

Battle for the Crown

A Miraveld Chronicles Short Story

(This story takes place between A Fated Quest and A Stolen Heart)

The light breeze ruffled Vallyn's brown hair as he surveyed the battlefield. He should have donned a cloak with a hood before leaving his tent. Or even the padded arming cap he usually wore under his helm—an unattractive thing, but necessary to make the helm bearable. His fingers tensed at his sides. Reaching up to rearrange his choppy shoulder-length hair would only draw attention to what he wanted to hide. No one noticed unless they were looking closely, so he would *not* touch his ears and give someone a reason to look.

“General Drake.” Duke Cassius Alimer's somber, authoritative voice sounded at his elbow.

Vallyn was still adjusting to his new title. *General* felt far heavier than *captain*, and at a mere twenty-five years old, he often wondered if he deserved it. He turned toward his lord. Cassius was the taller of the two, always had been, but both of his parents had been tall. Between his tall father and short mother, Vallyn had grown to... barely average. Still, being shorter had advantages. Like being more comfortable on the traveling cots while Cassius complained about them being too short.

Maybe the too-short bed had contributed to the dark circles under Cassius's eyes, or maybe that was the fatigue brought by a civil

war. The beginnings of a beard shadowed Cassius's light-bronze cheeks, and the short, tight coils of the black hair framing his face were frizzy. Who had time or energy for oiling hair or shaving between battles? Vallyn's own scruff was beginning to annoy him, but he had far more important things to deal with.

Despite how regal Cassius looked with his somber expression and a crimson cloak over his shining armor, he still looked so young—too young. Much like he'd been too young when his father had died. But Cassius had taken on the responsibility of a duke admirably at fourteen, and Vallyn had every confidence Cassius would bear the title of king with the same proficiency and honor at twenty-eight.

Vallyn bowed his head. "Your Majesty."

The corner of Cassius's mouth turned up in a wry smile. "Trying to jinx us, General?"

"Trying to will it into existence without all of...this." Vallyn turned back to surveying the field.

A dense early-morning fog obscured lumps strewn across the trampled expanse, the casualties of yesterday's battle. The night prior they hadn't had the energy to collect their dead, and now it was safest to wait until the fog lifted, so the enemy didn't misconstrue their presence in the field as an attack. He couldn't see Baron Shafer's forces, but they were still encamped on the opposite side of the expanse. His scouts had confirmed it before dawn.

Another, more persistent breeze rose, clearing some of the clinging tendrils of fog, but also shoving up Vallyn's hair. His hands were smoothing the strands back over the slightly pointed tips of his ears before he was conscious of the action. He clenched his traitorous hands and moved them back to his sides. If Cassius noticed the old habit, he didn't comment on it.

“I, too, wish this was avoidable.” His friend’s voice was heavy with sorrow and responsibility. That empathy, deep love for Aedylan, and understanding of his duties was a large part of what would make Cassius a good king. An infinitely better king than his distant cousin Silas Faine had been, and a far better king than Baron Shafer would make.

Cassius turned back toward camp. “Breakfast is finishing. The lords should be gathering. Do you have a plan?”

Vallyn nodded grimly. “A plan to end this.”

“Yet you don’t sound excited about the prospect.”

“There will be more casualties,” he said stiffly. “I suspect more on their side, if things go as I predict, but...”

“But their side is ultimately still our own people,” Cassius finished quietly. He grasped Vallyn’s shoulder. “I know it’s difficult, but this is why I’m glad you’re leading my army. I wouldn’t trust a man for whom it was easy.”

Vallyn’s gaze remained fixed on the shifting layers of fog. “This plan does not merely require a man,” he whispered.

Cassius’s fingers tightened on his shoulder. “I didn’t ask you to use that part of you.”

“Even if it will end this sooner?” At last, he shifted to look at Cassius. “No one should notice or be able to put it together.”

His friend’s eyes searched his face. “And will you be all right? Can you keep it under control?”

Vallyn hesitated—not because he feared losing control, but because it always messed with his head. “I’ll be fine. It is my choice.” He added in a mutter, “Besides, at least it will be good for something.”

By the pinched look on Cassius’s face, he was considering ordering Vallyn to form a different plan. But then he sighed, and his hand

slipped from Vallyn's shoulder. "If you're certain it will work. I don't want to be king of a decimated Aedyllan. I want this resolved as soon as possible."

Vallyn nodded. "I'm certain. This time, this is how I keep my oaths and protect you."

