Prisoner

By Mariah Moon

Chapter 1

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I gripped at the sword in my hands. Memories of learning how to fight at my mother’s request started to flood in. The cool, slick metal remained a constant in my life, despite everything else that had happened. Now, as I took a deep breath, I could hear the chaos outside intensifying. It sounded as though it now spilled into my home, but I couldn’t be sure.

At least, not until I could hear the footsteps coming from below me. My room sat up on the fourth floor. On a good, quiet night, I could hear what my parents were doing in the casual dining room – two floors below me.

With the chaos coming, I couldn’t tell if these footsteps were one or two floors below me. It didn’t matter, though. My sword would be a handy weapon in making sure that I survived the invasion. We’d known it was coming for a while, but father refused to evacuate the palace. Said it wouldn’t do much good for them to invade, only to find an empty palace.

I shook the thoughts away. It wasn’t the time to focus on why I was stuck in a palace, doomed to die in battle or be taken to a foreign land a prisoner. It was the time to fight. I decided to worry about life and death after I sized up my enemies.

My sword clattered to the ground. Nervousness caused my hands to sweat. I sighed, hoping no one had heard the loud crash.

I looked around my room in vain, hoping to find something I could do to buy myself some time. A blanket on the bed wouldn’t be much help. Nor would the sheets. The closet held all the ballgowns and capes that I would probably never wear again. Then, my eyes fell upon some rope. It had been used to tie me up when we had last been invaded – five years ago. No one had bothered to cut it; instead, they untied the knots.

That same rope could now save my life if I used it right.

Picking it up, I started to think about what to do. The hilt on my archer’s sword would be big enough to tie a rope around. If I slung the free end of the rope over one of the exposed beams in the room, I had a nifty little balance beam with a projectile. Without much thought, I tied the rope around the grip piece. Then, I tied a knot around the guards on either side.

Once I was satisfied with that, I picked the sword up by the grip. I would have only a couple of tries to get this over that beam before my room would become a prime target. Before I would have to fight for my life.

The rope left my hands, and it flew over the beam. I quickly caught it in my free hand, and then, pulled on it. The sword started up into the air. Once there was enough slack rope, I fastened it to a torch holster on a column to the right of the door.

The footsteps reached my ears again. I gulped. The more I moved, the more the armor clanked and drew attention to me.

At this pace, they were most likely on the floor below me. I could hear voices filtering up, bits and pieces of a conversation. They were looking for me. That much, I could understand. Why was less clear to me. If I had to guess, it was because I was the last Whitehall heir.

A fight to the death awaited me when they found me. If I wanted more time, I would need a distraction. It most likely wouldn’t do me much good, but I ventured towards the window. I was careful to avoid the patches on the floor that were illuminated by the sun. If I stepped into any of those, my armor would give me away quicker than my sword.

As I passed my dresser, I grabbed the small pocket knife that father had given me for my birthday. He wanted me to have a more discrete weapon.

I wished I had thanked him more profusely.

I took my arm plate off. The delicate fabric of my white blouse glistened softly, begging me not to. Ignoring that, I pushed the sleeve up to my elbow. This would hurt.

The blade cut into my arm at my demand. I winced, but I pulled the blade further down my elbow. Once the blood started to flow sufficiently, I leaned my arm out the window. Shaking it, I watched the red liquid drop to the ground, some few hundred feet below me. Once a sizeable puddle had appeared down there, I hurried to cover my bleeding wound. The blood on the floor was collateral damage, but it helped to strengthen my story a bit.

Slink, slink, thump. Thump, slunk, slink, slunk, thump.

Whoever was coming for me, they had a horrible rhythm. I could tell they were trying to slink along the hallway, but whatever armor they were wearing was preventing them from doing so quietly. With swift steps, I hurried towards the column where I tied my sword up.

As I untied the knot preventing it from dropping, I listened. It came again, the unorthodox rhythm of someone slinking along. Taking a deep breath, I tried to still my racing heart. More sweat came to my palms. I almost lost the rope a couple of times as I walked towards the other side of the column.

“I have blood on the lawn!” These were the first words that I could hear without having to strain or miss a word between the beats. It meant that something was working.

My distraction had probably caught the eyes of a watchful solider.

