

To Catch a Thief Tysche Dwai



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To Catch a Thief

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To my Ranger – always...

TO CATCH A THIEF

The night was hot and moonless. No breath of air stirred the stillness as the girl crouched beneath the shadows of a twisted Maloq tree. She craned her neck, trying to see into the candlelit room above her. The castle wall was smoothly wrought stone, well joined, and offered no finger hold, even for a thief of her caliber. She shivered a little despite the heat, clothes clammy against her skin from swimming the moat to the castle grounds.

She leapt and caught the lowest branch of the tree and swung herself up. She climbed like a cat, dagger clamped between her teeth.

The king was feasting in the great hall on the other side of the castle. He should be occupied for hours yet.

As she reached window level, she cautiously raised her head above the sill and surveyed the room beyond. Her eyes widened, and she drew in her breath with a hiss.

The chamber was a sumptuous bedroom hung with velvet draperies and silken tapestries. Gilt

ornaments adorned the mantelpiece and bejeweled trinkets littered the tops of occasional tables scattered throughout the room.

She drew herself onto the windowsill, balancing on the balls of her feet and sliding the dagger back into its sheath. The room was empty, as she had expected, and she eased herself to the floor.

She bit her lip. It was like being let loose in a pastry shop. She didn't know where to turn first. Stepping to the nearest table, she slipped a tiny snuffbox into her pouch. It would feed her lot for three sevendays if properly fenced, and Berne would know where was best.

As she crossed the room, her path took her beside the canopied bed, with its heavy velvet spread. She ran her hand over the soft fabric. It felt like stroking a large cat, and she shivered. A crooked smile quirked her lip as she sniffed and ran a grimy hand beneath her dripping nose. She'd never even seen such fabric before. Her life was more burlap and homespun than silk and velvet. For a fleeting instant, she wished herself the kind of lady who would live in a place like this.

A gilded mirror caught her attention, and she studied her reflection. Short and compact, she was well suited to her profession, but not the kind of girl who drew the eye twice. Perhaps that was

why she was so good at what she did....

Waves of hair of an indifferent brown hung in lank strands to her thin shoulders, framing a dirty face animated by eyes of startling green.

Her lip trembled.

Damn it all! Life wasn't fair.

She ran an angry palm across her damp eyes and snatched up more oddments, stuffing them haphazardly into her bag.

She had worked her way halfway around the room, far from the sanctuary of the window, and had her back to the doorway when suddenly she heard a step in the hall outside. She froze in horror.

In the distance, she heard shouting voices. Then more footsteps. She glanced wildly around her then darted behind a velvet drapery, pulling the heavy fabric closed behind her. Quiet as the feline of her name, Caitlyn the Cat crept to where the curtain met with another, cracking it open at the join. She squinted down a long, gloomy passage. It was no wonder the voices had sounded so near to hand. The chamber door was flung wide, only the curtain masked the chamber from the hallway.

The king was arrogant in his trust! Anyone could rob him blind. It was an easy climb to the window, and if he didn't bother even to shut his bedchamber door, any trinkets she took were fairly won.

The passageway beyond the chamber was dimly lit. The smoke drifted upward from large candles standing like silent sentinels on either side of the hall. They lifted a scent of bayberry into the air with their heavy smoke. The curling tendrils gave the scene an eerie unreality.

She could hear the footsteps more clearly now. Though the voices had died away, the tramp of booted feet seemed to be closing in on her.

Caitlyn's heart pounded so loudly in her ears she almost fancied it was reverberating from the castle walls. In her mind, it was deafening.

As she peered down the hallway, eight soldiers appeared, marching toward her in formation, each with a pikestaff in his hand. They wore swords at their waists, and in the candlelight their grand red and yellow uniforms seemed to sparkle.

"The King's Guard," she groaned, shrinking back against the wall and praying that her slender figure was not outlined behind the heavy curtain. As the troop drew level, Caitlyn could smell sweat and leather. She swallowed hard against the fear choking her. Then they were past and gone.

Why was there no sentry here on the door? It seemed the most perfunctory of precautions. Perhaps because the king was in the hall? She didn't care, as long as it worked in her favor.

