

Courage

Molly Evangeline

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Makilien Trilogy – Book 2

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:Chapter One:

Consequences

Makilien bit down hard, squeezing her eyes shut. Tears leaked from beneath her eyelids, but she brushed them away. Pulling her knees up closer to her chest, she clutched the front of her dress against her throat and tried to block out the pain that snatched her breath away.

“Sorry.” Aedan’s voice was low with sympathy. “I’m almost done.”

He rinsed a bloodied cloth in a basin of warm water and carefully finished cleaning one of several long, deep cuts across Makilien’s back. Once the blood had been wiped away and no other wounds bled freshly, he laid the cloth aside.

“There. I’m finished.”

Makilien exhaled deeply and took a moment to collect herself. Then she pushed to her feet, holding her torn dress against her shoulders. She turned to her friend, eyes full of gratitude. “Thank you, Aedan.”

He nodded but his own gaze expressed concern as he asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to go to your mother for help with the bandages?”

Makilien had to shake her head despite her longing to do just that. Contact with her family would only risk their safety.

“No, I’ll manage,” she answered quietly.

She turned and ducked into her small tent where she knelt down and reached for a roll of bandages. Steeling herself, she began the tedious and painful process of bandaging herself as best she could. It took time, but when she finished, she sighed heavily and wiped perspiration from her forehead.

Laying her torn dress aside to mend, she changed into a new one and left the tent. Outside, she straightened, grimacing, and scanned the small riverside camp at the edge of Reylaun. There were two tents—hers and Aedan’s—and a fire built between them. Except for a short line tied between two trees where Makilien dried clothes, the camp was bare.

Aedan sat by the fire, and Makilien sank down across from him. They looked at each other.

“So it was a trap,” Aedan said. “Reece acted as bait.”

“Yes,” Makilien murmured, vivid memories from that morning quick to replay in her mind. She’d secretly met Reece in the old barn nearby to talk to him about Elohim only to have armed guards appear as soon as she was finished. It was now the second time she’d had to endure the agony of being whipped.

“I don’t think he meant to see me hurt,” Makilien said after a moment of silent thought. “I think he was overcome by fear and felt he had to go to Vayzar.”

Aedan quietly stared at the fire. He didn’t want to speak or think badly of Reece, but it bothered him deeply that the man had given Makilien up to Vayzar, frightened or not. Having endured his share of beatings, he hated to see Makilien face such punishment.

At her sigh, he looked up.

“My father was there this morning, in the square. I felt terrible for him. I know he wanted to do something, but was powerless.” Makilien paused thoughtfully. “But I always hope that maybe seeing how strongly I believe will open his eyes to the truth.”

The greatest disappointment Makilien had faced since returning home from her adventures was her parents’ unwillingness to believe and accept the truth she shared with them. She knew it was largely out of fear, but it was something that weighed heavily on her every day, especially when others overcame their fear to believe.

Aedan understood just how she felt. His own mother and sister, and his mother’s new husband, would not believe either. His parents had wanted nothing to do with Makilien once she began sharing her stories, afraid of the trouble it might bring them. They’d tried everything to get Aedan to stay away from her, but the two of them were in this together. Of everyone, he had been the very first to believe what Makilien shared with him and trust Elohim.

“Do you ever consider leaving?” Aedan asked suddenly.

“I think about it,” she confessed. “There are times, like this morning, when I desperately want to, but I know it’s not time for that . . . not yet.” She stared at him for a moment. “But you can go. You don’t have to stay for me.”

Though it was one of Aedan’s greatest desires to leave Reylaun, to see and experience all Makilien had, she and her mission were more important than his dreams of leaving.

“I won’t leave until you do.”

“That may never happen,” Makilien warned.

“Then it never happens.”

Makilien smiled in deep gratitude, immensely thankful for Aedan and his unwavering loyalty, which had helped see her through many tough times.

“Well.” Aedan rose. “I should head over to the butcher. Cal promised me pay if I helped him butcher one of his cows today. Maybe I can even bring back some meat for supper.”

“That would be wonderful. I don’t want to sound ungrateful for what we have, but you can only eat so much fish and rabbits before you start to tire of them.”

Aedan chuckled and agreed. “Is there anything you need me to do before I go?”

“No, I’ll be all right. Actually, I was hoping I could find work too. I don’t expect to though, not after news of this morning gets around.”

“Be careful,” Aedan cautioned. The guards would keep an especially close watch on Makilien for the next couple days.

“I will.”

Alone at camp, Makilien sat in silence for a while, watching the small fire burn down and thinking, as she so often did, of the events and the people who had changed her life. At times she missed her friends so desperately it was painful, and even times when she found herself fearful of the future. Today was a day her fortitude wobbled a little. But to combat it, she turned to prayer. Meniah had promised her she would never be alone and to take courage in that.

“I don’t feel as strong today as I do other days,” she murmured, “but I know Your strength will prevail in my weakness. The enemy is always trying to fill me with fear and doubt and make me abandon this mission. Help me ignore the lies and have courage to go on each day.”

Being reminded of the presence she knew was there, she was ready to face the rest of the day, whatever may come of it. She rose, forced to move more slowly than normal, and left camp.

