

Enemy Fair
Book Two: By His Leave

By Sullivan Clarke

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Chapter One

Lady Mora did not know what to expect of Venrax. She'd never seen Lord Kedar's realm, but his power had grown and her late husband had spoken of his rival's ambition, she'd imagined the land to reflect the man whose image had been fixed in her mind before she ever faced him on the battlefield in her husband's stead.

She expected a brutal place - cold, barren and unyielding as the man who now held her captive. But just as he'd surprised her by departing from his disciplinarian role to show concern for her, so did the land surprise her now. It was much like Adwin which- she was forced to remind herself - yet another conquered holding of the man who owned her as surely as he did the land upon she once lived.

Would she ever see it again? She did not know. What Mora did know was that her life had taken a drastic turn since her decision to save her elderly husband's life by invoking a law allowing her to take his place on the battlefield. She'd thought that day that her life would end, but Lord Kedar had other plans. Rather than kill her, he'd taken her life in a different way. He'd deemed her his property, and the Noble Council had agreed. For Mora, the news had been devastating. Lord Kedar was so different than the kindly Lord Desmond, who - broken by the news, decided to try to reclaim his wife.

But he never made it. The elderly lord fell from his horse and died on the road.

And now Lord Kedar decided that the Lady Mora needed to be under his protection and had announced that he intended to wed her. It was not a proposal, but a statement. Now as Mora looked around at the lush fields and comfortable cottages, it was clear that Kedar was a ruler who took care of his own. She would be protected. But would she be happy?

He was strict. Already he'd spanked her twice for defying him. One of the spankings came after she'd offended his right hand man, Creed. Mora hated Creed. She hated his haughty look, and the constant needling. He was forever reminding her of how helpless she was to Kedar's will. He seemed to delight in seeing Mora struggle to be obedient.

But did she hate Kedar? She didn't know. She'd made love to him, and was still try to sort out how that could happen. It shamed her to recall how easily she'd yielded to him, just as he'd confidently predicted she would. Mora told herself it was because he'd saved her children when he did not have to. A mother's weakness is her children; his compassion in getting them out of the land he was conquering until it was stabilized was a kindness she did not expect. Her gratitude, combined with her grief over Desmond had created a fertile situation for an emotional reaction.

Her physical reaction was another matter, but she would not allow herself to ponder it. She glanced at Creed, who looked over at her and gave his arrogant half-smile. His eyes were knowing; had Kedar bragged of mastering her in bed? Had Creed heard through the walls of the inn? She could not think on it. So Mora turned her mind to other matters, chiefly how to recapture some of the power missing from her life.

She was to be wed to Kedar. She was resigned to that fact and there was nothing she could do to change it. But she was not resigned to the assumption that she would be some docile creature who obeyed his every command. Mora decided she would bide her time, and while she didn't plan to be disobedient for the sake of disobedience, when the opportunity presented itself she would show both her husband and his arrogant second-in-command that she was no lackey.

"You're lost in thought." Kedar pulled his horse beside hers. Mora startled at the sound of his voice and looked at him, hoping her expression did not betray what she was thinking.

"I was just thinking on random things," she lied. "It's beautiful here. I didn't think..."

Lord Kedar smiled a cynical smile. "You thought it would be a land of broken people?"

Mora blushed and looked down. "I don't know what I thought, really..."

They rode in silence for a few moments.

"I'm making arrangements for us to be married in the morning," he said.

"Is it to be so soon then?" asked Mora. Her heart was pounding suddenly.

"It's for the best," he said. "The sooner we are wed the sooner the people of Adwin will realize that I intend to honor their lady."

"So that's why you're marrying me, then?" she asked. "To appease the souls under my husband's watch? To soothe them? Buy their loyalty?"

His answer surprised and angered her. "Yes," he said. "Yes to all. There are enough vultures circling upon news of your husband's death. They would swoop in to challenge my hold on Adwin. I do not need to risk the ire of those who were loyal to Lord Desmond." He paused, looking at Mora. "And to you."

"I was not their leader," she said coldly.

"No," he said. "But you were - and are - loved. Word of the decision by the Noble Council to give you to me spread quickly by all reports. The people of Adwin, while upset, approved. They did not want to hear of your death. My decision to marry is another positive political move."

"So I am a pawn," she said.

"I would expand my holdings peacefully," he said. "If our union makes my growing realm stronger and lessens the chances of bloodshed, then it is a wise move for more than just the two of us."

“If you wanted to lessen the chances of bloodshed, then perhaps you should try being content with what land you have,” Mora said angrily.

“Not yet wed and already trying to run things.” Creed appeared on the other side of Lord Kedar. “She talks of hating battle, but her tongue suggests she’d bring the battlefield to your house.”

“True,” Kedar said. “It appears that the lady’s used to venturing her opinion where it is not wanted. And that she’s gotten away with it.”

“And it appears that your second-in-command does the same,” Mora said sweetly “My Lord Kedar cannot breathe but for his second appearing at his should to remind him how to do it better.” She paused. “Sometimes I wonder who is really the second.”

She spurred her horse then, not waiting to see if Kedar would follow. But she did not have to look back to know that this time, her words had hit home. Kedar did not come to her side again on the journey, and later when Creed passed her his expression was angry and he did not look at her. Would she pay later? She did not know, but she would not allow herself to dwell upon the matter. They were getting closer to Lord Kedar’s castle. It was an imposing place, and construction was under way to make it even larger.

“It looks like a city!” Her son Liam trotted up on his pony, his brown eyes wide. At thirteen, he was a gangly and studious lad who preferred studies to hunting and riding. He held on to the pony’s mane with one hand as he gawked at Kedar’s castle.

“Yes, it is,” she said.

“Will we be here long?” he asked. “I miss school.”

She smiled indulgently. “When it is safe, you may return. It will be for Lord Kedar to say.”

Her son looked down. “They say you are to be married, but our stepfather is but just dead. Is it true? Do you love again so soon, mother?”

She’d already talked to her older children about the matter and had hoped to find a quiet place to explain the situation to her youngest son, who was the least practical and most sensitive of the lot. But it seemed then that it was as good a time as any.

“No,” she said. “But he gives me no choice.”

“Because you forfeited your life to him on the battlefield. Then that is true, too?”

To hear her son say the words made her sound and feel rash.

“It is,” she sighed. “I thought I could save Lord Desmond.”

“I am glad Lord Kedar took your life,” her son said.

Mora looked at her son, hurt.

“And why?”

“Because I still have you,” he said.

Mora colored with shame. Sometimes she forgot that Liam still was just a lad.

“I am glad, too,” she said.

They could hear the welcoming cries from the castle now, and the groaning of the gates as they opened to admit the riders. Liam was right. It was almost like a small city within the castle walls. Underneath the turrets were all manner of structures. A blacksmith worked at a forge, an armorer sat working on chainmail nearby as another pulled a sword from a fire, placed it on a piece of metal and pounded it into shape. Liam gawked when the man plunged the still-glowing blade into a vat of water. Steam hissed from the surface and the man looked up through it and smiled at the boy.

A “thunk” caught Mora’s attention and she turned to see archers on the other side of the yard. They were firing at a padded target fashioned in the shape of a man. It was full of holes, and the straw and stuffing poked through them. It seemed everyone within the walls was preparing for some sort of combat, and those who were not were preparing to feed the fighters. A tired looking man pushed a wheelbarrow full of cabbages; another servant followed carrying two freshly killed geese by the feet. The birds heads flopped on the end of their long necks, striking the ground.

“At least you’ll feel a bit more at home now,” Lord Kedar was speaking to her again, and she started to tell him that “home” was never like this. Lord Desmond’s castle was far smaller, far less bustling than this place. She’d underestimated the wealth of the man who had claimed her.

“I’ll feel more at home after a hot bath and a nap,” she said. “If your Lord would be so indulgent...”

“He would.” Lord Kedar got down from his horse, walked over and lifted up his arms so that Mora could slide into them. She did not want to, but had no choice. He took her waist as she dismounted and held her there.

“I will have a maid show you and your Dagmar to our chamber. You will have your bath and your rest. And then you and I shall have a talk about the little barb you slung my way today. It did not go without notice, lady.”

Mora dropped her eyes. She did not want him to see the fear in them, or the frustration of knowing that he apparently planned to make her accountable for every slight, regardless of how cleverly she cloaked it.