She waited until the sound of their marching feet could no longer be heard then drew a deep

breath. Stepping from her cover into the hallway, she studied the gloomy passageway.

Which way now, was the question. Did she creep along in the direction from which the soldiers had come, or follow in the direction they were headed?

She cursed under her breath as she searched her pouch and found the crude map of the castle layout was missing. It must have slipped from her bag during the climb, or fallen to the floor of the bedchamber. Time was against her. She could not afford to go back and look for it. All she knew for sure was that Berne was imprisoned in a cell directly below the king's living quarters.

Berne was counting on her to rescue him. After all, it was her fault he had been caught. She was slow slipping out a window, and he covered for her. When she saw him surrounded by a squadron of the Guard, she started to go back to him. He waved her on, cudgel swinging about him desperately. One of the pikemen clouted him in the temple with the butt of his spear while she watched in horror from the shadowed alley.

She owed him her life. If the soldiers had caught her, she would have suffered far worse. She knew what happened to female companions taken by the guard. They were lucky if they made it to the dungeons alive. They never made it unsullied.

She could not abandon Berne now. She bit her lip once more. The guards had been relaxed and sloppy about their formation. They were probably coming off duty rather than going on. That meant they were likely to be coming from the dungeons rather than heading down.

She started in the direction from which the guards had come. The candles were widely spaced, flickering in the high draft of the corridor. One light had gone out altogether, leaving a wide swath of darkness.

Caitlyn gulped, one hand on the hilt of her dagger. She hated dark places. Her steps slowed further, until she crept forward an inch at a time.

As she entered the area between the lit candles, tracing the wall to keep her bearings, she stumbled into a room when her palm met empty space. Her dagger was in her hand without conscious thought as she stared wildly about the darkened room, trying to get her bearings.

"Well, well, well...what is this?" rumbled a man's voice.

Caitlyn turned toward the voice, panic rising in her breast. In the half-light, she saw a man—a huge, mountain of a man, with a wicked-looking scar across his left cheek.

She slid her dagger back into her belt, and straightened her tunic over it. In a fight—any fight—this giant would easily defeat her.

"Evening, s-sir," she stammered. "I be new to tha castle. A maid who got herself lost on an errand. 'Tis all so confusing to a girl used to a small hovel in tha village. So many passages..." Her voice trailed away.

The man mountain stared at her, and she saw that, despite his height and girth, his eyes seemed to twinkle in the darkness.

"The girl is lost?" He gazed at her. "The girl is not allowed in this hallway." He scratched his head. "The girl might be looking for the kitchen?"

"Yes!" Caitlyn replied quickly, nodding in agreement. "The kitchen. I must get back before Cook has my hide."

The huge man beamed at her. "I am Henry the jailor. I could show the girl to the kitchen."

"Oh, yes, please! I would be ever so grateful." Caitlyn looked up at him with her best beggar's plead.

"Follow Henry," he replied. "Henry is good to all castle girls."

Henry held out his hand, and Caitlyn smiled nervously, stepping forward and slipping her hand into his. He led her across the shadowy room to a curtain in the far wall. Behind the curtain was a narrow stairway trailing down into blackness.

Caitlyn pulled back against his forward progress. No light at all filtered up from below.

Caitlyn shook her head wildly. She could not face that darkness, no matter who waited below. Berne would not expect that of her. He knew her phobia of the dark.

Henry turned to her, his face a vague blur in the shadows. "What is wrong with the girl?"

Caitlyn continued to shake her head. "I can't. I just can't!"

Henry put an arm around her shoulders gently. "Don't be scared. Henry will only take you to the kitchen. Henry won't hurt you."

"The dark...I can't...the dark..."

Henry folded her to his chest and patted her back awkwardly. "Don't be scared, little one. Henry will protect you."

Caitlyn sobbed against the hard strength of Henry. She was petrified of the dark, and she had no clear remembrance of why. Something skittered through the back of her memory every time she faced the blackness, and she froze. It was a definite liability in her line of work.

Henry murmured soothingly, continuing to stroke her back.

