

Pretty
BRIDE

AUTHOR OF *THE MIDNIGHT BRIDE*
KATI WILDE

PRETTY BRIDE

KATI WILDE

CONTENTS

Pretty Bride

1. Aruk the Lost
2. Jalisa the Spoiled
3. Aruk the Fool
4. Jalisa the Selfish
5. Aruk the Wrecked
6. Jalisa the Difficult
7. Aruk the Fettered
8. Jalisa the Bride
9. Aruk the Unbound

Epilogue

Author's Note

The Dead Lands

Newsletter

Also by Kati Wilde

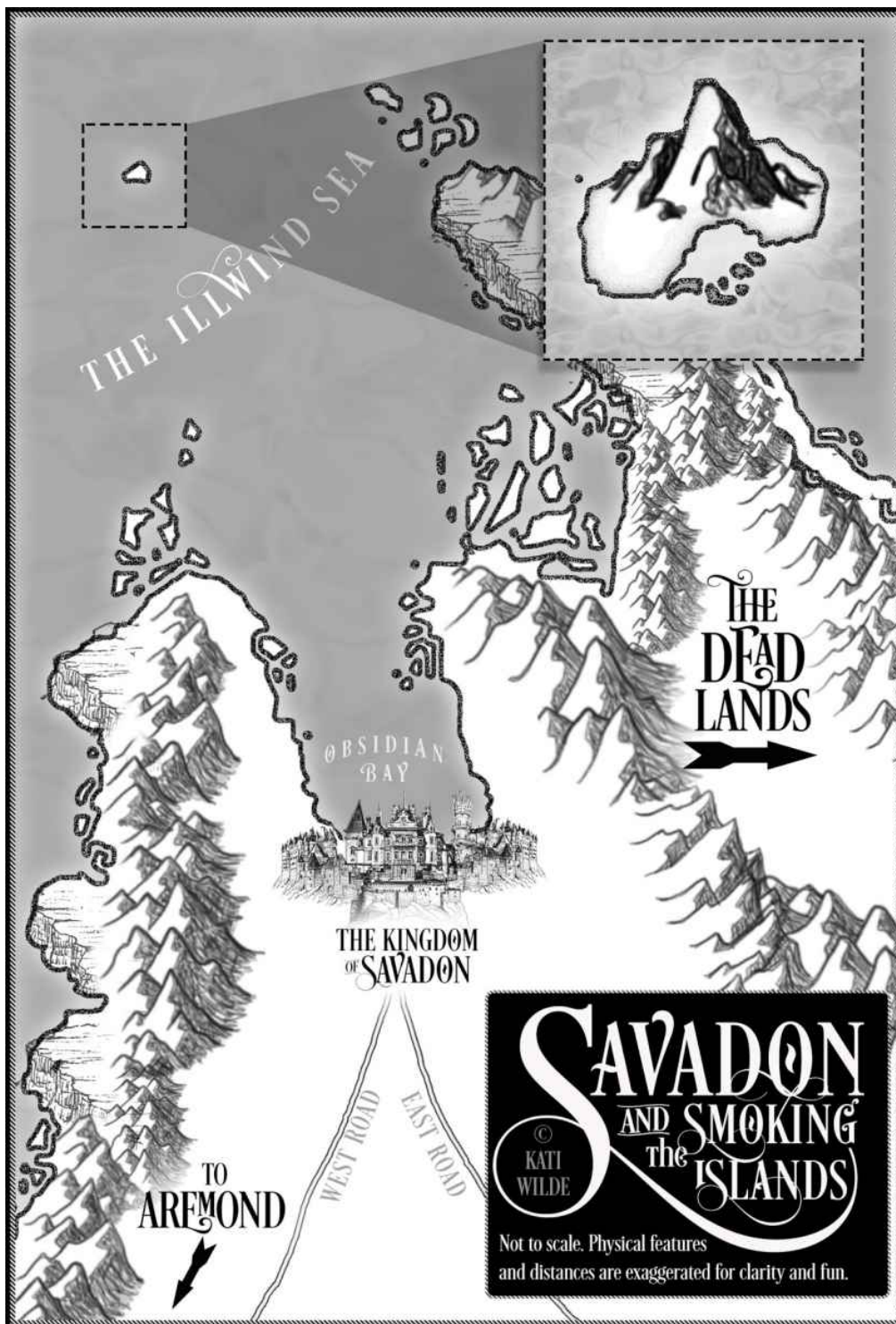
*To anyone who's ever cut out a piece of
themselves, trying to help someone else. I
see you.*

PRETTY BRIDE

A DEAD LANDS FANTASY ROMANCE

As keeper of a sacred oath, Aruk allows nothing to tempt him away from his duty. Not gold, not women, not power. So when the barbarian warrior is marooned in the middle of the ocean, his only thought is of escaping the island paradise and continuing his quest.

Until a pretty princess washes up onto the beach. Spoiled and disobedient, Jalisa should have been easy to resist. But when Aruk discovers the secrets concealed by her beautiful smile, he'll have to decide between his duty and his heart...



ARUK THE LOST

HERE WE ARE AGAIN, in the midst of five tales about pretty women—some in rags, some with riches—who are called virgin, human, daring, and prize.

Now comes the pretty bride.

The time is anotherwhen, a date unknown but only two nights before a fateful storm; the place is anotherwhere, a world unnamed but on the southern shore of the Illwind Sea. And this story begins, as many stories do, with a desperate princess wearing a smile that she doesn't feel, and a barbarian warrior too preoccupied by his long, hard sword to perceive what she conceals.

Only magic can pierce a guarded woman's skilled illusion, and our barbarian warrior is no sorcerer. Fear not, however, that this tale will end unhappily. Our hero has a skull as thick as his sword, but his heart burns bright and true.

And although love sometimes makes us bleed...it is powerful magic, too.

SAVADON

“I see Mara ahead.” Sheer relief filled Strax's voice. “She is making her way past that fishmonger's stall.”

Trying to make her way. Aruk saw her now, a slim figure with dark hair. Crowds packed these streets so tightly, she was

forced to wedge herself between the people standing in her way. A small woman she was, so it ought have been easy for her to slip through, but the saddle she carried and the pack slung over her shoulder prevented easy passage.

No such trouble did Aruk and his brother have. They stood head and shoulders above everyone around them, muscles hardened by years of hiring out their swords. People made room for the brothers, even when there was no room to make.

“Call out to her,” Strax said.

“Has your voice broken?”

“If I do, she will not wait for us.”

That was truth. If Strax called her name, Mara might push harder through the crowd to get away from him. He’d made a quick enemy of her three weeks past, at the start of the tournament to retrieve Khides’ gauntlet, by telling her that she wouldn’t last a week on the difficult route—especially as her competition were all experienced warriors, and she an unskilled noblewoman.

Aruk had thought the same, yet he’d had the brains not to say it.

And in the past weeks, Mara had proved herself far more capable than either brother had expected. But if ever Aruk looked at a woman in the same yearning and hopeless way his brother looked at Mara of Aremond, he prayed some kind soul would take pity on him and run his heart through with a sword.

A fine woman Mara was. Yet never could his brother have her—as Strax knew well. Mara believed Strax and Aruk were contestants in this tournament, as she was. In truth, they were bound by a blood obligation to prevent anyone from claiming the prize. In the end, all the obstacles she faced and all the sacrifices she made would be for nothing. For certain, she would hate them then.

Or she would hate Aruk then. Strax, she already did.

But from the moment Strax had clapped eyes on her, his heart had been ensnared. And there were but two ways for Aruk to watch Strax’s helpless tumble into love—with his

heart sore and aching for his brother, or with amusement and laughter as Strax twisted himself into knots.

Aruk always chose amusement. “For what purpose should we tell her to wait? We know where she goes.”

To the docks, as they did. The tournament map clearly marked the route from Aremond, where the contest had begun, to Khides’ Keep, which would take at least six months of hard travel to reach. They were in Savadon now, a kingdom that served as the only port along the southern coast of the Illwind Sea. From here they would sail to the northern coast.

Frustration marked Strax’s voice as Mara slipped out of sight, swallowed up again by the crowd. “She might find passage on a different ship.”

And Strax would not see her again until they landed on the northern shore. Weeks of agony his brother might suffer. So Aruk would amuse himself a little longer.

“She likely will, anyway. A noblewoman such as she will hire a ship we cannot afford.” And had probably not needed to sell her horse, as they had. She could have afforded passage for it, as well. But finding a ship that could also board a horse might take more time, and it was easy enough to buy another mount on the north shore.

“Call to her!” Strax snarled.

Grinning, Aruk shouted over the crowd, “Mara of Aremond! Hold where you are, and my brother and I will hasten your path to the docks!”

Nothing would tempt her more than going faster. This tournament was a race, and she lagged far behind the other contestants.

Strax surged ahead, forging a path through the crowd. A laughing Aruk followed in his wake. Quickly his brother was upon her, hauling the burden of the saddle from her grip and snarling, “If you cannot even push your way through a crowd, how will you have strength enough to climb the Skull Cliffs?”

“By eating the hearts of my enemies,” she snapped back. “Though I think yours might taste like piss.”

“More likely troll dung,” Aruk said. “Fresh and steaming.”

Strax growled at both of them.

Mara held out her hand in clear demand. “Give back to me the saddle. I *can* carry it.”

“You wish to go faster? Then I will carry it. Follow close behind Aruk as he makes a path.”

And with Strax close behind Mara. The besotted, cursed fool. Aruk glanced back once to see his brother bending his face nearer to Mara’s hair, as if to catch her scent, eyes closing in a mix of agony and ecstasy when he breathed her in.

She ignored Strax utterly. Around them, the crowd grew restless as trumpets sounded in the distance.

She tapped his shoulder, voice lifted over the din. “The horse dealer said the primary route to the docks will be near impassable, and to cut through to the lower street after we pass through the main square.”

Aruk nodded. “What is this celebration?”

“Savadon’s princess has come of age, so they are gathered for a parade.”

A parade for which the entire kingdom seemed to have turned out. “A popular princess she must be.”

“I do not know about that,” came Mara’s wry reply. “In short time, I have heard her called spoiled and selfish and difficult. So I suspect they truly gather because gold coins were minted with her likeness, and as part of the celebration, they will be tossed into the crowd.”

“They toss gold at the crowd? Then I might also linger for a glimpse of this princess, spoiled and difficult though she is.”

Mara laughed. “I have seen your purse. You are not so desperate for coins.”

“But we will not hire out our swords while seeking the gauntlet,” he said to her. “So there will be many coins leaving that purse and none going in. What sort of selfish princess tosses away gold?”

“I do not know that she is truly selfish. That is only what was said—and not much weight would I give to such words. Spoiled, she might be. Many princesses are. But I have known too many women who were called selfish and difficult, simply because those women did as they liked without regard for the opinions of those who would have her behave in a manner better suited to their own interests.”

“I think you might have been called difficult a time or two.”

“So I have.” She sounded amused. “Though by that measure, I am not nearly as difficult as a barbarian from the Dead Lands.”

As he and Strax were. “You think we only do as we like?”

“I think that you are so big that even if you were selfish and spoiled, never would I have the courage to say so aloud.”

Aruk laughed, for that was a clear lie. She had courage enough to say anything to warriors of his size. Had she not just threatened to eat his brother’s heart? Though there was nothing left of it that she had not already consumed.

The trumpets sounded again, nearer. The crowd surged, breaking around Aruk as a stream broke around a rock. Mara staggered into his back.

Her sharp protest sounded, then his brother’s gruff, “Quiet, woman. When they begin throwing coins, you’ll be trampled by the mob. I’ll set you down again when we are clear of the crowd.”

It was not coins yet, but the parade—mounted soldiers riding two abreast, banners flying, and those at the front shouting for everyone to make way. The crowd surged again, parting to clear a path through the street. The press of people around him became a tight crush, as they jostled for position and shoved closer together. On opposite side, he saw a woman stumble against another and disappear.

This was madness. Pushing forward, he threw back to Strax, “Get Mara away from this. I will meet you at the docks.”

With Mara cradled against his chest, his brother gave a short nod and pressed on.

Aruk broke through the line and into the cleared street, paying no heed to the mounted soldier shouting at him to make way. Into the crowd on the opposite side he shoved, gaze locked on where the woman had fallen. With sheer muscle, a path he made and dragged the woman up to her feet.

“Are you hurt? Shall I carry you out?”

Crying, the woman shook her head. “I wish to see our princess. A great beauty she is said to be.”

This woman risked her life in this crowd to see a princess’s beauty? At least the gold was worth something.

He made certain she was steady before pushing back toward the street. At the front of the crowd he was forced to wait by the passing parade. Mounted soldier after mounted soldier, then the princess herself, riding a white mare.

And a beauty she was indeed. A gold circlet crowned black curls that tumbled over her shoulders in waves. Dainty features she had, from the arch of her brows to her pretty little nose and delicate chin. Her pink lips curved into a sweet smile that never faltered as she waved to the crowd shouting her name.

