

Enemy Fair
Book One: The Challenge

By Sullivan Clarke

©2011 Blushing Books Publications and Sullivan Clarke

Copyright © 2011 by Blushing Books® and Sullivan Clarke
All rights reserved. No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any
information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the
publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books® is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Clarke, Sullivan
Enemy Fair Book One The Challenge
eBook ISBN: 978-1-60968-458-7

Cover Design: ABCD Graphics

Blushing Publications thanks you whole-heartedly for your purchase with us!

There are plenty more stories such as the one you've purchased from Blushing Books!
Visit our online store to view our mighty selection!

<http://www.blushingbooks.com>

This book is intended for adults only. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Chapter One

Mora sat there by the fire, shaking, as she listened to the raised voices of the men. They were angry. She knew that. And she couldn't blame them. After all, the old law decreeing that women be allowed to show honor in battle along side the men was seen as obsolete. The fact that it remained law at all was nothing more than a nod to a warrior heritage long forgotten among the men - and women - of her realm. As children, females were trained to fight, but as adults they never did.

So why had Mora stepped up and offered to fight Lord Kedar? The answer was simple, at least to her. By offering to fight in the Lord Desmond's stead, she'd save his life. For as much as she feared her own death at the tip of Kedar's blade, that fear was but a shadow compared to the fear of seeing her kindly husband die before her.

She blinked back tears of she recalled their wedding night a mere year before. She, a beautiful widow, had been chosen by Lord Desmond as much for her benefit as for his. He needed a wife; she needed protection. As he sat beside her on the bed, his bony knees poking from beneath his nightdress, he had fixed bleary eyes on her and smiled a kindly smile.

"Fear not," he had said. "I would not insult you by asking you to couple with me. I am old, and impotent. If it will not vex you, it is enough for me to have people think I was potent enough to keep you in my bedchamber this night."

Mora had smiled and kissed him tenderly. And she'd let the old man hold her all night long. It had made her happy, how kindly he was to her. And she had been relieved not to have to worry about soothing his ego or miraculously teasing his dormant cock enough to slip inside and impregnate her. For although she was still fertile, her children were grown - or nearly grown - and scattered about. It felt good to be approaching her fourth decade and look - and feel - as if she were much younger. The marriage to Lord Desmond had afforded her a comfortable home, land to stroll and ride on, and a kind companion whose eventual death would guarantee her a gracious living before she joined him in the afterlife where - she hoped - he would be young again as she knew he wished he were when they were together.

She never thought she would die before he did. She never thought she would die like this. But as she sat listening to the men argue against a law she knew they could not circumvent, she also knew she could think of any more noble way to die.

Finally he came in. He looked older than ever. He sighed as he took the seat next to her.

"Why?" he asked.

"You know why," she said quietly. "He'll kill you."

“He’ll kill you,” Desmond said, his voice quavering like a leaf on the wind.
“I cannot stand to see you die,” she said.

“And you think I can stand to see you die?” he asked.

She took her hands in his. The skin was so thin, like parchment.

“Desmond,” she said. “Please understand. You’ve seen death before. You’ve lost wives and children. But you’re still here and I believe it is because this land needs you. It needs your good counsel and your wisdom. It needs you to continue to raise the kind of army it will take to defeat Kedar. That is why he calls you out. You know it. I know it. He wants to cut you down because he knows it will throw our land into chaos.”

“But Mora...”

She closed her eyes so she would not have to look upon the distress on his face. “Please. It is the only way.” When she opened her eyes again, she sought to look brave. For him. “Besides,” she added, forcing a smile. “It will turn everyone against him when he kills a woman, forced or not.”

Her husband looked at her with sad-eyed wonder. “If you had been born a man, you surely would have been king. For you are brave and shrewd.”

She leaned over and kissed him, gently, on the soft, loose skin of his face. He was a good man, such a good and kind man...

Mora stood then, picking up the sword that she’d chosen from the chest while the men had been arguing. It was small, but big enough for her. The hilt was inlaid with blue jewels that matched the blue of her skirt. She was glad she’d dressed for riding and not for fashion; she’d be able to move and dodge. It would buy her at least a few minutes on the battlefield before Kedar cut her down.

The men were still murmuring in the other room.

“They’re angry with me,” she said.

“They are angry that you shamed them by doing what none of them were brave enough to do,” Desmond said simply. “The law clearly states that anyone one person can offer to give up their lives in single combat for another. Any of them could have stepped forward. None did. You shame them all...”

“That was not my intent,” she said.

“No,” he said. “But we know that the male pride is weaker than anything, even the weakest woman is stronger.” He stood and walked to her. His tired eyes twinkled in the

firelight. His beard was white as snow. His teeth were still even, although yellowed, as he smiled.”

“You are strong, my dear,” he said. “And now I will give you the only thing I have left that is of worth to you: Advice. Move swiftly. Kedar is big. Tire him out. Dodge. Weave. Duck. Make him chase you. He will; he has no choice. If he doesn’t take your life, by law he forfeits the challenge and is disgraced. He will try and kill you, as distasteful as it may be even to him. But your skill is in your small size and fleet foot. Evade him, my love. Evade him as long as you can. When he breathes heavy like a tired horse stab him here.”

Lord Desmond pointed to underneath his arm, where armor did not cover. “Go deep. It will feel...awful. There is no easy way to kill a man, not even an enemy. But you must drive the sword in deep, for if you do not kill him the wound will bring out the beast in him and I fear your death at his hands would be brutal.”

She nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

He was blinking back tears now and cleared his through several times in rapid succession as he ran his bony fingers through her thick, honey-colored hair. It fell in waves down her back. She could not count the times he’d told her it was beautiful, that she was beautiful...

They could hear roaring now. It was coming from outside. Kedar’s army was getting restless. He and his men were tired of waiting for Lord Desmond and his generals to find away around the law. It was time. Time for her to face him. She told Desmond this. He nodded.

They turned towards the entrance to the tent. Standing there was her maid, Dagmar. Her plain face was streaked with tears.

“A word?” she asked Desmond. “It will take but a moment.” He nodded and Mora walked over to the woman who had served her so faithfully for so long.

“They could find no way to save you?” Dagmar asked.

“I don’t want to be saved,” Mora said. “I’m at peace with my decision. It is the best way.”

“No....” Dagmar began, but stopped. “Are you afraid, my lady?”

Mora looked out through the slit in the tent. Kedar was standing on the crest of the hill. Even from a distance he seemed huge.

“Yes,” she admitted quietly. “I am afraid. I cannot beat him. He will take my life, as he must.”

“My lady...” Dagmar’s voice cracked with emotion.

“My husband will make provisions for you, Dagmar. You will live in comfort all the days of your life.” Mora turned to Desmond. “Promise me?”

“Your maid will live as a queen,” he promised.

Mora embraced the other woman and then, taking her husband’s hand, walked through the opening in the tent. It was late afternoon and ironically one of the most beautiful days Mora had ever seen. Winter was just beginning to break its icy grip. Birds chirped and chased one another across the field in expectation of spring’s arrival. But aside from bird calls, all was silent. She could feel hundreds upon hundreds of eyes on her. But two she sought to avoid. Kedar’s. She did not want to look at him for fear of showing her husband just how terrified she was becoming with each passing step.

Their army parted like a sea before them and finally they were there, on the hill, and Mora forced herself to look upon the man who would take her life. He was large, with blonde hair peeking from beneath the circular helmet on his head. His face was full, clean-shaven and slightly handsome. He had a cleft in his chin and even from a distance she could see that his eyes were blue. He wore mail, and gauntlets, but even with his arms and legs covered she knew he was broad and strong of limb. On the front of his tunic was the silhouette of a crimson eagle. It matched the image on the banner carried by his standard-bearer.

Dominant. It was the one word she’d heard used to describe him again and again. Kedar had dominated another army. He was dominant in his latest campaign. He was drawing closer and sought to dominate Lord Desmond’s army. Mora’s heart pounded faster. She was mincemeat.

“You send a woman to fight me!” Those were his first words, and not to her. The boomed like thunder.

“He did not send me to fight you!” She was surprised to hear herself speak in reply as she pointed to Lord Desmond. “I am choosing to die for him. It was my idea to thwart your plan. Not his. His land needs him, because even if he is now frail of body his is strong in wisdom and character and I would not see that taken from our people! That is the kind of loyalty this man inspires, Kedar! Perhaps one day you will be so loved as my Lord Desmond is.”

The mocking smile faded from Kedar’s face and was replaced by a hard stare. His expressions said it all: How dare this slip of a woman defy him. In his realm, there were no laws allowing equality between the sexes. Women spoke when they were spoken to.