She felt herself relaxing into the motion. He was so very strong...and so comfortingly big. She looked up into the blur of his face with a watery smile. He stood two steps below her, and his face was still above hers.

Impulsively, Caitlyn backed up a step, bringing

her face level with his. She leaned forward and kissed him sweetly on the lips. "Thank you, Henry. I feel much better."

"Why did the girl kiss Henry?" asked the man mountain, his voice puzzled.

She had spent so much of her time trying to defend her virginity that it took her aback to have a man ask such a question. "Because you have been so nice to me, Henry. You make a girl feel safe."

Henry bowed his head. "Most girls don't like Henry. They think he is ugly, because of his face."

Caitlyn reached out and traced the scar on his cheek. "What happened, Henry?"

"Henry doesn't like to talk about it. Does the girl want to go to the kitchen now?"

Caitlyn slipped her arms around Henry's neck. Something about this gentle giant called to her soul. With his protection, even the dark seemed less threatening. "Not right now," she whispered. She pulled Henry's head to hers. "Not right now."

Henry was puzzled. This slight girl, while terrified of the dark, seemed to have no fear whatsoever of him. She had even kissed him. On the lips. Lust and passion were emotions that Henry had not felt in years, yet this little one evoked a strange stirring in his loins. And just as she was scared of the dark, he was nervous about

the feelings coursing through his body.

Henry has always been solitary, not one to mingle with other children, and taken into the Guard at sixteen because of his size. He had been set to the task of jailor when it became clear he had no heart for war.

It had been years since he had a woman. In the darkness of the dungeons, and when he was alone, Henry often felt the surge of need in his body. He pleased himself regularly, yet it was always a temporary thing.

He imagined the girl's tight sheath accepting his cock and knew it would feel infinitely better than his own hand. But this new scullery maid...what if she told the cook? And what if the cook told the King's advisors?

Would Henry find himself incarcerated with the prisoners he was now charged with keeping? He shuddered in the darkness. He could not take that chance...and yet, she still encircled his neck with her arms, her lips smiling invitingly.

Taking the girl's small hand once more, he led her away from the darkened stairwell. "We will go another way."

He hurried her through a narrow passage, down another flight of stairs, then doubled back the way he had come, but on a lower floor of the castle. Finally, he stopped at a stout oaken door and thrust it open. He pulled flint and steel from

his pocket, and—sighing heavily at his own temerity—struck a spark and lit a candle.

Caitlyn trailed behind Henry like a paper streamer as he led her through the castle. As the candle sparked to life, she saw a room take shape around her.

It had the spare contours of a monk's cell. A table and single chair, a washbasin and stand...and in the far corner, a narrow cot. Her heart skipped a beat. Was she prepared to make this sacrifice to save Berne? He *had* saved her life....

Henry moved past her to set the candle on the table and turned back to her, his eyes shyly downcast.

"This isn't the kitchen, Henry."

Henry looked at his feet. "The girl said that she was not interested in seeing the kitchen right now."

Caitlyn hid a smile. "You are right, Henry. The girl did say that."

"What would you like to see instead?" he breathed, his voice hushed.

Caitlyn studied the quiet giant before her. His eyes were downcast, his hands twisting nervously, his attraction to her making itself obvious. In the relatively bright light of the candle, she could see that he was much nearer her own age than she

had thought. She would guess him to be no more than five and twenty. He seemed a good man, and honorable...but he was so huge. She feared what might happen to her if things got beyond her control. If she tried to give herself to him....

There were, however, other activities in which she could engage.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped to the table and hopped up to perch on the edge of it. She did not want to create the wrong impression by sitting on the bed. "Come here, Henry," she ordered, waving him forward.

Slowly, Henry came to stand before her. As large as he was, even sitting atop the table her eyes were centered on his chest.

Still not perfect. She slipped off the table and pulled out the chair, sitting upon it. Better.

Henry stood motionless, but she could sense a trembling in the big man. She glanced up at him, and saw his eyes were studying her face. Never taking her eyes from his, she reached out and laid a shaking hand against the bulge beneath his tunic. She could feel the heat of him through the fabric.

Henry groaned, deep in his throat, and pressed forward against her hand.

