

## GAMBIT by C.L. Denault

### FAIR MAIDEN

The jewel-encrusted dagger hidden beneath my skirt slipped out of place, driving its steel tip into my flesh. Wincing, I stopped mid-stride to shift my weight as warm blood trickled down my thigh. The scabbard wasn't designed to carry the blade against bare skin, and every time its leather bands loosened, I risked carving a hole in my leg.

The men at the bar shouted and swore, restless for ale, but I couldn't adjust the blade without lifting my skirt. A flash of leg would cause as much uproar as the jewels, so I limped toward the taps and slipped between the oak barrels for privacy. With practiced fingers, I retied the bands and dropped my skirt, ready to face a crowd that was already noticing my absence.

Sure enough, as soon as I reappeared, an empty tankard flew at my head. The scoundrel who'd launched it was too drunk for accuracy, and I had no problem dodging, but it didn't improve my mood. Any more of that nonsense, and I'd be having a drink myself.

My scalding glare sent the man staggering off his bar stool and into the crowd. The stool filled immediately, taken by a surly-faced miner with a swollen lip and blood oozing into his beard. I eyed him warily as he pushed a gold jingle across the bar.

"Ale," he slurred, his village brogue thick and muddled. "Now."

I pressed my lips together. He'd consumed three tankards in the last hour, a sign that he might become a problem. Pocketing the jingle, I poured him a lukewarm drink. He gulped it, throat bobbing, and slammed the vessel down in front of me.

"Another!" His jingle hit the bar and rolled. "Be quick about it, lass!"

Frowning, I stopped the runaway jingle with my palm. I'd seen this a hundred times with injured miners who guzzled ale after ale to numb their pain. Four tankards usually did the trick. A fifth was against tavern policy. Bracing myself for the backlash, I opened my mouth to refuse.

But before I could say anything, the miner's bloodshot eyes glazed over and crossed. He croaked out a rude belch and toppled off his stool. The customer sitting beside him shot me a grin. "Need some help?"

I flashed the jingle at him. “Free ale to the man who lends a hand.”

“Deal,” he said, hopping off his stool.

He dragged the miner away and returned for his drink. I was pouring him a tankard when the glint of steel caught my eye. A shaggy-haired patron had pulled back his vest, showing off a blade he’d snuck inside. I signaled my dad, who was busy patrolling the crowd. He saw my nod, approached the armed patron, and escorted him outside. No weapons were allowed in the Fair Maiden tonight—except for my own, of course.

Grateful for my dagger, I gave it a discreet pat. Not everyone in the tavern was dangerous, so I rarely had to use it. But I’d learned to be careful. Out here, sharp objects were a girl’s best defense against a man with too much alcohol driving his senses.

“How you holding up, Willow?” Hash, our cook, passed me a wooden bowl of hot, salted snacks through the serving window.

“About to drop, Hashie.” I popped a couple of snacks into my mouth and poured the rest into baskets sitting at intervals along the bar. Drawn by the enticing aroma, men grappled for greedy handfuls, emptying the baskets in seconds. I returned the bowl to Hash and waited for another. On a night like this, snacks would disappear as fast as I dumped them in.

Men were filing in like ants. Women and children, too. Patrons from all walks of life had started arriving early. I glanced around and smiled. A mixed crowd like this didn’t often mingle in one place, especially with ale involved.

But tonight was different. The tavern hummed with excitement as customers gossiped and jockeyed for seats. I saw it every six months, folks hunching around tables or sitting shoulder-to-shoulder at the bar, putting differences aside to wait for our messenger. As long as the ale kept flowing, they’d be buzzing about news from the Core instead of squabbling like children.

“Hurry it up, will you, love?” An elderly man hammered his shriveled fist against the bar. I seized the last clean tankard, filled it to the brim, and plunked the foamy brew down in front of him.

He tossed a jingle at me and grinned. Half his teeth were missing. My stomach rolled, but I pasted on a smile. Missing teeth would be the least of my problems if someone didn’t bring more tankards. Villagers were a touchy lot, and one lost temper could send fists flying all over the tavern.

Dad appeared with an armload just in time. I helped him stack the fresh tankards, but I couldn’t stand another second of pouring ale. “Can’t I work the exchange table? Please, Dad. I’m exhausted.”

The abundant volume of gold changing hands had set him in high spirits, and he took pity on me. “Go ahead, love. I’ll get someone to work the taps.” He rubbed my aching shoulders and sent me off. Relieved, I went to take my younger sister’s place at the mahogany table our family used for swapping goods.