He pulled the sword from his hilt. And as he did, Kedar smiled again. It was a slow smile, a cunning smile. Mora did not like it.

“If your frail lord is amused to watch his pretty bird’s life taken, then so be it.” He gestured her to come with his forefingers. His sword gleamed in the afternoon sun. Mora swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and walked towards him.

The armies were humming like a hive. As Mora drew closer to Lord Kedar she concentrated on feeling the wind on her face and in her long, loose hair one last time.

He lifted his sword as she came close. She felt like a child next to him, like David next to Goliath. But David had beaten Goliath. He’d beaten him by being quick. She decided to go for the element of surprise. Mora yelled and rushed him, and it worked. Lord Kedar leapt out of the way a split second in time to avoid being skewered.

She turned to see him advancing on her. His face was hard, resolute. Her heart pounded. He raised his sword. She stood and then ducked, dodging. He missed. The crowds roared. She wasn’t sure if it was in disappointment or delight.

Mora turned to face him. The wind had blown her hair across her face. She held the sword with one hand and pushed the billowing tresses out of her face with the other. She had no idea how beautiful she looked at that moment, even to the man who was coming at her with the sword.

She moved again, slicing backwards as she did. Her blade hit something. His arm. She caught him just above the gauntlet. There was blood on her blade. She looked down at it, amazed and then up at Kedar, who was looking down at his arm with a sort of curious surprise.

He walked towards her. She retreated backwards. His eyes were intense. He looked predatory, like a lion. Mora raised her sword. He was coming at her faster now. She looked at the rise and fall of his chest. He was breathing more heavily. Did it mean he was tired? Should she strike? She decided she must, before he did. She remembered where her husband had told her to strike. She lunged.

He moved out of the way with surprising swiftness and then Mora felt a crushing pressure. It took a second for her to realize that he had her in his grip. In the second he’d moved aside, Kedar had grabbed her mid-body with such force that she’d dropped her little sword and now hung helplessly between his body and thick forearm.

He felt the huge blade of his sword move to her throat. She heard the collective cry from her army and imagined the distressed face of her husband, who was about to witness her ultimate sacrifice.

“Lord Desmond!” Kedar’s voice boomed across the hill. “You allow your woman to do as she wishes, foolishly. She comes to fight and brave though she has been bested on the field of battle. She has offered up her life, and by law I am required to take it. But the law is open to interpretation. The law does not say, ‘kill.’ It says, ‘take a life.’ And I will do that. Lord Desmond, your woman’s life is mine. She is mine. And you will

now lead an army who knows you as the man who gave his woman over to the tent and bed of his rival!"

A cry went up from the armies and Mora felt her head swim.

"No!" she cried. "NO!" His statement had hit her like a bucket of cold water and suddenly Mora realized she'd been wrong when she thought death the greatest thing to fear. The idea of becoming the property of this large, inflexible man suddenly seemed ten times worth.

"You agreed to take my life!" she said, grasping the blade and pushing it towards her throat. "So take it! Unless you are a cowardly son of a whore dog! Take it!"

But Kedar instead grasped her arms and held them tight against her body as he sheathed his sword. Mora fought and struggled. She did not want her people to see her borne away like this to live as an example of what was being cast as her husband's shame. The bastard! He had bested her! He had beat her at her own game!

"Come," he was saying, and gave her a tug. But she refused and instead turned to strike him. Again - with surprisingly fast reflexes - he stayed her hand. And this time when he spoke, it was to her.

"Raise your hand against me again, or disobey me in any way and I will punish you until you cry rivers of tears."

The warning was said quietly, calmly, and something about the delivery of the words reminded Mora of the one word she'd so often heard associated with Lord Kedar. Dominant. He was not a man to be trifled with. He was not a man who was used to being disobeyed. She would have to go with him. Her head began to spin. She had to think of something, and fast.

"I DEMAND AUDIENCE WITH THE NOBLE COUNCIL!" she cried.

The army hummed again as her request was passed from those who'd heard it to the men who had not.

"The Noble Council?" Kedar asked. "And to what ends."

"I DEMAND AN AUDIENCE WITH THE NOBLE COUNCIL. FOR AN INTERPRETATION OF THE LAW! I WAS TO DIE TODAY, NOT TO BECOME THIS MAN'S...."

"...pet?" he finished the sentence quietly, where only she could hear. "Slave? Property? Chattel? If I take your life under my interpretation, any of those things apply. And if challenging me was indeed your decision then you must prepare to accept the consequences of your defeat."

She moved to pull away with a cry of frustration but he grabbed her and pulled her back against his thick, sturdy torso. Mora had never felt so small.

“The Lady Mora has demanded an audience with the Noble Council!” he shouted. “Only a dishonorable man would deny her the right to seek an interpretation of the law that satisfies all on this field.”

“And what then?” came an impassioned cry from somewhere among Desmond’s men. “If they say you must kill her, will you kill her?”

“I will! But it is not because I chose her as my opponent! How the lady ended up here is for you all to discuss. Until this matter is decided, she is my prisoner. After the council’s decision I will either kill her or keep her as my own! Either way, I am victorious on this day! Tomorrow, the council will decide her fate!”

He turned to go back to his camp. This time, he did not give Mora the option of following. Instead, Kedar picked her up as one would a child and began to carry her towards his tent. She struggled, but could not move from his grasp. She craned her neck to catch one last glimpse of her husband’s tent, but could not see it, for Kedar’s men had fallen in behind him and were blocking her view. Directly behind her captor was a tall, thin man with sandy hair and a slightly ferret-like face. She could tell by his armor that he was of high rank, and he grinned at her now. Mora’s face flamed with anger and she looked away. She wanted to strike the mocking expression off the man’s face, but knew she could not reach him even if she tried. And she remembered Kedar’s warning when she’d tried to strike him.

She looked ahead. They were approaching the camp. Men were laughing, jeering, and cheering as he approached bearing the diminutive blonde woman in the blue dress. Word had spread fast, and everyone seemed amused at Kedar’s reluctant burden. She wanted to hide her face for shame, but the only place to bury it would be in the broad shoulder of her enemy, and she could not bring herself to do that. So she concentrated on looking straight ahead and fighting back the tears she so desperately wanted to shed.

Chapter Two

“It isn’t necessary to restrain me.” Mora tried to keep the edge of fear from her voice as Kedar entered the tent and asked his top general, Creed, to fetch a manacle and chain.

“It is always necessary to restrain someone I believe will flee,” Kedar replied. “And in your case, you have nothing to lose by running away. Neither outcome from the council will bode well for you.”

“I’m not afraid to die,” she said hotly.

“No,” he said. “But you are afraid of belonging to me.”

He sat her and took her on his lap, instructing Creed to place the manacle on her ankle. But Mora was not willing to be restrained. With a cry she drew her foot back and kicked Kedar’s kneeling general in the chest, sending him sprawling. The chain flew from his hand and in the split second Kedar was distracted she reached down and bit his arm hard enough to shock him into losing his grip. Mora leapt from Kedar’s lap and made for the exit. But she didn’t get far before he’d caught up with her. Again, his iron grip fastened itself around her small waist. This time she fought like a banshee, cursing and swearing in a manner that would earn any of her husband’s soldiers’ admiration.

But Kedar was not amused.

“You were warned,” he said as he sat back down. And this time when he took her onto his lap, it was facedown across his knee. She felt his large hand reach for the hem of her skirt, felt the cool air on the backs of her thighs as the hem was raised to her waist. Mora cried out in fear and reached back to push the skirt back down, but Kedar trapped her hands with maddening ease.

And then he began to spank her.

Mora had never been spanked. She’d never had anyone raise their hand to her, in fact. Her family had been scholars, her first husband a quiet, wealthy vineyard owner who preferred cultivating plants to people. Her children were equally quiet, gentle and studious, having inherited little of their mother’s fire even if they did appreciate it. And of course, Desmond - even if he’d been able - would have never hit the woman he worshipped.

But Kedar had no qualms about hitting her, and that was just what he did now. His broad hand slammed down on her bottom with tremendous force, forcing from between her lips the cry she had vowed her enemy would not hear. She tried to prepare herself for the next blow, biting her lips to keep from crying out. But she could not. The deep, stinging hurt of the punishing spansks could not be ignored or endured. She cried out, and then those cries turned to wails and then - to her shame - sobs as her bottom rapidly reddened under

his hand. And in front of her, Creed - who had risen to his feet - watched the whole thing with a satisfied smile on his face.

“No! No!” Mora gasped through her sobs. “No! Stop! Stop! Stop!”