The sun shone high above the treetops by now, and the village was fully awake and bustling with those going about their daily business. As Makilien passed her first group of villagers, she smiled, but she knew the news of her punishment had already reached them when they did not smile in return. They stared blankly and hurried on as if they had not seen her. Others ignored her entirely. A young child pointed in her direction, but the girl's mother grabbed her hand and hurried her along.

Makilien had grown used to these reactions, but they stung nonetheless. More than half the people in the village looked upon her as an outcast. Many she once called friends avoided her, and most of those who still cared deep down were too fearful to associate with her. They wondered why she insisted on alienating herself, but all Makilien had to do was remember what had brought her back here to know she was doing right.

For most of the morning, she wandered around Reylaun, asking anyone she could for jobs. She and Aedan needed money for supplies, but finding work had become difficult. For anyone to give them aid was not looked kindly upon. Their closest friends offered them odd jobs and errands when they could, but today Makilien could find no such work.

At last, she stopped and glanced up at the sun. Midday was nearly upon her. With a sigh she headed toward camp, hot and tired. Along the way, someone called her name. She turned. Her little sister Leiya ran toward her. Though Makilien

tried to have as little contact with her family as possible, denying her sister a chance to speak with her was a difficult thing to do.

When Leiya reached her, Makilien knelt at her level. The seven-year-old's face was drawn in distress.

Makilien rested her hands on her sister's shoulders. "Leiya, what's wrong?"

Leiya's lip trembled. "I heard you were punished again."

"Oh, Leiya. I'm all right. Really."

But the little girl was not comforted. "I don't like it when you're hurt. I want you to go back to Eldor so you won't be hurt anymore."

Her sister's concern touched Makilien's heart. "I am fulfilling a purpose here. This is where Elohim wants me. But, if He tells me it is time for me to leave, I'm taking you, Mother and Father, and Aedan with me."

"I've been praying every day for Elohim to take care of you and make it so you can leave," Leiya told her, careful to keep her voice low.

Makilien smiled widely, amazed by her little sister's faith when she herself had struggled for so long for the same kind of faith. "Thank you, Leiya. Keep praying. Elohim is always listening. Now, you should go. It's not safe for you to be here with me."

"I miss you, and I miss hearing your stories," Leiya murmured. "I wish you could come home."

"I know. So do I." But Makilien couldn't offer any more comfort than a hug. "I love you so much."

"I love you too."

Knowing the danger of being together, Makilien gently urged Leiya to go. With one last longing look at her sister, the

little girl hurried away. Makilien stood and watched, her eyes prickling with tears. This was the hardest part of her mission.

Before Makilien could make herself move on, a voice spoke behind her, low and oozing with mock sympathy.

“Oh, how sad.”

Makilien bit down hard to keep from retorting and getting herself into more trouble. She turned, coming face to face with the owner of the voice—Vayzar, the most hated man in Reylaun. They stood perfectly eye to eye, the two of them. However, though Vayzar was shorter than most men, he commanded complete respect and obedience. He held the position of Reylaun’s governor, appointed by Zirtan to maintain order in the village. He was the greatest reason the people shunned Makilien. They blamed her for his presence. Before she had begun sharing the truth about Elohim, the people had been left alone to govern themselves aside from the guards, but now they had to endure Vayzar’s strict rule.

Vayzar’s cold, dark eyes speared into Makilien’s as he stepped close. “It would not have to be this way, you know. Having to live in that little camp at the edge of the village, shunned by the people, and separated from your family. All you’d have to do is show some loyalty.”

His persuasive, almost caring tone might fool some, but not Makilien. “My loyalties lie elsewhere. You know that as well as I do.”

Vayzar narrowed his eyes. “One of these days, Lord Zirtan will tire of your rebellion. I would be very frightened if I were you.”

Makilien held her tongue. At times, the thought of what might happen did frighten her, but she had faith in Elohim and His protection.

When she would not reply, Vayzar grew impatient with his failed attempts to goad her into foolish action. He motioned to his two bodyguards. They turned to walk on by, but Vayzar stopped before he had passed Makilien and put a heavy hand on her shoulder. In a hard voice, he warned, "I'm watching you closely."

He squeezed her shoulder tightly where one of her wounds was. Excruciating pain shot through her nerves, but Makilien tried not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her react. Finally, he released her and stalked off. Makilien glared after him. When he was out of sight, she grimaced and gingerly touched her throbbing shoulder, blinking at the tears in her eyes. She drew in a deep breath to calm herself and went on her way.

She was glad to reach camp. Though disappointed not to have found work, she now wanted time to herself. Meeting her sister and her confrontation with Vayzar had wreaked havoc on her emotions. She retrieved her torn dress and sewing kit from her tent and walked down to the river. She once hated its trickling sound, but now it soothed her. Sitting in the soft grass along the bank, she set to work mending her dress. This quiet task offered her the perfect opportunity to pray and collect herself again.

The bubbling of the river and the sweet singing of the birds in the trees above reminded Makilien peacefully of Elimar, turning her thoughts once more to the adventures she'd had and her friends. For a long time her thoughts focused on them.

At the sudden snap of a twig, Makilien jumped up and instinctively touched her hip where a sword would have hung.

