

SNEAK PEEK THROUGH CHAPTER ONE!!!

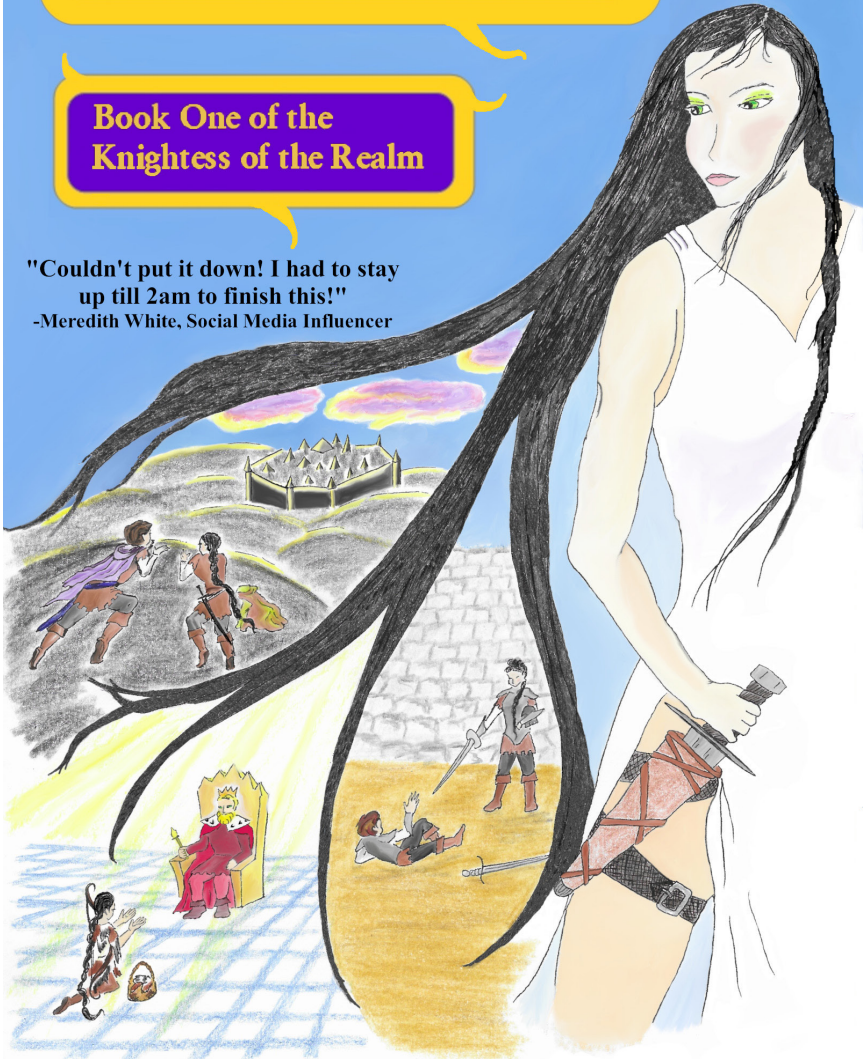
YA

KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

# A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden

Book One of the  
Knighthess of the Realm

"Couldn't put it down! I had to stay  
up till 2am to finish this!"  
-Meredith White, Social Media Influencer





*“I cry the King’s mercy to not throw me – orphaned,  
alone, and helpless – into the hands of the Evil  
Wizard!*

*“I cry the chance to undo the wrongs for myself,  
Majesty! Allow me to train, even as do thy knights  
and I shall see that the Evil Wizard Henig must face  
Justice!”*

Was it merest chance that a ray of sunshine seemed to particularly illuminate Karana in that instant? That the midnight of her hair seemed flecked with stars as dust-motes glowed about her and her green eyes sought the green eyes of the king? Was the look of startled recognition – and hope – on King Theolore’s face merely a trick of the light?

The sudden look of determination and belief on His Majesty’s face certainly was not.

“Thou shalt have thy chance, dear maiden,” King Theolore answered, to the shocked horror of the gathered onlookers. “Thou takest upon thyself a nigh impossible task, however. Thou hast only the remainder of the time allotted to us by the evil mage in which to accomplish the task of a lifetime,” he warned her. “Less than two full years from today – Midsummer’s Day.”

“For upon the end of that time,” King Theolore finished, “whither thy preparation is complete or no, thee must face Henig in his dark citadel. For the good of the Realm.”