“My shift, China.” I shoved her shoulder gently with my hip.

“Not now!” she hissed, keeping her seat.

All too familiar with the symphonic range of her hissing, I knew at once why she didn’t want to leave. She’d taken a fancy to the young man sitting across the table. I’d never seen him before, which wasn’t unusual during a messenger gathering. He’d likely popped in for news and a drink while on his way to a neighboring village.

But I could tell by the leer on his face that he intended to take full advantage of my sister’s infatuation. Perched on a rickety stool, he’d leaned forward, draping his upper body close to hers. When he saw me looking, his grin widened. My hand itched to slap him. If he thought I’d be easy prey, too, he was in for a shock.

Jaw clenched, I grabbed beneath China’s arms and lifted. “Up you go, lass.”

The movement caught her off guard, and she fussed like a chicken as I hauled her out of the exchanger’s seat. It wasn’t easy. I was taller, but she outweighed me by more than she cared to admit. She struggled for a moment before recovering her dignity.

“You’re such a pain!” she whispered furiously, flipping her strawberry-blonde braid over her shoulder.

“You’ll thank me later. Go on, now. Give Hash a hand with snacks.”

“Och!” She left in a huff, her freckled nose held high in grudge position.

Sighing irritably, I gathered my skirts and settled into the exchanger’s seat, reassured by the warm, familiar press of leather against my thigh. The dagger, a gift from the hooded man, evened the odds between me and the rascal eyeing me brazenly across the table.

I leaned back in my seat, ready to haggle. “What do you have for exchange, sir?”

The young man flashed me a wolfish grin, revealing a full set of teeth. He also had long, thick hair and wore clothing without rips or stains—evidence of an uncomplicated life. I pegged him as a merchant, the type of patron we didn’t see often in McKaireth. The bulk of our business came from local miners who worked all day and drank their wages each night.

“Sir?” I repeated, a little louder.

He toyed with a strand of his hair, an obvious bid for attention. I couldn't help admiring its length, though. No wonder my sister had been so enamored. Seldom did a man with long hair and good teeth pass through the tavern door, unless he was from the Core. But we hadn't seen a Core official in years.

"SIR?" I finally yelled, tired of his silent ogling. Tracing the outline of my dagger with one finger, I imagined thrusting its double-pointed blade into one of his eyes. "Do you have something for exchange?"

"Oh, right." He blinked, as if I'd interrupted his train of thought. "Look here. I got me some of the ripest, most delicious apples you ever laid your peepers on, miss." He dropped a tattered basket onto the table for my inspection.

I leaned forward, eager. Healthy fruit was hard to find in the villages. Sometimes we got lucky with peddlers, but not often. For fresh apples, I'd give him all the jingles he wanted. I might even forgive his lecherous gaze.

But the basket held nothing except the bruised, wrinkled remains of once-fresh fruit. Disappointment welled. "Those are far beyond ripe. Hardly worth bringing in here."

He looked insulted. "Well, it's all I got."

That was a lie. He was a merchant and had plenty more, but he'd intended to woo China into an unfair exchange. Annoyed, I plucked a shriveled apple from the basket and looked it over. It wouldn't be good for eating outright, but Mum might salvage some of it for a pie. My mouth watered. I hadn't tasted apple pie in months.

"Two jingles," I offered, replacing the apple.

"Two?" he fumed. "Are you daft? Those are worth at least five!"

"I know lame fruit when I see it, sir."

"They're *not* lame! You'll give me five." Anger sharpened his voice, drawing Dad's attention from across the room.

"You'll get two," I said firmly, sliding a couple of jingles toward him. "And no more."

"Why, you little tart—" He jumped up, his cheeks flushed and his hand raised high. I instinctively reached for my dagger, ready to stop him. But before he could strike me, Gerhold Kent was staring him in the face.

"Stand down." The words were quiet, but delivered with unmistakable force.

"The miss here is trying to cheat me!" the man spluttered.

"Is she?" Dad's voice was smooth and dangerous. "In case you hadn't noticed, that miss is my daughter. She's been working the exchange table since she

was nine, and I've yet to see her make an unfair trade. Now, I told you to stand down. Unless, of course, you wish to have a chat with my bluster."

The man paled. His presentable clothing did nothing to hide his small stature. Our bluster, Grindel, would have no trouble kicking him out. Reputable taverns needed beefy men for crowd control, and Grindel was the biggest brute in McKaireth.

"No, s-sir," stammered the merchant. "Two jingles is a f-fair price for them apples." He grabbed the two circles of scuffed gold lying on the table.