A flinch and a wince from Cassius, so minute that anyone else might have missed it. For better or worse, regardless of the fact it was an accident and they'd been children, the oaths they'd taken as lord and subject when Cassius became Duke Alimer and the promise they'd made to be like brothers and protect each other were magically binding. Fae magic loved bargains and vows, and Vallyn hadn't known how to stop it.

Of course, even without the magical binding, he'd still be loyal to Cassius, and they'd still be friends—brothers, as much as a duke and a knight could be. Most of the time, neither of them thought of it. However, the binding felt heavier when tested in battle.

Ignoring the intensifying breeze, Vallyn said, "I can explain the...personal part of the plan if you'd feel better know—"

"I trust you." Cassius offered a half smile. "Just be careful."

"When am I not?"

"There was a time with some pies—"

"I was *six*," Vallyn hissed. He folded his muscular arms over his chest. "And that misadventure taught me a good deal about how unpredictable and dangerous that part of me is. Let me rephrase—when as an *adult* have I not been cautious?"

"Fair enough," Cassius said with a chuckle.

A gust cleared more fog, and he again resisted the urge to check that the inhumanly pointed tips of his ears were covered. He'd inherited them from his father, along with his square jaw, thick

eyebrows, deep-set and heavy-lidded eyes, and the warm undertones of his light skin. Not very common Aedyllanian features, but no one cared that his absent father wasn't Aedyllanian. People migrated or traveled and fell in love all the time, like Cassius's grandmother.

The problem was Vallyn's ears. A decidedly not *human* feature, they were harder to hide than his fae magic. Not all fae even had pointed ears, but naturally the fae man that had fallen for his human mother had pointed ears and had inflicted them on Vallyn.

His father glamoured his own ears to make them appear rounded when he visited Aedyllan, which he claimed was as easy as breathing. Vallyn's control of his fae magic wasn't mindless enough for such frivolous usage. Although perhaps it wasn't frivolous if it prevented anyone from realizing his secret. In a kingdom where people used *fae* in their curses, his mixed blood was potentially dangerous. He tightened his grip on his biceps and glanced around to reassure himself no one was scrutinizing his ears. At least his were more subtly pointed than his father's. Small mercies.

Cassius must have noticed his discomfort as the breeze continued to ruffle his hair, because he smirked. "Nice ears."

Vallyn jolted but managed to keep his arms firmly crossed. "You can't even see them, can you?"

"No." Cassius winked. "Come on, General. We have lords to speak with, a war to win, and a kingdom to put back on the right path."

With one last appraising glance at the fetid battlefield—and the reminder of why he was willing to use his fae magic—Vallyn turned sharply and marched through the camp after Cassius, mentally bracing himself for the only task he disliked even more than dealing out death, but which he was far less capable in:

Public speaking.

The lords were gathered in front of Cassius's tent, and they all fell silent at their approach. Cassius gave a brief welcome before passing the meeting off to Vallyn. He locked his nerves behind a rigid posture, his hands locked at his sides so he wouldn't fidget with his hair.

Vallyn laid out his plan as succinctly as possible, making eye contact with each lord as he gave them their orders. Hopefully things would go smoother today. Few of the lords had much practical military experience, and even fewer of their vassals did. Yesterday's battle could have gone better. At least his part in the plan would help, although he didn't explain it—just claimed he was taking a small company with him to approach from another angle.

Lord Ackroyd flinched when Vallyn made eye contact with him again. The nobleman had originally planned to make a bid for the throne himself, but Vallyn hadn't given him the chance. He'd planned the ambush carefully, caught the lord's laughably small force unprepared, and cut a path through the few knights who, despite being only half armored, had tried to stop him.

He'd then let Cassius do the talking to convince Ackroyd to support him. Although, Cassius had insisted that Vallyn's "standing there, blood-splattered and wiping off your blade before turning that death glare of yours on him" had intimidated the lord into capitulation as much as Cassius had cajoled him. Based on how Ackroyd shrunk back under Vallyn's direct gaze, maybe it was true.

By some miracle, he got through the briefing without stumbling over his words, saying anything unintelligible or backwards, or touching his ears. He bowed to Cassius, and their leader shared a few inspiring words to send them off. The lords gave crisp bows and fervent *yes, sires*, and hurried off to prepare their men.

“You could stand to relax a little when you do that,” Cassius noted, a hint of teasing in his voice. “You look like you think *they’re* the enemy.”

Vallyn forced his shoulders to relax. “You know I hate people staring at me.”

Cassius gave him a sympathetic look. “You did well, General.”

“Let’s hope I do this next part even better.” With that, he returned to his tent and donned his plate mail.