"I can't give you what you need, Henry. I fear it would...damage me...do you understand? But I can do other things." She slipped her hand

beneath his tunic and fumbled with the lacings of his leggings. "Let me show you," she whispered.

The laces parted, and his member sprang free of its confinement. Her eyes widened at the sight of it. Her hand could not encircle its girth, and she knew her earlier assessment was correct. This gigantic shaft would split her in two if she tried to take it into her virgin slit. Her lips curved. She had often been chastised for her big mouth, however.

Caitlyn leaned forward and kissed the tip of Henry's rod. It was soft and warm beneath her lips, and Henry moaned. Taking a deep breath, she ran her tongue around the tip of the shaft, tasting a drop of moisture against her lips. She opened her mouth and slid the rigid cock deeper into her throat.

She had never seen a cock so huge. Her tongue slipped back and forth against its hole, eagerly trying to probe it. Her lips clenched tight and her head bobbed. She felt the cock's pulse throb against her tongue.

Caitlyn was oblivious to Henry's moans of pleasure as her fingers teased and tugged at his large, soft balls. To touch and suckle such a cock was a sensation she had never felt before, and as she concentrated all her powers towards making the mighty tool spurt its juices into her throat, all thoughts of Henry's ugliness vanished from her mind.

She purred with pleasure as Henry's large hand tugged at her tunic and fumbled clumsily for her breasts and nipples, and her suckling increased. She felt Henry start to buck into her throat, and her tongue danced faster over and around his cock.

Henry groaned low in his throat, and the warm cock spasmed in her mouth, gushing like a torrent. Caitlyn feared she would gag but, as her swallowing fell into rhythm with each flooding spurt, her task again became one of pure pleasure. Her throat convulsed again and again.

Then it was done.

Henry looked dazed. Caitlyn felt a swell of power. She had done this to him. She had brought this giant to his knees—figuratively if not yet literally.

She looked up at him past the semi-erect cock that formed an obstacle between her face and Henry's. "Berne," she whispered urgently. "Where is Berne?"

Henry's eyes struggled to focus on her. "Who is Berne?" he asked.

Caitlyn had never even considered the fact that the jailor might not be able to help her. She had to find Berne! He was almost a brother to her—the closest thing she had to family. Her eyes swam with tears at the thought she had caused him to be taken in the first place.

Henry's hand reached up to brush her cheek. "Do not cry, girl. Henry will help. If...only..."

There was always a catch, Caitlyn thought wryly. Always an "if."

She sniffed, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. "If what, Henry?"

"Could Henry...could Henry...kiss the girl...there?"

Caitlyn felt her breath catch in her throat. This was not the time or place...but Henry's face looked so hopeful that she gulped. "If you want to," she murmured softly.

She slid off the chair and moved over to the narrow cot. She owed Henry this much. The object of her mission—to rescue Berne—became secondary. Lying back on the hard mattress, she shucked off her leggings.

"Do I please you, Henry?" she asked breathlessly, spreading her legs wider as she lay on the bed. Her nervous fingers wandered over her taut belly and across the tops of her thighs. She trembled, both from the chill of the dank stone room and the awkwardness of the situation. She accidentally brushed the edge of her slit, and a gasp of pleasure distracted her.

Henry, his huge cock still semi-engorged, kneeled down beside the cot. A guileless smile creased his seamed face. "The girl pleases Henry very much," he replied. He lifted his hand,

reaching out as if to caress her, and then hesitated. "Can I touch it?" he whispered, his voice a mere breath of sound.

She took his hand and drew it forward, placing it against the soft fur of her mound. "You may do anything you like, Henry," she answered huskily. "Except fuck me. Do you understand why?"

"Henry would hurt the girl. Henry would never do that."

"I know, Henry. That is why I say anything else. I trust you." She swallowed hard, feeling her heart skittering wildly in her chest. Actually, she was excited by the thought of what he might come up with.

She felt Henry's massive finger—the size of some men's cocks—slip into her heated cunt and rub tentatively at her clit.