Princess Jalisa. Who smiled and smiled and smiled as she rode past Aruk, her eyes meeting his for a brief moment before swinging sharply back. Her gaze ran down his length and the smile vanished, revealing the fullness of her mouth in the instant before her lips pressed into a thin line.

Reining her horse around, she stopped before Aruk, regarding him imperiously from the height of her saddle. Abruptly the shouts from the crowd quieted.

“Have you no respect for a royal princess, barbarian,” she said in haughty voice, “that you arrive bare to my parade and flaunt yourself before me?”

Aruk was not bare. He wore boots and a sword and a ragged length of homespun weave tied around his hips that covered him to his knees, for it had been a cursed hot day.

And he had not much respect for royal princesses, but he had a little respect for the number of mounted soldiers who'd preceded her.

Though perhaps only very little.

"Forgive me, princess. What bare part of me offends you most? I will cover it now."

"Your chest."

With a nod, Aruk began to untie the knot at his hip.

A frown creased her brow. "What are you doing?"

"I have only enough cloth to cover my bottom or my top, your highness. But as it is my chest that most offends you, I hope you'll forgive me when I flaunt my cock."

Her mouth dropped open. And a very pretty mouth it was. Pretty enough that the cock he was soon to flaunt began to stir.

Or perhaps what stirred him was not her mouth at all, but what came out of it. For her eyes narrowed and she said, "I will give you a small napkin to cover it, too."

Aruk laughed. "I would be grateful, your highness."

The crowd murmured and jostled again as she gracefully dismounted. A gossamer cape she wore over a dress of white silk, and that cape's golden clips she unfastened as she approached.

Though not near to Aruk's height, a tall woman she was, with the top of her head on level with his chin. A soft perfume reached him, a scent both sharp as a lemon and sweet as its blossom.

She crooked her finger, and obediently he bent his head. That scent spun around him as she draped the cape over his left shoulder, and the warmth of her fingers as she smoothed it into place crosswise over his chest filled his cock with answering heat.

Clipping the cape closed beneath his right arm, she placed her palm against his ribs and softly said, "Keep this glowing

mark on your skin concealed, or you will find yourself in chains.”

The ward that protected him from spells. Most people from these realms did not even recognize what it was. “Why?”

She gave him no reason, but pressed a heavy coin into his palm. “With this you may purchase swift passage upon any ship you choose. Leave this kingdom as quickly as you can. All from the Dead Lands must stay away.”

“Why?” he asked again.

She looked to him in exasperation, as if unused to being questioned. “Perhaps because you are conquerers and butcherers who kill kings and steal thrones.”

“Only from tyrants. Is that what you fear—that I’ll steal your throne? Be not a tyrant, then.”

Dryly she said, “I only fear that you’ll inspire others to tear off their clothes.”

He grinned. “I should like to inspire that in you, princess.”

Her lips quirked slightly, but she only stepped back and swiftly mounted her horse. “Let me never see you again, warrior.”

“You will not,” he told her—for it was likely true. His duty and blood obligation had demanded that he sail away from here long before she made the same demand. And a long journey lay ahead. No thought did he have of returning.

Without looking back, she rode away from him, continuing her parade down the street. Easy then it should have been to leave. But he watched until she was out of sight.

Then Aruk did what his duty demanded. As dark clouds gathered over the Illwind Sea, he sailed away from Savadon.

And two days later, he was lost to the waves.

JALISA THE SPOILED

THE SMOKING ISLANDS

Six months later...

SALT WATER SPLASHED into Jalisa's mouth as she fell yet again, struggling to drag the dinghy onto the sand. A small wave broke behind the stern and assisted her next heave, and when the water receded the boat did not go with it. Onto the beach she collapsed and breathlessly laughed, exhausted and sunburned and *free*.

Only free would she be for a short time. Yet even temporary freedom was so sweet.

Climbing to her feet, she secured the dinghy's rope around the trunk of a palm tree, then looked out to where her ship was anchored beyond the mouth of the cove. Not a breeze stirred through the canvas sails—nor would it, until she returned.

Turning away from the water, she trudged through the soft, shifting sands. Only dawn it was, so the sun had not yet warmed the beach to burn her feet. Water dripped down her bare legs. She had abandoned her long, tangling skirts her first day upon the sea. The sleeveless silk shift she wore now had soaked through, and she might as well have been naked. Her hair was in a salty, ratty tangle. Her lips were chapped and nose peeling. And the finest part of it all was that there was no one to see, no one to care that Jalisa wasn't the pretty princess she was supposed to be.

Soon she would have to make herself into a pretty bride. But not yet.

She consulted the map of the island that her handmaid's brother, Bashir, had sketched into parchment almost a year past. A volcanic peak towered ahead, the steep sides covered in lush vegetation. The hut that stored all of her provisions lay at the western end of this cove, at the base of that mountain.

In no other way could she have stocked away so many supplies without being found out, except to have almost nothing to do with the process. As her coming of age day neared, Bashir had stored enough dried food to last a voyage to the western shore. Then for six months, it had waited here for her, because her father had not tried to marry her off as quickly as she'd expected him to.

Then two months ago, Prince Wanieer had arrived, as odious as could be. Almost as odious as her father's advisor, Fin Ketles, whose leering attentions had begun with the first budding of her breasts. So it became time to flee. Marriage still awaited her, but at least it would be a husband of her choosing.

The hut stood precisely where the map claimed it would be. After six months of neglect—and particularly since a savage storm had blown across the Illwind Sea a few days after she'd come of age—she had expected more disrepair. The thatched roof caved in, perhaps. Or a wall blown down, the door hanging open. She had prepared herself to find at least some of her goods spoiled by moisture or rummaged through by animals, yet the hut appeared intact.

A simple wooden latch secured the door. Swinging it open, she stepped into the dim interior—and froze as her senses registered the presence she'd not heard from outside.

A man. Laying upon a woven mat, his heavy muscles covered with a gossamer cloth. So sheer and light the fabric was, the golden glow of a ward carved into his ribs shone through. And she could not mistake the rough pumping movement of his big fist, or the jutting length that made a tent of the filmy covering.

“*Jalisa.*” That deep groan sent her gaze flying to his face, but his eyes were closed, his teeth clenched. “I love how you spread those pretty thighs so wide for me. So eager you are for my cock.”

Never had she been eager for any cock. Never had she spread her thighs for anyone.

And never had she heard anyone say her name with such naked want, unfettered by calculation and ambition and greed.

Faster he jerked his thick curving length. His hips arched up from the mat, the gossamer slipping away. “Your cunt...so tight...fill you up, princess, *so deep.*”

Skin prickling with heat, she watched him bring a gold coin to his mouth and press it to his lips. That firm mouth she knew. That glowing rune she knew. She knew that long black hair and the cheekbones like blades.

The barbarian from the parade.

“*Jalisa.*” Head back, the cords in his neck stood in sharp relief. “Give your sweet mouth to me as I— *Unnnnnh.*”

Now he kissed a coin imprinted with her likeness as he grunted and shook, pounding his shaft into his fist before abruptly stilling, ropes of seed splashing across his ridged abdomen.

Chest heaving, he eased his muscular ass down to the mat again. He lay the coin over his heart before rolling his head toward the door in languid motion, as if utterly pleased and spent. He blinked, then regarded her without much reaction while she stared at him, mouth hanging open, every inch of her skin hot and tight and tingling.

“This is the finest dream yet,” he said gruffly, his hungry gaze consuming her from head to toe.

Jalisa closed her gaping mouth. Then opened it again. But...what was there to say?

Except, “Again you are bare, warrior.”

A slow smile curved his firm mouth. “So are you, princess. And more beautiful than ever I imagined.”

For she left nothing to his imagination, standing before him in a transparent shift, with nipples hardened and cunt slick. Because he had just... With her name on his lips.

And the *coin*.

Silently she backed out of the hut and closed the door. So hard it was to think. Monkeys screeched in the trees. A multitude of birds seemed to be chirping and singing and flapping around inside her brain.

Had she gone mad? Was this a long-delayed scaling of a magic spell—an unraveled hangman's rope becoming a knotted mind? Or was it the effect of a fever? Was she perhaps still in her bed, drowning in her own lungs?

It couldn't be. Even vomiting, never in the palace had she been so...unkempt.

Through the door, she called out, "Why are you on my island, warrior?"

It opened. So tall he was, ducking his head to leave the hut. Around his hips he tied a fraying rag barely long enough to cover what she now knew hung between his legs. A small napkin would not have sufficed.

Oh, and so thick and hard his thighs were. And his chest. And his arms.

And his head. "This is *your* island?" he asked.

"Would I be here if it was not?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "It is not my island and yet I am here."

"All of the Smoking Islands belong to Savadon—which you were supposed to leave and never return. Why are you here?"

He narrowed his eyes as if the answer required deep thought, idly scratching his chest. "A wave swept me from my ship and into the sea."

Oh. "Then you swam here?"

“Only part of the way. I grabbed hold of a kindly dolphin’s fin and rode upon its back for a few days. But a monster squid attacked the dolphin’s pod, and I only narrowly escaped after cutting through one of its arms. Then the sharks came, but I had lost my sword battling the squid, and so a full night I spent heroically battering them to death with my fists before I could swim the remaining distance.”

May the gods have mercy upon him. The solitude had addled his brain. “How long have you been here alone, warrior?”

“Since two days past your parade.”

It was *that* storm he’d been swept to sea in? Six months he had been here, then.

Her heart stilled. “Did you eat all of my provisions?”

“Those were also yours?”

“*Were?*”

He grinned. “Still some are left. I touched none of the prunes. Far better fruits are found in the trees. And I am a mighty hunter. If you fear starving here, you need not.”

“I do not intend to *be* here.”

His gaze sharpened. “You are not also marooned?”

“Of course not. I do not ride dolphins to islands. I have a ship.”

Sheer relief filled his expression. “Then I will leave with you.”

“And starve upon the sea? How are we to survive a three month voyage to the western shore when you have eaten all the provisions?” Sheer frustration burst from her in a sharp screech. “You thieving pig! If you are such a mighty hunter, could you not have hunted your meals instead of raiding my stores?”

Unbothered he seemed. “So I will hunt and fill them again. Where on the western shore do you go?”

“Grimhold.” She kicked sullenly at the sand, because it was true—the island might provide what she needed. But so *long* the preparations would take. “Kael the Conqueror seeks a bride.”

So utterly still the barbarian became. His voice deepened as he asked, “And you intend that bride to be you?”

“I do.”

“Did you not disapprove of barbarians from the Dead Lands who killed tyrants and stole their thrones?”

“That is why I would marry him. So he might come and kill a tyrant.”

“Who? Sologius of Aremond?”

Who needed killing, too. But—“I hoped he would start with my father.”

He gave her a doubtful look. “A tyrant he is?”

Throat tight, Jalisa nodded.

“Because he does he not buy you enough silks? Or because he forces you to marry?”

As if she were a silly girl. Fire burned in her gut and she pivoted away from him. “I think instead I will send a ship back for you, warrior.”

The maddening barbarian kept pace with her through the sand. “He is no Sologius of Aremond, murdering and enslaving all those who stand against him.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He does not fill his mines with slaves, true, but he has enslaved some in other ways. And he orders all who stand against him executed. But the fates conspire against him, because the methods he uses keep failing. And in Savadon, if a hangman’s rope breaks or if an executioner’s axe shatters, the law states they must be sent into exile, instead.”

“Is this what has happened to you—exile? Did you stand against him?”

“No.” Not openly. Not for a long time. “I decided to find someone who might more successfully stand against him.”

“I will do it.”

“I would rather the Conqueror, for I know he killed four tyrant kings with great success.”

“Kael is already married.”

Dead in her tracks she stopped. “Are you certain?”

“I am. My brother and I were hired to bolster the army at the southern pass of Grimhold before we came to Savadon by way of Aremond.” Intensely he regarded her with unreadable expression. “He married a princess from Ivermere.”

Everything within Jalisa deflated—then filled again. *Hired to bolster the army.* “You are a hired sword?”

“I am.” He gave a wry smile. “Though my sword is at the bottom of the sea.”

She would buy him a new one. “What is your fee?”

For a long time his dark gaze searched her face, her eyes. Finally he said in a gruff voice, “One night in your bed.”

In astonishment she stared at him. “You want a night in my bed? And that is all?”

Jaw clenched, he gave a single nod.

“Very well. If that is all it will cost me, then we have a deal.” She laughed. “You sell your services so cheaply, warrior.”

His face darkened. “Cheaply?”

“I was willing to marry Kael the Conqueror in exchange for what you offer to me at only the price of my virginity. My whole life I would have spent married to a man I didn’t love, with no other purpose but giving birth to his heirs. You could have asked to marry me, and for me to make you a king, and I would have agreed. Are you certain you do not want that? I do

not want you to feel cheated. Especially as this job carries deep risk.”

The skin over his cheekbones drew taut. Hoarsely he said, “I cannot have a wife or a kingdom. When this task is finished, duty calls me elsewhere.”