A  
NOT-SO-SACRIFICIAL  
MAIDEN

*Book One of the  
Knighthess of the Realm*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

Also available in paperback and hardcover editions.

McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala

*A Not-so-Sacrificial Maiden* / by Kerridwen Mangala McNamara

Indiana: Rising Dragon Books, 2023

389 p.; 4 maps

(McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala. *Knightess of the Realm*; bk. 1)

Summary: Left orphaned by a magickal attack, seventeen-year-old Karana petitions the king to allow her to train as a knight so that she can fight the evil wizard, rather than being turned over to him in chains as a sacrificial maiden.

ISBN 978-1-960160-02-7 (pbk)

1. Knights and knighthood - Fiction. 2. Gender role - Fiction

ISBN 978-1-960160-03-4 (hc); ISBN 978-1-960160-01-0 (eBook)

*A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden: Book One of the Knightess of the Realm*

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Cover art and illustrations by the author

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For further information, email [\*\*RisingDragonBooks@gmail.com\*\*](mailto:RisingDragonBooks@gmail.com)

ISBN: 978-1-960160-02-7

First Print Edition: February 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my father, who let me keep homeschooling through high school even though he was worried about my future because he wanted me to be able to keep writing. It took longer than either of us anticipated, but it worked!

*“Somebody said that it couldn’t be done...”*  
*Edgar A. Guest*

And for every kid for whom school wasn't a great fit...  
(And for every one for whom it *was*...)

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# Chapter ONE

## Out of the Woods and into a Pickle

**K**ARANA LOOKED UP AT THE city of Tallspire standing high on its hill before her. There was nothing humble, or even particularly welcoming, about this place. Atop the high hill, a curtain-wall encircled the city-proper, turrets and towers marking even divisions of its smooth stone walls. But the glittering spires for which the city was named were those of the King's Crystal Castle, and those pierced higher still, bright pennons flying from their peaks.

The city atop the mesa was enclosed, but it had long since spilled past the protecting walls: the steep, nearly vertical, sides of Tallspire's hill were bare of human habitation, but the castle-city stood like a proud ship cresting a wave over a sea of buildings, mansions, yards, workshops, stables, even tents and cottages. The city on the plains was known locally as Tallspire-Below, as the city on high was known as Tallspire-Above.

The young woman was jostled on either side and addressed with muttered (and not-so-muttered) oaths of irritation as she stood still in the center of the busy highway leading to the main gate of the wall. It didn't seem to bother her; she was in her own world as she considered the edifice of the city above.

"Ah, well, there's nothing to be done but to do it!" she finally said aloud – surely to the confusion of some passerby – and she stepped forth again to join the stream of people heading to Tallspire-Above.



Karana drew many glances – some admiring, but mostly askance, as she made her way up the highway. She moved with the assurance of one used to crowds, but she was dressed in a hodge-podge of garments – men’s leggings and shirt hung all over with rabbit skins in a sort of ragged tunic. She was clearly a young maid; tall, and with the clear, fair skin of one raised in luxury... though her cheeks were sunken with hunger and she was far too thin for health. She was fair of feature, her demeanor knowledgeable, though somehow still innocent. A wealth of midnight hair spilled down her back in a tight braid that nearly reached past her knees.

But her wild, half-starved look, her self-assurance, and the bow and quiver she carried, discouraged casual attention from the sort of young men moving along the highway. As did her strangely determined, if not slightly grim, expression.

They were, after all, merely farmboys and townbred artisans and vendors.

It was a long, hot trudge to the gate at the top of the hill for Karana, who had been on her feet since dawn. The roadway had been made into a wide, long ramp for the convenience of the many carts and carriages that took this route – not to mention the King’s knights and men-at-arms on their destriers. Street vendors with carts lined the sides with food and other items for travelers to purchase. Karana paused to buy a late luncheon of fresh-squeezed juice and hot sausage-rolls, surprising the seller by paying in silver despite her ragged appearance.

The guards on the wall bound her bowstring to her unstrung bow and placed a seal on her quiver. They made a perfunctory check of the basket she carried. It was filled with furs – merely rabbit, but finished so that the leather was soft and pliable, the fur firmly attached but still sleek. One of the guards – perhaps a bit taken with her – suggested that the furs were fine enough that she might be able to sell them to a certain seamstress who was quite in fashion with the Court these days... and if Karana felt he’d done her a good turn, perhaps she would come back at the end of his shift? She smiled and thanked him for his kind words, but slipped away without a promise as his attention was required to check over a wagon hauling casks of some sort.

