

SNEAK PEEK THROUGH CHAPTER ONE!!!

KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

A Not-So-Simple
Mission

Book Two of the
Knighthess of the Realm





Kefen sat down a bit unsteadily on one of the sofas, and blinked a couple of times.

“That... was more effective as a demonstration than an explanation,” he said faintly. An explanation? Had Ivan been *explaining* to him how kissing worked? That conversation she’d overheard on the way back from Taridawil’s border had suggested Ivan had known that Kefen planned to try to kiss her...

Ivan grinned, looking well-pleased with himself, and stalked over to Karana. “Your turn, beautiful.”

Her arms came up without planning, and ended up trapped between his chest and hers. She fought her instinct to push him away, but some of the mischievous twinkle in Ivan’s eye died and he whispered, “You can say ‘no’...”

She shook her head minutely. She had agreed to it, she would see it through.

“Then try not to look so grim, beautiful. This isn’t going to hurt, you know.” Ivan quirked a half-smile.

Ivan was... much more expert at this than Kefen. That kiss in Taridawil now seemed chaste and tentative by comparison. His lips were soft against hers, but somehow demanding. Strange, fluttery feelings were making their way throughout her body, and she found herself kissing him back, her hands now clutching his tunic. Her legs didn’t seem to want to hold her up, but it didn’t matter because Ivan was not letting her fall...

“I guess you got past the grimness,” Ivan murmured with that same wry grin as she found herself wishing he would stop talking and go back to kissing her. “That was... rather more than I hoped for.”



*A
NOT-SO-SIMPLE
MISSION*

*Book Two of the
Knighthess of the Realm*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

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*This book is for everyone
who looks for a way to live in the world
and make it a more beautiful and caring place
for all
– no matter how odd that looks
to ‘traditionalist’ eyes.*



*And for my husband – happy 26th Anniversary!
July 5th, 2023*



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Chapter ONE

Out of the Frying Pan...

TWO WEEKS AFTER SHE RETURNED in triumph with her Companion from defeating the Evil Wizard Henig and freeing the province of Taridawil from his foul spell, Karana found herself wondering if it might actually have been a better idea to hang up her shield immediately and just face the consequences. Lord Jaycoff of Mountainmeadow and that cursed betrothal contract or no.

The one and only Knightess of the Realm Dawil glowered at the dusty, late-summer road ahead, glanced back at the train of men, horses, carts and royal carriages that trailed behind her, and sighed gustily. So much for being a Hero of the Realm.

She and Kefen had spent all of a week in Tallspire, being fêted and honored with parades and medals, before King Theolore had commissioned the pair of young heroes to escort his daughter, Princess Karivas, on her traditional trip to the Blessed Isle of Kalapula. Each prince or princess of Dawil made this pilgrimage, known as the Heir's Journey, usually just after their fifteenth birthday, to seek the Blessing of the Great Goddess Kaliatra. The island was some weeks distant to the south.

It had *seemed* like it would be a restful mission.

Certainly nothing to compare to the two years of planning and anxiety-ridden anticipation that had preceded their mission to destroy the Evil Wizard. Or actually facing and slaying him (*hopefully slaying him... Karana harbored some doubt that she hadn't shared with anyone on just how dead Henig actually was*). Or even the exhausting, hungry trek of two long weeks they had made as they hacked their way back through the overgrown temperate jungle that had suddenly appeared to replace the Desert of Blackness when her Companion somehow broke the spell on the province his father had once ruled. The Savior of Taridawil they were calling him now.

Kefen, her Companion and now the *Heir* to Taridawil, came cantering up beside her and she mustered a lighthearted tone for him. "Tired of being thee'd and thou'd?" she teased.

Her handsome, dark-haired Knight-Companion raised one hand to rub his eyebrows and pinch the bridge of his nose. "I don't know which is worse. The princess' prattle or those dark looks that nursemaid of hers keeps giving me. As if I was going to carry off her precious charge and make for the non-existent hills or something."

Non-existent hills indeed. The land they had traveled (ever so slowly) was a long slow glide of the central plains down to the port-city of Delta. The ground was almost flat enough to see the curvature of the earth to south... or even to the north, though there at least it was broken first by the wide flow of the Tari River. An occasional gentle roll to the land was all they would see until they reached the relatively sudden drop to the floodplain where the river divided itself into dozens of braided streams, giving the city its name.

The princess was beautiful – golden hair and brilliant green eyes just like her father's, skin as fair as milk, and adept in every maidenly skill. Unfortunately, she was also the Heir-Presumptive to the throne of Dawil and showed absolutely no interest in anything of substance.