Upon seeing who it was, she slowly released her breath, allowing herself to relax as she faced the tall, lean young man.

“Derrin, you startled me.”

“Sorry,” he replied, his eyes dropping apologetically before returning to her face. “I thought you heard me.”

It was true. Makilien was usually far more alert.

“I guess I was quite deep in thought.”

“I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“That’s all right.”

Awkward silence hung between them for a moment.

“Did you want something?” Makilien watched his expression fall from delight in seeing her, to concern.

“I heard about this morning,” Derrin explained, regret lowering his voice. “I came to see if you were all right.”

Makilien carefully bent to gather up her sewing. “I’ll be fine.”

“How did it happen?”

“Reece seemed to want to know more about Elohim so I met him this morning in the old barn. He must have become too fearful and told Vayzar. He had guards hidden there. They heard me tell Reece everything.”

Makilien turned away from the river and walked back into camp. Derrin followed. When she stooped to gather wood to build up the fire again, he quickly came to her side. “I can do that for you.”

At first, she wanted to say no, but she allowed him to help. She stood aside to watch him collect an armful of wood and carry it to the fire. He laid a couple pieces on the glowing embers. As he coaxed it along, he glanced up at Makilien, his dark blue eyes unsure, yet earnest.

“I hope this is the last time this happens to you.”

“I don’t think it will be,” Makilien replied, fully resigned to that fact.

Derrin stood, brushing his hands against his pants. “Why not?”

“Because Vayzar is growing ever more wary of me, and I’m bound to get caught again.”

This answer frustrated Derrin, and he couldn’t help but show it as his voice rose a fraction. “Why are you doing this, Makilien? You’ve been put in the stocks more times than I can remember, and now you’ve been beaten twice. When is it going to be enough?”

“People need to know the truth,” Makilien replied with quiet firmness, knowing full well he had no faith or interest in Elohim. “As long as I’m here, I won’t stop trying to share it with them.”

Derrin shook his head. “You’ve come back so changed. Changed . . . and scarred.”

The regretful tone in which he said *scarred* bothered Makilien. She touched the scar on her cheek. Clearly he wished she did not have it, but Makilien had always been glad Meniah had left it when he’d healed her wound. It was a reminder, signifying how Elohim had used her.

“But you’re back now,” Derrin went on matter-of-factly. “Why won’t you just live your life instead of always putting yourself at risk?” His tone was now pleading. “This is your home. Why do you refuse to make something of it?”

She watched him closely when he paused. He met her eyes and held them while Makilien mentally urged him not to take this conversation where she suspected he might.

“You know how I have always felt about you, Makilien. What is wrong with me that you feel nothing in return?”

Makilien looked away, suppressing a groan. “It’s not that, Derrin. It’s just that you and I are so different.” Her gaze returned to him. “You were right about me, I am changed. I have seen and experienced things no one here could imagine. And my faith, it’s everything to me, but we don’t share that faith.”

“There must be some way we can work things out,” Derrin pressed.

Makilien shook her head with adamant resolve. “It’s not that simple . . . I’m sorry.”

With a quiet nod, Derrin hung his head and turned his back to her. Compassion squeezed Makilien’s heart, and she wished she could say something to encourage him as he walked out of camp, but he was the one who would not give up his pursuit. Sighing, she took her eyes away and turned back to her work.

After putting her lunch over the fire to cook, she carried a pile of dirty laundry to the river and scrubbed one of her dresses on a rough stone along the edge. Channeling her frustration with the day into her action, she scrubbed hard, ignoring the pain it caused her back. It seemed everything had gone wrong today. A twinge of guilt pricked her for causing Derrin to feel such disappointment, but at the same time, she had no other choice.

Perhaps, if they had believed the same about Elohim and other circumstances had been different, she possibly could have found herself caring for him that way. After all, they’d been friends all their lives, and Derrin was not unattractive.

Over the years he'd grown from a rather awkward boy into the fine young man he was now, his once sandy-brown hair darkening to compliment his indigo eyes. But circumstances were not different, and Makilien felt nothing for him beyond friendship.

"If you scrub that dress any harder, you'll put a hole in it."

Makilien jumped, startled yet again. This time Aedan stood over her. Amusement played on his face, and Makilien glanced back to the dress.

"I guess I was overdoing it a little."

"You must be particularly annoyed about something."

Makilien stood and wrung out the dress. "Not really annoyed, just frustrated."

"About?"

"This day." Makilien sighed again, wiping her damp forehead and brushing back wisps of hair. All at once, weariness descended on her. "It's barely half over and already it feels long." She put her hands on her hips. "Derrin came to see me. I'm sure you can guess how that went. I also saw Leiya while I was looking for work. It's always so hard to see her when I can't spend time or go home with her. Then I had a little confrontation with Vayzar."

"You really should be resting," Aedan told her. "I'll help you hang up the clothes and then you can sit down."

Makilien exhaled loudly. "You're right." She gave him a little smile. "Thank you. I don't know how I'd do this without you."

:Chapter Two:

Found Out

“Thank you, Nita. Aedan and I are always grateful for your generosity.”
The rounded, middle-aged woman smiled kindly at Makilien. “I only wish I could do more for you. I sure do appreciate your help.”

