



THE
GOOD
DAUGHTER
Dragon's Birthright

H.P. MALLORY
J.R. RAIN

THE GOOD DAUGHTER

Dragon's Birthright #1

by

H.P. MALLORY

&

J.R. RAIN

Other Books by H.P. Mallory

PARANORMAL WOMEN'S FICTION:

Haven Hollow

Midlife Spirits

Misty Hollow

Trailer Park Vampire

Midlife Mermaid

PARANORMAL ROMANCE:

Witch & Warlock

Vampire Esquire

Ever Dark Academy

FANTASY ROMANCE:

Dark Destinies

Gates of the Underworld

Lily Harper

Dulcie O'Neil

PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM:

My Five Kings

Happily Never After

SCI-FI ROMANCE:

The Alaskan Detective

TRILOGIES:

Crown Of Lies

Dark Circus

Chasing Demons

Dungeon Raider

Here to There

Arctic Wolves

Wolves of Valhalla

Lucy Westenra

Other Books by J.R. Rain

VAMPIRE FOR HIRE

Moon Dance

Vampire Moon

American Vampire

Moon Child

Christmas Moon (novella)

Vampire Dawn

Vampire Games

Moon Island

Moon River

Vampire Sun

Moon Dragon

Moon Shadow

Vampire Fire

Midnight Moon

Moon Angel

Vampire Sire

Moon Master

Dead Moon

Lost Moon

Vampire Destiny

Infinite Moon

Vampire Empress

Moon Elder

Wicked Moon
Winter Moon
Sasquatch Moon
Moon Blade
Wild Moon
Moon Magic
Moon World
Vampire Deep (coming soon)

SAMANTHA MOON ADVENTURES

Banshee Moon
Moon Monster
Moon Ripper
Witch Moon
Moon Goddess
Moon Blaze
Golem Moon
Moon Maidens

SAMANTHA MOON CASE FILES

Moon Bayou
Blood Moon
Parallel Moon

SAMANTHA MOON ORIGINS

New Moon Rising
Moon Mourning
Haunted Moon

The Good Daughter

Published by Rain Press

Copyright © 2023 by J.R. Rain & H.P. Mallory

All rights reserved.

Ebook Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Reading Sample: Wrath of the Gods](#)

[About J.R. Rain](#)

[About H.P. Mallory](#)

The Good Daughter

Chapter One

The Wilderness

I woke when I rolled over onto a rock.

It seemed there was no way the rock was there the night before when I went to sleep or surely I would have noticed it. I mean—why would I go to sleep on a rock? Which left three options: either some mischievous animal was screwing with me, or perhaps rocks led a secret nocturnal existence I knew nothing about, or I simply remained the punching bag of the gods.

Option three seemed most likely. Recently it felt as if my life was a catalogue of ‘if it can go wrong, it will go wrong’ and it was so much more satisfying to be able to blame the gods rather than fate or simple bad luck.

Sitting up, feeling various joints click in a way that a twenty-one-year-old’s really shouldn’t, I looked for the man who had slept beside me, out here in the wilderness under the stars.

“Uther...?”

He was gone.

“Uther!?”

The thick, rough grass was still pressed flat to show where he’d slept but there was no sign of the man himself.

I sprang to my feet, as quickly as I was able, other bits of my body complaining bitterly, and scanned the endless skyline. The wilderness was vast, and it rose and fell in ways

that were topographically interesting but very unhelpful if you were trying to find a man who had wandered off.

“Uther!”

No response. I rushed towards the apex of the mound in the lee of which we’d slumbered, still yelling, now in desperation.

“FATHER!”

But that was probably futile; he’d ceased to respond to that name a while ago.

From the top of the mound, I got a somewhat better view, and I cast about desperately. At first, he seemed to have been swallowed up into the constant movement of the waving grasslands, but then I caught a flash of color amongst the dull greens, greys, and yellows.

“Fath... Uther?!”

I ran towards him, calling his name, and as I got closer, I saw him look around mildly, as if hearing me for the first time and wondering what all the shouting was about. He put a thin finger to his lips, and I skidded to a halt.

“Look...” The old man who I used to call ‘father’ pointed at a butterfly.

As he pointed, the insect took to the air and, with a cry of childlike delight, my father chased after it, laughing and clapping his hands.

“Wonderful! Wonderful!”

The sight had a sweetness and innocence about it, yet also a horror that nearly broke my heart. I steeled myself against the tears that threatened; I had to be strong. For him.

“Uther...” I laid a hand on his shoulder and he turned to me.

The beatific smile faded to a frown of confusion as he looked at me. “I know you. Don’t I?”

My heart started thumping in my ears. “Yes. Yes, you do. It’s me—Selena. Your...”

I paused. Several times over the past week I'd tried to explain to him that I was his daughter, that he was my father, but he always became upset or even angry, beating me with his weak fists, screaming at me, calling me a liar and dissolving into floods of tears insisting '*I have no daughter!*' In fact, he had three daughters, but perhaps I couldn't blame him for blocking all of us out.

"I'm Selena," I finished.

"Selena," he tried out the word. "Yes. I know you. You saved me."

"Yes."

"Thank you, Selena. I'll remember you. My name is Uther."

"I... I know. I know."

We went through something similar every morning as his disordered mind put itself back together enough to at least recall the previous few days. But his past beyond that remained a tangle that he couldn't unravel.

"Would you like some breakfast?" I suggested. Our supplies were getting low—we'd have to pick something up the next time we were near a town, and that would come with problems of its own.

Uther nodded. "That would be lovely."

Yes, I'd started thinking of him as 'Uther' rather than 'father'. Frankly, it made things easier because this vague, troubled creature in front of me was not the father I remembered. That father had been far from perfect, but he was still mine, and to see him reduced to this low state tore at my heart. So, I buried it and told myself this wasn't my father, just a stranger named Uther.

Breakfast was in fact a long way from lovely because my rations were running low and I didn't feel like I could leave 'Uther' alone so I could go off to do some proper hunting or foraging. There was a real danger of him wandering off or, worse still, talking to strangers. I was sure there were plenty of good people living out here, eking out what meager living they

could in the wilderness, but right now, everyone who saw us was a potential enemy, if only because of who they might tell.

Uther didn't seem to mind a breakfast that was more half-hearted than hearty. I wondered if he tasted it at all, or if in his mind he was eating sides of bacon or thick, rich porridge with honey. It was so hard to tell what was going on behind the vacant stare.

“Horses...”

Though he sometimes seemed immeasurably distant, Uther was right there, it was just that his ‘right there’ was not in the same place as the rest of us. Even so, he heard the approaching hooves before I did and I cursed myself for not paying proper attention.

“Come on.” I grabbed Uther's arm and dragged him to where a hollow in the side of a hummock created a natural hiding place.

“But... Horses...” Uther protested, pointing back. He wanted to see the horses. He'd always liked horses as a boy. I remembered him teaching me to ride, so proud when I wasn't scared of the horses that seemed so huge to me. I remembered how jealous my sisters had been.

“You need to be quiet.” I pressed a finger to his lips. “It's a game. Understand?”

His eyes lit up at the word ‘game’ and he clamped both hands over his mouth.

Leaving him, I crawled through the long grass to peer around the edge of the hummock across the broad, uneven landscape of the wilderness.

At first, I saw no one—that was the problem with the wilderness; it was good for hiding but that cut both ways. Then, from behind one of the more prominent hillocks, a quintet of horsemen road into view. Even at this distance, I could tell they were soldiers, and the bright, armorial colors they wore identified them as coming from Gaunt. Not that their origin mattered that much right now; Gaunt, Latran, or even Wincham, soldiers of any stripe equaled bad news for us.

The horses stopped as their riders, armed with pikes, stood up in their stirrups to survey the landscape. I ducked back down, my head nestled against something prickly that I hoped was vegetable rather than animal, as vegetables won't bite you.

When I dared to look back up again, the horses were already trotting away. I wondered which way they were heading. By night I could get my bearings by the stars and by day the sun was a useful, if limited, guide, but knowing what rough direction we were heading was not the same as knowing *where* we were going. Though I'd grown up in Wincham, I hadn't lived here for five years and even when I had, I hadn't immersed myself in the wilderness much.

Now, it all looked the same. To those who lived here, its rough contours were like signposts and they could navigate the wastes like a salmon finding its way home. But to me, no—it all looked alike. I knew there were towns and villages out there—some surprisingly large—but I had no idea where, so the best I could do was chart a course for the mountains and hope we arrived before we ran out of food.

The mountains represented safety.

Actually, that was absurdly optimistic; the mountains truly represented not so much safety, but less danger, and that would have to do for now.

“Did we win?” hissed Uther with childlike excitement.

“Win?”

“The game. With the horses. Did we win?”

“Oh. Yes. Yes, we won.”

My father beamed, happy even if he didn't understand why, or perhaps *because* he didn't understand why. It was horrible to see my father, who in his youth had been thought the quickest mind in the kingdom and even as he grew older had remained sharp, reduced to this. On the other hand, he did at least seem happy, and I wasn't sure when I'd last seen that. Not for five years, of course, but not for some time before that either, not really *happy* anyway.

We struck out through the wilderness, always keeping the mountains ahead of us, which was a nice big target to aim for but I wanted to head specifically for Greville's Pass, and at this distance, I couldn't be sure if we were going the right way. It could mean a long detour if I got my bearings wrong. Complicating matters still further was the topography of the wilderness; it was impossible to go in a straight line. We kept getting side-tracked while wandering around the steeper humps, and those we climbed always seemed to descend at a different angle, throwing us off course.

And of course there was Uther himself, easily distracted by wild dogs or a soaring buzzard. After lunch (another meager affair) I turned my back a moment to pack things up and when I turned back, he was off gathering wild flowers by the armful.

"For you," he said, smiling as he handed me the bundle.

I hid my tears. It was a nice gesture, but he didn't know who he was giving the flowers to. To him, I was just some woman called Selena, nothing more. Still, it *was* a nice gesture. In fact, it was a lot nicer than many of the things he'd said and done when he still knew who I was. We hadn't spoken at all for the last five years, and that parting had been... well, neither of us had come out of it well.

As the sun declined in the sky, I saw a small town nestled into the landscape as if the hills had been built around it rather than vice versa.

"Let's have a proper meal this evening," I suggested, smiling. "Real food for once."

"And a bed?" asked Uther hopefully.

"We'll see," I replied, cagily, hoping he would forget asking. Yes, sleeping so roughly was no good for his old bones, but spending a night in town made us more vulnerable to discovery. Even a meal was a risk, but a quick in-and-out seemed a risk worth taking when our supplies were so low.

Uther looked at me. Alongside the childlike joy that was the main symptom of his distraction, there was also an

uncomfortable melancholy. That melancholy probably occurred as he struggled to get his mind back—this was the time when he was most aware that there was something wrong, something missing. In that respect, I supposed it was a good thing as it showed that the father I'd known was still in there somewhere. But it was almost unbearable to witness.

“Are you... Are you Cara?” He looked at me, sure he was wrong but unable to get the name out of his head.

“No. I'm Selena. Remember?”

“Selena. Of course. Selena.” He frowned. “Where is Cara?”

My mother had died when I was still very young, and though he'd put on a brave face for his children, I'd grown up knowing that my father felt my mother's loss every day.

But I couldn't say that to him now; I would just be forcing him to relive the pain.

“I'm sure she'll be waiting for us when we get where we're going.”

That probably wasn't a very helpful thing to say either. But Uther nodded and was quiet again, though the tortured expressions passing back and forth across his face showed that he was still trying to put the broken fragments of his mind back together, and still failing. When we got back and Cara wasn't there waiting for him, then I'd have to tell him the truth. I'd break my father's heart all over again and run the risk of shattering his fragile mind still further.

The madness could be cruel as well as kind.

The town's name, according to the sign on its outskirts, was ‘Casper's Relief’, presumably an allusion to some local figure of history or legend. All the wilderness towns seemed to have names like ‘Drake's Hideout’, ‘Mary's Repentance’, and, most intriguingly ‘Roger's Shaft’—names that told a story.

Even when the original story was lost to time, they were names that invited you to make up a new story.

Casper's Relief was pretty typical of wilderness towns; a market that had grown up over time to become a permanent home for those who serviced the nomads and herders who traversed the steppe. There were blacksmiths to get your horse shod, tailors to get your clothes mended, bath houses where you could get a bath (with a happy ending if you slipped a coin to the right girl), tanners, butchers, dairies and, of course, taverns.

The herders spent long months out in the wilderness with nothing but sheep, goats, or the hardy longhorn cattle for company. When they came back to town, they wanted three things, two of which they could get at the 'bath houses', and the third was a drink. The wilderness taverns sold dreck, the sort of drink that makes up for months of nothing but water and goats' milk by knocking you out cold with one draft. They said that if you left the dreck in the tankard too long, it started to corrode the metal. It was a wilderness rite of passage that a young herder would take his first sip of dreck at the end of his first stint—if he was still able to see the following morning, then he was judged to be a proper man.

"Put your hood up," I whispered to Uther as we passed through the bustling throng—every day was market day in a place like Casper's Relief.

"Is it another game?"

"No." Sometimes it was better to be clear—to let Uther know this was serious.

Uther nodded and pulled the hood of his woolen robe over his head. The robe had been woven for him specially and when new, had cost a pretty penny. It had been a gift from my mother and Uther had worn it until it was worn almost through. He'd never let it go—even now it seemed to mean something to him, even if he could no longer explain why or what that something was.

Hooded and, hopefully anonymous, we wandered, looking for a quieter tavern—with so many, there surely had to be one.

Occasionally people would look in our direction and my whole body seemed to tense and contract at the feel of their eyes on us, but it was always no more than a glance. No one was looking too closely.

Truth be told, even if anyone had gotten a good look at Uther's face, it was unlikely that they'd recognize him, because what would he be doing here? In a place like this? They'd write it up as one of those coincidences—everyone is said to have their doppelgänger.

“Here looks alright.”

‘Alright’ might have been stretching—what the tavern looked like was *quiet*, which was my main criteria, although you did have to wonder what was wrong with it when every other place seemed to be heaving the seams. Still, beggars could not be choosers, so we went in.

Even with hoods up, Uther and I stood out among a clientele that was overwhelmingly male, between the ages of sixteen and sixty, and drunk.

“What’ll it be?” The barman gave us a funny look but had apparently seen enough not to ask questions.

“What’s good to eat?” I asked.

“I don’t know about ‘good’ but I’ll tell you what’s on.”

“Okay.”

“There’s goat stew,” announced the barman as if beginning a list, but then fell silent.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “Two goat stews then please.”

“Excellent choice. And to drink?”

I looked at the row of tankards along the bar and the row of faces wavering above them in varying shades of red.

“What’s not lethal?”

“Milk,” advised the barman. “Steer clear of the dreck, young lady—it’ll have you off your feet and then one of these reprobates will have you on your back. And you sir, stay away from the water. There’s not a well worth shit in these parts. Someone offers you water then he’s a liar. Either that or it’s liable to get up an’ get outta the glass by itself.”

“Two milks.”

We found a table, and we ate and drank. At first, we attracted more attention than I was comfortable with as an anomaly, but pretty soon the novelty wore off and the drinkers returned to killing their brain cells with dreck.

All bar one.

There was one man on the far side of the bar who kept looking our way. He seemed to be with a group of rowdies who stood out themselves, but our observer was different. While his friends made merry, he sat quiet, watching us.

He noticed me looking back and gave me a roguish smile that made me blush and return my attention to the goat stew (which was actually pretty good—kudos to the goat).

After a while, I chanced another look and found the man still watching. There was something about him that...

He was quite handsome in a rough sort of way (again, ‘*rogue*’ was the word that came to mind), but that wasn’t it. There was something in his eyes that made me think back to...

It was an odd connection, but I found myself remembering a day five years ago.

The day my life changed.

Chapter Two

Five Years Earlier

It was spring, but the wind fluttered the banners around the hunting camp, even though the camp had been set up in a relatively sheltered spot.

A casual glance might suggest that this was any relatively wealthy family out for a day's hunting (except for the fact that dragon hunting was outlawed in Wincham). But any more than a casual glance and you would spot the guards positioned around the camp, their steely gazes scanning the mountain slopes for any who might be approaching. Then you might look more closely at the banners and recognize the crest of King Uther, the King of Wincham, and the most powerful ruler in the lowlands, a position for which he'd fought hard in his youth.

It was hard to know what he was thinking at that moment, even for his daughter (his favorite daughter at that), seated near him as he stared into middle distance, perhaps listening for the sounds of the hunting party.

"Are you alright, father?" I asked.

My father seemed to come back to me from another world and forced a smile. "Quite alright, thank you, Selena."

"You looked miles away."

"It's an important day."

It would have to be an important day for my father to lead a hunting party. He himself had outlawed dragon hunting when he was a younger man, and I'd grown up being taught that hunting was a cruel and barbaric sport. But today we were entertaining important men from the lands that flanked Wincham, Gaunt, and Latran, nations with which Wincham had warred for many generations. Father was determined to put an end to that bloodshed, and if the price was a dead dragon, then he would pay it.

That said, though he led the hunt, he couldn't bring himself to actually do any hunting, using his advanced age as an excuse. I'd offered to keep him company, which gave me my excuse. By contrast, and though they'd been raised in the same beliefs as me, both my sisters, Rhea and Sylvia, leapt at the chance to hunt with the handsome princes we were entertaining. In Latran and Gaunt, dragon hunting was a popular pastime for the nobility and it was certainly the best way to keep the princes and their royal fathers happy during their visit.

My father had a plan, I knew that much, though I didn't know what it was. I did know that he'd grown tired of war.

A roar echoed down to us from further up the slopes and I saw my father's body tense as we both heard cries and the sounds of excited activity.

Though I didn't want to do it, I found myself looking up to see, emerging from over the ridge, the shape of a dragon, its wings beating loudly, fighting against the high winds with all its strength. Those winds would limit its maneuverability but it still managed to avoid a stout crossbow bolt that burst from the ground towards it. The dragon hissed and spat, and I heard the commotion on the ground as the hunting party rushed to avoid the incoming lance of flame.

"Fly away," I found myself begging under my breath. "Why won't you just fly away?"

Maybe the dragon was too angry, maybe it wanted some vengeance against this unprovoked attack, but whatever the reason, it remained, beating those vast wings to keep itself in place, facing down its attackers.

There was a wooden 'thunk' and a net was fired up into the air, in an attempt to snare the dragon. The attempt failed, but the net snagged the beast's wing and set it off-balance in its flight. As it writhed in mid-air, struggling to get free while keeping itself airborne and avoiding any further attacks, I heard a single voice from the party rising above the others.

"Now! You've got it! The thing's defenseless."

This time, I did look away, but I couldn't block out the sound; a screech like metal grated against stone as the crossbow bolt found its mark and the dragon screamed. Other sounds followed, the thud of a body, the sound of a struggle, the death throes getting ever weaker, all almost lost beneath the cheering of the party itself.

I looked up again, this time across at my father. His eyes were closed, but I could see he was listening. He'd hoped, as I had, that the hunt would be fruitless—dragons were rare these days and there was no guarantee the royal party would find one. Now he was forcing himself to hear the dragon die, partly to feel the guilt that he felt he deserved, but also because he felt he owed the creature that much; its death would not be unnoted, nor unmourned.

The party was led back by Lord Jonas, one of my father's best and most loyal warriors and a man I liked. I knew he would not have participated in the hunt if my father hadn't asked him to do so, and I was sure he hadn't been in at the kill.

"You are successful?" My father did his best to smile as the Kings of Latran and Gaunt returned, followed by their sons and my older sisters.

"See for yourself," smiled the King of Latran, through a thick beard.

Bringing up the rear, a group of attendants carried the body of a blue dragon. I didn't know enough about dragons to know if it was male or female, young or old—little was known about dragons as they kept to themselves, even in Wincham—but it was a sight that sickened me.

"Prince Harker fired the killing shot." My sister Sylvia smiled at the handsome Prince of Latran. "He was very brave."

"He couldn't have done it without Prince Titus." Rhea defended the tall, muscular Prince of Gaunt.

"Girls," my father chided. "Come, let us eat, while your... *catch* is taken down the mountain."

Dragons were not hunted for eating, they were hunted because killing a dragon was considered the bravest thing a man could do (despite the advantages of a modern hunting crossbow) and because dragons took livestock from time to time, though they were now so few in number, they could hardly be considered a pest.

We repaired to the dining tent, where servants had laid out an impressive spread along the folding table that had been carried up the mountain. My father took the head of the table as befitted his status—this was a diplomatic meeting, but it didn't do to let the other kings forget that there was only one King Uther, and that Wincham was the largest nation in the lowlands with the largest army. If the warring between the nations continued, then Wincham would surely be victorious.

But only eventually. And the on-again, off-again wars between Wincham and Latran, Wincham and Gaunt, Gaunt and Latran, and all against each other still had the potential to eke out long past my father's death and that of his successor, while each side ran up a terrible death toll.

As soon as he was old enough, when my grandfather was still king, my father had led troops into battle. He'd watched them kill and be killed and still bore his own scars. When he became king, ending that war with Wincham the victor was an obsession; he was determined not to just be King of Wincham, but ruler of a lowland Empire. Maybe age had brought wisdom, maybe the long wars had ground him down—a pact here and accord there, nothing that ever held—or maybe he was just tired, but now he sought a better way.

Not that his ambitions had really changed...

"This is how it should always be," my father said, raising his glass. "We should be friends, not enemies. And, as you know, I am here to propose that we henceforth be more than that."

I didn't know exactly what he was talking about but apparently the others did, because they all nodded heartily.

"The security of all our nations from the outside lies in our being together," my father continued.

“While still remaining individual,” put in the King of Latran. Past alliances had failed because, while all three nations recognized the value of unity, they also felt strongly that they were all separate sovereign nations.

“For now,” acknowledged my father. “Perhaps the day will come when that changes, but... Well, that is something that we old men may not live to see. I hope our grandchildren may rule a single unbroken empire, but it will be *our* grandchildren.”

I began to see where this was going and wondered why I’d been too slow to see it earlier. But all the while I wondered: what would it mean for me?

“I am here to propose a pact by marriage between our three nations,” my father went on. “My eldest daughter Rhea will marry Prince Harker so they may rule Latran after your majesty’s death.”

Rhea inclined her head though there was a flicker of uncertainty in her expression.

My father continued. “My middle daughter, Sylvia, comes of age in two weeks and will then marry Prince Titus of Gaunt, where they can rule jointly when the time comes.”

“What about Wincham?” asked Sylvia, not objecting, but noticing the gap in my father’s grand plan. Wincham was the throne that all wanted.

“Your sister Selena is not yet old enough to marry,” my father went on, smiling at me tenderly. “But when she is, she will marry Jonas, and they will rule in Wincham.”

“So Wincham remains solely in the hands of your family?” put in the King of Latran.

“Yes.” And the tone in which my father said the word expressed a world of meaning. Ties of family would henceforth keep the lowlands from war, but no one was pretending that there was not one big winner here. Wincham was the major power and so it would remain, and neither Gaunt nor Latran were strong enough to stop that. The marriages were a consolation prize, a way of letting Gaunt and

Latran have a share in the spoils of a war that had been averted.

With one problem.

“No.” I heard the word before realizing that I was the one who had said it.

My father looked up at me. “Selena?”

“I don’t want to marry a man just because you say I must.” It wasn’t that I didn’t like Jonas—he was a fine man—but he was twice my age and not my choice. I didn’t love him and that struck me as important.

“We will talk about this later,” said my father, firmly.

I nodded. “Very well, father. But I know how that conversation is going to go.”

My father’s face darkened. For all that he loved me, for all that I was his favorite, his little girl, he had a temper and he didn’t like to be disobeyed.

“You would speak to me like this? In front of our guests?” he hissed at me. “And on today of all days? You have a duty, a responsibility to the country.”

“I have a responsibility to myself too,” I argued. “And to you. I do not think...” I shot nervous glances at the other guests—I didn’t want to have this conversation in front of them. “Perhaps we can talk later.”

It was a nice dream; the three lowland nations united by the daughters of King Uther. It was the sort of dream that would give my father peace when he went to his final rest. But a dream was all it was. He underestimated the ambitions of his neighbors and, though I hated to say it, he underestimated the ambitions of his daughters. Rhea and Sylvia were both older than me and yet I was being made heir to Wincham. Father might say that it was because I was not yet old enough to marry, but my sisters were smart enough to know that it was because I was his favorite. Ironically, it mattered little to me—I was thankfully lacking in the ambition that both my sisters had inherited from our father—but it mattered a great deal to them, and I didn’t think they would let the situation stand.

King Uther's unified lowland empire would not last long after his death.

But I couldn't say any of that while surrounded by the kings and princes of Gaunt and Latran. Let alone my own sisters.

"I don't believe that my 'duty' requires me to marry for anything but love." *That* I could say. It had the advantage of being true, and I thought my father might see my point of view.

I was wrong.

"Your duty is what I say it is!" roared King Uther, leaping out of his seat. "Jonas is of noble blood so the throne remains in the family." Jonas was a cousin of some sort—our family tree was a tangled one.

"I'm of royal blood," I pointed out.

But my father dismissed this. "The king must be too."

There it was. If I'd been a boy, then things would have been different, but my father took it for granted that I would be ruler in name alone. I was there to convey royalty to the man who would do the actual ruling, and it was important that he was of the same bloodline, so that our children would carry that bloodline on, one inbred generation after another.

In my father's mind, he'd probably mapped out the intermarriage of the ruling families of the three Kingdoms so that within a generation, all was under his bloodline, and he, King Uther, would be the great progenitor. He might not have been able to create a single lowland empire in life, but he had laid the foundations of one that would flourish after his death.