Dad glowered at him. "Then you'd best be finding your seat."

The man skittered away like an outhouse rat, and Dad turned to me with a look of concern. "You all right, darlin'?"

"I am now, thanks to you," I replied, with my most adoring expression.

His barreled chest swelled with pride. He was a thickset man, brawny and tough from years of hard work. He ran the Fair Maiden alongside my mum, Patchie, a blonde smidgen of a woman with a solid head for business. What he couldn't intimidate, she outsmarted, and they'd managed to carve out a decent life for us. Or what passed for decent in the Outlying Lands.

Dad eyed the tavern door. "More coming, love. Folks are thirsty for ale and eager for news. We'll be raking in a fortune." He rubbed his meaty hands together. "Keep a sharp eye."

"I will, Dad. But I'm losing strength. I could use something to wake me up. Would you consider parting with a bit of black gold tonight?"

"Aye, my love." A deep laugh resonated in his chest. "I guess a shot wouldn't hurt my lucky charm none, would it?"

"Really? You'll fix me some?" Clapping my hands together, I tried to squeal the same way China did when she got excited. "Thank you!"

He smiled, looking pleased. "Be right back."

I gave myself a mental pat on the back as he left. My response had been perfect. He now viewed himself a hero of sorts, saving me from the young man I could easily have fended off without him.

But he needed that feeling, same as the tavern regulars needed their foamy tankards of home-brewed ale each night. Not only did it ward off the soulless chill of routine village life, it also gave them value. A reason to exist. My dad found value in rescuing me, and I'd gotten very good at pretending to need his protection.

“Well, look who we have here.” A teasing male voice drifted my way, scattering my thoughts and provoking an instant blush. “Catch you in your head again, lass?”

“Och!” My hot cheeks made me defensive. “Don’t startle me like that, Tem.”

“Didn’t mean to.” Smiling, he sat and clasped his hands on the table. “But you have to admit, Will, you’re an easy target with those deep thoughts of yours.”

“At least I’m thinking,” I retorted. “You here to chase skirts?”

His brown eyes twinkled. “Came for the news, same as everyone else. Has the messenger arrived?”

I shook my head. “We’ve seen naught of him. But the chain’s a rough journey. More miles than I could handle. You’d never catch me biking it.”

“Oh, you’d rather ride?” His cheeky grin brought back the humiliating memory of my last experience on horseback. “I know how good you are with horses.”

“That’s not funny!” I swung the back of my hand at his chest. Laughing, he caught it and linked our fingers together. Temsik Storm was a terrible tease, but he was my best friend. We’d been inseparable since the day he’d thrashed a roughneck bullying me in the schoolyard. “Are you having a drink tonight?”

His eyebrows shot up. “And risk another lecture from my dad on the consequences of irresponsible behavior? I think not.”

“Then scoot!” I waved him off. “You’re holding up the queue.”

“What?” He glanced at the line of irritated customers behind him. “Oh, sorry.” He brushed my nose with the tip of his finger. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Tem rose and swaggered off. I watched him flag down a barmaid and cajole her into sneaking him half a sandwich. He was all flattery and charm. Before the night was over, she’d likely be offering him more than a bit of free grub. Amused, I beckoned the next customer to sit and trade. While I was inspecting the twist of woolen yarn she’d brought, Dad showed up.

“Here you are, lass.” He handed me a steaming, child-sized tankard. Black gold! I swirled the liquid around, inhaled its decadent aroma, and sighed with pure pleasure.

“Dad, you’re a *saint*.” I squeezed his calloused hand.

“Enjoy it, love. And make your old dad proud this evening, you hear me?” He planted a delicate kiss on my forehead, the one man in the room brave enough to dare such a thing, and went back to work.

I didn’t wait for the drink to cool. The first sip burnt my tongue and blazed a scorching trail down my throat. But its sweetness was irresistible. I felt rich just

holding it in my hands. Only the elite could afford to drink black gold, and here I was having a taste.

Now, if our messenger would just arrive! I couldn't imagine what was keeping Knox. The suspense tested my patience, and Dad's as well. He kept sneaking glances at the grandfather clock standing sentinel behind me. Each time it chimed, he peeked out the tavern door, squinting his eyes against the setting sun.

The exchange table kept me distracted. In between sips of black gold, I traded jingles for every item imaginable. Potatoes, thread, nails, and coarse bolts of cloth crossed my table. One young girl even brought in a weaned kitten. Moved to compassion, I offered her more than the scrawny ball of fluff was worth. It curled up in my lap, warming me until the last coin was gone.