“Ah.” Duty, she understood all too well. “I would not take advantage of you, warrior. What of a mountain of gold? Will you not ask for that?”

“I cannot carry a mountain of gold upon a horse.”

“I suppose you cannot. So one night it is, then. And in exchange, you hand to me true freedom.” She sighed happily, her chest swelling with emotion. Because if this warrior succeeded, then her freedom would not be temporary. “And it is so much less than I ever expected to pay. Less than I have already paid. So yes, warrior—I think you sell your services *very* cheaply.”

ARUK THE FOOL

THE ILLWIND SEA

WHAT THE PRINCESS called cheap might come at the cost of Aruk's heart. A fool he was. Such a fool. The woman he'd woven so many dreams around did not exist. She had been but a focus for his mind as the endless days passed on the island, burning with frustration that he was trapped in the middle of the Illwind Sea instead of helping his brother fulfill their sacred obligation.

His brother still lived, at least. Even when separated, Aruk could feel the distant presence of his twin like a touch at the back of his head. So he had no fear that whatever obstacles Strax faced upon that tournament route had defeated him.

But he hated that his brother had faced them alone. For no doubt Mara would have nothing to do with him.

What would Strax have given for a single night with her? Aruk suspected that his brother would have given anything. A fine woman she was.

Not a haughty, spoiled princess who demanded that Aruk cover himself, then threatened to put him in chains for exposing a harmless rune, then screeched at him for eating unmarked provisions that had seemed abandoned and left for the very purpose he'd used them: to nourish someone trapped on the island. And now she wanted him to kill a king whom Aruk suspected had done nothing better or worse than any

other king. Every ruler punished those who rebelled against him. And these had only known exile? That was not what Aruk called a tyrant.

More probably, this princess rebelled because the husband chosen for her wasn't to her liking.

And because Aruk was a fool, every part of his heart rebelled at the thought of her taking *any* husband.

He had not meant to think of her for even a single moment after the parade. She had stirred his cock, true. Because she had smelled so fine, and her mouth was so lush, and her tongue so sharp. The imperious way she looked down at him had fired his blood. And so his first imaginings had been of her beneath him, instead. Not haughty and demanding but writhing and begging.

So very satisfying those imaginings had been. And that should have been the end of them. But although he'd tried, no other woman could he picture while stroking his cock. Until he never even *tried* to think of other women. His mind had returned to her again and again. So often that it almost seemed as if she had been his companion on this island these past six months.

But the woman he'd conjured in his mind had not screeched. She'd not been spoiled. A sharp tongue she'd still had—but also a warm and generous heart.

The woman he'd conjured would not murder a king or buy a kingdom for the cost of her virginity.

But that was not a price Aruk would truly demand. No night with this princess would he have. For he had no intention of killing her father. Only of escaping this island.

In all his dreams of Jalisa, never had he imagined that it would be she who rescued him. But it was for the best, if time spent with the princess could cure this obsession that ailed him. For even as she'd screeched, his cock and his heart had ached with need for her. As she'd dangled marriage and a lifetime in front of him, so badly he'd wanted to take them.

Yet she seemed quite pleased that he didn't.

No time had they wasted before leaving. Only two days' voyage it was back to Savadon, so no need to stock more provisions. Aruk studied her now as he rowed the dinghy to the sailing ship anchored outside the shallow cove. The princess looked as if she might have truly spent six months on an island with him. Sun and wind had pinkened her pale skin. Her hair was a wild tangle. Eyes closed, she sat in the boat with her face lifted to the rising sun, a soft smile on her lips.

“What did you mean when you said I offer you true freedom?”

That smile widened, as if simply the thought brought her renewed joy. “Only that I would not have to be what was intended for me. Instead I will be what I choose to be.”

“You do not wish to be a queen?”

“A queen? That would mean nothing in my father's kingdom.” Now she looked at him, her gaze so direct. “Never would I rule after my father died. The husband my father chose for me would. The only purpose intended for me is to breed heirs.”

“Is that not a queen's duty? You do not want children?”

“I want children when I am ready to have children. Not because a husband is ready to get heirs upon me. So I would like to be queen, warrior. What I do not want is to be a bride, whose only purpose is in marriage and breeding and looking pretty.”

“You do not wish to marry?” No husband then would Aruk have to hate.

Or kill.

She shrugged. “Not if it means always bowing to the wishes of a husband or marrying a man who wants the throne more than he wants me. So perhaps I will not marry at all. Perhaps a string of lovers I will take.”

Lovers? Aruk couldn't stop his snarl. His hard pull on the oars sent her swaying backward and forward as she laughed at him.

“You disapprove, warrior? After demanding to be the first of them?”

She was right to laugh. A fool’s reaction it was. Yet jealousy filled his gut and Aruk wanted to demand that he would be her first and her last and her only.

And he would not even be her first. Still he said to her, “You are a virgin. Do you truly know what you agreed to, and what I will do to you?”

“Of course. You will spread my thighs and shove your cock into me and then rut until you spend. Though I hope you will not spend inside me.”

Spilling his seed deep within the hot, wet clasp of her. His shaft stiffened at the mere thought.

Yet that could only be fantasy. “Never would I spend inside a woman who was not my wife.” A woman he could not stay with, if he got her with child.

“Then we are agreed.”

“I do not think we are.” Except in the broadest of details. He hauled back on the oars. “Your legs I would spread. Then I would settle my head between them and feast on your cunt until sweet honey dripped down your thighs.”

Her breath caught. Lips parted, she stared at him.

Another stroke of the oars. His firm grip on them was all that prevented Aruk from reaching for her. “And when you are wet and soft and swollen with your need, then I will sink my cock into you. Again and again. Full deep, never stopping until I feel the hot squeeze of your cunt as you come.”

Her fingers rolled into fists against her thighs. The shift she wore had dried, no longer transparent, yet still he could clearly see the hardness of her nipples.

“Why would you?” she whispered.

“Why would I fuck you? It is the fee.” One he would never collect. Though he’d begun to wish her father was a tyrant in truth.

“Why make me come? Why care whether I enjoy it at all?”

He frowned. “What sort of man would not care?”

“I think most only care for their own pleasure.”

The sort of men she knew were not men at all, then. “That *is* my pleasure. Not the hot clasp of your cunt around my cock, sweet though it would be. Pleasure is knowing I made you scream and writhe as I fucked you with it.”

As she squirmed now upon the seat in the boat. As if trying to ease an ache within her.

As if she were already dripping with honey.

Though he’d spent by his own hand less than an hour ago, hot and throbbing his cock was now, knowing that she had imagined what he’d described and her need slickened her cunt.

Breathing harsh, he swung the oars forward out of the water, securing them within the boat. “Give to me a taste.”

Confusion lined her brow. “A taste?”

“Of your cunt. Now.” A night he would not have. But he would have this.

Her eyes narrowed. “My father is not yet dead.”

“And you would not like me to feel cheated by the cheap price I set. What if the taste of you is not what I dreamed? Best I be certain now.”

She bit her lip as if against a laugh. But not only amusement did he see. Temptation was there, too.

“Come stand before me, Jalisa. When I make you come on my tongue, you can also be certain that what I said is how it will be.”

Indecision only warred over her beautiful face for another second. Then she rose, the boat rocking from side to side in the water. He held out his hand to steady her. The trusting curl of her fingers around his also curled around his heart in a tighter grip.

So fucked he was.

“Step up here on the seat,” he said, voice raw with hunger. With her feet in the bottom of the boat, she was at an awkward angle to his mouth. Yet if she stood on the bench where he sat, a perfect height she would be.

She stepped up between his thighs, gripping his shoulder when the dinghy rocked again. “It wobbles.”

“I will hold you steady,” he vowed, and so he did, taking her hips in a firm grip as she rose before him.

Again she looked down at him, though not imperiously. Instead he only saw nervousness and curiosity and arousal. And the deliberately haughty tone she put into her voice as she said, “You may taste me now, warrior,” only made him grin.

As did the realization of why she called him ‘warrior.’ “Do you not wish to know the name of the man who is feasting on your cunt?”

She blinked, as if that had not occurred to her. Then she gave him a considering look. “I don’t think so, no.”

Yet the way she flattened her lips together, as if repressing a smile, and the dimple that suddenly appeared in her cheek said that she only teased him.

He could tease, too. “Pull up your shift.”

Immediately her lips softened and parted. Her breathing deepened. With fingers at her hips, she rucked the silk upward, baring her upper thighs an inch at a time, then the cleft between. Standing as she was, her thighs pressed together, he saw nothing of her deeper cunt. Only the slit at the front that nestled her pretty clit—but that was all he needed to make her come.

Already she glistened with her need—and completely bare she was. “Is this a princess’s cunt? They pamper and groom you even here?”

“No,” she said softly. “I was being prepared for marriage.”

For another man to look upon her. But she was *his*.

She gave a soft cry of surprise as he abruptly dragged her forward, and his mouth opened against her, his tongue slicking

into that little slit. He groaned in pleasure at the first taste of her wetness. Salty she was from the sea, yet her flavor beneath was so sweet and heady.

Her body trembled violently as, with broad strokes of his tongue, Aruk teased her clit before sucking that pretty bud between his lips. A guttural sound she made, curling forward and releasing her grip on the silk to grab fistfuls of his hair.

“Warrior,” she gasped. “Warrior.”

With a growl low in his throat, he tore his ravenous mouth from her cunt and angled his head back to look up at her. Flushed she was, panting, her hair hanging around her face.

“Oh, do not stop.” With urgent hands, she tried to shove his head back down. “Do not stop.”

Unmoved, Aruk only waited, her sweetness on his tongue and lips, hungry for her cunt but hungrier still for something else.

She gave him a sudden dour look and tugged at his hair. “Then what do I call you, *warrior*?”

He grinned. “Aruk.”

“Aruk,” she repeated softly, and the fingers of her right hand let go of his hair to trace a path along his jaw. “So sweet a night with you will be.”

Fierce ache gripped his heart. Roughly he dragged her to his mouth again. This, the only taste he would have. So much better it was than his imaginings, with her fingernails digging into his scalp and the helpless rocking of her hips against his face. Her knees gave out and he held her up, sucking and licking her clit, his fingers digging into the soft cheeks of her ass. More frantic her movements became. His name she said, again and again, her voice high with frantic wonder. Then she stilled all at once, her soft flesh convulsing against his tongue, her teeth clenched on a scream.

Tremors slipped through her as he sucked on her clit again, and she pushed at his head. “Stop,” she panted. “Please stop.”

Too sensitive now. So no more would Aruk have, unless he hurt her.

Never would he do that.

With a last deep inhalation of her scent, he drew back, letting the silk fall into place to cover her. A fool he was to have done this. For he had told himself there were some things he would *not* do to spend a night in her arms—such as kill a king who did not deserve killing.

Yet now, after this taste of her...Aruk could think of almost nothing that he wouldn't do for another lick. And that a mere taste. To have her for one sweet night? To fuck her so deep and hard and feel her cling to him, calling his name?

He might do anything.

JALISA THE SELFISH

THE ILLWIND SEA

JALISA WAS STILL TREMBLING from the pleasure of Aruk's mouth when they reached her ship. This freedom she had now was so fine, indeed. For when she was the princess her father wanted her to be, never could she have followed her desire and let a warrior lick her cunt. And so wonderful it had been. He'd been so hungry for her—and never had the pleasure of her own touch approached the ecstasy of his.

Oh, how incredible it would be when she could always follow her own desire, without regard for what anyone else wanted her to do. Especially if she desired a man such as Aruk.

A better sailor Aruk was than she, more familiar with boats, for he didn't fumble with the ropes and pulleys that secured the dinghy.

He looked up alongside the ship, frowning. "Where is your crew?"

"I have no crew."

"A ship of this size must have a crew."

She shook her head. "This ship is spelled to always sail on the finest winds, wherever I want it to go."

Darkly he scowled. "That is no simple spell. And dangerous."

So it was. “I paid a great deal for it.”

“What of the scaling? How did you ward against it for a boat of this size?”

Because a spell always had a consequence. If a spell healed, it was by stealing health from somewhere else. If it strengthened, it was by stealing strength from somewhere else. And never could the scaling of those spells be predicted, whether the consequence was large or small. Healing a broken bone might only scale and leave a bruise on someone else—someone who was unprotected from the scaling, which might be anyone who didn’t wield magic—or it might break that person in half.

“For fair winds,” Aruk continued, “somewhere else will receive foul winds. When was this ship spelled? Six months past?”

“You think it caused the storm that swept you here?” Jalisa shook her head. “Sometimes, warrior, the weather is just the weather. And it was two months past that the ship was spelled.”

He did not like it. That she could see. But she had not tossed magic about carelessly. She would not risk such a scaling to harm innocents, either.

His arms bulged with corded muscle as he hauled the dinghy into place. They climbed to the main deck, treading across the weathered gray boards. He looked around them doubtfully. “You meant to sail three months on this wreck?”

She could not have bought a yacht without her father knowing. So it was a fisherman’s ship, old but sturdy. “It is seaworthy.”