Except that none of it would happen. I was sure of it. The whole enterprise would tear itself apart before he was even cold in the ground. In fact, given the fierce competitiveness of my siblings, there was a chance my father would live to see all his plans go to hell. And that would destroy him.

I bowed my head. "I would give my life for you, father, but I will not give up my freedom, and I will not hold your hand to walk you to your own destruction."

The anguished look on his face proclaimed that I had already brought him to the brink of that destruction, and my heart bled that I was causing him such pain.

“Please, father, let me talk to you later. In private.”

I saw the look that shot between my sisters. They knew what was in my mind.

But they need not have worried.

“You will do as I say,” growled my father, “or you will leave now. This table, this camp, this land.”

Banishment? Surely, he would never...

“Father...”

“Make your choice!”

And so I stood and walked towards the doorway of the tent, tears already springing to my eyes.

“What sort of daughter are you?” I could hear the heartbreak in my father’s angry voice.

I turned back briefly. “A good one, your Majesty. And I sincerely hope you do not live to realize that.”

As I left the tent, now crying more openly, still not sure where I was heading and only starting to realize the enormity of what I’d done and how it was going to affect my life, I saw the dragon. Not the dead one, but a second, hovering over the distant ridge. As I watched, it landed on the rocky outcrop and stared down at the hunting camp. It was too far off for its flame to reach us and perhaps too scared to come closer, though there was nothing in its stance that suggested fear to me. For a moment, our eyes met.

Chapter Three

The Man with the Roguish Smile

Why the man at the bar in Casper's Relief should have taken me back to the day my life changed, and to that particular moment when the dragon and I made eye contact, I could not say.

It was a moment I'd thought about often over the years and wondered what the dragon had seen when it looked at me.

Perhaps it was just the intensity of the man's stare, though he was smiling in a way that the dragon certainly hadn't.

He was handsome, in a rough, unshaven sort of way, but I wasn't sure I liked the way he was looking at me. There was something in his eyes—something more than the usual male leering, something I couldn't place. Perhaps it was recognition, and, if so, that was bad news for us.

"Have you finished?" I turned back to Uther. "Good. I don't want to remain here any longer than we have to."

I would have liked to give him more time to rest, but that was not prudent right now.

The man with the roguish smile remained seated at the bar as we walked out. He didn't seem to be looking at me any longer. Perhaps I was being overcautious, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Where are we?" wondered Uther.

"Casper's Relief," I replied, looking around.

"Yes, but... where?"

I smiled. "Well, if this land has a glorious and shining center, then we're at the point that's furthest from it."

Uther nodded and quite unexpectedly smiled at me. "I traveled much as a younger man. You make a good traveling companion."

Sad though it was to see him like this, his hazy mental state did make it possible for moments of connection between us that would never have happened if he remembered who I really was and what had passed between us five years earlier.

“We’d best get back on the road.” Although ‘road’ was not the right word for the route we were taking through the wilderness. Come to think of it, ‘road’ was barely the right word for the muddy stretch between the buildings of Casper’s Relief.

But as we walked, heading out of town, I became aware of someone following us. I had learned a lot in the last five years, and the instinctive knowledge of when you were being followed was one of the most useful things.

“This way.” I grabbed Uther by his arm and dragged him down a side alley that snaked between two bars. It stank in a way that suggested it was mainly used by the patrons of both as a makeshift toilet.

“This isn’t the way we came,” muttered the confused Uther.

“We’re taking the scenic route back.”

“Are you sure?”

“It gets nicer.”

We emerged out the far end of the alley and, to my right, I caught a glimpse of a hooded man ducking back behind a wall. Damn it. There was more than one of them.

The worst-case scenario was that we’d been recognized. The best-case scenario was that whoever had recognized us were drunken men looking for a vulnerable woman on her own (most of the women in Casper’s Relief had a price tag attached). Neither scenario appealed to me, and if these men tried anything, they were going to find out that I wasn’t as vulnerable as I looked.

Turning left, I kept going. It was hard to tell if we were in back streets or people’s backyards. Washing lines were strung across our path, skinny dogs chased plump rats and ragged children chased both.

“Heads up!”

We narrowly avoided being hit by a pile of garbage thrown from an upper floor. The washing lines, heavy with clothes, gave us some cover from anyone who might be following but they also made it impossible to check if there *was* anyone following.

Or indeed if there was anyone up ahead.

Pushing past a sheet that must have been incredibly dirty before washing if this represented an improvement, I came face to chest with a big man, with so little hair on his head and so much around his chin that it looked as if his face had been turned upside down. He leered a gap-toothed smile and made a grab for me. I pushed Uther to one side, ducked, and spun my leg out, sending the man tumbling to the ground.

“Come on!” I grabbed Uther and pushed on through the washing.

“I think you should see if that man is alright,” objected Uther, from behind. “I think you might have tripped him.”

As the washing lines came to an end, I saw two more men coming our way. If I’d been alone, I would have gone up and over the roofs, but with Uther here...

“Wait here!”

I hauled myself up onto the sloped incline of the roof and scrambled up it, Uther standing in the alley, looking lost and alone.

“You get her, I’ll get him!” said one of the men.

I could hear my pursuer struggling to mount the roof—something that’s harder than it looks. At the apex of the roof, I turned and, to the surprise of the man who had just managed to get up, I skidded back down towards him. The man went flying as I hit him and we both fell into the alley. The man hit his friend, and I got a soft landing on both of them.

“You really are most accident prone,” commented Uther, as I jumped off the groaning men, grabbed his hand, and continued on.

After leaving my home five years ago, I'd initially wondered where on earth I could go, but then I thought of my Aunt Leah.

Leah was my late mother's sister, though the two had been almost as different from each other as I was from my sisters. Unwilling to bend the knee to any ruler, Leah had gone to the mountains and carved out her own small nation, largely of women, getting what they could from the land and stealing everything else. It was a wild life and a tough one, but it was one place I knew I could go where my father would not follow. Though Leah lived outside his law and thumbed her nose at royal authority, she was a living link to my mother, Cara, and my father would not move against her.

"It can't have been an easy trip here," my aunt observed when I arrived.

"No," I admitted.

"However hard it was, living here will be harder."

"I understand."

Aunt Leah smiled. "No, you don't. You can't. You've lived a pampered and cosseted life. We don't allow freeloaders here. Everyone pulls their weight. Everyone works and everyone fights."

"Fights?" I wasn't averse to working, but I prided myself on not being a violent person.

"You are a woman alone in the wilds," said Aunt Leah, starkly. "Whether you wish it or not, one day you will need to know how to fight. Men will come for you. Someone will want to rob you of your money or your food, others will want to rob you of something more precious—which I assume you still possess?"

The whole room laughed at my blank face.

Aunt Leah looked more kindly at me. “Your virginity child. You’re sixteen, so it could go either way, but...”

“No,” I shook my head. “I mean, yes. I mean... whichever is the ‘I haven’t been robbed yet’ one.”

Aunt Leah nodded. “That’s another thing. At your age, anything in trousers looks good. Your desires outstrip your good sense. We do not permit men here frivolously. I don’t forbid my women from going off to find male companionship—for whatever *that* is worth—but they don’t bring men back here. The only men here are those who were born here, and they know their place.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

My interactions with men to that point in my life had been very limited by my status. I lived an observed life; there was always a maid, a guard, a tutor, or a companion, all of whom had their first allegiance to my father, not to me. And my father, like so many fathers, wanted to keep thinking of me as his little girl for as long as possible. There had been a few instructive fumbings and exchanged kisses with boys of my own age and of noble birth, but those had mostly been children playing. Since reaching an age when other things started to happen, I’d been carefully closeted to make sure that it happened at as slow a rate as possible.

The upshot was that, although I was now free to pursue boys, I was profoundly ignorant for someone of my age, and a little nervous of what was entailed.

Five years living in my Aunt’s mountain community taught me many things. It taught me self-reliance and the value of hard work. It taught me how to hold a sword, throw a punch, and climb a rope. It taught me how to plant potatoes to obtain the best crop, how to make and mend clothes, how to ride, and how to enjoy a wider range of literature than I was permitted back home. At the urging of some of the other girls of my own age, it also taught me some things about men, up to and including the practical side of things that my father would have happily deferred forever. I was not ‘robbed’ of my

virginity, I gave it up willingly. And then wondered what the fuss was about.

What I hadn't been taught by the mountain life or the other girls was why any of this was important. They hadn't taught me a reason to chase men or even desire them. They were... fine, but nothing special. I hadn't learned to love.

I'd barely learned to like. But I had learned to survive.

"Come on!"

"Where are we going?"

My time in the mountain with my aunt had certainly prepared me for some aspects of my current situation, but not for facing it with an elderly and disoriented relative in tow. I did my best, trying to hurry Uther without rushing him (which is a fine line to walk). On my own I could comfortably have outrun, jumped, and possibly fought any of my pursuers, but that all became more difficult when I was dragging Uther behind me.

"Could we stop for a moment?" suggested my father.

I was about to explain that now was not really the time when another man caught up to us with his sword drawn.

"Actually, yes," I replied to Uther. "You take a seat there, get your breath back. I'll be back in a moment."

As Uther gratefully took the weight off his feet, I spun around to face my attacker, who pointed the sword threateningly.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Works for me," I shot back.

"Put that sword away, Vorst!" yelled another man, running towards us. "I want them both alive!"

On the one hand, that was good news because I wanted us both alive as well. But it was also very bad news; if they were robbers, they wouldn't care if we were alive or dead; if they had ungentlemanly intentions towards me, then they wouldn't care if Uther was harmed. If they wanted *both* of us alive then they were collecting us for someone else. There were a couple of options as to who that someone else might be, but none of those options were happy ones.

The man called 'Vorst' went to put his sword away, and I took the opportunity to grab half a brick up off the ground and throw it at his head. It was a perfect shot, knocking the man to the mud.

"Stop!" yelled the upcoming man, who had long, dirty, blonde hair straggled about his hatchet face.

I grabbed Uther. "Time to go."

"Are you sure? Those men seem to want us."

Not stopping to answer, I dragged Uther on, pausing to knock over a stack of barrels to block our pursuers' path.

"Someone go around to cut them off!" I heard the blonde yelling. "Where's Devon?"

How many of these men were there?

Nervous of someone trying to cut us off, I took another side alley with no idea where it led.

"It's a maze, isn't it?" observed Uther.

We ran as fast as we could—or at least as fast as Uther could—and I began to think we would make it. At the edge of town there was a hitching post, and while I strongly disapproved of stealing horses, it was another area where I'd been schooled by my aunt, and it felt justified right now. If we could get on horseback and out of town, then we had a chance.

That little light of optimism led my way, right up until I tripped on something and went tumbling head over heels to the muddy ground.

"Oops," commented Uther.

I started to get up but in the next instant there was someone on my back, forcing me back down and pinning my arms behind me.

“Sorry about that. Not exactly fair, tripping you like that, especially when you were doing so well. But there’s no rules in life.”

Around me, I could hear people running up and I forced my head out of the mud to see the other chasers all arriving, glad to see me caught but a little irritated that they hadn’t been the ones to do it.

“Well done, Devon,” said the blonde man.

Devon?

The weight on my back was lifted and then so was I, by my bound arms, and put back on my feet by my unseen assailant, the man named Devon. As I was turned around, I got my first look at him.

The roguish smile Devon gave me was the same he’d given me in the bar earlier.

It was now evening. The sun had set and the men who had captured us were seated around their campfire.

As far as I could ascertain, they were mercenaries, and while I hadn’t heard them say anything specific, I could assume they were taking us to Latran or Gaunt. Looking at the stars and roughly gauging our direction, I guessed Latran. The blonde man, who had now tied his long hair back into a tail that gave him a distinctly horsey look, seemed to be the leader, though there was not what you would call a ‘command hierarchy’ amongst the group. They were your basic rabble, undisciplined and brutish. And right now, Uther and I were the center of their attention.

“What’s worth so much about them, eh?” asked one man.

“I know what’s worth so much about this one.” The man called Vorst slid the blade of his unsheathed sword up and down my leg and I shuddered.

Vorst grinned. “Don’t be scared girlie. I’ll be gentle.”

“No, no, no.” Another man shook his head. “A girl like that don’t want it gentle. I bet she’s a wildcat. A vixen.”

“More like a wolf bitch,” judged Vorst, his sword blade edging higher, pushing between my thighs.

Another man knelt forward, treating me to a blast of his breath that could have wilted flowers. “Let’s see what she’s got. It’s a warm night, we’ll have that jacket off her.”

A little glimmer of hope presented itself—they’d have to untie my hands to take my jacket off. I wasn’t sure what I would do, but if I had my hands, then I could do *something*.

But that glimmer was quickly extinguished as the man produced a knife and began to saw through my jacket. I glanced across at Uther, glad they weren’t targeting him but concerned he might be traumatized by what was happening. In fact, he’d gone to sleep. It was hard to tell how much he understood. Since we’d been taken prisoner, he seemed to have shut down even more, as if his brain was defending itself by refusing to even take in what was happening.

Two more men grabbed at my jacket, tugging hard so it tore where the knife had cut and a cheer went up as the garment split and was tossed aside, leaving me in the hard-wearing blouse I had on underneath.

“Fine figure of a girl.”

“Could do with a bath.”

“I’ll give her one!”

“She’ll scrub up well.”

“I prefer something with a bit more curves.”

I clenched my jaw and tried to focus inwardly on the ball of hatred building inside me, as the men groped, squeezed, and pinched at me.

“Hey, don’t damage the merchandise,” objected the blonde leader.

“Lighten up, Buck.”

The men ignored their commander who shrugged and sat back to watch—he’d done his best.

Vorst now took his turn. Just his gaze on me felt worse than all the other men’s hands. For the others, it was all just a bit of fun (to them), but in Vorst’s eyes there was something nastier and more dangerous, something that said this could go anywhere, and who knew where it would end. I recoiled from his touch and he grinned.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like it.”

“Sit your ass back down, Vorst.”

Everyone, including me, looked up to see Devon strolling back into the camp with the carcass of a deer over his shoulder.

“Leave the girl alone and stick to your own species in the future. Whatever species that is.” He dropped the deer. “Someone get that on a spit.”

“You don’t give me orders!” snarled Vorst. “I’ll do whatever I please with her.”

Devon raised his eyebrows. “You and the deer want some alone time? I don’t judge, but I don’t think any of us’ll want to eat it after that.”

The camp laughed and Vorst’s face got angrier.

“The girl not the deer! You don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. You’re not in charge here.”

Devon nodded. “You’re right, Vorst, I’m not. So, I guess you don’t have to do what I say.” He took a step forward, closer to me. “But do you really want to find out what happens if you don’t?”

Vorst had automatically taken a step back when Devon took one forward, and from the look on his face, he hated

himself for it. He wanted the fight, wanted it badly, but was clearly nervous of the other man.

Devon smiled. "How about we have some dinner? Everyone acts a little crazy when they're hungry, eh Buck?"

The man in charge, who had watched as fascinated and as tense as everyone else during this little stand-off, suddenly seemed to remember his position.

"Quite right. And no one touch the girl! I told them not to."

Devon nodded. "That's what I thought. I was just following your orders."

"Yes," agreed Buck, almost convincing himself.

I wondered if they all knew something about Devon that I didn't, if they'd seen him fight for example. Or if it was just the way he had about him, the confident aura of near invincibility. There was something about Devon. He seemed to be able to win a fight before a blow was struck.

The camp busied itself preparing the deer for dinner.

"How'd you bring this down, Devon?" asked one of the men. "There's not a mark on it. Reckon its neck's broken."

Devon nodded and smiled. "Got lucky. It took a tumble while I was chasing it. Damn thing probably would have gotten away. Some men are born lucky."

He knelt beside me as the men continued to work.

"You alright?"

I nodded, then added, "You mean other than being tied up and kidnapped?"

"Yes," nodded Devon with a smile. "Other than that. Sorry about that, but that's just business. He didn't hurt you? Vorst, I mean."

I shook my head. "No. And I'll hurt him if he tries anything."

To my surprise, Devon didn't smile or make a joke. "I reckon you would. I saw you fight. That's why I tripped you. Anyway, if Vorst (or any of them, but it'll be Vorst) tries anything, then you yell for me. Wouldn't be a fair fight with you tied up."

"Thank you," I said. And then felt utterly stupid for saying it. The man was one of my kidnappers and certainly no friend or ally.

But there was something in his words and in the way he spoke that made me wonder how much he wanted to be here. '*Just business*' he'd said, so how wedded to this affair was he? Perhaps he could be talked around. Maybe I had found a way out.

Or maybe I just wanted to believe good things of the man with the roguish smile.

Chapter Four

Captivity

“Here’s another!” Kimmel, one of the mercenaries, pointed to the ground up ahead, and the others rode up.

The ground around the hillocks over which we were now passing was mostly too hard to hold footprints, but a low spot had retained enough water for this one to be visible. It was little more than an outline, but there was still no mistaking what it was.

“Dragon,” breathed Buck, and cast a nervous glance around the grey skies, as if the beast might be coming for him now.

“How old?” wondered Devon.

“Recent,” judged Kimmel. “Last night I’d guess.” He grinned at Devon. “You *were* lucky. Out here hunting that deer, you might have ended up dinner for something else.”

“And then you’d all have had to go hungry,” replied Devon.

The mercenaries laughed, but there was tension to the sound. Dragons didn’t often come down to the lowlands and if they did, then it meant they were struggling for food in their natural home, high in the mountains. So, if they were coming down here, then it was to hunt.

‘*Dragons don’t kill humans*’ I well-remembered my father telling me, ‘*unless they are provoked*’. And yet it was common knowledge that dragons killed people. Everyone knew someone whose mother’s cousin’s best friend’s milk maid knew someone who had told her about someone who knew someone who had been killed by a dragon. Which made it as good as fact. Certainly, it was enough to scare people.

Dragon’s looks were against them. They looked terrifying and so we were terrified of them. And they were carnivores

and hunters, taking livestock and other animals. It stood to reason that they could kill humans. But, apparently, they didn't.

“What do we do if we see one?” asked one of the younger men.

“Ride for cover,” said Buck, with the confidence of someone who has no actual experience.

As one man, the group looked around the vast openness of the wilderness. If you had the time and inclination, you could find small stands of trees and even a few that were large enough to be called a wood, but for the most part, the wind scoured the landscape clear of anything taller than a bush. This was a land of grass and scrub, and even that had to be as tough as leather to survive.

“What sort of cover are we talking about?” asked another man (whose name might have been Vassek—I hadn't picked up on all of their names yet).

“You hide under your horse.” Devon's voice had none of the solid authority with which Buck had spoken, and yet it instantly commanded more respect because he sounded as if he knew what he was talking about.

“The dragon will ignore the horse?” asked the young man.

Devon cocked a smile. “No. The dragon will carry off the horse rather than you. It's kill or be killed out here.”

“Dragons can carry off horses?”

“The big ones can,” nodded Devon. “One this size...” He looked at the footprint critically. “Might just kill the horse here, eat what it can, and carry the rest back to its family.”

“Dragons don't have families,” scoffed Vorst.

“No?” Devon asked, his left eyebrow arching.

Vorst laughed. “You think they all sit together over dinner in a cave? Mummy dragon, Daddy dragon, and the three little kiddies, chowing down as a family on some poor bastard who just happened to be out for a walk? Never happen. They're no better than animals.”

Devon said nothing. He had a way of looking amused by something without smiling, as if he was laughing inwardly at a joke that no one else got.

“Families...” It was the first word I’d heard Uther say that day. And one of only a handful he’d said since we’d been captured by these men.

Uther had been staring hard at the dragon print as if it was a puzzle to be deciphered, though who knew what he saw when he looked at it. I could only guess at how he saw the world now, but I guessed it was different to what we saw.

“Dragons...” The old man started muttering frantically under his breath. I could only catch a few of the words from the spill of unintelligible nonsense. “... years... the blood on my hand... Tarascon... apples... Wantley... I said... I promised...”

“Shut up, you bumbling, old fool,” snarled Vorst, and Uther’s voice dropped, though he kept muttering and his eyes stayed on the footprint as long as it was in sight as we rode on.

It seemed more and more certain to me that we were headed for Latran, where King Harker now ruled, with my sister Rhea alongside him. Although, knowing Rhea, I wondered who was doing the ruling.

I was also becoming more and more certain that the mercenaries, even up to Buck, didn’t know who Uther and I were or why they were taking us to Latran. Perhaps they didn’t even know they were being paid by the queen there (as I was sure they were). We were just a job, just two people with a bounty on our heads that they were anxious to collect. I wondered if knowing the truth might sway them, might make them pity us, or let us go. But more likely, they would just increase their asking price.

After I’d been banished, the marriages of my sisters to the princes of Latran and Gaunt went ahead as planned. As for

Wincham itself, now that I was disowned, my father decided to split the royal prerogative between his two ‘remaining’ daughters, so both Rhea and Sylvia could claim to be Queens of Wincham, or at least some part of it. But that wasn’t the same as ruling it. They would be queens and would enjoy certain privileges and a degree of power, but the actual governing of Wincham would pass into the stewardship of Lord Jonas until there was a direct male heir to Uther’s bloodline. In other words, whichever of my sisters produced a boy first, that boy would become king, and would reign when he came of age.

But while my father was happy enough to die knowing that his descendants would rule a lowland empire, my sisters didn’t have that sort of patience. They saw Wincham as their birthright.

I didn’t wholly disagree with them: I saw no reason a woman couldn’t rule as well as a man (or better). But I did disagree with their methods.

They could have waited until our father was dead before making their move—perhaps then it would have had more legitimacy—but Jonas would be a strong ruler who would defend Wincham stoutly; it would be his duty as steward. My father was old and weak, and refused to believe that his daughters would move against him. That made him an easy target.

The sudden and unexpected deaths of the kings of Latran and Gaunt should have told him the lengths to which Rhea and Sylvia were prepared to go. Princes Harker and Titus became kings of their respective nations, with my sisters as their queens, and shortly after, the armies of both were mobilized, marching into Wincham.

As my sisters had presumably hoped, King Uther did nothing, even as advisors begged him to take action. Instead, he insisted that the armies marching towards the capital were just his daughters coming to visit. Too late did anyone realize that this self-delusion was the first symptom of a total mental breakdown induced by the betrayal of his daughters.

Perhaps I took my share of the blame for that—I'd been the first to betray him.

Wincham's capital was the fortified city of Farringcourt, built to withstand any onslaught and self-sufficient enough to hold out against a long siege. The two armies surrounded it and demanded that King Uther be handed over.

Curiously, Uther's word still mattered to both sides. If he gave his blessing to one or both of the queens as ruler of Wincham, without caveat, then few in Wincham would argue. Of course, that would just be the start of a larger war between my sisters and their respective armies. Both knew that the unity between them that existed for the purposes of the siege was a temporary truce and one that would evaporate as soon as my father was forced to announce his chosen heir. Then there would be a long and bloody war.

In some ways, I used that potential war as my excuse.

Perhaps the courtiers of Farringcourt, or even Jonas himself, would have handed over my father to prevent the pain of a long siege that could only end one way. Perhaps that would have been the right thing to do; my father had made mistakes that would cost the country dear.

But he was still my father and I couldn't let that happen.

By night, using all the skills I'd learned in my five years in the mountains with my Aunt Leah, I snuck past the siege lines of Gaunt and Latran and scaled the fortified walls of Farringcourt. While the city's many defenses made a full-scale attack a futile gesture, a single person—especially one who knew the city well—could sneak in, and I managed to do so, into the city and then into the palace, where I found my father under guard.

It was only then that I learned the extent of Uther's mental deterioration, and I will never forget the horror of that moment, when those eyes which had been the first to look on me as a baby, looked on me now and saw nothing. The fact that my own father didn't recognize me almost made me give up there and then. It broke me.

But I suppose I'd learned to be hard during my time away. So, I swallowed my heartbreak and went to the secret escape route in the king's apartments that my father had shown me when I was young. It could only be accessed from the inside—which was why I hadn't come in this way—and not even my sisters knew about it. My father had shown it to me during a game of hide and seek, when I kept losing to my older siblings. He always favored me, always allowed me to cheat, and gave me more leeway than he did them. Looking back, perhaps that was where all this animosity between my sisters and me had started. But there was no sense in dwelling on the past.

I took my father out through an underground tunnel that emerged into the wilderness, some distance from the siege lines, and we struck out for the mountains and the safety (or partial safety) of my aunt's realm.

The siege on Wincham ended a few days later. Spies within the palace had told Rhea and Sylvia that the rumors were true, the king was gone. That, presumably, was when they'd decided to look elsewhere and had hired mercenaries, who drew less attention.

And it was a tactic that had apparently worked for Rhea. Our capture would almost certainly mean death for us both, just as soon as Uther proclaimed Rhea his legitimate heir. Then there would be war. Certainly, between Rhea and Sylvia, with their husbands' armies behind them, but perhaps Wincham would go to war as well, depending on how Jonas and the others in charge responded to what was clearly a forced declaration by the old king.

It would be a long and bloody conflict, and I told myself that such was what I was trying to prevent. But in truth, I just wanted to save my father.

For the most part, the mercenaries rode while I walked behind Buck's horse, my hands tied and tethered to his saddle. I was grateful that Uther had been allowed to ride up behind one of the men, in recognition of the fact that the old man was slowing them down. I too was occasionally permitted to ride when they wanted to go faster, but I wasn't to be trusted—they had all seen me fight and knew I was more of a warrior than perhaps I looked.

“I'll take her.”

“No, I'll take her.”

“You took her last time.”

In other circumstances, it might have been quite flattering to be fought over by all these men, but the knowledge that they were fighting for the opportunity to grope me as we rode just made me slightly sick. I was happier to ride with Buck, who left me unmolested, but he was always trying to keep his men happy, aware that he was their leader more by default than by right.

