

BLADE *of* SECRETS

TRICIA LEVENSELLER



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*This one's for you, Dad.
Don't let it go to your head.*



“FLY, YOU FOOLS.”

—Gandalf,

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

GHADRA

PRINCE VERAK'S
Territory

Thersa

PRINCESS
MAROSSA'S
Territory

PRINCESS ORENA'S
Territory

Southern Mountains





CHAPTER ONE

I prefer metal to people, which is why the forge is my safe space.

The heat is relentless in here, even with all the windows open for ventilation. Sweat beads on my forehead and drips down my back, but I wouldn't give up being a smithy for anything.

I love the way a hammer feels in my hand; I love the sounds of metal chiming against metal, the slight give of heated steel, the smell of a raging fire, and the satisfaction of a finished weapon.

I pride myself on making each of my weapons unique. My customers know that when they commission a Zivan blade, it will be one of a kind.

I drop my hammer and inspect my current project.

The flange has the right shape. It's the sixth and final of the identical pieces that will be attached to the mace's head. After quenching the blade, I take it to the grindstone to sharpen every curve of the outer edge. I've already made grooves into the mace using a hammer and chisel. Now all that's left is to weld all the pieces together. Using separate tongs, I place everything into the kiln and wait.

There's plenty to do in the meantime. Tools need cleaning. Scraps of metal need disposing of. I work the bellows to keep the kiln over 2,500 degrees.

Shouts interrupt the peace of my workspace.

My sister, Temra, runs the shop at the front of the forge when she's not assisting me with larger weapons. From there, customers can purchase more simple items, such as horseshoes, buckles, and the like. My magicked horseshoes ensure the horses run faster, and my buckles never break or lose their shine. It's a simple magic—nothing like what's involved in bladesmithing.

"Ziva is not seeing customers now!" Temra yells from the other side of the door.

That's right. No one steps into the forge. The forge is sacred. It is *my* space.

Judging the steel to be ready, I pull the mace head and first flange from the oven, lining up the blade with the first groove.

"She *will* see me!" a voice screams in response. "She needs to answer for her defective work."

That word prickles. *Defective?* That's unnecessarily rude. If I were a person who handled confrontation well, I might go out there and give the customer a piece of my mind.

But I needn't have worried; my sister *is* that person.

"Defective? How dare you? Get yourself to a healer and stop blaming us for your idiocy!"

I wince. That was maybe a bit too far. Temra never has been much good at controlling her temper. Sometimes, she can be downright terrifying.

I do my best to block out the argument and focus on my work. This is the part where the magic will set. The metal is heated, primed. I thought long and hard about how I would make this weapon special. A mace is used for bashing and smashing, something that requires brute strength to wield. But what if I could increase the power behind it? What if every time the weapon absorbed a blow from an opponent, I could transfer that energy into the next swing?

I close my eyes, thinking on what I want the magic to do, but I jolt upright as, to my utter horror, the doors of the forge slam open.

I feel the extra presence in the room as though it were a weight pressing down on my shoulders. For a moment, I forget entirely what I'm working on, as I'm unable to think about anything but the discomfort coursing through my veins.

I hate feeling as though I don't fit right in my own skin. As though the anxiety takes up too much space, pushing me aside.

As footsteps draw closer, I try to compose myself. I remember the mace and focus on it like my life depends on it. Maybe the intruder will take the hint and leave.

No such luck.

Whoever he is, he stomps to the other side of my anvil, where he's now in my line of sight, and shoves an arm under my nose.

“Look at this!”

I take in the large gash across the man’s lower arm. Meanwhile, a ball of nerves roils in my stomach to have a stranger so close.

“Get out of here, Garik. Ziva is working!” Temra says futilely as she joins us.

“This is what your blade did to me. My *sword* arm! I demand a refund!”

My face heats, and I can’t think for a moment, can do nothing but stare at the man bleeding over my workspace. Garik is perhaps in his early thirties. Lanky rather than well built, with a hooked nose and too-big eyes. It’s no surprise that I don’t recognize him. Temra handles most of the commissions that come through the shop so I can focus on the actual forging.

Garik looks at me like I’m stupid. “Your weapon is defective. It cut me!”

“You cut yourself!” Temra shouts back. “You will not come in here and try to blame the weapon for your carelessness.”