Caitlyn knew it was unusual for a girl of her age to still be a virgin, living the life she led. It was not as if she hadn't fantasized about the day she would give herself to a man completely. She had always rather assumed it would be Berne, but he had never proposed it.

In a way, it was to Berne that she was giving herself, because this man might hold both their freedoms in the palm of his hand...

...though at the moment, it was the last thing she cared about Henry's hand holding.

She drew her breath in with a hiss. It felt so

good.

It wasn't as if she had never pleased herself. She was a healthy girl of nineteen. Most of her childhood playmates were mothers now, and she had listened to their whispered stories with wide eyes and rapt attention.

But she had never gotten such pleasure from her own ministrations. She began arching against the finger, impaling herself on it.

The big man climbed upon the bed between her spread knees, and she heard it groan. Henry's drooping cock was still larger than most of those she had glimpsed fully erect in the course of her adventures. He spread her hot little slit wide with two fingers, and she bit her lip at the rush of sensation that surged through her.

Henry bent his great head lower, until she could feel his warm breath stirring the fur upon her mound, and she gasped in anticipation. His free hand slid up her side to cup one breast, as if it were an apple in the palm of his hand, and he began to knead it gently. He placed a soft kiss on her straining cunt, and Caitlyn thought she would go insane.

Then she felt a warm wetness teasing the lips of her slit, and realized that Henry was running his long tongue around the mouth of her thirsting cunt.

"You could take me like that if you'd like,

Henry," she growled, her voice coarse with lust.

His eyes peered up at her like two glowing embers over the rise of her mons, and then he withdrew his fingers, slowly running the tip of his tongue between her nether lips.

She moaned. The sensation was indescribable.

Sliding down on the cot to get a better angle, Henry pulled her legs onto his shoulders and pushed into her with his tongue. On a man his size, the organ was as large as another man's finger, and again she felt herself beginning to arch against him.

His tongue thrust in and out like a liquid piston, and she pushed against it, wanting more and more of it.

"Deeper!" Caitlyn gasped, her fingers twisting into his hair.

She felt the tip of a finger against her bunghole, and nodded her head, too caught up in the sensations to speak. Slowly, he pushed the digit into her ass, and she howled with mingled pleasure and pain.

Instantly, it was withdrawn, and Henry cried anxiously, "Did I hurt the girl?"

"No, no, Henry!" she gasped. "More! Please, more!"

He replaced the finger, pushing upward on her cunt from beneath, thrusting his tongue to meet it.

Caitlyn felt as if her mind would explode. All

her reservations were burned away.

"Take me, Henry!"

"I can't..." he protested. "The girl is too small. Henry is too big."

"I don't care, Henry. Fuck me. Please!"

Henry pulled her legs down from his shoulders, his finger still playing within her ass.

"Is the girl sure?"

"Oh, yes, Henry! The girl is very sure."

Caitlyn could see that his cock was stirring at the mere mention of such sport. It was nearly erect again, and as big around as Berne's balled fist. The thought of it inside her, splitting her, excited her to the point of frenzy.

"Here, Henry. Come here. Let me kiss it first."

Obediently, he brought his engorged member to her lips, and she ran it deep into her throat one more time, dampening its length.

Pulling her head back, she groaned, "Now, Henry. Take me now."

He knelt on the edge of the bed and touched the tip of his cock to her slit. It felt like a live coal sitting there, hot and throbbing. She bucked forward.

"Now. Please, now!"

Biting his lip with obvious anxiety, Henry eased the edges of her slit apart with the fingers of one hand and renewed his invasion of her ass with the other. With tender care, he slid his cock forward,

one maddening finger width at a time.

Caitlyn felt as if she were being pulled apart by wild horses. The pain was devastating, yet exquisite. She thrust up to meet his assault, twisting and writhing to take him deeper inside her.

Suddenly, he could go no further. She could feel him up against her barrier.

She took a deep breath. "Pull back a little, Henry," she gasped, "and then ram through it. Do it hard and fast. Rip it away."

Henry grunted. He was beginning to feel the pressure mounting himself. Her cunt was just as hot and tight as he had imagined. "I'll hurt the girl," he moaned desperately.