“I enjoy helping out,” Makilien told her. The other woman certainly needed it from time to time. With seven children and number eight on the way, her work was never done, and Makilien was glad the woman wasn’t afraid to let her help.

“You enjoy this bread now, and come back for more if you need it.” Nita handed Makilien a basket of two fresh loaves of bread.

“We certainly will. We haven’t had bread in some time. Goodbye, Nita.”

“Goodbye, Makilien.”

Smiling to herself, Makilien left the little farm and walked down the street. She had not made much today, but it had been a good day. She loved working with Nita, and it was the first work she had found since her punishment four days ago. Makilien looked forward to telling Aedan once he came back from helping out at a nearby farm in an hour or so. With more

of the meat he had brought back from the butcher and the bread Makilien had received, they would have one of the finest suppers they'd had in a long time.

She had just about reached camp when she froze. Two guards roamed the camp, tearing it apart and scattering what little Makilien and Aedan owned.

Before they could spot her, she dashed over to a nearby building. Setting down the basket of bread, she crept closer, using the trees for cover. Her heart beat hard. Something was not right. Guards had never come to their camp before. She came within hearing distance just as a third guard joined them.

"There's no sign of either of them along the river," he reported.

One of the guards, who had been rummaging through Makilien's belongings, stood. "No matter. Once Lord Vayzar has the girl's family, she'll show herself, and the boy won't be far behind."

Makilien gasped and clamped her hand over her mouth. Never had Vayzar outwardly threatened her family. Something had changed. Turning, she crept away from camp and rushed through the village, dread churning her stomach.

Once within sight of her home, she crouched behind the corner of a neighbor's house and surveyed the area. Four guards stood outside the front of her house. She glanced at the stable in back, seeing no one. Creeping around, she came to the tree she had always used to sneak in and out of her bedroom.

She climbed quietly and peaked through her bedroom window. The room was empty. She eased the window open and climbed through as voices drifted up from downstairs. Tiptoeing across the floor, she knelt in the middle of the

room and lifted a loose floorboard. She reached down, her fingers grasping a long metal object wrapped in a piece of leather. She pulled it out and unwrapped her sword, her gift from Lord Darand.

Rising, Makilien buckled the sword's belt around her waist. With all caution she tiptoed to her door and eased it open so she could better hear the voices in the kitchen below.

“. . . my family has done nothing wrong.”

Her father's voice was firm, but desperate.

“You should have better controlled your daughter,” Vayzar retorted.

“We tried.”

“You should have tried harder!”

“If you must take someone, take me,” Néthyn insisted, “but leave my wife and daughter. They are not to blame for any of this.”

“Forget it,” Vayzar snapped. “Makilien's actions are far too serious for that, and she will learn so. Take them out!”

At the sound of footsteps and her parents' protests as they were dragged outside, Makilien's heart crashed against her ribs. She jumped up and ran back to the window. Climbing down the tree, she raced around the house and pulled her sword from its scabbard, sunlight dancing across the sharp steel blade. She came around the front of the house just as Vayzar and a large group of guards moved to take her family away.

“Stop!”

The men halted at the sound of her voice and spun around. Vayzar pushed his way to the head, followed by a group of men Makilien realized were not guards of Reylaun. Their clothes, though mostly black, were not the same, and none

wore armor. The man leading this group, a tall, black-haired, dark eyed man caught Makilien's attention. Something about him seemed strangely familiar.

But she had more urgent matters to deal with. "I'm right here, Vayzar." She locked eyes with the wicked man. "Release my family."

Vayzar scoffed. "Release your family? I think not. You see, I've just learned the details of your escapades last summer. The details of how *you* are the one who killed General Zendon and are responsible for our defeat in Eldor, a most unfortunate setback."

Makilien's mouth dropped open. How did he know? Her friends had promised to keep her secret. She glanced at her family. They stared at her, confusion and questions in their eyes. She never had told them of her part in Eldor's victory, believing the information too dangerous. Grimacing over having kept it from them, she turned back to Vayzar and spoke with quiet confidence.

"You are right. I did meet Zendon in battle and mortally wound him, but my family had nothing to do with it. Let them go."

"Why don't *you* drop your sword and surrender?"

Makilien took her sword in both hands, holding it defensively. "Not until you release my family."

Scowling, Vayzar shoved one of his guards forward. "Disarm her and bring her here."

The guard pulled out his sword and strode toward her. Makilien carefully watched his every move. It had been over a year since she'd engaged in a life and death battle, but she was ready. The guard raised his blade. Makilien brought hers up and swung hard, batting the guard's sword away with a

force that surprised him. Again, he raised his sword to attack, more determinedly this time, but Makilien's movements were much more fluid and practiced.

The fight was brief. After easily dodging an attack, Makilien maneuvered her sword around and cut into the guard's side. Though not a fatal wound, the guard stumbled away moaning. By now, another guard had rushed in to help. Just before he reached her, Makilien glanced at Vayzar. He scowled, his face darkening with disgust and rage.

Makilien found her next foe to be more experienced, yet still not a match for her. As hard as he tried, he could find no way to break through her defense. In the middle of the fight, a voice growled out, "Incompetent fools!"