“Kimmel. You take her. It's your turn.”

I braced myself. Kimmel had a strong grip and ideas about what he gripped.

Gradually, I was starting to learn the names of my captors, and their respective personalities (which was a big word for not much). Buck was the leader, though not a very strong one, but apparently was a good fighter. This gave him the right to lead over Vorst, who had more authority but was less of a fighter. Frankly, I just thought Vorst was a bastard: he argued with everyone, undermined Buck, and leered at me every chance he got. So far, I hadn't had to ride with him, but I knew I would because he was making such a fuss about it and Buck would want to keep him happy.

Then there was Kimmel, the tracker who didn't realize his own strength and so left bruises on my ass. Vassek; dark-skinned, soft-spoken, and a little creepy. Chico; the youngest, nervous but anxious to impress the others, he'd initially been too scared to touch me when I rode with him, then, when the

others made fun of him, he went way over the top, grabbing everything in reach. Bronson; huge and hulking with a low forehead and a face that looked as if he'd been used as a battering ram—I hadn't ridden with him yet because his horse already had its work cut out.

And then there was Devon. I hadn't ridden with him either, because he was the only one of the party who didn't seem to care whether I did or not. He seemed the most professional of the group, the one who was here to do a job whether he wanted to or not, and from time to time, I still got that vague sense that he didn't want to be here, that kidnapping a girl and an old man wasn't something he would do by choice. That made him seem my best chance of escape—as there was no way I would escape without help. On the other hand, his detached attitude made me less optimistic about that chance; perhaps he didn't care for this job, but he didn't seem to care much about me either. I was just cargo, to be treated well because damaged cargo was worth nothing, but cargo none the less.

And yet...

That was the problem with defining Devon; he seemed a mass of contradictions, a career mercenary who did the job in front of him and yet who was so different to all the others, a man who didn't care and yet who took the time to defend me against Vorst. I imagined Devon was someone who saw me as a package to deliver and yet who shared a smile with me when big Bronson tumbled off his horse. I had a hunch that smile had broken the hearts of a hundred or so barmaids, stable girls, and the privileged daughters of noble families looking for excitement. It was a smile that promised much, delivered briefly, but never stuck around for breakfast. The smile of a rogue.

And damn it all, it was a smile I rather liked.

The fact that I found Devon attractive clouded everything. I didn't think myself particularly shallow. The other girls in the mountains had introduced me to a few handsome men, and I'd actually developed a pretty low opinion of them because they all knew they were handsome. Devon didn't seem to

know, or if he did know, he didn't act like he did, or perhaps he wasn't that stereotypically handsome but was just attractive in a very literal sense; there was something about him that drew me. An aura he carried, a look in his eyes, that damn smile.

Was it odd to spend so much time thinking about the relative good-lookingness of one of my kidnappers? It certainly felt odd, possibly even a bit daft.

But it wasn't just me for whom Devon was a bit of an unknown. He was clearly new to the mercenary group, and they weren't quite sure what to make of him yet; they weren't so much nervous as tentative. The casual way he wore his sword, as if it was another limb, made it seem as if here was a man who knew how to use it.

"Well, someone's got to do it. You spent half the day with her pressed into your back, so I say it's me!" snarled Vorst.

Part of me wanted to say, '*Please, boys, don't fight over little old me,*' but it was hard to see the funny side of my current predicament.

It had been settled that just tying me up for the night wasn't secure enough and that if I left '*the old man*' behind then I could move fast enough to get away and never be seen again. (If they'd known who I was, and more importantly who that '*old man*' was, then they would have known that he was worth far more than I was, but they'd been paid for us both and would deliver us both.) The upshot was that someone had to spend the night 'taking care' of me, which could entail whatever that person liked, as long as I was still alive and in the camp in the morning.

I looked from face to face of the mercenary line-up. Buck would certainly not give himself this plum task for fear of trouble in the ranks. Of the rest of them, I thought most would try to take advantage of this uninterrupted alone time to some extent, even if young Chico only did it to prove he was a man.

Would I be able to fight off their advances with my hands tied? Not all night, and the harder I resisted, the worse I would

be knocked around before the inevitable. I would still try, of course, because that was who I was.

“You can settle it with a wrestling match,” suggested Buck, boldly side-stepping the actual decision.

The men agreed and stamped out a makeshift ring in the grass. Vorst took Chico out of the running quickly and cruelly, twisting the kid’s arm till he screamed. Bronson leveled Kimmel and Vassek in quick succession. I couldn’t see anyone beating the man mountain and was already trying hard not to think about being pinned under that musclebound weight. But then Devon surprised everyone (including me because I hadn’t imagined he was going to try for his right to spend the night with me), sending the big man tumbling simply by using himself as a pivot and letting Bronson’s bulk do all the work.

“Born lucky,” shrugged Devon as the others stared.

In the end, it came down to Devon, with his ‘luck’ and Vorst, who would try anything to win.

I watched as Devon stripped off his loose jacket, his body gleaming in the flickering firelight, the shadows making it seem as if each muscle was a living thing. Vorst followed suit, displaying his own, impressive musculature, though his body was more wiry and compact. He had youth on his side by a few years, but Devon’s experience might count for more. If the scars on his body were anything to go by, then Devon had seen more action—Vorst gave the impression of a man good at avoiding action.

“Aaaand... Fight!” Buck started the match.

Vorst jumped the gun by a few seconds, but Devon seemed to be expecting it (I certainly had been) and caught Vorst’s weight as it hit him. He spun with the impact, sending Vorst flying.

As he scrambled up from the flattened grass, it occurred to me that the one thing more dangerous than Vorst the victor was Vorst the loser. Humiliating someone like Vorst only made him more dangerous.

Maybe Devon knew as much, but if he did, he didn't show it. Everything was so casual to Devon, as if this was all no effort at all. When Vorst hit him again, Devon broke the other man's hold, spun, and flipped Vorst over his shoulder so he landed heavily in the grass.

This time, Vorst stayed down and grabbed Devon's foot, biting at his ankle (definitely against the rules!) but Devon snatched up Vorst's arm and twisted until he let go.

One more clash, and this time Vorst was cagey, letting Devon make the first move. Their bodies met again, the muscles straining and flexing under a sheen of sweat.

"Look out!" I found myself yelping as I saw the gleam in the dark.

Maybe it was my shout or maybe he saw it himself, but Devon grabbed Vorst's wrist and gave it a twist so the little blade dropped from his hand. His muscles seemed to suddenly swell, almost impossibly beyond their natural size, busting Vorst's grip. Vorst stumbled backwards and had no time to react as Devon punched him, knocking the bastard down.

"Well... that's technically against the rules," observed Buck, uncertainly.

"That's true," nodded Devon, stooping to pick up the dropped blade which he tossed contemptuously at Vorst. "Rematch?"

The look on Vorst's face was a picture; a trapped animal, filled with hatred and the desire to fight but all the while knowing he wouldn't win. He said nothing but eventually gave a snarl of decline.

"She's yours for the night," said Buck, smiling to Devon.

"Nights," corrected Devon. "And days. That's what I understood I was playing for."

"Now wait just a minute," Vorst started, but Devon didn't pull his attention from Buck.

"No sense us fighting every evening. Someone might get hurt. I can take care of her from here on in. I don't mind."

“Well...” Buck hesitated and then must have realized this was a way out for him too, because he nodded. “That might be best then. Bad for squad unity if we’re all arguing. Unless anyone wants to challenge Devon?”

He probably hadn’t made any friends, but no one was challenging him.

Now I just had to worry about what Devon might choose to do with me. He was still a man, after all.

What he did was to tie me up more securely still, then tie my hands to his ankle with a taut line so that if I moved it would tug at his leg.

“I like a good night’s sleep, so keep still,” he instructed, then rolled over, dragging me by my tether so I spooned up behind him. “Sleep well.”

He was asleep in seconds. But I had no doubt that he would be awake even quicker if I tried anything.

Chapter Five

Big Fish

Given the alternatives, I was pretty happy with the outcome of the wrestling match, and Devon took so little interest in laying hands on me that it was borderline insulting.

But, though it was a relief, it was not all good news; I was still a prisoner, and being Devon's responsibility came with its own trials. He treated me more like a pet than anything else, keeping me tethered on a long leash, walking behind his horse. He didn't lash out at me, make crude jokes or try to grope me, but then he didn't acknowledge me as a person in any way. I was just there. Perhaps that was the best I could expect, given that I was his prisoner, but it still felt dehumanizing.

And while Devon barely seemed to notice me, being his pet did not protect me from the attention of the rest of the group. The physical attention had ceased now I was Devon's property, but the way that Vorst looked at me had a penetrative quality, as if he could see through my clothes. I felt uncomfortable under his stare, and I knew his imagination was working overtime, deciding what to do with me if he ever got the chance.

Devon didn't look at me in such a way. He barely looked at me at all, and when he did then he would smile, as if to say '*Good girl*'. Strange, certainly, but there it was.

It was a little ridiculous that I shrank from the stares of the other mercenaries but was irritated by Devon's lack of interest—it seemed as if there was no pleasing me. But in a strange way, Devon's disinterest was as bad as the other's interest; both, in their different ways, made me feel less than a person.

There was one moment, in particular, which made me wonder. Exhausted from my days of walking, I typically woke late, usually when Devon tugged at my tether to wake me, but on this particular morning, I had, for some reason, woken far earlier than usual, before the sun was fully up. Devon was

already awake, seated beside me, toying with my tether between his fingers. In the still low sunlight, he couldn't tell that my eyes were open a crack, and I was able to observe him through meshed eyelashes, without him being aware that I was watching, giving me a rare glimpse of my 'owner'.

He was looking at me. Not with any particular expression on his face that I could make out, but still in a very different way to his usual disinterest. If I had to give a name to his expression, then I would have colored it as 'contentment'. He was happy to simply watch me sleep. There was always a calmness about Devon, contrasting with the other mercenaries, but at this moment, I saw too a peace I hadn't seen before. I'd previously observed that he didn't seem happy in his task, that it was just a job, and I was now more sure of that than ever before. The unforced pleasure in his face now, watching me sleep in the sweetness of the morning, was a stark contrast to the calm but professional manner he adopted throughout the day.

Testing a theory, I stirred a little, tugging at my tether 'in my sleep', and Devon solicitously paid out more rope, anxious that I should not be uncomfortable. Of course, I'd heard stories about women who began to identify with their captors, or who even fell for them, and I'd always thought how weak and stupid those women were. But I understood them better now. I understood them, yes, but I was also determined that such a thing wouldn't happen to me. Devon was my kidnapper, my jailer, my enemy, and if I got my chance, I would escape, even if it meant killing him.

Still, it was... eye-opening to see that look on his face.

As far as I could tell, Devon was the only one of the mercenaries who bathed regularly. He was scruffy, his hair disheveled, his clothes tattered, his face unshaven, but he preferred to be clean. And he preferred me to be as well.

This meant that when we were near one of the rivers that snaked across the wilderness, or one of the streams that trickled down from the mountains, then I was taken for a cold bath first thing. If ever there was an opportunity for Devon to legitimately take advantage of his position as my keeper, then this was it, because he certainly didn't trust me enough to untether me.

When we walked off in the direction of the stream on one such occasion, I could feel the eyes of the rest of the group on me. I could feel their lust—they all wanted a look, and I shriveled up inside, away from their gazes. I could also feel their envy, directed towards Devon—why did he get to have all the fun? But none of them dared challenge him.

When we reached a place where the stream had conveniently pooled, Devon unwound a long stretch of my tether, that usually hung beside him from his saddle.

“There you go. Tug if you need more slack. I'll be over that way.” He indicated a stand of stubby hawthorn bushes that acted as a natural shield to the pool.

“I...”

But before I could say anything more, he turned his back to me and strolled off casually towards the bushes.

“Oh, one more thing.” Devon turned back then, the genial smile still on his face. “Try anything and I'll put you across my knee and give you a whacking that, I'm guessing, your father never did.”

I blushed crimson to the roots of my hair, putting my hands over my ass in preemptive protection.

“Just be good,” Devon advised, as he turned again and continued past the bushes.

After he was gone, I waited a moment, eyes still fixed on the hawthorn, waiting to see if he peeped around to watch me undress, but all that happened was that he started to sing. The song was not one I recognized—which was odd, as I'd heard many an old folk song when I lived in the mountains. Stranger still, he sang in a language I didn't know and didn't recognize.

He didn't have the best voice, and the language seemed an oddly guttural one to me, but the song had a pleasant jollity to it. There were worse accompaniments to a morning bath.

Crouching near the pool, I hastily disrobed and slid into the water. It was absolutely freezing and my whole body seemed to cringe inwards, but it also felt so refreshing after days on the road, easing the aches and pains of my exhausted body. After a little while, my teeth stopped chattering and I could focus on scrubbing some of yesterday's dust and sweat off. Devon had generously adjusted the rope, so I was only tied by one hand, because washing with hands tied together was tricky.

As I washed, I kept half an eye on the hawthorn bush behind which my tether led. The singing had continued, but the song had now changed. Though the language in which it was sung remained unintelligible, this song seemed more mournful, with a keening tone to it that spoke of lost love—or at least that was what it said to me.

“Still there?!” called Devon, pausing mid-song. “Give the line two sharp tugs.”

I said nothing but did as I was told.

“Good girl.”

Treating me like his pet again. Maybe he should come over and scrub me like a dog. The thought lingered longer in my head than I liked and conjured up images and sensations that were thankfully blunted by the cold water. Why did this man have such a marked effect on me?

Putting Devon from my mind, I got down to washing my hair. Refreshing though the water was, I was now starting to feel that cold again and if I stayed in too long, I was going to get sick.

I dipped my head into the water, then raised it, my bedraggled hair hanging in front of my eyes.

“Very nice.”

I started, sending a spray of splashed water up around me, and dragged the wet hair back from my face. Vorst was

standing nearby, his leering gaze drinking in my naked body.

“Very nice indeed,” he grinned.

I tried to cover my breasts, but when you’re naked in a shallow pool of water, you don’t have enough hands and arms to cover everything that wants covering—moving your hand to one area just reveals something else.

“Leave!” I yelled at him.

“Vorst, what do you want?”

I hadn’t heard Devon come back around the hawthorn bush, but there he was.

Vorst’s eyes didn’t leave me to look at Devon even once as he replied. “Buck wanted to know how much longer you’ll be.”

“Did he?” Devon clearly didn’t believe him.

“We’re all waiting for breakfast.”

“Then you’ll wait a little longer,” said Devon.

Vorst didn’t move. I felt as if his eyes were etching every inch of me into his brain for later consumption.

“Why don’t I help with her and you can head down stream to do some fishing.”

“I want her help,” replied Devon. “Now off you go.”

Vorst scoffed. “You want her...”

“I want her *help*.” Devon’s voice suddenly became firmer. “I’ve told you to leave and I’m scratching my head as to why you’re still here.”

That extra edge was apparently enough for Vorst, who was no doubt remembering the wrestling match. He finally managed to tear his eyes away from my body for long enough to look at Devon. Vorst said nothing, but there was a look in his eyes that said plenty. One day he was going to come for Devon, not in a fair fight, but when the other man slept, when he was drunk, when he was bathing, and Devon would never see it coming.

“Put your clothes on,” said Devon. “We’re going fishing.”

As he said the words, he looked in my direction for what seemed like the first time. Maybe I was imagining it (maybe I wanted to believe it) but I thought there was a flash of something in his eyes, something like desire.

But all he said was, “Hurry up, you’ll catch your death of cold otherwise.”

Further down the steep and stony hill on which we’d spent the night, the stream broadened and sped up, tumbling over rocks, feeding into deep, icy pools, and dashing itself into rapids. These were not suitable areas for bathing (not least because they were so exposed), but they played host to some decent sized fish, hardy enough to thrive in the chill waters.

“You wait here with the basket.” Devon pressed a woven reed basket into my hands. “I’ll need my hands, so I’m trusting you to be good, else you know what’ll happen.”

“I know,” I said quickly.

“You’ll feel the flat of my hand so you won’t be able to sit comfortably for the next week.”

The threat was somehow worse when he actually said it. More humiliating. I was twenty-one for goodness sake.

Having told me to stay put, Devon then tied the tether to a massive boulder.

“You think I’m going to run off while tied to that?” I didn’t usually speak but... it was different somehow when it was just him and me, and I couldn’t always curb my natural tendency to answer back.

Devon shrugged. “I’d like to take you at your word, but I think you’d kill me as soon as look at me.” He shot me a smile. “Not that I blame you. In your place, I’d do the same. I admire that. Admire it, but I’ll still give you hell if you try anything.”

My aunt had taught me to fight. She’d then set me to learn with her warriors—all women, all with their different skills. With each one, I learned something I took onto my lessons

with the next and so developed my own skills, putting together what I'd learned along the way. In a one-on-one fair fight, then I gave myself a decent chance against any of the mercenaries, even though they were all stronger than me. But Devon? I'd need to be on my game to have a chance against him.

With me securely tied, Devon took off the soft leather boots he wore—almost as flexible as going barefoot. He rolled his trousers right up his legs then waded into the cold water. Reaching what seemed to be a good spot, he crouched on a rock like a monkey, staring down into the crystal clear water, watching the darting shapes, waiting for a likely candidate.

When the moment came, his hands moved faster than I could see and emerged with a big struggling fish in his grasp.

“Always take the big beasts,” he said conversationally as he strode back to me to dump his catch in the basket. “Taking the little ones is just cruel. Leave them to grow big so you can hunt them another day.” He looked down at the fish in the basket and smiled. “This old man’s lived a life, and now he’ll fuel another.”

“Just because he’s old, doesn’t mean he hasn’t got more to offer.” I spoke without realizing that I wasn’t talking about fish.

Devon smiled. “True enough. But the younger generation has to have its time. Besides, I assume you do want to eat?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Well, then.”

He waded back to his rock. This time his target was feet away, and he sprang from the rock into the deeper part of the pool, pouncing like a hunting animal. In fact, there was something animal about the way he hunted full stop. No spear, no knife, just bare hands and his wits against those of the fish. When one struggled out of his grasp and swam off at speed, he sat in the water laughing merrily, slapping it with his hands.

“Swim for it, old timer! You earned it!”

But few got away from him. I hadn’t seen Devon fight—not properly—but watching him hunt the fish was a hint of

what it might be like. He was patient, he was wily; he was quick and possessed of a wiry strength that made me think he'd grown up looking after himself. It was also clear that hunting was something he enjoyed more than the task of escorting an old man and his daughter to their fate in Latran.

This was the happiest I'd seen him; wild and free, part of nature.

Chapter Six

Somewhere in the Blue

The skies above the wilderness had always seemed to me a special shade of blue, and though the views from the mountains were spectacular, it was down in the lowlands where my heart lay and where those skies seemed at their biggest, broadest, and bluest.

But to some among the mercenaries, the sky now seemed a source of eyes, watching them from behind the clouds.

“Kimmel?” asked Buck, shortly.

The tracker shrugged as he stood back up. “Hard to say for sure. Could be. It’s the same sort of size.”

“The same *sort of* size?”

Another shrug. “I didn’t measure the last one. But judging by eye, I’d guess this is the same dragon.”

This time, there was more than one print, because it had rained yesterday afternoon leaving the grass soaked enough to hold the massive dragon prints for longer, though the stems were already starting to spring back.

“What’s it doing this far from the mountains?” wondered Buck, a rhetorical question but it still got an answer from Vorst.

“It’s hunting us.”

Vassek shook his head. “If it was hunting us, we’d be dead. We’re exposed out here, all it would have to do was drop.”

“*Following* us then,” said Vorst.

“Why would a dragon follow us?” wondered Chico, nervously.

“Hoping we’ll lead it to easier prey,” judged Vorst with a shrug. “Like a hunting dog following the big bulls back to the

herd so it can pick off a cow or a calf.”

I wasn't sure if I would define many of these men as '*the big bulls*' but it wasn't a completely ridiculous suggestion. Or at least it wouldn't be completely ridiculous if dragons killed humans, which they did not.

Or did they?

It had all seemed so certain when my father taught me about dragons when I was a little child. He'd spoken with such knowledge and authority, as only a parent can. But I felt a lot less sure out here under that big blue sky, knowing a dragon could be soaring somewhere above, so far away that it was no more than a speck to us, but all the while just waiting for its moment.

Yes, they didn't attack humans *usually*, but never? What if a dragon got hungry? What if one was injured and needed something that didn't run as fast as one of the lowland steers? What if one got mad because of the dragon hunt of Latran and Gaunt? Would they kill humans then?

“I don't think dragons hunt that way,” said Buck. “But in case they do, we'll pick up the pace. We're getting close now anyway, and there's no reason to drag our feet. We'll be on the edge of the woods in a day or so. Devon; get the girl up with you. Can't have her slowing us down.”

Devon nodded and tugged on my tether, bringing me to his side.

“Hold up your hands.”

I held up my bound hands, and he pulled me up and onto the saddle with impressive ease, settling me in front of him.

“Comfortable?”

I nodded.

“Good.”

We rode on.

Again, I noticed that Uther kept looking at the dragon prints until they were out of sight.

“Quiet, you old fool,” growled Vassek. Uther had been muttering to himself again, as he had when we saw the last print, and I saw on his face a melancholic look.

Riding instead of walking was a relief as my legs had started to ache from the long days of tramping along behind Devon’s horse, relieved only when it was felt that I was slowing them down. But I had to admit, though I hated myself for it, there were other perks to riding like this.

Devon’s strong arms were around me as he held the reins, his broad chest against my back, and I moved unavoidably against him as the horse trotted on at the faster pace we were now setting. It was a more pleasant position to be in than I liked to confess and I wondered if Devon was finding it similarly so—a man with a girl jogging up and down in his lap could be forgiven for inadvertently enjoying himself.

But if Devon was pleased with this new arrangement then, as ever, he made no outward sign of it.

“Can you get your hair out of my eyes? I’d like to see where we’re going.”

He remained all business. I was the cargo, and if there was anything appealing about the shape of this particular cargo, or anything delightful about it bouncing around in his lap, then he hid such delight well.

He hid it a damn sight better than I did, as I found my cheeks becoming increasingly flushed with every bounce. Maybe it was the contrast between him and the childish behavior of the other mercenaries, but there seemed to me to be something defiantly masculine about Devon’s presence that got under my skin in a way I couldn’t place, but which seemed to warm me from the inside. I’d immediately identified him as the oldest of the group, but the more I looked at him, the more I wondered. Buck could be his senior, so could Vassek, maybe even Vorst. You had to look at Devon to notice that he was younger than he acted, that professionalism, which seemed to inform everything he did, could fool you into seeing someone in his mid-thirties when the face was closer to that of a man in his late or even mid-twenties.

He was older than me of course, and older than any man I'd been with. Maybe it was that which made this situation so... *engaging*. It wasn't just that masculinity he seemed to exude, but that he made me feel small and feminine, in a way that a girl trained to fight in the mountains seldom felt and perhaps wasn't supposed to.

Though I was somewhat ashamed of that feeling, I also rather liked it. I didn't like being Devon's captive, but I liked his arms around me, perhaps I even liked being in his control.

Though I would also like to try him being in *my* control.

I shook my head, dispelling a train of thought that was becoming increasingly troubling and which was unwittingly plunging my cheeks into an ever deeper crimson.

"Must you?" Devon pushed my hair away and spat a few stray strands out of his mouth. "Are you alright?"

"What?" I started. "Yes."

"You've gone a funny shade. Getting too much sun. Try lying flat against Siegfried's neck. You'll be less exposed."

Anything that hid my red face from him was good, but lying flat along the horse's mane pushed my hips back towards Devon as he rose and fell with the movement of the horse.

It was awkward, but as crosses to bear went, there were worse ones. When life is hard on you, sometimes all you can do is lie there and enjoy it.

Again, it was the blue skies that seemed to pose the biggest threat as the day wore into afternoon. Ahead of us was a ragged line of hills masquerading as mountains, creating a jagged silhouette against the blue.

"Dragon territory," said Vorst, firmly, making Chico shudder.

Though I tried to mentally dismiss this as alarmist nonsense, it was hard not to see that rocky landscape as a miniature version of the dragons' natural habitat, and so the ideal place for them to stake out while they were away from home.

"We've got to go over and through the mountains," said Buck. "If we go around them, it'll be an extra few days out in the open, possibly with that thing watching us."

The looks on the faces of the mercenaries certainly suggested that no one liked that idea.

"Someone should scout ahead," said Devon, from just behind me, his breath briefly tickling my ear as he spoke.

"You volunteering?" snapped Vorst, nastily.

"Good idea," nodded Devon, with a smile.

"But..." Buck clearly objected to the fact that Devon was taking some of the merchandise (me) into danger.

"Back shortly." But Devon was already riding.

We slowed from a gallop as we began to climb the steep hill, Devon's horse, Siegfried, picking out a path through harsh terrain, where claws of rock tore through the surface soil.

"Sit up and keep an eye out," said Devon. He didn't sound anxious, but then he seldom did.

"What am I looking for?"

"Dragons, I suppose. But let me know if you see anything else interesting."

"Soldiers?" I suggested.

"Do you see any?"

"No."

"Well, let me know if you do."

It was the first time I'd 'tested the water' so to speak in how much he knew. I was sure as sure could be that the others, even Buck, had no idea who Uther and I were or the purpose of their delivery mission. I was less sure about Devon.

Suggesting that there might be soldiers out there looking for us seemed a way to hint at it without revealing anything. Naturally, he gave away nothing.

We climbed higher, weaving a safe path, away from the stretches of loose rock which threatened to send Siegfried skittering back down.

