

As a child they tried to kill her. They failed.

Ancient Echoes

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ANCIENT ECHOES
BOOK ONE OF THE ELESE SAGA
BY RJ CLAWSON

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For my mom,
Who encouraged me every step of the way.
For my husband,
Who put up with me every step of the way.
For my daughter,
Who made me smile every step of the way

Prologue

Else, eight-years-old

They were running again. Else was more than just tired as she slumped in the saddle in front of Wardolf. They had been traveling for a long time now; she had lost track of the days that stretched behind them. *Where would they hide this time*, she wondered wearily. It was all her fault again. That much she knew. Those men had come to kill her again. Wardolf would never outright say they were there for her, but she knew. Who *wouldn't* try to kill a monster, even if that monster was a little girl?

She shivered and Wardolf tucked her in tighter against him, bulky muscles overlapping her bony frame. The horse's smooth steps rocked her in and out of consciousness, but each time she was semi aware, the ring of horseshoes on stones seemed sharp and accusing.

"Quiet now," Wardolf whispered to her, a little too urgently to be soothing.

Else hadn't realized she was making any noise, but as soon as he called for quiet she heard the low whimpers that were passing through her lips. Clenching her teeth closed to shut off the noise, she tried to force herself to be more alert. They weren't out of danger yet.

Their horse had no problems with the steady clip Wardolf was asking the animal to go as they weaved in and out of trees barely visible in the moonlight.

How much farther? How much longer until those men were behind them? She wasn't sure and she was half sure Wardolf didn't know either. The thought was not a comforting one.

Their horse came to a sudden halt of its own accord, ears forward as if it was listening to something ahead. It was a breathless moment before Wardolf tried to heel the horse forward again. The sorrel gelding took a few more steps, head high and alert before it once again stood still. Else felt the horse's belly bounce as it whickered in greeting to something unseen. Another horse, unseen in the dark ahead, answered. Wardolf gripped her so tight it was hard to breathe. Her heart felt as though it had dropped to the pit of her stomach and refused to rise again.

"I know you're there. At least make yourself seen," Wardolf growled loudly into the night.

"Just give us the girl and we'll leave you be," came the bodiless reply.

"You're outnumbered this time," a voice to the left of the first informed them.

"There's no running anymore," yet another voice called.

"Just put the girl down and turn around," a voice, closer than the rest encouraged.

Four to one... even Wardolf wouldn't survive those odds.

"Else," Wardolf growled into her ear softly, "I'm going to get down and you're gonna kick this horse as hard as you can back the way we came. Don't stop until the horse can't walk anymore. You hear me?"

Else shook her head in mutiny, panicked by the thought of racing through the night alone.

“Do it!” he hissed. “Or I will give you a strap to your backside, understand?”

He had never hit her before, never even threatened before. Wardolf shook her hard, impatient. This was not something he would be disobeyed in. She nodded furiously and the rough treatment ended. He crushed her to him in a bear hug and then too quickly was sliding down to the ground after thrusting the reins into her smaller hands. She felt a vague sense of dizziness beyond the more intimate feeling of unreality. Cold, cold and distant her thoughts were slow in forming. *This can't be real. I'm dreaming. Wake up, Else!*

Wardolf grabbed the horse's bridle and turned him around. She only had time to look down at him over her shoulder; his face was covered in shadows and unreadable. His ghost white hand slapped the horse's rump and she was forced to face forward and ride or be bounced to the ground. Each stride the horse took felt wrong, terribly wrong without Wardolf there. The saddle felt too large and empty without him.

She let the gelding run until they were out of earshot and then brought him to a stop. Her hands were shaking and she was frightened, but there was no way she was leaving Wardolf to be murdered. She was eight now. She could fight. Wardolf was the best fighter she had ever known and he had taught her some. At the very least she could distract the murderers while the both of them faded into the

darkness. Elése tried to quell the sick feeling that rolled in the pit of her stomach, trying to tell herself it was the fear of leaving Wardolf, not the going back that scared her the most. The gelding didn't offer any resistance when she turned him back around and heeled him to a quick trot.

She didn't have to be stupid about it. She could be smart. She could fight smart, just like Wardolf always said, 'If you aren't strong, then be smart'. Guiding the gelding in the dark was harder than she thought it would be and her unsteady hands confused the poor animal.

The sound of metal sword meeting metal sword hit her ears and she felt like kicking the horse forward but she just managed to restrain herself. *Be smart*. The noise helped her keep her bearings even though it made her shiver with fear but at least she knew Wardolf was still alive if the sound continued. Suddenly, the gelding jumped sharply from underneath her and she was unseated. One second she had moving, breathing horse flesh underneath her and the next it was gone, replaced by air. Too late, she realized that she had been leaning too far forward, straining to hear the fighting and the reins were ripped from her hands as she plummeted to the ground at a sickening rate. Face first into the dirt she landed, the air whooshing out of her at the blow. It was a few precious moments before she could breathe again and the air moving through her body had never felt so good. Elése's threadbare confidence was shattered.