I dared not to leave the sword alone, despite how much my palms were sweating. Checking on the distraction could possibly tip them off to it. It was a risk I wasn’t willing to take. Not when my life was on the line.

My thoughts were interrupted when the door opened. I waited for a footstep, a signal that someone had walked into the room. The rope slipped out of my hands as I struggled to dry my palms. The sword clattered on the floor of my room.

They had already stepped into the room. A man stood in front of me. Sweat beaded down his face, forming a small puddle at his feet. His armor shone in the sun. A large shield sat heavily on his arm; I could only imagine he couldn’t wait to be done.

“Princess Nerissa Whitehall, I assume?” He spoke, panting heavily. His shield thumped on the floor. I wasn’t sure if I should respond, but a curiosity willed my voice silent.

“Who are you?” The curiosity didn’t still my voice for long. He stooped down and picked up the sword that I had been unable to hit him with.

“Quite the exquisite sword. Were you hoping to pull it from my body?” He looked up, his eyes meeting mine. I didn’t answer. “Oh, well. No matter.” He started to untie the ropes.

“Who are you?” I repeated my question. He looked up again, adrenaline shining in his eyes.

“Addy. At your service.” He bowed to me at the waist, a deep thing of respect. Or a mockery of my title. His words made it impossible to tell which. I raised an eyebrow, and then saw a second sword. This one was in a sheath, but the hilt was rather decorative. Much more decorative than my own. I wondered if he could possibly be a prince, but what kind of a king would name his heir ‘Addy’?

“Are you aligned with my father, or the enemy?” I avoided the question on my mind. Instead, my words sounded foreign to my ears. At this point, I was beginning to regret having such a small room.

“You see the insignia on my shield. Take a guess.” He grabbed my arm softly as he spoke. “Don’t try to resist this, Princess. You won’t stop us.” I jerked, partly out of habit and partly to gauge how serious he was. He tightened his grip. I winced. My feet started for the door, but his grip held fast on my arm.

“You *are* the enemy.” I glared at him. “I figured as much when I heard you approaching.” Certainly, he wouldn’t be too hard to take down. The issue would be getting my hands on a weapon. What captor would keep me around weapons long enough for me to get one?

“I don’t wish to hurt you.” His voice softened. “But ‘tis much better for me to take you. If someone else found you hiding here, ‘twouldn’t be pretty.” He bent down to grab the shield, keeping his grip on my arm. “If you had wished to avoid capture, you should’ve run when you had the chance, Princess. Come, and I’ll make sure you get to our destination safely.” I glared at him again. Trusting anything he said would have been like trusting a snake not to bite me. “I can’t promise you the same if someone else were to find you hiding up here.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“Did I pounce at you for trying to kill me?” He answered me with a second question. “No, I didn’t. Having a sword dropped on me wasn’t exactly the best first impression, Princess.”

“Why should I trust you?” I repeated myself. This had to be the stupidest thing I could do, but it was the only thing I could think of. “You’re the enemy, Addy. Even if you’re not the prince.” Venom laced the words as they left my mouth. Prince Adalius Franklin was no prince to me.

“I can make sure you get out of here alive today.” He loosened his grip on my arm. I took advantage of this and pulled away. “The blood on the ground was a clever trick. The rest of the soldiers won’t be so kind after that, especially if they find you still alive.”

“That means nothing to me. I’d rather go down fighting for my country than be a traitorous princess.”

“The king and queen are dead, Princess. For your country, for their future, I imagine you’d want to stay alive to give them hope.” I froze at his words.

“I don’t believe you. They wouldn’t allow themselves to be killed in battle.”

“Ma’am, I’m not lying to you. They’re dead, and ‘twould be a horrible thing if the entire royal family’s spark was extinguished in one day.”

“You have no bearing on that.” I took a deep breath, shaking.

“Yes, I do. I was there when they died, Princess Whitehall. I swear, this is the best way for you to stay alive in the enemy territory. My king’s orders were to capture you alive, but if you fought, we could kill you.”

“Get away from me.” I backed away from him even more. This couldn’t be happening. “You murderer.”

“I didn’t kill them.” He moved closer, but I continued to back away from him. He wouldn’t give me the curtesy of saying which of the sons had killed them.