"Mum!" I snapped my fingers as she hurried by with a tray of brimming tankards. She dropped them off, returning with the tray tucked beneath her arm and her braid, the color of high-summer honey, swinging behind her. Like China, she was curvy. The modest dress she wore couldn't quite conceal her bountiful figure.

"Aye, dearie?" she asked in her dainty, lilting brogue. Her gaze was fastened on the queue stretching clear out the door and into the street. Soon, the size of the crowd outside would rival the one within.

"We're out of jingles, Mum. I need another bag."

Her rosy mouth puckered into a smile. "Back in a jiffy."

She gathered some of the goods I'd collected and took them to the kitchen, where Hash was preparing hot sandwiches and soups. Through the serving window, he offered one of the barmaids another bowl of snacks to pass around. A trick of the trade, of course. The salt made customers thirsty for more of our ginger-colored brew, and most were too busy flirting with the barmaid to notice the deception.

"Here, love." Mum came back with a velvet pouch. It hit the table with a comforting clink. "What's this you have?"

She'd caught me taking a sip of black gold. Though no longer piping hot, it was still delicious. I swished it around my mouth before swallowing. Her light green eyes were disapproving as I licked the brown froth from my lips.

"You're one spoiled young lass—" she began to scold, but was interrupted when Grindel poked his head through the tavern doorway.

"Mrs. Kent, ma'am!"

Mum hurried to the door and peered out. In spite of my curiosity, I dared not rise and leave the gold or goods unattended. She spoke in hushed tones with the bluster, and they pointed to something in the distance. Tem passed by and saw me craning my neck for a better view.

“What is it, Will?”

“The messenger, I think.” I tried not to fidget and disturb the snoozing kitten. “I mustn’t leave the table. Will you go and find out what they’re looking at?”

He headed for the door, and he wasn’t the only one. Mum’s animated conversation with Grindel had caught the crowd’s attention. Their anxious voices rose to a clamor.

“Is it the messenger?” asked a bear of a man.

“It must be!” someone answered.

“How far off is he?”

“Och! Someone have a look and tell us what’s happening!”

I’d sent Tem off in the nick of time. A throng of squawking villagers rushed toward the entrance, blocking my view. Tem jostled his way back, knees and elbows cutting through the crowd, a look of astonishment plastered across his face. As he dropped to one knee beside my table, a strong premonition washed over me. Something was coming, and it wasn’t Knox.

“The messenger?” I asked.

“No,” he breathed, raking agitated fingers through his chestnut hair.

“Then what?”

“An officer on horseback. From the Core.”

The blood drained from my face. “What?”

“With four Ritters in accompaniment. Six steeds total.”

My stomach clenched in fear. Ritters were genetic abominations, killing machines assigned to guard high-ranking military officials. No one would mess with them, not even the burliest of the grubby miners. They could slice a man to pieces in a matter of seconds.

“Wait, did you say *six* steeds?”

Tem nodded.

“But that means . . .” My voice trailed off.

We both knew what it meant. Five riders with six horses. When they left, every saddle would be occupied. Someone in McKaireth was destined to be taken.



## ILL NEWS

The unexpected arrival of a Core posse spurred Mum into immediate action. She rushed to my table and snatched up every last barter, including the startled kitten.

“Willow, you look disheveled. Go clean up.” She stowed the goods away in the kitchen and thrust a broom into China’s hands. “Lass, make a quick pass across the floor. Hash, get that stove roaring hot. Pull our best cuts of meat from the salt barrels. Hurry, now!”

Clutching my pouch of gold, I ran to the water bucket behind the bar and splashed my face clean, smoothing back wisps of wine-red hair that had escaped my braid. I adjusted the high, velvety bodice of my grey serving gown and rolled the sleeves down over my wrists. Dad loved this dress. He often told me, with a wink and an affectionate grin, that its smoky color brought out the luck in my green eyes.

The mirror behind the bar revealed my paleness, and I pinched my cheeks for a bit of color. I might not have Mum’s womanly curves, but my skin was smooth and creamy, free of the freckles China complained about on a daily basis. Dabbing my lips with a drop of oil for shine, I carried the gold back to my table for more exchanges.

But the patrons were in too much of an uproar to trade. They blathered on about the Core and its cracked attempts to control the villages by hoarding technology. Leaning back in my seat, I tapped my fingers on the table and tried to recall my last experience with an officer. I’d been a wee thing, hiding in the folds of Mum’s skirts as he questioned her, and all I could remember was long hair and luminous eyes piercing the darkness. I had no idea what to expect this time.

