

The Kiss That Saved Her

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Chapter 1: The Hunter

The hunter's bow was cocked and ready to strike. He was nearing sixty years old and was aware of how the kill would go down. The unsuspecting prey carelessly allowed him the advantage by being unaware danger was near. He saw it many times before when he hunted deer. They were his favorite prey as they were as beautiful as they were easy to kill. But this was no deer. This was a girl of seventeen. She was raised in a castle with servants. If her parents were alive she would not be in this danger.

He pulled on the arrow. The target was within his grasp. Sweat poured out of his skin. He knew he must strike soon. He looked again at the Princess who was bending down to pick a flower like a maid would choose her brush. The moment was ideal for a kill. He would be rewarded or executed.

His mind said, *Shoot now!*

The Queen was like a python ready to squeeze power from the Princess. Power became everything. Princess Joanna would die by an arrow shot by her own servant. His hand twitched as if it caught all his guilt.

He thought of his task. *Shoot!*

Princess Joanna was the rightful heir to her father's throne. She should marry a prince, not face death. He let his finger slide on the bow for a second. Sweat had soaked through his clothes. The girl moved towards another flower as she hummed

a song from long ago — the melody familiar at the moment of discovery.

Shoot her.

He was blameless; it was an order from the Queen. His mind raced with images of Princess Joanna's father, mother, great uncles and all her relations; it was as if they were walking across it.

Shoot.

Even if the people of Bow would not know what really happened, the hunter would know. He would know. He tugged on the arrow. The arrow vibrated in the bow like the command vibrated from the Queen's throat.

The arrow waited on his command.

Shoot?

He lowered his bow.

True power, like love, was given, not taken.

He felt tremendous sorrow because he knew the Queen would kill him. He thought of his poor wife. Perhaps he could save her. He thought they might escape over the border to the Kingdom of Ott which was fifty miles away. Then he had a thought to save everyone. If the Princess would run away from Bow, she might reach the border and safety. He ran to her and tugged on her shoulder as the conscience tugs on the soul.

“Princess Joanna,” he said with urgency.

Princess Joanna froze. No one would dare touch her without permission, let alone tug on her! She was about to scold him when she realized that there might be immediate danger at hand.

“What is it?”

“I was ordered by your stepmother to take you to this field and kill you. She fears that you will challenge her for the throne.”

Her eyes darted to his bow strapped across his back and she stepped away from him.

“I must advise you to run, run to the north as the Kingdom of Ott is but fifty miles from here and there the Queen has many enemies. She will not be able to find you. Trust no one. Now take off your cape.”

His mind thought of a plan to cut out a heart from a deer to take to the Queen as she required him to bring the Princess’ heart back as proof of her death.

“Thank you,” Princess Joanna said.

She realized the danger she was in as she took off her royal cape to give to him then dashed into the forest adjacent to the hilly meadow. She touched velvety moss on a tree and headed towards the north. She imagined the army would search for her relentlessly if he failed to convince the Queen she died.

She ran for the first few miles on the hard dirt then she walked. The forest smelled of decayed leaves where spiders and bugs crawled near her feet. Plants

penetrated every space in the woods as green thriving examples of the reign of God.

Princess Joanna moved away from civilization. The ferns on the ground caught her silk dress until she lifted it up. She ran again, but the path became overgrown and more difficult. The fate she traveled towards held uncertainty like her kingdom; power stripped, gutted, and removed from her. Still, she was alive. Joanna could not predict if the nation would be broken by her stepmother.

*

The Queen waited alone near the statues in the rose garden. As she waited, she paced and her royal gown became caught on a white rose bush. Her fine silk gown trapped her to the bush. She snapped the rose in half and left it on the ground. She wondered why the hunter took so long to return. She longed to remove all obstacles in her path; the shadow of apprehension stifled her until the task was complete. To her relief, he approached carrying a cape and a box.