She hugged her knees and rocked. The fight was still raging, hitting a new fury as another fighter joined in. Wardolf was going to die twenty feet away from her and she was too much of a coward to help. It was all her fault. They would probably find her here after they finished with him but she was too scared to run far from Wardolf, too scared to move. Else had to cover her mouth to keep the sobs hidden but she couldn't stop rocking.

As she looked wildly around for the gelding, a flash of grey in the moonlight caught her eye. A wolf, bristled fur standing on end, eyed her. A snarl was beginning to form and white teeth were becoming visible. *No wonder the gelding had spooked.* Her gut reaction was just as instantaneous. *Wardolf!* Else scrambled up and fled without thought straight toward the sound of fighting. Fear that was already taking control of her doubled and overwhelmed her. A torch light shined like a beacon to welcome her home just ahead. She should have stopped. She should have thought about what that meant. Wardolf had not carried a torch. She should have been smart but instead all she could think of was the terror of being alone in the dark with hungry wolves.

The frantic pedaling of Else's legs was checked harshly by a branch just as she arrived into the very fringes of the light and for the second time that night she was thrown face down to the ground. Moving quickly, she reached to disentangle herself but her hands met softness instead of the hard wood she had been expecting. Her brain struggled to make sense of

it. *Fabric, cloth, the spongy feel of flesh under her fingertips* – she jerked her hands away. *Not him! Not Wardolf* – her brain denied – *too small, the body is too small to be him!* Repulsed and relieved at the same time she kicked free of the young man’s body and backed away as fast as she could, watching all the while to be sure the body did not rise to reach for her. An irresistible urge to clean her pant legs swept over her and her frenzied hands brushed at them with as much thoroughness as she could muster. Then she rubbed her hands in the dirt to wipe away whatever may have been on her clothes.

That was when she was grabbed from behind. A strong hand at her throat was lifting her, turning her. Time seemed to slow as breath was cut from her and as she was turned she saw the scene clearly in front of her. Wardolf was kneeling on the ground with a man standing in front of him, over him, blocking her view of his face. There was another body on the ground behind Wardolf – unmoving – a torch still flickering beside him.

Else’s ears felt stuffed with wool, making sound almost indistinguishable. Some part of her brain shrieked at her to struggle, to fight, but she felt strangely separate from the situation, like she wasn’t really there at all. *Just a dream*, she affirmed to herself even as her lungs cried out in pain. Finally she was fully turned to see the one that held her so. Blue eyes. She would always remember he had blue eyes. She had never seen blue eyes before. He was holding

her at a distance as if revolted by the idea of touching her.

There was just enough room between them for the grey shape that unexpectedly appeared to leap in and slice sharp teeth into the man's throat. Blood didn't just spray out of the wound as the wolf dropped gracefully to the ground – it surged out. Else could see it *too* clearly. She could see the severed tendons in his neck, the muscles that would never again restrict. She knew that her increased vision was unnatural; her eyes were changing from black to yellow – the very reason why these men had come to end her life. She was tainted. What she was able to do was evil, especially the way she felt her whole body being scorched on the insides by a fire that was all consuming. But the man still had her by the throat, his body slow to register his own death. *He is so slow*, she thought vaguely. So slow she could raise a hand to his neck and help stem his life blood if she wanted. Another gush of it hit her in the face and in that second she at last broke free of him, slapping his hand away from her neck as if it were nothing.

Else let herself fall to her knees and she grabbed the knife hilt that was sticking out of the man's boot a moment before he collapsed to the ground with a solid thud. The man hovering over Wardolf was turning to see what was happening and she had to wait for him. She had to *wait* for him to make a move that should have only taken a second. But he was slow too. It was a simple matter to flick the blade at the exact time and speed necessary to hit him in the heart. It was *too*

easy. She didn't remember ever being so accurate, so extraordinarily precise. He crumpled to the ground in another one of those slow movements.

She looked at Wardolf. He was watching the man in front of him fall to the ground. Then his eyes traveled slowly to the man with the ruined throat at her feet. Then they traveled to her – her glowing yellow eyes and her face smeared and dripping with blood as if she had been the one that had bitten the man's neck away. An emotion was slowly flooding his face; one she had never seen before on his features and it took her a long second to understand. Horror. *Hadn't he seen the wolf? Surely he didn't think she was capable of...* but the wolf was gone and with her monstrous eyes glowing with abnormal light and her blood soaked body, she realized that was exactly what he thought – that she was a monster. She was an animal and he was frightened of her.

Else stumbled forward, trying to form the words to explain but her body felt suddenly numb. Her legs buckled underneath her as her heart broke.

Better to have died than to see that look on his face... Better to have died than to know without doubt my father thinks me a monster...

Blackness consumed her vision as she fell into unconsciousness.

That was the first time. The first time that someone else's blood had been spilt by her hand. And she could feel, in the very depths of her bones even then that it wouldn't be the last.

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