

# The Shield



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For  
L.j. Charles,  
Who encouraged me to finish this trilogy without delay  
and  
Faith Freewoman,  
My Clan's Wise Woman, to whom I am forever grateful.



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## Chapter 1: A Change in the Air

Lord Theron of Brendt walked briskly down the well-lit corridors that led to his Ambassador Chambers, the tapestries on the wall rippling slightly with the breeze of his passing. His well-shod boots clicked on the flagstones as he drew his red satin cloak more tightly about his shoulders.

He glanced back, worried that he might have been more careless than usual, worried that he was being followed. He'd noticed more than one curious glance while he had bid a hasty good night to the Lords and Ladies of Lophft. It had been out of character, since he usually Charmed and entertained them well into the night. It had been a gamble, but it would have been more of a gamble if he had not attended their weekly gala at all.

He glanced back again, but saw only his shadow flickering in the torchlight and heard only his boot heels echoing in the hall. He took a deep breath and relaxed, but did not slow his pace.

Theron's mind still reeled from the information he had just learned from the smug young Walker that he had Charmed.

He did not know why he had decided to Charm the boy. Perhaps it was because the Walker was so young and arrogant. Perhaps it was because Lophft already had a fine Walker in AnnWyn. But most likely it was because he had noticed that AnnWyn didn't know that there was a second Walker in Lophft's employ. Why was that? Why were they not working together?

And he had just discovered why.

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It was information that had to get to Brendt as soon as possible. And not only that, it was information he felt he must deliver in person. Because he knew if word got out that he had uncovered what the Council of Lophft was planning, his days of spying were over, and possibly his life.

*Lophft was planning to bring explosives into Ruis!*

He thought of his son, Ash, and Ash's Bond Mate, Kate. He thought of his Kinsmen, and how unprepared they were for such an attack. He thought of Ioho, the living promise of a better future for all people of Ruis. And he knew, no matter what the risk, he must leave, and leave that very night.

Reaching his rooms, he headed directly to his bedchamber, pulled out his travel duffel, and began filling it with a few belongings, knowing he had to travel light. He changed his cloak, folding the red satin one carefully on his bed, regretting that it would be left behind.

He smiled to himself. He was going to miss a lot of the things he must leave behind. He had never pretended he didn't enjoy the indulgences and comforts his Kinsmen were forced to do without because of Lophft's dominion. Lophft luxuries were one of the biggest benefits of being Brendt's Ambassador.

Bringing his duffel with him, Theron headed to his desk and began adding the papers and notes he would not want to be read after his departure.

He was just opening the hidden panel in the wall when there was a pounding at his door.

Theron froze, his heart racing, and he looked wildly about, trying to think.



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But it was too late. The door flew open, revealing Spindle Slan, one of Lophft's Council Members and Estelle's latest henchman. Behind him were four guards.

"Gag him before he speaks!" Spindle ordered as the guards rushed forward to surround Theron.

Hands full and unable to defend himself, Theron couldn't stop the guards as they grabbed him, roughly cramming a dirty rag into his mouth and tying it in place.

Spindle leaned complacently against the doorframe, his thin and oily hair hanging limply at his bony shoulders.

"Were you going someplace, Ambassador?" he smirked.

\* \* \*

"You did *what*?" Estelle of Lophft shrieked. Too furious to even look at Spindle's weak-chinned face, she whirled towards the window, arms folded, fingers tapping on her forearms.

Spindle stood watching her rigid back, feeling the heat spreading up from his neck, hating that he could not stop himself from flushing. "I thought, given his Gift, that it was a very appropriate thing to do," he said huffily.

"Well, you didn't think long enough, Spindle, or clearly enough. Per usual. Must I remind you that he is Straif's father?" she said turning slowly back to him, her sapphire skirts whispering with her movements. "I have a certain soft spot for him in my heart."

Spindle glowered. "He is a Brendt and a spy," he spat.

She waved her hand as if she were brushing away an insect. "We all know that, Spindle. He is also an Ambassador. We are not heathens. If word of this got out ..."she paused. "There are many

people at Court who enjoy Theron's company. We do not need to make new enemies."

Spindle was silent, thinking things through.

Estelle could see the wheels turning. They turned very slowly, especially for one on the Council, one who had been on the Council for much longer than she. It showed that money could buy a place of power for even the greatest idiots. She shook her head, swallowing back more angry comments. It was not her objective to turn Spindle against her.

"I own my error," he said at last.

She nodded. "What is done is done, Spindle. I apologize for my temper. You took me by surprise." She smoothed her gown and smiled. "So, where is Theron now?"