She's an airheaded twit, Karana thought uncharitably as she watched her best friend try to massage his headache away. It wasn't entirely fair anyways: she'd seen Kefen treat the princess as almost a younger sister at royal balls – as her father's ward, he had been

the only young man she had been allowed to dance with before her first majority, and Karana had heard that he and Ivan had spent years standing duty at the Children's Balls and playing at puzzles and boardgames with the little princess.

Ostensibly, the pair of them had been selected for this duty because Karana made a better chaperone than a male knight – though Lady Thea Mitarr, the Royal Nursemaid, seemed to fill that role without need for any assistance. Karana rather feared that the *real* reason they had been chosen was her Companion. King Theolore and Queen Marlerite might well think that Kefen was the sort of steady, serious young man who could do the *actual* job of ruling when Karivas eventually took the throne.

Certainly, Kefen had been taking his still-unconfirmed title as Heir to Taridawil with great seriousness and had spent most of their week in Tallspire attending sessions with the King and Council on getting his people the aid that they needed to rebuild. He had spent his remaining time telling Karana about his frustrations with the slow progress and asking her advice on matters of economics that he knew next to nothing about... and hiding out from the sudden flare of matrimonial interest amongst the ladies of the Court.

Ivan, their other Companion, had accurately predicted that the change in Kefen's titled state would alter the perceptions of the nobleladies regarding his attractiveness. The nobleladies *and* their fathers and mothers, liege-lords and -ladies, all of whom saw his existence as an opportunity to further their own ambitions. Kefen had gone from being a politically problematic squire to being the most eligible young man in the Realm.

Or possibly even the next *several* Realms. The prince of Pathremir was all of twelve years old, the Crown Prince of Sethival was even younger, and Emperor Eloduan never let anything be known about the children growing up in his *khareem*, though he had been young when he ascended the throne of Amberdia eight years earlier. Perhaps it was the young man's simple luck that there were no other eligible princesses besides their own Princess Karivas on this side of the Merutian Sea to make it all that much more complicated.

Karana had spent the remainder of her own time mostly with Ivan, though she hadn't yet forgiven him entirely for not coming with them to beard the Wizard in his lair, despite how well it had turned out in the end. The golden-haired knight had claimed that he'd gotten a late start and missed catching up before they entered the Desert. And that he'd been turned around by the sands over and over when he tried to follow. It *almost* added up, since he wasn't the only knight to have been turned back like that by Henig's Power, and his grim expression had given her no reason to doubt that he'd tried just what he'd told them. But Ivan had uneasily excused himself from every time she and Kefen had worked to prepare and plan the assault during the two years prior.

And he'd ditched them *publicly* at their Knighting Ceremony, though King Theolore had confirmed that Ivan had taken his Oath to King and Country privately when he saw her skepticism in His Majesty's private debriefing with her. Karana had managed to ignore the rumors that the nobility had built up around her and her training as the lone female squire among all those young men; but the Knighting Ceremony had been open to the public – and well-attended, due in no small part to her own presence. She knew Ivan's defection had made her an object of scandal in the eyes of her commoner peers. *That* was something she found far more difficult to set aside.

On the other hand, there was no question that her golden-haired Companion was conscientious about ensuring that her skills with the sword stayed at their peak. Since none of them were on the strict schedule of the training academy anymore, Ivan had taken it upon himself to plan practices for the two of them... incorporating Kefen whenever their frustrated friend could find the time.

And while Ivan had ranged from condescending to outright annoying during their training, he'd also been unbelievably thoughtful and had never seemed to doubt that – with his help – she could achieve her goal of winning her shield. He'd been her support, her teacher, her friend... and although she couldn't reconcile that with his behavior at the Ceremony and his persistent refusal to help with the Wizard-mission, she couldn't help wanting to give him a chance to really explain himself. If he ever would.

And, perhaps, she also wanted to justify her own skills at reading people and analyzing situations. Skills she currently couldn't trust, though her Family had always lauded her abilities in that area. It was... more than mildly distressful that she had not realized who her two best friends and Bound Companions really *were*: the Heir to Taridawil and the youngest son of the Lord of Mountainmeadow... with whom she still had a betrothal contract requiring her to marry one of his sons, though Ivan said it wasn't to have been him. It made her feel off-balance – her faith in her very identity had been ripped away.

Dealing with the Princess and her retinue didn't help with keeping her feelings of waspish uncertainty under control.

Ivan wasn't helping his case, in her opinion, by staying out of sight when the King had assigned them this task, though Kefen had pointed out that they had been given the commission in open Court and that Ivan's fearsome father was still in attendance. The dark-haired young man had been forced to deal with Lord Jaycoff over the Council table and had nothing to say about the man to mitigate what little Ivan had told her, nor what she had learned from her own recent researches.