“You're late!” she said.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty.” He bowed a low bow. “It took longer than I planned. This is her cape.”

He handed her the cape and the box. The Queen took it, looked inside, and smiled.

“You may go, but tell no one or I will tell my Commander in the Royal Services

to hunt you down and kill you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Queen." He bowed to her and left her in the cultivated garden.

The garden unleashed flowering spring tulips in rows of red and yellow. The gardens contained an assortment of green bushes. A hawk landed on a round lilac bush which caused a rabbit to dart out from underneath and run into the thicker bushes on the other side of the garden.

A wind blew and the scattered trees bent at its command. The fresh breeze lifted the Princess' cape up as the Queen held it. She smiled at the thought of her victory; no more would the Princess challenge her authority.

The Queen felt invincible. Her power became complete. Her smile faded as she thought of informing the staff of the death. The Queen walked back to her castle and the trees' shadows cast dark spots against the grass. She reached the bronze castle door and she passed two guards who bowed to their Queen.

"I need to see General Stuart," the Queen said.

"As you desire, Your Majesty."

The soldier hurried past the main hall in which paintings hung like recollections.

The paintings of the Tower family kings lined the walls. A painting of a budding garden with a tree above the animals was larger than the others. The lines ran together to make the tree seem alive like the paintings of the Princess' family made the castle seem alive.

The Queen followed her soldier into the Grand Room in the heart of the palace. She put the cape down on an oak bench and stood near the fireplace covered with green marble. She saw her reflection in the mirror which rested on the mantel. Her face had aged, but her lovely high cheeks fitted her regal birth.

The fire flared as it devoured the wooden logs and the Queen looked at her box. A drop of blood sat on the keyhole. She threw it in the fireplace and the fire reacted by shrinking, but then it overtook the box — its flames grew mammoth. In an instant, what had been was no more.

The Queen sat at a desk and took out paper, her long fingers separating the pieces, and wrote a letter to explain the death of the Princess.

General Stuart wondered why the Queen would summon him, but his duty was to advise then follow her command. The hallway, thin and tall like a forest canopy of pines, echoed his steps and the muffled sounds of doors closing in other parts of the castle seemed to indicate excitement. He approached her and bowed to his Queen.

The Queen glanced at her General. She wondered what the man, his silver hair short and his dark uniform fitting his strong frame, would say when he heard the news. He was fond of the Princess the Queen acknowledged, but she knew he would follow her command as she understood the workings of her military.

“Your Royal Highness, you wanted to see me,” Stuart stated.

“Yes.” The Queen stopped writing and stood up.

The General did not allow himself to be swept away by the willowy woman whose vibrant voice compelled others to action. He refused to make the same mistakes of other commanders as he was the Superior Commander responsible for the well-being of the kingdom and his judgment must reflect the truth.

She said, “I have been informed by my hunter that the Princess was attacked by wolves and she died.”

“No!” His posture slumped at the news. Then Stuart added, “When and how?”

General Stuart needed to sit from the shock but didn't dare. Memories of Princess Joanna replayed in his head and he regretted he did not accompany her that morning.

“It happened when the hunter took her out for a morning exercise. She traveled into the woods near the meadow. By the time he reached her, some wild animals had killed her. There is her cape.” She pointed to the bench.

Stuart felt the heat of the fire, which was almost unbearable, as a bead of sweat rolled down his neck.

“Where did he place the body?” Stuart saw the Princess' cape, but he wanted more proof.

The Queen turned away from him as she spoke. “The attack left little remains of the Princess and he buried her before the birds of prey devoured her corpse.”

“May I send out a search party to confirm his account?” Stuart stepped toward the fireplace as if to make her face him.

“Not at this time. We must prepare for the funeral. We will need to inform the other Royals.” The Queen faced him as if she complied with his thoughts.

“We must tell her subjects quickly,” he said.

Stuart tried to understand what happened. He disliked the Queen and his shock gave way to suspicion. Still, he swore an oath to her. It was the same oath he took when her husband was alive.