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The fog had cleared. Vallyn oversaw a small cohort of unarmed men to retrieve the bodies. Sometimes, they couldn’t find a crest or colors on the fallen that marked them as belonging to either side, and they simply had to guess and would sort it out once the fighting was over.

Meanwhile, the rest of the army moved into position. It was both satisfying and irritating to see that Baron Shafer’s troops were still in their camp. They’d also sent unarmed men to collect their fallen, and the two sides ignored each other, honoring the tradition of gathering the bodies so they wouldn’t be trampled over in subsequent fighting. A small measure of respect for the dead, even though they couldn’t yet bury the men as they deserved.

Once the battlefield was clear, the men who had helped fell back to guard the camp and the wounded under Captain Caldecott’s supervision. Vallyn charged him to stand his ground well as he pulled on his helm over his arming cap and prepared to depart. The older man bowed, his spine so rigid and straight it appeared he was trying to make himself taller. His hand fluttered toward his sword hilt as he glanced between Vallyn and the baron’s forces across the field.

“The guard here is mostly a formality and overabundance of caution,” Vallyn said as he mounted his piebald gelding, hoping to put

Caldecott's mind at ease. "Shafer's forces will be otherwise occupied shortly and likely won't bother you."

Caldecott's pudgy face reddened. "I—I'm perfectly capable—"

"Of course you are, Captain Caldecott." He frowned. Why was the typically reliable senior member of Cassius's guard acting so flighty? "I don't anticipate an attack here, but should that occur, it's important the camp is well defended. I wouldn't leave someone I thought incapable in command."

"Thank you, General." Caldecott bowed again, a low obeisance that couldn't be easy at his fifty-some years and was entirely unwarranted. "I won't let you down. I won't let His Highness down, I mean."

Vallyn lifted the reins and hesitated. He needed to get into position, but the recently-promoted captain was acting strange. "If there is a problem, I need to know *now*, Captain."

The man's throat bobbed with a hard gulp. "No, sir! General!" Another over-enthusiastic bow. "You won't have cause to be angry with me!"

Angry...? Ah. This must be about the men he'd caught drunk a couple nights prior, when they were all supposed to be on alert in case Shafer's forces attacked. Vallyn had herded the group of five peasants to the middle of camp, where he made them pick up their weapons and attack him. After quickly disarming them to prove how dangerous their intoxicated state was, he'd sentenced them to a night in the stocks and a thorough drenching to sober them up. Apparently the public humiliation had struck more fear into the camp than he'd intended.

"I'm sure you won't," Vallyn said, and rode away.

As far as Caldecott—and the rest of the army—knew, he would

join up with a small force of hand-picked knights who had been sent ahead early that morning to set up a rear ambush.

It was a lie.

No knights had been picked or sent.

As Vallyn rode into the forest, he accessed the fae magic he usually kept dormant. It awakened in his veins, warm and intoxicating and a little feral, and full of tantalizing promises. He let the magic flow free and cast it about himself and his horse, Riven, like a blanket. A fairly simple enchantment, although it still took a lot of his concentration to maintain, especially while cantering. Wearing steel also made it slightly more difficult, as his magic reflexively avoided his armor. Steel wasn't nearly as harmful to fae as pure iron, and neither steel alloys nor iron burned Vallyn on contact, a perk of his human half. Prolonged direct contact still hurt him, though, so he wore gloves and thick clothing so none of the steel touched his skin.

The spell muffled all sound he and his steed made—the creak of leather and armor, hoofbeats and the sound of Riven's breath—so it would scarcely be of note in the forest. It also shielded them. He couldn't make them entirely invisible. That was a skill he'd never mastered and could only do when absolutely still. But he could cause anyone's gaze to skip over them, making them look like nothing more than the play of light and shadow under the forest canopy.

Thus cloaked, Riven and Vallyn rushed through the forest. They passed cohorts of Cassius's army, waiting in position for his signal. Then they dodged guards from Baron Shafer's army, all of whom dismissed their movement as a trick of the light.

As his scouts had reported, Baron Shafer's massive tent was toward the rear of the encampment. Not at the very back, of course, in case they were routed, but close, to provide an easier retreat down

the road. Vallyn stopped at the edge of the forest.

Time for trick number two.

He lifted the horn from his saddle and blew a long, clear note. Birds took to the air, and shouts came from the camp and guards nearby. That was the signal to the others to attack from their assigned locations around Shafer's camp.

Tying the horn back to his saddle, Vallyn let the disguising cloak fall so he could focus on the next enchantment. This one was fairly easy—a simple illusion, showing things that weren't there. The mirage wouldn't hold up to scrutiny, but it wouldn't be closely observed.