Kefen had *also* pointed out that she herself had been avoiding any contact with the Lord of Mountainmeadow while she had her Family's lawyers review that betrothal contract. Not that the conservative old Lord seemed to be splashing through any puddles to see it fulfilled. Likely he'd be just as relieved not to have to bind his own family any closer to Karana and her unconventional ways. Bad enough, after all, that his youngest son was her Bound Companion; she'd heard what a row he'd raised over *that*. She certainly wasn't the shy and demure maiden he must have thought he was contracting for – not that she had been quite that *then* either, though it mightn't have been possible to tell that by correspondence, especially if he just assumed... Neither he, nor the son Ivan thought was to have been her intended, his next-older brother Peder, had ever met her, after all.

No, avoiding Lord Jaycoff was something she agreed with Ivan about completely, and that was one thing this mission with the shallow Princess Karivas had going for it in her opinion.

The knightess wondered briefly if the king was actually sending them away again so quickly because Kefen was driving him a bit mad. The young man had absorbed a sense of responsibility at his father's knee, but his older sister had been their father's chosen Heir and whatever actual training Kefen had been receiving as the 'Spare Heir' in the art of rule had ended when he had come to Taridawil as a page at the age of eleven. He chafed at the politicking needed to accomplish even the – to him – most obvious things and had been following King Theolore around *outside* of the Royal Council sessions to ask him more questions.

Karana decided to stick with the light, teasing tone as she answered her handsome, dark-haired Companion. "Oh, it could be worse," she said. "It could be *milady Mitarr* giving you those dove-eyed looks." The Royal Nursemaid was a minor noblewoman with a temper to match her deep red hair. She would have been a striking beauty... if her face ever relaxed from its expression of perpetual disapproval: the stormy grey of her eyes always seemed to promise more such weather to come.

Kefen groaned. "Don't even *think* that. These two. The ones back in the capitol. What *is* it about *women* all of a sudden?"

Karana didn't bother reminding him *again* that he had gone from an unknown – if rather handsome – orphaned squire of no means to a hero knight and soon to be the youngest and (almost) only unmarried Great Lord in the land. Taridawil had once been the seat of the kings of Dawil and until Henig's arrival had been second in importance only to Tallspire itself. His official title would be Duke of Taridawil and Second Peer of the Realm... His Majesty being the First Peer.

"I'm sure *I* wouldn't know," she deadpanned.

He quirked a half-smile at her. Only half, but at least he had left off rubbing at his head, and it was a *real* half-smile, not the kind he so often used as a mask. "You know what I mean. That high-pitched voice Karivas is affecting absolutely sets my teeth on edge."

"Oooh, so you're on a firstname basis with Her Royal Highness now, are you?" Karana asked archly. "My, my. *Whatever* shall come next?"

Kefen narrowed his eyes at her and kneed his mount closer, settling his reins and adjusting his weight in the saddle—

“Oh, no you don’t!” Karana cried and, with a laugh, kicked her horse into a gallop. Kefen followed after, and they let the horses run until they were lightly lathered. Even Sunswift and Moondark had been pettish and bored with the interminably slow pace of the caravan.

They finally stopped, just barely within sight of the caravan, laughing breathily. Kefen made a bit of a show of grabbing her reins. Amused, Karana let him. Her black mare danced with the desire to run again, and the young woman’s racing pulse reminded her uncomfortably of the way she’d felt when Kefen had kissed her in Taridawil. The kiss he’d later told Ivan was a mistake.

“What are they going to think of us galloping off like a pair of squires with new steeds?” Kefen was still laughing, but his glance back was filled with trepidation.

“Probably better than whatever they’d think of us if you’d actually managed to knock me out of my saddle like you did when we *were* squires,” Karana retorted. “Don’t give me that innocent look. I could see what you were getting up to. You did it at last Spring’s field-camp after all.”

Of course, she’d gotten him back in kind... and they’d both gotten reamed out – sequentially – by Master Felerico, Master Edlen, *and* Ivan for being so casual about such a dangerous move. The fact that they two were by far the best in the academy at falling safely... had not seemed a good idea to bring up with all those dour looks thrown their way. Goddess, but Karana was glad to be done with being treated as a child... and as more of a child than children in *her* family were *ever* treated. Not that she could deny that most of the squires needed it. Nobles did not reach their full majority until their twentieth birthday, but commoners such as herself were legal adults at sixteen, and she had been Head of her far-flung and prosperous merchant House since that age; the very day that her father, the previous Head of House, had been killed by Henig while taking her to Mountainmeadow for that cursed betrothal contract.

Kefen didn't deny that had been his plan, and the look in his eyes seemed ready to say something more... She couldn't help wondering what else he might have done once he catapulted her from her saddle and they were both on the ground...

