

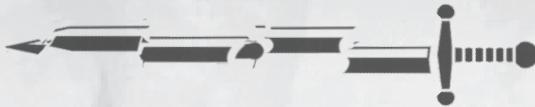


MELISSA BLAIR

# A BROKEN BLADE

THE HALFLING SAGA

*A*  
**BROKEN  
BLADE**



MELISSA BLAIR

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NEW YORK



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ISBN 978-1-4549-4787-5

ISBN 978-1-4549-4788-2 (e-book)

ISBN 978-1-60582-279-2 (galley)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022010411

For information about custom editions, special sales, and premium purchases, please contact [specialsales@unionsquareandco.com](mailto:specialsales@unionsquareandco.com).

Printed in Canada

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

[unionsquareandco.com](http://unionsquareandco.com)

Cover art and design by Kim Dingwall  
Interior design by Colleen Sheehan and Jordan Wannemacher  
Map art by Karin Wittig

*This book is dedicated to BookTok,  
creators and viewers alike.  
It wouldn't exist without you.*

*Love,  
one of your own*

# Elverath





# CONTENT WARNING

This book is a fantasy romance that explores themes of alcoholism, addiction, colonialism, depression, and systemic violence. While it is not the focus of this book or depicted graphically on the page, some content may be triggering for readers who have experienced self-harm, assault, depression, or suicidal ideation.

Please read with care.

*My body is made of scars,  
some were done to me,  
but most I did to myself.*



Year AC

# *The Halfling Decree*

*Henceforth the King shall only recognize two species  
as citizens of the Crown:*

*Mortals*

*&*

*Dark Fae*

*(as long as they reside in the Treaty of the Faeland)*

*From this day forward, all those of impure blood are considered  
wards of the Crown. All Halflings, those of Mortal and Elvish  
lineage, carry the same abomination as their impure ancestors.  
King Aemon has tirelessly fought to banish any surviving Elves  
from his Kingdom. Now that his mission is complete, he holds  
himself responsible for their unnatural offspring.*

*The citizenship of all Halflings is revoked, and they are now  
considered property of the Crown. All Halflings living in the  
Kingdom of Elverath must turn themselves in.*

*Refusal to submit to this order will result in death.*





## CHAPTER TWO

I PULLED MY HOOD BACK over my face as soon as I left the throne room. Only a few people in the palace had truly seen my face. A good assassin knew how useful anonymity could be. Though the title of king's Blade was enough to strike fear in most and give pause to the stupidly fearless.

I marched in the direction of my chambers, hoping my bags had made it there by now. The scent of horse shit and stale ale clung to my clothes. I was in desperate need of a bath.

"Empty-handed again, Keera?" I would know that superior tone anywhere. There was only one person who made a point of using my name over my title.

"Lovely day, *Gerarda*," I said, emphasizing her full name only because I knew she despised it.

A petite halfling stood behind me, twirling her favorite throwing blade between her fingers. Her hood was pulled back slightly on her

head, enough that I could see her face. A smug smile grew on her lips. Sun had tanned the high points of her cheeks and flat nose, leaving a tawny hue to her skin. A mark of her Elvish lineage.

Gerarda Vallaqar was also a spy and assassin for the king. We had trained together at the Order before she passed her Trials and became a Shade. By the time I graduated, she had already been promoted to the king's Dagger. It was the second highest position in the king's Arsenal.

The day I was promoted to the king's Blade, only three years after leaving the Order, had been glorious fun. Gerarda, expecting the nomination for herself after the death of my predecessor, had loudly gasped when the king called me forward. Dressed in the plain black garb and hood of the rest of the Shades, I had accepted my cloak, fastened at the neck by a silver sword. The cloak a symbol of the king's Arsenal, the fastener a symbol of my title within it.

Gerarda had left the throne room, her short black hair brushing against her shoulders as she raced away from the ceremony. If I hadn't been so nervous, I would've laughed. Gerarda was often inconsolably angry for such a tiny creature.

"The king might have to reconsider the order of his Arsenal if his Blade keeps failing him." The sweetness of her voice covered the poison of her meaning.

"That is for the king to decide. I am at his disposal," I said carefully. Trapping me to speak against the king would be the easiest way for the Dagger to become the Blade.