"In the dungeon."

She clucked her tongue. "Such a waste," she said with a sigh. "I think it best we spread a story that Theron has finally returned to the Brendt encampment and we will most likely see him when this dreadful uprising has ended."

Spindle nodded and turned to leave, pausing at the entrance of Estelle's sitting room. "You do have to admire the man for being able to continue spying all this time. Putting himself in constant danger."

"This is true, Spindle. Now, if you will excuse me, I must think." She turned from him, then paused. "No, wait a moment, will you?"

Spindle took his hand off the door and waited quietly, soaking up her beauty as sunlight caught the gold of her hair.

Once more she turned and looked out the window, over the tiled rooftops of Aldwater to the distant hills beyond. She steepled her hands and tapped her forefingers on her perfectly shaped mouth.

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“What if,” she said slowly, “we let it leak to those we know to be Brendt sympathizers that Theron has been incarcerated and is awaiting trial for treason. Can we do this, do you suppose, without those at Court finding out?”

She turned and looked at Spindle, watching the slow grin spread across his face.

“It could be done.” he answered, eyes glittering.

She crossed over to him and rested her hands lightly on his shoulders. “Good,” she said and brushed his lips with her own.

Spindle all but giggled.

“This shall be our little secret,” she purred.

Spindle’s eyes glinted with lust. “Of course, Estelle.” He moved to kiss her, but she skillfully maneuvered away from him.

“Go now, darling Spindle.” Her eyes promised more as she opened the door to let him out.

He left in a daze.

Estelle closed the door softly behind him, then wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. “Fool,” she growled.

Tugging the bell rope, she summoned a serf.

“Bring AnnWyn to me,” she commanded when the serf arrived.

\* \* \*

Ogdan the Elder, Head Council Member of the House of Lophft, studied the maps he had compiled from his network of spies. He had been poring over them for several hours, working deep into the night. The flickering candles lighting the maps cast a shadow of his slight form that danced eerily against the stone walls of the Council Chamber. His dark robes were drawn tight against the cold, despite the fire blazing in the fireplace. It had been a chilly

autumn, and although the snows had not yet begun, it promised to be a harsh winter.

Movement at the doorway caused Ogdan to glance up as Estelle of Lophft stepped from the shadows. She was a woman Ogdan deeply admired, but one whom he trusted not at all. Estelle had become the most recent of the Council Members, having taken Col Ailim's place after he had been slain, right here, in this very room.

"You work late," she murmured in a voice better suited for a bedchamber than the Council Chamber. She pulled her robes more tightly as she took a seat across from him. "I've ordered some hot tea," she added, studying Ogdan with her tawny eyes—the eyes of a predator, Ogdan decided.

"There is less distraction at night," Ogdan replied.

Estelle lifted an eyebrow in response, settling deeper into the chair. Her honey-colored hair was loose and full, spilling about her shoulders. Ogdan noticed that her eyes and hair matched, surprised he had not noticed that before. He was also surprised at how badly he wanted to touch her hair, to grab big fistfuls of it and inhale its scent.

The tea came, silently placed before them by one of the castle's serfs.

Ogdan nodded his thanks to Estelle as he took a sip of the warming brew. "Winter's chill comes early this year," he commented.

"As was the harvest," Estelle replied, using the cup to warm her hands. "But it was a good summer and there will be plenty to feed our army."

"Aye," Ogdan agreed. "Luck was on our side in that respect," he commented, thinking back on the winter before. It had nearly broken the campaign. In fact, by mid-winter, they had sent their army home to their families, and did not resume the war until

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after the spring planting. “This year I would like to continue the battle through the winter months,” he shook his head. “Seven years is too long to wage a war.”

“What are you studying?”

Ogdan sighed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “I am seeking a pattern that might pinpoint the direction from whence Brendt attacks.” He shook his head again, staring sightlessly at the maps. “They come out of nowhere, attacking our supply lines, raiding our food and weapons...” His voice trailed off.

Estelle scowled, her skin flushing a deep red. “It’s that woman, is it not?” she spat. “She who murdered my son. She and her group of Sword Maidens come bursting out of trees, wielding their swords as they hide behind that dreadful shield she carries.”

Something flickered behind Ogdan’s eyes when he looked at her, nodding. “All three of them: the woman, the Walker *and* the beast, lead the Maidens, not just the woman.”