But the light in his chocolate-brown eyes died a moment later and he sighed. "I suppose I'll have to explain it all to Her Royal Highness when they catch up."

Of course. Just another momentary distraction. That was all it *could* have been, no matter if he had suddenly decided that first – and only – kiss hadn't been a mistake. They were just too far apart in their places in life.

Kefen looked wistfully ahead at the road, empty save for a hay-wagon piled high and green with the second-cutting – the farmer would be greatly inconvenienced by the royal caravan or vice versa – and then back with some reluctance. "We've been on the road for nearly a week, and it's another three days to Delta at this pace. Then a week or more to the Isle, we stay perhaps a week there, the same back. I should be back in *Taridawil*, helping rebuild. Or at least in Tallspire, working with the King and Council to find more resources for my poor people."

Karana's own 'small problem' – the unsatisfied betrothal contract – had been turned over to her cousin Mitael, the Head of House-Secundus for The Family, who had stayed in Tallspire to await her return from the Henig mission. He, in turn, had passed her query on to the cadre of lawyers who served House Metreedi, but had quietly agreed with Ivan's assessment. Mitael had his own sources that confirmed that they did not want Lord Jaycoff of Mountainmeadow as an unlimited partner, no matter how sweet the deal. Especially since Mitael still refused to take the role of Head of House from Karana, despite his nearly ten years of greater age and experience.

Mit had thereafter returned to Wave and their center of operations at about the same time as Karana had set off on this 'mission' to escort the princess.

"Well, you're stuck on this trip with me... and with Ivan if he ever quits skulking around long enough for us to talk to him." Karana noted dryly.

Their prodigal partner was shadowing the caravan and invariably took a room in the same inns that the royal party did. He seemed to be taking some private glee in his relatively incognito status – hardly anyone knew he really *had* sworn to the king, and out here among the commoners he wasn't the training academy's Golden Boy with everyone expecting Great Things while Kefen lurked in his shadow.

Or perhaps he was simply reveling in not being trapped with them in dealing with Her Royal Highness... though his usual sense of responsibility apparently kept him close enough to rely upon in need. And the wording of the king's commission had implied it was laid upon all three of them; King *Theolore* knew he held the golden-haired knight's oath after all

Ivan would smirk at them from across the common-room while they danced attendance on the princess, and Karana had made a game of making faces back at him when no one was looking. Kefen, alas, was *always* being watched by Princess Karivas, Lady Mitarr, or the princess' bevy of fluttery ladies-in-waiting and maids. The princess, after all, wasn't the only one of those girls in need of a husband.

Kefen returned an embarrassed look at her dry tone. "Sorry. You know it's not you I mind." He still looked frazzled.

Karana took pity on him. "Look, our Royal Master has arranged for the ship to be waiting in Delta, but one of us really should check on it and make sure that the accommodations on deck are 'up to standard' for the Royal Nursemaid and her charge." The ship that had been 'arranged for' was the flagship of the Royal Navy, the monarch's own personal transport in time of peace. It hardly required an inspection by a newmade knight, but...

Kefen looked at her with awe as he realized what she was suggesting. "You mean-?"

She smiled back. The look of relief in her friend's eyes was more than worth fabricating the excuse. "You'll get at least three days free of thees and thous. Four, if you're careful to keep busy with the ship when we arrive at *last*." She let out a little of her own exasperation with a trip that would have taken three days in total by fast horse, or five with a proper merchant caravan.

The look of exasperation also did to mask her thoughts: *I can't help you be where you want to be, my friend, but I can give you a break from where you don't want to be.* He was her friend. Her *best* friend outside her Family. No more... but certainly no less.

“Though I suppose you should be on hand to help present Her Royal Highness to Lady Mendria,” she finished. “So maybe just three days.” The party was to stay in the palace of the Lady of Delta, and those who were not to take ship to the Blessed Isle would continue there while awaiting the return of the rest.

Kefen took a breath so deep it looked like he hadn't had a full breath since they began the journey. “Are you sure? Then *you* have to deal with them all...”

The knightess shrugged. “Perhaps Sir Hide-in-Plain-Sight will come out where he can be useful,” she pointed out sardonically. Kefen was better at coming up with these teasing names for their golden-haired Companion, but the crinkle of his eyes said he appreciated the effort. “But the princess hasn't much interest in me. Without *you* here, I suspect she'll be just as happy to spend her time with her ladies-in-waiting. And Lady Mitarr has still less use for me than the princess.”

To her surprise, Kefen actually had a speculative look. “I think half of that is jealousy in your case. I rather think milady would have liked to be a knightess herself.”

Karana was a bit dumbfounded by that suggestion and resolved to pay a bit more attention to the older woman to see if he was right.