"Of course, this Shadow may dispose of you," she chided. I ignored her and started walking again. I did not have the patience for her quips, at least not without hard liquor.

"He does seem obsessed with us, doesn't he?" she called out after me. I stopped. "What do you mean?"

"He struts around in a black cloak, keeps his face concealed

underneath a hood. Maybe he didn't pick his name, but from what I've heard he certainly encourages it. The Shadow. The Shades. He's making a mockery of the Order." Her eyes widened, the thick line of ink along her lashes created the illusion of a crease. Gerarda always tried to blend in with the Mortals at court.

A cold wave of understanding crashed against my skin. In all the months of chasing down pieces of information on the Shadow, I had never taken a moment to think about what he was trying to *say*.

"He's not making a mockery of the Order," I realized aloud. "He's making a mockery of the Crown."

Gerarda studied me with crossed brows. My neck tensed as her gaze trailed down my body and back to my face. "Careful, Keera," she warned coolly. "Your drinking may be clouding your judgment more than you realize."

"My drinking is not an issue." I rubbed my temple, rolling my eyes under the cover of my hand.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Her voice was gentle. My brows stitched together. Gerarda was anything but gentle. "But the initiate I trained with would've never been shocked by what I said. She would've been the first to figure it out." She walked down the hall leaving me wanting nothing more than a drink.



I moved swiftly across the castle, taking the servant passageways between the royal wing on the west side and the Arsenal quarters on the east to avoid unpleasant encounters. The few servants I crossed paths with simply avoided my gaze and moved out of the way. They knew better than to address a member of the king's Arsenal, and those who didn't often found themselves without a tongue.

My chambers were on the side of the castle closest to the sea that

bordered Koratha. From my balcony one could just make out the edges of an identical castle in miniature perched on an island off the coast. The Order. I had spent my childhood staring out of its windows, wondering what my life would be like as a Shade in Elverath. Now, whenever I found myself at the palace, I was forced to stare back at my past. No wonder I needed to drink.

I had just climbed the three flights of stairs when he appeared at my side, pretending to cough as if I didn't know he was there. Prince Damien had somehow crossed the castle quicker than I did.

Two women were standing at his side, ogling him, and giggling behind their silk fans. I didn't recognize either of them, but that wasn't unusual. Damien had a reputation for interchanging his women regularly. One had tightly coiled hair that floated above her ears. To anyone else, she appeared Mortal, perhaps a newcomer from the northern Mortal realms, but with my heightened senses I noticed the slightest pinch at the crest of her ear. She was part Elvish.

I looked away from her ear and met her gaze behind the fan. Her eyes were wide and the hand fanning her face quivered slightly. I could hear her heartbeat race. For her to be walking and laughing as she was meant that the prince did not know her secret. I would not be the one to let him know she was a Halfling.

“Did I forget something earlier, Your Highness?” I asked, hoping that he didn't notice the brief exchange between me and his escort.

His mouth lifted at one side before he signaled for the women to leave us. I watched them walk down the hall, both looking back at the prince. I couldn't help but notice their dresses, which were identical apart from color. They had appeared typical from the front. Full skirts and sleeves, leaving an acceptable amount of bust for a lady at court, but their backs were bare, completely open from the curve of their shoulders to the base of their back. It was beautiful but I also knew it was intentional.

“Lovely new fashion, isn’t it?” Damien said, raising a thick brow at me. “I expect all the women will be wearing them this season.”

“Then they will look even more beautiful than usual, sire,” I answered coolly, unsure of where this conversation was going. He wouldn’t forget what I witnessed in the throne room. Damien had all the king’s ruthlessness and none of his tact.

Damien lifted his arm and lightly traced a finger from my shoulders down my back. His touch was a knife of pure ice, slicing my skin once again. “I would love to see you in one.” His breath burned my ear.

I inched out of his grasp. “It would be inappropriate for the Blade to wear a dress, Your Highness. I am not expected to participate in the festivities of court.”

“No, but I could have you wear one for me in private.” His smirk had transformed into an evil grin. I felt my face flush at the suggestion, wondering if this was when he would cross that final line. He had spent decades threatening me with it.

I didn’t move but I met his gaze head-on. There was no warmth in his eyes. The black rim around them seemed to thicken with his grin. He liked playing his wicked, little games.