But he did not. And she knew he would not until she begged him to. It was not something she'd considered, being subjugated by an enemy. She'd not prepared herself for the inevitability. Kedar had been correct; she'd been naïve. And now, across his broad lap, each successive blow of his huge hand on her small, burning bottom brought her closer and closer to the keen humiliation felt by one who is forced to beg for mercy.

“Please! Please! I beg you! Stop! Please! It hurts!!!!” She was aware that tears were sluicing off her face in streams and was reminded of his warning. Rivers of tears. Well, she was crying them now and it would be Kedar who decided how long the river would run. She was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. She had no fight left in her. She was drained. Mora went limp, the only movement now coming in little spasms that shook her each time his hand met her backside with a resounding smack that jolted her forward across his sturdy thighs.

When he was done she continued to cry bitterly, brokenly. Kedar drew her skirts back down and with a patient sigh turned her over on her back and sat her up. She yelped pitifully when her punished bottom made contact with his lap but he held her there, shushing her now as he did. He was not holding her tightly, just tightly enough.

“Do not raise a voice or a hand to any male in this realm, especially not one in my confidence.” he said. “Do not disobey me.”

He nodded towards Creed.

“Put it on her.”

This time Mora did not fight; instead she turned her face into Kedar's chest. She was shaking from the pain of the spanking. Did he even know how badly she was hurting? Did he care? She could feel Creed's mocking eyes upon her. She knew he was enjoying her humiliation, even if his commander saw it as nothing more than responsibility.

There was a click and when she looked down she saw the manacle on her foot. A chain ran from the metal ring that encased her ankle to a pole that anchored the center of the tent. She could not escape now.

Kedar stood and carried Mora to a pile of furs near the post. He knelt and put her down gently.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She shook her head and sniffed dejectedly.

“Thirsty?”

She shook her head again.

“You are tired.”

Mora did not respond. She did not want to acknowledge that he was right about anything, and he was right about this. She was exhausted, spent, wrung out. And all she wanted to do was lie down, go to sleep and wake up to find this whole thing had been a terrible dream.

“Rest, Lady Mora,” he said. “You’ll need your strength to make your case to the noble council tomorrow.”

She looked up at him. “Will you kill me?”

“Only if they give me no choice,” he said. “But they will. The council is wise and just. They will see the folly in your decision and spare you.”

“By making me your property?” she asked bitterly. “And how is that sparing me?”

He knelt down. “I may be ruthless. I may expand my empire at the expense of others. But all I dominate know me to be a fair master, if a harsh one. You will know me as such, too. That much I will guarantee.”

He did not wait for her to reply, and Mora was glad he did not. For she had no reply. The word “master” had chilled her to the core and she lay down now and curled into a tiny ball on the fur. She wanted to cry again, but Creed was still in the tent and she could feel him watching. Her bottom throbbed with pain. She longed to rub it, to scream from the hurt of it. But instead she squeezed her hands into the fur of the hide she lay on and shut her eyes tight, holding back another river of tears until blessed sleep overcame her at last.

It was dark when a dream jerked her awake. Mora cried out and sat up, disoriented. Somewhere between reality and dream state, she rose and tried to run, only to fall when the chain stopped her. She felt strong hands on her, and instantly remembered where she was. And she remembered the hands, too. They were the same hands that had captured her, restrained her, and spanked her until she’d cried rivers of tears.

“Sshh,” he said as she froze with fear at his touch. “I’m not going to hurt you. Lay back down.”

His voice was gentling her, like one would gentle a wild and frightened thing. Mora felt herself quiver as he drew her back up and towards the furs. She wanted to run, to fight, but the soreness in her bottom was still there, diminished now but its lingering presences a humbling reminder of her helplessness against him.

She lay back down, not speaking and turned her back to him. Mora curled up into a ball, making herself feel and seem smaller. It was how she slept when she was scared or insecure, an old habit developed in some nascent point in her childhood she'd long forgotten. Had she analyzed it, she may have realized it was borne from a desire to curl up and disappear from whatever was scaring her. But she was not letting her mind acknowledge just how scared she really was.

She closed her eyes and prayed to the gods to let the Noble Council call for her death. She tried to imagine what it would be like. Kedar did not seem as he had been portrayed. He did not seem cruel so much as resolute. He was a man who did what he had to do. He was not to be toyed or trifled with, and he did not toy or trifle with others. If he killed her, it would be quick and she knew he could do that easily. His arms held her so easily and she knew that had he chosen to, he could have crushed her on the battlefield that very day. He could have squeezed until the breath left her, or snapped her neck like a twig. She'd have been dead in an instant and without a drop of blood. A moment of pain and it would have all been over.

She thought about this, lying there, until her eyelids grew heavy and another restless sleep carried her off to a land of dreams in which she was captured and recaptured again and again.

Kedar woke her at dawn. She found a plate of food waiting for her, and a basin of water for washing. She cleaned her face and ignored the food. A scruffy looking youth retrieved the plate and a moment later Kedar carried it back into the tent.

"It's not a short journey. You need to eat."

She pushed it away when he offered.

"No."

He handed it back to her. "It is not a request. It is an order. You will eat what is on this plate, or most of it, or I will turn your bottom a deeper shade of red than I did last night." He paused. "The choice is yours."

Her face flamed hot with shame at his casual mention of the hue of her spanked bottom. Mora took the plate resentfully and, wincing, sat down from her kneeling position. She tried to ignore him watching her eat but could not.

"Have you no men to command?" she asked peevishly. "Or are you so bored that you make a habit of watching strangers have breakfast?"

"I seldom get strangers so pretty," he said.

"I suppose most kill themselves before you capture them," she said. "Were I so smart to have done the same..."

“You’ve a sharp tongue, woman,” he said. “Your men must live in fear of their harridans’ words.”

“Actually, they do not,” she replied coolly. “Nor do they consider us harridans for speaking our minds.” She raised her light blue eyes to his darker ones. “But then again, our men are men.”

He merely smirked at this.

“Tell me, Lady Mora,” he asked. “Are you yet with child, being married a year hence to the old lord?”

Now it was her turn to feel the sting of a jibe.

“Of course not,” she said. “We are both too old.”

“He is,” Keldar said. “But you...”

“I am older than I look,” she replied. “I am coming up on my fourth decade a month hence and the children I bore to my late husband are all nearly adults themselves. So if you seek to hand me off to one of your men as a fertile prize I’m afraid he may be disappointed.”

“I have no intention of handing you off,” he responded. “The notion of a well-settled, schooled mount always appeals to the seasoned rider.”

Her face flamed. “I’m not a horse,” she said.

“No,” he said. “But you can be mounted. And should the noble council decide...”

“So the ‘honorable’ Keldar - the man who would not kill a woman - would ravish one?” she cut him off, her eyes hard and challenging.

“Ravish? Never,” he said. “When you come to my bed, if you come, it will be as an obedient and submissive partner. No force will be necessary.”

He rose and smiled at her. “We leave within the hour. Creed will fetch you.”

Mora looked away, choosing not to respond. She did not want to see Creed and dreaded his arrival. When he came, he knelt before where she sat on the furs and stared at her. He wore the same bemused expression he had the day before.

“Does it hurt where I kicked you?” she asked with a deliberately false sweetness.

“Not as bad as your bottom hurt after Lord Keldar got done with it. He reached down for the manacle on her ankle, fiddling with some keys as he did so.

“He’ll have you docile enough in no time,” Creed said. “We all know it, even though you try to act so strong. You’re afraid of him.”

“I’m not,” she lied.

“And I’ll never be docile, especially not to the likes of Keldar.”

“That’s Master Keldar to you,” he corrected.

“I’ll never call him master,” she said. “And I’ll never bend my knee to him. So get it out of your head, you...”

“Name’s Creed,” he replied. “I’m Keldar’s second, which means he tells me everything. And he’s sure the council will side with him today. And when they do, he’s going to break you like he’d break a spirited filly. He won’t crush you. But you’ll look to him for direction and will bear his marks on your pretty bottom should you ever think to defy him.”

“It’s the way of bullies and rogues to lead by force,” she said.

“Not force, pretty one,” Creed said, undoing the manacle. “But firmness. Any one of us could find ourselves lashed to the post for disobeying orders. Be glad that he is gentle with you, and only needs a thimbleful of strength to subdue you.”

He stood. “Now get up and come with me. Or refuse so I can bear you in my arms. Why should Kedar have all the fun. I’d like to feel your warmth against me, for it’s chill out today.”

Creed held out his hand. “Come on. Take it. Or I’ll tell Kedar what a bad girl you are.”