"Only for a moment. It's all right, Henry. I want you to," she assured him. "Please!" She rocked against him, the elastic barrier caressing the tip of his straining cock.

It was the last incentive he needed to fall over the edge. With a growl low in his throat, he inched back, and then thrust home. His huge cock ripped through her membrane, and she screamed with pain.

Henry froze, tears starting to his eyes. "I didn't want to hurt the girl!" he wailed.

"Don't stop!" she begged. "Finish it. It will help the pain."

He groaned, and Caitlyn pushed herself further

onto his cock, grinding forward as it tore its way deeper. "Oh, yes, Henry!" she gasped. "Give me more."

He pulled back a fraction and then pushed forward past his original resting place.

"Yes!" Caitlyn screamed, throwing her arms around his neck and dragging his face downward. She kissed him hard, thrusting her tongue between his parted lips.

He returned the kiss avidly.

"Suck my tit," she whispered in his ear, and he bent his head to take her nipple into his mouth.

She pushed it into his face as his cock thrust within her, faster and faster now that their juices began to lubricate the untried passage. Her legs locked around his waist, and she felt the tip of his cock hit her very center. He was still not fully sheathed.

"More," she whimpered. "I want more!"

Henry nipped her ear. "I'll give the girl more," he breathed.

She felt a second finger maneuver into her ass, and then the teasing pressure upward against the friction of his cock. The sensation was maddening.

Henry suckled her breast while his fingers played, and she moaned.

The sound seemed to be the final straw. Henry nuzzled her neck, nipping and then sucking the soft skin. His thrusts within her were now hard

and fast, and he no longer tried to be gentle.

Caitlyn bit her lip against the pain until she tasted blood, but beneath the pain a pleasure began to rise, the likes of which she had never experienced. Her entire world seemed to explode as Henry impaled her on his fiery cock. And now she felt her nether lips grinding against his pubic bone, and the extra pressure was enough to send wave after wave of ecstasy crashing down upon her. She ground against him, shuddering with desire as his seed exploded into her willing cunt.

She had never felt anything like this. Surely she was dying!

Henry groaned, and collapsed beside her on the narrow cot. "I am sorry if I hurt the girl..."

"Cait," she replied, "my name is Cait." Dimly she knew that she had just placed her life in Henry's hands by giving him her name, but she felt compelled to do so.

"Cait..." he whispered, making it sound like a prayer.

"Henry, I must find my friend, Berne. The one I asked you about."

His face fell. Sadness washed over it, and he sighed. "Yes. Cait is looking for a boy. Cait has no need for Henry."

She felt her heart lurch. What was it about this gentle giant that affected her so?

"That's not true, Henry," she answered quietly.

"I think I have a lot of need for you. But I must help Berne. I owe him a great deal. He—he is like my brother, Henry. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Henry had a brother once."

"Good. Then you know how important family can be. He's all I've got. They brought him to the castle at the beginning of the sevenday."

"Is he a spit-boy, or footman?" asked Henry, obviously puzzled. "If so, he should be in the kitchen for dinner about now."

"N—no, Henry..." Caitlyn took a deep breath, and then released it with a shuddering sigh. "He's a prisoner in the dungeon. He's a thief, Henry. And so am I."

"A thief?"

"Yes, Henry. A thief—a street rat. But not by choice," she hastened to add. "I have no other way. I have no family except the other cast-offs. I am too old to be a serving-wench—they train for that from the time they toddle. I am too plain to be a barmaid. All I have are my wits and my agility."

"But Berne was taken to save my neck, and I cannot let him rot in a cell, or worse, because of me. If you help me to rescue him, I will turn myself over to the king in his place."

"No...no, gir—Cait—that is a bad idea. The king hates thieves the most. He would do terrible things to Cait. No. Henry will not turn you over to the king."

"But I have to get Berne out of the dungeon, Henry – don't you see?"

"Aye," replied Henry sadly. "I see. Berne must get out—but Cait can't go in. I will bring Berne to Cait. Then she will go. Henry will never see her again."

"Sure, you will, Henry. We can meet in town. You get out of the castle sometimes, don't you?"