“Think they can still see us?” asked Devon.

I looked back towards the mercenaries far below. “Probably. I can still see them.”

Devon said nothing. What was he planning that he wanted to be out of sight? As we climbed to the ridge, the path took a curve behind a pinnacle of rock, hiding us from below. The landscape gave way to a brief plateau, where a few trees had taken advantage of the shelter from the wind afforded by the cliffs, and where...

... and where someone was standing.

We'd seen barely another living soul since we'd left Casper's Relief, which was often the way in the vastness of the wilderness, so to see someone now came as a shock.

“There's someone there!” I squeaked.

Devon looked. “So, there is. Must live around here. There're a few herders even this far out. I'll have a word with her, see if she's seen any dragons.”

He gripped me around my waist and plonked me down on the ground before dismounting himself.

“You'll be good while I'm gone?”

I hated it when he spoke to me like that, but I nodded.

“Good girl.”

“You're still going to tie me to a tree though, aren't you?”

“Certainly not,” muttered Devon as he looped Siegfried's bridle around a tree branch. “I'm not tying you to a tree like a common horse. I'm tying you to a rock.”

He did so then, smiling at me to see if I enjoyed his joke.

I didn't.

"You'd kill me if you could, wouldn't you?"

"Slowly," I replied.

Devon laughed. "In another life, I think we'd have been friends."

"I don't."

Devon raised his eyebrows. "Lovers then?"

I blushed, which he missed because he'd already turned and was wandering unhurriedly across the plateau in the direction of the figure, who I could now see was a woman.

For whatever reason, that irritated me. The fact that he was meeting a woman.

And as I watched them, it became more and more clear to me that this *was* a meeting. How quickly he'd leapt on the chance to scout ahead—and it had been his suggestion to do so, of course. Was this pre-arranged?

Their body language said they knew each other. A hot flare of stupid jealousy lit in my belly as the woman touched his arm in an unforgivably familiar fashion. Who was she to touch him like that?

Now he was touching her! What was he doing that for? Perhaps she was a prostitute, and he'd gone to all this trouble just for a bit of fun behind the other men's backs?

That didn't seem too likely, especially watching them together. It didn't look like business. They were close. Almost intimate.

Angrily, I looked away. The truth was, I was more angry with myself than anyone else. Why I was feeling this way was the most frustrating of all questions but it didn't change the fact that I was feeling... jealous. Envious. Angry. I turned my head, wanting an outlet for my wayward thoughts and focused on Siegfried's saddle where Devon's knife was still in its sheath.

I blinked.

Devon wasn't the type to make many mistakes, but in his eagerness to meet with this *person*, he'd left his knife behind.

Suddenly, thoughts of jealousy were replaced by thoughts of escape. It wasn't perfect because Uther was still with the others, but a chance like this was very unlikely to come again, and if I was free, then I could set about getting him free, sneaking up by night perhaps. The point was: one of us being free was better than both of us being captive.

Hastily, I drew the knife and sawed through my tether, glancing frequently over to Devon and friend to make sure they were still talking. They seemed deep in conversation and I might have wondered what about had I not had other things on my mind.

"Easy, Siegfried," I whispered. "You know me, don't you? You like me, don't you? Don't you?"

It was so hard to tell with horses.

As unobtrusively as I could, I stepped into the stirrup and swung myself up and into the saddle. Riding was a rare thing that I'd learned from my father, who had passed on to me his love of horses, but mountain riding specifically was a skill I'd perfected under Aunt Leah.

Newly freed, I kicked Siegfried's sides, urging him on, so he was already at a gallop when I heard Devon's yell.

"Hey!"

I didn't look back, but I did grin to myself. All that time on his tether, under his command, his prisoner, well who was laughing now? And he had no way of catching up to me on foot. By the time he got back to the others, I'd be long gone. Then I'd ditch Siegfried and shadow the party through the wilds until I could rescue Uther.

But, for now, it was all about speed and distance, putting as much clear space between me and them as possible. Siegfried took me further up the hill, and we wove a path through the rocky outcrops as quickly as we could. The tougher the path that we gave them to follow, the better. My

heart pounded in my chest with excitement and I felt a breathless exhilaration.

I'd done it! I'd outfoxed them. I'd...

A blur to my right and I was knocked out of Siegfried's saddle, the wind knocked out of me as I hit the ground and found myself on my back and staring up, into Devon's face.

"Not bad. But also not good enough."

He held me with a grip like steel while he dragged Siegfried back, then swung himself into the saddle before pulling me up after him, dumping me unceremoniously across his lap with my ass in the air. Quickly, he secured my hands once more, then gave my vulnerable rear a light swat with his right hand. There was no muscle or malice behind it, but the shock still made me squeak.

"Last warning," said Devon, conversationally, triggering a rush of relief flooding through me. "Try anything like that again and you'll spend a long five minutes in this position and you will not enjoy one moment of it."

I shrank inwardly, and at that moment, I hated him. He could have carried out his threat then and there of course, as he'd said he would, another more sadistic man would have. But that wasn't Devon. It was just business. *I* was just business.

"Can I sit up?" I asked, meekly, as we started back.

"No. Not yet. You have forfeited the right."

And so I lay, glumly, across Siegfried's back, rocking in time with the horse's steps. But although much of my mind was flooded with disappointment, there was an increasingly large part of it that burned with one single question: How in the hell had he caught up to me?

Chapter Seven

The First Shifter

The boundary between Wincham and Latran was marked by the Border Wood, which stretched almost the whole length of the boundary from the mountains to the sea.

That seemed to be our destination, and come daylight it would be in sight. Tomorrow then, Uther and I would be handed over to our enemies.

“How about a tale to while away the evening?” Buck asked.

The campfire was lit, and the mercenaries were all seated about. Uther was next to Buck, swaying slightly from side to side. He seemed healthy enough physically, but his mental state worried me more and more. I, of course, was sitting beside Devon, who had a close grip on my tether, keeping me tight against him. I didn't mind that too much at the times when I was unavoidably close to Vorst—I liked him to be reminded that Devon was my keeper, not him. It was not an ideal situation, but things could too easily go from bad to Vorst.

“A tale?” Vorst scoffed. “Are we children?”

“Make it one with a few wenches,” suggested Chico, playing the big man for the group.

“Nah,” Vassek growled. “I don't want to be reminded of something I can't have right now.”

“Do you know the tale of the first shifter?” Devon's voice cut through the bickering.

“More dragon nonsense,” muttered Vorst.

“Ah, but it's true,” smiled Devon. “Most probably.”

I listened as Devon began, all the while sitting close enough to him to feel his voice reverberating in his chest. I

found myself mesmerized by the sound of his deep alto and by the story he unfolded.

“When Juno the dragon was pregnant, she and her mate Jove were delighted, and made their nest on the lower slopes of the mountain, so their child would grow up with the beautiful view of the lowlands. They decorated the nest with feathers and colored stones, with scraps of sheep’s wool, and with their own cast-off scales that caught the sunlight and made them gleam rainbow colors. (Some say that magpies brought them gold and silver to decorate the nest, but that is another story—and probably just a story.)

‘Every day, Jove flew out across the great plains of the lowlands to hunt—only the best food would do for his mate and the baby she bore inside her. But the further he traveled from their mountain home, the more he trespassed into the realm of the humans. And he could not help noticing that the fattest cattle were those farmed by those humans, penned together in great herds. They were tempting, they were a meal fit for Juno, and there were so many of them; surely the humans would not miss one.

‘I’m not here to judge what Jove did or if it was right or wrong—that is not what this tale is about. Perhaps he stole, but everything on the plains is common property, owned by all. Did the humans ask the land’s permission before they grazed their cattle, their sheep, and their goats upon it?

‘But as I say; I do not judge.

Jove dove down from the blue skies and, with the accuracy of an archer, picked off the finest and plumpest cow of the herd, carrying it up into the sky with him, bearing it back to the mountains, back to the nest, back to Juno, who ate it and thanked her loving mate for so tender a treat.

‘That night they slept, bodies held close, tails wound around each other, little knowing that this would be their last night together in this life.

‘Come the morning, they were woken by angry shouts. A party of humans had found them and was determined to punish them for the ‘theft’.

“If dragons have started to nest this far down the mountain, then we have let them come too close to us. They must be stopped!”

‘Jove urged his mate to fly away with him, but Juno was too far along in her pregnancy, and was no longer able to get into the sky.

‘There was no way that Jove would abandon his mate, and he turned to face the wrath of the humans, seeking to scare them off by roaring, arching his back, flapping his wings, and baring his teeth. With a blast of hot breath, he set a tree on fire, hoping the display would make the humans retreat, and for a moment it did, but they had come prepared.

‘The humans pulled out bows and arrows and began to fire. Jove could have dodged the arrows, for the humans were not the best of shots, but he had to protect his mate and his unborn child, so he put himself between the humans and Juno. He took the arrows aimed at her, while she begged, pleaded, and implored him to save himself.

‘But Jove would not leave, he stayed there to protect his mate until, with the big male dragon now barely able to stand, one final arrow found its way to his heart.

‘As Jove fell, Juno turned her head to the blue skies and howled her anguish, the image of her dead love seared into her mind.

‘In the next instant, fury boiled through her veins and, without thinking, she broke every dragon law. She turned her rage onto the humans and incinerated every last one of them. The image of their burning bodies as they shrieked met with that of Jove’s corpse, the two forever connected in her anguished mind.

‘Some say it was that day that the peace which had existed between dragon and human in the elder days evaporated, and the two species learned to hate each other.

‘Only able to walk, Juno headed for the upper slopes, afraid of what vengeance the humans might take when they learned what she had done. Heavier with every passing day as

her child grew, she dragged herself up the mountain to be with her people when she finally gave birth.

'But to what?

'The trauma through which Juno had suffered had scarred more than her mind. That trauma had flowed through her blood to mix with the blood of her child, so the unborn baby was nourished by those twin images of its dead parent and the burning humans.

'Then came the birth. And there was uproar amongst the dragons of the mountain; disbelief and disgust, for the creature that had been born, was neither dragon nor human, but a hideous conglomeration of both.

'Only Juno could bear to look upon the child, because to her it was the only thing she had left of Jove. And even she had reservations—she had planned to name the baby after its father, but now could not bring herself to do so. Instead, she called him Caine.

'As it proved, in contrast to the condition in which he was born, Caine could change from dragon to human and back again. But that did little to improve his standing amongst the other dragons. He was not one of them, and he never would be.

'Though it broke her heart to let him go, Juno knew that her child could never have a proper life with the other dragon kin, because they knew what he was. Even if he never changed form again, they would always know. He would never be trusted, he would never have friends or a mate, he would always be 'The Shifter' and nothing more. And so, by night, she carried the boy down the mountain where, after a tearful farewell, she left him at the farmstead of a human family.

'From a distance (for dragons have keen eyesight), she watched as the humans found the boy, and assumed him to be a foundling. They took him in, they looked after him, they raised him as their own, and Juno was sad, but content.

'But such secrets can only be kept for so long.

‘Juno—I should perhaps have said earlier—before she left the boy, had told Caine that he was, on no account, ever to reveal his true nature. He must remain in his human form for the rest of his life. Caine was sad about this, because he had grown up with dragons and that was how he thought of himself, and because he longed one day to fly. But he did as his mother instructed, and apart from an occasional tendency to sit for long hours staring wistfully at the mountains, no one would have thought him any different from any other human boy of his age.

‘Now, amongst the family with whom Caine had been placed, there was a daughter, a young girl with long blonde hair, whose name was Elsa. In the way of such things, Caine was taken with her and she with him, and her parents were gratified to see it, for they liked Caine and had no male heir and hoped the two might one day marry and inherit the farm.

‘But as she grew older, Elsa became steadily more and more beautiful, and attracted more and more attention from other young men in the area. It did not matter to Caine, who would have loved her no matter what. And the attentions of these other men did not matter to Elsa, who loved Caine to the exclusion of anyone else. But young men of that age do not take no for an answer.

‘One day when Elsa was out at work on the farm (I do not know what she was doing but let us imagine that she was feeding the cattle) a group of young men from around the region came to watch her at work.

‘She politely smiled at them—because she had been brought up that way—and got on with her work, and maybe did not notice that they had edged closer, until they had gotten very close indeed.

“Is there something you need?” Elsa asked—she still was not scared because hers was a life into which threat had never intruded.

“There’s something we want,” the leader of the young men said. “The time has come for you to choose one of us.”

“One of you?” Elsa frowned. “For what?”

“To love,” another young man explained.

*Elsa smiled (clearly these young men were ill-informed).
“I love Caine.”*

“A girl like you should not be loved by just one man,” the leader spoke again. “That’s unfair.”

“It’s selfish.”

“Caine should learn to share.”

“To share what?” asked Elsa, anxiety only now creeping into her. She took a step back but found that the young men were encircling her.

“To share you,” the leader explained.

“How?” Elsa quavered.

“Let us show you.”

‘And the young men did.

‘Some say they were too rough with her, and that was how Elsa died. Some say she took her own life in horror at what had happened. Or perhaps the young men killed her to keep her quiet. Whatever the case, all versions of the story agree that she was dead when Caine arrived.

‘He saw the body of the girl he loved. He saw the men standing over her. And an anger he had never previously known tore through him.

‘And so Caine shifted.

‘It had been many years since he had done so. Then he had been a boy but now he was a man, and as a dragon, he was big and strong, with broad wings and fiery breath that he did not hesitate to use as he took his revenge.

‘Not that doing so would bring Elsa back.

‘Caine would have liked to stay for the funeral, to say goodbye to Elsa, but when others came on the scene, they drew their own conclusions from the bodies. Of course, it was the dragon that had killed Elsa—that was what dragons did—

and of course these brave young men had died while defending her; they were heroes!

'Driven from another home, Caine flew away. Some say he went back to the mountains to his mother, and that his people now accepted him because his human side had been purged away by hatred. Others say that he went off to die alone.

'I prefer the first version, and I do believe that to be the truer, if only because, since the days of Caine, there have always been dragon shifters. Though they still struggle, for they can never be fully accepted into either world.'

It would be too much to say that there was not a dry eye around the fireplace when Devon finished his tale, but it was notable that as he had told it, not one man, not even Vorst, had interrupted. Indeed, they had all listened in hushed quiet, wide-eyed as children. But, as the story ended, the spell was broken.

"Nonsense," muttered Vorst. "That's not how dragons are. They're just animals."

"What about shifters?" asked Chico.

"I've never seen one."

"How do you know you've never seen one?" asked Devon, softly. "They appear as humans."

Vorst shook his head. "I'd know. You can smell a dragon, whatever shape he takes."

But it seemed to me that Vorst's irritability was to mask the effect the story had had on him, as it had on all of us.

In fact, it seemed to me that telling the story had had an effect even on Devon himself. To anyone looking he would have seemed his normal, withdrawn self, but held against him, as I was, I could feel the tension in his body as he recounted the tale. I could feel his heart speed up at certain points as if the telling had a physical reaction on him.

For myself, the story had been desperately sad, of course. It had also felt strangely believable. But what I most took away was the sound of Devon's voice as he told it, as if he had

whispered it into my ear and every word was just for me alone. Even with all the others present, it had been a curiously intimate experience, and hearing that tragic tale in his voice had deepened that indefinable attraction I felt towards Devon.

But the member of our party most affected by the tale was Uther, who quietly sobbed, and, when Devon had finished, kept on whispering, "I'm sorry."

Chapter Eight

Border Wood

I'd only ever seen Border Wood from a distance, knowing that it represented the limits of my father's realm.

That knowledge had always given the place an air of mystery to me. Beyond it was a world I didn't know, a dangerous and strange one. It was just Latran of course, but the fact that it was forbidden made it seem like something more.

Seeing it now, the wood represented something quite different; the end of the line. I cursed myself inwardly. If only we hadn't stopped at Casper's Relief, if only I'd fought harder against the mercenaries, if only I'd ridden harder when I tried to get away from Devon. If only I'd been able to get through to Devon.

For all that had happened, I remained sure that he wasn't like the others, that he could be made to see that what he was doing was wrong. Maybe I was kidding myself, but I also thought that behind that amiable façade, he masked some genuine affection for me, that made him feel guilty about what he was doing. But he was a professional, and a man has to eat, and so Uther and I had to be delivered.

As we crossed the final open space before the wood, I saw Buck and the other men watching the skies with more nervousness than usual. Once we were beneath the canopy, we would be comparatively safe from dragons, which meant this was when one might attack if it had been following us.

There had been more prints the other morning.

And once I'd woken in the night to find Devon gone. Naturally, he'd tied my feet as I slept to ensure that I wasn't going anywhere so I lay awake until he returned.

"Midnight stroll?"

“Thought I heard something,” Devon muttered as he lay back down beside me.

From what I knew about him thus far, it was unlike him to get jittery. But the possibility of dragons coming as we slept had us all on edge. I wondered how long he’d been gone.

We reached the woods unmolested and the whole party seemed more relaxed once we were out from under the broad blue skies.

“How much further?” asked Vassek.

“Half hour,” replied Buck. “Maybe less.”

Half an hour. That was how much time I had left. Suddenly, being the prisoner of Devon and the mercenaries started to feel like freedom, because I knew what was coming next. My sister Rhea wanted only one thing; for my father to sign a proclamation making her the heir to his throne in Wincham, and given his current state, I didn’t think it would be hard to make him sign.

With that done, the nobles of Wincham would mostly fall in line. There would be a few hold-outs (Lord Jonas for one), but they would end up as rebels and outlaws, and would be hopelessly outnumbered. Rhea and her husband, King Harker, would then command the combined armies of both nations.

Would that be enough to bring the rebels in line? Probably, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t try to fight, starting a guerrilla war that would claim many lives. And what of Sylvia, and her husband, King Titus of Gaunt? Would they just accept Rhea and Harker as rulers and live with this powerful new neighbor looming over them? Unlikely.

With such an army at her command, Rhea wouldn’t stop at Wincham, she’d want Gaunt as well, she’d want the lowland empire my father and his father had dreamt of. And Sylvia herself would not be happy with her sister getting the crown of Wincham which she felt she deserved. She still had friends there and would consider striking first to be a pre-emptive defense. Gaunt was outnumbered, but Sylvia was cunning and ruthless, and so she would have a plan.

The bottom line was that I couldn't read the future, but it was hard to see any chain of events that didn't lead to a bloody war.

And some might say; what of it? It wouldn't be the lowlands first and maybe one big, bloody war would be its last. My own father certainly had no moral high ground when it came to warmongering. But it now seemed so unnecessary. All the nations were joined by ties of marriage and blood. Couldn't we be happy with that?

Truthfully, although all of that did worry me, I was more concerned with what might happen to my father. To Uther. Would Rhea allow him to live? Because as long as Uther lived, he would be the legitimate King of Wincham, and I couldn't imagine her allowing that. He was an old man, perhaps he had no more than a handful of years left to him anyway. But he was my father, and I wouldn't allow him to be murdered in cold blood. Not if I could help it!

Except that I'd already failed to stop it.

We came to a clearing in the wood where there was a little encampment of Latran soldiers. Their captain looked up as we rode in and Buck dismounted.

"We got your message. You have the runaways?"

'*Runaways*'? I wondered what lie had been spun to Buck and his men to hide our true identities.

"Here they are." Buck helped Uther down from the saddle, and he stood, looking around himself half confused, half in wonder at the wood.

"I can hear the birds."

The captain of the guard frowned at him. "What's that about?"

“His mind is gone,” said Buck, shortly. “But our agreement was to deliver him. Where he left his mind, I don’t know, but I’m not sure you’d find it if you go looking.”

The captain seemed to accept this. “And that’s the girl?”

Given the gender make up of the group, I felt that was quite an insulting question.

Devon swung out of Siegfried’s saddle and slid to the ground before reaching up to help me down.

If there was any hesitation or regret in him, then I couldn’t find it in his face. Maybe it had simply been wishful thinking to imagine he harbored any sort of feeling for me? Just the imaginings of a romantic and foolish girl. But, still, I wanted to believe those feelings were there.

As Uther and I were manhandled off by the soldiers, the money was handed over, and the mercenaries celebrated, jumping around excitedly and slapping each other on the back. All except Devon. He took his cut, stowing the money away in Siegfried’s saddle bag, but there was no wild celebration for him. I would have liked to interpret that as regret but, again, his face showed no hint of it. Ever the pro.

I watched as the mercenaries rode away, my eyes always on Devon’s disappearing back. Presumably, I would never see him again, and it irritated me that that thought disheartened me. Why I should care? He was my captor, my jailer. And yet the emotion was there regardless, almost too embarrassed to show itself.

Then, at the last moment, just before the trees swallowed them up, I saw Devon turn in his saddle and look at me. His face was serious, but then it split into that roguish smile I well-remembered from the first time we’d met.

That was the last I saw of him.

“Right,” the captain of the guard surveyed me and then Uther. “Let’s get you birds back to the Queen.”

Uther beamed. “You hear that, Selena? We’re going to meet the Queen.”

I didn't know the width of Border Wood but we were still under its spreading canopy when we bedded down for the night.

Traveling with the soldiers was different from traveling with the mercenaries. They were less chatty, they did as they were told without argument, and they knew the value of their cargo.

I couldn't be sure if all of them knew who we were, but I guessed they did and the captain certainly did. We were enemies of Latran, but we'd be treated with care because the queen wanted us alive and unharmed. This also meant that, a stark contrast to the mercenaries, the soldiers kept their hands to themselves and I didn't feel in any danger of them taking advantage of me. In some ways, they were more like Devon, but had none of his easy swagger—he was casual, they were uptight. They never smiled.

And yet, though it was nice to know that I wouldn't be molested in any way during the night, I feared these men more because I knew the fate towards which they were taking me.

“You'll sleep in here,” the captain pointed to the tent that had been erected for us to spend the night under guard.

It was probably more comfortable than sleeping under the stars next to Devon had been, I had more defense from the cold and the leaf litter of the wood made the ground softer. But the ball of knotted anxiety in the pit of my stomach made me feel very uncomfortable and I tossed and turned a long while before finally falling into a fitful sleep, full of bad dreams about what tomorrow might bring.

When I was shaken awake, it was still dark and for a moment I thought I must still be dreaming. The face looking down at me wasn't that of one of the soldiers, it was Devon. In that instant, when I thought this was still a dream, then a

wicked thrill seared through me, because in my dreams I could let him do whatever he wanted without feeling bad about it.

“We must leave, Selena,” he said hurriedly and in a whisper. “There might be other patrols about.”

“Other patrols?” What about the soldiers who had been escorting us? Didn’t we still have to worry about them?

Devon said nothing more as he cut my bonds and moved onto Uther.

“Can’t we sleep a little longer?” my father asked.

Devon sighed. “I wish we could, but we’ll be safer once we’re back across the border. It’ll be a few hours before they realize you’re not coming and I’d like to put some distance between them and us before then.”

“We won’t be able to move fast,” I pointed out. “Siegfried can’t carry all three of us.”

Devon shook his head. “As luck would have it, there are other horses available.”

He helped my father up then and we followed him out of the little tent.

As the scene outside met my eyes I drew in a sharp breath.

“Best not to dwell on it,” observed Devon. “Just remember that they were taking you to your deaths.”

The camp was carnage. It looked as if a squad of enemy soldiers had attacked in the night and left no one alive. I looked at Devon with a mixture of admiration and fear—a feeling I’d never felt for him before and one that was strangely discouraging.

He shrugged. “If it’s any consolation, I did make sure they were all awake before I fought them. I don’t kill sleeping men. Unless I absolutely have to.”

“You fought all these men by yourself?” I gasped. “And you won?”

“A few lucky strikes perhaps,” he answered on a casual shrug as if this feat were no big deal. “I’ve always been lucky.

Come on, they won't be needing their horses now so you may as well pick the best of the bunch. You know about horses don't you, princess?"

My long-held suspicions were confirmed; he knew who we were, and had probably always known. But that didn't explain why he'd come back and risked his life to save us. A hot, frantic little part of me urgently pointed out that after what Devon had done to rescue us, any attraction I might have unwillingly felt for him could now be much more willing and could even be acted upon without feeling guilty. It also pointed out that there was one very obvious reason why he might have come back to save us.

But that was just wishful thinking by my libido, which had been making its own bad decisions since I'd first laid eyes on Devon.

Uther was already over with the horses, moving from one to another, whispering to them, petting them, seeing which he liked and perhaps which liked him.

"This is yours," he smiled, passing me the reins. "Her name is Autumn."

"Is it?"

"Yes, or so she told me."

He selected a horse for himself too (*Lightning*) and took a last look at the camp, as if noticing the dead men for the first time.

"It looks as if they were ambushed," he observed.

Devon nodded. "Good."

I wondered what he meant by that.

We mounted up and rode off through the Border Wood, as night began to edge its way into morning.

Cautiously, I sidled Autumn up closer to Devon.

"You could have been killed."

"Yes." He didn't bother looking over at me.

“That begs the question: why are you helping us?”

He didn't meet my eyes directly, continuing to look up ahead as he replied, “I've been paid already. The job is over. What I do now is on my own time and by my own choice.”

Which didn't exactly answer the question, but at that moment, riding beside Devon toward freedom, I couldn't say I cared.

Chapter Nine

Family Life

Once we were out of Border Wood, Devon turned Siegfried towards the hills.

“It would be in your best interests if you stick with me for now,” Devon said.

“Why is that?”