“Barely.” He tapped a knuckle against the mast as if to check it for dry rot. “Who made the spell for you?”

So he was not off of that yet? He seemed more bothered by knowing this spell had been cast then when she’d described what her father was.

“A witch of the Dead Lands.”

His eyes widened, then narrowed. “What do you know of witches?”

More than anyone else in Savadon, for witches were not commonly in these western realms. Almost everyone born in the Dead Lands was born with great ability to cast spells and magic within them. As Aruk had been. That glowing symbol on his side was proof of the magic in him.

Yet those from the Dead Lands also believed that the magic slowly pushed the world out of balance until there was a disastrous Reckoning. And so most bound their magic to their skin with a small rune, and they deliberately never learned the spoken spells that would bend the world to their will.

Yet some still did. The witches, who were all highly respected within the Dead Lands. For they did not bind their magic, and they knew spells, yet only in the most dire of circumstances would use them—such as a child dying of infection or sickness, or the most fatal of injuries. Because most injuries would heal. They simply took time and patience and left a scar.

Outside of the Dead Lands, spells were used more carelessly. Healers were common even for the most minor of pains. But because the scaling could not be known, healers always resided in warded chambers or huts, so the consequences of the magic could not escape and harm an innocent person. And within that hut, the healer would keep small animals such as mice or insects for the scaling to target.

Yet a ship could not fit in a warded chamber. So Aruk believed that an innocent must have been affected by the scaling.

“A witch would never cast a spell on a ship like this,” he said.

That was true. But still, a witch was the reason Jalisa had known the spell. But she thought this warrior might disapprove of how she’d cast it even more vehemently than he disapproved of the spell already.

“Do you think kindness and love would keep it afloat?” she teased him. For those were the magics that had no scaling. Pure they were, working change not by stealing from elsewhere, but by adding themselves to the world, like a low flame beneath a pot of water, slowly warming it.

Though in truth...kindness and love *would* keep this boat afloat. Because this spell had not been of pure magic, but everything Jalisa had been taught of magic was born from love.

As if she thought he mocked him with mention of true magic and love, Aruk cast her a dark look, shaking his head. “How do we sail?”

“With but a thought from its captain.” Which she gave now. The breeze suddenly picked up, filling the sails. The creaking ship began to slide across the water.

And though he disliked the magic behind it, the spell was done. No more fine winds would be stolen to create it.

“You should take the ship!” she called over the new sound of rushing water against the bow. “When my father is dead and your duty calls you away!”

For that is what Aruk had said—he could not marry because of duty. And his voyage had been interrupted, so after his job for her was done, he would sail away again.

Now the thought of his leaving filled her chest with a tight ache. “Will you ever return to Savadon, warrior?”

He grunted, jaw tight. “You told me that I should not.”

“It would not be so dangerous with my father dead.” She grinned at him, fluttering her lashes. “And if you please me in my bed the first night, perhaps I would take you again.”

So fierce and determined his expression became. “I would please you so well that you will abandon your plan to take many others to your bed.”

“Well, I would not take them all at once!” she teased. “Or perhaps I would. When I am queen, who is to tell me how to behave?”

A muscle worked in his jaw. “Will you be a selfish queen, then, demanding men to warm your bed—so that I might have to return to you for different reason?”

To kill another tyrant, as her father was. Hurt speared through her then. He spoke as if she would take lovers without regard for whether they wanted her or not. As if she would order them to her bed instead of only seeking the same pleasure that he’d given by wanting her so much.

Tightly she said, “If what I do harms no one, what issue do you have?”

“You think those you take to your bed will not fall in love with you and be destroyed when you are done with them? That is no harm?”

She laughed, though beneath it lay pain, sharpening. “Is that all it takes to fall in love? Are you not in danger, then, for asking to spend a night with me? Suddenly the fee you wanted seems not so insignificant or so cheap. I did not know one night would earn me your heart.”

Though they both knew it would not. So she did not know why he suddenly disapproved of her hope that she would find love and pleasure in someone’s arms. For he was not staying to give it.

“You are welcome to the ship,” she said tautly when he gave no immediate response. “We will add it to your fee. What duty did you say calls you away?”

“Aremond’s tournament,” he said, voice harsh.

She knew of that tournament. Dozens of warriors had passed through Savadon on their way to seek some relic in the realms north of the Illwind Sea. Whoever brought the relic back to Aremond won the tournament’s prize—a pile of gold.

The pile of gold that Aruk had refused from her. And he was so far behind the others, he must have already lost. Unless he meant to ambush and steal the relic from the victor as they made their way back to Aremond.

“And is that what you will do? Return to that tournament route?”

He nodded. "It is."

Her heart constricted. And she understood him not at all. "Did you not say—"

The bow tipped up suddenly, throwing her back. Aruk's strong arms caught her.

"What was that?" The sails were still full, yet the boat had stopped. "Did we hit a rock?"

Which should not have happened. The spell made this ship always sail true.

"I do not think so," Aruk said slowly, eyes fixed ahead. "You ought to have spelled this ship against sea monsters, too."

Jalisa gasped in horror. A huge gray tentacle was coiling around the bow. Enormous it was, slick and pulsating, the suckers hungrily seeking.

A monster squid. Which could tear apart ships, so the vessels spilled out contents and passengers, and the squid could feast at will. Frantically she looked to the stern, where another tentacle had begun winding over the deck.

Not a hint of fear did she hear in Aruk's voice when it rumbled in her ear. "Do you have any weapons aboard?"

"No."

"What did you intend to do if you came across pirates?"

"Not fight them! I would make the ship outrun them."

But already that option was too late. The winds blew, but even spelled winds could not free a ship from the grip of a monster squid.

Aruk led her to the ship's mast. "Hold tight to this," he told her. "I must kill the monster before those tentacles rip apart the timbers."

"Kill it with what?"

From the small bundle he'd brought from the island, he showed her a palm-sized stone with a sharp edge. "This razor I

made.”

“Do you mean to give the monster a shave with that little blade?”

His teeth flashed in a broad grin. “It sliced into my face often enough, so it will likely also slice into a squid’s. Hold fast to that mast until I return.”

With smooth stride, he moved to the edge of the deck and leapt up onto the gunwale as if his thick muscles were made of springs. He looked down into the water, and a hearty laugh broke from him.

“It is my old friend! Perhaps he has waited for me all this time—but this day, I will not stop after cutting off only one arm. It is this monster’s day to die!”

And with stone blade clenched between his teeth, Aruk dove in.

ARUK THE WRECKED

THE ILLWIND SEA

ARUK HAD HEARD that monster squids had memories as long as their arms. True that seemed now, for apparently the squid had left the deep sea to lay in wait for him near the island. He knew not if the squid intended vengeance for the lost arm, but whatever feud between them lay in that foul brain, Aruk would end it today.

Under the water was a slithering mass of tentacles. A firm grip on the ship it had—and the vessel was already lost, Aruk saw. Timbers beneath the waterline had splintered and cracked. No spell for fair winds would prevent water from filling the hold and sinking them to the bottom of the sea.

He surfaced again. His disobedient princess stood not at the mast but clinging to the rail, her wide-eyed terror melting into relief when she saw him. “Throw everything into the dinghy and drop it free of the ship!” he called to her.

“I will!” She spun and disappeared from his sight.

With a screech of wood, the ship splintered in half, the center popping upward, the bow and stern tipping downward into the water. Cursing, Aruk dove under, stone knife in hand.

Broken planks rained down through the water, sharpened edges like wooden daggers. Feet kicking, Aruk arrowed through the water to the center mass of those tentacles. All the

arms were wrapped around the ship—and so the squid’s great eye was unprotected.

As he dove toward it, his own face he saw reflected in that black orb, a mask of rage and purpose. He plunged the stone blade into the fleshy eye. Blood spilled out like ink, blinding him with black clouds. The squid began to thrash, convulsing tentacles still wrapped around the ends of the ship, tearing apart the two ends and flinging them about.

And Jalisa was still aboard.

Aruk’s heart pounded with sudden fear, his lungs were afire, but the squid was not dead yet. Deeper he shoved his arm, hacking into the monster’s brain.

All went still.

Aruk jerked his arm free and kicked for the surface. He broke through on a great heaving gasp for air, and in the next breath shouted, “Jalisa!”

The ship was scattered over gentle waves. He struck for the dinghy, swimming fast. Gripping the side, he heaved himself up and looked into the small boat. She had managed to toss his bundle into the bottom but no more.

“Jalisa!”

His frantic gaze scanned the wreckage. There she was—clinging to a floating plank. Unmoving, facedown. Crimson blood soaked her silk shift.

No. Painful dread split through his chest. He raced through the water, diving beneath wreckage too big to push aside. At her side he surfaced, praying to all the gods as he gently lifted her head from the plank to see her face.

She still breathed. His heart began beating again, then stopped as he saw her injury. A splintered piece of wood the length of a short sword had pierced her side.

He had once been stabbed in the same place. It was not a fatal wound. But it would be if he did not get her out of the water.

Cradling her still form against his chest, backward he swam toward the dinghy. He was almost to that small boat when the first dorsal fin sliced through the water nearby. Drawn by the squid's blood.

Drawn by Jalisa's blood.

The sharks were big enough to tip over their small boat. If a frenzy began, she would not be safe.

Kissing her soft lips, Aruk carefully lifted her into the dinghy.

Then into the water he went again. With his knife, he made a shallow slice across his thigh. A full night this had taken before, and he had not that much time. Better to draw them quickly and get this over with.

The first shark attacked from beneath, a swift nightmare of gaping jaws and dagger teeth. With a mighty swing of his arm, Aruk battered his fist into its head.

By the time the shark's gray body settled dead onto the sea floor, he'd sent eight more sinking to join it. When no more fins were in sight, Aruk climbed into the boat. For the briefest moment, Jalisa opened her eyes.

Alive. But so pale she was. And still she bled.

He would *not* lose her. Had he known a spell, his own life he would have given to save her. But no magic did he have but the emotion in his heart—and the untiring strength that emotion gave to his arms.

Eyes blazing with it, he struck the oars into the water and began to row.

JALISA THE DIFFICULT

THE SMOKING ISLANDS

THE FEVER WAS upon her again. But this time, her lungs did not seem to be drowning. Somewhere nearby, monkeys screeched. A woven mat she felt beneath her back, featherlight gossamer blanketing her front.

Restlessly she moved. “Aruk?”

“Shh, princess.” A soft rumble his voice was, and cool water touched her lips. “Be at ease.”

Her throat and tongue were parched. Thirstily she drank, then whimpered softly when he drew the water away.

“Slowly.”

Or she would vomit it all up. She nodded and the movement made her head swim. Her voice seemed a cross between a whisper and a croak. “I still do not believe there were kindly dolphins.”

His quiet laugh she heard, but when Jalisa’s own weak laugh shook her body, pain ripped through her side.

“Be at ease,” he said softly again. “I stitched your wound as I would a battlefield injury. But it will hurt for some time.”

And she was fevered, so still in danger. With strength born of desperation, she caught his wrist. Her eyes would not properly focus in the dim hut, and he was but a giant shadow looming beside her.

“If I die,” she croaked, “even though you would not have your night with me, please kill my father anyway. Or all of Savadon will be as Aremond is, and ruled by a sorcerer tyrant.”

“Your father is a sorcerer?” was his grim reply.

“No.” Such effort that short answer was, yet more effort she had to make. “But magic he always seeks for his own corrupt gain. Please. If I am dead, no one will hold him in check.”

“You will *not* die, princess.” Strong hands cradled her hot cheeks. His voice was hoarse as he vowed, “Never will I let you.”

And that seemed to be the only promise Aruk would make to her. But no more effort could she give.

Her fingers fell away from his wrist, and she knew no more.

ARUK’S PROMISE HE KEPT, and she did not die. Jalisa knew not how many days he tended to her fever, but his gentle care continued after it broke. With every movement, the pain from the wound in her side jabbed deep and stole her breath—and so Aruk assisted her every move, attended to every need that she had. No embarrassment could she feel, even during the intimate tasks. Too grateful she was. Yet still it was a relief when enough of her strength returned for Jalisa to manage those tasks on her own.

And still he cared for her. When she finally could stand and walk, merely crossing the small hut left her weakened and shaking. So he would carry her outside, where she could enjoy the fresh breeze and warm sun, until exhaustion forced her to return to the sleeping mat.

While she had been fevered, he’d woven another mat, and every night he slept beside her. If ever she stirred in the dark, instantly he seemed to wake, asking if there was anything she needed.

All that she needed was Aruk, close beside her. So he had already given her everything.

Over the next week, more strength she gained. Except for when he hunted, everywhere Aruk carried her then, as if he feared letting her out of his sight. He had decided to make the dinghy more seaworthy, so that the small boat might carry them the two days' voyage to Savadon. Trees he felled and began to shape, explaining to her what he did and why he did it, so that she watched him not only in admiration of the way his powerful muscles gleamed beneath the sun, but in admiration of his skill and knowledge. Less strenuous tasks, such as braiding vines into ropes, he showed Jalisa how to do after she complained of being useless. So much more he showed her, too. How to start a fire with no flint and steel, how to catch and clean and roast a fish, how to make a flute from a thin hollow bone he found.