Dad and Grindel were just hauling up a fresh, cold barrel of ale from the cellar when the Core officer stepped through the tavern door. An awed hush fell over the crowd. Few of us had witnessed a man of his bearing. I stopped tapping and leaned forward, my breath catching in my throat.

He was impossibly tall. The top of his head stopped an inch shy of the six-and-a-half-foot doorway, putting him above every man in the room. As he started through the crowd, his broad, muscular frame strained against the supple military uniform that adhered to his body like a second skin. Hair as black as a raven’s wing spilled over his shoulders, and his eyes glittered with the pale, icy-blue sheen

found only in the highest ranks of the military. Simply put, he was stunning. My heart did a funny little dance at the sight of him.

Tem wasn't as impressed. Drawing himself up to his full height, he crossed his arms over his chest and stood beside my table with a guarded expression. He'd never been one to show weakness, and there wasn't an ounce of fear on his face—until the Ritters walked in and fell into rank beside their master.

They were small, almost like children, and seeing them jogged my memory. Mum had done her best to shield me with her skirts when I was young, but I'd had the vague sense of other humans in the room—ones who hissed instead of speaking and moved so quietly that I'd hardly known they were there. I remembered being afraid without really understanding why.

But I understood it now. The slender, pale-skinned creatures standing around the officer were only half-human. Though they walked upright and wore uniforms, their feline features couldn't be denied. They stood in complete silence, surveying the room with cold, amber eyes—living reminders of the terrible genetic power wielded by scientists in the Core.

The crowd stirred uneasily, and I could feel tension brewing. Brushing the dirt off his hands, Dad took control of the situation, stepping forward with a confident air.

“Commander,” he said, acknowledging the man's formal title. “Welcome to the Fair Maiden. I'm Gerhold Kent, owner of this fine tavern. Would you and your comrades care for some refreshment?”

The officer leveled his discriminating gaze on Dad's face. For a long moment, he kept silent. When he spoke, his husky voice was deep and charged with authority. Not that he needed it. Every pair of eyes was riveted on him.

“Your hospitality is noted, Mr. Kent, but my first intent is to find lodging.” His polished Core accent sounded smooth and melodic compared to the harsh dialect of our village. “I'd appreciate a referral.”

“Aye, sir. You'd be best served staying at the White Haven, down the street. It's nothing fancy, but it's run by good folks. You'll find it welcoming and sincere.”

The officer nodded, then swept his glance around the room. “Has your messenger not arrived?”

“No, sir. We hope to see him soon, but there's no way of knowing how the bikers fared along the chain.”

“Hmm.” The officer scanned the room once more. When his gaze fell on me, he paused. I hated the awkward blush inching across my face at his cold inspection.

Dad cleared his throat. “May we offer you a drink, Commander? Perhaps an ale to wet your whistle after such a long and dusty journey?”

The officer continued to stare at me. Despite the fact he was allegedly my superior, I lifted my chin in defiance. A hint of a smile tugged at one corner of his mouth before he turned his attention back to Dad.

“I’d prefer to settle in first. But I’ll rejoin you within the hour. We’ll need a great deal of meat prepared.”

“Aye, anything you want. And how would you like to be addressed while you’re visiting?”

“Addressed?” Irritation flashed across the officer’s face. “You know exactly how to address me.”

Dad’s composure faltered. “I just thought . . . well, I meant, maybe you’d rather be called by your proper name—”

“By a commoner?” he sneered. “Listen well, Mr. Kent. I’m here on business, not pleasure. I may be a patron, but I’m most certainly not your friend. I’m a commanding officer.” He took a menacing step toward Dad, who shrank back. “And when you’re in my presence, you will remember your place.”

The patronizing response was like a slap across Dad’s bearded cheek. Chastened, he dropped his gaze to the floor, and I sucked in a furious breath. The officer had no right to be so rude! But my sharp hiss caught the commander’s attention, and his head swiveled in my direction again. Eyes blazing, he headed straight for my table.

“Great.” Tem tensed beside me. “Now you’ve done it.”

As the officer approached, uneasiness squirmed inside my belly. Good heavens, he was intimidating! Up close, his enormous stature shrank the room. He halted beside the rickety stool and glared down at me. “Is there a problem here?”

I shook my head the tiniest bit.

He frowned, studying my face. “What is your name?”