She glared at him, her eyes saying what she dared not say aloud. She slipped her small hand into his large one and rose. Mora dreaded the weight of all the gazes she knew awaited her when she left the tent. And today they were more intense than ever. Kedar was on his horse. There was no other; Mora knew it was expected that she would ride with him and it was all she could do not to resist as Creed led her to his Lord’s mount. She felt his hands on her waist, lifting her into Kedar’s waiting embrace. Wordlessly, she swung her legs over the animal’s back, looking straight ahead as she settled into place.

“To the Noble Council!” Kedar called, and the animal moved forward with a lurch. He did not speak to her as they set out, and Mora did not speak to him. She looked down instead to study his forearms, thick behind the gauntlets. The cut she had given him was a solid red line now. Mora knew had she sustained such a gash the simple act of moving her arm would be difficult. But Kedar was different; he didn’t even seem to notice the gash she’d given him even as her sore bottom still caused her to wince with the horse’s movements.

She tried to gauge the distance to the Noble Council. The battlefield was two leagues from her home, and the Noble Council another three leagues past that. She looked up at the sun rising in the sky. They would be there by noon. Would she see the sun set on this day?

Kedar's strong arms flanked her. She looked at them, at the huge biceps. The saddle creaked beneath them. He said nothing to her as they ride. Occasionally when the horse took a misstep on the rocky path his nose bumped the back of her head. At one point he held it there and smelled her hair. She shuddered and looked ahead, concentrating on the party's progress. The crest of each hill, each turn of the road took them closer to the citadel where they would stand before the Noble Council. Each step took them closer to her fate.

Chapter Three

The citadel was the most ancient building in the region. And it was the most respected. Whatever disputes there were between the realms, the seat of the Noble Council was considered off limit for seizure. It was where stalemates were settled, treaties forged, disputes mitigated. Just seeing it filled Mora with a sense of security. Here, she thought, she would finally get justice.

She did not want to die, but she did not want to live as Kedar's slave. In the back of her mind, she hoped that the council would recognize the sacrifice she'd been prepared to make and send both sides back to their respective quarters to mull over issues of loyalty and duty. Mora had seen them issue such directives before as a way to realign the priorities of rival realms the council determined had lost their moral bearings.

In Mora's mind, the best outcome would be to return to Lord Desmond, whom she imagined was still beside himself over what had happened the day before. Kedar had shamed him in the worst way, for what man would not be shamed to know his wife had spent the night in the tent of his sworn enemy. The fact that Kedar had not ravished her - and Mora was, at least, grateful for that - was inconsequential. Rumors would have speculated on what had taken place between them as her elderly husband stood helplessly by, unable to risk attack since she'd agreed to sacrifice herself.

The links of the chains that lowered the drawbridge into the citadel were as thick as a man's arm. Thicker maybe. The platform groaned in protest as it was lowered. Kedar's horse danced impatiently. Mora's gritted her teeth as the animal's motion worried her still-sore bottom.

They dismounted in the courtyard, Kedar first and then Mora. He held his arms up and she slid obediently into them, her face flaming with humiliation as he again handled her as easy as he might a child. To the side Creed watched, the perpetual expression of amusement still on his face.

Mora noticed her husband's horse was there. Hers was tethered beside it. Her heart lurched with love for the old man who harbored the same hope she did: that today her horse would bear her home to familiar surroundings and the people she loved.

Kedar kept his hand protectively on her lower back as they entered. Or was it possessively. Mora longed to push it away, not wanting Desmond to see this man touching her. But she dared not defy him publicly for fear of retribution. So she looked straight ahead, her face stone cold and defiant. And she knew all who looked upon her would know that her heart had not yielded to her situation.

The council members were seated in a large, circular room. Sconces holding dripping candles hung on the stone walls. The eight councilmen sat in eight throne-like chairs on a slightly raised dais. They were older men, noble. Or clerics. They had passive faces, impossible to read.

Everyone had gathered. All stood now respectfully before the council.

“Who calls upon us this day?” asked the eldest.

Mora held her head high and stepped forward. “I do.” She curtsied with respect and - as custom dictated - kept her eyes lowered until acknowledged.

“The Lady Mora of Adwin,” the elder said. “Rise and state your case.”

She looked up and straightened to her full height. Even though Mora was small, something in her bearing when she concentrated on her posture gave her an air of authority.

“My husband, the Lord Desmond, is at odds with Lord Kedar of Venrax. Kedar seeks to expand his holdings by seizing our lands. Yesterday he challenged my husband to a match for his life. I believe this to be because he knows the strategic importance of my husband to not just Adwin but other realms in the proximity. My husband is still keen of mind, if not of body..”

Her voice trailed off and she looked apologetically at Lord Desmond, who smiled and nodded in forgiveness. For she spoke the truth.

“I could not see him die, noble sirs. And so I did what no one expected. I invoked the law to stand in. Under our realm’s dictates, women - who were once warriors - may do this. My decision caused heartache and debate. I know this. But there was no way around the wall. I went to the field knowing that Kedar likely would take my life. But he did not. Kedar took hold of me and announced that rather than killing me, he would take my life - the balance of it - by making me his...property.”

The council members looked at one another. Beards were stroked, eyebrows raised. Knowing glances, silent communications, passed between them.

“And what would you have preferred for the outcome?” the elder asked.

“Death,” Mora said quietly. “And if Kedar is unable to bring himself to kill me, then he should forfeit and give me my freedom.”

A council member to the elder’s left smiled. “You are crafty, Lady Mora. But we have yet to hear Lord Kedar’s side.”

Kedar stepped up to stand beside Mora. He stepped into the light coming from the wall, engulfing her in his shadow.

“The law is vague,” he said. “It does not state that the victor must kill his opponent. It only says the victor must take the other’s life. I proudly admit distaste at the notion of

killing a defenseless female half my size, especially one with such heart. I believe in my care this woman would prosper and learn.”

“Learn!” Mora said, her face reddening with anger. “From the likes of you?”

“Silence!” the elder commanded. “You have spoken. Now allow him to.”

Mora bit her tongue as Kedar continued.

“Lord Desmond is an old man. He will fall in time. The Lady Mora will need protection. Under my wings she will have it, along with a firm hand to guide her should she consider future reckless acts.”

“You mean to take her to wife?” the elder asked cautiously.

“Not immediately,” Kedar replied. “She is in need of tempering. Lord Desmond has indulged her, spoiled her. Already the tales of what she did without his permission have swept the land. What other women will follow suit to follow her legend? It would benefit all realms to see her stand at the side of her man as a complement, and not as a rogue.”

The elder leaned back and looked left to right at his companions.

Mora forced herself to look at Desmond, who looked slumped and defeated. Why, she wondered angrily, did he not speak up for her. Then she realized why. She had - as the council pointed out - made her decision independently. Law dictated she answer independently for a decision she made without consulting her husband.

The council members leaned forward to talk in hushed tones. Mora searched the serene faces for signs of conflict, which she would have considered hopeful since it would mean that this was no cut-and-dried case. But they were nodding and at least one glanced at Kedar.

“No,” she said to herself. “No...”

They leaned back in their chairs and the elder crooked his two forefingers at Mora, indicating she should approach.

“Lady Mora, what you did was a noble thing. You fully expected to die at Lord Kedar’s hands, but you considered your life forfeit for the greater good. And you loved your husband enough to sacrifice your life for him. But what you did was also reckless. It is well known that the law allowing women of your realm to take up arms is still in effect. But it is also well known that the law is archaic and stands only in testament to a time when men had not grown into the fullness of themselves. By calling upon the letter of the law you took advantage of it...”

“No...,” she said quietly, shaking her head, but the elder was continuing to speak.

“You took it upon yourself to make a decision in a manner opposite the style you defend in your husband. You acted without cooperation, and without regard for the consequences. Kedar knows the law, and his quick mind determined a way to spare you but punish you all the same. He is wise, and this is why the council now sides with him...”

“No,” Mora heard herself saying. “NO!”

“Let your realm’s humiliating loss of its Lady to another man lead them to rethink the recklessness of keeping such a law on the books, even for ceremony..”

“NO!” she cried. “You cannot do this! You cannot!”

She approached the dais, angry, but Kedar stopped her, his strong arms around her.

“She is yours now, Lord Kedar,” the elder said with a smile somewhere between sadness and amusement. “May the gods help you.”

The council’s word represented the final, unbending rule for all the area realms. As the elders got up to leave, Kedar tugged Mora’s arm. “Come,” he said. “It’s over. You’re mine.”

But she pulled so viciously against his grip that she somehow managed to wrench herself free.