“We will wait to inform them. We will allow the capital city of Pantor to mourn first, and then we will inform my subjects of the Princess' death. We must keep order. There will be no uprisings or distant kings coming to rule our kingdom.”

The Queen studied General Stuart.

“As you order.” Stuart bowed.

“You are dismissed,” the Queen said.

The Queen took the cape to the planning room and informed the Minister of the Kingdom of the terrible news. Then she asked to be left alone to grieve.

The official left her and the Queen looked out the large window and rejoiced.

She planted her hand on the glass with her fingers spread open. The castle window overlooked the town of Pantor and its majestic cobbled streets. Beyond the gate many people began their morning unaware that the heir to the throne was not in the

castle.

The Queen would silence any who opposed her and reward those who supported her. She planned to make Pantor the most envied city in all the kingdoms. She would restore beauty to the city neglected by her late husband's lenient ways towards the common people. She pictured in the city square a marble statue of herself and generations of children would pay homage to it. Her joy overwhelmed her, except the Queen felt a quiver in her hand. She thought it strange.

General Stuart made his way out of the Great Hall to the narrow corridor and passed an empty room. The statues stood in the room waiting to be catalogued. The Queen planned to redecorate again. He made for the front entrance of the castle and the other soldiers. He almost told them the news, but he spotted another room off the main entrance — a small chapel. Stuart slipped inside to pray.

Chapter 2: A Cave

Princess Joanna walked as far as she could until darkness filled the forest. The moon remained invisible. She heard the screeches of wild animals causing fear itself to sway inside her mind. She thought to pray for protection and called out to Almighty God. Peace fell upon her like fog rolling into a valley. She decided to huddle under a tall pine with low lying branches and fell asleep rather quickly. The morning sun filtered through the trees. The sound of birds calling to one another in a pleasant snippet of song drowned out the rest of the sounds. Joanna got up and began her journey. Through the trees, she saw a village in the distance and became afraid that someone would spot her. She left the path to return to the woods. Her pace quickened in order to cover a greater distance.

*

The night began and Joanna felt full of trepidation. The sounds of the night frightened her and she was too weak to go on much further. She called out to God once more. Then she walked along the stream in the woods until she spotted a cave. The trees of the forest grew up and around the cave and partly covered it. At the sound of a man's voice, she hid behind a tree. She saw a man approach the cave and enter it. The firelight from the cave flickered and then vanished as the makeshift door opened and closed. Joanna thought she must be in the Kingdom of Ott as the caves were not recorded in her kingdom. The famished Princess saw two

men approach the cave, the younger one about six feet tall, and the other about five foot two, shorter than her.

“I told you the last one home tonight must wash the dishes,” the young man said.

“I will not wash the dishes! It is unfair! I am late because I had to close up the mines; it couldn't be helped, David.”

Princess Joanna moved and the branch below her feet gave her location away.

Fear overtook her curiosity and she knelt down to hide.

“Who’s there?” the shorter man called.

The young man, David, took out a knife from his belt. “Show yourself, thief!”

She had been caught and she sensed the best action would be to ask for clemency.

“I am not a thief!” Joanna called out.

She moved away from the tree and they saw her. David put his knife back in his belt. When they reached her, he realized she was a girl about his age.

“Why she's just a girl!” cried out the shorter man.

“Who are you?” asked David.

“My name is Joanna.”

“Joanna, why are you wandering the forest late into the evening; are you lost? I will help you find your way back home.” The young man shifted his foot, kicking the leaves from their spot.

“No, please, my family abandoned me. I haven't eaten in two days. I can hardly stand.” Joanna felt the ordeal acutely as she gave her description.

“Don't listen to her! It's a trap, David. Look at her dress.” The old man moved to her and touched her fine silk dress with his stout fingers. She moved back but wobbled and fell down.

“That's enough, George, she is weak.”