He shrugged. “When that squad doesn’t show up, Latran’s going to come looking and they’re not going to like what they find. By this afternoon, I reckon there will already be squads out looking for you. You’ll need a place to hide with people who are trustworthy, and, I might be wrong, but I don’t suppose that you or his Majesty have many friends out in the wilderness.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. Back when I was still a Princess of Wincham, living in Farringcourt, then most of my friends had been ladies of court (although, when you’re a princess, it’s hard to tell if *anyone* is a real friend). There were people I knew farther afield, maybe even a few this far out, but they were all nobility, and when I was disowned by my father, they disowned me too. Now I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could throw them. I had friends in the mountains—truer friends I liked to hope—but the mountains were many days ride away.

“We will stay with you. If we may.”

Devon nodded. “Good. I’ll be glad for the company.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” I said, sincerely. “You didn’t have to help us.”

I expected the shrug and the smile but Devon’s face remained uncharacteristically serious and he looked away from me. “I suppose you inevitably get to know someone a little when you’re tethered to them.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t deserve to be used as a pawn in someone else’s game, but we don’t always get what we deserve.” He breathed out a long sigh. “You say I didn’t have to do this and you’re right I didn’t have to. But here I am.”

As with a lot of things about Devon, I didn’t really know what to make of his little speech, but I was just grateful for his help and continued protection.

“You know somewhere we can hide out?”

The smile returned. “I have a friend high in the hills.”

With everything else that had been going on, I’d completely forgotten about the woman whom Devon had met in the hills on the day I tried to escape, but I recognized her instantly when, late that afternoon, we rode up to a rough little homestead set high on a windswept slope, and she came out to meet us.

Devon jumped from his horse and went to embrace her, setting off the same flares of jealousy I’d felt before. Now that I could see her close up, I could see that she was a very attractive woman. Though I placed her a good ten years older than me, and though the wind and weather had tanned her skin, she had a beauty that went beyond the skin deep.

“This is Selena,” Devon announced, bringing the woman over as Uther and I dismounted. “And Uther.”

“Charmed.” My father gave the woman a courtly bow.

She answered with a curtsy. “Pleased to meet you.”

“This is Martha,” Devon went on, and I found myself stupidly irritated by how well the faintly rustic name suited her. “And... where are they? Ah, here they come. These are Jem, Hob, and little Daisy.”

A trio of children tore out of the house, screaming in excitement, heading right for us and throwing themselves at Devon with such force that they nearly knocked him over, hugging him, begging for his attention, tugging at his clothes and hands, eager to show him something or other.

“Alright, alright, it’s good to see you too.”

“They adore him,” Martha whispered to me, quite unnecessarily I thought.

The first thought in my head was, of course, that were these Devon’s children. There were many inhabitants of the wilderness who saw their children only at brief intervals through the year because they were away with the herds or on trading trips. This could easily be a scene from such a household. But they were calling him ‘Devon’ which made it seem less likely. Though still not impossible. He could be that elusive ‘uncle’ who showed up with presents and stayed in a spare room in which the bed suspiciously never needed making.

I could have stood there all day, making up possible relationships between Devon and Martha, torturing myself with what might be and quietly hating a woman who was very generously opening her home for two people on the run, or I could be a better person.

“Thank you for letting us stay.”

Martha waved this off. “Devon says you are good people who need a place to hide. Well, you won’t find a better place than this. We’re off every beaten track. Stay as long as you need.”

“That’s unbelievably kind of you.”

Martha smiled. “I’ve never been able to say no to Devon.”

I wished she hadn’t said that; I was trying so very hard to like her.

“Would you like something to eat?” Martha offered.

“That would be wonderful. Wouldn’t...”

I turned to look for Uther but he'd wandered off and was now running his hand through the wild flowers that grew around Martha's property. It was amazing how swiftly after our escape from captivity, Uther had picked up again. He was still vague and wandering, still more interested in the natural world than me, but he seemed happy again, and up here he seemed happier still.

“Colm... Keiron... Romain... Siobhan...”

I realized he was giving all the flowers names.

With each passing day at Martha'scroft, it seemed Uther became calmer. I wasn't sure if that meant anything positive towards his eventual recovery—if such a thing was even possible—but it meant more than I could say to see him smiling and at peace. If his mind were to remain broken, then at least it had done so in a good place.

A very good place.

It was not just Uther who felt the calming effect of life up here in the wild hills. My own stupid jealousy meant that I almost resented how pleasant I found our time at Martha's. I liked waking with the sun in the little loft that I shared with Uther. I liked going out to milk the goats before breakfast (I'd insisted on helping out with chores). I liked watching the children having their daily lessons with Martha and their daily games with Devon. I liked washing at the stream and carrying buckets of fresh water back to the house. I liked helping Martha with preparing the food. I liked sitting out in front of the house as the sun sank, watching the stars blink into life with a drink in my hand and good company around me. I liked the pleasant ache in my limbs when I sank into my bed at the end of a long day.

I didn't know where Devon slept, and I hadn't summoned up the courage to ask.

Now that I knew what a good man he was, I'd started to dismantle the wall I'd constructed in my mind to hold back the feelings I'd developed for him. It turned out that there were a lot of them.

But if I was ready to acknowledge my attraction to Devon, who seemed to spend most of his time here with at least one child hanging off him, then I was not ready to act on those feelings. The timing was obviously all wrong; we were on the run, we were in hiding and I didn't know what would happen when the danger was past; would he stay with us or move on?

Then there was Martha; though I saw nothing between them that would say definitively that they were together, they were clearly close. One morning, I'd woken early and looked out into the greying dawn to see them both walking toward the house. Where they'd been together during the night I didn't know and didn't ask.

But beyond those practical factors, there was something more. Devon had saved me and my father from being prisoners of Latran, and likely from death. But he'd also handed us over to them. Looking back, I didn't think that Buck and his motley mercenaries would have caught us without Devon, and if they had, then I did think I would have escaped them.

He'd done it for money. Perhaps as a princess, it was easy to forget that everyone has to earn a living somehow, but for someone as skilled and smart as Devon, I had to believe that there were other ways.

Though I liked him so much that he invaded my dreams by night and left me hot and flushed come the morning, he was still that rogue I'd seen in the tavern in Casper's Relief. Maybe that roguishness was one of the reasons I liked him, but that was not necessarily a good thing. What would happen if he ever had to choose between Uther and me and a fistful of gold?

It was a chilling moment when I realized that, despite all this, I trusted this man completely. I'd so easily forgiven and forgotten him tethering me to his horse, treating me like a

cargo to be traded, and threatening to spank me like a disobedient child. I trusted him because I wanted to trust him, and that was a blinkered reason that I might yet regret. At the same time, though, I couldn't help but remind myself that he had come to my father's and my rescue—he'd pretended to turn us over but then he'd rescued us. And there had to be a reason why.

It was hard to think that anything bad could find us up here. Hell, surrounded by such beauty it was hard to believe that anything bad even existed. And when I saw Devon playing with Martha's children, and my father sitting nearby smiling and laughing, then I couldn't stop myself from dreaming and wishing that we could stay in this moment forever.

“Why did you come back for him?”

It was one of those rare moments when Devon's attention wasn't occupied by the children, who were off with Uther picking flowers—they'd become fond of him too. I'd been watching them from a distance, leaning on a fence and smiling to myself when Devon came up to stand beside me.

“What?”

“From the siege of Farringcourt,” he continued. “He banished you, but you still came back for him when he was in danger.”

It was the first time we'd spoken of such things. Other than occasionally calling me ‘princess’ he hadn't really acknowledged the circumstances of our meeting or who I was.

“He's my father,” I answered, simply.

“You think he'd have done the same for you?”

“I don't know,” I replied, honestly. “But it doesn't matter. I love him, and that means I'd do anything for him.” I turned

to face him then. “I think that’s a lot more understandable than you coming back for us.”

Devon rocked his head from side to side. “Maybe.” He made no effort to explain why he’d done it. “You’re a good daughter.”

“I was a spoiled daughter,” I smiled. “It’s easy to judge my sisters—the gods know that’s what I’m doing—but their upbringing was different to mine. For whatever reason, I was always Uther’s favorite. Life was very easy... then.”

“You think that if you’d been in their shoes, you’d have been a power-hungry, ruthless dragon hunter like they are?”

“Who knows?” Odd that he should specify ‘dragon hunter’.

Devon absorbed this. “An easy life is wonderful until it’s taken away. You’ve lived rough for five years and you haven’t turned into them yet.”

“I had a place to go, people to look after me.” I forced a smile. “Rescuing my father was probably the first tough decision I ever made. This is the first time in my life I’ve lived without a safety net, and if it hadn’t been for you then... well, I’d probably be dead by now.”

“Hmm,” was all Devon said.

“How do you know Martha?” There were probably bigger questions I should have been asking Devon but that was the one to which I most wanted an answer.

“I knew her husband,” Devon replied.

“Her husband?”

He nodded. “He’s dead. Five years now. So, I come by every now and then just to make sure she and the children are doing alright. Though Martha can take care of herself. Like you.”

I scoffed. “You think I can take care of myself?”

“You walked away from that easy life when you thought it was the right thing to do. You came back to save your father

even though he banished you. You looked after him in the wilderness, and even though you got caught, you never stopped fighting. Strong women aren't necessarily the ones who succeed at everything. The strongest thing you can do is to keep going in the face of adversity."

I considered this. "Every time I try to talk about you, you turn the conversation back to me."

"Why do you feel the need to know about me?"

I laughed. "Because you captured me, then you saved me and now my life is in your hands."

"I wouldn't say your life is in my hands."

"I would," I answered on a sigh, shaking my head. "I try to be independent but I always end up falling back on someone."

"Why do you do that?"

"I guess I..." I paused. "Son of a bitch, you did it again."

Devon shrugged and chuckled. "I'm just not a very interesting person. I'm lucky. That's about it. But go on, ask me a direct question."

I leveled a stare at him. "Where do you go at night?"

Perhaps there was a little flicker around the corners of his smile, but his face remained its usual amiable expression.

"I've seen you come back," I went on. "Sometimes alone, sometimes with Martha. Where do you go? What do you do?"

"Hunting," answered Devon. "Sorry. Boring answer. Did you never notice there's always fresh meat and fish here? Where Martha and I come from, people hunt by night."

"And where is that?"

Maybe that was a question he would have struggled to evade, but before he could make up some excuse not to tell me, Martha's oldest son, Jem, came running up.

"Uncle Devon! Soldiers! Mother told me to let you know."

Devon's manner changed on the instant. "Where is Uther?"

"Mother's hiding him." With that, Jem turned on his heels and went running back the way he'd come, no doubt returning to his mother.

Devon turned to me, laying a comforting hand on my shoulder. "You can trust Martha. She knows these hills like no one else, she'll put him someplace safe." He grinned. "Now we need to hide."

Devon led me to the little barn where the animal's winter feed was stored, and up a ladder to the hayloft.

"They're bound to look here."

"We're not hiding here."

Reaching up above him, Devon pried away some planks from the apex of the roof to reveal a tight space between beams and thatch.

"Come on."

I scrambled in and Devon followed me, pulling the boards into place after him. There was barely space for both of us and we took a few moments to adjust ourselves into the least uncomfortable position we could, our bodies crushed together in the darkness.

I felt Devon's mouth close to my ear, and his breath hot on my skin as he whispered. "Keep as still and as quiet as you can."

It seemed to me that my heart was loud enough to alert everyone for miles around, and Devon's closeness probably wasn't helping matters. Because of his loose clothes and casual manner, it was easy to forget that Devon was an impressive figure of a man, and I was now very aware of his hard body pressed to mine.

Awkwardly, I moved against him and had to swallow back a gasp, for fear of making too much noise. For the first time, I'd been presented with hard evidence that the attraction I felt

for Devon was in some way reciprocated. *Very* hard evidence, that was currently poking against my hip.

“Sorry,” Devon mouthed into my ear. “Mind of its own.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, and fortunately the circumstances allowed me a good excuse to say nothing. I adjusted my position slightly to give him the space he needed.

“Thank you.”

The surprise discovery added to the cocktail of emotions bubbling inside me. There was fear and anxiety for myself and for Uther, there was shock and a little nervousness at Devon’s arousal, but there was also sheer excitement and a roiling undercurrent of long-suppressed desire. This wasn’t like me; men were fun but I’d never wanted one the way I now realized I wanted Devon. At that moment, I would have given almost anything for him to throw caution to the wind and just take me, here in this narrow crawlspace. The need for his touch, for his kiss, and for so much more burnt inside me like an out of control fire.

But, obviously now was not the time. At the outside edge of hearing, we caught the sound of voices. The soldiers were conducting their search, probably against Martha’s objections, though she would be putting her childrens’ safety first.

Both Devon and I tensed at the sound of the barn door opening. The voices were louder now as the men searched. Then came footsteps on the creaking ladder up to the loft.

Suddenly, it all seemed more than I could take, I could hear my heart racing in my ears and I began to breathe faster, sucking in air yet there never seemed enough. I knew my breathing was becoming audible but I didn’t seem to have a choice.

Then, I felt Devon’s hands on me. One found my chest, pressing softly, as if he could slow my heart from the outside. The other caressed my cheek, stroking and calming, and at his touch the sudden rush of fear died away.

There was nothing to worry about because Devon was here, Devon would protect me, even if they found us, Devon

wouldn't let anything bad happen to me.

The search ended, and we listened to the soldiers leave.

Some little while after, the boards were pried away, letting in blinding light.

"You two alright?" asked Martha.

"Are they gone?" asked Devon.

"I'd hardly be opening this if they weren't."

"What about Uther?" I asked urgently.

"I hid him out in one of the old folds," replied Martha. "Hob and Daisy stayed with him and I've sent Jem to fetch them all back. Don't worry."

We managed to half-climb half-drop out of the hiding place. One of my legs had gone to sleep and Devon had to hold me up until the feeling came back. I noticed him subtly adjust his clothing when he climbed out, not wanting Martha to see his 'condition'. He'd remained hard throughout our hiding, his solid weapon pressed against me, making me wonder what he was thinking and wonder at the things I was thinking.

"I'm going to go scout the area to make sure they're gone."

Once I was able to walk again, he pulled away from me, as if embarrassed by what had happened.

"Thank you," I said, fervently.

He smiled. "There's really no need to thank me."

With the benefit of hindsight, I later wondered about that.

That night, I lay in bed, unable to sleep. I knew that if I slept, I'd dream of Devon, of his lips on mine, of his hands on my body, freeing me from my clothes and then those lips and hands taking me to previously untouched heights of pleasure, and only when I was exhausted from his touch, feeling as if I could take no more, only then would he take me, not roughly but firmly, like a man, commanding my body and bringing me to yet more and higher peaks of passion. The second time

would be rough, though not unkind, and the third would be soft and slow and endless until we both dissolved into mutual bliss, him for the first time, me for the umpteenth, after which we would collapse to the bed, breathless and spent, muscles aching, bathed in sweat, at which point, against all reason, he would flip me over and start again, until my limp body sang with ecstasy.

It seemed as if staying awake was not actually stopping me from dreaming, and those dreams seemed to be setting an awfully high bar, and perhaps not the most physically realistic one.

Come the morning, I went out early to douse myself in cold spring water, to see if that numbed my rampant imagination.

On my way back, I saw Devon returning from one of his nocturnal excursions. Usually, I only saw him when he was approaching the house and what I saw now took me aback. He was naked.

In fact, he was getting dressed, which made me feel marginally less guilty about watching from the bushes as he covered up that strong, toned body. I noted that he had his share of scars—he'd lived an active life, and not a peaceful one. I also noted that he had no animal carcass with him to indicate he'd been hunting. And why would he have been hunting naked, anyway? Was that another tradition where he came from? Wherever that was.

Perhaps I could ask him about it later, but there was another more urgent question I was determined to ask him before then. After yesterday, the heat between us was obvious and I no longer saw any point in denying it or denying ourselves. It wasn't traditionally the role of the woman, but I planned to make my move, anyway. My libido was damn near forcing me.

But over breakfast, things changed.

"Time to go," Devon announced.

"Go?" I gaped.

“I scouted around again this morning,” (why was he scouting naked?) “and I think your sister’s soldiers have moved on. I assume you still want to go to your aunt’s?”

“Well... yes,” I answered.

“I’ll help you.”

Leaving Martha’s would be a wrench, but the fact that Devon still wanted to come with us made my heart sing. Maybe he had reasons for remaining with us that went beyond being a good person—of course I had to wonder, but then that voice in the back of my head told me to trust him, that he was a good sort.

We gathered our things quickly and said heartfelt goodbyes to Martha and the children.

“We’ll definitely visit,” I smiled.

Martha’s reaction wasn’t what I expected. She looked sharply away, almost guiltily, then back to me with a forced smile. “I hope you can.”

Then she hugged me again, tightly.

By late morning, the three of us were already heading back down the mountain. I felt a little melancholy but also excited about what might happen next. I’d almost forgotten the wretched state of the world we lived in, and was finally focusing on myself and my own happiness. For the first time in a while, it seemed like some sort of happiness might be in reach.

Once we were onto the lower slopes, Devon dismounted.

“Come here, I’ve got something to show you.”

I got off Autumn and walked up to Devon.

“I’m... sorry about this,” he said.

“About what...?”

But before I could finish the sentence, he’d slipped the old tether over my wrists again and pulled it tight.

“At least you get to ride this time.”

I gaped in horror as the bottom seemed to drop out of my stomach. “You’re taking me back to Latran?”

“That would hardly be sensible. But your sister in Gaunt—Queen Sylvia is it?—she’s willing to pay even more for you. And a man has to eat. Now, you remember the rules right? Be a good girl and do as you’re told.”

Perhaps I would’ve fought back if I hadn’t been in a sort of a daze. I simply couldn’t believe it, I couldn’t believe that after everything, he’d betrayed me so easily, and, it seemed, had always intended to do so. *This* was why he’d rescued us. So, he could get paid by both my sisters.

Yet, he freed you before, I thought to myself. Perhaps this is just another instance of him collecting the bounty for you both and then he’ll free you again?

Having secured me on Autumn’s back, Devon secured Uther too, who looked on with a sort of mild interest.

Devon looked back at me. “For what it’s worth, which I acknowledge is probably not much, I *am* sorry.”

“I hate you,” I hissed back, even as that stupid voice in the back of my head still begged me to trust him—still made the case for him that he was a good man, just crippled by circumstances. But that he wouldn’t sell us—he’d protect us.

“That’s fair enough,” nodded Devon, and there was contrition on his face. Once again, it wasn’t that he particularly wanted to do this. It was just business.

Chapter Ten

The River Rapids

There were no words for the fury that boiled inside me as we traveled.

I was angry at Uther for needing to be rescued, I was angry at myself for falling for our captor, but above all, I was furious with that captor for betraying us.

Just as I'd thought Devon had true feelings for me, just as I was about to tell him how those feelings were reciprocated, then he betrayed me completely as if I didn't matter to him at all. Was it all just lies? Had he ever meant any of his kind words to me? But then, there hadn't been much to mean; it had all been in my head, my feelings for him reflecting back and making me hope. And the worst of it was that, even now, I caught myself making excuses for the bastard! Some little part of me still wanted to believe that he was a genuinely good person just caught in bad circumstances and that he'd never allow us to die at my sister's hands.

How weak I was. How stupid.

I'd hoped that my stubborn silence would make him feel guilty, but even as I refused to speak to him or answer his questions, he just shrugged and allowed my rage to roll off him like water off a duck's back. He had no morals, no conscience. There was no way to wound him when there was nothing there to wound.

Back at Martha'scroft, I'd let myself believe that this man might care for me, now I knew that he cared about nothing. Certainly not me.

"You know the rules." Though he was a little more stretched than before, keeping an eye on two of us this time, Devon wasn't about to start trusting me now, and still took precautions when I went to bathe. "Try anything and I'll warm

your seat so you'll be begging me to walk just to keep your ass out of the saddle."

I said nothing. I just glared at him. I hated him.

Devon smiled. "Bear in mind that if I wanted to hear your voice, I could simply put you across my knee and soon it would be echoing off the hilltops. You don't have to smile, you don't have to like me, but you could have worse captors."

"I *trusted* you."

It was hard to say if my words had any effect but he shrugged.

"Point taken."

Then he walked away, still holding one end of my tether.

He might have intimidated the other mercenaries and been a great fighter, but Devon was still human, he had to sleep. That meant that if I could get free, then I could rescue Uther while Devon slept. All I had to do was get free, and that was proving to be more difficult than I hoped.

Devon had chosen this part of the river for me to bathe with good reason. Firstly, the land around presented nothing in the way of cover, so if I were to run, I would have nowhere to hide. Secondly, to either side of this relatively calm section, the river rushed over rocks, building into rapids. It was dangerous, and there was no guaranteed escape this way.

But I'd reached a point where the danger was worth the risk. I wouldn't be his prisoner any longer and I certainly wasn't going to end up in Sylvia's dungeon. Perhaps my decisions were being made more by personal anger than common sense, but I was long past rational thinking.

"Tug the rope twice!" Devon called.

I did so, then reached into my clothing for the sharp flint I'd found the other day. I'd secreted it away for an opportunity like this one. Devon was fast (I still had no idea how he'd caught me when I'd first ridden off on Siegfried), but the river was faster: it could carry me to freedom. Provided it didn't kill

me first. And then, as before, I would have to come back for Uther.

A frisson of sharp excitement passed through me as the tether snapped beneath the flint. It was followed by a sharp contraction of my stomach as I stared at the fast-flowing waters into which I was about to toss myself. Was this really such a good idea?

No. No, of course it wasn't. It was probably the stupidest of all ideas.

But I didn't have any others, and I refused to be prisoner to this man for one more day.

And so I jumped.

For the first minute or so, it seemed to actually go quite well. Against the odds, I found the safe path down through the boulder-strewn weir, buffeted by the waters but snaking between the rocks. The river was as fast as I'd hoped; I'd already put considerable distance between myself and Devon, who might not yet even realize I was gone (there was no way I would hear him coming over the roaring of the waters). But then, the current seemed to get faster still, it picked me up and tossed me. I winced breathlessly as I was dragged over the stony bed, rocks scratching at my limbs. When I opened my mouth to get a big breath of air, water rushed into it and then the river bounced me off a rock, knocking the breath out of me. The rapids flipped me over and back like a cake on a griddle. Now the rocks came faster and harder, knocking my body and my out-flung limbs. I tried to cover my head, knowing that at this speed one bad blow could dash my brains out. Suddenly the river was no longer the route to freedom, but a road of pain, pummeling me and punishing me.

I'd made a mistake. Perhaps it had been my only chance to escape, but that was no reason to throw my life away.

I'd just been so damned angry. I wanted to prove to Devon that I could get away. All I had proven, though, was that I was going to kill myself.

A glancing blow to my head made me dopey, and my head dipped beneath the surface. I breathed in water, too weak to stop myself. I could feel unconsciousness beckoning, a black void looming up to swallow me into it, and right then, I welcomed it as an end to the pain.

Suddenly, I wasn't alone. There was a splash beside me and then strong arms around me, holding up my head so I could choke up the water I'd swallowed and breathe again. Devon put his body between me and the worst of the rocks, fighting against the current, his muscles straining impossibly.

Somehow, he managed to get us both to the rocky shore, and I lay there, unable to move, coughing up water, as I felt over my battered and bruised body to see if any permanent damage had been done.

"Are you alright?" The urgency and anxiety was sharp in his voice as Devon stooped over me. I couldn't respond. "Selena?" He demanded. "Are you okay?"

And that was when it dawned on me: he'd risked his life to save me. Why had he done that? He knew that the lion's share of the bounty my sister was offering was for Uther not for me. So, why had he saved me?

"Selena?"

"I think I'm okay."

I managed to sit up, feeling all over my body for tell-tale broken bones. But, against all the odds, I seemed to have gotten away with only cuts and bruises. That was extraordinarily lucky.

"I'm okay," I repeated.

"You're sure?" His face was filled with what appeared to be concern. Although how it could be concern I didn't know because the bastard had already proven that he didn't give a damn about me.

"I'm sure."

On the instant that he was sure I was okay, Devon's face darkened with an anger I'd never seen in him before. "You

stupid woman! What were you thinking? You could have been killed!”

“I...”

I wasn't sure what explanation I could have offered that would have made a difference, but before I could say any more, Devon grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me to him as he seated himself on a boulder, dragging me down over his lap with my ass in the air.

“No!” I yelped with whatever energy I still had remaining, which wasn't much.

But Devon was beyond angry, and all that anger was about to be concentrated on my rear end.

When we were younger, my sisters had been beaten by various nannies and tutors for their disobedience, but my father had forbidden anyone from ever laying a hand on me. Perhaps I would've been better prepared...

The first smack came as more of a shock than anything else, but it was swiftly overwhelmed by the second, the third, the fourth and so on. Strangely, after each thump, Devon then rubbed my offended flesh with the palm of his hand, which somehow deadened the pain.

“I don't like this just as much as you don't,” he said, voice low.

“I doubt that very much.” I spat the words back at him.

The hell with this!

My ordeal in the river had left me exhausted, but that also meant that Devon was just taking my capitulation for granted. And I wasn't about to lay here and let him go to town on me. So, I grabbed his ankle and tugged it upwards, sending him over backwards, twisting out of his grip as he went, away from that spanking hand.

Devon leapt to his feet, looking even angrier.

“How dare you...?”

“How dare I?!”

I walked right up to him and pulling my arm back, punched him right in his stupid cheek.

Again, I don't think he was expecting it, but even so, it was one of the most perfect punches I'd ever landed. Aunt Leah and all my tutors in the mountains would have been proud of just what a fine shot it was.

Devon went down like a sack of potatoes and I went after him, diving on top of him, pinning him and raining blows down on him. None of them had the sort of perfection as that first punch, but there was a whole lot of pent up rage to get out of my system and this felt beyond wonderful.

Grabbing my wrists, Devon got me back under his control and, in doing so, flipped me over. I tried to kick and knee him but he was wise to that.