“After all,” Kefen added with a sly grin, “that temper of hers should have proven quite the asset for a knightess!”

Karana pretended to glower at him, but couldn't respond in kind without proving his jest. It wasn't really true, anyways – Karana was quite nearly as even-tempered as Kefen himself – and she gave up the fake-glower to laugh at him. “Go on your way before they catch up to us.”

Kefen didn't argue further. They'd been taught always to keep a spare change of clothing and other basic supplies in their saddlebags, so there was nothing he needed from the baggage-train. He

clasped her hand in thanks, then headed off down the road to the coastal city of Delta. At a gallop.

“Stay at the Sign of the Hippopotamus!” Karana called after him, but had no idea if he heard. . It was an unusual inn that seemed to have been built to avoid any possible right angles and was one of the Sights that visitors to Delta were recommended. It was also supposed to be an excellent inn, and while Karana could vouch for their food, she had never stayed there when she had come up to the city with Papa. The Head of House couldn’t patronize even a famous inn if there was a Metreedi House in town for him to stay at, after all... no matter how awkward Uncle Alasdar always made that stay.

The knightess watched him go for a moment, then resolutely turned back to watch the caravan struggling on. She cast a wistful look over her shoulder at Kefen’s rapidly diminishing form, then began cantering back towards her charges.

A restful mission the king had said when assigning them.

Hah.



Ivan had, indeed, come out of the woodwork once Kefen had disappeared. Princess Karivas was briefly enchanted with the dashing handsome blonde knight, but quickly retreated in the wake of his sardonic attitude... and Lady Mitarr’s conspicuous disapproval.

“Milady doesn’t want Her Royal Highness falling for a youngest son,” Ivan explained dryly to Karana as they cantered ahead of the caravan the next day, his silver stallion perfectly matching paces with her black mare. Both horses were tall and broadchested, powerful creatures with large, intelligent foreheads. They had the strength to carry the knights in full armor – full *jousting plate* in Ivan’s case – and the wits to serve as partners in battle, but be as gentle as young lambs with their riders and any civilians who might end up in their path. Moondark was a hand or so taller at the withers than the stallion, setting their riders’ heads on more of an even level despite Ivan’s much greater height.

“I would have thought that marrying a youngest son would avoid complications when she takes the throne,” Karana replied. She didn’t add that she’d seen Ivan romance women of far more timid or tempestuous natures at the royal balls they had been required to attend. He’d referred to that as ‘work’ once, and not for his pleasure, but hadn’t explained.

“Ah,” Ivan answered. “I should have clarified. The youngest son of *Mountainmeadow*.”

“Because your father and the King don’t get along?” she hazarded.

“That’s part of it.”

Karana glared at him. “Do I have to drag *everything* out of you? I assume this is more nobles’ infighting that I’m unaware of.”

Ivan sighed. “If you didn’t keep asking for the sordid details about my family this would be easier. I’d be happy to tell you all about Lady Mendria Desteinar of Delta and her weird obsession with Lord Kelmar Velviroth of Sea’sHaven.” He offered this with a hopeful look.

Keep asking? He and Kefen had somehow managed never to let her hear their family-names in two long years of training, and Karana hadn’t pressed them about it when they seemed unhappy talking about their families. Kefen *had* told her that his family had died in the Fall of Taridawil, and having so recently lost her own parents to the same Wizard, she could understand his reticence. Ivan, it was clear early on, had a terrible home life and the training academy was his sanctuary – she had guessed he didn’t want to spoil it.

The young woman had assumed they were the sons of minor nobles from their provinces – a statistically rational assumption since most of the lads at the academy did fit that profile – until the Evil Wizard himself had enlightened her with respect to Kefen’s status as should-be-Duke of the province. Kefen had given her Ivan’s history over their campfire one night as they fought their way back through the overgrown mass of greenery that his formerly heavily-farmed province had turned into when the spell had been broken. It hadn’t been until they had met up again with Ivan on the way back to Tallspire and the King that all the pieces had fallen together and she

realized it was to one of *Ivan's brothers* that she had been betrothed to so long ago... the betrothal for which she and her parents had been traveling to Mountainmeadow when Henig's monsters had attacked them.

Though her first thought as she'd put it together on that ride back to Tallspire had been that it was *Ivan* whom she was expected to wed. He'd quickly disabused her of that notion – it was his next-older brother, Peder, apparently. *Very* quickly, actually. Clearly the idea had bothered him. She would say 'almost as much as it had bothered *her*', but he'd corrected her before she'd really had a chance to consider it beyond her initial shock and surprise.