But he could not teach her to play it as beautifully as he did.

Nearly every waking hour, they spent together. Aruk told her of his twin brother, Strax, and of growing up in the wastes of the Dead Lands. Of the adventures they'd had as hired swords, the places they'd been, the things they'd done and seen.

To Jalisa, who had rarely stepped outside the palace walls and who had never been beyond the borders of Savadon, his adventures were the most wonderful of all stories.

In turn, she told him of the war-torn history of her kingdom, which served as the only route through the southern realms to the Illwind Sea, and the battles fought over the riches that the trade through Savadon brought. She told him of the heroes and villains in her own royal line, she told him of books she'd read—and said nothing at all of her own life. But if he noted how she avoided ever mentioning growing up within the palace, never did he say.

When she could trudge through the soft sand for more than a minute without having to stop to catch her breath, longer walks they took along the beach. Each day she grew stronger,

and each night she fell exhausted and happy into bed, Aruk within arm's reach beside her.

And through it all, so desperately she fell in love with him.

But Jalisa knew a reckoning was coming. For he had tended to her so closely. Feeding her, bathing her.

She knew he'd seen the rune carved into her skin, a rune that matched one of his.

She knew he'd seen the small scars that climbed her inner thighs like ladders.

And she suspected they were why he hadn't touched her again, except to care for her in sickness. In the first weeks, her wound might have been the reason, except that more than a month had passed since the fever had broken, and her side barely pained her now. Yet still he didn't touch her. And despite the yearning ache within her, she hadn't reached out to him, either—too afraid that he would push her away.

When the reckoning came, it was not unexpected. Too quiet he'd been that morning. Together they walked along the shore, Aruk gazing out beyond the cove to where her ship had once been anchored, when he asked gruffly, "What did you pay for the wind spell?"

Painful constriction circled her heart. No use was it to lie, to name a sum of gold. Already he must know that she'd not paid with coin.

"A drowning cough," she whispered.

He drew to a halt in the sand, eyes closing. "The scaling of the spell stole the good wind from your lungs?"

Essentially that was what it had done. Almost never was the consequence exactly equal. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Almost two months." Desperately struggling for every breath, stricken by fever—all the while her father waited for her to heal, so she might be wed. "As soon as the illness passed, that was when I fled."

“Two months of drowning in your own lungs.” Jaw clenched, he opened his eyes, his gaze blazing into hers. “Blood magic should *never* be used.”

“Perhaps not.” But it was the only magic she had.

“Perhaps not?” he echoed. “Do you not know *why* it should not be used?”

“Because it defeats the purpose of this rune.” She passed her fingers over her hip, where the marking was—the rune that bound her magic to the border of her skin.

In the Dead Lands, that rune was a vow made to never use spells that would push the world out of balance. That was likely what it meant to him.

But that was not what the rune meant to Jalisa. She had not chosen it or made a vow. Instead it was a cage that she’d been tossed into.

And so her power was bound beneath her skin...but her blood was still full of her magic. By shedding drops of blood, her magic she could use again.

“Because it is *dangerous*,” he snarled. “The scaling *always* affects the one who cast the spell. And never can anyone predict what the scaling will be. Blood magic kills the person who uses it. *Always*.”

“Eventually it will,” she agreed softly. “But I won’t need to use it so often after my father is dead. Until then, it is a risk I must take.”

“Why must you?” he challenged fiercely, and dropped to his knees, shoving up the hem of her torn and ragged shift. Jalisa trembled as his thumb brushed over a small pink scar on her inner thigh—the most recent of the scars. “This must be the ship. But what is this one?” His fingers moved higher, touching the oldest. “What was so important that you risked your life for this?”

“My father decided to make an example of a pack of street urchins who had been stealing food from the market. They were meant to hang. I unraveled the ropes. So they were exiled, instead.”

So still Aruk went. “And the scaling?”

“My hair was knotted for weeks. Which does not sound so very dire, I know,” she whispered painfully. “Except that I am always supposed to be a pretty princess and my father was so very angry with me and my maids. They could not fix my hair and so he had all of theirs shaved, as criminals have their heads shaved. They had to endure that humiliation—and to me, that was the worst part of the scaling. But other scalings were not so bad. Some spells, the effect on me must have been so small that I still do not know what the scaling was.”

For an endless time Aruk stared up at her, his tortured gaze searching her face. Then he glanced down again, his fingers sliding down the ladder of small scars. “All of these...?”

“To save those he would have executed for cruel and petty reasons,” she said softly. “But I did not save everyone. Such as a man who beat his wife to death—no spell did I cast then.”

“And the marks you hid here,” he said hoarsely. “So your father would not realize what you’d done.”

“Yes. And I have been mostly fortunate in the scalings. The cough was the worst.”

“*Jalisa.*” He groaned her name and pressed his face into her belly, holding tight to her hips. “You should not have used it.”

Her eyes burned. Did he not understand how helpless she’d been? “Then what should I have done? How could I have saved them?”

“What if the blood magic had killed you? Who would have saved them, then?” Drawing back, he looked up at her fiercely. “You *must* find another way.”

“I *have*,” she reminded him. “And the only blood required is my virginity.”

Again his eyes closed, his face a mask of torment. “To hire my sword and kill him.”

“Yes.”

The one night that had seemed such a cheap price to pay... and now seemed not a price to pay at all. Instead it was the sweetest gift, that she would have one night with him before duty pulled him away.

Gently he urged her down to kneeling in the sand with him, her face on level with his. “So tell me what sort of man I am to kill.”

“When I was a little girl, he was the best of men. He doted on me, spoiled me, encouraged me. Anything I wished for, he gave to me.” Her breath shuddered in painful remembrance. To a young girl, such indulgence seemed like love. And she had loved him so much in return. “He was so proud of how strong my magic was. From the beginning, he made certain I had the finest tutor—a witch from the Dead Lands whom he’d rescued from slavery after she’d been stolen from her home, and her magic bound with the rune. As my father instructed her to, she taught me many spells, so that I might one day become a powerful sorcerer who could protect our people and defend our kingdom. That was the sort of man he was.”

“Then he changed?” Aruk asked softly.

“He did not change,” she said aching. “All that changed was how I saw him. I was fifteen years of age when I discovered the witch was my mother—and that he’d not rescued her from slavery, but instead had purchased her from a slaver. He married her so that I would be a legitimate heir, then forced her in his bed. Then he told her that if she ever wanted to see her daughter, it could only be as my tutor. But I do not think he ever realized that she taught me more than spells—and that she taught me of true magic, too.”

And that love was not just unchecked indulgence. That kindness was not just benevolent condescension. That compassion was not just prayerful pity.

She looked into Aruk’s eyes. “She ruined me for what he intended—to use my power to bring other kingdoms under his heel.”

“*You* would have been the tyrant sorcerer,” he said in a gruff voice.

“Yes. Probably he would have lied to me, said our kingdom was under attack and he needed me to cast my spells to destroy the enemy. But what difference would my ignorance make to those I would have killed or harmed? No difference, so a tyrant I would have been.” She drew another long, shuddering breath. “When I understood what he’d done, I attacked him—though not with magic. My mother taught me never to use spells that weren’t contained by wards, so no innocents were harmed in the scaling. Instead I went after him with a dagger, but I was no warrior. And he plunged it into my heart instead.”

Rigid Aruk became. “*What?*”

“My mother saved me.” Tears wavered through her voice. “Her magic was bound with the rune, so she used blood magic to heal me. That was when I learned what it was, because never did she teach it to me. That scaling, she survived. A small cut only opened over her own breast. Then in her rage, she used blood magic against my father—the scaling killed her. But the spell didn’t even touch him. We didn’t know that he wore wards to protect himself. Perhaps fearing that one day I might turn on him with my magic. But I never turned on him again.”

“Not where he could see,” Aruk said.

“No.” Pain clogged her throat. “He branded me with the mark because although I would not use my magic to further his ambitions, my usefulness wasn’t over. I could be bred to produce another child with magic—and if I was bred to someone who also had magic, even more powerful the child would be. But Sologius of Aremond’s power had been rising, and that sorcerer had most of the strong magic users in these southern realms killed so no one might stand against him. And my father did not want to settle for a someone such as a mere healer.”

“That is why you told me to cover my ward and never to return.” Realization pushed through the harsh mask his expression had become. “Because I am from the Dead Lands, and any child of mine would hold strong magic.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “He would have captured you, tied you to a bed, and bred you to me—and perhaps bred you to many other women, too. Just in case my child turned out as disappointing to him as I did.”

“You are *no* disappointment,” Aruk said forcefully, holding her face in his hands. “So you stayed to save those who he tried to execute. When did you decide to run?”

“When he found Prince Wanier. No powerful magic does that prince have, but my father is desperate. So I became desperate, too.” So desperate, she’d spelled the ship and spent two months drowning in her lungs. “My father’s wards meant that my magic couldn’t touch him, and I couldn’t fight him with a sword, so I went in search of someone who could help.”

And it was Aruk she’d found. A man whom she’d fallen in love with. A man who might no longer want to take this job, now that he knew she’d used blood magic over and over again.

Her heart aching, she hesitantly asked, “Will you still help me?”

“I will,” he vowed hoarsely. “I will kill him for you.”

Tremulously she smiled, and closed her eyes in sheer relief, before pressing a grateful kiss to his lips. “Thank you, Aruk. I would have done *anything*. But I’m so glad it will be you.”

He nodded, his jaw clenching. “But no more blood magic. Whatever needs done, we will find another way. Not one that risks your life every time.”

Jalisa could not make that promise. “Some things are worth risking my life for.”

“And you have hired me to risk mine. So no more blood magic. We will end your father without it.”

She nodded. “If we can.”

“We *can*,” he said fiercely, then paused and gave her a wry look. “As soon as we get off this island.”

Jalisa laughed. “Yes,” she agreed. “I think we must do that first.”

ARUK THE FETTERED

THE SMOKING ISLANDS

ARUK WOULD HAVE GIVEN anything to stay forever on this island with his princess. Jalisa was nothing like the fantasy woman he'd conjured as a companion the first six months he'd been stranded here. Instead she was far more incredible than he'd ever imagined. Never had she complained of the roughness of their living or the work they must do. Always she helped when she could—and when she could not, some other task she would complete for him. She made him laugh and made him think and made him smile and made him ache with need for her.

But never would she be happy here. Not while her kingdom lived under her father's heel. Worry for her people would consume her, and never would she abandon them.

Just as Aruk would never abandon his duty. So similar they were, though it had taken him so very long to see.

Not much longer would he have to see her at all. He'd recovered canvas and timbers from the wreckage of her ship, then remade the dinghy to sail and added projecting floats to stabilize it. Another day or two would cure the resin that waterproofed the outrigger hulls, and then they would set out for Savadon.

Where she believed that Aruk would kill her father in exchange for one night with her. Yet that was not what Aruk

would do.

Kill her father, yes. But Jalisa had already paid enough. No more blood would Aruk ask her to shed in her search for freedom.

The sun was high when he returned from a short hunt to the hut—which was empty. To the beach Aruk went in search of his princess, slowing as he saw Jalisa shedding her silk shift and walking into the turquoise water.

This cove was well-sheltered by a reef, the waves gentle and waters calm. Yet she had not often bathed in the water—not when the salt stung her wound. Now her sleek golden skin was bared to the sun, only slightly paler over her back and ass. Her hair was not so wild as it had been when she'd first arrived on the island. Aruk had carved a comb for her, and every night she untangled the snarls. Still the dark tresses hung in thick, messy waves to the upper swell of her ass.

He recalled the woman at the parade who had risked a trampling simply to see Jalisa's beauty, and thinking that beauty was not worth as much as gold. Yet now Aruk would have crossed oceans to look upon his princess.

So beautiful she was. Yet Jalisa's true beauty was not her face; instead it was her warm and generous heart.

A heart so generous, it might have killed her.

In all of his travels, Aruk had seen many warriors—men and women—fight and bleed to protect their homes. He'd seen them sacrifice their lives to defend the people they loved. He'd risked his own life many times, and not always for love. Sometimes simply for gold or for adventure.

Yet the risk Jalisa had taken...in Aruk's experience, almost always it seemed to be women who sacrificed themselves in that quiet way. Almost always it was mothers and wives. Most did not use magic, but it was the same. Silently bleeding as they did what needed to be done. Always giving pieces of themselves to others, without keeping anything for their own.

Mothers and wives...and now a woman who would be queen. And Aruk had thought her selfish when she'd spoken

of having something for her own. She had simply wanted a life where she was not always bleeding for everyone else. Still she would be kind and generous—but she wanted something for herself, too.

True freedom, she'd called it. Aruk would do anything to see her have that freedom. For she was worth so very much. He was nowhere near worthy of her.

Yet he could not stay away.