“Carelessness! I am a master swordsman. The fault certainly doesn’t lie with me.”

“Really? How else does a man cut his sword arm with his weapon? What were you doing? Practicing twirls? Throwing the weapon up in the air and trying to catch it? Was there a large audience to see you stumble?”

Garik sputters for a good minute as he tries to find his words, hinting that Temra’s guess is exactly what happened.

“Perhaps you should try acrobatics if you’re going to use your sword in such a manner instead of how it was intended,” Temra bites out.

“You stay out of this, you little heathen! I’m taking this up with the smithy. Or is she incapable of speaking for herself?”

That has me dropping my tools and giving the foul man my full attention. It’s one thing for him to come in here and attack me, but to call my sister names?

“Garik,” I say with confidence I don’t feel. “You will leave now before we bring the city guards into the matter. You are no longer welcome in the forge or the shop or anywhere near our land.”

“My arm—” he tries.

“Is not nearly as hurt as your pride, else you would be at a healer’s and not here.”

His face grows red as blood drips onto the ground.

I can’t look at him any longer. It’s too much. My eyes find the laces at his shirt instead and focus there. Maybe that was stupid. Did what I say even make sense? If I say something more, would I only be rambling?

I decide to add, “I would be happy to take a look at the weapon to ensure its effectiveness. Perhaps in front of all your friends? Though, by the excellent gash in your arm, it appears to be working just fine.”

That does it. He storms out the way he came, but not before taking a swipe at the worktable along the way and sending my tools cascading toward the ground.

Then he’s gone.

“Horrible man,” Temra says, and she goes to put the worktable to rights.

But I can’t really hear her. I’m looking at my tools, then back at the spot where Garik once stood. The entire ordeal is replaying in

my mind over and over again, completely out of my control. He was here. In my forge. I had to speak. Had to question myself. Had to feel like I was going to boil from the inside. Logically, I know neither my sister nor I were in any real danger, that such confrontations don't mean the end of the world is nigh, but that doesn't mean my body is convinced.

I can't breathe. Or maybe I'm breathing too fast.

"Ziva? Oh dear. Everything is okay."

Everything is not okay. Temra tries to approach me, but I step backward, nearly falling over as I do so. My hands are shaking, and my body temperature goes from uncomfortably hot to unbearably so.

"Ziva, he's gone. You're safe. Look around the room. It's just us. Here, hold your hammer." She thrusts the instrument into my hand. "Now listen to my breathing and match it." She exaggerates the sounds of her own breath, slowly dragging it in and out.

I fall to my knees in front of my anvil, my head level with the unfinished mace, my hammer held loosely in my hand.

You are no longer welcome.

I can't believe the things I said. I insulted him. He's going to tell other potential customers about the ordeal. Everyone will know that I said something stupid. They'll all want to take their business elsewhere. I'll be ruined. Humiliated.

Everyone will know there's something wrong with me.

"Breathe. You're safe. Breathe," Temra says, cutting through my tangled thoughts.

"What if the sword was defective, and I just—"

Temra says, "The sword was perfect. Don't think like that. Come on, Ziva. You're amazing. Just breathe."

Time falls away as I try to crawl out from under the weight of my own panic.

I've no sense of how long it takes before the attack recedes, before my mind can understand that there's anything else besides impending doom. But it passes, easing out of me like a fruit being juiced.

I've always been a naturally anxious person, but being around people makes it so much worse. And sometimes these attacks happen—when it's a particularly nasty encounter or if I'm simply feeling overwhelmed.

I'm tired and overstimulated, but I still welcome the hug my sister wraps me in. She lets me decide when to pull away.

"Thank you," I say as I set my hammer back on one of the many worktables in the forge.

"I'm sorry, Ziva. I really did try to keep him from entering."

"Trust me, I heard. But I hope you know that if anyone is acting dangerous, I insist you show them in. I don't ever want you in harm's way."

She scoffs. "How can a man who injures himself with his own weapon be dangerous?"

We share a laugh, and I turn back to the unfinished mace, trying to decide whether to continue working or to rest for a bit.

Only . . . the weapon has already been magicked.

There's no physical change that I can see, but I sense it. A slight pulsing of heat.