Before Makilien knew it, the guard she fought was shoved aside, and the dark man took his place. He was much taller than her, one of the tallest men she had met. At once everything changed. His skill was far superior to that of the guards, and Makilien realized it instantly. Now she truly was in a fight for her life. Never before had she battled such a skilled opponent. His attacks came swift and unpredictably, eliminating any chance for Makilien to retaliate. She could barely react fast enough to defend herself.

She fought with desperation, but sensed the fight was already lost. At last, the man's superior skill and strength won out. In a flash of movement, his sword slashed down across her arm. Makilien groaned and retreated, but the strength of her opponent's next attack loosened her grip on her sword. Her left hand, tingling from the pain of her wound, slipped as her sword was knocked sideways. The next thing she knew, the razor sharpness of the man's blade pricked the sensitive skin of her throat. She swallowed, thinking in a moment she

would be dead. However, the man did not kill her, though the loathing in his eyes told her he wanted to.

“Drop your sword.”

Breathing heavily from pain and exertion, Makilien’s eyes darted to her family, and she hung her head in defeat. She had done everything possible to defend them, but still had failed. She let her sword slip out of her hand, and it fell with a clatter to the ground.

The man slid his sword back into the scabbard and grabbed Makilien by the arm, careless of her wound. Her breath was snatched away by the sudden, sharp pain as he dragged her into the midst of the group. There, Vayzar gave two of his guards, the wounded one and the other who had attempted to disarm Makilien, a fiery glare.

“I’ll be having words with you two later,” he spat. He then turned his attention to Makilien’s captor. “There, Jorin, you’ve got Makilien. Is there anything else?”

Jorin’s expression was like stone. “Just make sure her family suffers.”

Makilien looked up at him, horror gripping her heart, and her eyes went to Vayzar who sneered, “Oh, I will. They will be put on display in the square for all to see, and then, at dawn, they will burn.”

“No!” Makilien cried. She struggled to pull away. “They have nothing to do with this!”

Jorin jerked her around to face him. “Maybe you should have considered the consequences before you killed my brother.”

Makilien’s eyes flew to his, realization crashing in. He was Zendon’s brother. She could see that now.

“I killed him in the midst of battle,” she argued, adrenaline pulsing through her body. “Do whatever you want to me because of it, but my family is innocent. They weren’t there. They had no idea what I did.”

But the cruelty in Jorin’s eyes told Makilien her pleas were wasted. He looked at Vayzar again and repeated, “Make sure they suffer.”

“No!” Makilien screamed. She tried with all her might to pull away, but Jorin squeezed her arm and the pain weakened her attempts. Throwing her at his men, he ordered, “Bind her hands.”

Makilien had no chance of escape before her hands were tied securely behind her back. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

“Oh, Elohim,” she whispered in desperation. “Please don’t let this happen to my family because of the things I have done!”

Makilien’s heart broke at the sound of Leiya’s sobbing. She gazed at her family, and their fearful, hopeless expressions were seared into her mind.

“Come,” Jorin commanded his men. “Let’s be on our way.”

Fighting against being taken, Makilien looked back at her family with deep remorse. “I’m sorry. So sorry.” She wanted to tell them she’d find a way to stop this, but how could she?

The men yanked her along, and though she continued to struggle, it was useless.

“Have mercy, Vayzar, please!” Makilien cried, but he did not even look at her.

His men escorted her family in one direction, and Jorin and his men dragged Makilien in the other. She tried to keep her eyes on her family, but they were soon out of sight. Heavy sobs racked Makilien's body as she was forced along, and her heart cried out to Elohim.



Aedan stood aside as Ray and his two teenage sons backed their oxen team and full wagon of hay up to the barn, the last of the day. When it was in place, he picked up a pitchfork and climbed up into the wagon where he pitched the hay into the loft of the barn. Ray and the boys joined him.

For several minutes they worked undisturbed until Ray's wife rushed from the house.

"What's wrong, Elarie?" Ray asked.

"It's terrible!" Elarie exclaimed. "I just heard Vayzar has Makilien's family tied up in the square. He's going to have them burned at dawn!"

Aedan's heart leapt into his throat, and he jumped down from the wagon. "Where is Makilien?"

"A group of men came and took her away."

"Out of the village?"

Elarie gave a sad nod.

"When?"

"I don't know. A half an hour ago, maybe more."

Aedan looked off in the direction of the gate and started moving. "I have to find a way to help her."

Elarie grabbed his arm. "Wait, Aedan. Vayzar is after you now. He has guards combing the village. They will reach here any minute. You must hide until they move on."

Aedan clenched his fists. He didn't want to hide. He needed to go after Makilien. The farther her captors took her, the harder it would be for him to find them. But he had no choice. If he was caught, there would be no hope for either of them or for Makilien's family.

"Here, Aedan, climb back up in the wagon," Ray said. "You can hide in the hay."

Aedan groaned in frustration, but crawled into the wagon. Ray and his sons helped him burrow down into the hay and covered him completely, making sure no part of him could be seen. Just as they finished, Elarie warned in a sharp whisper, "Guards are coming!"

"Quickly, boys, start working," Ray instructed.

