyre a little faster and circled around from one end to the other.

When she lit the last one, she threw the torch at the feet of the King as the flames of pyre already burned high in the sky. When she did, something happened that made all the crowd gasp. The flames turned blue and little orbs of light rose from the bodies of those fallen. As each one rose, the flames calmed back to their orange glow.

“Kion!” Zelia pulled him back from Leena’s pyre as a wave of heat rolled out and Leena’s soul rose from the flames.

One by one the blue orbs lifted into the stars, twinkling until they faded from view. Zelia glanced around at the mourners, what was left of families were crowded together, and those that stood alone held clasped hands over their hearts as they stared up at the stars. The crowd stood staring at the stars long after the souls had gone, but one by one people trickled away and the somber silence moved with them.

The next few days went by in a bit of a blur for Zelia. They had stayed and tended the wounded and Eleanor had scarcely let her out

of sight. Their trip home was much slower than their trip there as the elves who fought in the battle returned with them; many had been injured or had scarcely slept as they tended the wounded. When they stopped for the night Eleanor called to Zelia before she could run off with Alrindel.

“Stay close by, alright?”

“Actually, I believe the two of you have some archery practice to catch up on,” Eadon said.

“But I don’t have my bow with me.”

“We can share,” Alrindel offered. “Come on, I saw a board back there.”

“Do not go too far,” Eleanor warned again before the two of them ran off.

They weaved between the clusters of elves that tended to each other’s wounds. When they found a weathered board tangled in grass they wedged it between two stones and stepped back a ways. Alrindel went first, drawing his arrow back by his ear.

“Alrindel?” Zelia asked.

“Trying to distract me?”

“No. I just- do you think Kion will be okay?”

Alrindel released and the arrow just barely hit the edge of the board.

“What’s this about me?” Kion’s curious voice made her jump as he approached them from behind.

“Zelia here is worried about you.”

Zelia twisted her foot in the long grass and fought not to look up at Kion.

“She is now, is she?”

There was a hint of the old Kion in his tone and she glanced at him.

“How about you show Alrindel how a real archer shoots.”

Alrindel pulled an arrow from his quiver and handed it to her.

“Your turn.”

She took his bow and drew back a little past her ear. A hand touched her arm and gently pushed her elbow down so it was level with her arrow.

“Remember, release with the last of your breath.”

She stared down the shaft of her arrow and released as her breath steadied towards the end. The half rotten board splintered as her arrow shot through, just off center.

As the arrow shattered the board it was as if something within Zelia shattered too. The shell of dark emotion that had held her captive within since the funeral, was gone. She spun around and gave Kion a hug, holding the bow across his back as she did so.

“Thank you Kion.”

“Your welcome.” He gave her a light squeeze and leaned back from her hug. “Now, give the bow back to Alrindel before you hurt yourself with it. It’s still a bit too big for you.”

“But we just started.”

“I will personally make sure you make up for the lost practice when we get back. Deal?”

Zelia couldn’t help but smile as Kion looked down at her with a raised brow.

“Fine. Here you go Alrindel.” She tossed the bow to him and grabbed Kion’s hand. “Let’s go find Eadon.”

“Sure,” Alrindel said as they disappeared into the crowd, “just leave me to pick up your arrow.”

Some weeks later, time seemed to glide by as she laid on Starjaina’s back, the two of them out in the middle of a field.

“There you are.” Kion pulled her from Starjaina’s back and onto his own horse. “You are supposed to be at practice.”

“So are you.”

Kion squinted at her with his lips pressed together and she giggled.

“Sorry Kion.” She spun around on her knees and gave him a hug.

“How is it you are so graceful on a horse and in the trees but so clumsy on the ground?”

“Guess I’m just not meant for blades.”

“No, we will get you using a sword with at least a bit of skill one day. We just have to make sure you do not hurt yourself before then.”

He tapped her nose and turned his horse around to start back across the pasture.

“Wait, you are forgetting Alrindel.”

“Thanks,” Alrindel said with a sigh and stood from his hiding spot amongst the tall grass.

“Hey, you’re the reason I’m out here. I came to get you, remember.”

“Well, at least you two have been paying attention to one of your teachers. Eadon must be teaching you the ancient fairy language now.”

“Why do we learn languages the fairies don’t even bother to learn anymore?” Alrindel asked.

“Why do you use contractions like the humans?” Kion asked and let that sink in as they crossed the pasture. “We learn the languages both to keep them alive and because we may one day need them. Just because the fairies on the mainland no longer use the language does not mean that fairies elsewhere do not.”

Kion helped Zelia from his horse and handed both her and Alrindel a bow.

“Now, you can’t leave until you each hit the target across the field three times in a row.”

Alrindel sighed and Zelia laughed as she picked up a handful of arrows.

“What’s wrong Alrindel? Afraid I’ll finish before you?”

“How about a wager? Last one has to retrieve all the arrows?”

“Fine.”

She pulled an arrow back to her ear and released, missing by a foot. Alrindel did the same, but he barely missed. Soon they both had two arrows in the target and were lined up for another shot. They released as one and an arrow shot from the side knocked both their arrows aside.

“Kion!” They complained in unison.

“What? I never said there would be no interference. Try again.”

They sighed and leaned over to grab another handful of arrows.

“Rapid fire?” Alrindel asked in a hushed voice.

Zelia nodded and grabbed up a few more.

“You might need a few more Kion!” Alrindel yelled as they began shooting arrows one after another at the target.

At first they were in time with one another, but as they went Zelia lagged behind. Still they filled the target and surrounding ground with arrows.

“Alright, now go pick up your mess.” Kion laughed and walked off to where the other elf children trained with swords.

“I saw some of the elder wizards this morning. Why do you think they are here?” she asked as they picked through the grass for their arrows.

Alrindel looked as though he was about to say something, but he shook his head.

“I don’t know, but they are watching us.”

Zelia glanced over her shoulder. Eleanor and the wizards she had seen stood on the dining room balcony of their home, their gazes all turned towards her.

“Why do they always watch me when they come here?”

“Why don’t you ask Eleanor that?” Alrindel asked. “But not until you find all those arrows.”

Zelia sighed and continued picking through the grass for her arrows, more of hers having missed than hit.