A maid was summoned to show her to her quarters. Or, as Kedar had called them, “our chamber.” It was obvious he wasn’t going to hide his hold on her by giving her private quarters.

As they walked, Dagmar remarked continuously to her about the scope of the castle, the richness of the tapestry, the carvings in the beams. Even the rushes on the floor were remarkable to Mora’s maidservant and she bit her tongue to keep from snapping at her trusted friend. She knew that Dagmar was simply voicing what she herself felt about the castle, but in Mora’s mind she could not help but feel a sting of disloyalty at how the place invited comparisons between Kedar’s wealth and the wealth of the man she’d been married to.

The bedchamber was in the west tower. It was huge, with a large bed in the center of the room hung with heavy drapes. A fireplace filled the room with a warm glow. Servants were already hauling in a tub and buckets of warm water to fill it. As soon as they’d done their work Dagmar shooed them out and began to help Mora out of her clothes.

“There’s no need to feel guilty,” the maid said as if reading Mora’s mind. “It’s not as if you chose all this over Lord Desmond, God rest his soul.”

Mora felt the gown fall from her shoulders. She stepped out of it and stood as Dagmar helped loosen the ties of her undergarments.

“He plans to marry me tomorrow,” she confided.

Dagmar stopped in mid-untie and glanced up. “So soon?” Then she shrugged pragmatically. “Great men such as he do not wait for what they want. They take it. But it could be worse, my lady. He could have killed you, or just made you his lover until he tired of you and handed you off as a prize to one of his generals. Perhaps you should feel fortunate...”

“If I were a man, I would have more choices,” Mora said.

Dagmar stood now and looked her mistress right in the eye.

“Now you listen to me. You are not a man. I’ve known you since you were just a wee thing, and you’re as stubborn now as you were then. I’ve seen you through two indulgent husbands who spoiled you rotten. But I can tell this one will be different, Mora. He will love you, but he will not coddle you. Best you put away notions of what your life would be like if you had a cock, because you don’t, lady. Best you start seeing things for what they are.”

Mora shook her head and gave a sad laugh.

“You always did have a way of telling me the truth, whether I wanted to hear it or not, Dagmar.” She stepped into the tub and slid into the brimming water as she spoke. “You are right about my lot, of course. I cannot change my gender. And you are also right about Lord Kedar. He is a strict man. Does it surprise you to know that he has now twice beaten me?”

“No,” Dagmar said. “I caught sight of your bottom before you got in the tub and know this, my lady. Had I seen marks on any other part of your body I’d drive a dagger into his heart myself. But the man spared you, and he seems fair enough. So what if he’s a bit strict. Some women have it far worse.”

“Good Lord,” Mora said. “Has he charmed you now as well? The maid at the inn went on and on about my good fortune. Perhaps this is no mortal man, but a sorcerer who has glamored every woman but me.”

Dagmar tugged the hair she was now washing. “Fie,” she said. “I’m too old to notice such things. I care for naught but you, and you know that. And I am not suggesting that you become a quiet mouse of a woman, only that you stay mindful that you are now matched with a man as stubborn as you are, but with less tolerance for your willfulness.”

Mora looked back over her shoulder. “Am I really so willful.”

The maid rolled her eyes and dumped a pitcher of water on her lady’s soapy head.

“Yes,” she said. “Stand.”

Mora stood.

“Both your husbands asked me for advice on your stubbornness. Neither had it in him to do anything but spoil you, however.” The older woman chuckled and Mora frowned at her for it, for she was perplexed. She was stubborn, but was she really *that* bad? She thought back on the day of the battle, how she’d mentioned invoking the law to Lord Desmond, and how he’d laughed at the idea that she could stand in her stead. She was forced to admit to herself now that this had made her angry. *Who is he*, she’d asked herself, *to tell me what my decision should be if the law allows it?* Now she was forced to wonder how much her own defiance had played into her decision. She’d not had a history of defying her husbands, but only because - as Dagmar pointed out - they’d always given Mora her way. With this man, it was indeed different.

She stepped out of the bath and let the maid rub her dry. A new gown lay on the bed, put there by one of the servants. Mora wondered if it had belonged to Kedar’s first bride, the young woman who had killed herself after being forced into a political marriage with the wealthy lord. She recalled how pained Kedar had looked when he spoke of her, and how hard his expression had grown when he talked of taking revenge on the father who

assured him that the girl was willing to be his wife. Had Kedar thought to get a sweet, obedient wife. Had he hoped to train her? Did he see Mora as something different altogether - a challenge? Was he so strict with her because she was older, more headstrong, more set in her ways? And then Mora wondered if part of her didn't want to be tamed. She's never had a man do anything but spoil her, as Dagmar said. No, she'd never secretly desired it. But then when she thought to how she'd responded so passionately to Kedar's touch she wondered if it was not because he was so different from her other husbands, so dominant....

"You're flushed," Dagmar said, handing her the gown. "Are you over-warm?"

Mora shook her head, embarrassed. "No," she said. "I'm just rosy from the bath."

"Well get dressed," Dagmar said. "You've only got a little time to rest before the Lord calls on you."

Mora nodded. And what, she wondered, would happen then. Time would tell...

Chapter Two

Mora could not rest, even though she was tired. A mixture of apprehension mixed with anticipation of Kedar's visit made her too nervous. Dagmar's advice had given her much to think about.

"You look lovely," he said when he entered their chamber. "The dress...?"

"...is appreciated," she said. "And it fits well. Thank you."

"I'll have more made for you," he said.

She nodded and offered a small smile of gratitude.

"Is there anything else you need, Lady?" he asked.

"To spend time with my children," she said.

"And you will," he replied. "I've arranged a feast tonight. But first we must talk."

Her heart began to thud. "Are you going to punish me again?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

Mora swallowed hard. A ball of fear was forming in the pit of her stomach.

"My second, Creed. He angers you."

Mora nodded. "He taunts me. I do not know why."

"It's just who he is," Kedar replied.

"I don't like him," she responded.

Kedar gave a laugh. "Few people do. But if you have an issue with the man, come to me, Mora. Do not use your anger at him as an excuse to insult me. It will avail you naught but trouble."

"So it is permissible for him to be disrespectful?" she asked hotly. "And why? Because I am a mere woman?"

"No," he said evenly. "It is not permissible. And Creed understands that now. However, it is less permissible for you to suggest that I am not in complete control of my men. Making that statement in the presence of one of them was a very big mistake. I will not allow you to say such things."

"I won't say them again," Mora said, backing away now. Her hands had reflexively gone behind her, covering her bottom. She did not think she could take another spanking, but she knew that he was not going to let her escape his judgment once it was rendered.

"And what of him?" she asked angrily. "Did you strike Creed as you will strike me?"

"I rebuked him, Mora," Kedar said. "For Creed, a disapproving word from me is worse than the harshest blow."

"That's because he's a cur," Mora replied, tears coursing down her face now. She didn't know where to direct the anger she felt - at Creed for getting her into trouble or at herself for rising to the bait as he probably knew she would.

"That's enough, Mora," Kedar said. "He's a loyal second to me. And he's been forbidden to needle you further. Now come here."

"No!" Mora stepped back, her chest heaving with fury. "I will not be punished while he escapes with no more than a rebuke."

He advanced on her. "You will face the consequences I decide," Kedar replied, and caught Mora before she could move away. He pulled her easily over to the bed and pushed her over the edge. It was a high bed, and her feet left the floor and she could not evade him when he pressed his hand down against her lower back and lifted her skirt with the other.

"You will learn to obey me, Mora," he said and began to spank her again. The first blows were focused just above the tops of her thighs, on the lower buttocks. Mora felt herself propelled painfully forward with each hard swat, his unyielding, battle-calloused hand raining waves of fire down onto her helpless bum. Mora knew that attempting to hold back the tears was futile, and she was glad at least to be able to wail into the bed covers. He balled her fists up in front of her as she shook with pain and rage. She knew he would not stop until she begged him to, but did not want to give him the satisfaction. But as the punishing spanks began to land with increasing intensity all over her bottom she could endure no more and pleaded for mercy, her legs kicking wildly now against the throbbing hurt he was inflicting on her.

"Do you accept my authority?" he demanded to know.

"I will!" she cried, hating him for making her say it so easily.

"Stand up." The spanks stopped and she felt the skirt fall back down over her punished backside. Pushing herself up from the bed, she moved backwards until her feet touched the floor. She stood there a moment, crying into the back of her arm and unable to face him through her tears of humiliation.