I pick up the mace by the metal handle and bring the head toward my face for inspection, careful of the single flange that is still cooling.

"Something happened," I say.

“Did Garik ruin the weapon?”

“No, it’s already imbued with magic.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I was welding the first flange on, and then Garik came in. I set it on the anvil, and then . . .”

“Then?” Temra prompts.

“And then I couldn’t breathe.”

I head outdoors, Temra following. Our city is located in the middle of a conifer forest. It rains every other day of the week, and the sun is constantly battling the clouds for dominance in the sky. Today the sun shines brightly, warming my skin through the light breeze.

Our parents kept chickens and a goat in the backyard when I was little. I remember helping Mother collect the eggs each morning. But neither Temra nor I care for such responsibilities, so the land mostly serves as an area for me to demonstrate my weapons.

When I judge myself to be a safe distance from the house, I grasp the mace tightly before taking a swing in the direction of the old cedar tree.

Nothing magical happens.

Though rare, there have been a few times when I’ve unwittingly magicked a weapon and had to figure out how it worked.

It’s rather frustrating.

I try bringing the shaft down against the dirt-packed ground, but that does nothing either. On a whim, I breathe onto the mace, since my face had been so close to it during my attack.

Still nothing.

“Let me try,” Temra says.

“Absolutely not. You might hurt yourself.”

“I’ve handled your weapons before.”

“But oftentimes my weapons have long-range effects. Until I’m sure what it does, I won’t let you—”

Temra falls to her knees, her hands going to her throat as she makes a gasping noise. I’d started twirling the weapon over my head, and I immediately stop and rush over to her.

“What happened?” I ask. “Did you swallow something?”

A burst of air fills her lungs, and she stares wonderingly at the weapon. “I didn’t swallow anything. It’s the mace. Do that again.”

“What?”

“Spin it over your head in a circle.”

I give one full rotation of the weapon, and this time Temra is ready. “I can’t breathe when you do that.”

I stare at the mace in shock before handing it over to her. “Now you can try.”

She does, and I feel the effects instantly. The mace is sucking the air away from me, toward itself. I step farther and farther away. Once I reach about ten feet, I can breathe again.

Temra stops the motion. “Incredible!”

“I’m glad my sheer panic is good for something.”

Temra looks on me sadly. “It’s all right, Ziva. Whenever it happens, I’ll be here for you.”

As the older sister, *I* should be there for her. But more often than not, she is the one saving me. Temra should have been the one to receive our mother’s gift for magic. She is so much stronger and braver than I will ever be, but I don’t think she realizes how much my gift took away my own childhood.

I'm glad that, at sixteen, Temra is able to concentrate on more trivial tasks, like flirting with boys and focusing on her schooling. But me? I've been providing for us since I was twelve. I often wonder if spending so much of my formative years locked in a forge somehow made me fearful of everything else. At eighteen, I hate to leave the house and be around people.

Or maybe it's simply an effect of the magic itself. I've no one to ask for answers about magic. Mother was killed when I was five, long before my gift manifested.

"The local tournament is only months away," Temra says. "I'm sure we'll have many more customers passing through the city between then and now. Everyone is going to want a Zivan blade."

She's trying to make me feel better. I appreciate the effort, but I'm still reeling from the effects of my attack.

"It's a phase," Temra says, reading my thoughts. "It will pass eventually."

"I'm sure you're right."

But I don't believe it for a moment.

CHAPTER TWO

It's Tuesday, which means we go out for dinner.

I hate going out.

There's a small relief when I see that our usual table is free. I make a beeline for it, taking the far chair. It's my favorite spot because my back is against the wall. No one can get behind me, and I can see the whole room.

I don't like feeling as if people are staring at me, and it's a sensation I can't shake off when my back is exposed to a large space.

Temra and I make a show of raising the menus, but we both already know what we want.

The waitress greets us both by name before taking our orders. "I'll have the cauliflower soup and fresh bread," Temra says. "She'll have the lamb and steamed vegetables."

I nod with a forced smile on my face toward the waitress. It's

an arrangement Temra and I have. We're both terrible cooks. Everything seems to be burned or soggy when we try. Still, I'd rather eat poor food and be safe at home than out and about where strangers can watch me eat. Temra, on the other hand, loves eating out, so we have a deal. We can eat out for half the week; the other half we take turns cooking at home. And Temra always orders for me so I don't have to talk to anyone but her.