Estelle was cunning and excelled at manipulating the lords and ladies at Court. Beauty was her Gift and she used it as another would use a weapon. She was also very wealthy. Her properties had provided many with the supplies necessary for an army to march. But alas, Ogdan thought, she had no strategy for war, her only goal being revenge. Power and revenge. And as the war dragged on, her goals were beginning to obstruct the goals of Lophft. Oftimes Ogden felt he was fighting on two fronts: with the Brendt, and within the Council of Lophft.

“Then we must slay them and be done with it,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “This war is putting a strain on us all.”

“It is difficult to fight an enemy that you cannot track, one that appears from nowhere and disappears at will. We by far outnumber Brendt, but if they will not meet with us face-to-face

upon the battlefield, then I am afraid that this war is destined to last far longer.”

“We could set another trap.”

“And have we not tried that? Time and again?” Ogdan shrugged. “No, I believe that the only way to end this is to take the battle to them. We must lay a siege upon the House of Brendt. I only need to locate their stronghold. We have done it twice before, and we shall do it again,” he said with conviction.

“And so you study maps? How does that help?”

He smiled at her supercilious tone. “As I said, I am seeking a pattern.”

He paused and studied the woman across from him.

“It does not matter what you think of me, my dear,” he said with a slight smile. “I am still the Head Council Member, and I will remain so until the day I die.” He paused again, looking into her calculating eyes. “And I intend upon living for a very long time. You need me, Estelle. My Gift of Persuasion is sometimes the only thing that keeps the Council Members in office. Our esteemed Lords and Ladies can become very unhappy with our lack of success. They do not understand the value of patience, the strength of the long view.”

He angled his head toward Estelle. “As do you. Now, if you will excuse me, I have seven years of surprise attacks to chart. Our supply lines have remained unchanged and thus easy to predict—an oversight on all our parts. Perhaps we will reroute them this winter.” He took another sip of tea before he set it down and refocused on his maps, adding, in a distracted tone, “...however, our oversight may become our foresight. By charting the locations of these seemingly random attacks, perhaps we can determine the location of the Brendt’s stronghold.”

Estelle finished her drink and studied the slight man before her. He was right. Unfortunately, she did need him, and congratulated

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herself for resisting the temptation to slip poison into his tea that very night. She knew full well that her temper was a weakness, and she did try to control it. With a pang, she remembered scolding Straif about his temper, knowing deep down that it would be his downfall.

Once that dreadful Shield Woman was dead, perhaps her heart would know peace.

With a soft sigh, she gently set down her tea cup and slipped from the Chambers, wondering if she would remain sleepless for the rest of the night, as she had on so many nights before.

The sky was just lightening in the east when Ogdan rose and stretched. He glanced at his half-filled teacup and took a sip of the now-cold beverage. It had been a long night, but a satisfying one. He had finally found the pattern within the chaos of the attacks upon his supply lines. The architect behind the small band of raiders was brilliant. Ogdan would have given all his worldly possessions for one such as he, and he made a note to himself to not take Brendt's defenses for granted as long as they had such a strategist amongst them.

Rubbing the stiffness from his neck, Ogdan carefully folded his maps, gathering them together with his notes, and headed for his sleeping chambers. There were a few more hours until the day would begin. He hoped to rest until then.

Two people were all he needed to confirm his discovery: A Walker who could follow energy trails and a Hunter who could track the signs.

\* \* \*

Ash found Kate on a ridge overlooking all three of the Brendt encampments. She was sitting with her dragonskin-clad legs

stretched out, booted ankles crossed, back leaning against a tall fir tree. Beside her sat Mog, the Battle Hound. Mog's big head swiveled around when he sensed Ash's approach. Seeing who it was, the huge beast returned to his watch, nostrils dilating to examine the scents carried on the soft autumn breeze.

Ash settled beside his Bond Mate, took one of the silver-tipped hands that lay limp on her lap and held it between his.

He waited.

In a moment, Kate looked at him and smiled before she returned to the view. It was a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I'm scared, Ash," she told him.

"How so, my Kate?" he asked, gently stroking her hand.

She looked at him again. "Do you remember when I killed that boy? With the *naginata*?"

"That I do," he answered quietly. "It was a long time ago. Why do you ask?"

She nodded and locked fingers with him. "I barely knew you. I barely knew anything about all this. Battles and killing. They were all games to me back then, things that were discussed in my martial arts classes with my *Sensei*." She sighed and absently stroked Mog's broad forehead with her other hand. "And now..." she paused. "Now, I'm killing all the time, and I'm not liking myself very much," she said in a small voice. "I'm scared of what I'm becoming, Ash."

"You're still my Kate," Ash reassured her. "You are still yourself."