Ivan claimed he'd known nothing of the betrothal contract until his lady mother had summoned him the day before the Knighting Ceremony to order him to publicly declare Karana unworthy to be a knight. Which he'd avoided doing – barely.

He and Kefen had both assured her that she wouldn't like Peder, and she'd decided not to hang up her shield immediately upon their return to give House Metreedi's lawyers time in order to find her a way out of the contract, should Lord Jaycoff seek to pursue it. It was by no means clear he would do so, since he had been known to refer to her as an 'unnatural woman' numerous times already. Kefen had said Lord Jaycoff had made no mention of her in Council.

When she'd finally read the House's copy of the contract for herself, she'd noted that Lord Jaycoff had not specified *which* son she was to marry, and that the Head of House Metreedi had to approve whichever son was offered. That had been her father, but was now herself.

Karana still felt like her head was full of wool when she tried too hard to think about the betrothal contract. At first, she had thought that it was merely the recurring nightmares – and daymares – that continued to pursue her with images of the carnage from the attack. But she was beginning to wonder how her usual sense of curiosity and her much-vaunted ability at solving puzzles could have gone to sleep on something as important as the identities of her two Companions. It was just *barely* believable that no one else had mentioned their

family names to her or in front of her and that everyone else had just assumed she knew who they were – after all it had been no secret. But there had surely been a thousand clues scattered about that she had, somehow, ignored.

It was almost as disturbing as the fact that the attack by Henig’s monsters had occurred a hundred leagues from where she had finally emerged from the Forest... a hundred leagues and *exactly* one year later. And she had certainly not walked that far. And since that lacuna of time had *protected* her from the Wizard’s search – although it had also prevented anyone else from finding her – it could hardly have been more of his vile workings. Even if that ‘protection’ had resulted in a near paralyzing fear of being alone...

But she certainly had not *‘kept asking’* for *‘sordid details’* about her golden-haired Companion’s family. The very idea that she might was more than slightly offensive. Ivan should know her better than that.

But... a part of her wondered what she would do if Lord Jaycoff offered her *Ivan* as a husband.

Infuriating though he often was, he was her Companion and her friend, and surely far better than a stranger that both he and Kefen said she would dislike. One way or another she’d likely be wed shortly after she hung up her shield; if it was obvious that Kefen needed to find a nobleborn wife who could bring him the resources his badly damaged province needed, it was just as clear that Karana would also need to wed... to the benefit of The Family. If not to Peder Torvalds (*or Ivan Torvalds?*) in exchange for those trade-routes to Pathremir and Selavan, then to one of her merchant peers for some other trade-negotiation. Another stranger, most likely.

The whole idea had felt entirely abstract before Kefen had kissed her atop Taridawil Keep...

Not that Ivan had shown the slightest interest in adjusting that contract. Not that she *wanted* him to, even if there was no reasonable hope for...

It was simply that she knew him well enough to be comfortable with him.

That was *all*.

Friend or not, Ivan would likely make a terrible husband for the ruling Head of House Metreedi. All those conservative Mountainmeadow attitudes that he tried so hard to disavow... but that crept out when he wasn't paying attention... included rules about a 'woman's proper place' among other things. While he accepted her as a peer and Companion, she had come to the training as his student in the sword and, given his passion and brilliance with it (*and his greater height and reach*), would likely never truly be his equal with a blade.

It took a special sort of person – man *or* woman – to play the role of the spouse of a Head of House. Had the betrothal gone through as planned, there would have been years – decades – to train Peder Torvalds (*or whichever of the brothers she ended up wed to... there were seven after all, though the eldest two were wed*) to accept her position. Now... she was probably best off with another merchant who knew how these things worked from the beginning. Even a stranger.

Karana eyed him irritably. She seemed to be inheriting Kefen's headache. "Having to sort through all this gossip disguised as politics is bad enough. *Irrelevant* gossip makes it worse. Though I wish I didn't have the horrible feeling this is all going to be important for me to know," she added mournfully. And she did...

All she wanted to do, she told herself firmly, was hang up her shield and go back to her *real* work as Head of House Metreedi with no further distractions. And figure out how to make that work include command of her own ship as she'd always dreamed, despite the fact that it had never been done before in The Family's very long history. Vague *feelings* and gossip about nobles had no place in her pragmatic, real world. And if she couldn't wed for love as her parents had done... then she would just have to learn to love whomever she wed.

"I hope you're wrong," Ivan told her. "I wish I didn't have to *live* through it." He looked at her sideways and sighed again. "I told you I have six older brothers. My lord father was also the seventh son."

She frowned. “Was there some terrible plague up there? What happened to his older brothers?” Mountainmeadow, she knew, was the only province in the Realm that went only from father to son, and almost inevitably father to *oldest* son, though Sea’sHaven was nearly as parochial. They were also the only two provinces likely to not have quick access to proper medical care, mostly due to their remoteness. Ironically, Mountainmeadow was located right next to the neighboring Realm of Pathremir, which was entirely and aggressively matrilineal.