Henry shook his huge head. "No. Not if Henry helps a prisoner escape. Henry has the only key. He'll be put in the dark instead. No way to hide that he helped."

Caitlyn's heart skipped a beat. "They'd blame you?"

"Yes."

Of course, they would. They'd have to blame someone. Henry would be a perfect scapegoat.

"No...that won't do. Never mind, Henry. You can't help me."

"But Henry wants to help Cait."

"I can't get you in trouble. It wouldn't be right. You've been so kind to me."

"If Henry doesn't help, how will Cait rescue the boy?"

It was a good question. She had no idea how to find Berne, much less get him out of the cell.

"Maybe you could give me the key and pretend that I stole it from you."

Henry chuckled. "You, steal key from Henry?"

He pointed a finger at his slab-like chest.

"I guess that is pretty hard to believe...even if you told them it was a man who stole it."

"I will do it for Cait. I do not care what happens to Henry."

"Cait cares, Henry." She raised a hand to trace his cheek. "I don't want to see you hurt."

"Maybe...Henry could go with Cait and the boy. Far away from the castle. Henry can work. Take care of Cait."

It was a thought. Pickings had been slim of late, and the trinkets she had stolen from the King would give them a nest egg. The border was but hours away, and Berne not worth a manhunt. They could start over in the next country...be more than street thieves. Have a real home...

"That would be lovely, Henry. Let's find Berne, and we will all three go away."

Henry could not believe his luck. The girl—Cait—would take him away from this castle and the job that hurt his heart every time he had to lash a prisoner or lead them to the block. Had he truly found an escape from this jail he was confined in as surely as his charges?

He thought he might know who the girl was looking for now. The thin blond boy with the broken skull. The boy was sick, but Henry could carry him away. There was no weight on him.

"Henry thinks he knows the boy. Come. Henry will take Cait to the boy."

Awkwardly, he reached out and caressed Cait's cheek. "Then we will go away?"

She nodded against his hand. "Then we will go away."

Henry's heart soared.

Cait straightened her clothing hastily, and rose stiffly from the bed. Moving was painful at first, but she brushed aside the discomfort. They would get Berne and get out of here. Go someplace where they could start over. Maybe somewhere where they didn't have to live on the street to survive. With Henry's strength to protect them...

"Let's go."

She followed him with more confidence now, not minding the dark so much with Henry's shadowy bulk before her. There was one bad moment when he suddenly thrust his arm back to block her and answered a hail from a passing guard, but the other never even saw her lurking behind her benefactor.

After what seemed an eternity of wandering up and down corridors, Henry stopped before a heavy, ironbound door and took a key from his pouch.

"The boy is in here," he rumbled, in as close an approximation to a whisper as he could manage.

She nodded. Eagerly she pushed forward. "Open the door, Henry. Hurry."

He turned the key in the well-oiled lock, and the door swung open.

Cait flew across the threshold, to pull up short when she saw the dim form lying in the corner. There was no movement at the sound of their entry. Berne lay as if dead, a huddled heap of rag and bone on a thin layer of straw.

"The boy is sick," Henry said softly, his voice gentle.

Cait tiptoed to Berne's side, fearful of disturbing him. Her heart thudded hard in her chest when she saw the ragged cut on his forehead, and the bruises that darkened his pale skin.

"Henry cleaned him up as best as knew how. Tried to feed him some broth, but he won't eat any. The boy doesn't look good."

Cait knelt beside Berne. "No, no, he doesn't, Henry." She felt the trickle of a hot tear on her cheek as she smoothed Berne's hair from his forehead. His face was flushed with fever. At the touch of her hand, he gave a little cry, and his eyes snapped open.

Berne dragged himself backward, cringing against the wall. "No, don't hurt me anymore!" He curled into a ball.

"Berne, it's me, Cait. I've come to take you out

of here."

The boy frowned, trying to focus on her face. "Cait? Is that really you?"

"Yes, Berne. I came to rescue you."

"Cait must come now. The guards will be back soon. Henry will take the boy." Henry started forward.

Berne cried out, raising a hand before his face.

"It's all right," Cait soothed him, draping a comforting arm about his shoulders. "Henry is a friend."