"Now collect yourself," he said. "Your family is expecting you in the hall for a feast."

“I’m supposed to go like this?” she said resentfully. “I can barely sit.”

“You will,” he said. “You’re strong.”

Mora shot him as angry a look as she dared. “Now you taunt me, too.”

He brushed a tear away from her face. “No,” he replied. “I am not taunting you. You are strong. But even the strong need direction. Strong women, particularly need direction.”

Kedar took her hand. “I’ll come back when the hour is half passed and fetch you.”

He left, and as he did, Mora heard him talking in low tones to someone in the doorway. A moment later, Dagmar walked in. Mora closed her eyes and looked away.

“Don’t say a word in his defense,” Mora said.

“I’d not planned to,” Dagmar said pointedly. “Here.”

Mora turned to see her soaking a rag in cold water and squeezing it out. “Put this on your face. It will take some of the puffiness down.” Mora took the rag and began to dab around her red eyes. Dagmar reached into the pocket of her apron and took out a tub of salve. “This,” she said, “is for your sore bottom.”

Mora took the salve with an embarrassed sigh. “Did I cry that loudly?” she asked.

“I didn’t hear you cry at all,” the maid said. “But I could tell by your lord’s expression that he intended to have a strong word with you, which is why I fled the room.”

“You could have defended me,” Mora sulked.

“Against him?” The maid cackled. “I think not, my wee one. He could trounce a grown man. A broken down serving lady would be no obstacle to his will.”

“Neither are the tears of the woman he plans to marry,” Mora said. She sighed heavily and looked at Dagmar. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You will do what you must,” Dagmar said. “You will do what you must as you always have - for the people, for your children...”

“And for myself?” Mora asked. “What of what I desire?”

Dagmar shrugged. “Show me one woman who lives by her own leave. The best a woman can do is wield her own kind of influence. You’ve done it with two husbands and you’ll find a way to do it with this one, Mora. You won’t always get your way, but I think this is a man who values a woman with a brain and you do have that. You’re more than just a

tumble or a bit of fluff. You need to let him know who you are, but it won't happen if you fight him every step of the way."

"I grow weary of your logic, Dagmar," Mora said, embracing her maid. "It is sometimes hard to hear."

"Ach, lass." The older woman patted her lady on the back. "It's what your mother would say if she were still alive, god rest her soul. And speaking of mothers, your children are looking quite forward to seeing theirs this evening."

Mora nodded. She applied the cream to her bum and as Dagmar promised it took the ache away almost completely, which pleased her since it meant that she would be able to sit comfortably. She was sure that Kedar would disapprove if he knew Dagmar had given her something to lessen the impact of her punishment; Mora tried not to find too much satisfaction in this fact.

Lord Kedar came for her at the appointed time. He studied her face and seemed pleased that she showed no traces of her earlier distress. Mora felt small beside him as he led her down to the hall. It was as grand as the rest of the castle in scope. The fireplace was large enough for a whole tree trunk. Musicians played in the corner and the long low table was heaped with food. Fresh rushes were strewn on the floor, and the hall smelled of cooked meat, bread and beeswax from all the candles glowing from sconces.

"Mother!" Her children came running to her and she embraced them. They seemed wary of Lord Kedar, but were at the same time polite. Mora knew it was because he'd spared her and essentially saved them from any possible turmoil. She was not sure how much they knew, and over dinner she told them about her ill-fated decision. Lord Kedar watched her as she spoke, and did not interrupt when she told them how she'd demanded to see the Noble Council because she considered death more honorable than being a prisoner.

Her children were all practical, and like Liam they expressed relief that the council had not sided with her.

"What will become of us now, mother?" her son Cian asked.

Mora's answer was not easy to give. "It will be for Lord Kedar to decide."

Kedar, who had been listening, finally addressed her children. "And I have decided," he said. "Your mother and I are to be married."

Mora's children stared in shocked silence.

"So the rumors are true," her daughter Roan said. "We thought talk of a wedding was castle gossip."

“No,” Kedar said. He explained to Mora’s children, just as he’d explained to her, why he considered marriage the only option.

“Mother loved our father,” Roan said. “She loved Lord Desmond, too.” She looked at Mora. “Will you love Lord Kedar as well?”

Love. It was a big word, and the notion of applying it to the man who only had her because he’d planned to kill her husband seemed ridiculous.

“It’s a marriage of political expedience,” she told her daughter. “I have loved twice. That will have to be enough for me.”

Mora suddenly felt a lump arise in her throat, and hot tears prick the backs of her eyes. She did not want to cry in front of her children. She stood quickly and summoned all her strength to look at them.

“You know, I am suddenly quite tired. I have enjoyed the feast but I need to retire and rest, especially if I am to be wed tomorrow.” She looked at Lord Kedar. “By your leave...”

“Granted,” he said.

Mora turned, feeling the tightening of anxiety in her chest as she walked from the hall. All she could think of was seeking the refuge of her room, so she could calm her nerves and accept her fate. Everyone was right; there was nothing she could do. She’s been brave enough to take to the battlefield against Lord Kedar. Now she must be brave enough to marry him.

She rounded the corner and gasped when she felt a sharp tug on her arm. Before she could even cry out she found herself pulled behind a tapestry. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim light until she could make out the face of her captor.

“Let me go, Creed,” she said.

He smiled. “Now, now. Not so fast.” The smile faded. “You caused me some trouble with Lord Kedar.”

She tried to wrench free of his grip. “Not as much as you deserve.”

Creed squeezed her arm. “You think you’re clever, don’t you, Lady Mora? But you’re not as clever as you think. If you were then you’d have more respect for authority.”

“Let me go,” she said, but he ignored her.

“You know, I’ve served with Lord Kedar on more campaigns than I can count. I’ve killed to protect him, and he to protect me. I’ve never disagreed with him on anything

until now. He's not stern enough with you. He's treating you like a lady, even though women are all the same, whether they're bar maids or queens. They all need a good spanking followed by a good fuck to bring them to heel."

He pulled her close. "I know he's worn out that pretty bottom," he said. "Tell me, lady. What else has Lord Kedar worn out?"

Mora did not even think before her knee struck Creed. She felt the sharp jab of her kneecap slam hard into the pouch of his testicles and then watched, surprised, as he fell at her feet and moaned in pain.

She could think of doing nothing then but running, and so she did, praying that she'd remember the way back to the room. It was up the stairs and down a long hall. Perhaps, she thought, she should go back to the hall, to the safety of Kedar's watch. That this should even occur to her came as a surprise. But she had no time to ponder her need for his protection. It was too risky to go back the way she had come. Mora had no doubt in her mind that she'd made a serious enemy of the man who had her future husband's ear.

She found the doorway to the bedchamber and rushed in. Once inside she slammed it shut and slid the bolt across it. She was hyperventilating in fear.

"God's bones, child! What happened?" Dagmar, who'd fallen asleep in a chair, rushed over.

Mora hugged the older woman to her and began to cry.

"Why did I do what I did, Dagmar? I've ruined everything! I was so stupid to try and fight Kedar."

"There, there," the maid said. "Marrying him won't be the worst thing. We've discussed this..."

"No," Mora said, disengaging from the other woman's grip. "That's not what I'm talking about." In a rush of words she confided in Dagmar about Creed, about his constant harassment and the altercation in the hallway of the castle.

"You must tell Lord Kedar," Dagmar said.

"No," Mora said, shaking her head. "Creed will only accuse me of lying, and I'll end up getting punished for it. Every time that man does something, I am the one who pays. He is never held accountable beyond a verbal reprimand, Dagmar. If he tells the story differently, who do you think Lord Kedar will believe? A mere woman or the man he trusts to protect his back in battle?"

Dagmar sighed. "Perhaps..."

“There is no ‘perhaps,’ Dagmar,” she said bitterly. “I will end up over his knee. Creed will see to it. He’s out for vengeance now...” She began to cry. “And to think I’m to marry a man who would not believe me if I told him the truth.”

“Men are indeed curiously loyal to their male friends,” Dagmar admitted. “Perhaps the best thing to do is just to avoid this man. He certainly seems to be no good.”

That seemed an outrageous understatement to Mora, but she didn’t say so. She was suddenly exhausted and was more than eager to accept her maid’s offer of help to dress for bed. She could still hear music coming from the hall and was grateful to be locked in the room with Dagmar. The older woman’s company afforded her a feeling of security. It was nice, too, to have the comfort of a matronly figure to tuck her in and make her feel loved, especially now that she faced a life without the love of a husband.