“Are you ready to behave yourself?”

“No.”

“You can't win against me, Selena.”

“I don't care.” Suddenly I realized there were tears in my eyes. “You betrayed us! You bastard! We trusted you and you betrayed us! Do what you want to me. Nothing you do will ever be as bad as what you've already done!”

The cathartic thrill of pouring out the words I'd been dying to say seemed to give me new strength, and I managed to land a kick into his side. Devon's grip loosened, and I squirmed out from under him, lashing out as I went and managing to get another decent hit in.

As I scrambled away across the shore, he grabbed my foot and dragged me back. I kicked free. With a spring like a cat, he pounced on me, and I was reminded of watching him hunt fish—this time, though, I was his prey. We tussled on the ground until we seemed to have reached an impasse, our bodies twisted together.

“You're a very good fighter,” said Devon.

“You're a terrible person.”

“Probably.”

Fighting in close quarters like this, I was able to get in a few good hits but Devon's strength would always win out. That, and my knuckles were burning and I could only hope I hadn't broken any fingers. Devon got control of me again, though I prided myself that I didn't make it easy for him and managed to knee him in the center of his masculinity, which felt good. I knew, though, that when he returned me across his knee, he'd be even angrier, and I cringed at the thought.

He held me fast and looked me in the eye, even as I tried to avoid his gaze. "You could have died."

"It's Uther they want—I'm worth nothing to anyone."

Devon's face looked suddenly distraught. "You'd still be dead."

"Save me the insult of pretending to care!" I snapped.

There was a strange moment of indecision in his face, as if he couldn't decide what he thought, or what he wanted me to think he thought.

"Back to the camp," he said, finally.

There was no further punishment. Indeed, later that evening, he came and sat next to me as the fire crackled.

"I'm sorry for... what I did. That was wrong. I was angry. At myself as much as you."

I said nothing, so Devon went on.

"Did you... Were you trying to escape or..."

It was then that I realized he wondered if I'd been trying to purposely kill myself.

"Escape," I replied.

He looked relieved. "Don't do that again, Selena. You're worth much more."

I turned to him with hatred in my eyes. "And how much am I worth exactly? How much is my sister paying you?"

For a moment, it seemed as if the weight of the world rested on Devon's shoulders. "From time to time we all have

to do things we're not proud of.”

“If you're not proud of it, then why are you doing it?” There was more emotion in my voice than I would have liked. I hated him, but I wasn't done with a bunch of other feelings yet. Hopefully, I would be soon—and I had to admit that the hatred was starting to win out.

He looked at me, his face etched in flickering shadows by the firelight. “Because I have to.”

Chapter Eleven

The Arrow

In the already muddled mess of my feelings towards Devon, it was hard to say if those words made any difference to me, but they certainly fed into my confusion about my mercurial captor.

Something about the way he spoke made me sure that this wasn't just about the money, as I had always thought. He always said it was about the money, and I think he found it convenient to have me believe as much. But I was increasingly sure that there was more going on—more to which I wasn't privy. There had always been something unknowable about Devon, a sense of secrets beneath the surface.

I was more compliant after our little conversation by the fireside. Maybe I was kidding myself once again, but I'd always had a sense that he didn't want to be doing what he was, and that now seemed borne out by his words. It was hard to imagine Devon doing something he didn't want to though. So, I began to ask myself; would he go through with it?

More and more, I thought of the Devon whom I'd gotten to know in the hills at Martha's croft as being the *real* Devon, while the kidnapper I saw on an everyday basis was someone he'd been forced into playing by as yet unspecified necessity. Despite everything, I believed in the good man under the mask.

Which, perhaps, was just my way of surviving and staving off the thoughts of what awaited us at the end of our journey.

Truthfully, I didn't know who the real Devon was.

I just had to hope I was right.

Since he was now alone, looking after Uther and me, Devon had to be careful in ensuring I didn't flee as he slept. I knew he still sometimes left the camp by night, so there was theoretically an opportunity for me there. But Devon was careful, and tying me up to make me ready for bed had become something of a nightly ritual. He'd secure me to something sturdy and then tie my hands and feet, so I was going nowhere and unable to untie anything. And even then, Devon usually slept up against me, so he would feel if I moved in the night.

I'd gotten used to sleeping in such a way.

Rolling over in my sleep one night, though, I found him gone. That wasn't unusual, and I assumed he was off on one of his 'hunting' trips, no doubt confident that I was securely bound, and that I wouldn't be able to get far with Uther in tow.

Even so, as a matter of course, I tried to bite through my bonds. As long as Devon was gone, I had to try—he'd have expected no less from me.

As I was picking futilely away at the rope with my teeth, I heard a noise from out in the darkness. You can't underestimate the darkness of the wilderness on a cloudy night, when not even the stars and the moon are there to alleviate it. The campfire still glowed red, providing a limited circle of low light, but beyond that, there was simply blackness, inky and total.

Any noises that came out of that darkness were made eerie by the fact that you couldn't know what was making them, but this noise seemed especially so. It was a leathery sound, accompanied by a rushing of air that did not at all sound like wind. It was almost like the heavy breathing of some gigantic animal and was terminated in a loud thump, and the noise of something big hitting the grass and scrub, crushing it.

There were then a few moments of quiet before a keening whine slid out of the night, like a lost soul. It could have been the wind whistling, or an injured wild dog. It was a melancholy sound, that reminded me of something, though it took me a few seconds to work out what. It had the same tone

as the ballad I'd heard Devon sing when I was bathing, sung in that guttural and unearthly language.

"Devon...?" I chanced.

The keening sound was replaced by more human sounds; gasps and grunts.

"Devon?"

Out of the blackness, I saw a figure emerge, barely revealed by the glow of the fire's embers. It walked unsteadily, wending from side to side, stumbling in a way quite unlike Devon's confident, casual swagger.

But as the figure came closer, I saw that it *was* Devon. He was completely naked and...

"Devon!" I cried out as my captor collapsed not far from where I was sleeping.

The red light of the old fire revealed something more to my astonished gaze as the light picked out the feathered fletching of an arrow sticking out of Devon's side. He'd been shot.

As I watched, Devon dragged himself up to all fours, managing to suppress the groan of pain that reverberated within his chest. He shuffled closer to the fire, then went down again as the pain proved too much for him to move any further.

"Devon."

The ropes that bound me allowed some limited movement, and I rolled closer, tugging at the bonds as never before, until they cut into my flesh. I *had* to help him!

"Where's your knife?"

Devon gasped, grating his teeth. "Siegfried's saddle."

There was no way I could get to Siegfried. The knife might as well have been on the moon. I tugged again desperately at my hands. "This is what you get for tying me up."

A cough of agony. "Don't make me laugh."

“I can’t help you if I can’t use my hands.” I’d never felt so utterly desperate.

“Bite.”

“You think I haven’t tried? What do you think I do when you go away for the night?”

He shook his head. “I bite.”

“What, are your teeth better than everyone else’s as well?”

“Can we not stop to discuss this?” Every word was an effort and I could hear the pain in them.

Stretching to the end of my tether, I managed to get my hands in front of Devon’s mouth.

“There you go, but I’m telling you...”

The ropes came away and Devon spat the stray fibers from his mouth.

“You must have teeth like a beaver,” I said, frowning because I wasn’t sure how it was possible that he’d just cut through my bindings when I couldn’t. And, damn it all, but I’d tried!

He made no answer, the effort of biting through my bonds had already been almost too much for him. Quickly, I untied the rest of the ropes, then knelt to blow on the embers of the fire.

“Yes...” nodded Devon. He knew what had to be done. It wouldn’t be pretty, it wouldn’t be pleasant, but it might save his life.

Battlefield medicine was another thing I’d learned in the mountains and had occasionally had cause to use, because the life that Aunt Leah’s women lived on the outskirts of the law was not a safe one.

Now that I was untied, I was able to get across to where Siegfried was tied up to fetch Devon’s knife. The horse was awake and stirred anxiously from foot to foot, as if he’d picked up on his master’s distress.

Returning to Devon, I placed the knife on the growing fire, which I fed with dry grass to build the flames and heat the blade, first to sterilize it, but a wound like this would also need cauterizing, a process that made me shudder. All the while, I kept asking myself if I should even bother to help him, given how he'd backstabbed Uther and me. Furthermore, if Devon died, my father and I would be free.

But at the thought of Devon dying, I knew I couldn't just leave him to it. Not when there was a chance I could help him survive. Damn my big heart.

On the far side of the fire, near to where Uther still slept soundly, smiling in his dreamy sleep, were two flasks of fresh water, which I was grateful that Devon had sent me to refill the night before. The stream water was straight from a spring, clean and clear, and I used it to wash my hands and then splashed it on Devon's side, washing the fresh blood away, revealing where the arrow's shaft was buried.

"It's going to have to come out," I said grimly.

"Yes."

"If there's damage on the inside... If it's hit any of your organs..."

"Yes."

I didn't need to finish the sentence. He knew how serious this was. A wound like this could be a death sentence, and all too often was. The best I could do was to remove the arrow, clean and seal the wound and then make him as comfortable as possible. Everything else was down to luck and nature. Internal wounds healed just like external ones, but if he was bleeding on the inside, then there was little I could do about it. Devon was young and strong, that would count in his favor. And, of course, he was very lucky, or so he always claimed.

He could pull through. He had everything on his side. Except for the arrow that was stuck in it.

"Do you still have the bag you took from me when you first captured me? Back in Casper's Relief."

“Saddle bag.” His voice was more strained every time he spoke.

I hurried back to Siegfried and rooted in amongst Devon’s few belongings was the cloth bag that had been taken along with all my property when the mercenaries had kidnapped me, all those days ago. Thank the gods they hadn’t thrown it away, and that it was Devon who’d taken it, not one of the others. I had a hunch that Vorst or Bronson wouldn’t have kept hold of a bag of herbs and powders, but Devon was a little more thoughtful. All Aunt Leah’s warriors carried such bags with them, the contents especially important for battle. The oils and herbs could only do so much, but they helped stem the flow of blood, they disinfected, they aided sleep, and they could take away some portion of the pain.

Devon grimaced as I applied dried leaves around the cut, numbing the area a little before I attempted to pull the arrow out.

“Sorry.” Reaching back into the bag, I took out a small packet of powder, wrapped in greased paper. I took a portion of it and spread it along my finger.

“Sniff this. It will help.”

The powder didn’t actually take away the pain, but it took you someplace else. Aunt Leah, who was an amateur doctor as much as a warrior and philosopher, had explained to me that pain was not real, it was not a ‘thing’, it only existed in the mind, so if you could give the brain something else to do, then you felt it less. The powder, which the other girls called ‘dream dust’, did nothing to numb the senses, but it gave you something else to think about.

“Ohhh...” Devon’s eyes dilated as the powder took swift effect. He looked at me, his focus uncertain. “Why am I lying down? Let’s go for a run—no, let’s fly.”

Of course, that was the problem with dream dust: it stopped you from thinking you were hurting and encouraged you to do other things which ended up making your injuries worse.

“Let’s just lie still,” I suggested.

“Okay.” He looked at me again. “By the gods, you are beautiful. Why have I never said as much to you before? Or have I?”

“No, you haven’t.”

He nodded. “I’ve always thought it, Selena, but I never said it.” He looked down at himself then. “Why am I naked?”

“I wish I knew.”

It was just rambling—the words of a man out of his mind. It didn’t mean anything. He was looking at me, but he could have been seeing a two-headed unicorn with stars for eyes and fabulous breasts for all I knew. You couldn’t rely on what people said on dream dust.

Anyway, I needed to work fast now, the effects of the dream dust didn’t last long, and giving people a second hit could lead those happy dreams to become ugly and terrifying—I’d seen girls shrieking in horror, their bodies convulsing. You could even suffer a heart attack as the dust drove you too far.

I gripped the arrow’s shaft where it had entered Devon’s body and heard the slight gasp that told me the pain was still there behind the delusions.

“There’s nothing I can do to stop this from hurting.”

“If there’s nothing you can do, there’s nothing you can do,” drawled Devon. “If it’s going to hurt, it’s going to hurt. And it’ll hurt. But it hurts now—doesn’t it? I can’t tell—so it may as well hurt then as well. Hey... that rhymes.”

“It’s going to hurt worse.” Probing around the entrance, I tried to ascertain how the arrow head was oriented so I could take it out through the existing wound rather than tearing his flesh further.

But there was only so much I could spare.

“Bite down on this.” I placed a stick between his teeth and, for a second, it seemed that reality found its way through the dream dust, and Devon gave me a curt nod; *do it*.

I wouldn't quickly forget the sound that issued from Devon's throat as I pulled the arrow out of him. He didn't scream, but the sound of the scream caught in his throat was almost as bad. The tendons in his neck stood out, his face a rictus of agony, eyes screwed up, jaw clamped so tight on the stick that I thought he might bite through it.

Arrows are designed to be hard to remove, to go as deep as they can on the way in, and do as much damage as they can on the way out. It wasn't as easy or as quick as I would have liked, and I had to steel myself and block out the noises Devon made as the pain burst through the dream dust fantasy.

Finally, the head of the arrow came out, cruelly serrated, not the sort of arrow you used on a human at all. Perhaps someone had mistaken him for a wild dog poaching sheep.

Devon collapsed back down to the ground, his body heaving, bathed in sweat so he glowed in the firelight. The knife's blade in the fire was also glowing.

No time to waste, no time to let him relax and get his senses back. The dream dust's effect was already receding, so better to get the rest of it over with. I wrapped my hand in my blouse to hold the hot handle of the glowing blade as I drew it from the flames.

"I'm so sorry." I couldn't even be sure he heard me.

This time, he did scream, an animal howl, echoing into the night. Try as I might, I couldn't block out the sound, nor the smell of burned flesh in the air. Such terrible pain, and it all might be for nothing—there were no guarantees that any of this would be enough to save him.

I'd expected him to pass out from the pain, but somehow Devon remained conscious. He seemed to be forcing himself to do so, and I wondered what it was inside him that drove him so relentlessly to do the things he did. As ever, Devon seemed to me a mass of contradictions; so casual about everything, and yet at times so focused and unwilling to let anything go. He had a reason, I was sure of that. And it wasn't money. Something made Devon do the things he did, whether that was

kidnapping Uther and me or resisting unconsciousness now, something wouldn't let him off.

Though he stayed awake, he was clearly exhausted. His body had gone limp after being held in tension for so long, and the sweat now ran down his sides in rivulets, across the muscular contours of his body.

Stupidly, I suddenly felt embarrassed by his nudity, which, now that the crisis was over, suddenly seemed so much more obvious. I felt as if I kept staring at... it. And the more I tried to stop myself staring, the more I seemed to end up looking, until I took my blanket and put it across him.

"Thank you." They were the first words that bubbled out of Devon's labored breathing since I'd cauterized his wound.

"I'll dress the wound."

I applied the medicated leaves again, and then ripped up a sheet to make bandages which I wound carefully around his torso. He lay still while I did so, recovering some composure and marshaling the pain he still felt, but his eyes never left me, following my every move.

"You didn't have to do this," he breathed.

"No."

I held the water flask to his lips, and he swallowed down a couple of gulps. For a few minutes I let him rest, until his breathing was back to something approaching normal.

"What happened to you?"

"I got shot," replied Devon, unhelpfully. "With an arrow."

"Why? By whom?"

"I didn't stop to ask," Devon said, still evasive. "A gamekeeper perhaps. I must have strayed onto someone's land and they thought I was poaching. Which I suppose I was."

"There are no land owners in the wilderness."

"Farmers then. They might not own the land, but they think of it as their own and they certainly defend it from hunters."

Everything he said was right, and yet I didn't believe a word of it. "You did well to get back here," I pointed out. "You must have gone some distance or the 'farmer' would have followed."

"I used all my strength to get back," Devon nodded. "I don't know what I thought would happen when I did."

"Maybe you guessed I'd know what to do," I suggested.

"I'm not surprised you know how to tend a wound," Devon agreed. "But I had no right to expect you to tend mine."

"No, you didn't."

Tentatively, wincing as he did so, he sat up.

"Careful," I urged.

"It doesn't feel too bad now."

"That's just because it hurt so much before that normal pain feels like relief. Plus, the herbs are numbing some of it. It's fooling you. But you're still hurt."

"Maybe," Devon shrugged. "But I've always healed quickly. Plus, I am, as you know, very lucky."

"*Very* lucky," I agreed.

There was a moment of silence between us, that seemed all the deeper in the blackness of night.

"You could have run away." Devon finally said what we had both been thinking. "Even with Uther slowing you down, I don't think I could have caught you."

"You couldn't have," I corrected.

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I put my mind to it."

"You still couldn't have."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But again; you didn't run away."

"I still can." That was the other as yet unsaid thing; I was still his prisoner in some regard and yet if I chose to leave now, there was probably not a lot he could do to stop me, although he did seem better already than I would have

expected. The arrow must have missed anything vital within. Lucky, lucky, lucky.

His eyes on me felt hot, as if his gaze went beneath my skin. Again, I sensed from him that inner drive that pushed him on so relentlessly.

“Hands.”

When he had come into the camp, obviously injured and utterly helpless, I hadn't seriously thought about running. The idea had crossed my mind, yes, but once I saw the trouble he was in; I had to help. Now, just as automatically, I presented my hands for him, without even thinking. I heard the slight catch in his breath as his wound troubled him when he reached out to me, picking up the discarded tether. I said nothing as he bound my hands then my feet, slowly, which was all he could manage now. He avoided my gaze as he worked, though I kept looking straight at him, daring him to meet my eyes.

“Sorry,” he muttered, as he finished the job. “I have to sleep.”

And he didn't trust me not to run while he slept.

That was fair enough. It made sense. What didn't make sense was why I hadn't taken advantage of his weakness. I could have. If I had, I would be free now, riding away for the mountains to safety, with Uther beside me.

Instead, I'd chosen to remain his prisoner. Why in the hell had I made that choice?

Because it was no longer enough for me to get away from him. That was no longer what I wanted. I wanted him to set me free. I wanted it to be *his* decision. And in my heart, some stubborn part of me remained sure it was a decision he *would* make.

Chapter Twelve

The Inn

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that Devon woke early the following morning.

But that sort of thing had ceased to surprise me about Devon. If he'd slept late, then Uther would have woken and could have untied me—Uther wasn't bound up like I was, because he didn't represent a flight risk. So, Devon woke early to keep an eye on me; it was that simple. It needed to be done and so he did it, no matter the pain in his body, no matter the exhaustion, no matter the need for time to heal.

But even he had to make some concessions.

“You will have to make breakfast.”

He untied my hands and feet then tethered my ankle so he had me on a long leash while I went about the chores that he usually did, cooking and washing. He sat up against a boulder as I did the work, eyelids heavy but never closing, sitting still to let his body heal itself. He ate voraciously at breakfast, and I got the impression that he was forcing himself to eat even more, on the basis that his healing needed fuel, and the more it got, the faster that healing would go.

“I should change the dressing,” I said.

“Yes.”

Again, I probably should have been more surprised by how quickly he seemed to be healing when it had only been a matter of hours since I'd removed the arrow. But it was Devon so, of course, he healed fast.

“We're going to stop here for today,” Devon decided. “We'll move on tomorrow.”

“You need more time to heal.”

He shook his head. “We’re not safe when we sit still. Queen Rhea’s soldiers will struggle to find us out here, but the longer we stay put, the better their chances. And they’re not the only dangers in the wilderness. I’ll struggle to defend us from bandits or the like in my present condition.”

“You need a proper night in a proper bed,” I argued.

“Well, unless you plan to build me a proper bed, I don’t see that happening. Not today anyway.”

And so we spent a day of rest in the wilderness. I spent most of it chatting to Uther, trying as tentatively and patiently as I could to jog his memories of times past. He still recalled my mother, Cara, but only in the vaguest way as someone he’d known and loved. Neither I nor my sisters seemed to feature in his memories at all, and perhaps that was understandable.

Devon spent the day eating or in repose. But his eyes never closed, even when he looked asleep, there was always a thin slit between his eyelids, watching me, never giving me a chance to escape.

The following day I was again amazed by the rate at which Devon was healing. After breakfast, we moved on again, going slowly and resting often as riding aggravated Devon’s wound. As the afternoon wore on, we came across a small village; barely more than a street, a waystation for herders far from home where they could get a meal, a bed, and pick up supplies. Most prominent in the town was a large inn called ‘The Herder’s Rest’.

“I know that place,” observed Devon. “The landlord and his wife are good people. Mostly. He tried to overcharge me I remember, but he backed down when I mentioned it.”

“*Mostly* good people.”

“No one’s perfect,” Devon shrugged.

“Very true,” I said, with feeling.

Devon grinned his roguish smile, and I couldn’t help smiling back which was absurd, given my situation. I really was deplorably weak where this man was concerned, but I remained convinced that, eventually, he would do the right

thing before we reached Gaunt. He would *not* hand us over; he didn't want to, and we'd been through too much together.

"A night in a real bed is exactly what I said you needed," I pointed out.

"That's the sort of place Latran's soldiers will be checking," Devon shook his head.

"Good food too," I went on. "It'll help you heal."

"I'm healing fine."

"You're healing incredibly fine, actually, but think how much faster you'll continue to heal if you stay in a bed. One night."

He was tempted, I could tell.

"You said they were good people," I continued. "Slip them a few extra coins and they'll warn us of any soldiers. Won't they?"

Devon rocked his hand from side to side. "I'd say it depends if the soldiers are offering bribes as well. But Latran's soldiers aren't paid much so perhaps we could be alright."

I smiled. "You clearly want to stay. It'll do you good."

"I guess it will," Devon relented. "But don't think this is an opportunity."

"Haven't I earned your trust yet?" I hadn't asked a direct question like that before, and I was slightly surprised by the seriousness of Devon's answer, as he hung his head.

"You think you can make a decent man of me. That if you tow the line and treat me better than I've any right to expect, that I'll do the right thing. You're on a fool's errand, Selena. I told you; there are things I *have* to do, even if I don't want to do them."

“Marcus?” The landlady, Petra, was a large woman in her middle forties. “I kicked him out over a year ago. He had one hand in the till and the other up the scullery maid’s skirts.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Devon.

“Don’t be,” laughed Petra. “I clonked him over the head with a saucepan, and dragged him out into the mud, then let everyone know that he’d been shortchanging them for years. Herders don’t take kindly to being cheated—it’s a lean enough life. They gave him a hiding and sent him packing. That’s when I married Thomas.” Then she turned around and bellowed, “Thomas! Come in here and say hello.”

The kitchen door swung open and a young man hurried in, whacking his head on the frame as he did so, though he didn’t seem to notice it.

“This is Devon,” Petra introduced. “And his friends. Say hello, Thomas.”

“Hello!” Thomas exclaimed. He was well over six foot and built like an ox, muscles threatening to tear his shirt open. He had a handsome face, thick black hair, and an expression that was so open, it was practically letting in a draught.

“Alright, back to it,” Petra instructed. “Customers waiting.”

“Right!” Thomas exclaimed and went back into the kitchen, whacking his head again.

“Does he always hit his head like that?” asked Devon.

“Yes,” nodded Petra. “But, don’t worry yourself. There’s nothing in there to damage. Not a brain in that man’s head. He’s the ideal man Thomas; too dumb to pilfer the takings, but smart enough to keep hold of a good woman when he’s got one.”

“Sounds like life is good,” judged Devon.

“Life’s what you make it,” smiled Petra. “I decided it should be good.”

I wondered how true that was, how many of the problems we face are of our own making.

“And you?” the landlady asked. “Same as ever?”

“As you see,” Devon nodded.

I had noted that, when we walked in, Devon suddenly straightened up and regained the swagger in his gait that had been missing since his injury. He was determined to show no weakness. Whether there were enemies here or not, he wouldn't let anyone know that he was vulnerable.

“How many rooms?” Petra asked.

“Two,” said Devon. “It'll do Uther good to have a room to himself.” He could trust Uther, at least partly because my father had rather taken to him since our time at Martha's. Uther didn't understand that this man had taken us prisoner or that he was going to sell us to our enemies. Devon's charm worked well on a man who'd become somewhat detached from reality. But I could hardly brag; I knew what he was doing and that charm had worked on me too.

“Three rooms might be more comfortable,” I put in.

“Two,” said Devon, firmly.

“You'll have more fun in two,” Petra recommended.

I didn't argue. It wasn't as if I was going to get my way—if he wouldn't even leave me untied after I saved his life, then there was no way Devon would let me have a room to myself for the night.

The inn was charming and warm and well run. The rooms were cozy and even though I was forced to share with Devon, I was already looking forward to a night in a real bed, with a soft mattress at my back instead of the hard earth.

Downstairs Petra created a convivial atmosphere, chatting and laughing with regulars, singing songs with them and sharing gossip, while her young husband raced this way and that, taking orders which he wrote down slowly with his brow deeply furrowed, then scurried to the kitchen to cook, never failing to whack his head on the way through.

To be frank, I hadn't expected much from the food, but Thomas turned out to be an excellent chef.

“There’s only two things he’s good at,” laughed Petra. “Cooking is one of them.”

“What’s the other?” I asked.

Petra looked at me a moment then patted my cheek. “You’re so very young, aren’t you?”

I blushed and Devon tried to hide his laughter.

The fire was lit in our room when we entered later, and, standing in front of it, was a gleaming copper bath, freshly filled with steaming water.

“You said you needed hot water,” Petra said, as she showed us in. “I thought we’d go you one better.”

“Much appreciated,” nodded Devon.

“Just the one,” Petra grinned. “But I’m sure you two can share.”

When the landlady was gone and the door closed, I said, “I told her we needed hot water so I could clean and replace your dressings.”

Devon shrugged. “Well, this ought to do it.”