He shed the rag around his hips at the water's edge. She had seen him bathe too many times in this cove to be surprised by his nudity, so when she turned to him, it was with a warm and welcoming smile.

“Join me! The water is so fine!”

As was Jalisa. Waist-deep she stood, two long locks of wet hair hanging forward over her shoulders and veiling her breasts, the waves lapping gently at her stomach. Waist-deep for Jalisa barely covered the hot rise of Aruk's cock. Farther out he waded before facing her.

Her gaze slipped downward before lifting again, soft color in her cheeks as she laughed at him. “You returned from your hunt too quickly! I have been caught being lazy.”

Never lazy was she. If she had been, they would not already have a store of fruit and smoked fish ready for their voyage. “We only need enough meat for this night and tomorrow. So it did not take long.”

“Oh.” The laughter in her eyes dimmed and she sighed. “Yes.”

“Do you wish to stay longer?” Aruk would. But he did not truly think she wanted to.

She confirmed that with a small shake of her head. Softly she said, “It is just...so lovely this island has been.”

“Yes,” he agreed gruffly, chest aching.

Eyes downcast, she skimmed her fingers through the water in idle swirls. “You must be eager to rejoin the tournament finally.”

“I am not. But I must rejoin my brother and carry out our duty.”

“You are not rejoining the tournament?” She looked up, brows arched imperiously. “Then what is the duty that will take you away from me, warrior?”

That would *take* him away from her. As if he belonged to her.

As he did. “To make certain no one brings Khides’ gauntlet back to Solegius.”

Her lips parted. “Khides’ gauntlet is the relic they seek? My mother told me the legend of that weapon and of the brothers who broke the world. If it fell into the hands of a tyrant such as Solegius...”

Jalisa trailed off, as if every word she would choose to describe the horror of that was simply not horrific enough.

“Strax and I are bound by a blood obligation to see that no one unworthy ever wields it,” he told her. “And the gauntlet’s location is well-guarded...but I have to be certain none of the contestants wins the gauntlet and brings the weapon back to that sorcerer.”

“And so you *must* go,” she whispered thickly.

Throat constricted, Aruk nodded.

Through her lashes, her downcast gaze shimmered as brightly as the waters when she hesitantly said, “When you are certain the gauntlet is safe, warrior...would you return to Savadon?”

Hoarsely he admitted, “I know of nothing that might keep me away. Though more than a year might pass before I can return. The keep where the gauntlet is held lies six months’ journey away.”

A shuddering breath left her. As if in pain and relief, her eyes closed and the tears slipped over her cheeks. “I do not care how long it will be.”

Aruk did. Because every moment apart would be agony.

But *these* moments they had.

He surged through the water and eagerly she met him, lifting her mouth for his kiss. Catching her, Aruk hauled her up against his chest, her face level with his and her legs circling his waist. Salt from the sea and her tears flavored his first taste of her, then only her sweetness and heat as he licked his way past her lips. Her fingers tangled in his hair and fiercely she returned his kiss, his princess taking something for herself.

Aruk would give to her all that he had. Hungrily he consumed her mouth, slanting his lips over hers again and again until the low moan in her throat was a constant refrain. Greedily she met his kiss, lick for lick, then broke away, her gaze searching his as her heaving breaths swept over his lips.

Shakily she whispered, "I want more than one night, Aruk. I want *every* night until you have to leave."

Nights not spent as payment or fee but in shared need. No sacrifice would it require. Only when it was over would they bleed.

"You will have every night," he vowed harshly and began carrying her toward the shore. "And the days, too. Every moment that remains, I will have you so hard and so long, you will still feel me within you when I am gone."

The word *gone* seemed to pierce her through. A gasping sob escaped her and she kissed him again, deep and hard, hands fisted in his hair. Branding herself on him. Sinking so deep under his skin. So that he would always feel her, too.

Aruk wouldn't feel anything *but* her. Nothing but the way she filled his heart so full.

Beyond the waves, his feet sank into warm sand. Urgently she moved against him, stiffening his erection to throbbing steel. So hard he meant to fuck her. But no pleasure would she know with those rough grains abrading her every soft and wet crevice. Yet if he didn't ease his need before taking her to the hut, their first time would be over the minute he sank his cock into her scorching embrace.

So hot she was. And so blessed he was, to ever know her thus.

Lowering her onto the silk shift she'd discarded on the sand, Aruk followed her down, and a tortured groan ripped from him when she eagerly spread her thighs to make room for his hips. His body shook with the need to accept that blatant invitation. Molten seed overflowed his sac, burning up the length of his shaft and dripping from the crown.

But only a small taste would he take now. Only a small taste.

Her cunt glistened with her arousal, tight and pink and lush. Braced above her, Aruk fisted his aching length. Through her sultry folds, he slicked the head of his cock up and down, teasing her entrance before pressing forward through her cunt lips and over the top of her cleft, his long thick shaft riding over her clit. Beneath him, Jalisa cried out in frustration, her hips angling upward as if to draw him down to her entrance again.

So that he might sink his cock into her, again and again.

Not yet. His mouth claimed the wonder of hers as he stroked again over the slick heat of her cunt. Faster, over her clit with each thrust. Soon she no longer tried to lure him inside but moved with him, legs tight around his waist and her body arching beneath his. Sobbing gasps of pleasure she breathed into their kiss, then all at once she threw her head back and cried his name, her slim torso a quivering bow with plucked string.

Grunting, Aruk followed her into that release, seed spurting over her belly. Then chest heaving, he kissed her. Soon he would rise with Jalisa in his arms and carry her into the sea to rinse the abrasive sand from her skin before continuing to the hut. Not much time did they have to waste.

But time spent kissing her was never time wasted.

Her lips were swollen and smiling when he lifted his head. Then she frowned and her brow pleated...as she heard what he suddenly did.

The rhythmic splash of oars. The creaking of boats. A petulant voice drifting over the water.

“...do you think I will still have her now? After we have all watched that barbarian defile her? Better that I had never cast the spell that let you find this cursed island!”

Jalisa scrambled out from beneath him, eyes panicked. Blindly she fumbled for her shift, shaking loose sand from the silk. Aruk turned to look as she dragged it over her head.

Twelve boats full of armed soldiers—and the vessel at their head also carried three men in silks. One with a protruding bottom lip as petulant as the words he’d spoken. One with a weasel’s sly air and his hot eyes fixed on Jalisa. The other with rigid face whose narrowed eyes returned Aruk’s gaze before he looked down at Aruk’s side, where his ward softly glowed.

“Your father?” Aruk guessed.

“With his pig advisor Fin Ketles and the prince.” Frantically Jalisa tugged on his arm. “We must run.”

“Where to?”

“The hut.” With desperate strength, she tried again to drag him up. “There I will cast a spell that—”

With her blood? Urgently Aruk caught her arms. “*Never* like this, Jalisa. *Never* in fear and to harm. The scaling is always unknown but that is more certain to scale larger. You must have seen. Your mother saved you out of love and the scaling was small, but she died when she attacked your father. And your worst scaling was when you spelled the ship in fear and desperation to leave. Swear to me you never will.”

“But—”

“Swear to me!”

“I swear it!” she shouted at him, then her terrified gaze swung past Aruk to the water. “Then what do we do? We cannot fight this many.”

In time, Aruk could. He only needed to flee with her to the jungle that grew on the mountain—and as the soldiers pursued

them, he would hunt them and kill them one by one. Or ten by ten. It mattered not to him.

Yet such a plan put Jalisa at high risk. In the confusion of the jungle, a soldier might mistake her for Aruk when loosing an arrow. As they ran and hid, more likely would she be injured. And when he left her to hunt the soldiers, she would be unprotected—not just from her father, but from the fanged predators that stalked the mountainside.

“We will surrender to him,” Aruk said.

Jalisa looked at him as if he’d gone mad. “*Surrender to him?*”

“You did not defy him. I laid eyes upon your beauty and stole you from Savadon. Here on this island, I held you prisoner and mercilessly ravaged you against your will.”

Eyes filled with tears, she shook her head. “Aruk, no. He will—”

“Kill me?” No. It was her father who would die. As Aruk had vowed to her. “He will keep me alive.”

Her swimming gaze fell to the glowing rune at his side. Helplessly she shook her head. “Let me instead—”

“*No*,” he snarled. “You risk sacrificing everything. What I propose sacrifices nothing. He will not harm you. And he will do no real harm to me.”

Agony filled her face as she implored him, “Please, Aruk. He will chain you like an animal.”

“Chain me, he might. Imprison me and keep me away from you?” Aruk smiled with grim determination. “He can try. Now rip away from my grasp and race toward the water, screaming for rescue. Then do not watch any of what occurs after.”

“No, Aruk, *please*,” she sobbed, beating at his chest. “Please. I love you.”

His heart swelled so fiercely his entire soul ached with it. Such a sweet ache.

“Then I have strength to survive anything. As you will, princess, for so much do I love you in return,” he told her gruffly, and her wondering gaze lifted to his. Her sobbing breaths eased, and he saw the hope and determination in her that matched his own. “Now, go.”

After one last lingering look at his face, Jalisa yanked free of his hold and fled. From the king’s boat came the shouted order to take the barbarian alive.

Naked, Aruk turned to face the soldiers surging up onto the beach. Lifting his arms wide, he grinned at them. “Come on, then!”

Because surrender, he would. But not until he unleashed upon them his fury and pain at sending Jalisa back to her father, even for a moment. So he did not surrender until the golden beach was soaked in blood.

Better their blood—and his—than Jalisa’s.

On the red sands Aruk finally kneeled, and let the soldiers put chains upon him, then let them beat him to the ground with clubs and boots. Into the dark hold of the king’s ship he was tossed, in fetters, imprisoned.

But Jalisa loved him. So not once in the long, painful days that followed did Aruk’s grin fade from his bloodied lips.

JALISA THE BRIDE

SAVADON

SUCH A PRETTY BRIDE SHE WAS.

With dull eyes, Jalisa stared at herself in the polished silver mirror as the maid secured her tiara atop sleek, shining tresses. Her golden tan had not faded, but was hidden beneath a pale powder. Aruk's kisses no longer swelled her lips. As if the island had never been.

But it *had* been. And Aruk loved her. So she would not despair.

Even though tonight, she would marry another.

No notice had she been given of the wedding except for her maids scurrying in to make her ready. So it seemed that, in spite of watching her be ravished by a barbarian, Prince Wanier must have agreed to marry her. Because she was not what Wanier wanted, anyway. Her kingdom was.

And her father only cared that she was bred. No doubt he believed that Aruk had already taken care of that part. So proud he'd seemed of her for catching Aruk's eye and—for all that her father knew—for being abducted and raped. As if Jalisa had deliberately set herself up as bait to catch her father a warrior from the Dead Lands and impregnated with his powerful seed.

But the child needed to be legitimate, so Jalisa must be wed. And in Savadon, after every royal wedding came the royal bedding—a ceremony witnessed by officials who confirmed consummation had been completed.

Consummation with the odious Wanier.

Jalisa closed her eyes. She would *not* cast spells in rage and fear. She would not.

But she might vomit on him. Not such a pretty bride would she be then.

And if not vomit, something else. Jalisa *would* think of a way to stop this wedding—and attempt an escape that would take her down to the dungeon and free Aruk.

The sacrifice he'd made would not be in vain. Because although he'd told her not to look back at what happened on the beach...she had looked. She had seen. A great fighter he was. Yet still he'd been brought to his knees. Beaten.

Her heart had been screaming ever since. Screaming for her to fight, to run. All that kept her compliant was the terror of what her father might do to Aruk if she rebelled against him.

The time came to be escorted to the ceremonial chambers—and never had she wished for her father's company, but now she did because her escort was Fin Ketles. His attentions toward her had never been subtle. Yet ever since he'd seen her on the beach with Aruk, it was as if he believed seeing her naked meant that she belonged to him now in some way. As if the brief ecstasy she'd found with the man she loved had been only a show put on to tease Fin Ketles.

That possessive gaze swept her the moment they stepped into the corridor. His eyes settled on her breasts. "How beautiful you are, princess."

She ignored him and continued on, needing no escort to find the chambers. Never had the ceremonial chambers been used in her lifetime, but it was one of her favorite rooms within the palace. There was the altar room where a ribbon would be tied around her hand, binding her to Wanier. There

was the large, open bedchamber with discreet nooks for the observers to sit in. None of those did she ever spend time in. Instead she always opened the doors to the enormous balcony. The palace had been built on a cliff overlooking Savadon's busy bay, and on that balcony she could see so far north over the Illwind Sea, and so far south through the rolling hills. Her view west was obstructed by mountains, yet they were also so beautiful—and when the sun set, the snowy peaks were painted in such incredible hues of rose and gold.

Fin Ketles' voice demanded her attention again. "I will be one of the observers tonight," he said gleefully. "So this will be the second time I see you fucked."

Jaw set, Jalisa heard nothing. *He* was nothing.