She pondered love, and how suddenly realizing the lack of it in her life had driven her from the hall in despair. Mora was so used to having husbands who loved her that the idea of being wed to a man who did not left her with a deep feeling of emptiness. She knew what other women would say. There was plenty of other things she could use to fill the void. Kedar’s coffers would buy her splendid gowns and finery that other women only dreamed of. She’d be warm and snug during the harshest of winters, and always have plenty of food. Kedar, she knew, would provide for her children so long as she served him as a dutiful wife. Other women would say she was selfish to want love, too, since so many lived with less and still had no love.

Her mind turned to her dead husbands. Her love for them had been quiet. It had not spawned passionate intensity. She’d been young when she’d married the father of her children. She was fond of her studious husband at first, and later came to love him as a companion and a father to her little ones. She’d wept when he died, and when Lord Desmond came along to save her, she’d loved him from gratitude. When she really thought about it, did she have any more basis of love for these men than she did for Kedar. Why did she think she could not grow to love him?

She decided it was because she feared him, and because she did not think she could go to him when she needed to. Even though he’d been kind and had spared her and saved her children, she got the feeling that Kedar had distinct ideas about a woman’s place, and she did not rank as highly in importance as Creed did. Was it ridiculous of her to be jealous of the loyalty he showed Creed when they’d known each other for so many years? Mora decided she’d have to figure that out later. But she’d have to do it while giving the man a wide berth. She knew that wedding or not, Lord Kedar’s second in command would be waiting in the wings to extract revenge on her for what she’d done. She had to find a way to keep that from happening.

Chapter Three

Mora's wedding day to Lord Kedar dawned cold and gray. She hoped it was not an omen. She did not expect a big ceremony and was pleased when he sent word that it would be conducted in the chapel in the castle. Only those closest to the couple would be in attendance. She knew this meant her children. And Creed.

Dagmar, who already had her practiced hear trained on castle gossip, brought word that a satin gown had been modified to become a beautiful wedding dress.

"They say it's lovely," she said as she brought breakfast to her lady. Mora, who'd not enjoyed any of the feast the night before, forced herself to eat despite the butterflies in her stomach.

"Did you see your lord last night?" Dagmar asked. "If he snuck in to bid you goodnight, I missed it. I fell asleep in that chair and did not stir till the cock crowed in the courtyard."

"No, he did not come to me," Mora said. "But then again, why should he? We are not yet married."

Dagmar raised her eyebrow and once again Mora was left wondering how it was that her servant seemed to instinctively know things she should not. She'd not even told Dagmar that she had already slept with Lord Kedar.

But fortunately, the older woman did not mention this. Instead she chatted of simple things to keep Mora's mind off all the reasons she had to be nervous. They decided Mora's long hair would be wound into a knot at the nape of her neck and decorated with sprays of tiny purple flowers and pears. The gown was indeed beautiful, and elegant in its simplicity. Mora was relieved, for she'd not wanted something too opulent for her third wedding.

The chapel of the castle was beautiful. Huge oak beams supported an arched ceiling and even though the day was gray, the stained glass windows still were still splendid. Dagmar gasped when she saw them, with their representations of the Sermon on the Mount, the crucifixion and the ascension.

Lord Kedar was waiting for her at the altar. He eyed her with appreciation and what could have passed for affection, and Mora would have relaxed but for Creed's presence at his right arm.

Her children were seated in the front row and smiled as she approached. She tried not to look nervous.

The priest read the vows and Mora looked up at Kedar as he affirmed them with more intensity than she'd expected. His eyes were locked on hers and she was struck again by how handsome this man was. He'd dressed well for the occasion; had she just been

seeing him for the first time she'd have thought him a gentleman lord who'd never seen battle. Only the scars on his arms and hands gave him away.

It was time for her vows. Mora listened to the priest. She was promising to love, to honor, to cherish, to obey. Till death do you part, the priest said. Mora vowed to do all those things. She'd made those promises twice before and had never broken them. This man was younger than her other husbands. She could look forward to many years, unless he fell in battle.

The priest announced them man and wife. Kedar pulled her close and lifted the simple veil she wore. His lips touched hers, and Mora felt her knees go weak as the memories of their night at the inn rushed back. His mouth was soft yet persistent on hers and suddenly it was as if everyone else melted away. She returned the kiss, enjoying the taste of his mouth, the feel of it. Her lips seemed to throb with need after their mouths parted.

Lord Kedar and Lady Mora of Venrax, the priest said as they turned to face the small group. Her children rushed to congratulate the couple. Dagmar had told her she'd heard from other servants that they'd spent much of the evening talking to Kedar and seemed to enjoy his company. This gave her some comfort. His generals and their ladies were now coming forward to pay respects. Mora smiled and tried to be as gracious as she could to these strangers who stared at her long; having learned of her legend they no doubt found her fascinating. Was this really the tiny woman who had challenged their larger-than-life Lord and lived to tell about it? Was this the one who demanded of the Noble Council that he keep his word and kill her? She said she preferred death, and now she stood by Kedar's side as his wife. Mora knew she would be the talk of the realm. She would be a distraction. Distractions made people happy; distractions were amusing - yet another advantage for her new husband.

Mora's kids turned to her new husband, giving him their best wishes and talking of their mother's future, and the future of the realm.

"My lady." She turned to see Creed standing before her. A chill went through her body. Before she could stop him, he'd taken her hand and pressed the back of it to his lips. They lingered there longer than they should have.

"As I have shown loyalty to your new husband, now I will show it to you," he said. "Please know that I will always consider you worthy of my protection, no matter what happens. Do not worry that I will ever stop keeping watch over you. Should Kedar fall in battle, I will be instantly at your side to care for you as he would want me to."

"Thank you, Creed." Kedar was at her elbow now, nodding to his second. But his words had made Mora feel strangely unnerved. Why would he say such a thing? Why would any man be so callous as to talk of her husband's possible death on their wedding day. She was just glad that Kedar was there so she would not have to talk to Creed.

“Loyalty, Mora,” Kedar said. “It’s the foundation of Venrax. Loyalty is what it’s built upon. Without loyalty we are nothing.” He tipped her face up to his. “I will be loyal to you, and work to earn your loyalty in return.”

Mora colored, strangely touched at his words. Under his stern exterior were flashes of a good and caring man.

He smiled to see her blush. “It’s a good day,” he said quietly. “Today the whole of Venrax feasts to celebrate and we get to know one another better.” He held out his hand and she placed hers in it. They walked back up the aisle of the church but as they did, she caught a glimpse of Creed’s face and was again frightened. He looked angry and determined, and she wondered why he hated her so much.

She did not ponder Creed any further, however. She was with Kedar, and felt safe. She was his wife now and had decided that Creed’s actions the night before were just one last effort to unbalance her and start problems before she was out of his clutches for good. Mora decided now that she’d done the right thing by not mentioning the incident to Kedar; it probably angered Creed even more to be ignored. The thought made her smile, and for the first time she felt a sense of expectation.

The wedding feast was as extravagant as the wedding was simple. The table in the hall was piled with every possible food one could imagine - pigs roasted whole, plump geese, wild game, breads, puddings, cakes and every manner of fall vegetable she could imagine. Tankards of mead sat a foot apart all along the table and it looked as if everyone who was anyone in the realm was in attendance. Mora smiled to see her children being introduced by Kedar to some of his visitors, and before she even sat down to eat her knees were sore from curtsying to so many new acquaintances her husband lined up for her to meet.

The feasting and visiting lasted most of the day. In the early evening, musicians came and began to play. Lord Kedar stood and held out his hand. Mora took it and he led her to the dance floor. She felt so small beside him and he was careful as he guided her in their first dance. Mora found herself shyly smiling up at her new husband. The smiles he returned were kind and reassuring.

“May I have the second?” Creed was there now, his scheming eyes fixed on Mora. Mora’s heart began to pound. She did not want to say ‘no’ for fear of offending Creed and having Kedar rebuke her for it, so when her husband pulled her close and refused his second, her relief was palpable.

“I would grant you anything,” Kedar said. “But the lady is mine and I alone will dance with her all day.” He smiled down at her. “Unless one of her sons usurps me. But no other man will be allowed.”

