

Excerpted from
The Silver Seed

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Interminable as it seemed, in reality the wait was not very long. The *sheki* revealed their intentions as soon as the sun sank below tree level, bursting from the forest in a rush. With a shout, Mouse threw another armload of wood on the fire, then grabbed a pair of burning sticks and made his way through the gauntlet. As he came to the foot of the stairs at the other end, he tossed those torches onto the layer of kindling Nestor had spread across the floor. The green twigs did not burn very rapidly or very high, but they made the entryway a more dangerous place to walk.

Mouse's cry sent icicles into Aileen's gut, and for a moment she was afraid she might be sick. She thought Nestor looked pale as well, and found it oddly reassuring that she was not the only one who was frightened. They climbed to their feet at the edge of the dais, and Aileen raised her bow. She had decided to use it rather than her sword, since she was a better archer than swordswoman - at least, she would be if her hands would stop trembling.

Mouse had taken up a position just outside the door to the throne room, and Aileen could see him raising his bow, as well. She was pleased to see that he did not have to use it right away, since that meant their traps were having some effect.

The view was even more encouraging from where Mouse stood. Forced to leap the bonfire, two *sheki* had impaled themselves on the front row of stakes, while a third had been unable to stop itself before running into the second rank. A fourth *sheki* had been shielded from the spikes by the bodies of the others, but had fallen backward into the fire as a result. That one ran off into the woods, howling with pain and fear. Two more fell to arrows from Mouse's bow as they scrambled back to their feet on the floor of burning twigs.

For a moment Mouse felt the urge to raise his fist in defiance. The *sheki* were having more trouble with the snares than he had dared to hope, giving the humans some slim chance for surviving the encounter. Suddenly the beasts stopped jumping through the flames, however, and Mouse lowered his bow in confusion. There had been more than six in the pack. Moments later he heard a scratching sound from the stairs to his right.

"The stairs!" he shouted. "They are coming down the stairs!"

Aileen saw him turn, tossing his bow to the side as he ran into the throne room. At his heels was a group of sleek, grey shapes, their yellow teeth flashing in the light of the torches they had put on the pillars.

As the young bard hurried past him, Durgan stepped out from behind one of those pillars and brought his hammer down on the skull of a *sheki*.

Two others tried to scabble to a stop, but a flick of the smith's wrist sent one of them sprawling with a broken hip.

The princess raised her bow, but Mouse was blocking her line of fire. She heard Nestor shout something, a single word, and another of the *sheki* was thrown back, as though struck by an enormous fist. Then Mouse was at the bottom of the dais, leaving Aileen with a clear shot at his pursuers. Her hands were no longer shaking, she realized with a sense of pride. The *sheki* were too quick, though, and her arrow struck the flagstones harmlessly.

The shot had done some good, distracting the nearest beast long enough for Mouse to draw his sword. He spun to his left as it sprang, his blade flashing through the firelight. Its tip caught the *sheki* in the throat, and its body flew past him to crash into the throne atop the dais. A loud crash echoed through the hall as it toppled.

Suddenly it occurred to Aileen that the fight was not over, and she fumbled to get another arrow onto her string. Nestor spoke another word, and a *sheki* seemed to burst apart, as though a dozen invisible missiles had torn through its body. Mouse spun around to face the two which remained, but they were already in motion. The best he could manage to do was raise his sword in front of him. The first *sheki*, unable to stop, leapt straight onto the blade, tearing it from Mouse's hands. He turned back to face the last one with empty hands. There was an air of menacing certainty in its crouch. Aileen did not think Mouse would have the chance to knock it aside the way he had the *sheki* in the forest.

The seconds seemed to grind to a halt as Aileen finally nocked an arrow and drew the string to her cheek. She turned the bow in the direction of the springing *sheki* as quickly as she could, but her arms seemed stuck in molasses. The realization that she had loosed too soon tore a scream from her heart. Then the beast left the ground, and she saw that it was leaping right into the arrow's path. The missile buried itself between two ribs. The *sheki* was dying even before its body crashed into Mouse. He staggered back, his heel catching on the steps of the dais, heavily against the stairs. Somehow he managed to keep a hand on the beast's throat, holding its snapping jaws away from his face until its struggles ceased.