I bristled at his request. He had a lot of nerve, asking for my name after treating Dad with such disrespect. My rebellious nature took over, filling my voice with hot defiance. “That’s none of your business!”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Refusing to answer a Core officer wasn’t generally considered wise. He had several weapons attached to his belt and was authorized to use them in any manner he wished. But he didn’t appear angry. More than anything, he seemed curious. Leaning over, he placed his palms on the table and looked me in the eye.

“Your name,” he demanded, his voice firm.

I held my ground. “Yours first.”

His icy-blue eyes narrowed, and he studied me with a diligence that warmed my face again. Och! What did the man think he was staring at? Tem inched closer, obviously feeling protective, but the officer gave him a dismissive glance and straightened.

“Reece.” Taking me by surprise, he extended his hand. “I’m called Reece.”

My eyes widened. I hadn’t expected cooperation. I reached out and took his hand, watching it swallow mine whole. His touch was like fire, his skin radiating an intense amount of heat.

“Willow Kent,” I replied, polite but frosty.

One corner of his mouth edged upward. “Are you sure?”

My heart stopped beating for a moment. “Positive.”

He kept hold of my hand, smiling that crooked smile. “It’s a pleasure.”

I couldn’t answer. His hand was too hot, his smile too knowing. He waited a moment, then released my hand and headed for the tavern entrance, gesturing for the Ritters to follow. As they vanished quietly into the dusk, I let loose a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

The tavern came to life with anxious, chattering voices. Most had come for news from a messenger. They’d not expected an officer from the Core. The unlikelihood of both in one evening had put them in a state of near hysteria.

Tem started in on me with fury. “Have you gone mad?” he shouted over the sudden din. “What the devil were you thinking, talking back to him like that?”

Dad overheard Tem’s scolding. “He’s right, lass. Care to explain yourself?”

“I shouldn’t have to!” I threw my hands up in frustration. “He was insulting. Doesn’t it bother you to be treated that way?”

“He’s an officer,” Dad said. “He can treat us any way he likes, and there’s naught we can do about it.”

“It’s not right,” I huffed.

His voice grew impatient. “No, but it’s the way things are, and I won’t have you provoking the man’s temper. Settle yourself down, love. We’ve work to do.”

My shoulders sagged. “Aye, Dad.”

“And when he returns, I want that saucy mouth of yours keeping the peace. You hear me?”

I sighed. “I hear you.”

Turning my attention to the customers, I stifled my rebellious thoughts and concentrated on working the table. Tem stayed by my side to help. Between the two of us, we blew through the queue in half the time it would have taken on my

own. When the last person had traded, I picked up my tankard. Little more than a swallow of black gold remained. I lifted the drink to my lips, but Tem yanked it away and jumped out of his chair with a grin.

“Tem!” I shot to my feet and made a grab for it.

“What’s this?” Laughing, he held the tankard just out of reach. “Have I finally driven you to drink? Might as well join you, then.” He sniffed the contents and turned serious. “Wait, is this what I think it is?”

“Of *course* it is!” I gave up the struggle, which was futile, anyway, since he was taller. “Now give it back!”

“What did you do to deserve a helping of black gold?”

“There was such a crowd, Tem. I needed the energy.”

“And you won’t share?” He put on a sad face. “Not even the last sip?”

“It’s mine.”

Tem clutched his chest. “You’re breaking my heart, love.”

“Fine!” Frustrated, I shoved him. “It’s turned cold, anyway.”

That didn’t bother him in the least. He drained the tankard and sighed with pleasure. “It’s so rich. One sip isn’t enough.”

“It better be. After the way I stood up to that officer, I’m sure Dad won’t be allowing me any more.”

Tem swiped the inside of the tankard with his finger and licked it clean. “Piper’s working the White Haven tonight. Wonder what she’ll think of him and his posse.”

“We’ll know tomorrow at school,” I said, intending to find Piper first thing and pry the news from her lips. It wouldn’t be hard. She loved gossip.

“He could have settled in first, you know,” Tem said. “There was no need to stop here for a referral. If you ask me, the man’s looking for someone. Did you see the way he kept scanning the room?”

“Aye. But the patrols are in charge of catching criminals, and there’s no one in McKaireth of any political importance. Who could he be after?”

“I don’t know. But that extra steed he brought isn’t going back without a rider.” Tem raised an eyebrow. “He certainly gave you a thorough glance or two.”

I flushed. “He did no such thing.”

“Don’t argue, Will. Every man passing through that door looks at you twice. You really going to deny that?”