The music started again and he took her and began to dance. Mora looked past him as she did to see Creed watching them. His face looked livid. She had a sense of foreboding she could not shake and dismissed it as the side effect of too much excitement in one day.

They danced long into the evening, and Lord Kedar was true to his word. His sons were allowed to dance with her, but for all the other dances he was her partner. It was clear to everyone in the hall that he was smitten by the woman he'd met on the battlefield just days before. And as the evening wore on, and her laughter and smiles became easier and more readily given, it was apparent that the attraction was mutual. By the time it was announced that the Lord and Lady of Venrax would be retiring to their wedding chamber, everyone thought the moment was well due.

"We thank all of you for coming," Lord Kedar said. "We are taking our leave now for some time alone. I am pleased to have taken a wife who not only will ease the hurt of our new citizens, but who will certainly ease the loneliness I have felt. I have been blessed by many things, and have much to be grateful for. The one thing I did not have and longed for was a companion. I am happy to have that now."

The people of Venrax rarely heard their Lord speak on such matters, and cheered his words. Mora and Kedar left to the sounds of those cheers and then the music started again as the revelers continued to make use of the musicians talents and the remaining food and mead.

A fire had been lit in their bedchamber, and a beautiful night gown lay on the bed. Dagmar was there to take Mora behind a screen and help her change. After that, the Lady of Venrax excused her servant to go and revel with the others. When Mora stepped from behind the screen, Kedar was clad only in his breeches. His chest was bare and well-muscled. A scar shone silvery against the flesh of his shoulder. Mora walked over and put up her finger, touching it.

"What happened?"

"It was on my first campaign, the one with my father. I was injured defending him."

Mora traced the scar with her finger. "Your father must have been grateful."

"He would have been, but he died," Kedar replied. "I killed the man who killed him. And then I became Lord of this land."

Mora looked up into his eyes. "How old were you?"

"I was seventeen."

Mora tried to imagine her studious sons on the battlefield and shuddered. She'd always been glad she'd been able to send them to school, and secretly pleased that they were her sons with another man and Lord Desmond, for he surely would have made any son serve

by his side as Kedar's father had done. It was the way of those who conquered and defended land.

"Was he a good man?" she asked.

"He was a good man and more," Kedar said. "He was noble and true."

She pondered this and continue to study his scars.

"And this one?" she asked, pointing to a faint, thin scar across his right bicep.

"I got that when I was seven. I was riding my horse through the woods and hit a low-hanging branch."

Mora raised an eyebrow. "You should have known better."

He smiled. "Lads can be foolish creatures."

She nodded and reached for his arm. Her fingers traced the cut she'd given him. It was healing nicely. "I did this," she said, her tone sad.

"You were brave," he said. "Foolish, but brave. I've had men larger than I am refuse to face me in battle."

"If I'd known you as I know you now, I'd have been too afraid to challenge you," she said.

He put his hand to her face and cupped her chin. "I don't want you to fear me, Mora. There are consequences for defying me, but I am not a cruel man. I would only have order. I was born to lead."

"I do not want to be afraid of you," she said. "I want to trust you, to be able to speak my heart and my mind."

"And you can, so long as you are respectful."

She opened her mouth; she was going to tell him about Creed, but she stopped. It was their wedding night. She did not want to mar it with talk of the man she hated. Mora stepped closer to Kedar. His lips closed onto hers. She felt the same warmth flow through her as she had when he kissed her in the chapel, but now the kiss deepened. His tongue brushed hers and her arms wound around his neck. His hands molded themselves to her body, sliding down her lithe form and then back up again to cup her breasts and squeeze them. He pushed the gown from her shoulders and she stood naked before him. He took a step back and looked at her.

"You are a goddess in the flesh," he said.

She blushed. "I am past my goddess days."

He tipped her chin up until she was looking at him. "Say one more word against your own beauty and I will strap you most severely."

Kedar removed his own pants. He was completely comfortable with his nakedness. His cock was already hard and standing at attention. It was just as impressive as Mora remembered.

He picked her up and gently placed her on the bed. His mouth found her breasts and teased first one nipple and then the other. He pulled his body over hers until they were touching. Mora felt her skin flush with pleasure. Her velvety skin felt tickled by the fine hair of his legs. He kissed her some more, his hands winding themselves in the blond tresses that Dagmar had loosened before she left the room. He buried his face in the fragrant waves of her hair. "Beautiful," he murmured. "So beautiful." Mora flushed with pleasure at his words and kissed him again.

Kedar's hands moved underneath her to cup her bottom possessively. Mora's legs fell open at his touch and his mouth traveled down between them as he had done at the inn. She arched her back and snaked her fingers through his hair. She was sure he would die before he finished, but when he did and pulled himself back up over her, she surprised him by pushing him back.

"Let the lady pleasure her Lord now," she said, and pushed him back on the covers. Mora lowered her mouth onto him and was pleased to hear him groan. He was helpless beneath her warm hands and warmer mouth and she felt him become harder than hard as her tongue lapped up and down his shaft. When the first drops of liquid crowned the tip of his cock, he moved to turn her over and pull her beneath him. But she was quicker. Instead she pulled herself astride him and lowered herself down onto his rigid pole. Kedar was clearly not expecting this. His eyes widened in surprise.

"The benefit of an experienced mount," she teased, making a play on his earlier comments to her.

Kedar let her use him in this fashion for a few moments before lifting her off and turning her to face the headboard. She was on her knees and he grasped her with an arm around the middle and landed two slaps on her bottom.

"Just in case a lady needs reminding who's in control," he said, his voice half teasing. And then he was filling her again with exquisite slowness. Mora groaned with passion as his hips moved back and forth. She caught his rhythm and moved with him, their breaths coming as one as they pushed themselves upwards towards a shuddering climax.

Mora had never felt like this before. She'd never known pairing with a man could feel this way. She wanted to tell him, but was suddenly tired and he was laying her down, his

fingers tracing her spine as they lay there spoon-fashion. He was still inside her and she could feel him slowly grow flacid. She was asleep before he slid out of her, and in her dreams they were happy and the land was at peace and Lord Desmond was telling her that if things had to be this way, then he was content.

Mora hoped that the rest of her life would be as happy as that very moment. She had no way of knowing that Creed was plotting to change that, not just for her, but for the man whose trust he'd held for so many years.

Chapter Four

Kedar kept her in bed half of the next day, not that Mora had any complaints. At around noon, the servants brought two tubs and they both bathed and then dressed. Kedar told her that after lunch he planned to take some guests to see the fine stags that inhabited the forests near the castle.

"I wish I could go with you," she said.

He smiled. "Then go. You can handle a horse well enough, and the land is easy to ride."

Mora brightened at this. Through lunch she got to know the visiting Earls and their wives and then they prepared to go on the hunt. But as her horse was brought round, she began to regret her decision. Creed held the reins of the mount she was to ride, a small snow white horse with a flowing mane.

Creed dismounted and gestured to the saddle. "I'll lift you astride," he said.

"It won't be necessary." Mora led the animal way and deftly leapt into the saddle. "I do not need your help in any shape or form."

"That may change in the future, Lady," he said. "One never knows. You'd be wise to consider how fate can turn even lords into dust and ladies into slaves."

"Save your gibberish, Creed," she said, and turned the horse to join the others. But Creed grabbed the reins and leaned over towards her.

"You think now that you are married you are above me, Lady Mora? Careful, lest you find yourself under me one day."

Mora felt the same chill she'd felt on the stairs.

"I've not forgotten that you struck me," he said.

"Then why don't you tell my husband?" she asked.

He leaned further towards her. "Because it's time I dealt with you myself. And don't think I will. I'm biding my time, Lady. And soon enough you'll be begging me for mercy in a way you never begged Lord Kedar."

"Let go," Mora said, and turned her horse's head harshly as she kicked it forward. Her mount bumped Creed's, causing it to stumble backwards and he nearly fell. Mora cantered her horse towards Kedar, and was worried to see him looking at her with a disapproving expression.

“You need to be more careful,” he said. Mora started to speak but Creed had recovered and ridden up behind her.

“She’s a stubborn thing, your new lady. I was telling her how to best handle this animal since it’s the first time she’s ridden and she told me she needed no advice on how to handle a horse. Then she pushed the animal into my horse and nearly unsteadied me.”

“That’s a lie,” Mora said hotly. “He was going to help me mount and then...”

“You challenge my honor, Lady?” Creed turned to Kedar. “How long have you known me? Have I ever proven false?”