“Perhaps when you return from Cereliath I’ll have one waiting for you,” he whispered, so close to my ear I could feel the brush of his lips. It sent a cold shiver down my spine. I reached for my dagger on instinct, but the prince had already turned toward his ladies.

I leaned against the door to close it; my fingers still wrapped around the hilt of my dagger. I was usually able to ignore Damien’s taunts, but lately it had become more difficult. Thankfully, the prince spent most of his time gallivanting across the kingdom from one lord or lady to another. A ceaseless trail of parties and women. He only came after me when he was home and bored.

My chambers looked the same as ever. A large four-poster bed sat

in the middle of the bedroom bookended by two windows that faced the gardens below. The other wall was made entirely of glass, a window to the rolling waves along the beach. It magnified the view, so the water seemed to roll into the room. Koratha Palace was the only building in the kingdom with such features. A remnant of the Light Fae who built it when their people ruled these lands. Some said the glass was imbued with magic; others believed it was a technology the Fae had developed. If that was true, the technology had been lost with their extinction however many centuries before.

The king had no interest in funding innovation. Instead, he ruled from the throne he built himself and forced those in his kingdom to farm and mine what was left of the magic. He traded with all the Mortal realms. The continents the humans had come from had no magic of their own, and they paid handsomely for just a taste of what Elverath had left.

The Light Fae had left a world of beauty behind, but that would not be the case for the king. If he ever died, if he was ever killed, his legacy would be one of death and destruction. Not that it mattered—the king believed he would live forever. At least, he said as much when in front of an audience. He claimed immortality like that of the Fae, but they needn’t dye their hair to hide the gray.

My bags were already sitting at the foot of my bed and my weapons were splayed across the dresser waiting to be polished. Gwyn must have been called away. She was the only chambermaid I allowed in my rooms, let alone touch my blades. I unsheathed the dagger from my thigh and unbuckled the holster. I placed it gently beside the other weapons. The deep crimson of the blade stood out against the silver of all the others.

I got undressed, lazily throwing my clothes onto the bench at the end of my bed and walked into the bath. I turned the gold faucet to fill the large oval basin and sprinkled some essence of birch into the

water. The room filled with the thick scent of wood and damp earth, the only thing that ever made me feel at home.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the looking glass that hung above the vanity. My dark brown hair was spilling from the braid I kept it in. My face was flecked with mud, the dark hue almost looked like freckles against my light brown skin. My eyes were still a striking silver—the color of blades and death—but all I noticed was the redness around them. Maybe Gerarda had been right. My endless nights of drinking were finally starting to show.

I hadn't always been a drinker. When I first graduated from the Order, I took my duty and my oath seriously. I roamed through cities and villages searching for secrets in whispered conversations. I traipsed across the kingdom on horseback, on foot, by sail. Whatever was needed to get the job done. All without touching a drop of ale or wine.

Eventually it got harder, the killing and the scheming. The broken promises.

Most Shades were dead in ten years, killed by some enemy of the Crown. The ones who survived would last twenty more if they were lucky, before their Mortal blood made them slow and weak.

But I wasn't like my sisters in the Order. For whatever reason, my Elvish blood ran stronger than theirs. My ears were long and pointed, unlike most Halflings, who had something between Mortal and Elf. I stood tall among the Mortals at court, even among the Halflings. As a child, I wished I could say that I got my eyes from my father or my hair from my mother, but I was a foundling. No parents and no memories of what kind of life I had lived before.

I had long ago accepted that I would never know my true lineage. The only reason I had been taken into the Order at all, the only proof I had of my Mortal lineage was my blood. Its amber color was the sign of Halflings. The mixed breeds of Elves and men.

All those of Elvish blood were an abomination in the eyes of the king. Any full-blooded Elves that still lived spent their days in hiding or had long ago left Elverath for other lands. I suspected most had moved into the Faeland west of the Burning Mountains.

So the only abominations left were the Halflings, though the king preferred to enslave us rather than kill us. Our bodies were of too much use to the Crown. Centuries after the Halfling Decree, most Halflings barely had a drop of Elvish blood. But a drop was all that was needed to make one's blood amber instead of red.