"Or perhaps I won't," the advisor smirked. "I do not know that your groom will be able to complete this consummation. No woman—or man—has yet been able to get a rise from him. So perhaps your father will have me take his place."

No rise from Prince Wanieer? Perhaps that was yet another reason why her father had been so unbothered by what Aruk claimed to have done to her. The prince couldn't have bred her, anyway.

And despite the advisor's hope, she had no fear that her father would let Fin Ketles touch her. For the king had but one purpose: to get strong sorcerers from her. As horrible as that purpose was, at least it protected her from his advisor, who had no magic at all.

Head high, she entered the ceremonial chambers. Her step faltered. A dozen soldiers from the palace guard stood near the bedchamber. There was no sign of Prince Wanieer. Only the magistrate in his dark robes, and her father—who was in consultation with the master of the guard.

The trail end of the guard's assurance she heard. "...these new chains are twice as thick. He will not break them so easily."

Aruk. Chained with arms and legs outspread, naked on the enormous bed. His bruised left eye was half closed, his jaw

swollen and lips split.

Yet as her eyes met his, he grinned.

“So my daughter is here,” her father said abruptly. “Now we must find a way to get a rise out of him.”

“Slyworm powder?” Fin Ketles suggested.

Her father nodded, turning to look at Aruk. “We’ll force it down his throat if we must...” He paused, for Aruk’s cock no longer lay heavily against his thigh. “Or perhaps my daughter’s beauty is all that was needed. Go to him then, Jalisa, and put your hand to his. We will not use the altar this night.”

To marry them. To marry Jalisa...to Aruk.

Just as her father had married her mother, simply to legitimize the heir. And then he’d enslaved his unacknowledged queen with chains made from her love for Jalisa.

So, too, could Jalisa see the same happening to Aruk. His love for her would bind him stronger than any iron chain. That he would be trapped, as she had been, in the role that her father had decided for him. With no freedom, and no choice. And soon drugged so that other women could be bred on him.

None of it would Jalisa ever allow.

Heart thundering, she approached the bed. His gaze devoured her, as if he’d been as starved for the sight of her as she had been for him. His arms were outspread, chained to the corner posts. Thick iron cuffs circled his wrists, the skin beneath raw. Pain lodged in her throat as she climbed onto the bed, kneeling beside him, and placed her hand against his.

And how was she supposed to act now? As if he were a barbarian who’d forced her?

She supposed it didn’t really matter anymore. Yet she spoke quietly enough that her voice would not carry to her father and his advisor, observing from near the bedchamber’s entrance.

“You are bare again, warrior,” she said softly.

His grin didn't spread as she expected it to. Instead his smile faded and his voice was hoarse as he told her, "You don't want to be a bride. I will refuse the vow."

And be beaten again? No.

"I said that I would like to choose," she reminded him. "And to marry a man that I love. So I will happily be your bride, Aruk."

His eyes blazed. "Then where is that magistrate?"

Approaching warily with crimson ribbon in hand. Jalisa took a moment to look at the chains that held Aruk to the bed. Truly thick they were.

"Did you break your chains in attempt to escape?"

"And come for you. I was near to it before the guards rushed me. And like a fool, in that small cell I swung the broken chain at them instead of lashing it like a whip." A dull flush climbed his cheeks, as if in embarrassment and shame. "It matters not. A full night we will be bound together in this bed. I will break them again—or the bones in my hands. One way or another, Jalisa, this night you will be free."

A full night—because the ribbon that the magistrate weaved through their fingers now could not be untied until dawn, or their marriage would also be undone.

The magistrate looked across the chamber to her father, who called out, "Begin!"

To Jalisa, the magistrate spoke her string of royal names before asking, "Do you pledge yourself to this man and swear to be his faithful wife?"

So very fast and dizzying her pulse was, rushing the blood through her veins. "I will."

"And you, barbarian—"

"Aruk of the Dead Lands, son of the Fang Clan, Keeper of the Sacred Oath," Aruk said in a raw voice. "And 'warrior' to this woman who will be my wife."

“Do you pledge yourself to this woman and swear to be her faithful husband?”

Fiercely he vowed, “*Always* I will.”

“Then upon a kiss that seals your vows, you shall be wife and husband.”

So swiftly Jalisa claimed him, bending over to capture his mouth beneath hers. So sweetly he kissed her in return, silently echoing the vow he’d just spoken, his love heating and sweetening every tender caress of his lips.

“Now shed the wedding gown, daughter, and mount him.”

Jalisa froze. Dread and sickness coiled beneath her heart—where moments before, only joy and love had resided.

“Wife.” Aruk’s low, rough voice brought her gaze to his. “There is only me.”

Only Aruk. Her husband. With trembling fingers she unlaced the ties at the top of her shoulders. Bound hands meant that everyday gowns could not be so easily removed—and the observers could not have fabric concealing the consummation. So her wedding gown had been designed for simple removal, and included a gossamer undergown that allowed her to stay covered while not truly hiding anything beneath.

Aruk groaned as she revealed her breasts, her taut nipples beaded beneath the glimmering fabric. “No taste have I had yet, wife.”

Right arm outstretched to his, she braced her left beside his head and bent over him. Hungrily he latched on to her nipple through the gossamer, sucking at that taut peak.

Pleasure shuddered through her. So hot his mouth was. Every flick of his tongue and pull upon her breast filled her entire body with liquid fire.

“With their hands bound,” her father said, “more slack is needed in that chain. She is not tall enough to stretch over him.”

Pleasure fled.

“Only me, wife,” Aruk rumbled softly against her breast. “Only me. Now bring your sweet cunt to my mouth, or never will your virgin sheath stretch easily for my cock.”

Only with more slack in the chain could this be done. But those guards were not here. With heat and tongue, she kissed her husband as one guard placed the point of his sword against Aruk’s throat and two others carefully unfastened the chain from the bed post. They doled out more length before swiftly locking it again.

“Now mount him, daughter.” Impatience hardened her father’s voice.

“I am not ready!” she snapped back over her shoulder. “Look at the size of him! He will tear me apart.”

“I will find oil to rub on her cunt,” Fin Ketles suggested.

“Rub it instead on your cock and then set it afire,” Jalisa hissed. “You will *never* touch me, you rotting codpiece.”

“To my mouth, wife,” Aruk growled. “Now.”

She did, lifting the gossamer hem so she might see his face. His gaze locked upon hers as his mouth locked over her cunt. His tongue slicked and teased and there was pleasure here again, swimming through her in hot waves. But there was rage, too. Rage that he was chained. Rage that she was forced to do this.

Softly he kissed her clit. “Only me, wife.”

Only him. Only the love she had for him, pressing away all the rage and fear. She let that sweet emotion fill her, until there was nothing else but Aruk and how much she loved him. Wet lust slicked her inner thighs as she moved down to straddle his stomach, yet it was only love that Jalisa tasted when she kissed his mouth, glistening with her arousal.

Only love on her lips as she said to him again those words. “I love you, Aruk.” And that love was on her lips when Jalisa rose over his cock and spoke different words, but they still had the same meaning. That she loved him.

And she would free him.

His big body tensed as she fitted the broad head of his cock to her virgin entrance. Realization flared over his battered face. “No, Jalisa—!”

With his name on her lips, she took the full length of his shaft into her cunt with one hard downward stroke. Pain speared through her, a hot flare at her entrance as her maidenhead tore and spilled her virgin’s blood, a burning pressure where his thickness wedged deep inside her.

So deep inside her.

With a ragged cry, she fell forward, bracing her hands on his chest. His heart thundered under her palms.

“Jalisa!” Hoarsely he called her name. “My wife, my princess. Tell me you are well.”

Chest heaving, she looked up at him. “So very well.”

His gaze searched hers, then down the length of her body, and she read the question he did not ask.

“I cannot tell if it scaled,” she whispered huskily. All she could feel was his cock inside her sheath. Her head rolled back and unable to help herself, she swiveled her hips, stirring his heavy shaft deep within. “Oh, my husband. You feel so good.”

“Then use me for your pleasure, wife,” he said in a low and urgent voice. “And tell to me the spell.”

“To weaken a link in each chain,” she gasped, rising and falling. “You’re so deep inside me, Aruk.”

“And there I will stay, for this crimson ribbon I will not unbind. But you must hold tight.”

So she would. Rising the length of his cock, she kissed him before sliding back down, her inner muscles clinging to the thick shaft spearing the full depth of her cunt.

Aruk groaned beneath her, and it was but the rumble of a deeper roar that built within him, vibrating through his chest. With a mighty heave, he snapped the chains holding his arms and legs.

Then her father got a true rise from him, as Aruk arose from the bed with death in his eyes. Jalisa clung to him with her left arm circling his neck, her legs wrapped around his hips, and his cock buried deep. With their hands bound together, she knew he would not be wielding a weapon with it. Instead he locked his forearm over the small of her back, and though that made Jalisa hold her own arm at an awkward angle, it was not a painful one.

“Watch none of what happens next,” he commanded harshly, as brusque orders from her father joined the frantic shouts of the guards.

Jalisa buried her face in his shoulder and closed her eyes. The powerful surge of his body shoved his cock deeper. She moaned against his neck, then gasped when a sudden pivot swung her around with him and her clit rubbed against him where they were pressed so tightly together. Screams she heard, yet none of it louder than the pounding of her blood, her heaving breaths. Only once she looked up, to see a soldier’s face wiped from the front of his skull by the whip of the heavy chain as Aruk fought for their freedom.

A sharp lunge was a deep, hard stroke inside her. Jalisa began to shake, frantically tasting his skin, showering his neck with hot openmouthed kisses. Suddenly all became still and quiet, except for a nearby wheezing.

“Where did the weasel go?” Aruk demanded. “The one who thought he might rub my wife’s cunt.”

“Don’t...know...”

That wheezing answer was her father’s. Jalisa lifted her head to see that Aruk had the bloodied chain wrapped around his throat.

To her, Aruk said, “Are you certain?”

She buried her face against his neck again. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Then come for me, wife.” His forearm tightened, holding her in place for a strong upward thrust. “Come for me as I fulfill this vow I made to you.”

Sinking into her, again and again. The drenched slide of his cock driving her higher and higher, tighter and tighter. Barely did she hear the thud of a body to the floor, then Aruk's hand was buried in her hair and he was kissing her, fucking her, and it was more sweet pleasure than she could bear. Hard she came, her sheath claspings him so tight, his name a scream from her lips. Then he slowed, and held her close, breath mingling.

With his seed not within her, but splashed hotly over her belly. Because Aruk would not spend inside her unless he could stay.

Heart aching, she searched his dark eyes. "You have wife and kingdom now, Aruk." Two things her warrior had said that he could not have. "But will it only be for one night?"

No answer he gave, except to kiss her and to carry her to bed.

ARUK THE UNBOUND

SAVADON

AS DAWN CREPT across the sky, Aruk knew that he would not leave his wife.

But he had known it before—on bloodied sands and in chains. Perhaps he had known longer than that, from the long days when she'd still recovering from the wound in her side, and she'd told him of Savadon's war-torn history.

Now his fingers lightly skimmed over the scar that wound had left as Jalisa lay sleepily atop his chest. Their hands were still bound, but although dawn had come, he was in no hurry to unwind their marriage ribbon.

After the second time he'd had her, she'd called for the bodies and his chains to be taken away. In the ceremonial chamber they'd remained, with its balcony that seemed to open up to the sky...and look down into the bay that was the heart of Savadon.

"Might I set up a watch up along the docks?" he asked softly.

"You are king," she murmured against his throat. "You can do anything you like. Who would you be looking for?"

"Tournament contestants returning to Aremond." For they would have to pass through Savadon to reach that kingdom. As all trade to the realms south of the Illwind Sea did. "Little

sense it makes now to go chasing after them. Our paths might too easily cross—especially if they sail south as I sail north. But I know the names and faces of all the warriors who entered the tournament. Their descriptions I could give to the watch. So if my brother has failed...then it would be I who makes certain the gauntlet never reaches Solegius's hands.”

“And so you would still fulfill your duty.” Her voice sounded thick. “But also you would stay?”

“Yes.” Though he must tell her, “If I ever hear again that the gauntlet might fall into unworthy hands, I would have to go. Though it does not happen often. This is the first time in six generations that warriors of the Fang Clan were called to our sacred duty.”

“If you go, then I would, too. We would leave Savadon in a good advisor's hands, and an adventure I would have. And so you are staying?”

Her voice broke. And that was the second time she had asked—as if she had not believed the first. Rolling her onto her back, he saw the tears on her lashes.

“Did you think I might not? You are my heart, Jalisa.”

“I knew not if you would have a choice. And you did not spend inside me.”

He brushed away her tears. “Because you said not to.”

She blinked. “I did?”

“You asked me not to when you hired me. And said you wanted to choose when you would have children, to wait until you were ready.” Which Aruk had no argument with. This was the freedom his wife needed. So he would give it to her.

“Oh.” She softly bit her full bottom lip. “With you, all is different. I am ready now.”