“No,” Kedar said. “But this will not be continued here.” He looked at Mora. “Mind your horse, and your manners. Married or no, my rules still stand. You know that.”

Kedar turned his horse around, signaling that the conversation was at an end. Mora’s face flamed hot with anger. She did not look in Creed’s direction, having no desire to see the smug look on his face. Instead, she focused on the countryside. The day was overcast and gray, making the colors of the trees even brighter by comparison. Despite the coming of winter, the hills were still green. It felt good to ride in the country air, and the little horse Kedar had chosen for her was forward and responsive.

It did not take them long to find the deer. Herds of them moved through the trees at the edge of the forest. Mora saw Kedar point out two huge stags approaching one another. The larger one, a majestic animal with towering antlers, dropped its head and bugled a challenge to a smaller but well-muscled rival. The older stag was battle-scarred but had a wise eye and a confident stance. It bugled again and trotted towards the other stag, which stood its ground and pawed.

“Are they going to fight?” ask Mora.

“They are,” Kedar said.

The older stag charged. The younger male lowered his head and the hillside resounded with the clash of their antlers. The muscles in their necks strained as they pushed against one another. Mora could see the older male’s scarred shoulders working hard as he sought to gain ground against the younger stag, which was making a surprisingly strong showing. The older male broke away and moved to charge again, but the younger animal stepped aside and gouged his rival in the barrel with his horns. A huge gash opened up on the old stag’s side and he staggered away and turned, panting.

Now the younger stag charged. The older stag, reeling from his injury, just had enough time to put his head down before he was hit. But he had not steeled himself and crashed down to his knees. The young stag pushed him back and the old stag tore up the turf trying to regain footing. There was a sickening snap and at first Mora thought that one of

them had broken an antler. But then she realized that while trying to rise, the older stag's leg had broken from the force of being pushed against the ground.

The young male backed off, leaving the critically wounded former king of the stags floundering on the grass. The animal bellowed in pain and confusion, and his rival snorted and then turned to grunt at the females, which looked past him with expressions of what Mora could only interpret as concern. But the young stag was having none of it. He began to chase the females towards the does he already led, doubling the size of his herd. The old stag watched from the ground, calling out in pain as he tried to rise.

"Kedar!" Mora was trying not to cry at the scene. It was nature's way, she knew, and it would have happened whether they'd witnessed it or not. But to see the noble stag come to an end like this broke her heart.

"Kedar," she repeated. "Can you not ease his suffering?"

Her husband nodded and he and one of his guests rode towards the animal to put it out of its misery. Mora did not notice that Creed was beside her until he began to speak.

"Do you know the truly ironic thing about this sad drama?" he asked. "The stag who won the fight used to be part of the old king's herd."

Mora looked at him with disbelief. "Oh yes," Creed continued. "They were quite close. In fact, I'd say that old stag taught the younger one everything he knows, including how to kill and lay claim to that which belongs to another. The young stag followed the older one, worshipped him. But over time, the young stag became disloyal. The old stag never realized it but now he lays dead because he assumed that everyone would always follow him."

Mora felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she watched a visiting Earl drive a sword into the old stag's heart.

"Now the young stag will breed the females held by the old one who lays there dead. He will establish his authority by brutality if he has to. There will be no refusing him. Within a fortnight, he will have driven any thought of the old king from their minds."

"Why do you tell me these things?" Mora asked, tear stinging the corners of her eyes. "Of what use is this information to me?"

But Creed only smiled. "Eventually, you will learn that we are not so different from the deer that graze around us," he said.

He trotted off on his horse and Mora wiped her eyes with the back of her gloved hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realize..."

“It’s not your fault,” Mora said. “And I know it is the way things are. I just feel for the stag.”

“Me too,” said Kedar. “He’s ruled this place for many years. But nothing lasts forever, and it is a good reminder to the mighty that any of us can fall.”

They turned to ride for home. Behind them, some of the others had stayed to retrieve the meat from the fallen stag. Mora did not want to see that.

“There are skirmishes breaking out in Adwin,” the Earl who’d felled the deer was saying. “It is not from your people, Lady Mora, but from outliers looking to create trouble. Even though Kedar of Venrax has claimed the lands there are those who would seek to cause dissension. Until we establish a presence I fear there will be unrest.”

“We need to put them down, personally,” Creed advised. “They need to see the man himself among them.”

“Do you think that’s necessary, Creed?” asked Kedar. “A small party of soldiers would be enough to disperse the rabble.”

“Ordinarily I would agree,” Creed reasoned. “But consider how you acquired Adwin, and the lady of that land. There are those who are surely spreading lies. It is powerful to see you in the flesh. We should go, together, immediately.”

“You would need to go so soon?” Mora asked.

Creed laughed aloud. “Ha! Your lady would have you trot her around the grounds and sleep the day away, Lord Kedar. Does she not realize that there are things more important than her petty needs?”

“Hold your tongue, Creed,” Kedar said, pulling up his horse. “I grow sick of your insults towards Mora. I shall not tell you a third time without consequence.”

Mora did not have to look at Creed to know that he was fuming. His very tone was tight with anger.

“I apologize,” he said, delivering the words through gritted teeth. “I am just not used to seeing you so...” He let his words trail off. “But what say you, about Adwin?”

“I will consider it,” Kedar said.

“I think Creed’s advice is wise,” the Earl said. “You’ve been to Adwin but briefly. You should go again to set up your own people in authority, to reassure the residents that they will all enjoy their portion. I’m sure they’ve long feared you; now they need to learn to respect you instead.”

“Adwin is home to me,” Mora said. “Or it was.” Her tone was hopeful. “I could go. I could help!”

“No. Not this time,” Kedar said. “If there are conflicts then it could be dangerous.”

“Nonsense,” Mora argued. “I accompanied Desmond to the front many times. I would be fine if you...”

“No!” The word was delivered with finality.

“Is it offensive if I observe that your choice is wise, Lord Kedar?” Creed asked. “Women have no place in battle. They should be home, waiting to reward their men upon return.”

“Agreed,” the Earl said, and Mora swallowed the anger that rose in her throat. She said nothing on the ride home. The day had grown late and she should have been tired after getting so little sleep on her wedding night, but she was too angry to rest.

Dagmar noticed how quiet she was when she helped her change for dinner. Mora’s children were a distraction, but even so throughout the entire meal she could not help but brood over her husband’s decision. She longed to see Adwin again, to see its people. And she knew she was right. Her presence would calm them; it would reassure them to see her happy and supportive of Kedar. Mora decided there was only one thing to do; she would need to make her husband see that he was wrong.

She put on her most beautiful nightdress after dinner and had Dagmar brush her hair until it gleamed. Standing in front of the looking glass, the woman who looked back at her was a vision. She hoped her appearance would soften Kedar’s resolve.

He certainly seemed appreciative when he walked in.

“You look lovely,” he said.

“And you look handsome.”

He walked to her and took her in his arms. His mouth found hers.

“Can I speak with you?” she asked when their lips parted. “Before...”

“You may.”

“It’s about Adwin..”

“Mora, no..”

“Kedar, please.” She held out her hands imploringly. “I was loved there. If I go and the people see I am well and happy that can only reflect well on you. Don’t you see that?”

“I’m not saying that you can’t go, Mora. Just not this time. These outliers need a show of force. Diplomacy is the second step. I will not appear weak by bringing my wife in as my first tactic..”

“So relying on me makes you *weak*?” she asked, defensive. “Is this your silly notion or are you allowing Creed to think for you again?”

“Mora, have you not been warned about insulting me?”

“Why should you care?” she asked. “He insults me and there are never consequences. There are always consequences for me!”

“I told you. I rebuke him. And today there were no consequences when you slammed your horse into his, Mora.”

Mora’s eyes narrowed in anger. “I did not intentionally do that. I was trying to get him to loose hold on my reins.”

“Creed was simply trying to help you!” he said.

“No,” Mora argued. “Creed was doing what he always does, trying to anger me in the hopes of dividing us. He is always so scheming and always successful. Look at us, arguing now. It’s what he wants!”

“Nonsense, Mora.”

“It is not nonsense,” she said. “You are blind to him, Kedar. He is not a trustworthy man!”

“I have told you to stop this, Mora. My men and how I handle them are my own affair, not yours. We’ll speak on this no more.”

“I’ll have no man tell me what to speak on!” she said hotly. “And I’ll not open my legs to one who tries to silence me.”