As he rode into the center of the wide, rutted dirt road, mere paces from the rear of Shafer's camp, he conjured his non-existent band of chosen knights. A hundred of them filled the road behind him.

Vallyn drew his broadsword and charged toward the rear of the camp. "Shafer!" He lent a little magic to his bellowing shout, so his voice carried like a great bear's roar.

The guards posted at the rear of the camp looked at him, bearing down on them on Riven's muscular equine bulk, and at the mirage knights marching forward, much slower, behind him, and they ran. Not fast enough.

He cut down one of them and continued on, grabbing the rope of the rear-most tent in a gloved hand. A bit of wild magic gleefully leapt to his aid to strengthen his arm, and he yanked the tent over. It collapsed, causing frightened shouting within, and then the fabric caught fire. He hadn't planned that, but he smiled. It would add to the chaos and uncertainty.

The important part of this plan was the element of surprise.

With all of Shafer's lookouts, a *real* troop of knights could never have gotten within a few paces of the rear of the camp. Their appearance would cause havoc.

Already, confusion rippled through the camp. Men ran panicked, some missing pieces of their armor. Vallyn cut down any who got close enough, either because they mustered the courage to attack him, or because they didn't get out of his way fast enough. He let his fae side have a little more control. Bloodshed affected the fae less, and he couldn't afford to let his sorrow over Aedyllanians dying on his blade prevent him from completing his mission.

He knocked or pulled down two more tents, then slowed Riven to a walk as he neared the baron's pavilion.

"Hear me!" he yelled. "Duke Alimer will spare any others among you who pledge their allegiance today!"

It only took moments for everyone within earshot to reach the conclusion he'd led them to. The enemy impossibly close to their camp. *Any others.*

"We've been betrayed!" a man wailed. "Someone has turned on us!"

Ahead of him, Baron Shafer finally emerged, surrounded by six knights. All of them wore a full suit of steel armor and had already drawn their weapons. Shafer carried a sword and shield, but his face was deathly pale as he caught sight of Vallyn. His gaze flicked toward the road, and his eyes widened.

Vallyn reined in Riven and glanced back just long enough to confirm that his illusion knights still blocked the road, their drawn swords drawn held in front of them. Some of Shafer's men stood off with them, but they didn't engage, waiting for the troop to attack first so they could lure the enemy knights deeper into their camp,

rather than throw themselves at an impenetrable wall of blades. They'd be waiting a long time.

"Surrender, Roland Shafer." Vallyn pointed the red-stained tip of his blade at the enemy leader. "If you swear your allegiance, my lord will be merciful."

"Then why did he send his attack dog and not come himself?"

"He is coming." Vallyn allowed himself a grin, made a bit more predatory by the fae magic swirling through him. "If you haven't surrendered by the time he arrives, his patience will have worn out."

As if on cue, a man ran toward them, shouting for the baron. His frantic eyes took in Vallyn before he fell to his knees before Shafer. "Surrounded," he gasped out. "All sides. Duke Alimer leading the charge from the front—had come to ask for reinforcements..." He looked over to Vallyn again, despair plain on his face.

If Shafer had thought to ready his men sooner, instead of assuming Alimer's forces would wait to move into position until after the battlefield had been cleared, they could have made a good stand. In truth, they probably still could, if they realized the hundred knights waiting to attack their rearguard were a lie.

But Shafer's camp was unprepared and in chaos. His men—including several who appeared to be lords—watched warily rather than attacking Vallyn, even though he was surrounded. One of those lords stepped forward.

"I, Lord Peter Bynes, surrender to Duke Alimer."

"I surrender, too!" another lord declared. "I'm not dying for this!"

The chaos spreading through Shafer's camp intensified. Battle sounds from the three-pronged attack of Alimer's forces moved closer. With his fae magic active, Vallyn could hear confused chatter

as commanders tried to determine if they were supposed to be giving the order to stand down.

“You can end this and prevent more useless bloodshed, Shafer,” Vallyn intoned. “Surrender now and give the order for your men to do so as well.”

Indecision and fury flashed through Shafer’s eyes. He worked his jaw beneath his helm, but the sounds of battle were growing louder—the clash of steel, the shriek of horses, the screams of the wounded and dying. Vallyn raised a hand, as if giving a signal, and shifted his illusion enchantment, making his knot of foreboding warriors take a threatening step forward.

“Fae take you,” Baron Shafer snarled.

They already tried, Vallyn thought with dry amusement. *I said no.* He nudged Riven forward and lifted his weapon. “Is that your final answer?”

Shafer threw down his sword. “I surrender.”