Activity near the tavern entrance saved me from the necessity of a reply.

“*Messenger!*” Grindel’s hoarse cry brought the crowd to its feet. A few minutes later, Knox stumbled through the door. Grindel caught him and held him upright, calling for patrons to clear a path so he could get the biker to a seat.

“Ale,” cried Mum, rushing to the bar. “Gerhold, a drink for the poor man!”

Dad filled a tankard from the cold barrel he’d hauled up for the officer, while Mum convinced one of the patrons to give up their chair for the messenger.

“Are you well, Knox?” she asked.

Knox, covered in perspiration and grime, sank into the chair and accepted the tankard with a grateful sigh. He took a long, noisy swallow. “I am now, Patchie. Your Gerhold’s ale always brings me back to life.”

Good-natured laughter rippled through the crowd.

“How was the ride?”

“A mite uncomfortable, love.” His hands shook as he gulped from his tankard again. “Sorry for the late arrival. The chain ran behind, or I’d have been here sooner.”

“Was there trouble?”

“Not in my section. But word is the lead biker had problems getting through the storm and had to be treated before he rode back through. Secondhand shields don’t hold up like they used to. The chain’s getting more dangerous by the year.”

“What about you?” She looked him over. “Are you injured? Should I send for the whitecoat?”

“Nah.” He smiled. “I’m made of stern stuff, Patchie. You know us McKairethans don’t break easily.”

“Here, here!” toasted a customer, prompting everyone to drink.

“What news do you have of the union?” Mum asked.

Knox shook his head. “You won’t like it.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning there’s little I can do to dress this up, lass. Kindly have Grindel help me to the bar, will you?”

She stepped aside, allowing the bluster room to maneuver. He pulled Knox to his feet and led him to the bar, where the crowd could be addressed. Flanked by Grindel and Dad, the messenger appeared out of place, a thin sapling between two giant oaks of men.

“Good people of McKaireth!” he screeched in a brittle voice. “I come with tidings from the Core, as relayed to me from the bikers along the chain. The young

heir, Thess Tiernam, has come of age and will soon be taking his rightful place at his father's side. This event was heralded with a grand celebration in the Core."

Knox stopped to sip his ale, and Tem leaned in close beside me. "Coming of age? That'll be me in a few months. Think I'll get a grand celebration?"

"Shh." I elbowed his ribs.

Knox wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Thess continues to make use of his skills, and his ability to manipulate molecular structure is proving useful in the family's trade."

Tem grunted. "What, he's turning lead into gold, or something equally boring?"

"Shut it," I whispered. "I can't hear."

He poked my side with a playful finger, but I wasn't having any of his games. I gave him a push and worked my way closer to the bar, straining to hear Knox's voice over the murmurs of the crowd. He spoke of changes on the Core Council and a new Skill Certification Bill that, if passed, would have the patrols bearing down on villagers with even more legal force than usual. Tapping my heel on the tavern floor, I waited for him to speak of the issue that would have the greatest impact on our village.

"As for the heir's impending marriage contract," Knox said at last, capturing everyone's full attention. I crossed my fingers, hoping for good news. But instead of continuing, he faltered, his gaze dropping to the bar's polished surface.

"Out with it, man!" someone yelled.

Dad wrapped his grizzly-bear arm around Knox's shoulder for encouragement. The messenger hesitated, and then finally looked back to the crowd.

"There will be no union between the Houses of Tiernam and Roanoke."

A wave of earnest chatter rose around me, and I stood in stunned surprise. No union? But that meant no more peace. If the two most powerful Houses in the country couldn't get along, we were in serious trouble. The villages might not make it through another war.

"Quiet!" Dad bellowed, silencing the crowd. He turned to Knox. "Were you told why this happened?"

Knox nodded. "The young lady to be wed—Morrigan Roanoke—is an impostor."

"That's impossible!" shouted an outraged customer.

"It's not," Knox argued. "Apparently, they have proof."

"What proof?" the customer demanded.

“She has no skill to speak of,” Knox explained. “The Surge came and went, and they found nothing. Not a trace. Somehow, the industries have been duped.”

“With all their technology?” another patron cried. “Rubbish!”

Knox held up his hand to fend off questions. “I’m only repeating what I’ve heard. But listen up—there’s something else.” He waited for the chatter to subside. “A fraud of this magnitude requires teamwork. Someone on the inside orchestrated this. And, according to the chain, someone on the outside had a hand in it as well.”

“Wait.” Dad put his hand on Knox’s shoulder. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the villages have been warned.” He glanced soberly around the room. “There’s an accomplice in our midst.”