Her head whipped around so that she could look fully into her Bond Mate's face. "Am I? Am I really?" she asked. For a moment her blue eyes flashed silver as the soul of TinneHolm was revealed.

Ash reached out and stroked her cheek. "You are to me, Kate."



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It wasn't enough, he could tell. He sighed.

"Hear me well, Kate. For nigh onto two hundred years the House of Brendt has been running and hiding. *Two hundred years, Kate!* Bloodshed and danger now seem normal to us. We cannot help but see you and what you have become in a different light. We celebrate what you have become, we surely do. You are what we have needed. We accept you, Kate. *I accept you.*"

She nodded, her red-gold bangs hiding her expression. "But can *I* accept me? When this is all over, if we survive, what will happen to me?"

"Perhaps we could consider resuming our Bond Mating trip," he replied, a slight smile teasing his lips. "We never did manage to have one."

"Did too!" Kate shot back. "It was three whole days!"

Ash chuckled and they lapsed into silence.

"Ash?"

"My Kate?"

"If this war...no...*when* this war ends, what do you want to do with your life?"

"To live in a house of stone and wood by a stream near a village. To wake up each morning with you," he paused with a slight smile. "To have a daughter with red-gold hair. A son..." his voice trailed off.

The answer had come so swiftly that she realized he had been thinking about it for a long, long time.

*Children.* Ash dreamed of children. A family.

"Why haven't you ever mentioned this to me before?"

Ash laughed softly. "You have never asked, my Kate, that is the truth," he answered, adding, "and it was not the proper time."

There has been a war to win.” His eyes sparkled. “There will be time later.”

Kate smiled at him. “A little boy who looks like you.”

She leaned her head against his chest.

They sat together in a comfortable silence, hands clasped, fingers intertwined, as the shadows lengthened, the setting sun highlighting everything with an orangey glow.

“I’m feeling sorry for myself,” Kate said. “There will be time to sort all this out when this war is over. In the meantime, maybe a good talk with Faith can help.” She looked over at Ash, and smiled. “Thank you. I’m very lucky.”

Ash nodded. “Aye, that you are.” He laughed when she bumped him with her shoulder. “You have not allowed me to finish!” he said, re-capturing her hands. “I was going to add ‘as am I!’ Truly!”

Kate snorted. “You’d *better* add that.” She wiggled a hand free and punched him lightly for good measure. “It’ll be dark soon. I suppose we should get going.”

Ash helped her up, keeping his arm around her waist. “The setting sun mimics your hair,” he told her, smoothing her bangs back. He toyed with some strands. “There is a Council Meeting tonight,” he said. “They have need of She Who is Sword-Souled.”

Kate sighed and smiled wanly. “They must mean me,” she said dusting off her dragonskin breeches.

She glanced at her Battle Hound. He was still lying placidly, smelling the messages on the winds. “Let’s go, Moggers,” she said, lacing her fingers through his ruff and giving him a gentle tug.

With a *hurummmph*, the massive beast heaved himself to his feet and dutifully followed them through the portal Ash had created.

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Brann of Brendt leaned over the Council table, his large, square hands taking the weight of his massive shoulders. “There’s been a change,” he said, looking at each of the members in turn. “Scouts have reported that the supply lines have been rerouted. They’ve also noticed a Walker accompanied by another with unknown gifts closing in on our location. I do believe that Lophft has finally taken the bait,” he concluded as he sat.

It never failed to impress Kate how quick and lithe the large man was. Ash had the innate agility of a Walker, but he was more slender, like a panther. Brann, on the other hand, was like a polar bear, large and powerful, yet sleek and sure. His hair was different from Ash’s curtain of black hair that flowed when he moved. Brann’s was a rich, dark brown that waved to just below his shoulders when it wasn’t pulled back into a tail. He had the Brendt eyes, Kate mused, and the sculpted cheekbones that made them all look like heroes from anime.

And he was now staring at her, waiting for her answer.

Kate felt herself reddening. “I’m sorry, would you repeat that?” she asked.

Brann scowled, “This is a Council gathering, lass, not a wool gathering,” he remarked with a sigh. “I asked for your opinion on our strategy.”

She looked at Brann’s frowning face and realized she hadn’t heard anything for several minutes.

“Pay attention, girl!” he growled.

Faith leaned over and touched his hand. “Softly, Brann,” she said with a quick shake of her silvered hair. “There is no need for that.”

Brann turned to glare at Faith, but whatever he saw in his Bond Mate’s face caused him to soften. “Aye, Faith, there’s no need.