“It is not over!” she cried furiously and all who’d assembled now turned to see the wild-eyed Lady of Adwin rush to draw a dagger from the sheath of the man standing nearest to her.

“Hey!” the fellow called, shocked. But when he made to reach for it he stood down and fell silent along with everyone else. Mora had pressed the blade to her own throat.

“Coward!” she hissed at Kedar, and her eyes scanned the room to fall on the council. “Cowards, all, to condemn me to a life as property of a man other than my husband simply to remind all men that women are nothing!”

“Mora, put the blade down....”

Mora was surprised to hear Desmond’s voice.

“The council is right. Your death would profit nothing, and this law....it has long since served its purpose. Had I been a better leader I would have thought to strike it long before it cost me your company...”

“Do not denigrate yourself!” she said, her voice shaking with emotion. “Do not let what happened here make you think less of yourself. You’ve more character in your little finger than these men have in the whole of themselves.”

But Desmond looked away and she could not be angry. She could be replaced, but his reputation could not. He would not side with her against the council.

“Give me the blade, Mora,” Kedar said. “Give me the blade and I will not punish you.”

“You will never punish me again,” she said, her eyes on him as he advanced. With each step closer he came, Mora pushed the sharp edge of the dagger harder against her throat. One quick slice. One quick slice and it would be over. She was ready.

But she hesitated and in that split second saw Kedar’s eyes move to someone behind her. Before she could react, she’d been grabbed and the hand holding the dagger wrenched away from her throat. Pressure was applied to her wrist, causing her to cry out and drop the dagger.

Creed.

He held her in a grip nearly as firm as her new master’s and Mora twisted helplessly in his arms. She recoiled as Kedar approached her, seeking to turn and flee. But Creed simply picked her up and handed her over to the man who - by law - now owned her very life.

A numbness came over her. She could not escape and with the council’s decision, Mora knew she had no chance now of escaping her fate. She would never see Desmond again. She’d probably never see her children either, and was thankful at least that they were old enough to be getting on with their own lives and able to live independent of a mother.

She swallowed the lump that was in her throat as Kedar put her back on his horse and mounted behind her.

“We’re for home!” he called to his entourage, and the men cheered. It was a victory cheer, and Mora knew she was the prize. What must Desmond be feeling, she wondered, as Kedar’s horse wheeled and bore them off to his home.

She’d never been to Venrax. She only knew that the hear of Kedar’s ever expanding realm lay beyond what her parents had always referred to as the Twisted Forest. The place had spawned tales in her childhood designed to frighten little ones from venturing into the dark wood.

“Once you go into the Twisted Wood, you never come back,” her nursemaid had solemnly said with a knowing nod of her head.

The words proved cryptic now as the forest loomed on the horizon. One through the forest, Mora would never return, at least not unless she escaped and with both Creed and Kedar watching her, that seemed unlikely.

They traveled for miles. The forest was indeed full of twists and turns but not as dark as it had been portrayed. Kedar seemed comfortable with his surroundings. He did not speak to Mora as they rode; in fact he'd not spoken to her since he'd taken her.

When Kedar's party stopped in the forest to give the horses a rest and to eat, he did not speak as he helped her down from the horse. Instead, he handed her off to Creed.

"See that she doesn't stray," he said.

Creed smiled down at her as Kedar walked away. "Don't worry, my lord. This one isn't going anywhere and she knows it." He touched her face with the back of his hand. The gesture was mocking. "Don't you, pretty little thing?"

She hated him. She hated him almost as much as she hated Kedar. In a way, it was comforting; it gave Mora something else to ponder.

"I need privacy," she said.

"You get one," he replied.

"I need to make water," she insisted.

He stared at her, as if pondering the request. Then he took her arm and led her to his horse. A length of rope was on the saddle. He knelt and tied an end of it to her ankle, just as he'd affixed the mantle the night before. The other end he looped around the saddle horn.

"That should give you enough tether to protect your modesty," he said. He stood by the horse, his hand on the saddle horn, and nodded towards a nearby boulder. Mora lifted her skirts and walked through the brambles, dragging the rope behind her. When she was sure she was out of site she hiked up her skirts and squatted. She hated knowing that her most intimate functions were now the knowledge of her enemies but she tried not to let her indignation show as she came back from behind the rock.

She was smoothing the front of her dress when Kedar walked back over.

"Still here, I see," he said.

"When you tie a woman like an animal, it makes it easier for a man like you to keep her," she said silkily.

“And when she acts like a disobedient wild thing, it makes it justifiable to give her a necessary beating,” he replied with equal calm. “Of course, you already know that. It remains to be seen whether you are a fast learner, or possess the intellect of a goat that needs more than one cuff to set it to rights.”

Creed laughed uproariously at this. “Yes, but confess, lord. The difference between a woman and a goat is not in the stubbornness but in the beautiful bottom. Don’t we secretly hope for a little defiance in our females for just that reason?”

“A little,” Kedar said. Then his voice became serious. “But only a little. I grow tired of defiance after a short time, and I can guarantee, Lady Mora, that you will tire of the consequences before I tire of delivering them.”

Mora, feeling angrier by the second, whirled on Creed.

“And I’m sure one such as yourself has more experience with goat bottoms than the bottoms of ladies. You lowly cur of a..”

“LADY!” Kedar was pointing at her. “You’ve been told once not to take that tone with me or my men. Remember your place. Or else.”

Creed was smiling at her from behind Kedar. Mora shot him daggers with his eyes and she wished she possessed a dagger to cut the look from his handsome face, and to drive into her captor’s heart.

She looked down, biting her lip to keep from issuing a retort. She could not take another spanking, especially not in Creed’s leering presence.

A servant came over bearing a plate of food - dried meat, apples and a hard piece of bread. He carried a skin and a wooden cup. He put the plate and the cup on the rock. He nodded towards Mora as he filled the cup with water.

“Here ya go,” he said. “Eat up. The next meal will be at Lord Kedar’s house, and much more to your liking.”

“How do you know?” Creed asked the servant, but he was looking at Mora as he spoke. “Our lord has not voiced his intentions regarding his prize. For all we know she may become another servant in the house. Perhaps this is the food she can expect after a day of washing chamber pots.” He looked at Kedar. “What are your intentions?”

Lady Mora looked up to find Kedar studying her. “I don’t know,” he said after a moment. “That has yet to be decided.”

Mora picked up her plate and wordlessly began to nibble the bread. It felt like a rock in her throat when she swallowed, but she knew it was because her mouth had gone dry with fear. She was facing the unknown, and that scared her as much as Kedar did.

Chapter Four

By nightfall they'd reached a town teeming with activity. Kedar got rooms for his party at an inn. For Mora, this meant the first pleasant experience since she'd been captured: a hot bath. As she sank down into the oak tub brimming with hot water, she allowed herself to relax for the first time. The muscles in her body were knotty with tension. The easing of them felt good.

A maid appeared to wash her hair. The girl was about twenty, and plump. Her pleasant face was covered in a smattering of charming freckles. As she lathered Mora's tresses, she commented on how beautiful they were. Mora thanked her.

"So you are to be Kedar's lady now," the maid said. "The whole realm's talking of it, how you stepped up to defend your weak husband..."

"Lord Desmond is not weak," Mora interrupted, her tone harsher than she'd meant it to be. "He's old, child. Far too old for the kind of challenge your Lord Kedar should have issued. 'Twas weakness on Kedar's part to take advantage of a man in advanced age."

The girl ran her fingers through knots now loosened by the soap. "Forgive me lady. I only go on what I've heard." She paused. "Are you to be married, then?"

"I will not marry him," Mora said.

"Then perhaps he will give you to Creed to wife!" The maid giggled. "Now there's a strapping piece of manflesh if there ever was one!"

"I'll not marry him either," Mora said. "He's wretched. They both are."

The maid shook her head and laughed as she poured a bucket of warm water over Mora's soaped hair. "Yer a picky one, if you don't mind my saying so. You'd be a rich woman, indeed, with Kedar for a groom. And Creed as his second is well on his way to acquiring his own wealth. Virility and wealth are rare combinations in a husband. Most women who marry wealth find an old man in their bed..."

The maid's voice trailed off. "Forgive me, lady. I din't mean..."

"No, it's well enough the truth," Mora said, standing so the maid could wrap her in a towel. "Lord Desmond was old. But he was good to me."

"Good enough for you to want to die for him," the maid said. "Bards shall sing of that one day."

"I hope it is before he dies," Mora said sadly. "So that at least he will have the tune to remember me by..."

