



Chapter 8

The Accident

After the opening ceremonies and announcements, the first day of the festival focused on the Maleni (young ones) and their activities: games of skill, races, traditional dances, craft-making, storytelling, animals, archery, knife throwing, and a fairy hunt that night.

The next day would feature similar events for the older elves, including a night hunt where each participant would wear a ribbon tied around their upper arm. If they were captured, they had to relinquish their ribbon—as well as any others they had collected. That eliminated them from the game. Once one elf collected all the ribbons, the hunt ended. It was known to last all night and into the following day. The longest hunt had stretched to five days, extending the festival longer than ever before.

On the third day—or once the hunt ended—there would be music, dancing, and the closing feast.

This year, Rhonan had asked Avalina to assist with the Maleni's archery and knife-throwing events. Grabbing her bow and arrows, she headed to the training field just outside Thaladore's side gate. She had barely stepped onto the field when she stopped in her tracks.

It was Denno—the grumpiest elf in the world.

He was a stout elf with wild dark hair and a scar that ran from just below his eye and curved down his right cheek. He also served as the council’s representative from the desert elf tribe, his homeland.

“Where’s Rhonan?” Avalina asked, trying to make cheerful conversation—though she already suspected the answer.

“Guard business,” he huffed.

As captain of the guard, Rhonan would be checking on Elashta with Dakath, her caretaker. Avalina reminded herself of that fact to keep calm.

Breaking into her thoughts, Denno grumbled, “You’re too old to be a Maleni. What are you doing here?”

“I was supposed to help Rhonan with today’s events.”

“Oh no! I wasn’t told I’d have to work with you!” Denno dropped the training bows, arrows, and knives onto the ground.

“You’ve never liked me,” Avalina said, hands on her hips.

“And for good reason,” Denno shot back.

“Well, I made a promise. Like it or not, you’re stuck with me—at least until Rhonan returns.”

She thought she heard Denno mutter something under his breath, but chose to ignore it.

“Fine then,” Denno said more clearly. “You can set up the archery targets and teach the Maleni. I’ll supervise—from over here, where it’s safe.”

Avalina couldn’t suppress a snort at his little tantrum. Denno glared before stomping off to the shade of the nearest tree. In one sense, he was right. Maleni

wielding arrows and throwing knives could be dangerous. That's why a healer always accompanied them.

Setting her bow and quiver aside, she began setting up targets in front of the thick treeline bordering the west side of the field. She laid out bows, arrows, and throwing knives on a side table.

She smiled, remembering her first time on this field. Denno had been in charge that day, too. He kept trying to correct her stance, insisting she was doing it wrong—even though she hit the center of the target with every shot. She'd gotten so mad she let an arrow fly just past his ear, nicking it ever so slightly. You'd have thought she'd pierced his heart, the way he squealed. The healer patched him up in seconds, but he'd banished her from the field for the rest of the festival.

That didn't stop her. She'd found her father and Rhonan and convinced them to let her compete in the adult tournament that year. They both knew her skills could stand against the best archers in the guard, so they agreed. To add insult to injury, she'd beaten Denno—shattering his five-year winning streak.

"Avalina, dear, are you ready for us?"

Avalina looked up to see Leandra—Rhonan's wife and the tribe's lead healer. Her almost-white blonde hair was pulled back in a long braid. Slender with soft features and pale brown eyes, she radiated kindness. Her healing touch always left an elf feeling whole.

A group of Maleni followed her.

"Yes," Avalina replied.

"Where do you want us?" Leandra asked.

Avalina turned to the children. “Pick out a bow, a couple of arrows, and a throwing knife. Then sit here in a row, facing the targets.”

The Maleni did as they were told. Avalina reviewed the safety rules, then said, “Everyone stand up leaving everything on the ground in front of you.”

They rose.

“Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Hold out your arm as if you had the bow in your hand. To shoot the arrow, pull the bowstring back to your cheek—elbow high and tight. Inhale as you draw back, and exhale as you release. When you let go of the bowstring, pull your elbow back to complete the follow-through.”

She guided them through the motions, correcting each student one by one.

“I knew you’d be a natural teacher.”

Avalina turned to see Rhonan walking onto the field. Tall and more muscular than most elves, with sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes, he joined her to help prepare the Maleni for their first shots.

“Avalina, why don’t you fire off an arrow so they can see how it’s done?” Rhonan suggested. “Then each of them can have a turn.”

She picked up her bow, pulled an arrow from her quiver, and took her stance. From the sidelines, she heard Denno grumble about her doing it wrong again—but she ignored him. Focusing, she inhaled and drew the string back.

The exact moment she released the arrow, A hooded figure stumbled out of the woods—right behind her target. He tripped over it and collapsed, the arrow striking as he fell.

“JESSIN!” Leandra screamed.

She and Rhonan sprinted toward the boy.

Avalina froze. Her bow dropped. Cold sweat poured down her face. Her stomach lurched. Her head spun. She tried to cry out, to ask if he was all right—but her voice failed her. All she could do was watch in horror.

She heard Denno rounding up the Maleni and leading them away, but her eyes never left Jessin.

Rhonan rolled his son over. “Where’s the arrow?” he demanded, spotting a bloodstain spreading across Jessin’s tunic.

“Pull up his shirt,” Leandra instructed. She held her hands over the wound, channeling her healing magic to stop the bleeding.

Once the bleeding ceased, Rhonan scooped Jessin up and started toward Avalina with Leandra by his side. As they passed, Leandra gently placed an arm around Avalina and guided her along with them toward the healers hale.

Her healing touch seemed to unlock Avalina’s voice at last.

“Did... Did I kill him?” she choked out.

“No, dear,” came Leandra’s shaky but reassuring reply. “The arrow only grazed him... but something else is very wrong.”