"He's one of them. One of the Guard!"

"No, he's not...well, yes he is, but he's helping me to take you away from here."

Berne moaned low in his throat. "They hurt me."

Cait's nose prickled, and tears welled in her eyes. "It's all my fault. I never should have left you."

"It would have been worse...for a girl."

Henry put a hand on Cait's shoulder. "They will be coming soon. We must leave now."

She nodded and stood. "Berne, you can trust Henry. He's risking his life to help us."

Henry bent down and scooped Berne into his arms like he was lifting a bolt of cloth. "Henry knows a way out of the castle, but we must go quick."

He led them out of the cell and down a dank

corridor with walls that felt damp beneath Cait's fingers.

"This hall goes under the moat. It comes up in a hill far away from the walls. It is well hidden. No one knows about it anymore. It is forgotten to all but Henry."

Berne's breathing was labored in his chest, and rattled in his throat like her father's had when he was dying of the Cold Sleep. Cait bit her lip. Would she lose him after all?

They came at last to an arched wooden door with a heavy lock. "Cait must get the key from Henry's pouch," their rescuer instructed. "Henry can't reach with the boy in his arms."

Cait reached into the belt pouch at Henry's waist, fingers glancing against the bulge of his member. A little shiver went through her as she remembered their earlier coupling. It was a sensation she could definitely get used to....

She fished out a key and fumbled it into the lock. It turned with a grating protest, as if reluctant to release them, but it did turn. The door swung open into the night. After the dank, dampness of the tunnel, the warm air smelled sweet as summer.

Cait could hear sleepy birds twittering in the distance, and saw fine lace shadows of tree branches against the blue velvet sky. "It's starting to lighten, Henry. We must get as far from the

castle as we can."

Henry knelt down and laid Berne on the ground.

"What are you doing, Henry? There is no time."

He got to his feet and put an awkward arm around her shoulders. "The boy is gone, Cait."

"What do you mean, gone?" The import of his words struck her like a knife to the heart. "He can't be—he can't be dead."

Cait threw herself to the ground beside Berne, bending her head to his lips to feel for a breath on her cheek. There was nothing.

"At least he died free," murmured Henry softly.

The tears that had hung threatening in the back of her throat broke through her resolve and streamed in a hot flood down her cheeks, great wracking sobs tearing from her. She vaguely registered Henry trying to raise her to her feet, and she pushed him away.

"Cait, he's gone. The boy is dead. If Cait and Henry don't go, the guards will find us. There are not many ways out of the castle from the dungeon. Someone will remember this passage. It is not safe here."

"Berne..." she moaned. He had always been the smart one; taking care of her from the time she was six. What was she to do?

"Come, Cait," urged Henry. "Henry will protect you now." He lifted her to her feet.

She collapsed against the warm strength of him. "Oh, Henry, what will I do?"

He slipped an arm behind her knees and lifted her up like a child. "Cait will stay with Henry. Henry will take care of her."

She laid her head against his chest, hearing the strong beat of his heart, feeling the solid warmth of him. "He was all I had."

A thought struck her, and she struggled to get down. "We should bury him proper!"

Henry's arms tightened their hold. "There is no time, little one. The boy may prove himself one last time. The guards may think that he escaped on his own if we leave him there to be found. They may not search further for one jailor that most feel to be of no importance anyway. Henry and Cait will be free."

It was the longest speech she had yet to hear from Henry, and the longing in his voice at the final word convinced her. "You are right, Henry. There is nothing more for us here."

She sighed and let herself relax against him once more. It was ironic...she had gone to the castle to rescue Berne, but she had wound up with his jailor instead. The street life was behind her now. She would work to make Henry a home. Perhaps to raise his children...

She curved her lips into a smile at the thought. It would be a pleasure to please him so. Henry



had well and truly caught this thief...and offered her a life sentence that she freely accepted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tysche Dwai tries to live up to her unique name. Her fiction explores sensuality in many forms. She's written fantasy, fairy tales, contemporary, and paranormal so far, and intends to turn a hand to science fiction soon. She believes there is nothing more interesting than human sexuality, and wants to venture down all the paths she can find.