Patrons started shouting, panic and accusation in their voices, and I pushed through them to stand beside the bar. If they got out of control, I didn’t want to be crushed. Tem saw me and edged in close, putting his lips to my ear.

“Told you.” His voice was solemn. “What do you think now?”

“I think you’re right, Tem. The commander *is* looking for someone.”

“More like hunting, I’ll bet.” He laughed uneasily. “Whoever the accomplice is, I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes when the officer gets hold of him.”

Dad yelled and waved his arms madly to get everyone’s attention. “This is ill news. Patchie, darlin’, help me pour another round. On the house, lads.”

With a pitcher in each hand, he set about refilling tankards and directing patrons to their seats. Mum settled Knox into a corner booth with a sandwich and fresh ale. Acts of compassion to the common observer, but I knew my parents were trying to restore some semblance of order before the officer returned. A riotous crowd could earn us a black mark, or even shut us down. If war loomed on the horizon, we needed the Fair Maiden in order to survive.

I went back to the exchanger’s seat and faced an empty queue, thanks to the free round of ale. Drumming my fingers on the table’s chipped surface, my mind worked through the message Knox had suffered to deliver.

So Morrigan was a fake. I shook my head in disbelief. What a shocking turn of events. For sixteen years, she had been treated as the Roanoke heiress. She’d grown up in wealth and privilege, betrothed by law to the richest boy in the city, living a life someone like me could only dream about.

But that was over for her now, and I shuddered to think what the Council would do. Imprison her? Dump her in a clinic? Banish her to the Outlying Lands? The Core had little use for normals. Whatever fate they decided for her, it wouldn’t be merciful.



I looked up when China took a seat on the rickety stool. She rested her arms on the table with a heavy sigh. Behind the freckles, her face was pale and drawn.

My heart went out to her. "You all right?"

"I'm scared, Will. A Core posse shows up out of the blue, and then Knox brings this dreadful news. What's going to happen to us?"

"Don't worry." I reached over and took hold of her hands. "We'll be fine, I promise."

"But the contract is broken. What if war breaks out?"

I chewed on my lower lip, trying to think of an encouraging reply. "It won't, China. Not right away, anyhow. The Core has to keep itself balanced. The Council will try and work things out first."

She didn't seem convinced. "What about the officer? Do you think he's here because of Morrigan?"

"It's likely, but don't worry yourself too much. He'll make an arrest and be gone before you know it."

"How do you think she managed to fool everyone?"

I shrugged. "Not sure. But her Surge brought out the truth. You might be able to fake an identity, but you can't fake a skill."

"I wish I had a skill." Her grey eyes grew wistful and dreamy.

"Bite your tongue," I scolded. "The patrols would take you away if you did."

"Not if I could hide it."

"There's no guarantee of that. Some skills are outwardly visible, and I don't want to lose my baby sister to the clinics."

She smiled faintly. "Still, it must be nice to be a prodigy."

"Don't talk that way, China," I said, trying to block out the horrible image of her bound and gagged in the back of a patrol wagon. "Being a prodigy isn't always a blessing."

"It's better than being normal," she complained. "Normals get treated like dirt. You heard how that officer spoke to Dad."

"Aye." My eyes narrowed. "He's arrogant, that one."

"You'd best keep from irking him. You've such a hot head, and I don't want you getting hurt." She paused. "Why was he so interested in you, anyway?"

"I don't know." I recalled the commander's curious expression, the odd way he'd studied my features. My defiance should have made him angry, but it hadn't. I wasn't sure how to feel about that. "Look, Dad reined me in. I'll take it down a notch, all right? Cross my heart."

“Good.” She pulled her hands away and stood. “Night’s come on. I’d best be lighting the lamps.”

Drumming my fingers on the table again, I watched her wander off to retrieve a candle, cherishing her plump figure in its green gown trimmed with lace. I adored China, but she was such an innocent. Village prodigies weren’t to be envied.

Neither was Piper. A few months older than me, she’d gone through her Surge and come out with a remarkable ability. She could sense skills in other people before they went through their own Surges. Not even the Core scientists could do that. They would kill to get their hands on her.

But Piper hadn’t declared herself. Instead, she’d sworn me to secrecy in order to remain in McKaireth with her family. If the Core knew about her, they’d use her to find others, and then have the clinics breed her to produce more of her kind. She deserved far better than that. Her secret was safe with me.

Besides, she had something on me that would forever seal my lips. She’d detected *my* skill.

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