Never had his cock hardened so fast. And she laughed at him as he spread her legs and pushed inside her, but on the next thrust her laugh turned to a pleased gasp. Then she joined him, racing to the end with her cunt clutching his

pumping shaft, coming helplessly beneath him as he endlessly filled her with his hot seed.

For a longer time he kissed her, but the day could not be delayed much longer. Savadon was waking up to a new queen—and king—and so much would need to be done.

Aruk untied the ribbon, then tied it again around his wrist. To the balcony he walked to relieve himself over the railing, while Jalisa groaned and moaned her way to the privy cupboard. A clever design that was, with a waste shaft that emptied over the cliff—though she had told him that when the wind blew strong enough, it might blow the piss right back up the shaft and onto the person seated there.

So when she gave a short scream, he briefly wondered if that was what had happened. Yet there was not even a breeze. Frowning, he turned as she burst out of the privy—where the weasel advisor was climbing out of the shaft, knife in hand. All night he must have hidden in that waste shaft, because Aruk had himself looked into the privy cupboard in search of him.

Blood thundering, he surged toward her—but not before the weasel caught her by the hair and jerked her back against him, knife at her throat.

“She was mine!” the weasel wailed. “And if I cannot have her, no one will!”

To his knees, Aruk fell, meeting Jalisa’s panicked gaze. “Anything you wish,” he begged hoarsely. “Anything—”

Heart rending in two, Aruk watched the blade slash across her throat. A primal scream ripped from his chest and in the next moment he was on his feet and—

Jalisa still stood, unbleeding. Looking as stunned as he.

The weasel slashed again and the sound was like steel scraping over iron.

“The scaling,” Aruk told her, beginning to grin. “You weakened the iron chain by stealing weakness from yourself—and gained iron’s strength.”

“Scaling?” the weasel exclaimed. “What scal—”

That was as far as he got before Jalisa whipped around and punched him in the throat. Gasping, he fell back. With a scream of rage, she struck with her knee between his legs, sending him reeling out onto the balcony. Then her dainty foot she shoved into his ass and sent him flailing over the railing.

Chest heaving, she looked to Aruk. “I have wanted to do that for *so long*.”

Laughing, he went to her, cupping her cheeks—and feeling in amazement the warm suppleness of her skin. No different it seemed. Yet when she picked up the dagger and drew the blade over her flesh, nowhere could she cut. Not even her tongue, when she tried that.

“No more blood magic,” she whispered.

Aruk could not be sorry. No longer would she silently bleed herself to death while giving all that she had to others. Yet he knew that, in Jalisa’s eyes, blood magic had been her way of helping—and of not being helpless. “You are queen,” he reminded her softly. “With iron skin, so no one might do you harm. You will not need that magic. Other options you will have...and a husband who will always fight for and protect you.”

Smiling, she lifted her mouth for a kiss—then drew back to look up at him imperiously. “Many riches we have in this castle, Aruk. Reassure me that I will not find you one day, jerking your cock on a pile of gold coins.”

Heartily he laughed and drew her up for that kiss. “The only promise I will make is that, if I do, they will bear your likeness.” Then his heart filled, and he kissed her again. “It was the only likeness I had of you. And when you gave it to me, still warmed it was from your skin. Now I need no gold at all.”

For the greatest of riches he’d already found in her.

EPILOGUE

ARUK THE FOUND

SAVADON

HERE WE ARE AGAIN, in the kingdom of Savadon, on the southern coast of the Illwind Sea. Eight months have passed, and on this day, two travelers are escorted from the docks to the palace at the behest of Savadon's king.

Hardly surprised Aruk was to see Strax, though lack of surprise was not lack of joy, and fiercely the brothers embraced. More surprising was his companion, Mara, who had hated his brother so fiercely—though after Aruk's own tumultuous path to love, perhaps no surprise it should have been. Full with child Mara was, and the trip across the sea had been difficult for his brother's new wife. Soon it was settled that the pair would stay in Savadon until she gave birth, and was strong enough to continue home.

*No arrangement could have pleased Aruk more, to have the people he loved best in the world gathered together. And so proud he was to introduce his brother to his wife, Queen Jalisa the Ironskin—though some within the palace also called her *The Queen Who Rode Her King Into Righteous Battle*. No one in Savadon missed her father's rule, and the pretty princess they'd once called *spoiled and selfish and difficult* had other new names, such as *Jalisa the Kind* and *Jalisa the Generous*.*

And soon she would also be called a mother.

Of their sacred duty, Strax told him the gauntlet was still safe in Khides' keep. Aruk gave to his brother the news that, eight months before, Sologius the tyrant and all of his warlords had been killed, freeing Aremond from the sorcerer's rule. He saw the look that passed between Strax and his wife, and knew there must be a story there. But Strax laughed and said that a long story it was, and would take perhaps five days to tell—and so for the next five nights, together Aruk and Jalisa sat back, relaxed, and unwound while Strax and Mara spun a tale of a sorcerer's trap and a midnight wedding, of poisoned lips and skull cliffs and wolf brothers.

Happy months passed in Savadon, with healthy babes born to both couples before Strax and Mara left for her home. But no sad parting it was, for only a few weeks' journey separated their kingdoms, and Jalisa eager to travel and visit.

As the years passed, that journey Aruk and Jalisa took many times with their four children—and other adventures they had, too. Only once did Aruk's duty call him again. Just as she had promised, Jalisa accompanied him—and great dangers they faced along the way. But that is a tale for another time and another when. Rest assured that all turned out well, as it always should in such tales.

But this one must come to an end.

Don't miss Strax and Mara's story! Truly sit back, relax, and unwind while it is available as a free audiobook from the [Read Me Romance](#) podcast!

And don't miss the other titles in the Rags-to-Riches series!

Pretty Virgin by Alexa Riley

Pretty Prize by Ella Goode

Pretty Human by Ruby Dixon

Pretty Daring by Jessa Kane

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello there, book lovers! I hope you had a great time reading *Pretty Bride*, because I definitely had a fantastic time writing Aruk and Jalisa's story. When the other ladies of the Club and I decided to get together to do another themed series, the first thing that popped into my head was the scene with Aruk killing everyone with the chains while Jalisa was...well, you know what she was doing. So I told the other ladies that it didn't matter what the theme would be—I'd make the story work and write that scene. Luckily, the rags-to-riches theme ended up being an absolutely perfect way to get there!

If you were wondering about Strax and Mara, their story is called *The Midnight Bride* and is available now as a **FREE** audiobook on the [Read Me Romance podcast](#)! (If you don't like audiobooks, no worries! [It'll be released as a Kindle Unlimited ebook in September.](#))

If you're looking for more fantasy romance and barbarian warriors, don't miss *The Midwinter Mail-Order Bride* (which is the story of Kael the Conqueror and his bride.) Coming soon is also *The Midsummer Bride*.

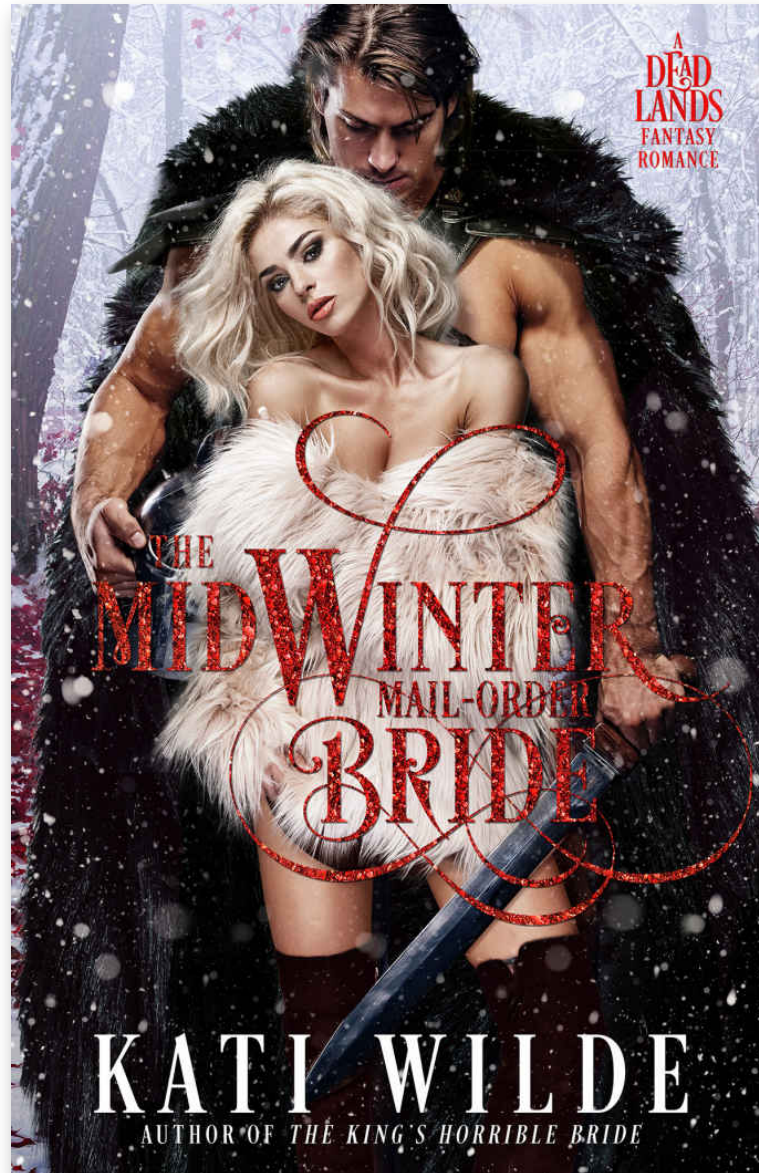
And of course, don't miss the other books in the Rags-to-Riches series: Alexa Riley's *Pretty Virgin*, Ella Goode's *Pretty Prize*, Ruby Dixon's *Pretty Human*, and Jessa Kane's *Pretty Daring*. These will all be released in June 2019 and available in Kindle Unlimited!

If you'd like to receive a notification when these books release, [please sign up for my newsletter](#)! I promise I'll never

spam your or trade your information. I'll only use it to inform you of my new releases.

Until then, happy reading!

Kati



THE MIDWINTER MAIL-ORDER BRIDE

AVAILABLE IN KINDLE UNLIMITED

Some might call Princess Anja of Ivermere brave for offering herself up as a bride to Kael the Conqueror, a barbarian warlord who'd won his crown by the bloodied edge of his sword. It was not courage that drove Anja from her magic-wielding family's enchanted palace, however, but a desperate attempt to secure a kingdom of her own—even if she has to kill the Conqueror to do it. She expects pain beneath his brutal touch as she awaits her chance. She expects death if he discovers the truth of her intentions.

She didn't expect Kael to reject her and send her back to Ivermere.

Raised in the ashes of the Dead Lands, Kael fears nothing—certainly not the beautiful sorceress who arrives at his mountain stronghold. But no matter how painful his need for her, Kael has no use for a bride who would only tolerate his kiss. Yet the more of Anja's secrets he uncovers during their journey to return her home, the more determined he becomes to win the princess's wary heart.

And Kael the Conqueror has never been defeated...

AVAILABLE FOR 99¢ OR BORROW IN KINDLE UNLIMITED

**SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER AND NEVER MISS A
NEW RELEASE!**

I will never spam your inbox! I will only send a newsletter to announce a new release or pre-order.

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review at Amazon or any other reader site or blog you frequent. Don't forget to recommend it to your reader friends.

If you want to chat with me personally, please LIKE my page on Facebook or drop me an email day or night.

kati@katiwilde.com

[facebook.com/authorkatiwilde](https://www.facebook.com/authorkatiwilde)

ALSO BY KATI WILDE

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

GOING NOWHERE FAST

(a new adult romance)

SECRET SANTA

(a holiday romance)

ALL HE WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS

(a holiday romance)

THE WEDDING NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

(a holiday romance)

THE DEAD LANDS

Barbarian Fantasy Romance

THE MIDWINTER MAIL-ORDER BRIDE

THE MIDNIGHT BRIDE

PRETTY BRIDE

THE HELLFIRE RIDERS MOTORCYCLE CLUB

THE HELLFIRE RIDERS, VOLUMES 1-3: SAXON & JENNY

(includes: Wanting It All, Taking It All, Having It All)

THE HELLFIRE RIDERS, VOLUMES 4-6: JACK & LILY

(includes: Betting It All, Risking It All, Burning It All)

BREAKING IT ALL

(Gunner & Anna)

GIVING IT ALL

(Saxon & Jenny)

CRAVING IT ALL

(Bull & Sara)

FAKING IT ALL

(Duke & Olivia)

WEREWOLF ROMANCE

BEAUTY IN SPRING

(a short Beauty & the Beast romance)

HIGH MOON

(a werewolf romance novel)

COMING SOON

LOSING IT ALL

(Stone's book)

THE MIDSUMMER BRIDE

(a Dead Lands novel)

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical articles and reviews.

PRETTY BRIDE

Copyright © 2019 Kati Wilde

All rights reserved.

First Digital Edition, June 2019

katiwilde.com