**Revenge and Revelation**

“And you will kill a king,” the old crone said with a knowing smile that failed to hide mocking laughter that lay beneath. The cruel twist of the woman’s withered lips implied that Elaina would do no such thing. Elaina turned, her jaw set in defiance. She would, it was her right, her revenge. She didn't care what that smile said. The king would die by her blade. She would let nothing stand in her way. No fancy chair, nor standing army behind it would stop her. Royal blood had been at the end of her path from the first step she took.

And yet, years later, with the man groveling in the mud in front of her, and all of the rest of the prophecy fulfilled, she found that the blow would not fall. She gritted her teeth, remembering the journey that had led her here. Callas tragedy and absent friends. The death. So much death.

The king looked up from the mud. He looked about as far from regal as one could get. His clothes were torn and frayed and caked with the dirt of the road. Tears tracked down the dirt crusted onto his face. His eyes were red and his nose was running. “Please,” said the man who had been a king.

Elaina’s shoulders feel, weighed down by the steel of her armor and the weight of her sword. The tip of her blade drifted down to the ground, embedding in the mud. She steadied her grip and straightened her stance.

The muddy travel worn man curled in on himself, shuddering at the pain of ribs that had probably cracked with that last kick. He wept. Kings weren't supposed to weep. Neither were monsters. Elaina inhaled, but the warm, wet air inside her helm did nothing to bolster her resolve. She took another breath, but it didn't help. She wasn't getting air, she couldn't breath. She reached up, pulling the helm from her head with one inexplicably clumsy hand.

It wasn't smart, the words of the old knight came to her as she dropped her helmet into the mud. “A knight never takes off his helm, unless he's right eager to quit breathing.” He had been like that. Some combination of gruff and strange, with a morbid humor that often failed to quite be funny. He was dead now.

The old knight’s helmet landed in the mud with a wet splat. It was hers now, along with the old man's armor and his sword. Elaina took a deep breath of refreshingly cool air. Then, she took several more deep breaths finding that they survived to steady her, a bit.

“And you will kill a king.” Elaina grasped the hilt of her sword in both hands.

“Kneel, your majesty,” the man who had been a king looked up at her, his ocean blue eyes, once so callus, now heald only terror and pain.

He drew in a shallow breath, “I yield,” he said, quietly and without hope. His eyes flicked to her face. The pleading had been replaced with a cold and deep resignation. His gaze flicked from hers for a moment. Elaina didn't turn to follow it. The boy whimpered quietly behind her.

The sound made her breath catch in her throat. She remembered sitting in a corner, clutching her nose as blood ran across the front of her new dress. She had whimpered much like that as the king's men killed them.

The man on the ground clenched his teeth and set his shoulders. Even as he trembled in terror, he pulled himself to his knees. Elaina raised her greatsword.

“Wait,” shouted a small voice. The boy had apparently worked his gag loose from his mouth, “he yielded.”

A voice echoed in the back of Elaina’s mind, “And you will kill a king.” The sword fell. The man’s head snapped forward as he slumped to the ground, but his neck was still intact. Blood ran from where the flat of Elaina’s sword had slammed into the back of the ex regal head.

She turned to the boy, “that didn't stop him and his when I was where you are,” she said. “His men cut them down without a second thought. I am not him. I'm better.”

She lashed out with a steel plated boot. The once-king’s nose crunched wetly. “Maybe not quite good, probably not a hero, but better,” Elena turned. Behind her the man who had once been king bled into the mud. He would live… probably. “And I’m far too stubborn to do what some stupid prophecy tells me to,” she said under her breath, her voice pitched too low for the boy to hear. She knelt and picked up the helm that had once belonged to a gruff, strange, old man.

As she walked away from the clearing, Elaina was burdened with one final realization. She swore. In a certain sense, she had killed a king. She had torn apart everything that made him one, she just hadn't ended the life of a man who had once held the title. She hated prophecy.