“Well, I have something to cheer up a sad lady,” the maid said. She walked across the room to the bed and lifted a gown. It was forest green with gold braid on the edges of the sleeves and matching gold laces along the back where it laced up. The front collar was low, as was the fashion. The bodice was fitted, the skirt flowing. A pair of leather slippers and an undergarment lay beside it.

“Lord Kedar had them purchase for you!” she said excitedly. “He had the clothier use your old dress and shoes to get the right size. Aren’t they beautiful things?” The maid sighed as her fingers brushed the fine fabric. Mora wanted to tell her she could have them, but without anything else to wear she had no choice but to accept Kedar’s gift of clothing.

“My husband bought me finery just as grand,” Mora said as she allowed the maid to help her into the undergarment and gown. “Grander, even...”

She turned and looked into the mirror as the maid laced her up. Her long hair was drying, and as it did it sparkled in the firelight. The maid brushed it until it gleamed golden. She’d just finished when there came a knock at the door.

The maid opened it.

“Sir Creed!” she said, her voice breathless.

“Evening girl,” he said. “I’ve come for the Lady Mora. Lord Kedar would dine with her.”

Mora turned from where she stood before the mirror. Creed entered and smiled appreciatively. “A vision to whet my lord’s appetite.”

She colored up and looked away.

“Tell him I dine alone,” she said. “I desire no company.”

“What you want is of no consequence,” Creed said. “You have no more power than the maid who dresses you. You will do as he bids you.”

“No,” Mora said. “I will not. And neither will I heed the bark of this cur that trots at his heels.”

“Mora, apologize!” She looked up at the sound of the command to see Kedar standing at the door.

“I will not,” she said stubbornly.

Kedar regarded her for a moment and then turned to the maid. “Leave us,” he said. “And tell anyone who asks to ignore what cries ensue from within this chamber...”

Mora felt her heart quicken at his words, but she held her ground. The inn was crowded; surely he would not risk making a scene with so many about.

Kedar walked over. In the small room he and Creed seemed even bigger. Creed was observing her with a look of self-assured arrogance.

“Apologize,” Kedar repeated. “Your sharp tongue is not to be borne. Beg this man’s pardon. Now.”

Mora’s heart quickened, but with anger now. “Beg his pardon?” she asked. “Very well.”

She took a step towards Creed. “I am sorry, sir,” she began, her tone grave. “I am sorry that your bitch mother birthed such a lackey. Perhaps it soothes her somewhat to know he follows a man as despicable as himself.”

The look on Creed’s face went from arrogance to anger. She’d finally gotten a rise out of him. But her victory was short-lived as Kedar took her by the arm and pulled her towards the bed. Mora’s heart thudded in her chest as he sat down and drug her down across his lap. Instantly her hands flew back to protect her bottom.

“No, we will have none of that,” Kedar said, and motioned to Creed. “Come, help me hold her.”

“NO!” Mora said, struggling. “Do not strike me! And if you must, do not do it in the presence of this...animal!”

“You disobeyed me in Creed’s presence. You shall pay in his presence.”

Creed pulled a chair to the edge of the bed and held out his hands. “Come on now,” he cajoled. “Be a good lass and give me those pretty wrists to hold. You can’t protect yourself from what is coming.”

“No!” Mora cried. “I will not!” She tried to twist and writhe out of Kedar’s grip, but she could not.

“Very well,” Kedar said, and began to lift the hem of her dress. Mora could not keep the panic out of her voice as she tried to reason with the man who held her. But he would not hear it. Now his hand was on the waistband of her thin undergarment.

“Give Creed your hands, or this goes, too...”

With a strangled sob, Mora moved her hands and placed them in Creed’s. She knew that the only reason Kedar had commanded she do this was to humiliate her; he could easily hold her himself.

“She’s shaking, poor thing,” Creed said. “See how afraid the helpless little thing is?”

Mora fought to free herself harder, grasping one of Creed's fingers with her own and desperately attempting to wrench it from her wrist. But when she could not move him she turned her head to the side and squeezed her eyes shut tight.

"Why are you being punished?" Kedar asked.

She did not answer and for her recalcitrance was rewarded with a hard, open-handed smack to the top of her thigh. She yelped.

"Why are you being punished?" he asked again. "I can spank you all night until you tell me, and once you do then the actual punishment will be under way."

"It's for...." The words caught in her throat. Kedar's hard hand descended again. Mora cried out and attempted to choke back the sob that threatened to erupt from her throat.

"Why?" he asked again.

"For being dis--disrespectful to Creed." She felt his hands squeeze her wrist as she made the statement, as if reminding her that he was responsible for her vulnerable position over Kedar's lap.

"Yes, for that," he said. "But moreso for defying me. When I give an order, you obey it, even if you do not want to."

"Even if I am wronged?" she asked.

"Without question," he said.

And then he began to spank her. It hurt terribly. Kedar's large hand was calloused from battle, and he used substantial force in his blows. She heard the sound of her own wails and knew others in the inn could as well. She tried to pull Creed's hand off her wrists so she could move her hand back to cover herself. But she could not and found herself reflexively squeezing his hand with her fingers as Kedar continued to spank her.

Even with the flimsy protection of the undergarment, her bottom was hurting worse than she could have imagined, and she rightly knew that the pink of it showed through the filmy fabric. She'd begun begging for mercy by the tenth spank of Kedar's hand and now she spewed a litany of pleas and apologies for her behavior. And all she wanted was for the pain to stop. It did not matter to her that everyone in the inn knew the wife of Lord Desmond now lay over his enemy's lap, being spanked like a child.

"PLEASE!" She hated to plead, but she could no longer stand what Kedar was doing to her. She only wanted to be free. "I beg forgiveness! I beg!"

The blows stopped. But Kedar's large hand remained on her bottom. He squeezed it lightly, but she still whimpered at the pressure.

“Sit up.” He took hold of her and gently helped her to sitting position. Creed released her wrists and she rubbed them as she tried to control the sobs.

She was facing Creed, who studied her face with a satisfied expression. Mora had never felt so hopelessly humiliated.

“Are you ready to beg pardon now?” Keldar asked. She felt small and helpless sitting in his lap, and she knew if she refused she’d just end up back over it. She nodded, defeated.

“Then get to it...”

Mora forced herself to drag her eyes up to Creed’s face. “I beg pardon,” she said quietly.

“Her voice is but a whisper. I cannot hear. She mocks me with feathers for words.” Creed said.

“Louder, lass,” Kedar said.

Fresh tears of humiliation stung her eyes.

“I am sorry,” she said. “I offended you and I must apologize.”

She held her breath. Would Kedar catch that she’s said she “must?” If he did, he ignored it. But by Creed’s scowl she could tell that he had picked up on it. Kedar’s second started to speak but the lord held up his hand to silence him before he began.

“Well done,” Kedar said. “Now. I believe you were sent word that we would be dining together.”

Her face grew warm. It had been her refusal that had started the argument with Creed. She could hardly do it again.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

He tipped her gently off his lap and although she did not want to, Mora could not stop herself from reaching back to rub some of the soreness out of her bottom. She deliberately kept her eyes to the floor, not wanting to see either men’s reaction to her obvious discomfort.

We shall take dinner here. I will be staying here with you tonight.

Mora looked up at him then, afraid, but he smiled an almost gentle smile.

“You have nothing to fear. My intent is to keep you from running off, lady. I meant what I said before. If you ever find yourself in my bed, it will be because you are as willing as I am. I have no desire to force a woman.”

She gave a short nod. Kedar and Creed left and the maid walked back in. The overly sympathetic look the servant gave her did nothing to improve Mora's mood. If anything it made her feel worse.

"He's a hard man, lady, but those are the best. Only a man who loves you cares enough to take a hand to you..."

"I was not raised to mistake brutality for love," Mora replied. Her tone was more imperious than she'd intended, but the servant's words angered her.

"Well pardon me, ma'am," the servant responded. "We are simple folk here, to be sure, and are used to our men taking charge of us. And we do not see it as brutality when it is balanced with kindness and fairness. Kedar is a fair man; that is known throughout the land."

Mora bit her tongue. She wasn't about to argue with a servant, especially one who seemed so smitten with the Lord and his men. Instead she crossed her arms and walked to the window, where she looked out over the village. Frost was forming on the peaked roofs of the surrounding buildings. It was getting cold again. The early spring had just been a tease. The maid continued to talk as she added logs to the fire. A few moments later two more servants came in carrying trays of food, which they placed on the table. Mora wondered how Kedar could expect her to sit through dinner on the rough wooden chairs. But when he entered she could tell by his expression that he had not changed his mind about having her dine with him.