I place my hands atop the table in front of me and twist my fingers together, a habit I've had since childhood. A light buzzing sensation has taken root just under my skin. In an attempt to distract myself from my discomfort, I say, "The governor came by to collect his weapon this afternoon while you were at school."

"He came in person?"

"Yes."

"He must be really excited about the mace. How did he like it?"

I try to hide a cringe, but I must not manage it, because Temra says, "He didn't like it?"

"No, no. He liked it just fine."

"Then what's the problem?"

"He . . . invited us over."

A bright smile fills my sister's beautiful face. She makes it so difficult to be appropriately upset at times.

"That's wonderful. Ziva! Don't you know what this means? We must make a good impression."

"I tried to say no," I explain. "The man wouldn't let me."

"Oh, it'll be fun! A party is just what we need."

“It’s not a party. I was assured it would be a quaint dinner affair.”

“That’s fine. The governor’s son will still be there.”

Her mischievous smile can mean only one thing. “Attractive, is he?” I ask.

She sighs in response.

I wish the food would get here more quickly so I’d have something to do with my hands. My fingers have turned red from all the fiddling; I hide them beneath the table.

I can tell Temra wants to discuss the governor’s son in greater detail, but I just can’t be bothered. I’ve never really felt attracted to anyone before. I’m not sure if it’s the anxiety keeping me from getting close to people or something else. Whatever the case, it just hasn’t happened for me yet.

It’s not that I don’t want to connect with people. I desperately do, but even more than that, I want to feel safe. No one but Temra has ever felt safe.

I do a quick sweep of the restaurant. Only four other tables are filled. Two couples are seated at separate tables: a pair of middle-aged women holding hands, and a bickering man and woman trying to keep their voices low. The woman storms out of the establishment. The man throws down some coins before following.

How awkward.

Then there’s a lone woman sitting in a chair by the window, sipping a glass of wine.

And the fourth—

Is staring right at me.

I lower my eyes instinctively, my face heating to be caught staring. Except, he was looking at me first, wasn't he?

Temra is talking about something, but I barely hear it as I risk glancing out of the corner of my eye back at the man.

He's still watching me.

"Temra," I whisper. "Someone is staring at us."

"How many times do I have to tell you? No one is staring at you."

"No, I mean it this time. Look, the fellow behind you."

She turns in an obvious way to meet the eyes of the man near the door. He doesn't have any food yet, and he's certainly not looking at the menu held open in front of him.

Temra gives a quick half wave at the man before turning back around. "He's handsome, if you can forget what he's wearing. Maybe I should go talk to him?"

"Don't you dare leave me," I mutter between my teeth.

"I'd just invite him to join us."

"No!"

"I'm teasing! I'll wait until after dinner before—"

At first, I think the waitress has arrived with our food, but then I realize the far table is empty and the man has sauntered over. I turn my attention to the wood grain again as Temra twists delightedly toward the stranger.

"Hi there," she says in a voice she only uses with men.

"Hello," he says. "Forgive my interruption, but is there any chance you'd let me join you?"

Temra looks to me, but I can't say anything. I still can't look up properly. So she answers, "Please," and indicates the free chair.

The hairs on my arms stand up at the close proximity of the stranger. I feel as though my insides are being kneaded like dough. I want to be anywhere else.

“I’m Temra,” my sister says.

“I’m Petrik,” the stranger says.

“Petrik,” Temra repeats, trying out the name. “I haven’t seen you around before.”

“I’m not from here. I came from Skiro’s Territory.”

“What do you do in Skiro?”

How does she do that? She just effortlessly knows what to say and how to say it. I manage to talk to my customers in the shop sometimes. Weapons I know well, and I don’t have too much trouble discussing them. But anything else?

I’m helpless.

A pit of longing rests in my gut. A wish to be more like my sister. So at ease with the world, so comfortable in her own skin.

“I’m a scholar from the Great Library,” Petrik continues in his deep tone. “I specialize in ancient magics.”

My eyes flit upward of their own accord, my interest piqued.

“Magic?” I question.

The man grins, and I find the courage to look at him properly. He’s somewhere around my age. He wears his hair shorn close to the scalp, a thin strip of black fuzz. He has full lips, a wide nose, and his skin is a deep brown with matching eyes.

