

Estevan strode past, his posture self-assured. "I'm headed to town and the tavern, if anyone is interested."

Dresden snorted. "It's barely past three."

"Yes, and by the time we arrive, it will be quarter to five." Estevan pulled the knife out of the tree and stuck it in a sheath on his hip. "Gives time to get a nice steak pie, down a few pints, maybe smoke a pipe, and get back at a decent hour."

Regulus looked at Dresden. "Can't argue with that logic, Drez."

Drez gave him a crooked grin. "Then to the tavern we go."

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Adelaide leaned over a red bolt of cloth, inspecting it. Giselle followed her around the tidy little shop, so silent Adelaide scarcely noticed her.

"I assure you, my lady, all of my cloth is of the very highest quality." The shopkeeper, a middle-aged man with a wide girth and bushy beard rocked up on his toes and back onto his heels, a too-big smile on his face. "Every weaver lives within a day's ride, and they use wool from quality, local sheep, and only the purest dyes."

Adelaide rubbed the cloth between her fingers, admiring the the closeness of the weave. "I'll take this entire bolt."

The shopkeeper bowed, his grin so wide it looked painful. "Of course, my lady!"

"And that white linen." She pointed. "And that bolt of green."

"Yes, of course, a fine choice." The man bustled about, placing the bolts in a large twine sack. Giselle took the cloth while Adelaide paid the shopkeeper.

Adelaide stepped out into the cool early evening. Gaius still lounged where she had left him on a rough bench, the back of his head resting against the wooden shop front.

The muddy cobblestone road stunk, as did many of the peasants hurrying past in dust-covered clothing in neutral hues. The shouts of men and women hawking their wares up and down the street echoed off the packed wooden buildings. Bakers, cobblers, blacksmiths, and brewers all cast their voices into the street, vying for the attention passersby. Pages and serving women wove through the crowds, their finer cloth standing out in flashes of vibrant color. A few knights also wandered here and there, swords hung at their sides.

Gaius raised his head as she approached. He had graciously agreed to take her into town, although the two-hour ride was far too much for Minerva, who had stayed behind with Lady

Commented [1]: This actually *is* still in the book, but changed a lot.

Commented [2]: One of this reasons this got cut was because this was a weird transition. But it makes sense in a minute, I promise...

Drummond. It had taken a couple awkward minutes for them to kiss goodbye. *A miracle it took Minerva nearly two years to get pregnant*, Adelaide thought with amusement.

In addition to Giselle, one of Gaius' squires, Thomas, a fourteen-year-old boy with a shock of red hair who always seemed to be squinting, had accompanied them. He had stayed to watch their horses by the tavern down the street.

"Find everything you wanted?" Gaius asked as he stood.

"Probably more than I needed, but don't tell Minerva." She winked.

Gaius chuckled. "On my honor." He pointed his thumb behind him, further down the crowded street. "Shall we fetch our horses and head home, then?"

Adelaide nodded and followed close behind Gaius as they made for the stables. She lifted her skirts slightly to keep the muck from dragging them down. The tall wooden buildings on either side moved toward each other the higher they went, like upside down stair steps. As a result, little sunlight was able to reach down to the street, and already many shops and mobile stalls were illuminated with torches and lamps even though it was not yet five in the evening.

The crowds thinned as they neared the tavern, although a few people turned off to enter the tavern. They had a little food in bags on their horses, but a rebellious and curious side of Adelaide would have loved to eat at the tavern, just to see what it was like.

"*For shame!*" she could just hear her half-brother's wife saying. "*A tavern is no place for a noble lady!*" They never had liked each other.

A group of five knights were dismounting as Adelaide and Gaius rounded the side of the tavern and approached the stables.

"Venison pie is the best kind of pie," a stocky knight with a crooked nose and a great broadsword strapped to his back said. "The more venison, the better."

"And to think your father sent you to university," another retorted. The second speaker's cheeks and chin were covered in stubble, and dark blond hair tumbled around his temples.

"Don't even start, Rathburn."

Stubble ignored his friend's wrathful tone. "Any *educated* person knows that veal pie is both the most flavorful and the most tender, and insisting otherwise is just evidence of willful stupidity."

"Ha!" Crooked Nose pointed at Stubble. "See, I've long had this theory you're actually a shepherd, and I think this proves it."

Stubble reached behind him and produced a lute while stable boys took the knights' horses. "If only I were a shepherd, I would have long ago married a sweet shepherdess and we would live together in the hills and have veal pie twice a week." He plucked at the strings, the clear notes

carrying over the conversation and clatter of wooden dishes from inside the tavern and noise from the nearby thoroughfare.

"Here we go," Nose grumbled. "That wasn't an invitation to play a love song, fool."

"You're both fools," said a man with a strange accent. Dark, thick hair covered his head and a baldric slung across his chest bristled with throwing knives, which Adelaide eyed with interest. "Ale first, then you can order both a venison and a veal pie and realize both pair excellently with ale, so what's the point of arguing?"