The knights surrounding him cast aside their weapons, and the lords and other bystanders raced off, shouting for the others to surrender. The warriors at the rear of the camp quickly complied.

Vallyn jumped down from Riven’s back and stalked toward Shafer. A reckless impulse to torment the man who had caused the last two days of fighting roared through him, as did a laughing desire to let his magic rush out and see what it could do. He tamped it down.

Stupid fae magic. It wasn’t this loud for his father. The human half of Vallyn weakened his ability to control his magic. Human enchanters and their books were little help. Fae magic had overlapping abilities and qualities as human magic, but it didn’t work quite the same. Fae magic was also more powerful and capricious. A fae trying

to learn magic from a human was like a housecat teaching a mantico-re to hunt.

Vallyn clenched his teeth and focused on Shafer. He couldn't be distracted by the boundless energy of his fae side right now.

“On your knees.”

Shafer bristled. “That seems unnec—”

“On. Your. Knees.” Vallyn lunged forward and held the tip of his bloodied blade less than a hand's breadth from Shafer's pale throat above his gorget.

His hands trembling a little, Shafer lowered to his knees, and Vallyn traced his movement.

“Remove your helm.”

As soon as Shafer obliged, Vallyn moved behind the baron and held the sharp edge of his sword against the man's throat. “Every-one,” he shouted. “Stand down and wait for Duke Alimer.”

“Why do your men just stand there?” Shafer asked.

“They'll ensure no one tries to escape.”

In reality, Vallyn hoped no one would test them. He'd never maintained such a large illusion or for so long before. Illusions were, according to his father, one of the strengths of his kin—the Court of Light. They were easy for him to create, but keeping this one up was wearing down his concentration. Worse, the longer he let his magic flow freely, the more it pushed at his control, tempting him to let it run wild.

He didn't dare. He didn't know what it was capable of and was too afraid to find out—and afraid of anyone noticing.

So Vallyn focused on looking stoic and rigidly held his magic in check.

At long last, Cassius approached, flanked by a group of lords and

trusted knights. Lord Ackroyd was among them, all part of the show to demonstrate that Cassius was now unchallenged in his bid for the throne. With all of the focus on Cassius, Vallyn cut off the illusion. The hundred knights faded into the air, vanishing without a sound as he reeled in the raucous energy and locked it deep in his chest. He removed his sword from Shafer's throat but remained standing menacingly behind the vanquished lord.

"Roland Shafer," Cassius said, his voice clear and steady. "I'm told you wish to surrender to me."

For a moment, the baron was silent, and Vallyn feared he was going to make this difficult.

"Yes," Shafer gritted out.

"And will you also recognize and support my claim to the throne?"

Shafer's armor creaked as his shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "If I do, what is my future?"

"If you surrender but do not recognize my claim, you and your son, who has surrendered but says he is waiting to follow your lead regarding any oaths, will be imprisoned. Your family will be stripped of their status and lands. If you swear fealty now, I will allow you and your son go free and retain your title and lands, although you and your family will be watched closely. You have one opportunity to accept this offer."

It was incredibly generous. Risky, too, and Vallyn had tried to talk his friend out of it. Cassius, however, didn't want to weaken Aedyllan further. He was willing to reach across the chasm and offer forgiveness for the sake of peace.

Shafer's gloved fist clenched and unclenched. At last, he bowed his head. "I cede the throne of Aedyllan and recognize Cassius

Alimer's claim to the throne. I swear my allegiance to him as king.”

Tension drained from Vallyn as the rest of the lords stepped forward to swear their fealty to Cassius. At last, it was over. All that remained was to continue to the palace and formally coronate Cassius. With the lords brought to heel, especially Shafer and Ackroyd, that should be easy.

Everything after that would be difficult as the kingdom adjusted to the change in power. Cassius would have to lead a kingdom in need of healing. Aedyllan had festering wounds from the last few decades of Faine rule, and the cataclysmic nature of the end of the Faine line had caused unrest. Despite swearing fealty, Vallyn expected distrust would remain between the different factions, and the various nobles would all have their own agendas. Cassius would face not swords but the deceptions and intricacies of politics.

At least Vallyn wouldn't have much to do with that mess. Cassius would retain him as his general, military counsellor, and head of the palace defense, but Vallyn was no lord. He'd support his friend as much as he could, of course, but most of that would be making sure no one put a dagger in Cassius's back. Let Cassius deal with politics and talking. Vallyn would be his sword and his shield.

Whatever the future held, Vallyn was ready for it.

Narrator: Vallyn was not ready.

But that's a much longer story for another time.

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