They picked up their pitchforks and pitched hay again. Aedan held his breath. A moment later, footsteps approached, and he remained absolutely still. Leaning against the edge of the wagon, Ray asked, "Can I help you?"

"We're searching for the young man who is always stirring up trouble with Makilien," the leader of the group said. "We heard he was here."

"Well, you can look around if you want, but you won't find him here."

"Check all the buildings," the guard ordered.

As his men hurried off, he peered up at Ray. "Do you know where he is?"

"Have you checked their camp?" Ray asked.

"Of course we have," the guard snapped.

Ray shrugged. "I can't say more than that."

The man squinted suspiciously before turning away to wait for the others to return. They searched all around the yard, in the barn, and even in the house, obviously coming

back with nothing. Without a word, the whole group moved on.

Ray sighed in relief. “They’re gone, Aedan, but don’t come out just yet. They are still checking the neighbors.”

Aedan waited for what seemed like forever. He hated it. He needed to go and figure out how to rescue Makilien. Both she and her family depended on him. On his own, he didn’t think he’d be much help to her family, but together they stood a much better chance of success. Aedan considered asking Ray for help, but the farmer could not fight. None of their friends could. It was all up to Aedan.

More than twenty minutes passed before Ray gave the okay to come out. At last, the guards had moved on to another area of the village.

“What are you going to do?” Ray asked as Aedan crawled out and brushed hay from his dark hair and clothing.

“I have to get out of the village and try to rescue Makilien so together we can rescue her family.” Aedan turned to Elarie. “Do you know if Vayzar has done anything with my family?”

Elarie shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Aedan was relieved by this, but his thoughts focused on Makilien.

“How will you get out of the village?” Ray asked.

“I’m not sure. There is a loose stake in the palisade where Makilien and I sneak out sometimes, but I don’t know if I can get there. First I have to get to Makilien’s house. She has weapons hidden there that I need if I’m going to be able to save her.”

“Aedan, if there is anything we can do to help, just ask,” Ray told him.

“Thank you, Ray. Right now, I don’t think there is anything you can do. But, if I can rescue Makilien and we successfully make it back into the village, we may call on you to help us free her family.”

“We’ll do whatever we can,” Ray promised.

Aedan turned to go. Time was against him.

“Aedan,” Ray said. “You have our prayers.”

Aedan looked back at the whole family gratefully. “Thank you.”

He then went on, determined to get to Makilien’s house and arm himself. The going, however, was slow. Guards patrolled everywhere. Too many times they nearly spotted him before he had a chance to duck for cover. Heart pounding, he pushed on. Finally, after more close calls than he believed he should have escaped, Aedan snuck along the stable behind Makilien’s house. When he reached the back door, he eased it open and slipped inside.

He let out his breath to find the house quiet and empty, and rushed up to Makilien’s bedroom. When he walked in, he discovered the floorboard already lifted. Dropping to his knees, he reached into the open space and pulled out an Elven bow and a quiver of blue-fledged arrows. He reached in again, feeling for Makilien’s sword, but found it gone. *She must have taken it.*

Aedan rose and strapped the quiver over his shoulder. A bow would be far better than no protection at all. While not as proficient as Makilien, he still had confidence in his skill with the weapon.

Hurrying downstairs, he went to a front window, searching for any nearby guards. Something near the road caught the light and his attention. Makilien’s sword! He looked both ways.

The road was empty. His gaze returned to the sword. Going out into the open to get it would be a huge risk, but to have a sword would be worth it.

With utmost caution, he pulled open the front door and stepped out onto the porch. Still, no guards were within view. Praying not to be seen, Aedan dashed out to the road and snatched up the sword before he turned and sprinted back to the house.

Once inside, he closed the door and leaned back against it, heart racing. He flexed his fingers around the hilt of the sword and stared at the blade. He'd held it often enough when Makilien had taught him how to handle the weapon, but this was the first time he would have to use one in defense of his life.

Aedan walked through the house and back out the rear door. He needed to reach the palisade. Getting there proved just as difficult and dangerous as getting to Makilien's house, and he never quite made it before realizing it was impossible. He would be caught for sure if he tried. He sighed heavily. His only other choice was to try to make his escape through the gate.

:Chapter Three:

Unexpected Aid

Aedan peeked around a corner and down the alley between two buildings situated on the main street. If he could sneak down the alley without being detected, he would be able to see how many guards were at the gate. With no one in sight, he inched his way toward the far end of the alley. He had barely made it halfway when someone spoke behind him. He spun around, Makilien's sword extended.

"Whoa, Aedan! It's me!"

Aedan exhaled loudly. "Derrin, what are you doing here?" But he didn't give the other young man a chance to speak. He took him by the arm and dragged him around to the backside of the building.

"What in Dolennar is going on?" Derrin asked.

"The guards are after me," Aedan answered, looking around the corner to make sure no one had seen them.

"I know, I heard. I saw Makilien's family tied up in the square. What happened?"

"Makilien has been taken, and Vayzar is going to kill her family. Apparently he wants me too."

"What do you mean she was taken?" Derrin demanded. "Who took her?"

Aedan shook his head. "I don't know. Men who work for Zirtan, obviously."

"Why would they do this?"