"Dresden will back me up on this," Nose said as he followed his companion toward the tavern. "Drez, venison—"

"Quail pies are my favorite and you know it, Perce. Also I don't get involved in arguments between you two on principle."

Adelaide blinked as she recognized the latest speaker. Olive skin, black hair and tidy, thick beard. *Sir Dresden Jakobs*. The man who had been with—

"Caleb, if you manufactured this entire ridiculous argument just to give you an excuse to sing *The Ballad of the Shepherdess* again, I swear I will strip you of your knighthood and make you my jester."

Lord Regulus Hargreaves. He stood taller than all his knights. A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth, like he was trying hard to suppress it.

"Ah, but if I am *your* jester, then all will be well!" Caleb grinned and strummed on his lute as he headed for the door to the tavern.

Regulus looked at Dresden. "Why? I think they do it to torment me."

"*You* picked them, so any torment is on your own head." Dresden laughed. "And despite all your frowning, you know you—"

At that moment, Dresden looked over and caught Adelaide staring. Her heart raced and she jerked her gaze away. Gaius and Giselle were several paces away, loading the fabric onto their horses. *I'm standing in the tavern yard all alone like some kind of wild peasant child!*

She glanced back out of the corner of her eye and saw both men looking at her. Dresden elbowed Regulus in the ribs, and her eyes widened. An unusual level of friendliness existed between those two for a lord and his knight.

Stop standing here like an idiot. She hurried toward Gaius and their horses.

"My lady."

Adelaide faltered as Regulus approached, his sword jostling at his side with his long strides. His tousled black hair brushed curled at the ends around his face. The muscles in his shoulders and upper arms seemed to push against the sleeves of his black shirt. He stopped a little before her and bowed.

Her throat felt dry as she curtsied. “My lord.”

Gaius wandered over, leading both of their horses. “Lord Hargreaves.” His voice betrayed some measure of surprise, but he smiled amicably. “I trust you are well?”

“Very well, thank you, Sir Drummond.” He inclined his head and looked back at Adelaide. “And I hope you are well, Lady Belanger?”

“Yes.” It was not the proper response, and the social misstep only made her feel more uncomfortable. *Come on, Adelaide. Do better.* She looked up at his eyes and felt an odd squeezing in her chest. “That is, yes, I am tall—well.” Fire burned across her cheeks. “Very well, thank you,” she added quickly. She glanced away, mentally cursing herself and just wanting to turn into mist and vanish.

Regulus chuckled, and she forced herself to overcome her embarrassment and looked back at him. He ran his fingers through his hair, rubbed the pommel of his sword. “What brings you to Valet, my lady?”

“Cloth,” she said, a little too quickly. She took a calming breath and smiled. “I needed cloth to make a new dress, and Gaius kindly offered to take me. Plus, honestly, I just needed a good long ride through the countryside.”

Regulus nodded and smiled, his lips puckering around his scar. “Nothing clears the mind quite like a peaceful ride.”

Before she could stop herself or even think through what she was saying, she asked, “will you be attending the Glower’s banquet on the eleventh?” Immediately, she realized her error. *What if he wasn’t invited?*

“Yes, I do intend on it. You will be present as well, I hope?” His throat bobbed and he shuffled his feet, scraping his boot on the packed ground.

“I shall.” She smiled, probably a little too broadly.

“Excellent,” Gaius interrupted. “We shall see you there.”

Regulus looked at Gaius and cleared his throat. “Yes. Well, I...probably shouldn’t keep my men waiting.” He bowed to Gaius. “Sir Drummond.” He turned back to her and bowed again. “It was a pleasure seeing you again, my lady.”

Commented [3]: Back in the initial draft, I felt Regulus and Adelaide needed to meet more for their love story to be believable, so I added this scene. I later decided this scene didn't add anything significant to their relationship, and I needed to cut words.

Commented [4]: However, I wish I could have kept this line. XD

"The pleasure was mine," she replied with a curtsy. *What in Creation, Adelaide? Minerva would poke you in the ribs for being too forward if she were here.*

Regulus smiled again, and Adelaide thought it made him look gentler and more handsome. *By the three kingdoms, what is wrong with you?* He turned and strode toward the tavern, and Adelaide couldn't help but notice the quiet confidence with which he walked. He didn't swagger like Nolan Carrick, but walked with less reserve than Gaius. Just with the assurance that comes with strength.

Gaius handed her Zephyr's reins. "I don't know why people dislike that man so much. He's nice enough every time I've seen him. Doesn't seem particularly malicious. Just tends to be on the quiet side." He lifted a brow, mischief in his eyes. "Except, perhaps, around you."

Adelaide turned to mount Zephyr, using the gelding to hide the heat rushing to her face. But suddenly, her interest in making a new dress and attending the Glower's banquet grew considerably.

Commented [5]: Once upon a time, I had a convoluted history about an old alliance between Monparth and two neighboring kingdoms, but it was too distracting to explain and the only benefit was random curses like this. So it got cut.