Far from following the guard's directions to the Fashion District, Karana continued with purposeful strides towards the center of the city on the hill. The basket of furs was no more than a useful excuse to be here, a way of fending off more questions than she cared to answer.

At the very center of Tallspire-Above, a great paved courtyard lay in front of the Crystal Castle. In another time – a less peaceful one – this space would be kept clear for the use of soldiers and horses, but for now a huge market-fair filled the courtyard on all sides. After nearly a year living in the wilds, the complete lack of greenery was jarring to Karana's sensibilities, but she steeled herself to the shouting, hawking, jostling crowd of people and made her way across the expanse to the very foot of the broad stairs leading up into the Castle.

These steps were still kept clear, with guards watching to ensure that they remained so. Only watching, however. It was an Audience Day, to her relief, and any citizen of Dawil – indeed, any foreigner also – might enter within to seek the King's attention.

Karana began to climb the stairs between royal guards and the twelve-foot tall gilded statues of rampant dragons – the symbols of the Realm. She was determined, but all too aware of her ragged appearance. Tallspire had a reputation throughout the Realm of being very conscious of appearances, and the King's Court moreso than any. Perhaps, she thought yet again, she should take the time to obtain more conventional clothing... but she had momentum on her side now and, if she stopped, she wasn't sure she would be able to start moving again. It had taken her a year to reach this moment. She could not bear to put it off.

She reached the top of the broad, marble stairs and went in through the vast doors with the doorguards casting the barest glance at her – presumably to ascertain if her weapons were bound as required by law.

The hall within was well-lit by lanterns, but much darker than outdoors. Karana paused to let her eyes adjust, trying to make sense of her surroundings without looking like a country-cousin, all a-gawk at such simple marvels as smooth marble floors and multi-story columns. Two grand staircases curved away to either side, and a surprisingly short distance ahead of her was a wall with a small

door guarded by a pair of sentries in tabards of the royal scarlet-and-silver over full-sleeved shirts of fine, white linen and black doeskin pants. They each bore a plain-hilted sword in addition to what looked like ceremonial staffs, or maybe spears, twisted with ribbons of scarlet and silver. They made a fine, brave sight though they were mismatched in height as well as coloring, with the taller one on the left being an arrogant blue-eyed blonde and the shorter – taller than Karana, but shorter than his mate – having dark hair and eyes.

As she drew closer to the wall, Karana did find herself marveling, for it seemed to be made in jointed segments that extended to the ceiling which could only have been done so as to slide it back to open the room up into a hall of even greater grandeur. She had seen such things in the past– albeit on a much smaller scale – and she had some understanding of both the cost and the complexity of such an endeavor. It was a clever solution to the limited space available on top of even the miles-wide flattened top of Tallspire’s hill.

A series of benches were arrayed before the sentries, with a scant handful of people waiting upon them. As Karana drew abreast, a man emerged from the door, gave the sentries a pleased nod, and made his way out of the castle. A moment later he was followed by another man with a much less pleased – though perhaps somewhat chastened – expression. The dark-haired sentry consulted a sheet of paper placed on a small podium to one side and called the next petitioners to enter. The entire number remaining on the benches rose and entered the door.

The sentries exchanged a look as the door closed.

“What a mob of sourpusses,” commented the tall sentry on the left. At closer inspection he was a tall and strikingly handsome young man with bright blue eyes and equally bright golden hair that was just curly enough to be fashionable. “I’ll be glad when we’re done serving this duty, Kefen. We see more of that sort, than pretty maids–” he leered a bit towards Karana, “–and I, for one, am quite bored with it all.”

“Hush, Ivan,” murmured the other before turning his attention to Karana. He was equally young, though somewhat shorter – she guessed they were about her own age of seventeen years – with wavy, dark-brown hair. His chocolate-colored eyes had a warm humor to them, and when he spoke, there was none of the deep irony that beset

the other sentry's tone. "Are you here to see the King, Miss? I'll need your name and your purpose."