David knelt to help her up, which frightened her, but she had no strength left to stop him. In the dark, she could not make out their faces.

The door opened into the kitchen and the smell of sour bread and stew made her hungrier. The fire made the inside of the cave bright which reminded her of her home. How she missed her room at the castle with its yellow brick fireplace and royal red tapestries. The cave was sparse with a plain wooden table but the chairs were ornate she thought for such a place. David helped her to an oak chair and she sat down. Joanna noticed he was a handsome boy. The modest cave disappointed her at first glance, but in her present circumstance she was grateful for the shelter.

“David, how did you find a girl?” asked the elderly cook.

“She just appeared from behind a tree!” His voice rose as if they wouldn't believe him.

Another man stooped down towards her and studied her closely while she cowered.

“I am a doctor, please let me help you. My name is Dominic, and I own this cave. You are not well. You need food.” He motioned to the cook.

The elderly cook limped as he brought her a bowl of stew. She was thankful for the food. She shivered as the dirt floor was not warm even if she was close to fire.

“Thank you Louis,” Dominic said. He turned back to Joanna. “Now eat please.”

She ate it quickly and unlike a princess.

“Who is our guest?” asked the cook.

“Her name is Joanna,” the young man said, “and she sure is hungry.”

“Please, let me stay here, at least for the night. I have no family,” Joanna pleaded.

The five men stared at her as if judging what to do with her. The silence frightened her more than the animals outside.

“We will help you,” Dominic said.

She sighed as she nodded.

The other man said, “It looks like she is very rich; maybe even royalty by the looks of her dress.”

Princess Joanna worried this group of men might be robbers or other unsavory characters and she had just asked to stay with them. Her instinct had told her to trust them, but at the man’s comment she became afraid again.

“You are forgetting how we became a family, George. You escaped death

yourself, and since then you have become one of my dearest friends,” Dominic announced as he stood back up, his hands folded gently.

“What are we supposed to do with her? I mean we are five men and a female will make us wash up and stop saying certain words!” George raised his own hands waving them wildly to emphasize his point.

“I will not if you let me stay! Please,” Joanna said.

“Oh, I think she should stay, Dom, I mean I can't even work in the mines anymore because of my poor health and here I am in this cave. You haven't thrown me out,” the cook said.

“Alright, Louis, we would never throw you or anyone out. I had every intention of sheltering our guest,” Dom said.

“Thank you, thank you all!” Joanna felt safe, at least temporarily.

David put his hands on his hips as he spoke. “You are fortunate to have found our cave as there are some who would not hesitate to harm you, Joanna. Dom told you he is a doctor who works in Randeale. This is his home.” He continued, “In one way or another, he found us and we are a strange bunch for sure! Louis is our cook. Frank and George mine for silver. George is the hothead of the group. I'm David. I make furniture, and smaller things like bowls, cups and flutes.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said. The formal address surprised Dom.

Louis said, “We should eat, Joanna. We will sit at the table but you stay near the fire.”

The men sat down on a bench. They held hands and said a prayer before they ate. Joanna bowed her head as they prayed and repeated to herself a prayer of thanksgiving. She finally felt safe.

Joanna fell asleep in the chair while George washed the dishes after dinner while the others helped clean the table. The men tip toed around her for the most part to let her sleep.

She woke up with a jolt to a conversation about which man would pull in the most silver in the mine by year’s end and the boasting of George made her remember she was no longer at the castle.

“We tried not to wake you, Joanna,” Dom stated.

“It is late, and I have to get up early,” George announced then yawned.

Frank said, “I will make up a bed for you, Joanna. This is a large cave and our bedroom is down the narrow part off the gathering space. You may sleep in the main part of the cave. If you follow me, I will show you.”

She followed him to the gathering room. He took out a blanket from a wooden chest which she took from his hands. She noticed the tips of his fingers had black stains on them as if the years of mining made him its marked property.

“Thank you for your kindness. I will work hard while I am here.”

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