"I'm not sure, but I think I have an idea." Taking Makilien and killing her family on top of it seemed to Aedan to be going awfully far just because Makilien had defied Vayzar. There had to be another reason, and he was willing to bet someone knew what Makilien had done in Eldor.

"What are you going to do?" Derrin asked.

"I need to get out of the village and rescue Makilien so we can save her family."

Aedan did not wait for Derrin to respond. He walked back into the alley. Derrin followed, but did not speak. When he reached the end, Aedan peered around the corner toward the gate a hundred yards away. He scanned the area, and his attention focused on one guard and another man coming up the street. The other man was dressed unlike anyone Aedan had seen in Reylaun and appeared entirely out of place. Aedan found his face familiar. Then it dawned on him.

"It can't be," he murmured, but he'd seen the drawings in Makilien's sketchbook too many times to be mistaken.

"What?" Derrin whispered.

Aedan glanced at him, but did not answer. His mind worked too quickly in an attempt to form a plan. He looked around the alley and spotted a broken axe handle laying a few feet away.

"Hold this." He handed Makilien's sword to Derrin whose eyes went wide at holding such a forbidden object. Aedan retrieved the axe handle and tested it in his hand. It still had adequate weight to it. He pushed Derrin back against the wall of the building. "Stay there and keep quiet."

Aedan returned to the corner and peeked around again. The two men were only a couple yards away. Pressing himself up against the building, he drew in long, deep breaths and prayed for success. In a moment, the guard and other man passed by the alley. Before they could get far, Aedan stepped out and swung the axe handle. It crashed into the guard's helmet. The man stumbled forward and fell face first to the ground.

Aedan glanced toward the gate. None of the other guards had noticed, but they would if he didn't get the unconscious guard off the street. His eyes swung around to the young man. He appeared to be around Aedan's age with dark brown hair cut chin length and deep brown eyes. Now Aedan had no doubt. This was Sirion.

The Half-Elf stared at Aedan, his expression one of shock and confusion over what had just taken place, but there wasn't time quite yet for explanation.

"Help me hide him, quickly."

Aedan took one of the guard's arms and waited for Sirion to take the other.

Together, they dragged the man into the alley. He moaned once, but did not come to. Straightening, Aedan glanced briefly at Derrin who stood in silence, his mouth hanging open, but his attention returned to the other man.

"You're Sirion, right?"

"Yes," he answered, his brows lowered in question. "Do I know you?"

"I am Makilien's friend, Aedan. I recognized you from Makilien's sketches."

Recognition of the name dawned on Sirion's face. "Where is Makilien?" he asked, concern edging his voice.

“She was taken by a group of men,” Aedan told him, “and Vayzar, Zirtan’s appointed ruler here, has Makilien’s family held captive. He’s going to execute them in the morning.”

“How long ago was Makilien taken?”

“At least an hour. I’ve been trying to get out of the village to rescue her, but the guards are after me too.”

Sirion stood quiet for a moment as he processed the information.

“Is there only one gate in and out of the village?”

“Yes.”

“All right, there are at least four guards there right now, but only one is right at the gate. I will distract him long enough for you to run out. I’ll follow. We’ll make our way along behind the buildings until we’re closer.”

Aedan nodded, and Sirion picked up the fallen guard’s sword. Turning to Derrin who just gawked at them, Aedan took Makilien’s sword back. Without further words, Sirion and Aedan jogged down the alley and behind the buildings.

When they reached the last one closest to the gate, the two of them stopped, peering around the corner. The guard stationed at the gate stared off out of the village and would not see them coming. The other three also faced away from them.

“Follow close behind me and try to be as quiet as possible,” Sirion instructed. “As soon as I’ve taken care of the guard at the gate, run straight into the forest. I did not come alone. The others are waiting in the trees, and they will make sure you get there safely.”

Aedan squeezed Makilien’s sword and followed just behind Sirion as he walked out. All went well until they had just about reached the lone guard at the gate. He must have heard them coming and turned. His eyes widened when he

saw Aedan, and even more when he realized they were armed. He reached for his sword and opened his mouth to shout a warning, but in a swift move, Sirion smashed the hilt of his sword into the side of the guard's helmet.

Aedan bolted, straight for the forest. The other guards shouted and ran after him. He glanced back. Sirion was right behind him, but so were the guards. Just before he reached the bushes, something swished past his head. A guard cried out. Aedan looked again over his shoulder. One of the guards lay on the ground with an arrow piercing his chest. The other guards retreated back to the safety of the village.

A moment later, Aedan and Sirion crashed through the brush and stumbled to a halt in a small clearing. Working to slow his breathing and heart rate, Aedan's eyes swept over the group gathered around him. Everyone was familiar from Makilien's sketches, but to see them in person was the culmination of a year of dreaming about it. Halandor, Torick, Loron, and Gilhir all stood before him.

"Aedan."

"Hello, Torick," he replied breathlessly.

The man looked pleased to see him and asked, "Are you all right?"

Aedan nodded. Makilien's friends looked between the two of them, and Halandor asked, "Where's Makilien?"

Sirion turned to Aedan who relayed everything he knew of Makilien's capture and the fate of her family.