He motioned to the chair a servant pulled out while the table was being set. A cushion had been discreetly placed in her seat. She pretended not to notice as she sat down, and she tried not to wince although she could not help it, even with the padding in her seat.

Mora was silent as dinner was served. There was goose, stewed apples, dried bread and the last of winter greens. She suddenly realized she was hungrier than she imagined she would be. The servant heaped her plate high and filled her glass with sweet wine. She vowed to only take sips of the stuff; she still did not put it past Kedar to try and seduce her.

"Do you not have wife?" she asked when the servants had stepped aside. Mora knew it was an impertinent question, but she was curious as to his intentions. Did he intend to make her his mistress? Or to pass her off to one of his men as she feared.

"I did," he said. "She died."

Mora looked at him, surprised. Usually the unions of other realms were interesting news for their neighbors, especially when it came to leaders like Kedar.

"I am surprised," she said. "Reports of this matter are usually fodder for neighbors. I heard nothing of it."

“It was a secret wedding, and one engineered to forge an alliance between my realm and the one to the east..”

“Fengar,” Mora said. “Yes, I know of this. But you’ve conquered them.”

“The alliance was broken,” he said. “My wife killed herself before we could announce the union...”

Mora stared at him in silence. Kedar was staring at his plate. His body seemed tense, even though he’d delivered the statement with little emotion.

“How awful,” she said. “Why would she do such a thing?”

“She was forced into the situation. She did not want to leave her lands and her home. She felt betrayed by the father who sent her to me.”

Mora put down the piece of bread she was holding. She suddenly felt as if her appetite had fled.

“Did you care for her?”

“I would have,” Kedar said. “She was a sweet girl, and of good nature. But there was no time for us to get to know one another. And I was fool enough to leave her unguarded. I wrongly thought she would adjust to her situation. But she was so young, and more fragile than I’d been led to believe...”

“So she died and you conquered her father anyway?”

Now he looked up at her. “The alliance had been broken. He told me she was willing. I had no reason to believe otherwise. I conquered him not just for misleading me, but for what he’d done to his daughter. She never should have been forced....”

Mora pondered this, and carefully chose her next words.

“And yet you force me...”

Kedar smirked. “No, Lady Mora, you took to the battlefield by free choice.”

“But I thought to die!” she said.

“Did you really think I would kill a woman?” he asked, his tone dripping with disgust.

“I did not think it through!” she said defensively.

“You should have,” he replied. “You are no silly girl, but a woman in the full of her bloom. And I know from being in your company that you are no dolt. So do not dare to compare your lot to that of my bride’s.”

His eyes were angry and Mora saw hurt in them. She was surprised and somewhat grateful that he’d privately acknowledged her intelligence, and she displayed it now by backing down. There was more to this man, she mused, than she’d thought.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Lord Kedar.”

“Thank you, Lady Mora,” he replied. “I abide failings in others far more easily than I abide them in myself. If someone fails me, there is instant pain. When I fail another, the pain I feel lasts far longer. The lash would be easier to bear.”

“That is why you are a leader of men,” she said quietly. Then she’d blushed. She’d not intended to compliment him, but it had come so easily.

He looked up at her and stared into her eyes. Mora reddened and turned her attention back to her food. She ate a bit of the meat and followed it with wine.

“Lady Mora...” Kedar began but a knock sounded at the door.

“Enter!” Kedar said.

Creed came in. Kedar frowned.

“I hope this is important. I’m enjoying dinner.”

“It is,” Creed said, and Mora observed that his expression was serious. “I need to speak to you in private.”

Kedar stood. “What is it?”

Creed looked from Kedar to Mora and back again.

“It is Lord Desmond.”

Mora sprang to her feet. “What?” she demanded to know, walking over to step between the men. “What of my husband?”

Creed glanced at her then turned to Kedar. “Let us step into the hall...”

“No,” Kedar said.

Creed looked baffled, but continued. "Intelligence came to us that the old lord decided he could not just let you take his wife. He set out with a party to follow us. But there was an accident. Lord Desmond fell from his horse..."

"No..." Mora's hands flew to her mouth.

"His death was instant, by reports," Creed said quietly to Kedar. "His neck snapped."

"You lie!" Mora cried, but when Creed looked at her the usual mockery in his eyes was gone and she knew he spoke the truth.

"I'm sorry, lady," he said.

Mora opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out. Blackness rose like a fog to claim her and the last sensation she had before fainting was the feel of two strong arms catching her as she fell.

Chapter Five

It felt like a bad dream from which she could not awake. Mora had not been out long from the shock of the news, but the weight of her grief made rising impossible. Kedar gently lifted her from where he'd lowered her to the floor and carried her to the bed.

"This is my fault!" She said this over and over. "Had I not done what I did..."

"Had you not done what you did then he would have died in battle," Kedar reasoned, sitting beside her on the bed.

"At least he would have died with honor!" sobbed Mora.

"There is no way that Lord Desmond could have died without honor," Kedar replied. "He was a good man."

"A good man who lies dead on the road like a dog!" Mora sobbed again. "And a fearful wife for a cause." She sat up, her eyes wild with grief and guilt. "Will you now take my life, Kedar? Will you do this for me? Will you end my suffering!"

"No," he said.

Angry and unbalanced, she slapped him hard and began to beat on his chest with her fists. Kedar restrained her by her arms.

"No," he said. "Death is not for you, lady. And certainly not by my hand."

"Then by mine!" she cried, but again he shook his head. "No, not by yours either. I will not lose another in that manner. You are now without a husband as I am without a wife. There is no reason it should be as such..."

She stopped her rant and looked at him, her tear-filled eyes wide with shock. "You would ask me to marry you?"

"Not ask," he said. "I will have it so."

"But my husband would..."

"...would have wanted you and your children under the protection of someone strong now that he is gone. His lands and holdings will be targeted by morning, Lady Mora. It will not just be our armies that fight for it now that it is without a good leader. I will send my men tonight to warn your children and bring them out. And your maidservant, too, should you want her."

Mora did not know what to say.

“Why would you do this?” she asked.

“Out of respect for the man, and for his widow,” he said.

“Respect?” Mora asked. “You attacked him! You challenged him!”

“One can challenge a man and still respect him,” he said. “Your husband accepted my challenge, but it was because he respected me. And I accepted your challenge.”

“You had to,” she said.

“I did,” Kedar conceded. “And now circumstance has led us to where we are, and time runs short. Where can I find those dearest to you?”

She gave him the names of her children - Beatrice, Liam, Cian and Roan - and told him where they could be found. He promised to bring them along with her trusted maidservant.

Mora, too weak from shock to move, watched Kedar as he suited up to ride to her husband's lands. It occurred to her then that he might return and another wave of fear overtook her, followed by a wave of guilt. Kedar stopped fastening his blade at his side and walked over to her.

“I will return,” he said, as if reading her mind.

She looked at him through tear-stained lashes. “Be safe and godspeed,” she said. Her lips quivered as she spoke the words. “That is what I used to say to my husband before he went off to battle.”

Kedar gave her a sad smile and stood to finish suiting up. As he did, Mora summoned all her strength and forced herself to rise. Creed watched from the side as she helped Kedar into his armor. He accepted her help graciously and afterwards bowed to her.

“My lady,” he said. She curtsied, keeping her eyes down. When she looked up, he was gone.

She did not need to look to know that he'd stationed guards at her door. Kedar was a man of his word, after all, and whatever he seemed to curiously feel for her Mora knew he still considered her the spoils of battle. She stood at the window, watching him and his men ride from the yard of the inn. It was so cold out. The thin layer of frost had grown thick now, and the bright moon lighted it silver on the rooftops.

He'd said he'd come back and Lady Mora wanted him to. She told herself it was because he would be fetching her children, but she knew there was another reason - one she could not even explain to herself - that hated to see him go, that worried. A tear slipped from her eye.

“Husband,” she said, speaking to Lord Desmond’s ghost. “What is happening to me?”

She could not take to her bad that night for worry. Instead she sat in a chair by the window, watching the moon. Her bottom still hurt from the spanking but she endured it, telling herself that she deserved to bear some of the pain for all that she’d caused. She finally drifted off to sleep and awoke just after dawn when the door opened and a maid came in with a tray for breakfast. Mora ate more from nervousness than hunger. She wanted to get out and walk some of the nervousness away, but the maid apologetically said that strict orders had been given for her to stay confined to the room.

“Orders from Lord Kedar himself,” she said, as if proud to deliver the news secondhand.

Mora said nothing.

“I can bring you some implements for drawing, or something to embroider or some other pursuit ladies enjoy to pass the time,” the maid offered.