It didn't matter how much I hated it, how my skin recoiled every time the king's eyes landed on me. I carried the brand of his estate everywhere I went. With no parents to give me a name of my own, I carried the name bestowed upon all orphans.

Keera Kingsown.

I turned the faucet off and climbed into the bath. The hot water was biting; I could feel the grime and dirt loosening from my limbs and hair. Baths were hard to come by outside of the palace, especially when one was trying to avoid being seen. I leaned back and let my body fall into the water until I was completely submerged. I liked the way the water filled my ears and muted outside sound. I could no longer hear the waves rolling on the beach or the servants laughing as they pruned the garden. For just a moment, all I could hear was the beat of my heart vibrating through the water.

Eventually, I started to wash my body with the sponge and perfumed soaps Gwyn had restocked for me. The sponge's abrasive touch felt like it was cleansing away more than the dirt—if I only pressed harder, I might be able to wash away the blood on my hands.

Mathias's blood.

It always came back to that. The men crying for their lives, the Halflings fighting for their families. There had even been a few children. But I didn't let myself think about that without a barrel of wine nearby.

I washed my back thinking about the fish merchant. Whether he had a family who would miss him. A child whose mouth he had fed. Would they even have realized he was gone in the six days that had passed since I killed him? These were answers that I would never have, but the questions would never rest.

My back twinged where I pressed too hard with the sponge. Even after thirty years, the scars on my back were still sensitive. I could see the redness of them in the mirror. Harsh, curved lines carved into my back by Prince Damien. He had taken hours to paint the lesions along my skin, an Old Elvish rune no one could read. He had said it was a mark of my loyalty to the Crown.

Of course, that wasn't the only scar along my body. By now, most of my flesh was marked in some way. The small scar on my right hip from before I could remember. Its lines were too clean and perfect to have been unintentional, but I had no idea who the carver was. Another answer I would never have.

The others I carved myself. They were the names that stretched across my shoulders, down my chest and arms. Tiny scrolls of the lives I had taken in the name of the Crown. Of the innocent and unarmed. Each one etched into my flesh so I carried their deaths with me always. In a sea of so many cuts, so many people, it was hard to tell where one name ended and the next began.

One name stood out from the rest. Etched in large letters along the forearm of my dueling hand. The rest of the skin around it was left untouched. I scrubbed at it with the sponge, glad when the suds rinsed away and it remained. I traced a finger along the ridges of the name over and over. It was one of the only things that could bring me a moment of peace.

“Keera? Are you here?” I heard Gwyn call from the bedchamber.

“In the bath,” I answered, but Gwyn had already skipped into the room. I didn’t try to cover my body from her. She was the sole

person who knew of my scars and where they came from. She even carried some of her own gifts from the prince. It was a secret I didn't mind sharing with her. She had known of them since she was a wee Halfling and her mother was my chambermaid.

Gwyn's soft curls bounced as she approached the basin. The strands were a mix of bright red and auburn, just like her mother's. Her skin was pale from being kept inside. She always looked slightly ill because of it. Gwyn had not been able to leave the palace since her mother died.

"Sorry I couldn't finish earlier. I needed a moment in my room," Gwyn said shyly. I didn't need to ask why. I could tell from the red of her eyes and the tender way she walked that she had been with the prince. He loved tormenting the Halfling servants of the palace, but he especially liked Gwyn.

"Don't worry about it," I said, dunking my head to rinse out the soap. "There's something for you in the saddlebag."

I chuckled as Gwyn squealed and ran back into the bedchamber to fetch her gift. I tried to bring her back something every time I returned to Koratha so she could experience a little bit more of the world than she had been given.

"What is it?" Gwyn whispered, holding the small red pouch in her hands.

"You have to open it, Gwyn," I said gently.

She rolled her eyes. "The anticipation is half the fun, Keera. You should know this by now." I should, she said the same thing each time, but I never wanted to change our script. It was one of the few habits I kept.

She closed her eyes and opened the pouch, pulling out a ring. Where there should've been a stone, there was a cluster of gold lac-ing in the shape of a tear drop. "I've never seen such a ring," Gwyn said, turning the jewelry over in her fingers.

I smiled. “That’s because it’s not just a ring.”