"They must be taking her north to Zirtan," Halandor said. "They did not come south or we would have met them on the road. Aedan, do you know if they are traveling by foot or by horse?"

"I don't know," Aedan answered. "I didn't see anything for myself, I only heard what happened."

“Do you know how many there were?”

Aedan shook his head.

“We need to go after them before they get too far ahead,” Sirion said as he took his own weapons from Gilhir and armed himself after giving them up to get inside Reylaun.

Halandor agreed. “Let’s get the horses.”

Everyone followed him deeper into the forest.

As they made their way, Aedan asked, “Did you come here for Makilien?”

Halandor glanced back and nodded. “We came as soon as we realized word was spreading all over Dolennar that she is the one who killed Zendon.”

After walking a distance of half a mile, they came upon another clearing where six horses were tied. Everyone went to their own horses, but before Halandor untied his buckskin, he led a tall black horse to Aedan.

“This is Makilien’s horse, Antiro. You can ride him.”

Aedan took the magnificent horse’s reins and looked him in the eyes. “Antiro,” he murmured. “Makilien has told me all about you. She will be delighted to see you after we rescue her.”

Antiro tossed his head and gave an eager nicker. Aedan stepped back and slipped Makilien’s sword into his belt before pulling himself up into Antiro’s saddle. He’d never before ridden a horse, but since Antiro could understand his words and would not do anything unpredictable, he was not concerned.

As the others rode out, Aedan gently squeezed Antiro’s sides, and the horse followed.



Sweat glistened on the sides of Makilien's face and trickled down her back, dampening her bandages and making them rub uncomfortably. Her arm throbbed deeply, and her head pounded. She did not know how the men kept up such a grueling pace with no sign of slowing.

She had ceased crying, knowing it would do no good and would only make her look weak to her captors. But her heart wept. Nothing was more painful than the thought of her family being burned to death, especially her parents. Without believing in the truth, they were not ready to die. *Oh, Elohim, Makilien pleaded, whatever happens to me, please do not let my parents die without knowing You!*

Losing herself in her thoughts and prayers, she unknowingly slowed her pace, but a strong hand shoved her forward. She stumbled, tried to regain her balance, but failed. Landing hard on her knees, she dragged in deep, ragged breaths.

Before she could get back up, Jorin took her by her injured arm and hauled her to her feet. Stabbing pain burned through her nerves, and she could not stifle a whimper.

Leaning close, Jorin said in a low, steely voice, "Get moving."

Makilien locked eyes with him. His expression seemed to be daring her to try something. Summoning every last ounce of determination, she pushed on. She could not let herself be defeated. No matter what happened, she had to trust Elohim was in control.

A couple hours after leaving Reylaun, the sun sank low and the forest dimmed, yet they continued on for another hour. Makilien's weary muscles burned, but at last, the group stopped to set up their nighttime camp. They sat Makilien at the base of a tree and tied her securely. From this position, she watched Jorin command the tasks of each of his men. She wondered

at how enemy leaders treated their men and the way men remained loyal in spite of this hard treatment. Jorin's wish to avenge his brother was the only small indication of care she had ever witnessed within enemy ranks. Otherwise they seemed to have no love for each other, united only by their hatred of those opposed to Zirtan.

In a short time, a fire burned and a meal was set cooking. Makilien wondered if any of this food would reach her stomach, but she doubted it.

Now that everything was settled for the night, Jorin came and stood before her, peering down at her. She studied him, finding him not quite as frightening as his brother had been, but intimidating nonetheless.

Finally, she grew uncomfortable under his intense and silent gaze. "Whatever you are thinking, you may as well speak it."

Jorin was more than happy to do just that. "When I came to Reylaun for you, I was expecting more. The people of Eldor speak of you as some sort of great hero."

Though he meant for his words to hurt, Makilien was not affected. "Stories are often full of exaggeration, especially where heroes are concerned."

Frustration flashed in Jorin's eyes as they narrowed just slightly. But in a moment, he had a comeback. "It's a pity. They were even hoping for you to bring them another victory."

Makilien's brows drew together. "*Another* victory?"

Cruel amusement played on Jorin's face. "Yes, against Lord Zirtan's new and vastly larger army. You didn't believe in your pathetic victory in Eldor that you had truly defeated Lord Zirtan, did you? That was merely an unforeseen setback, but this time there will be no chance of defeat. Lord Zirtan

himself will lead this army, and we will crush Eldor and anyone who stands in our way.”

Makilien stared at him. She didn't want to believe it, but there was no lie in his expression.

“And news of your death will be the first blow.” Jorin's voice lowered with hatred for her. “It will be a slow, painful death for what you did to my brother.”

For a moment she said nothing, considering the torture that awaited her, but then she spoke with quiet surety, “You may take my life, but you will never have my soul.”

She watched his jaw shift and tighten, and his eyes become shadowed with rage. Without warning, he reached down and slapped her hard. Makilien's cheek stung, and she squeezed her eyes shut, but otherwise she did not react. Looking back up at Jorin, she held his still furious gaze with a calm confidence building in her heart.

Infuriated by the strength in her eyes, Jorin finally turned on his heel and stalked off to the fire. Makilien let out a deep sigh and leaned her head back against the tree. It was going to be a long night.