“Officially? Lots of things.” He snorted. “Hunting accidents, bandits, bad food. He had three younger brothers as well, and didn’t even bother with subtlety in disposing of *them*. I’m told that my youngest uncle was strangled by the scullery maid he’d taken to his bed – who by all reports had neither the strength... nor the wits to boil water.”

“Oh.” Karana could feel the blood draining away from her face. There were clearly *reasons* why Ivan had never wanted to discuss family.

“My aunts were all married off to the advantage of the province,” Ivan went on. “But somehow not a one of them ever was able to bring a child to term. My aunt Allegra literally wore herself to death trying.” He paused. “I’d feel more sorry for them if I hadn’t heard enough stories to know that the only difference between them and my lord father is that he was more successful than the rest. He probably wasn’t even responsible for all of it, considering how many other contenders he faced for his father’s seat.”

“Oh.” She had no idea what else to say.

“So, my brothers don’t trust that I won’t try the same thing,” Ivan explained somewhat unnecessarily. “My sisters don’t trust any of us. My lord father’s word is ironclad law in Mountainmeadow and he has declared that we will live our lives to the profit of the province – by which he means himself. There is no benefit to the province – to him – in us killing each other off when he can marry us out to gain control of the whole Realm... hence milady Mitarr’s caution at discouraging the princess’ interest.”

Karana found her voice. “But once you are beyond his reach, surely you could each go on and do as you please.”

Ivan shuddered. “There is no ‘beyond his reach’ that I’ve yet found.”

They rode in silence for a time while she digested that... and wondered what impact that would have on her own unresolved contract with the Lord of Mountainmeadow.

At last, Karana ventured, “So, seventh son of a seventh son?”

Ivan snorted. “Don’t even get me started on *that* one. When I was born, a small cult apparently sprang up in Mountainmeadow. My lord father stamped it out, of course. My nurses and tutors were under strict orders not to let me know anything about it, but my older siblings taunted me enough that I know it existed.”

“How... strange.”

“That... is a very good way to summarize Mountainmeadow,” he said sardonically. After a pause, he added, “You have no idea how much I’ve envied you and Kefen. Your families may be gone, but at least you *wish* they weren’t.” His jaw worked, as if he regretted admitting it as soon as the words were out.

On impulse, Karana reached over and rested her hand on his arm, bringing their horses so close that their legs brushed. “Family can be the people you *choose* also.”

Ivan gave her a slightly surprised look, then half smiled, but without his usual irony behind it the expression was much warmer. He placed his other hand over hers.

Karana withdrew her own hand after a moment and let their horses move apart to a more comfortable distance. “Thank you for warning me about your father before we returned to Tallspire. I was able to avoid him – and your brothers – but it took more effort than I would have bothered with otherwise.”

He knew that, more or less, or at least he hadn’t questioned when she’d asked to come into his room to play chess. Kefen had somehow always known where to look for them when he was free, but although his brothers had knocked on the door and asked if he

knew where Karana was, they hadn't managed to step inside to see her with Ivan blocking the opening with his body and a great deal of sarcasm. They had played a great many games of chess.

Maybe Lord Jaycoff *was* splashing through puddles – or even ponds – to get that contract completed.

Or possibly he had been seeking after her to negotiate an *end* to the bloody thing and she'd foolishly missed her opportunity. Time would tell.

"Anything to stick it in the old doomcrow's craw," Ivan said a little viciously. "And, um, to keep you out of his clutches," he added a bit more circumspectly, glancing sideways at her.

He waited a beat, still with one eye on her, then ran a hand through his golden hair, pulling free some strands that had gotten caught in the edges of his collar. On another man, it would have been disarmingly attractive, but this was Ivan and he was all-too-aware of his looks. Most of his movements seemed calculated... though Karana was beginning to wonder how much of that was simply how he had learned to survive in such a cutthroat family. It was all so ingrained in his behavior that it made small difference at this point.

"So now you know why I've nothing to fear from Her Royal Highness. Nor her ladies, if their parents have any sense. Unlike our good friend. Which is, I assume, why he went on ahead. He doesn't think he can avoid her all the way to the Blessed Isle and back, does he?"

Karana sighed. "No. I don't know. He looked like he needed a break."

"He'd be perfect for her." Ivan suggested, his eyes watching her face.

"He can't stand her voice, she doesn't seem to think about anything beyond clothes and jewels, and she's barely past childhood," Karana retorted, with more heat than she'd intended.