Kedar took her arm. “Wife, it is time for another lesson. You will not use your body as a reward or a punishment. You are my wife, which means you do my bidding. In case you have forgotten, you belong to me. And it’s time you remembered that.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her across his lap. Mora cried out as he bared her bottom and reached down to pick up a leather slipper. She shrieked as he brought the supple sole across her buttocks.

Mora began to cry in earnest, more from frustration than pain, and then from pain as Kedar disciplined her in his usual unflagging, merciless style. He did not cease until her pretty bottom was covered in dusky imprints of the slipper and she was sobbing too hard

to form any audible plea for leniency. Only then did he toss the slipper away and stand up, pulling her with him. He pushed her over the edge of the bed and for a moment she thought he was going to spank her some more. But instead he was parting her legs.

“You belong to me, Mora,” he said. “I will not allow you to refuse me as a means to gain advantage. I am master of you both inside and outside of our bedchamber.”

He slid into her then and she gasped in surprise. She’d not been quite prepared for his entry and it took her a moment to adjust. His pelvis was pushed up against her flaming bottom and she could not move away. She whimpered with pleasure-pain as he took full possession of her and began to move back and forth, thrusting steadily into her. Mora sought to remain impassive, and was horrified when - in spite of her pained bottom - she felt herself responding to him. The throbbing response of her womanhood would not be quelled, and she pulsed on him without wanting to. She heard his soft laughter, heard him comment on what a wanton she was. Mora groaned with shame into the bedclothes and lay there, unable to stop him or herself from climaxing together.

He picked her up then, and tenderly put her in bed with him.

“So you won’t change your mind?” she sniffed.

“No, we ride out tomorrow, and if you raise the subject again, I shall spank you once more. Is that what you want?”

Mora shook her head and sniffled pitifully. She could not take so much as another pat on her sore bottom. That much she knew.

“We ride out in the morning,” he said.

Mora closed her eyes, trying not to think about it. She was calculating the distance to Adwin, and wondering how long they’d be gone when she fell asleep. She dreamt of the stags. They were fighting. The old one was valiant but could not hold his ground. The younger stag pushed him into the earth. Blood spilled across the fertile soil. Then the stags were men. One lay on the ground, the other standing over him with a broadsword. She called out and the man on the ground looked up at her. She gasped. It was Kedar, and the man standing over him was Creed.

Mora screamed and sat up in bed.

Daylight was coming through the windows. How long had she slept? Dagmar appeared at her side.

“Bad dream?”

Mora nodded.

“Your man has gone,” her maid said. “But he left this.” She handed Mora a box. Inside was a necklace with a beautiful amber pendant.

“To my beloved,” the note with it read.

Mora smiled. “He’s thoughtful,” she said.

“He is.” Dagmar said. “You’re much loved. The shine of that stone should chase that nightmare away.”

Then the maid stood up. “Oh, I nearly forgot. There’s another gift, too.” She handed Mora a smaller box. “This was left beside the door. I suppose he didn’t want to wake you.”

Mora opened it and withdrew a tiny carving. It took her a moment to realize it was a stag. A splash of red covered its side. She felt a chill run through her. The note with it read, “From Creed.”

“Lady?” Dagmar’s tone was worried. “You’ve grown pale. What’s wrong?”

Mora dropped the box. “Dagmar, prepare me a dress for travel and go to the stable and have someone fetch me a good horse. I ride for Adwin today...”

“Lady..”

“Do not argue, Dagmar!” Mora cried. “Do this *now*! I have to warn my husband that his most trusted man plans to murder him!”

Chapter Five

Mora forbade Dagmar from telling anyone where she was going. She did not even want her children to know. Dagmar only told the stablehand that the Lady Mora wanted to ride in the fields. This was a common enough pursuit, and no one thought it a strange request.

Of course, Dagmar wrung her hands and begged Mora to take a companion. She even offered to go, which solicited a laugh from her charge.

“No,” Mora said. “You’re too tired for the journey. I can ride as well as a man and there’s no one here that I can trust to go along with me who would not think me mad in my reasoning.”

She kissed Dagmar before heading East for Adwin, leaving the old woman to cover for her by telling everyone in the castle that she’d taken ill and was confined to her chamber pending recovery.

For her part, Mora made for Adwin like the wind. When she’d come to Venrax, they had stopped along the way. But that was only because Kedar had wanted her to rest. She knew the men would ride straight through, and perhaps camp along the way. She would not stop riding until she found them and then...

She did not know what she would do then. How could she warn her husband about Creed based on a dream and an odd gift. When she’d held the little deer in her hands she’d been reminded of the things Creed had said in the field about the old king and the young rival. He’d not been talking about deer; he’d been talking about himself and Kedar and Mora. She represented the females that Creed planned to take. How could she have been so blind to not pick up on it then? How could she have missed his cold analogy?

She spurred her horse faster and it answered her command, moving from a canter to a lope.

It saddened Mora that Kedar did not heed her warnings about Creed, or seem to notice the darker side of the man. She realized that her husband saw the best in people, which was a good trait but perhaps in some cases a reckless one.

A cold rain began to fall and Mora’s horse was hot from the running. She was forced to take shelter in some trees until it passed. Dagmar had given her some bread and she forced herself to eat some before starting off again. She did not know how many men were riding with her husband, but she knew one fast horse could travel more quickly than a group. She spurred her animal on, praying he did not trip on the wet ground. The tracks she came across looked fresher and fresher. She was not far from them, and the last thing she wanted to do was run up on Kedar and his party and be sent back home after being punished in front of the entire group, and she knew that would be exactly what would happen if she were to ride headlong into her husband’s sight.

Something similar had happened to the wife of one of Desmond's generals. The couple had been newly married and the girl had opposed him going to maneuvers. She was a spoiled little thing with flaming red hair, and when her husband left she followed dressed as a man. Her plan was to secrete herself in the camp and spirit her husband away for romantic trysts at night when the others were asleep. She thought she could just hide by day. But her husband was not amused by her romantic scheme. When she revealed herself to him, he marched her up to the front of the men and announced what she had done.

Then he bared her bottom, pulled her across his knee and gave her such a dreadful strapping that the nearby villagers were sure someone was being killed. Of course, once they came out of the houses and saw that it was just a soldier teaching his wife a lesson, they all enjoyed the spectacle.

When Lord Desmond had recounted the story upon his return, Mora had been horrified. Having never been spanked by one of her husbands, the notion seemed barbaric, and she wondered aloud why the errant girl had not just been sent home. Lord Desmond's answer had surprised her.

"Because humiliation is a lesson longer remembered."

Mora agreed. Or did she. Kedar had spanked her on several occasions, and yet she was now following in express defiance to his will. Did that make her a bad, disobedient wife? She decided it did not. Were it not for her fears, she'd be home now with her children.

She'd been riding for a while and saw smoke in the distance now. Her horse neighed and she jerked the reins, fearful when one answered. The animals knew each other. Now hers danced, wanting to join the horses of the part. Mora dismounted and tied her horse to a nearby tree. She held her breath, hoping that no one would come check out the sound of the neigh.

They were camping on the ridge. She could see them now in the distance, could make out Kedar's bold form and Creed's talk lanky one. But they could not see her for the cover of the trees.

In the thicket, her horse moved nervously about. Mora took the reins and patted his shoulder, attempting to soothe him. "There, there," she said.

An apple. Perhaps a treat would settle him. They'd passed a few trees just paces up the road. Mora decided to walk back and fetch her horse a snack to occupy him. But as soon as she stepped away, he began to call the other horses again. Now they were eagerly calling back and forth and she could see Kedar and Creed looking out towards where she was. She saw them walk down the ridge to where their horses were tethered.

No! No! No! She needed to talk to Kedar alone. Why was Creed coming with him? Mora felt panicky. She did not know what to do so she fled deeper into the cover of the trees.

She knew it was only a matter of time before her horse was discovered and recognized. She sank down behind a boulder and hugged her knees to her chin as she tried to figure a way out of her predicament.

“Mora!”

She could hear Kedar calling to her. “Mora! Mora! Come out! We know you’re here. Come out now!”

Creed’s voice joined his. “Come out, Lady! There’s no need to hide! Your husband will only show mercy if you give yourself up!”

They were getting closer. Mora could not let herself be found by the two of them together. She needed to get Kedar alone, to reason with him. She stood and fled, trying to make as little noise as possible. But ever stick she snapped sounded like a thunderclap.