“Perhaps some parchment and a quill for writing,” Mora said.

The maid curtsied and left.

And the day dragged on. Night fell and Mora paced in between writing letters to her husband’s relatives across the sea - letters of explanation and apology for what she called the “well-intentioned but rash decision that led to his death.” She did not mention that Kedar was intending to take her to wife, only that her fate now lay in his hands and that she accepted her lot.

She slept that night, more from exhaustion than calm. Her dreams were plagued by images of Lord Desmond laying on the road, his lifeless eyes staring into nothingness. She dreamt of fire and bloody clashes on the battlefield. But it was a dream of Kedar’s death that made her wake up screaming. The guards stationed at her door burst in, bleary-eyed, and with swords drawn. She assured them it had only been a nightmare, and prayed their puzzled expressions did not mean they’d heard her cry out the lord’s name in her sleep.

Two more days passed like this, with Mora nearly made from boredom and worry and no word from Kedar. Finally, on the fourth day she heard a call from the window and looked out through the frozen mist. Riders were coming, and she could see the man at the lead carried a shield with Kedar’s crest.

Blood pounded in her ears and her heart caught in her throat as she watched to see if it was the man itself. When she saw it was, she put her hands to her mouth to suppress a sob of sheer relief. Creed rode at his side, and behind them, flanked by protective soldiers were her children.

Mora turned and ran through the door of the room. The guards called after her, but she would not stop.

“My children are here!” she cried, and though they lunged after her, she was like quicksilver and sped down the stairs and out the door just as Kedar and his war party came into the inn yard.

Mora stopped in front of the horses just as the guards burst through the door. Kedar stopped the men in their tracks by holding up a hand, and all eyes were on his captive lady now as she stood, chest heaving, looking from him to her children.

“Mama!” They all cried in unison as they dropped from their horses and ran to her. Mora opened her arms and sobbed as they rushed to her. The youngest was thirteen, the oldest nineteen. She inhaled the smell of them, touched their hair, remarked on how tall and true they’d grown - for they’d been visiting relatives in the north for months.

When the tearful greetings were over, she pulled away and walked to Kedar and curtseyed.

“My Lord, I am grateful.”

“I am glad to return your family to you,” he said. “And your maidservant as well.”

She’d nearly forgotten, but now with an expectant little cry she looked up to see Dagmar coming towards her. The older woman’s face was lined with exhaustion from the trip, but her eyes glowed with happiness as her mistress embraced her.

They all went into the inn and Kedar ordered rooms for them. The next day, they would all travel the rest of the way to his home. Later in the day he ordered a feast prepared for the night, but bade Mora give him a private audience before joining her children.

They went back to her room. Kedar looked larger than she’d remembered. He’d cleaned up and wore a fresh pair of breeches and tunic. Gone was the mail that had been covered with dirt and the dried blood of his enemies. She’d only needed to look at him to know he’d been victorious.

“You took my husband’s land,” she said.

He nodded. “That was my goal before I took you,” he said. “But this time the victory was sweeter because I took it not from him but from raiding barons from the West. It is secure now, and part of my holdings...”

She wondered what Desmond would think of this but didn’t tell Kedar this.

“The people...”

“Will continue to work. My emissaries have been dispatched to assure them that they will be taken care of and treated with honor if they yield to my rule.”

“And if they do not?” she asked.

He gave her a knowing look that indicated this was a ridiculous question, for who better knew than she that punishment met those who did not obey Lord Kedar.

“The people are good and true,” he said. “They will know one of their own kind and resentment will give way to common sense soon enough. The transition will be easy in your realm, as it has been in others.”

“How far will you expand?” she asked. “Do you seek to be king?”

“King?” Kedar mused. “My intent now is becoming a man of wealth. I have no desire to rule unless it reveals itself to be my destiny.”

“Destiny,” she said. “Desmond talked much of destiny, and how it shapes mens’ fortunes. She looked at the ring still on her finger. His ring. “Tell me,” she said. “Any more news of his death?”

“His mount spooked at a fox. The fall was sudden. He was pitched forward at a bad angle.”

“Did death come quickly?”

“Word is he said one thing before he passed,” Kedar said.

She looked up hopefully, her eyes filled with fresh tears.

“Do I want to know his last words?” she asked.

“He said he wished you knew that had he could live his life again, he would have fought for you. They said that is why he rode back, not for honor, but for you.” Kedar wiped away the tear that leaked from her eye and tilted her chin up until he was looking down at her. “You are the kind of woman that inspires that. Do you not see?”

He lowered his lips to hers then. Her first impulse was to pull away, but she could not. Mora felt herself yield to the pressure of his mouth on hers. His arm went around her, pulling her body up against his as he had done that first day on the battlefield. There was no fight in her now, only a swirling sensation of pleasure as his large hands began to roam her body. She pulled her mouth away to catch her breath and his lips moved to the hollow of her throat. Mora’s knees went weak and he supported her with one arm as his hand traveled down the small of her back to rest on her bottom. He squeezed on firm cheek and then the other, the move possessive in nature. She tried to summon outrage, but could only moan.

Kedar picked her up and put her on the bed. He stretched out on top of her. He'd undone the laces of her gown and now pushed it over her shoulders, his mouth blazing a trail of tiny bites as he lowered the fabric. Mora tried to temper her cries as his mouth closed over her nipple. He sucked it hard, aggressively, while palming the flesh of her other breast.

"Stop..." she said, but it was herself she was afraid of and not him. She could feel a long-dormant passion erupting from somewhere deep within, passion that had been denied Desmond and even the husband before him. No man had ever made Mora feel the way she was feeling now. She pushed against Kedar, but he simply held her hands and moved his head lower, lower.

She could not control the cry she emitted when his head dipped between her legs and his tongue began to lap and dart and the secret, musky flower between her legs. Mora twisted this way and that, but was as unable to escape the sensation of his mouth as she'd been to escape the spankings he'd given her. She felt her skin grow hot and flush with a sheen of sweat as he forced her once - and then twice - over pleasure's precipice. And then when she was building for a third time and begging for...what she did not know...he pulled himself up and drove his cock deep inside her with one swift motion. He was large, and Mora cried out in pleasure pain as he filled her.

Kedar kissed her gently and gave her a moment to adjust to his presence inside of her before he began to move. Mora's legs went up and around, hugging him to her, pulling him rhythmically towards him as she rose to meet his powerful thrusts. He made her feel alive and consumed all at once. His hunger for her only increased hers for him. All thoughts of Desmond were momentarily pushed from her mind as he rode her relentlessly. She reveled in the pleasure he took from her body. She wanted nothing more than to submit to Kedar, to please him.

He collapsed on her. She felt him flood her inside with the warmth of his seed. Fear brought her back to reality, but then she calmed. "I'm too old to become a mother again," she told herself, and allowed her body to relax against his. They lay like that for a while and then he rolled onto his side, and nestled her in his strong arms. Mora lay there quietly. Just a few days before she had told Creed that she would never come to Kedar's bed. Now she had, and in as wanton a fashion as any village slattern.

"There is no need for shame," he said, kissing her temple. Mora looked at him, marveling again that he could read her so well. "It is a pleasing thing to meet one's match in the bedchamber."

This made her blush. "I was shameless," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Never apologize for being shameless underneath me, or I'll spank you till you can't sit for a fortnight," he said in a tone that was mocking but also firm. "Too many women are shy or frigid. They never learn to take pleasure god intended for woman as well as man. If any woman should appreciate that, it should be one brave enough to step onto a

battlefield.” He kissed her. “But this is the battlefield I prefer. From now on, the only sport I expect from you, my lady, is bedsport.”

Mora wondered if it was right to feel happiness at his statement, having just lost a husband. But Desmond had always wanted her happiness. Would he be pleased, knowing she’d found pleasure with the man who’d set out to take everything from him. It did not matter now, and as they got up and prepared for the first feast she’d enjoy with her children in many months, Mora mused at the new life ahead of her.

There were still so many unknowns. Kedar was a kind man, she realized, but a firm one. He would demand her obedience, and as much pleasure as she’d given her in bed, she knew he could easily give her at least that much pain outside of it should she defy him. And then there was the issue of Creed, whom she knew would always have Kedar’s ear and therefore a hand in how she was treated.

Tomorrow they would leave the inn, and she and her family would find themselves in a new realm. Kedar would take her to wife, and after that? The future was misty, unreadable. But it was one she’d unwittingly chosen when she stepped onto the battlefield, and she knew now she had no choice but to face it with the same kind of bravery and determination.

END OF BOOK ONE