“It’s not?” Gwyn eyes widened as she brought the ring to her nose to look at it more closely.

I shook my head as I stood and reached for a towel. I gestured for her to put it on as I wrapped the towel around me. “See this tiny button here?” I said, pulling her hand to the inner side of the ring.

“Not really, but I feel it,” Gwyn said. She danced back and forth with excitement.

“Good. Now push it,” I told her, dropping my hand from hers.

“Oh!” Gwyn gasped as the coiled lacing snapped into place around her finger, leaving her with a singular claw.

“Be careful. That blade may be tiny, but it’s as sharp as they come,” I warned. That single ring cost more than most of my daggers. Elven-made relics did not come cheap. “This way you can always have a weapon on you.”

Gwyn twisted her hand to get a full view of the ring. “What am I supposed to do with a claw?”

I shrugged. “Scratch?”

“That won’t kill anyone.” Gwyn laughed. “Rawr!” She pretended to swipe me, but I grabbed her wrist.

“No, it won’t kill anyone,” I said seriously, not letting go of her hand. “But if you pierce the calf or thigh muscle, the cut will hurt. Enough for you to run. If you can’t do that, pluck an eye out.”

“Keera, that’s disgusting!” Gwyn shrieked. Her face turned slightly green. Damien had never violated Gwyn, but I wanted her prepared in case he grew bored of beatings and mental torment. She deserved the chance to fight.

“Yes, it is,” I said with a nod. “But so are men. I just want to know you’re safe. Especially when I’m not here.” Gwyn’s mother had died three years before. At sixteen Gwyn had been so young. Too young to lose a mother and certainly too young to inherit her mother’s debt.

“Thank you,” she said, giving me a long hug. I tried not to tense when her hand grazed the scars on my back.

“I assume you want to sleep since you’re leaving so soon?” Gwyn asked, walking with me back into the bedchamber. I nodded. The threat of a headache loomed over me, and I wanted to sleep before I felt compelled to find a different way to cure it.

“I’ll take your weapons with me, then. They’ll be with your horse in the morning.” Gwyn placed a large basket on the dresser.

“Thank you, Gwyn.” I tried to smile but I was too tired. Gwyn gave me a soft smile as I climbed into bed and she started packing my weapons.

“Gwyn?” I asked, pulling back the heavy coverlet.

She turned back to face me. “Yes?”

“Leave the mage pen.” I pointed to the nightstand beside the bed. She placed the gold handle on the table. I stared at the sharp point shaped like a quill. Gwyn gave me a knowing look and kissed my cheek, leaving me to sleep and carve yet another name into my skin.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa (she/her/kwe) is an Anishinaabe-kwe of mixed ancestry living in Turtle Island. She splits her time between Treaty 9 in Northern Ontario and the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg in Ottawa, Canada. She has a graduate degree in applied linguistics and discourse studies, loves movies, and hates spoons. Melissa has a BookTok account where she discusses her favorite kinds of books including Indigenous and queer fiction, feminist literature, and non-fiction. *A Broken Blade* is her first novel.

Find her on TikTok @Melissa.Bookshelf

# ADVANCE READING COPY—NOT FOR SALE

## MY BODY IS MADE OF SCARS, SOME WERE DONE TO ME, BUT MOST I DID TO MYSELF.

**K**eera is a killer. As the king's Blade, she is the most talented spy in the kingdom. And the king's favored assassin. When a mysterious figure moves against the Crown, Keera is called upon to hunt down the so-called Shadow.

She tracks her target into the magical lands of the Fae, but Faeland is not what it seems . . . and neither is the Shadow. Keera is shocked by what she learns, and can't help but wonder who her enemy truly is: the king that destroyed her people or the Shadow that threatens the peace?

As she searches for answers, Keera is haunted by a promise she made long ago, one that will test her in every way. To keep her word, Keera must not only save herself, but an entire kingdom.

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### AUGUST 2022

FICTION / Fantasy / Romance

\$17.99 U.S. (\$23.99 CAN.)

Trade Paperback

6 x 9 • 448 pages

Book ISBN: 978-1-4549-4787-5

E-book ISBN: 978-1-4549-4788-2; \$9.99

Galley ISBN: 978-1-60582-279-2

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COVER DESIGN: KIM DINGWALL

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