His body had slumped as soon as the door closed, and I realized that putting on an act all evening had put a strain on him. A relaxing hot tub was exactly what he needed.

“I could wait in Uther’s room,” I suggested.

“I need you to help with the bandages.”

Of course, the real reason was that he didn’t trust me.

I turned my back as Devon undressed but still felt my cheeks flushing hotly at every sound that came from behind me. Finally, I heard a pained gasp. A pause. Then another.

“Selena,” and there was some embarrassment in his voice. “I can’t get into the tub.”

I wished I wasn't blushing so obviously as I turned around and went to help him.

"What are doing?"

"I'm helping you."

"With your head, I mean."

"I'm trying not to look."

He chuckled. "Very polite, I'm sure, but you're going to tip me into the fire if you're not careful. Please look at what you're doing and I apologize if it offends you."

It didn't offend me. What bothered me was that my eyes were treacherous and kept looking where I didn't want them to, which then kickstarted my imagination of what it might feel like to get into that bath with him, to feel his touch on my naked body as I touched his. To let my finger trace patterns across his wet skin as he drew me to him, seating me in his lap until...

"Selena?"

"Yes? What?"

"Little help?"

I lowered him into the bath. Devon sighed with relief.

"Thank you. You may go back to standing and facing the wall."

I sighed. "How are you going to wash yourself?"

"I'll manage."

"No, you won't." I reached for the soap and the cloth. "Let me."

The next half hour seemed to pass in slow motion, and every moment of it formed an indelible memory in my mind. The smell of the soap was sharp in my nostrils as I applied it to the cloth and then started to suds Devon's broad chest. I could feel his heart beneath my hand, and felt it speed up slightly at my touch. His breathing too increased, my soapy hand rising and falling with the swell of his sculpted chest.

“You have a lot of scars.” My voice was low and thick, as if I was struggling to speak.

“Yes.” He seemed to have the same problem.

“What is...” My fingers found a long dented valley in his skin where one particularly noticeable scar ran and I traced its length, my heart fluttering in my chest as I did so.

“A knife fight,” Devon explained.

It didn’t look like a knife wound to me though, more like an animal claw, but that wasn’t the first thing on my mind at that moment.

I didn’t think I was deliberately taking my time—no, I was going slowly because I was working around a recent wound, and because it felt like if I went any faster, my pounding heart might break my ribs from the inside.

“Tell me if I’m hurting you,” I said, making conversation as much as anything, trying to keep things ‘normal’.

“You’re not hurting me.”

“Your heart’s beating fast.”

Devon swallowed. “That is an unrelated issue. Well... not completely unrelated but... You’re not hurting me.”

“Oh. Oh!” Glancing down into the increasingly soapy water I glimpsed what he meant. Devon was an impressive man and getting more impressive by the moment. No wonder the water seemed to be staying hot.

“Should I stop?”

“Maybe if you moved onto the dressings,” suggested Devon.

“Right.”

We seemed unnaturally close. I mean... it was impossible to wash someone without being close to them, but we somehow felt closer than we physically were. As if the walls of the room had been closing in around us so the world was limited to him and me and the bath tub.

The hot water made the soaked bandages easier to remove and I peeled them gently from Devon's body.

"You really do heal fast," I murmured, examining the spot where the cauterized skin was closing and even starting to get its color back.

"Lucky," said Devon.

"Hold still."

"I'm trying."

I cleaned the healing wound, dabbing gently against his toned torso. The only sound was the dripping water and Devon's breathing, which just gave the whole thing a still more erotic charge. I bit my lip, trying to focus on the job in hand and not on the man I was doing the job on.

"I think that'll do," I breathed.

"Good." He sounded genuinely relieved.

"If you get out and dry yourself then I'll put the new bandage on. Though you hardly need it." I paused. "Do you... do you... need a hand getting out?"

Devon looked down into the water between his legs. "I'll manage."

I turned my back and listened as Devon levered himself out. "I believe I feel better."

"Soon it'll just be yet another scar."

"I really must be more careful." Out to the right extreme of my vision I saw a towel picked up off the bed.

"I thought you were lucky."

"I am. It takes a lucky man to have this many scars and still be alive." He paused. "Okay, ready for my bandage."

I turned back around and carefully redressed his wound. Neither of us mentioned the prominent tenting in the front of the towel wrapped around his waist.

When I was finished, we turned tentatively to the next problem. "Where do I sleep?"

“In the bed,” said Devon firmly.

“The whole point of coming here was so you could have a good night’s sleep in a bed.”

“It’s big enough for two.”

“It’s not decent,” I said softly.

“We can control ourselves,” he answered.

I let my eyes drift down to the front of his towel.

Devon shrugged. “Okay, I may not be able to control him, but I can control myself.”

“It’s him I was worried about.”

“I keep him on a short leash too,” Devon reassured me.

It was obviously going to be awkward but on this subject, I *did* trust him. It was myself I didn’t trust. Even now, I was fighting conflicting urges to sleep in the uncomfortable looking chair by the wall or to pull that towel away and let whatever happened happen.

“We can do this,” said Devon.

“I guess if we can get through the bath then we can get through anything.”

That ought to have been the case, but the gods like to have their fun and we were about to learn two things. Firstly, we learned that the landlady and her strong young husband were in the room next door. Secondly, we learned beyond doubt what Thomas’s second skill (after cooking) was.

“Oh, Thomas...” Petra’s voice was clearly audible through the wall. “Thomas, you insatiable... Oh... OH! Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. YES!”

In the bed next to me, Devon shrugged. “Never had this sort of racket when she was married to Marcus.”

“Thomas! Thomas! More! Harder, harder, harder! That’s it! Oh, yes, like that! Don’t stop!” And then there was a trilling sound that would have made a dog howl if any dogs had been nearby.

“Don’t stoooooppppp!” she belted out.

There certainly seemed no danger of Thomas stopping as the sound of Petra’s voice, the words becoming less and less intelligible, was now joined by the thumping of the bed against the wall next to my head. I buried my face in the pillow, facing away from Devon, trying not to think about what they were doing next door, and what we very pointedly weren’t doing in here.

The performance came in waves, with Thomas building his wife to an almost crescendo then letting her down gently before building up again, this time still higher so her screams made the windows rattle, and so on, until, after what seemed like an hour or so.

“Yes, Thomas! Now! Finish me! Finish me! FINISH ME!”

“Yes, please, Thomas, finish her,” I whispered.

Based on the volume and length of the scream that followed, Thomas had done as instructed, and as his own grunts and roars mingled with it, I had to assume that he too was finished.

“Do you think he finished her?” asked Devon.

“Either that or killed her,” I whispered back. “And, at this point, I don’t care which.”

If the bath had left me a little heated and frustrated, then Petra’s vivid audio of what I was missing had made things so much worse. I was lying in bed next to a man I found furiously attractive, whether I liked it or not, but one who I couldn’t do anything with because I was his prisoner and damn it I still had my pride!

“Perhaps we can get some sleep now,” said Devon. “Although I might open a window. Seems to have gotten very hot in here.”

“Can you get me a glass of water?” I asked, as he got up.

“You thirsty?”

“No, I want you to throw it in my face.”

I tried not to look at Devon as he walked across the room, he was just a shadow at the periphery of my vision, but somehow, it was a very attractive shadow. The way he moved, that strong, animal physicality he possessed, had always been as attractive to me as his appearance, and the night could not hide it.

He returned to the bed with a glass of water. “Here you...”

We both froze at a sound from beyond the wall.

“Oh, Thomas,” Petra purred. “Already? You’re not human. Get over here, you incorrigible boy.”

The noises began again, as fierce and loud as before.

“Do you think anyone in town has had a good night’s sleep since those two were married?” asked Devon.

The encore performance lasted at least an hour and was followed by a half hour of silence by the end of which I’d started to drift off, only for the words, “Oh, Thomas,” to drift through the wall once more, and we were treated to the late show, after which, even the rapacious Thomas seemed to be tapped out for the night.

Or dead.

I lay in an agony of unfulfillment, painfully aware that potential fulfillment was inches away from me, perhaps lying in the same agony. Based on what I’d glimpsed through the water of the bath tub, the poor man wouldn’t even be able to roll over in his current condition, he’d just keep bouncing back.

I could feel the tempting warmth from Devon’s side of the bed. I wanted to reach back, to reach into that warmth and share it, to make it *our* warmth, that would then be stoked to an inferno.

But, no. I couldn’t. He was going to sell me in a matter of days. And once he did that, I would never forgive myself if I let him have me now. I was going to have a hell of a time forgiving myself for everything at this point. Sharing one another’s bodies would only make things entirely worse.

Unless he changed his mind about selling me. Then I would just feel stupid for having let this opportunity pass...

I tossed and turned on the question through most of the night, idling away hours wishing that things were different, better, wishing that I could see into Devon's mind and know his heart. Wishing I could know what this was about because I was still sure that it wasn't money.

I slept fitfully. Five minutes here, half an hour there. It was after such a brief bout that I opened my eyes with the early light of dawn bypassing the curtains and saw Devon looking back at me. How hadn't I noticed before how penetrating that stare was? How beautiful his eyes were, as curiously animal as the rest of him. Right now, they were filled with desire.

It was Devon who moved first, but I made no attempt to stop him and my body was awash with relief as his lips met mine and we kissed. It was as pure a kiss as I'd ever experienced, and the fact that it had been such a long time coming made it all the sweeter.

He pulled back almost immediately.

"No... I'm... I'm sorry. I shouldn't."

I didn't answer, I just lunged for him, kissing him harder, opening my mouth to push my tongue into his and feeling him respond. His hands slid down my body, pulling me to him and I moaned into his mouth as I felt him hard against me, as if he'd spent the whole night in this condition. Like a cat in heat, I twisted against him, grinding my hips into his to get some respite from the burning need between my legs.

But in the next instant, to my horror, Devon pushed me away and swung around out of bed.

"No. No. I can't... we can't."

"Why not?" It seemed a really fair question. At that moment, I was happy to be bedded one day and sold the next, I just wanted him, however ludicrous that was. Because I still believed... I still hoped, in my heart of hearts, that he would do the right thing.

“Because if I do this, then I won’t be able to do what I need to do. What I *have* to do!” He seemed to be berating himself, insisting to himself that this was how it had to be.

“You don’t have to,” I started, but he interrupted when he looked back at me.

“I’m sorry, Selena. For everything I’ve done and everything I’m going to do.”

Right then, I was more upset about what he hadn’t done.

Chapter Thirteen

The Last Day

Whether by mistake, because of what happened last night, or simply because he no longer thought it necessary, Devon didn't tether my horse to his as we rode on the next morning.

This would be our final full day's riding before we reached Gaunt, and we certainly had a nice day for it. The sun beamed down from a clear sky with only the barest scudding of white clouds out to the east, but the temperature was not *too* hot; a pleasant spring heat. The harsh winds of the wilderness had lowered to a sweet breeze that carried with it the scent of new flowers.

It was a day on which nothing bad could happen, and I couldn't help hoping that might extend to tomorrow—the day we reached our final destination.

"I'll race you to the ridge?" smiled Devon, riding alongside me.

"Challenge accepted."

"On your marks..."

"Get set..."

"Go!"

We both kicked our steeds into action and the pounding of hoofbeats at a full gallop filled the air. I felt elated and childish, I found myself laughing. I felt free.

It didn't matter who won the race. It was silly, and pointless and fun, and we both grinned at the end of it, then trotted back to where Uther brought up the rear, shaking his head. He didn't know what was going on, but then, I didn't either. Was this smiling man who raced with me and smiled whenever he caught me looking at him, really going to sell me to my enemies tomorrow?

It just didn't seem possible, but with Devon anything was possible. And I was always aware that what I saw was the surface Devon, and that there was some dark trust beneath that which he couldn't betray, something that forced him to do things that were against his nature whether he wanted to or not.

"What are those songs you sing?" I asked.

"Songs?"

"When I'm bathing, you sing. You sometimes sing to yourself when you're riding, as well."

"Do I? I didn't even realize I was doing it."

"I'm not complaining. I just wondered what they were."

"Folk songs," Devon answered in his typically evasive fashion. "I think it was my grandmother who taught them to me. She used to sing me to sleep with them. I suppose they remained in my head."

I shook my head. "I don't recognize them."

A light shrug. "Can't know them all."

"When I lived in the mountains, there were women from all over the region, and there were many folk songs sung in the evenings—everyone contributing their own local ones. But I've never heard yours. I've never even heard the language you sing them in. Where *are* you from?"

"Elsewhere in the mountains." Vague thought it was, that was the most specific thing he'd yet told me about himself.

"I thought I'd heard all the mountain languages."

Devon laughed. "The deeper you go, the more divided the communities become. The mountains are so hard to traverse in places, that people in one valley don't know the people in the next valley even exist. Every village grows up in isolation and they all develop their own customs and songs and, yes, even languages."

"I suppose." It wasn't impossible, I just didn't think it was true. But I did think he'd been telling me the truth about

coming from the mountains. The way he'd said as much made me believe it.

"They're very beautiful. The songs."

Devon smiled. "I've always thought so."

We stopped for lunch, and as Uther ran off chasing a bumble bee, Devon and I talked more.

"I had wanted to ask," he sounded uncharacteristically tentative, "about you going to the mountains."

"Ask what?"

"Why? Why did you go there five years ago?"

"My aunt lives there."

"Yes, yes, I know that. Everyone knows that. It was quite the story for a bit. And that's what I mean; everyone knows the rebellious Princess Selena ran out on her father over the succession but no one knows the details. Which means people make up their own stories. I always heard you were angry that your sisters got a share of Wincham and you didn't. But now that I've met you, I'm not sure I believe it. Though I suppose you might have changed in the last five years."

"I'm sure I have changed quite a lot," I nodded. "I've been leading a very different life. But no, that's not why I fell out with my father. The opposite in many ways. He wanted to give me Wincham."

"And that drove you away?"

I smiled, wanly. "Not exactly. Although it could have."

"I don't understand."

I breathed in deeply. "Can you imagine my sisters calmly standing by while I became Queen of Wincham and they had to make do with Latran and Gaunt?"

Devon shook his head. "People say the herders have a hard life and then you hear about princesses who don't get the country they want."

"I'm sure you can imagine how they'd react."

“I can guess.”

“So there was that.” I paused.

“And?” suggested Devon.

“And being Queen of Wincham—even if I’d wanted it—came with a caveat. My father certainly doesn’t believe in a lone Queen of Wincham. She has to be attached to a king who can do the actual ruling.”

“While you stay home and clean the palace?”

“Something like that.” I sighed. “Uther had a husband picked out for me. Maybe it all sounds petty now. He was a good man. I’d probably have made do and been happy enough. I’d have had more than most people get in their lifetimes.”

“But not love.” Devon’s words landed with a solemn gravity.

“No. Not love.”

Devon shrugged. “It always amuses me that the people who rule, who can have anything and everything they want, so often deny themselves the one thing that really matters. They turn marriage into a game of treaties and genealogical chess.”

I looked down at the ground a moment then up at him again. “You think love is the only thing that matters?”

Suddenly Devon’s face changed, as it sometimes did when I touched inadvertently on some subject that related to his purpose here.

“Not all.” There was an almost desperate melancholy in his eyes. “Maybe it ought to be. I really wish it was.”

Though I’d been free all day, Devon still tied my hands and feet for the night, though it seemed a bit more perfunctory than usual, and I settled down to sleep.

It had been... it sounded so very stupid to say it, but it had been a wonderful day. We'd ridden in the sun, we'd picked flowers with Uther and watched the birds in the skies above us. We'd chatted and laughed, we'd joked and shared deep and meaningful moments, albeit brief ones. We'd been together.

Naturally, we'd been together all this time—thanks to the tether we'd been quite forcibly so. But today we'd been *together*. Today I hadn't merely been in the vicinity of Devon, I'd been with him and he'd been with me.

For all the near misses and forced intimacy and even those few stolen kisses, it was the casualness of today that had most made me feel close to him, and most made me wonder hopefully about tomorrow.

“Goodnight, Selena,” he whispered.

“You've never said goodnight to me before.”

“Haven't I?”

“No.”

“I meant to.”

“Goodnight, Devon. See you in the morning.”

To that, he didn't respond. We'd made it through the day without mentioning tomorrow, he wouldn't start now.

I should have been unable to sleep, anxious and scared for the coming morning. I should have been making one last ditch attempt to get away. But, instead, I dropped off almost instantly into the easiest sleep I'd managed for weeks.

But I didn't wake as pleasantly.

I started as a hand shook me and almost choked as another was clamped over my mouth. It remained there as my bonds were cut and I was pulled roughly to my feet.

Was I being rescued? Some idiot part of me thought it must be Devon, saving me from himself.

“Come on,” hissed a voice I knew and feared.

“Vorst?”

The unpleasantly sharp face snatched back to look at me. “You want to stay here and be sold or you want to be free?”

“I...”

“It wasn’t a question.”

The hand clamped over my mouth again and Vorst grabbed me, displaying a wiry strength I hadn’t been expecting. Still dopey from being woken, I struggled but not very effectively as Vorst slung me over his shoulder and started out of the camp. The more I woke up, the harder I struggled, kicked at my latest abductor, trying to scream past the gag he’d thrust into my mouth.

“Shut up complaining, you ungrateful bitch.”

I wasn’t sure how far we went, but we were out of earshot of the camp when Vorst dropped me to the ground.

“You’ve got a funny way of saying ‘thank you’ for being rescued. If I was Devon, you’d be all smiles, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t call that a rescue,” I snapped back.

“You’re under his spell at the moment,” said Vorst. “You think he’s a good man. Well, he’s not. Look at the way he cut me an’ Buck an’ the rest out. Thieving bastard. You shouldn’t trust him. I’m the one who’s set you free.”

“What about Uther?” I asked sharply. “If you were really rescuing me, then you’d have taken him too.”

“I can hardly carry the both of you.”

“If you’d helped him then I would have come willingly.”

Vorst shrugged. “Well, I guess I’ll know that for next time. Anyway; you’re free, which I don’t think is nothing. You ought to be showing me a little gratitude.”

A cold shiver passed through my body.

“If you help Uther, then I’ll be ‘grateful’ to you.” I was aware that in my own backing and forthing on the subject of Devon, I’d rather ignored the fact that my father was in danger, as well.

But Vorst shook his head. “Frankly, I don’t want your gratitude while the old man is watching. ‘Gratitude’ should be a private thing between a man and a woman.”

“I’d rather die,” I growled at him

Vorst shook his head again. “You can do that when you reach Gaunt. Yeah, I may as well own up; once we’ve had a bit of fun, I’ll be selling you on. But first things first.”

I started to run, but Vorst grabbed my arm, dragging me back. I lashed out at him, a panicked blow but it caught him nicely.

“You little bitch!”

I managed to get a few steps away, but he came after me fast, tackling me to the ground, pinning me with his weight while I kicked and beat at him with my fists. I needed to focus and remember my training. And, so, that is exactly what I did. I drove my knee up into the small of his back and he went forward, meeting my fist coming the other way. That knocked him dopey and I was able to push him off and scramble free, running into the dark.

If it wasn’t for that damn dark, then I would have made it away, but the wilderness was no place to be running blind. My foot caught on something and I went down hard on my face.

In the next instant, Vorst was on top of me.

“Just for that, I’m not going to play nice. You’re lucky they want you alive. But there’s no rules about what condition you’re in.”

I cried out as he twisted my arms behind my back, managing to hold both wrists with one hand as he used the other to haul up my skirt.

“Thrash around all you want, but this is happening.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t.”

I choked out a sob of relief as Devon’s voice came out of the night. In the next instant, there was a smack of flesh on flesh and Vorst’s weight was off me as he flew backwards with the force of Devon’s punch.

“Are you alright? Selena, are you alright? I’ll kill him if he’s hurt you.”

“I’m okay,” I gasped, trembling and trying to mask my tears.

“She’s not your property you treacherous bastard!” snarled Vorst.

“I know that,” said Devon, his voice heavy with guilt. “I’m as bad as you. In some ways. Which is why I’m letting you live. But get the bloody hell out of here.”

“The hell with you!”

In the moonlight, I saw the flash of a sword being drawn.

“Don’t do this, Vorst,” said Devon, calmly.

“Scared?” asked Vorst slyly. “You talk a big game, Devon, but a game is all it truly is.”

He rushed at Devon, sword raised for action. Devon moved with speed and confidence. I barely even saw his hands as he drew his blade and in the same movement slashed up from Vorst’s belly to his chest.

For a few steps, Vorst kept moving, as if it had happened so fast that his body didn’t know it was dead yet. He tried to look back at Devon, but just collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.

“Sorry, Vorst,” Devon said. He wasn’t sorry for saving me, of course. I wasn’t completely convinced that he was sorry for killing the other man either. But he was sorry for being so much better with a sword, and he was sorry that he was killing someone who was, in some ways, no worse than he was. Devon would never have done to me what Vorst had tried to do tonight—that much we’d established—but he’d kidnapped me and planned to sell me, just as Vorst had intended to do.

“Are you alright?” he asked me again.

I hadn’t seen Devon fight before. I wasn’t sure I’d really seen it now—it had been over so fast. But it had given me some idea of what must have happened in the camp of the

Latran soldiers the night that he rescued Uther and me. Devon was one hell of a swordsman.

“Selena? Are you alright?”

“No,” I admitted.

“I’m so sorry.” And I knew he was apologizing for a lot more than what had happened tonight.

I fell into his arms and let him hold me close, his strong body seeming to hug away some of the pain and fear. For no good reason, I felt safe with him. Perhaps I’d never be able to convince myself of the right way to feel about this man, but it seemed my body felt one way and my brain screamed at me another—that he was going to sell me, that was I was so foolish for ever trusting he wouldn’t.

And yet... yet, somehow I still didn’t believe it—every part of my being was convinced of the opposite.

“This is them?” The captain of the Gaunt soldiers asked.

Devon nodded. His face was grave and grim; set hard.

Wordlessly, he passed the tethers across to the captain who gave a sharp tug, pulling Uther and me over to his side of the guard room, where more soldiers were standing, watching us as if we might somehow make a break for it.

“Where are we going?” asked Uther.

“You’re coming to Gaunt,” the captain replied. “Honored guests of the Queen.”

Uther nodded, smiling. “That’ll be nice.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” The captain turned to Devon. “You’ll want paying.” He said the words in a tone that suggested the contempt he felt for someone who’d sell a girl and her father for money. Personally, I didn’t think much of someone who would buy them either.

Devon held out his hand and the captain handed over a bag that clinked with the coins within.

It was such a small bag. All that had happened and in the end, it all came down to such a small bag.

As I'd done once before, I watched Devon go, after he'd taken money for us. Though on a conscious level I'd known this would happen, deep down, I hadn't believed he'd go through with it. It wasn't just that I'd wanted to believe as much, to believe the best of the man I liked so much, despite myself, I really hadn't believed him capable of it. All along, I'd imagined that at the ninth hour, his guilt and his feelings toward me would overthrow his duty. And he would realize he couldn't hand us over to our deaths.

And yet... yet here we now were.

I'd made the wrong bet, taken the wrong odds.

The door of the guardhouse stayed open as Devon went through it and walked on. He paused and looked back. And then, just for a second, I thought I saw the flicker of that roguish smile tease across his lips, as it had the last time we went through this.

A little flutter from within lifted my spirits.

Oh, how much I wanted that smile to mean something.

Chapter Fourteen

Gaunt

“Dear sister, how revolting you are looking.”

Sylvia was much as I remembered.

The middle sister of Uther’s daughters had always struck me as being all angles. There was something sharp about Sylvia in appearance and in manner. She was a beautiful woman, if you liked a bone structure that looked like cut glass. She was thin but her breasts and hips seemed so angular that she looked like two diamonds, one on top of the other. But it was her tongue that was sharpest. Sylvia possessed a natural cruelty that had never failed her when we were growing up, and which made her a natural queen in some ways.

I stood in her throne room in chains, pulled down to my knees in front of her as she sat, resplendently perfect on her throne, beside her husband, King Titus of Gaunt.

“She was always a shadow compared to you, my love,” the king said.

Sylvia flicked a sharp look at him. “For the love of the gods, Titus, you don’t have to fawn.”

Titus’s big head drooped. “Sorry, my dear.”

It ought to have been easy to feel sorry for King Titus. He was the model of what a king used to be in the olden days, he would have ridden magnificently through fairytales, slaying dragons, rescuing princesses, and being generally fabulous, showing off his man-mountain musculature, unbelievably handsome features, and his flowing blonde hair, and no one would have cared that he was a bit of an idiot.

But times had changed, and a moron on the throne stood out all the more when he sat next to Sylvia, whose intelligence was as penetrating as a diamond-tipped drill. So, it should have been easy to feel sorry for him, but an idiot can be nasty

as well as someone smart. King Titus had grown up pulling the wings off flies, and though the flies had gotten bigger, he was still basically doing the same thing.

“Where is our father?” They were the first words I’d said since being brought in here. We’d been separated earlier, Uther and I. I’d been dragged off to be put in irons and he’d been taken someplace else.

“You should be more worried about yourself,” said Sylvia, her smile etched in acid.

“I asked about our father.”

Sylvia shrugged shoulders you could have cut yourself on. “He is quite safe. Remember, he is of use to me. I *need* him. You, on the other hand, are more or less superfluous to requirements. I could have you flogged to death now and no one would make a peep. Except for you, of course.”

“Let me see our father.” I ignored her threats. This was how Sylvia operated; she liked to be in control, to see the other person squirm.

Which didn’t mean that she wouldn’t carry those threats through.

“You’ll see him if it becomes necessary,” replied Sylvia. “For now, he is quite comfortable. I have no reason to be hard on him. Particularly when I need his word.”

