

A DRAGON AGE NOVEL

THE STOLEN THRONE

David Gaider



"Run, Maric!"

◆ ONE ◆

Run, Maric!”
And run he did.

His mother’s dying words whipped him into action. The image of her grisly murder still burning in his mind, Maric reeled and plunged into the trees at the edge of the clearing. Ignoring the clawing branches that scraped at his face and clung to his cloak, he blindly forced his way into the foliage.

Strong hands grabbed him from behind. One of his mother’s men, or one of the traitors who had just orchestrated her death? He assumed the latter. Grunting with effort, Maric shoved back, struggling to dislodge the hold on him. He succeeded only in getting a few more branches striking him in the face, the leaves blinding him further. The hands attempted to haul him back into the clearing, and he dug his boots into the ground, gaining a bit of purchase on gnarled tree roots. Maric violently shoved back again, his elbow connecting with something hard . . . something that gave way with a wet crunching sound and a startled grunt of pain.

The hands loosened, and Maric leaped forward into the trees. His cloak resisted, jerked him back. Something had caught on his long leather coat. He twisted and fought frantically, like a wild beast caught in a trap, until he somehow wriggled himself out, leaving the cloak torn on a branch. Maric gasped, launching himself into the darkness beyond the clearing without risking even a glance behind. The forest was old and thick, allowing only the faintest beams of moonlight through the dense canopy. It was not enough to see by, only enough to turn the forest into a maze of frightening shadows

and silhouettes. Tall twisted oaks stood like dark sentinels, surrounded by dense bushes and recesses so black, they could have held almost anything.

He had no idea where he was going; only his urge to flee guided his feet. He stumbled over roots that jutted out of the uneven ground and bounced off solid tree trunks that kept springing out of nowhere. Wet and slippery mud made his steps treacherous and his balance so precarious, it seemed the ground might give way beneath him at any moment. The woods were completely disorienting. He could have been running in circles, for all he knew. Maric heard men shouting as they entered the woods behind him, giving chase, and he could clearly make out the sounds of fighting as well. Steel blade ringing on steel blade, the cries of men dying—his mother's men, many he had known his entire life.

As he frantically ran on, images kept whirling through Maric's mind. Moments ago, he had been shivering in the cold forest clearing, convinced that his presence at the clandestine meeting was more a formality than anything else. He barely paid attention to the proceedings. His mother had informed him earlier that with the support of these new men, the rebellion would finally become a force. These men were willing to turn on their Orlesian masters, she said, and that made it an opportunity she wasn't willing to pass up after so many years spent running and hiding and only picking what battles they could win. Maric hadn't objected to the meeting, and the idea that it might be risky never even occurred to him. His mother was the infamous Rebel Queen; it was she who had first inspired the rebellion, and she who led the army. The battle had always been hers and never his. He, himself, had never even seen his grandfather's throne, never understood the power his family had possessed before the Orlesians invaded. He had spent his entire eighteen years in rebel camps and remote castles, endlessly marching and forever being dragged along in his mother's wake. He couldn't even imagine what it might be like to not live that way; it was a completely foreign concept to him.

And now his mother was dead. Maric's balance was ripped from him, and he tumbled in darkness down a short hill covered in wet leaves. He slid awkwardly and slammed his head against a rock, crying out in pain. His vision swam.

From far off came a muffled answering cry of his pursuers. They had heard him.

Maric lay there in the moonlit shadows, cradling his head. It felt like it was on fire, a raging inferno that blotted out reason. He cursed himself for being so stupid. By sheer luck if nothing else, he had managed to run some distance into the forest, and now he had given away his location. There was a thick wetness on his fingers. Blood was caking in his hair and running down around his ears and neck—warm in sharp contrast with the frosty air.

For a moment he shook, a single sob escaping his lips. Maybe it was best just to lie here, he thought. Let them come and kill him, too. They had already killed his mother and earned whatever lavish reward the usurper had surely promised them. What was he, besides an extra body to be slaughtered along with the too-few men Mother had brought? And then he froze as a terrible realization settled at the edge of his consciousness.

He was the King.

It was ridiculous, of course. Him? The one who elicited so many impatient sighs and worried looks? The one for whom Mother always had to make excuses? She had always assured him that once he got older, he would grow into the same easy authority that she evinced. But that had never happened. It was no great offense, either, as he had never taken seriously the idea that his mother might actually die. She was invulnerable and larger than life itself. Her death was a hypothetical thing, something that had no actual bearing on reality.

And now she was gone and he was supposed to be King? He was to carry on the rebellion on his own?

He could just imagine the usurper upon his throne in the capital, laughing uproariously when he received the news of Maric's succession. Better to die here, he thought. Better that they put a sword through his gut, just as they had done to his mother, than to become the laughingstock of Ferelden. Maybe they would find some distant relative to take up the banner of rebellion. And if not, then it was best to let the bloodline of King Calenhad the Great die here. Let it end with the Rebel Queen falling just short of her goal—rather than petering out under the leadership of her inept son.

There was a certain amount of peace in that thought. Maric lay there on his back, the damp coldness of the leaves and mud almost comforting against his skin. The irregular shouts of the men drew nearer, but it was almost possible for Maric to blot them out. He tried to focus solely on the rustling of the leaves in the wind overhead. The tall trees stood all around him, like giant shadows peering down at the tiny figure who had tumbled at their feet. He could smell the pine, the tartness of nearby tree sap. These forest sentinels would be the only witnesses to his death.

And as he lay there, the pain in his head dulling to an insistent throb, the thought rankled. The men who had lured his mother here with promises of aid were nobles of Ferelden, the sort who had bent knee to the Orlesians so they could keep their lands. Rather than finally live up to their ancestral oaths, they had betrayed their rightful Queen. If no one escaped to inform those who had remained with the rebel army about what had actually happened, they might never know the truth. They would guess, but what could they do without proof? The traitors might never pay for their crime.

Maric sat up, his throbbing head protesting fiercely. Aching and shivering, he was wet and chilled right to the bone. Getting his bearings was difficult, but he guessed he was not far from the edge of the forest. He had stumbled only a short ways in, and the men chasing him were not far away, searching and calling out to each other. Their voices were getting fainter, however. Maybe he should just remain still? He was in some kind of a depression, and if he stayed there long enough, these men could pass him by, giving him enough time to catch his breath. Perhaps he could find his way back to the clearing and see if any of his mother's men had survived.

A sudden crunch of twigs nearby made him stop again. Maric listened carefully in the darkness for an agonizing moment, but heard nothing. The noise had been a footstep; he was sure of it. He waited longer, not daring to move a muscle . . . and heard it again. Quieter, this time. Someone was definitely trying to sneak up on him. Maybe they could see him, even if he couldn't see them?

Maric cast about desperately. The far side of the hollow he was in opened up into a downward slope. It was difficult to tell the general terrain with so little moonlight coming through the canopy. There were also trees in that direction, roots and thick bushes that would prevent him from crawling out of sight. He either had to stay where he was . . . or climb out.



*A gentle sound of splashing drew Maric into the present.
He made the mistake of opening his eyes to bright afternoon sunlight
shining through a small window, making him wince.*



He spotted Gareth, the big man swinging his sword in wide arcs and cutting a swath through soldiers that had undoubtedly expected nothing like this kind of resistance.



*The young elf in the colorful robes stopped then, and so did the hunters.
He pointed toward the hut. "There, that is where you need to go."*