Kefen was *just a friend*. Nothing more could possibly work, no matter that kiss atop Taridawil's tower in the wake of the broken spell. He was soon to be confirmed the Second Peer of the Realm,

and she had a business to run. And perhaps a ship to command. It was beginning to form a litany in her mind.

“Time will solve that last one, and I said *he’d* be perfect for *her*,” Ivan commented. “I said nothing about the other way around.” He paused meaningfully. “On the other hand, as King Theolore’s son-in-law, Kefen *would* have access to all the resources he needed to help Taridawil. And he’d be the next Prince-Consort. Or even King.” He was looking for her reaction, Karana knew. Though why it mattered to him she had no idea.

“When you put it that way, I suppose he’d be a fool to say no, if the King offered him her hand,” she said trying for a light tone. She knew how Kefen would feel about this, but if Ivan even guessed that the idea bothered her *personally* and not on their Companion’s behalf... well, he’d tease her mercilessly, of course.

Ivan half-smiled again, but the irony was back. “Our Kefen is many things, but a fool isn’t one of them.”

“No.” Karana didn’t really have anything to add, and she didn’t want to continue this conversation. She looked back over her shoulder to note that the baggage train was lagging a bit behind the rest of the caravan. A couple of the men-at-arms, who were doing the real work of providing security to the princess in her travels, had gone back to chivvy the muleteers on.

Ivan was still looking ironically at her when she turned back. Thunderflanks was so superbly trained that his master rarely seemed to need the reins, and if Ivan’s attention was elsewhere, his horse still followed his intention and stayed on course. Unlike her own, despite the fact that it had been Ivan who had helped her train Moondark. The black mare had veered towards the edge of the road when Karana checked on the caravan.

No, it wasn’t irony, it was curiosity in his gaze. “So, did you ever find out what it was that Henig wanted of you, personally? Kefen never said, and you... very carefully didn’t tell that audience of peasants at the inn – or the nobles in open Court.”

Vain, arrogant... and observant, she reminded herself. And... careful. He had waited to ask her this until they were on the open

road and no one could possibly overhear them. Even in the security of his own room, with a closed door, he hadn't broached the subject over any of their many games of chess.

Karana shivered and wrapped one arm around herself, careful to keep control of her horse with the other. The day remained cloudless, but a shadow seemed to pass between her and the sun. "He wanted to marry me. He said I was already bound to him in some way." She shook herself and looked at Ivan. "I did tell the King. In private." Though she hadn't told His Majesty quite *everything* the Evil Wizard had said.

The golden-haired knight quirked another half-smile at her. "Some things aren't meant for public consumption." He waited a moment to be sure she saw the connection with his own confession on the return from Taridawil about how he had privately sworn to the King. "But surely one's Knight-Companion...?" It was the same question she had asked of him.

She tilted her head wryly in acknowledgment of his point.

"So, the Wizard said you were already bound?" It seemed to be a rhetorical question. "That's... disturbing. What did Kefen have to say about it? Or the King?"

Karana looked ahead down the road between Moondark's ears. "The King seemed upset, but didn't really say anything. I didn't discuss it with Kefen."

She didn't have to look at him to know that Ivan's brows had shot up. "What, you spent three weeks cutting your way through that forest – just the two of you – and most of the next week holed up together in Tallspire, and you never talked about what Henig said?"

"Two weeks. He didn't bring it up. I didn't know what to say about it." Karana truly didn't know if she wanted to talk about the Wizard's words.

And not just the part about her – the parts about his sister and niece. Who were they? Who had he been before he was Henig? Kefen... seemed determined to focus only on Taridawil's future. It must be too painful for him to think about losing his family, his home... And trying to bring it up would inevitably lead to them

having to discuss that kiss. Which she was determined not to do. A mistake, he had said to Ivan...

“And I spent far more time with *you* in Tallspire than with Kefen,” she finished.

It was true. They’d eaten together, fenced together, ridden their horses together, played chess together, talked to Kefen together – though when she started to answer Kefen’s questions about trade and finance in detail, Ivan had begged off. She’d made several excursions to Metreedi House to talk to Isarella – Mitael had left shortly after the return celebration, having been gone too long from Wave and their central offices as it was – and Ivan had even escorted her *there* and back. It had almost been as if he were unwilling to let her out of his sight, for all that she should be more secure as a named Hero of the Realm than she had been as a squire who was only there on the King’s sufferance.

Or as if he was trying to make up for not having been there in Taridawil.

Of course, if he *had* been with them, Kefen likely wouldn’t have kissed her.

Maybe that would have been for the better.

Ivan shook his head. “That idiot.”

“What do you mean?” Karana demanded.

Ivan just shook his head again and wouldn’t answer. But the look in his eyes was speculative.



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