His clothing is unusual. Most opt for tunics and leggings and sturdy boots, but this man wears a deep sapphire robe that covers his hands and ankles. In fact, all I can see of him are the pointed tips of his boots and his head. It would appear the robe has a hood, but he wears it down, so I can see his face.

“Yes, from the seeresses in the northern continent to the animal speakers in the western isles—I’ve read into all of it. I’m compiling my own book. A quick guide of sorts to every known magical ability in the history of the world.”

Temra’s eyes narrow, and she looks pointedly at me. She raises her brow, as though trying to communicate something silently to me. After a moment, she gives up and looks heavenward. “And this study has brought you to Ziva,” she says.

“Precisely,” Petrik says. “I was hoping Ziva might allow me to ask her some questions and inspect some of her work.”

At first, I feel delighted. A man my age wants to talk to me about my work? Is this the opportunity I’ve been waiting for? A promise to stay in safe conversational waters while getting to know someone new?

But then I remember he said this was for a book.

Other people will read it. Petrik will quote me. Describe me and my processes. I’ll be scrutinized. What if I say something wrong? What if he thinks my magic is boring and he rejects me and leaves? What if everyone who reads the book thinks I’m a hoax and I lose all my customers?

Even if I know most of that is unlikely to happen, I can’t shake the fear. Agreeing to talk with him doesn’t feel safe at all.

“No, thank you,” I say, and turn my attention to my hands in my lap.

The waitress comes then, delivering our food. She looks to Petrik. “Have you decided on anything?”

“Not yet,” he returns.

She leaves, silence and steam the only things filling the air in her wake.

“So, Petrik,” Temra says, flipping her hair over her shoulder. The rich mahogany locks catch the light with the motion. “Tell me about Skiro. I’ve never been there before.”

I can tell he’s staring at me. I can feel it. Temra makes her best attempt to direct the scholar’s attention back to her, but Petrik all but ignores her.

“I must have spoken too hastily, Ziva. I apologize. It’s been a long journey, and I didn’t mean to ambush you at dinner. I hadn’t expected you to walk into the very restaurant where I was eating. I meant to seek you out. Set a proper appointment and explain the whole arrangement. I would of course compensate you for your time. Perhaps I could come by your forge sometime so we could discuss the matter further?”

“No, thank you,” I repeat.

“May I ask why?”

“The forge is Ziva’s safe space,” Temra explains. “She doesn’t like anyone intruding. She’s a very private person. I’m sure you understand. Maybe I could talk to you to help with your book. I assist Ziva in the forge frequently. I’m familiar with her process and have extensive knowledge of all the weapons she’s made. Maybe the two of us could get together sometime. We could meet up for dinner again.”

Yes, I like that idea much better. Just leave me out of the entire thing, and Temra can flirt with the supposedly handsome boy.

“Are you certain I can’t do anything to convince you otherwise?” Petrik asks, his attention never wavering from me.

I need to be direct. Confident. If there’s any hint of uncertainty from me, he’ll likely keep hounding me. So I raise my

gaze, look the scholar firmly in the eye. “I’m certain. I have no desire to be questioned or to have my life scrutinized.”

Then I pick up my fork and knife and start cutting pieces out of the roast lamb. I try not to repeat what I said in my head. I don’t want to fixate. I don’t want to worry. I just want to enjoy my dinner.

Petrik rises without another word. Instead of retreating back to his table, he exits the restaurant altogether.

Good riddance.

“Can you believe him?” Temra says.

“I know,” I say. “How many times do I have to say no for him to understand?”

“What? Oh, right. But also, he completely ignored me! Rude. He just used me in the beginning of the conversation to get to you.”

That’s a first. People usually mistakenly try to talk to me to get closer to my pretty sister.

“He’s gone now,” I say, and I finally take a bite of the mouth-watering food. It’s delicious, as always.

Temra only dips her spoon in her soup, never actually bringing it to her lips, her mind clearly still on the strange encounter.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her. “Soon I’ll have enough money for us to leave Ghadra and retire in the northern continent. He won’t be able to track us down there.” We’ve been talking about it for years, ever since I opened my own business. The northern continent is beautiful, and few people can afford to live there. No one will know who I am. No one will seek me out for weapons. I love what I do, but I’d prefer forging for no one but myself. When I finally have a comfortable amount for

Temra and me to be set for life, we'll leave behind this place and settle somewhere out in the country. Just the two of us. It's all I want. To feel safe all the time and never worry if someone is going to surprise me with a social visit when I haven't mentally prepared myself.