“To make you Queen of Wincham.”

“It must be killing you,” sneered my sister.

“I couldn’t give a rat’s shit about Wincham,” I snarled back. “I only care about our father.”

“He is quite safe as I said,” Sylvia went on, a little put out that I wasn’t squirming as she’d hoped. “For now. I may need you to convince him to remain so.”

“I thought I was superfluous to requirements.”

Sylvia shrugged—it was a gesture for which that angular body could have been designed. “You should be. But I like to have a secondary plan. Frankly, I see no reason why our father

should not make me his heir—particularly in his current condition. I could probably convince him to eat a lemon the way he is now, addle-minded old fool. But if, for whatever reason, he proves uncooperative, then you will convince him to do the right thing.”

“I’ll never tell him to give up his throne to you,” I growled back at my sister.

Sylvia pointed her finger at me. “You’ve become very combative since living in the mountains. I don’t know if Aunt Leah made you this way or if you were always a belligerent little cow and she just helped you to be yourself. I’m inclined towards the latter. Anyway, you misunderstand, I do not need you to verbally convince him. If King Uther chooses not to make me queen, then we shall simply torture you in front of him until he sees sense. I wonder how long and how loud your screams will have to be before he gives in. Especially, as he doesn’t currently seem to remember you. It will be an interesting experiment.”

I said nothing.

My fate was sealed as was my father’s, and the fate of the lowlands along with us. Sooner or later, my father would make Sylvia queen. Wincham might resist, but even if they didn’t then Latran certainly would. One way or another it would be war. Though I’d probably be dead long before that.

And I had no one but myself to thank.

“Take her away.”

The jail cells of Gaunt were as unpleasant as you would expect. They occupied a tower on the outer edge of the castle, and I was sure that it was positioned so that the inmates could look out and see the wilderness spread before them; all that freedom, and they had no part of it.

I sat in the darkness, trying to think and at the same time, desperately trying not to think. I wanted to come up with a plan for my escape and then for my father's rescue. But as soon as I focused on as much, then I came up against the fact that there was no escape. I couldn't get out of this cell and when the door opened, I'd be met by guards.

I buried my head in my hands.

At least Uther—at least *my father* was safe—for now. But how long would that last? Once he'd signed over his rights as monarch to Sylvia, then his existence would become an inconvenience to her.

There had to be something I could do!

But there wasn't.

As I sat there, feeling increasingly sorry for myself, a noise reached my ears from outside; a strange one but one I recognized none the less. It was the sound I'd heard the night Devon had come back injured. A leathery sound accompanied by the rushing of air. This time, it seemed more controlled, the rushing air coming in great gusts that finally stopped in a crunch that seemed to come from directly outside my window.

Well... I had nothing else to do.

I got up and crossed the little room, gingerly picking my way around piles of stuff from previous occupants that didn't bear looking at too closely. On tip toes, I grabbed the bars of the window and dragged myself up, finding purchase with my toes on the brickwork of the wall, until I could see out of the window.

My heart skipped a beat and the breath was stolen from my lungs.

Outside the window, clinging to the wall with its clawed feet, and looking straight at me, was a dragon.

The End



Selena and Devon return in:

The Dragon Protector

Dragon's Birthright #2

by H.P. Mallory & J.R. Rain

Coming Soon!



If you enjoyed *The Good Daughter*, please help spread the word by leaving a review!

Thank you!



[Return to the Table of Contents](#)

Also available:

Wrath of the Gods

Gates of the Underworld #1

by H.P. Mallory

& J.R. Rain

(read on for a sample)

ONE

PEN

My face is my prison.

Yes, my mother might have blessed me with her beauty, but she's also handicapped me with her curse.

I slip the hoop through my ear, strands of delicate chains dangling from my lobe.

They feel like shackles.

Janie, my sister, attempts to catch my eye in the mirror from where she's sitting behind me on the bed, but I avoid her. It's easier to keep my gaze on her foot bobbing up and down, the light catching on the glittery blue polka-dots on her socks.

"Why don't you just quit?"

The question startles me into looking at her fully in the glass, my brush in hand only halfway raised. "What?"

She leans forward, sensing her chance to grab my full attention, and tucks short blond hair back behind her ear. My heart gives a little twinge. Sitting there in her pink sweater and faded blue jeans, she looks more like Mother than I do, which should be impossible, considering they aren't even related.

“Your job,” she says. “Why don’t you just quit?”

My face in the mirror is colorless, even under all the carefully applied make-up. I look like I’m going to be sick. “You know I can’t quit.”

Because I’m stuck.

I don’t say the words, though. Instead, I swipe my brush through my hair again, carefully avoiding the dangling earrings. I’m frazzled—I should have put them on last.

“Yet you hate it.”

“I *don’t* hate it.” The words come out automatically.

“Really? Because every single time you go to one of these stupid galas, you get this look on your face like someone’s volunteering you to be a virgin sacrifice.”

I quirk an eyebrow, lips twitching. “Virgin?”

Janie doesn’t take the bait. “Pen, come on. You know what I mean. You’ve got this stiff upper lip thing going on like you’ve been sold.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what’s it like?”

I shrug. “It’s fine.”

She gives me a withering look and crosses her legs on the bed. “Fine?”

I look away, my eyes drawn to the dangling length of chain hanging from my ear. “Yes, it’s fine. Why are you being weird?”

“Because you hate this,” she says and waves her hand in the air as if to say ‘this’ includes everything around us—everything in my bedroom. “You hate the photoshoots, you hate the catwalk, you hate *Renfield*—”

“Renfield is good at his job.”

Janie rolls her eyes. “Renfield is a sleazy mobster from an eighties movie.”

“He’s not *that bad*.”

“*That bad* implies he *is* bad, Pen.”

“Ren does his best.” I finish brushing my hair and start putting it up. It’ll take a hundred bobby pins to get it all to stay in place. “It’s a tricky industry.”

“That is the most pimpy thing you could have said,” says Janie. “You know Renfield doesn’t care about you.”

“He’s my agent. He doesn’t *have* to care about me.”

“He should!” she says, her gaze fierce. “Look, Pen, I don’t care how tricky the industry is, people should be treating you like a person.”

No one will treat me like a person, owing to what I am, what they see. And Janie knows that, which is why she swallows down whatever she was about to say next.

“You’re just this... this beautiful *object* Renfield uses to do his job and... I hate it.”

“I *am* his job.” And I am that object, but that’s just how it is and how it’s been for a very long time.

“Don’t you realize how gross that sounds? You’re more than an object, Pen.”

“You know that and I know that,” I answer on a sad smile. “And that has to be good enough. You know how it goes, Janie.”

I cinch closed. Like a drawstring bag, something inside me coils shut. I turn back to the mirror. “I need to get ready.”

I see Janie frowning in the mirror, amber-brown eyes framed by a fluffy blonde bob. “So that’s it? We’re done talking?”

I sigh. “What’s the point in talking, anyway? You know I can’t do anything about it.”

“You could... go to your mother and ask her to get rid of this damned curse she put on you.”

“Ha,” I laugh. Because that’s never going to happen—not only do I have zero interest in seeing Mother again, she would have zero interest in removing my curse.

Janie scowls and looks down at her phone. It lights up as she texts someone. “Carlos is here.”

I’m ashamed to say I’m relieved. I hate talking about this with Janie. She always makes me feel like a hooker when we talk about my job. I know she doesn’t mean to, she just doesn’t understand. Being a model is just *like that* sometimes. All the time.

She stands up slowly, like she’s waiting for me to say something else. I don’t. I keep putting up my hair. One bobby pin after another, each one another brick in the wall I’m building.

“I’m worried about you, Pen,” she says. “It’s just... no way to live your life.”

“I’ve been living this way for going on two-hundred-fifty-years.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she frowns. Then she presses her lips together in a thin, flat line, and her eyebrows push together, and for a second, I’m worried she might cry. I hate it when Janie cries; I can’t handle it.

“I know you’re worried about me. I appreciate it, I do,” I start, hoping we’re still good.

Her phone buzzes. She looks down at it and curses softly.

“Carlos?” I ask.

She nods as she texts him back. “Yeah, he’s getting impatient.” She gives me an apologetic look. “We’ll talk later, okay? Call me after the gala’s over. Let me know how it goes.”

“I will,” I say. *And I’ll lie to you about every second.* Because it’ll be awful. It’ll be one long, horrible night of people staring at my boobs and asking if I’m comfortable taking nude photographs. But I can’t let Janie know that. She already worries too much—and it’s not like there’s anything else I can do. I’m not like her. I’m not outgoing and friendly—I’m the quiet one, the withdrawn one, the cynical one. And I also don’t have a handsome doctor boyfriend; I didn’t get into every Ivy League college on the face of the Earth; I’m not

conducting life-saving research in university laboratories for extra credit.

She puts on her shoes in the hallway and looks at me accusingly. “Promise to call?”

“I promise,” I say. “Go have fun.”

She smiles. “I will.”

“Tell Carlos I say hi.”

“Okay. Bye, Pen. I love you.”

“Love you too,” I say. And I mean it. In fact, I love her more than I’ve ever loved anyone.

Outside, Carlos honks his horn. She smiles and runs off. I hear the front door open and close. That’s the one thing in the world Janie is bad at—closing doors. She’s always so damn loud.

Almost against my will, my lips curl up into a smile. Janie, my little sister. Well, she’s actually not my sister, but we are related—distantly. Owing to the fact that I was born 1774, I can’t quite figure out what we are to each other, but once upon a time my mortal father shared a bed with my immortal mother and they had me. Then he wed another mortal woman, Janie’s ancestor, and started her line. Janie’s grown up with me and she knows what I am—the daughter of a goddess. But she doesn’t hold it against me and neither did her father, Tom—he just welcomed me in just like his mother before him and hers before her—I’m like this family heirloom that’s been passed down through the centuries, only instead of collecting dust on the mantle, I’m... well, me.

It’s a little funny how much Janie worries about me. I’m a literal demi-goddess, for whatever that’s worth. I should be the one taking care of her. It’s just that there never seems to be anything I need to worry about with her.

She’s fine. Her life is *amazing*. She’s amazing.

My life just kind of... is.

And Janie’s right—I do hate this job. But I don’t know what else to do—there’s really nothing else I can do because

Mother cursed me so ordinary humans aren't able to see beyond my looks, *her* looks. That means no matter how smart I am, how educated I am, how much experience I might have, all mortals can see is what appears on the surface—it's how they decide my worth. Janie and her family are the exceptions because they're related to me, so our shared blood means they see me for the person I really am—they see beyond the beautiful face and body to the person beneath, they see Penelope Callas.

But back to Mother and her fucking curse—it was her way of throwing me a curve ball when I said I had no interest in living with her in Olympus.

My phone buzzes on the vanity. I turn it over, looking at the name.

A black hole of dread pops into existence somewhere behind my stomach. It's Renfield. I'd told him I'd be at the gala an hour ago. He's likely been fielding angry cameramen since he got there.

I don't want to talk to him, so I let the call go to voicemail.

And he immediately calls again. The buzzing feels a little more insistent.

This time, I answer. Dodging him is just going to make matters worse.

"Hi, Ren," I say.

"Where the fuck are you?" He sounds pissed.

"I'm at... home."

He sputters for a moment. "Why are you at *home*?"

I can hear people in the background, talking, laughing. There's a harp being plucked somewhere. Glasses clinking. "Do you know how much we're being paid to be here?"

"A lot," I say, pinching my nose. It's always a fair guess.

"A *lot* a lot," says Renfield. "Metric fuck-ton a-lot. And more if you flirt well enough with Frederick."

Frederick Kellington, or Smith or Jackson. Some money-money-money name. One of a litter of corporate middle-aged white men who think if they put me in the right magazine or on a big enough billboard, I'll sleep with them. I haven't and I won't—but Renfield keeps trying to get me to. He receives a commission from every job I get, and he's one hundred percent sure that letting an old man stick it in me is exactly the thing to get him filthy, stinking rich.

"You can't be serious," I say.

"Darling, I'm always serious."

"No."

"Pen, this is a *lot* of money we're talking about, for an hour or so of hanging on Frederick's every word. It'll be nothing for you."

"*Nothing* is nothing for me," I say.

"Come on, sweetheart. Make an effort. For me."

I hear Janie's voice in my mind, saying that Renfield doesn't care about me as a person. Just an object to line his wallet. She's not wrong. "I'm not comfortable with this."

"And I'm not comfortable being homeless." As though one missed job opportunity will put him under the poverty line.

"I really should fire you."

"And I really should quit, but here we are," he says. "*Please*, Pen. For me? For your career? I've done so much for you and I'm not asking for much in return. Just one teensy-weensy conversation."

I feel a twist of guilt in my stomach. I swallow. "I can't, Ren."

"You can."

"I *can't*. I won't."

"Nobody likes a girl with a temper."

"Nobody likes you at all."

“They don’t have to like me,” he says. “They just have to *pay me.*”

“I’m going to hang up now.”

“No. *You* are going to get in the goddamn car and drive to the event center *now.*”

I hang up. Then I throw my phone onto the bed and put my head in my trembling hands. I try to just breathe.

I should fire him. I really should fire him. But where would I be without him? Renfield and every other man in the whole wide world, that’s my demographic. I do nothing but stand, smile, walk, and pose. Six figures to saunter—*not walk, saunter*—up and down a platform in a dress I didn’t design, to smile and laugh at people I don’t know.

Pout your lips to the camera.

Reach for it, let them pretend it’s their face you’re caressing, their eyes you’re staring at, their dicks you want inside you.

Look back and down over your shoulder, touch your arm.

Look up, stare, just a little longer than you should—there, you’ve got them.

Perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect flower crown implying this perfume doesn’t smell just like everything else in Macy’s.

Smile, touch your hat.

Run into the surf, pretend this bathing suit isn’t going to fall off the second your boobs hit the water.

Renfield and Frederick Richman, the twentieth. It’s agonizing.

But it’s my life.

TWO

PEN

Tonight's dinner is a necessary evil.

It's a charity event, something some action-movie actor is doing for kids with cancer. The cast won't be there until much later in the evening, but until they arrive and make their speeches, I'm supposed to mingle. Ren wants me to get my face out there so I can start landing some TV and movie gigs. It's not a bad idea.

The last time I was on the big screen, it was during the era of silent movies, when the talkies were in their infancy. It's been long enough now that I can probably start landing some TV roles again—wait long enough for all the directors, actors and producers to die and no one will recognize you a hundred years later.

So, we chat with reporters and people with cameras, let our faces be seen and appraised. Trade business cards, though that part is really Ren's job. Flounce around in a dress I hate, shoes that hurt.

But I have to do it. Making public appearances and keeping myself in the spotlight is required if I want the work to continue. And, yeah, I want the work to continue. It's not like I can do anything else, owing to this curse from mommy dearest.

As I face the mirror, I struggle to find anything that doesn't need fixing. My hair is up in curls on top of my head, trailing ringlets, wreathed in flowers, and I despise it. The lipstick they gave me is way too bright—a tacky coral—but I'm lucky I get to do my own make-up in the first place. If I show up in any other color, that luck would go away; then I'd have to sit in a chair with five thousand people swarming around me like bees, pulling my hair and powdering my face until I choke, just like all the other models.

The dress isn't my favorite, but it's never my favorite. My favorite is a little black knee-length dress I bought from Wal-Mart, but obviously, that's not an option. This gaudy red thing is by some French designer with a name I can't pronounce. I realize my boobs are still hanging out of it, and I push them back in. The top is this heavily corseted flower-patterned nightmare, and the skirt is a ball-gown explosion of vaguely silky floof that's one bad wash away from being tulle.

It's something Mother would love.

And it's also literally by anyone's standards, unacceptably expensive. Just goes to show money can't buy taste. Or talent.

I cross my arms and lay my head on the table.

I hate this. I really fucking hate this.

Bzzz.

A text from Renfield. *Where the fuck are you?*

Bzzz.

He texts me a picture. Old white dude, hair like salt, skin like folded paper. Smiling, holding a wine glass. Then a second later, in parentheses, (*Frederick*).

I glance at the clock on the wall. Tick-tick-tick-tick. Like a bomb.

Bzzz. Bzzz.

More pictures. They're all terrible.

He's only fifty-three, says Renfield. *That's not so bad, is it?*

As far as Renfield knows, I'm twenty-five. So, yeah, it is so bad.

The girl in the mirror stares at me expectantly.

I text back: *I'm on my way.*

Renfield says, *That's my girl.*

I think I'm going to be sick.

I wish I had a boyfriend or a bodyguard or something. Anyone to anchor me against the tide of the crowd. A reminder...

A reminder of what?

To treat me like a person.

What kind of person?

Something catches in my lungs. The air tastes funny. The dress's corset top is too tight. It's strangling.

What kind of person, Penelope?

I slip on the necklace that matches my earrings. Diamonds and sterling close around my throat, and the cold chain links slide into place where they practically form an arrow towards my breasts.

Just one conversation. Just smile and nod for a little bit, that's it, nothing else. It'll be okay.

It'll be okay.

It won't be—Janie's right—but sometimes the lie is all you have.

Renfield is waiting for me on the stairs of the event center.

He's sitting on the bottom steps, staring at his phone—waiting for me to text him again, or waiting for someone else? He has other clients, supposedly, but he treats me like I'm the only thing standing between him and poverty.

Gray hair, beard, rounding in the middle from beer and age. His eyes twinkle—less like stars and more like coins at the bottom of a fountain, the reflections of half a hundred dreams thrown into the water and abandoned.

He hurries down the carpet and says, "And here she is! Sweet Penelope mine."

There really is something pimp-like about Renfield's demeanor. There's no animal print in sight, no heavy chains, no gold teeth, no sunglasses, no hideous purple hat; but it's there, all the same. It's in the crystal gleam of sweat on his hands, in the smile that changes color when it reaches his eyes. It's in the way he says "mine", making me feel like a teenager in an alley, coming to ask about that easy money he mentioned.

"There are some people I'd like you to meet," he says.

There always are.

He guides me into the room, hand on my lower back. Thumb moving up and down as if he's already counting the hundreds coming in.

Inside, it's a massive space—shiny white floors, window-walls framed by golden pillars, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling like statues of stars and broken glass. The crowd mills, a swarming animal all in red and black. The models—the only colored dresses in the whole room—are easy to pick out. They laugh, they smile, and they look like puppets—maneuvered by their agents who manipulate their strings.

I'm no different.

I feel like a corpse at a baby shower. Dead and shriveled, trying not to be seen, but fuck, there are only so many places to hide in a room full of cameras.

It really is like wearing a mask. Except you can barely tell the mask is there, and there's no way to know who's wearing the mask with you, and who *actually* looks like this. Which faces are real, and which ones are plastic fabrications.

They're all plastic.

"Frederick!" Ren calls the second we've passed the man at the door. The man reaches for my coat, and I only just get it into his hand before Renfield literally drags me away.

There are waiters with wine glasses everywhere. One of them stops before me and smiles, asking if I'd like one. I'd like to down his whole tray, but I can hardly say that. So, I

smile in gratitude and take one, down it, and then I take another.

The waiter gives me this little nodding bow as if to say he understands my need to drink excessively and heads off into the sea of the crowd. Doesn't look at me twice; people have probably been drinking up their courage or drinking down their self-hatred all night.

Renfield vanishes briefly, looking for someone, I guess. By the time the waiter comes around again, my glass is empty. I almost take two more, one in each hand. But visually that's a little much. So just the one.

Renfield appears from nowhere.

"This way." He pulls at me, insistent. I almost spill the champagne down my ridiculously expensive front.

An old, predictably white man somewhere in his fifties is standing to one side of the crush, nursing a martini and an e-cigarette. He smiles as we approach. Like a shark in a suit. I think about spilling my drink on him, or on myself, so I can escape to the bathroom to clean up.

"Frederick, Frederick," Renfield says, laughing in that way businessmen do when they're pretending to be friendly. He shakes Frederick's hand vigorously. "How are you?"

"Capital," says Frederick.

I blink twice to keep from rolling my eyes. *Capital? Who says that?*

He does. Frederick does. He's preening like a peacock, making a point not to look at me.

"This is the goddess, Penelope Elandra Callas," says Ren. That's not my middle name, he just thinks it makes me sound more Greek, more exotic, more goddess. Little does he know I'm actually fifty percent stamp-of-authenticity goddess. "Penelope, this is Frederick Svetslander with *Scatsva*."

Some brand I've never heard of. It must be expensive if he's here, mingling with the golden crowd. *Scatsva* sounds foreign, so maybe it's a big name somewhere else. Finland,

maybe, or Norway, or maybe it's a Chinese brand and calls itself *Scatsva* because the word sounds exotic in the other direction.

Regardless, Frederick looks like the kind of guy that would start a fashion company of some kind in Asia. Not in China. Laos, maybe. Vietnam. Somewhere obscure that would look interesting on a company bio.

Now Frederick looks at me. He appraises me openly. I'm supposed to be okay with it—I'm a model, my body is my commodity—but I'm fighting the urge to squirm.

"Good evening, Miss Callas," he says. "You look absolutely ravishing."

There are few people more dangerous in this world than rich white men who use the word "ravishing".

"Good evening," I echo. Like a fucking parrot.

The window's not far. If I hit it hard enough, maybe I can jump through it and run. The glass shredding into my skin would only hurt for a few seconds, and then it would heal in the next few. And the fall wouldn't kill me—only a fellow immortal can do that. But I manage to dampen down the desire, all the same. The time for jumping out of a window and maiming myself in my quest to leave hasn't quite arrived just yet. But the night is young...

Renfield makes a show of seeing someone he recognizes. "Marley? Marley Lasch, is that you?" He looks between us and he's just so obvious. "If you'll excuse me for a moment. Marley!"

And my pimp leaves me standing there with Frederick Scat.

Totally silent, no segue. The crowd closes around us like concrete closing around the feet of some sorry SOB who's just been dropped into the Chicago River.

I drink.

I narrowly resist the urge to toss the whole thing back at once. It's just champagne, but my stomach is empty, and

nothing gets you properly tipsy quite like good champagne. Of course, my tolerance is at a level which would require at least two bottles of champagne before I'd feel even slightly tipsy—after a couple of centuries of building up my tolerance—it's built up. And I've got Mother's metabolism.

“Are you having a pleasant evening, Miss Callas?” says Frederick.

He has the air of someone important who stands on meandering porches in the dark, holding a cigarette and not making eye contact with whoever it is he's talking to. The glass serves mostly the same purpose. He gestures with it.

“Yes,” I say. It's easiest to lie with single syllables.

“Are you here alone?”

I gesture vaguely after Ren with my glass. “I'm with him.”

“And he is?”

“My agent.”

“Ah, then you are a model.” He has an accent, just barely. It's almost French, but not quite, his R's are landing too hard. The whole thing seems incredibly fake—put on. In fact, he's probably from Georgia.

“I thought I recognized you from somewhere. What have you done?”

“I've done a lot of things,” I say. More than most. I tend to get preferential treatment; that happens when you have Aphrodite's face.

Frederick drinks. He grins at me. “Do tell.”

And so, it begins.

I talk to people. I shake their hands. I accept business cards from photographers and a few painters looking for models, and I shove them down my bra—old industry trick. It's a gross feeling, watching their eyes follow my hand and linger on the card (read: my breasts), but at this point, it's compulsory. I flounce around in my tight-topped, ball-gown dress, telling every rolling camera in the room who I'm

wearing. I'm sure I'm butchering the name, but no one corrects me. Probably because no one knows how to pronounce the damned thing. Not that it really matters.

I talk very briefly with Frederick What's-his-fuck of *Scatsva*, and the look Renfield gives me from across the room sits like curdled milk in my stomach. He throws a thumbs up; it's almost enough to make me abandon the conversation entirely.

But when Frederick takes out a business card, scribbles out his work number and writes his personal one, I accept it. Because Renfield is looking at me. Because I'm totally alone in the snake pit.

Because Frederick has a job for me.

A bikini shoot. Something in the Bahamas. I've got the blonde hair he's looking for, the shape of the eyes, and they are just the loveliest shade of ocean blue, but would I be willing to wear brown contacts?

I course I am.

I always am.

Wrath of the Gods

is available at:

[Amazon Kindle](#) * [Amazon UK](#)

[Return to the Table of Contents](#)

About H.P. Mallory:

H.P. Mallory is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. She writes paranormal fiction, heavy on the romance! H.P. lives in Southern California with her son and a cranky cat.

DOWNLOAD FREE E-BOOKS FROM HP MALLORY
NOW!

Getting your FREE e-books is as easy as visiting:

www.hpmallory.com

Enter your email in the link at the top of the home page

Check your email!



Also available:

Who would you choose: a noble warlock (who also happens to be your boss) or a rogue of a vampire with his own agenda?

The first book in the New York Times bestselling Witch and Warlock series:

Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble

Witch and Warlock #1

by H.P. Mallory

Available now!

[Amazon Kindle](#) * [Amazon UK](#)



[Return to the Table of Contents](#)

About J.R. Rain:

J.R. Rain is the international bestselling author of over seventy novels, including his popular Samantha Moon and Jim Knighthorse series. His books are published in five languages in twelve countries, and he has sold more than 3 million copies worldwide.

Please visit him at www.jrrain.com.

Join his [newsletter here](#).

Follow him on [Amazon](#).

Follow him on [Goodreads](#).

Follow him on [BookBub](#).

Follow him on [Facebook](#).

Join his [Facebook Group](#).



Also available:

Mother, wife, private instigator...*vampire!*

The first book in Amazon's #1 bestselling vampire series:

Moon Dance

Vampire for Hire #1

by J.R. Rain

Available now!

[Amazon Kindle](#) * [Amazon UK](#)



[Return to the Table of Contents](#)