“This way!” She heard Kedar’s voice. He was getting closer. She dodged ancient trees and then found herself at a dead end. There was a rock face the base of the ridge up ahead. There was nowhere to go. When Kedar emerged in the clearing, his face was grim.

“I am disappointed in you, Mora. What you have done here is exceedingly reckless, and the punishment will be beyond measure.”

“Indeed,” said Creed, walking up behind him. “Surely only a severe penalty will be fitting for a woman whose disobedience leads to the death of Lord Kedar.”

Kedar turned, and the last thing his puzzled mind registered before hitting the ground was his second-in-command coming at him with the butt of his sword. Creed hit Kedar squarely in the forehead, knocking him unconscious. Mora rushed to her husband’s side, but Creed grabbed her and covered her mouth before she could scream.

“Look at him, Mora. Look what you did! You led your husband down into a den of bandits. And why? All because you did not want to stay home. Selfish and spoiled. That is what they will say when they learned that your carelessness killed him. And now I’m going to let you go with this warning. Scream or tell anyone what you see, and I will kill your children one by one when we return and I take my rightful place as leader. And it will happen, for I have fooled the others just as I have fooled your husband.”

He slung her away and Mora moved to cover Kedar’s body with her own.

“Don’t!” she cried. “Don’t do this.”

“Stand back!” Creed said, stepping up with his sword. “It’s time for the old stag to make way for the younger one.”

“No!” Mora pulled Kedar’s sword from its sheath and stood over his unconscious form.

Creed stared back and laughed.

“So you’ll challenge me as you challenged Lord Kedar?”

“I do!” she said. At her foot her husband groaned but when Creed approached, she swung the sword viciously, slicing him across the thigh.”

“Stupid cow!” he seethed, looking at the bloodstain seeping through his trousers. “Do you know what I will do to you when we get back to the castle. Do you know how I will make you suffer, beg, plead?”

His attention was on her now. He sought to disarm her, lunging. Mora recalled Desmond’s advice. “Fleet of foot,” he’d said. “That is your advantage...”

Mora moved quickly away. Creed dodged at her, enraged, but she kept the trees between herself and him. Behind Creed she could see her husband coming to and looking at the scene before him with disbelief. Then he rose, but she kept Creed’s attention on her.

“What kind of dog are you?” she asked. “That you cannot even be a loyal one?”

“Drop the sword, Lady Mora,” he said. “Drop it and I will only beat you a little before I ravish you.”

Mora dodge from behind a tree and swung the sword. It hit Creed on the hip, but with the broad side and did not cut him. But just the impact maddened him. He came at her and she remembered what her husband said. Aim for just below the arm. She held the sword up. It was heavy and took all her effort. The point hit him exactly where Desmond advised. Creed screamed but moved back; the blade only went in an inch, but he knew now that he meant to kill him and that he’d misjudged her even as his rage unbalanced him.

He raised his sword and advanced. Mora saw murder in his eyes.

“CREED!”

Kedar was on his feet, but he had no weapon. Mora turned, spun and threw the sword. It landed six feet behind her husband. He lunged for it, and Creed lunged for him. Mora screamed and suddenly there were men all around them. Kedar grabbed the sword and rolled just in time to evade the crashing blade of his second-in-command’s weapon. The other men looked around, trying to process what happening.

“Help him!” Mora cried, but Kedar called for them to keep their place.

“No,” he said. “This is my fight.”

Creed could not stop now. The men were fighting for dominance of the army, of Venrax. Even though Creed had proven himself to be a traitor, if he prevailed he could still influence the men through his strength and superior knowledge. Mora knew that Kedar had to win.

A deep purple bruise was in the middle of his forehead, but it did not seem to effect his fighting ability. He gauged each of his opponent's moves, countered them, and then advanced. Kedar was large, but Creed much taller. He was getting winded, both from his own anger and from the effort of the fight. He cast glances of hatred at Mora from time to time that chilled her to the core.

He was limping from where Mora had cut him and Kedar took advantage of that to strike his leg again, this time on the back. Creed cried out and stumbled towards the Lord of Venrax. He knew he would not win and suddenly he turned and came at Mora, a cry of anger on his lips. He was going to kill her. But he never made it. Kedar's sword flew at him, going through his thigh. He fell to the ground, screaming in pain and cursing. His own sword flew from his hand and Kedar retrieved it, holding it to the man's throat.

"I trusted you," Kedar said. "I was loyal. I thought you were loyal. Loyalty is the cornerstone of Venrax. Without it a man is..."

Mora stepped to her husband's side and looked down at the man who had betrayed him. "Without it, a man is nothing," she said.

"Are you going to kill him my Lord?" One of the generals stepped forward.

"I should," Kedar said. "I'd be well within my rights. He tried to kill me, threatened my wife." He looked at Mora. "I should have listened, Lady. I will let you decide. Should I take his life?"

Mora had seen more death in her decades than she cared to. Even the idea of seeing Creed's turned her stomach. Even though he'd threatened her, her husband, her children. Was it for her to say?

"Can he be sent away?" she asked. "He did serve you."

"Banishment?" Creed's frightened eyes widened. "No! I'd rather die!"

"I thought the same thing, once," Mora told him. "I was wrong. I'm now glad I lived. Perhaps you will be, too. Yes, husband. I think banishment would only be fair."

"Guards!" Kedar motioned for two men to come over. Each took Creed by an arm and Kedar walked over and pulled the sword from his thigh. Creed screamed, started to say something and then slipped into unconscious.

“Bandage his wounds,” Kedar said. “And take him to beyond the realm. Put a mark on him such that any man who sees him within our borders knows him to be a hunted man.”

Mora watched him being drug off.

“I had a dream on this,” she said. “Yesterday, he spoke of the young stag killing the old. He said we’d soon see that we were like the deer. I thought nothing of it, Kedar, but now I know he meant to kill you. That’s why I came. He’s done other things, too - laid hands on me....”

Kedar ran his hand through his hair, exasperated. “Why did you not come to me?”

“You have to ask?” Mora cried. “You never would have believed me, Kedar. I feared retribution for telling you.”

He sighed. “I erred, Mora. I am sorry. I should have listened.”

“It’s not too late,” she said. “We are well on the way to Adwin. I would think that a wife who saves her husband has earned a trip to see her people.”

He gave a sad smile. “I will allow it as long as you realize that this does not mean you can run roughshod over me. My rules still apply, and you will still be bottom-up over my knee should you cross me.”

“Even though I can handle a broadsword?” she teased.

“Your handling a broadsword as you do has only convinced me I need to spank you harder,” he growled. Kedar reached for her and held her close.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know you cared for him.”

“Like a brother,” Kedar said. “I taught him what he knew.”

Again Mora was reminded of the stag. She was glad that on this occasion, the older and more experienced fighter had prevailed.

“Who will be your second now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. One of my generals. There are many good ones. It will be hard to choose.”

“But you will make the right choice,” she assured him.

“I’ve been making some good ones lately,” he said, looking down at her. Mora kissed him gently and they turned to walk towards the horses.

The trip to Adwin would go smoothly. Mora had been right; her presence did reassure the people, and dispelled some rumors planted by troublemakers that she'd been held against her will and passed around to Kedar's guard. She visited villages, took note of their wants and needs and solicited Kedar's commitment to provide extra food and medicine to those who needed it.

On the way back to Venrax, she stopped at her late husband's castle to visit his grave. It was as dignified as he was in the churchyard by the castle.

"I don't know if you can hear me," she said, laying some flowers against the headstone. "I never thought when I took to the field for you that you would still end up dead and that your lands would still fall to Kedar. If it is any consolation, he is not so bad a man as we thought, nor so perfect as everyone believes. He has seen misery and loss, just as we have and he is of good temperament, if not so lenient."

She smiled and brushed away a tear.

"I think, Desmond, that you would like him, and that you would approve of his having me if you cannot. I will never forget you, or the love you gave me. I hope wherever you are that you've found peace..."

A sound caught her attention. A stag was at the top of the hill, looking down at the graveyard. He was noble and kind of eye. He turned his head, surveying the land, before glancing at her once more. Then he walked away.

Mora smiled. Had Dagmar been there she'd have said it was a sign that Desmond heard her and was well and happy where he was. A year before, Mora would have dismissed such talk as nonsense. Now, she thought, she'd completely agree.

THE END