I do very well for myself as the only magical smithy in existence—at least I've never heard of another one.

People seek me out from all over the world for weapons. Some have been for nobles who want to boast their wealth and superiority. Others have been high-ranking officers of private armies. City and castle guards receive small salaries, so I've never had one of them grace my doors.

But the bulk of my customers?

They're mercenaries.

Sellswords.

Fighters for hire.

There's been a high demand for them in recent years.

Our former sovereign, King Arund, had a bit of difficulty with his younger brother, who constantly tried to usurp him and steal his throne. The story goes that the king eventually had to sentence his brother to death after a failed assassination attempt on his life. He loved his brother dearly and hated that the crown had come between them.

In an attempt to do away with future familial animosity, Arund decided he would divide the kingdom of Ghadra between his six beloved children.

New boundaries were drawn. Six territories arose, each named after the prince or princess who rules it. Ghadra became divided.

And opportunities arose for unsavory sorts.

It was only a decade ago that the split happened, and there were many who took advantage of it. Bandits have become more common than flies on the roads. They move from territory to territory, making it impossible for any one ruler to stop them. No one wants to allocate men or funds toward criminals when they're no longer in their territory. Then there's the problem of six new rulers trying to create their own courts, build their own economies, finance their individual rules.

The people have suffered greatly for the change.

And I've heard tales that not all six royal children are content with one little piece of the pie. Rumors abound about revolts and plans for takeover, but that's all they are at this point. Whispers on the wind.

Regardless, my business has become a necessity, and I make very good money doing it. Countless individuals have tried to hire me as their personal smithy. Given my abhorrence for people, I've always refused. Lately, these requests have become more frequent. Knowledge of my abilities has started to spread to the far reaches of Ghadra. Probably because I've been taking on more commissions lately, trying to reach our goal faster.

Temra and I are so very close to being able to leave. Just two more years, I think. If I want to be able to retire and afford the higher cost of living for myself and my sister for the rest of our days, we need a bit more.

"That's great, Ziva," Temra says, pulling my mind from images of her and me alone in paradise.

She still doesn't touch her food.

"Have you given any more thought as to what trade you'd like to commit yourself to?" I ask, hoping to distract her.

“Not really. I love to act in the local city performances, so maybe I could join a traveling troupe someday.”

I don’t see how she would stay with me in the north if she intends to go traversing about for her trade. She clearly hasn’t thought that one through very much.

“Or . . .,” she hedges, “maybe I’ll do something with weapons. I’ve basically been apprenticing under you my entire life.”

Yes, I like that idea much better. “Of course! There’s always a place for you in my forge.”

“That’s not what I meant. I can’t be in your shadow my entire life, Ziva.”

My shadow? How curious she would put it that way, since it’s always been me who’s tried to hide behind hers.

“You’ll find something that will make you happy. I know it,” I say.

“I’m already happy, but I know I’ll figure out the future, too. What about you?”

“Me?”

“Are you happy?”

My instinctual response is yes, but I pause. I do live in constant fear of others. Sometimes it’s overwhelmingly hard to leave the house.

“I’m happy,” I decide in the end. “I have everything I need. You and my forge. I just wish the rest of the world would disappear.”

“That’d be an awfully empty world.”

“Exactly.”

“Then what need would you have of me, if I’m not scaring away most of your customers?”

"I'd get lonely if it were just me," I joke.

"And what about me?"

"What about you?" I ask.

"What am I to do while you're in your forge making weapons for nonexistent people? I can't be an actress without an audience."

"You could get a hobby."

"I have hobbies!"

"I don't think flirting counts. Besides, there are no men in my world."

Temra shakes her head in astonishment. "One day, you're going to fall madly in love. You'll find someone who will make you want to leave the forge. You won't even see him coming."

"The day the world runs out of iron ore will be the day I leave my forge. But even then, I'm sure I could figure out something with copper."

Temra flicks droplets from her spoon into my face.