Karana warmed to him right away, but she was hesitant to tell him why she had come. Her story seemed far-fetched, and she feared that she would be denied the chance to speak to the King if she tried to explain it. She hoped – she had prayed – that the King would somehow see to the heart of the matter, despite its strangeness. She had heard naught but good of King Theolore, including from those who should have had the experience to know.

"My name is Karana Metreedi," she began, knowing that her quest might end right here before it was barely begun, but the two sentries exchanged such a startled glance that she hesitated to add more.

"Do we interrupt His Majesty?" asked the blonde Ivan in a hushed voice, all irony gone now.

Kefen's warm brown eyes held a strange look as he nodded. "Wait here... Miss." He instructed Karana and he ducked through the door himself, leaving her with the tall, golden-haired Ivan. They exchanged mutually dubious looks as Karana wondered what was going on.

She was not left to wonder long. Kefen reappeared almost immediately. He took her upper arm and gently held her out of the way as the group of unhappy petitioners exited right behind him. They looked no happier than before, but there was an excited buzz beneath their scowls and they, too, eyed her with speculation. Murmurs of "all that waiting!" and "but it's HER!" made no more sense to Karana than the speaking looks the two sentries kept exchanging.

As soon as the petitioners had cleared the front hall, Kefen escorted her to the door and all but shoved her inside.

It was much brighter. Light seemed to be everywhere – even brighter than outside! – and Karana guessed that she was beneath one of the famed spires of the Crystal Castle. "So much glass!" her papa had exclaimed on more than one occasion, "And all of it enchanted a thousand years ago, not the work of the 'mere honest tradesmen' of today." While all the Great Families of Dawil had their ancient magickal extravagances, somehow it was Tallspire's that had attracted her merchant-father's ire.

“Squire Kefen says that thy name is ‘Karana Metreedi,’” said a deep, kind voice before her watering eyes had begun to make out more than vague shapes. “Art thou truly?”

Only years of training rescued her. She made a graceful courtesy – an awkward thing to do dressed in leggings and a man’s shirt and draped in rabbit furs! – in the direction of the voice and turned her words to the Courtly modes. “I am, Your Majesty. My father was the Master Merchant–” Her eyes had recovered enough to see the King gesture in negation and she cut off what else she was going to say, though she still could not make out the faces of the other nobles sitting in the audience chamber. The liege-lord of her own home-city of Wave, Lord Andros, might even be up there, but she could not tell. *He* would believe her tale, she knew.

“Explain thyself, child. Why hast thou come before Us in audience this Midsummer’s Day?”

She hadn’t known it was Midsummer, but that would explain the slightly frantic celebratory energy of the crowds outside. Midsummer... it had been *exactly* a year, then...

Karana swallowed hard. The moment had come. “Sire, I am come to beg King’s Justice upon the murderers of my family and servants. We were fallen upon by bandits and foul monsters as we took the King’s Road through the Forest of Ryylyn to Mountainmeadow a year ago this very Midsummer’s Day. My mother hid me in a secret compartment of our carriage... when I emerged, all were slain. My mother, my father... and amongst the bodies of those I knew and some that were clearly bandits, were some of monsters, dressed somewhat like men and carrying weapons.” She had steeled herself for this, rehearsed the evil words till they were spoken without thought, without having to remember...

... but still the tears came into her eyes and she could not blink enough to clear them though they half-blinded her again. “I was but alone, Sire. And – in some wise – the Road was gone and we were – *I* was – stranded among trees with no clear path in any direction. In the depths of the Forest, with night coming on. I was alone and I knew the wild beasts would be coming, nor did I know how far our attackers had gone... The Goddess pardon me–” her voice broke, but she continued, “I had to take what supplies I could and flee from that spot. I could not bury them or even burn them...” She could hear the

shocked murmur of the courtiers about the room, but she could not tell if they were shocked *by* her or *for* her.

“Dear child,” another voice, and the blur of tears still let her identify it as coming from the crowned and gowned figure seated beside the King and in that same eye-hurting scarlet. “However didst thou manage?” The Queen’s voice held an ancient regret, but much kindness.

Karana stood tall and forbore to dash the tears from her eyes. “My father was a wise man, Your Majesty, and I his only heir. He had me trained as the daughters of other men are not – in some wise even as a son, perhaps.” Well, that was true as far as these northern nobles were concerned. In Wave it hardly mattered if one was male or female, but rather one’s skills and talents. But she was in the north now... “I learned the ways of the bow and the knife. To hunt and know the woods that I might parlay with our noble customers.” A better explanation for the King than the embarrassing tale of why she had been sent to learn such skills from the shepherds who tended the Metreedi flocks in the wilds east of Wave. “To know the tanning of hides and the knowledge of plants that I might judge the quality of our goods and the expertise of our suppliers. Due to his wisdom, I have survived. What I did not know,” she admitted, “was how to find the Road. It took long and long to find my way out, and Winter came before I knew my way.”

“More than survived, thou hast thrived,” the Queen said and her tone was clearly approving. “My Lord,” she said, turning to her husband, “It seemeth me that this girl hath no conception of our concern upon her presence, or indeed our search for her.”

Search? Search for her? Karana could not fathom what the Queen meant.

The King nodded briefly. “Know then, Karana, that one year ago the Wizard Henig – aye, even he who hath transformed the province of Taridawil, the home of our ancient kings, into a Waste – he came even unto this Audience Chamber on Midsummer’s Day. And when he did stand there – even as thou dost – he demanded that We yield up one maid named Karana to him. Of his *generosity*,” the King’s emerald green eyes glinted with repressed anger, “he gave us three years to do so – else he will create the rest of Dawil as he hath done the Black Waste.”

Karana tried not to gape and her Courtly phrasing failed her. “Me? He wants *me*?”

“Hast thou any notion as to why?” the Queen queried in a gentle voice.

Karana could only shake her head numbly. But the pieces were falling into place. It must be Henig – whose vile deeds were whispered at even so far as her southern home city of Wave – who had murdered her parents. Or rather his foul retainers had. And he must have bespelled their carriage and servants to lose the road, though it seemed some grace of the Goddess must have protected her from his searchers even as she had moved, all unknowing, the hundred leagues and more from the site of the attack to a bare half-day’s walk from the capitol – though the young woman could have sworn she had not traveled a tenth that distance.

But what could such an evil creature want with *her*? Why *her*?

The Court was discussing these things more loudly than she was in her own head. Each courtier seemed to feel it was necessary to share their thoughts with the rest – and several were clustered around the King and Queen though she did not see Lord Andros in the still-hazy blur of bright colors and glittering jewels. A sea of unfamiliar faces deciding her fate...

Karana herself seemed almost to have been forgotten. A small chill crept up her back as she realized the debate was at least partly about whether they should immediately deliver her up to Henig – in chains if need be – and thereby spare the Realm.

Henig had appeared – seemingly from nowhere – some five years earlier. The first anyone had ever heard of him was when the Black Waste began to expand from the city of Taridawil, capitol of the province, pushing before it the people – common and minor nobles – who had lived there. The city and the province-proper had been transformed instantly, but the vassal fiefs had time to evacuate before being overwhelmed.

Of the Lord Duke of Taridawil and his family there was no word at all. The Waste had continued to expand until it covered all of what had been the largest and most ancient province of Dawil and most of its vassals, and fully one-third of the Realm as it currently stood. Knights and armies had been tried against the Wizard, but all to no avail. And it seemed there were no sorcerers in the land powerful

enough to combat him directly – Dawil’s native magicks had been declining for a thousand years, though none knew why, and they were largely limited to midwives and other Healers.

Henig had finally sent word to Tallspire – to King Theolore the Third, before whom Karana stood – to name himself. This much had been known before Karana’s family had set forth, four years later, from their southerly home-city of Wave with no more exotic a plan than to secure a foothold into the nobility by her marriage to a younger son of a Great House and arrange for the tariffs on certain trade-routes through Mountainmeadow to be reduced.

The courtiers were eyeing Karana with too much interest. And how could she blame them? If they did not yield her up to this Evil Wizard – for whatever mysterious purpose he wanted her – they might find themselves homeless and fleeing Henig’s depredations, even as the Taridawilm had. Or vanished utterly, as those of the central part of the province had done. Karana had cousins who had lived there...

But, oh! She did not want to be placed helpless into those evil clutches!



Please check out the other books in the  
Knighthess of the Realm series!

*Out of the Woods... Hopefully*  
(YA-appropriate PREQUEL to *A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden*)

*A Not-So-Simple Mission*  
(Book Two - which is where Karana and her Companions begin  
sorting out their long-term relationship... NOT a YA book)



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