“But someone in England did!” I unconsciously cursed Prince Franklin.

“Forget that for the moment, Princess Whitehall.” He sighed.

“Why should I forget that? That’s where you’re going to take me!”

“You ought to forget it because I can keep you safe there. Please, allow me to be the one that takes you into custody. I won’t hurt you, soldier’s honor.” He extended his hand.

“If you can keep me safe in enemy territory, what stops you from allowing them to do what they please when I refuse to cooperate?”

“My honor as a soldier and a man of my word. If I break it, no one would ever work with me again.” He gave me a deep bow. This time, it was meant to be a bow of respect.

“What would I have to do?” I raised an eyebrow. There was no way he could do as he said he could.

“I simply require that you come quietly with me.”

I took a deep breath. He had to be lying to me. Leave it to King Franklin to send a soldier to do his dirty work.

“No.” I frowned even deeper. “I cannot, *will* not, allow myself to be taken hostage so easily.”

“Then ‘tis out of my hands if you’re caught by others.” He started to walk towards the door. My sword sat firmly in one of his hands.

“May I have my sword back?” I held my arm out for my sword. He blew right past me.

Once I was sure I was out of danger, I could cry. If what he had said was true.

Addy’s footsteps disappeared down the hallway. He must have been heading down the way he had been going when he found me. A certain loneliness settled over the room.

With a quiet step, I started towards the hallway. This palace wouldn’t be safe for much longer. If Addy had found me, there was no telling how easily others might find me if I didn’t run. Without a weapon, I wouldn’t be able to defend myself. However, it also meant I could run a little easier.

What I wouldn’t give to have my sword.

I shook my head, and then tried to find a way to get out of the palace. It wouldn’t be easy with a bleeding arm. I had it contained with a rag. My arm felt a little numb, but that would be because of the rag.

Slowly, my feet started to travel. Down the hallway, the candles flickering in the winds of battle. Eerie silence settled over the palace, and I could no longer hear the slashing of swords. The clashing of lives, of blood mixing on the battle field. The inner courtyard would be difficult to get through.

I suddenly found myself wishing that I had taken my father’s camouflage lessons a little more seriously.

I took a back staircase to the throne room. Two flights of stairs allowed me a cover of darkness. Not even a candle flickered around me on the second floor.

As I walked towards the first floor, I finally got a glimmer of light. A lone candle had continued to burn through the carnage: a single flame of hope.

I pulled the little candle dish down from the ledge. Since there was a small flame on the candle wick, I had just enough light to walk the last few steps. The sun had yet to set, but the pinks, purples, and blues already set into the sky.

All my anxieties disappeared as I rounded the corner. The back of my father’s throne came into view. The familiar sheen of the metal calmed me down. I didn’t know why.

It was quickly replaced by a sudden grief. My parents lay on the floor. The blood pooled around the bodies. Bloody tracks raced across the floor. Thankfully, none came close to where I stood.

My hand clasped around the arm of the throne, attempting to keep from collapsing to the floor.

Father’s eyes were wide open, a look of fear frozen on his face. Even the way his body lay on the floor contributed to his fear; his right hand grasped the hilt of his sword, but it still lay in the sheath. His left hand grasped at what I assumed was the death blow – a gaping wound to his chest.

Though less bloody, my mother was no less frightened in her death. Her head turned towards the courtyard, and her mouth formed a large ‘O’ shape. She had most likely been about to call for my father. Her right hand grasped at her throat, and her left locked around her hair.

Despite my best attempts to keep from falling to the floor, a loud clatter told another story. My knees hit the hard floor. I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. Tears rolled down my face. Sobs echoed around me, bouncing through the room as vibrantly as laughter had only the day before.

I pulled my metal gloves off, fumbling for the first time in years with the leather straps. They clanked to the floor, landing as heavily as the blows to my parents. I covered my face with my hands. My shoulders curled in, as if attempting to protect me. Still, I could hear the sobs around me.

“I told you that your parents were dead.” I started when a voice was behind me. Sniffling, I turned to face the person. Addy stood there, his hand outstretched. My hand started towards his, but I stopped it.

Taking help from the enemy wouldn’t help now.

“Please, don’t come closer.” I sniffled again, and then slowly pushed myself closer to my father’s throne.

“Princess Whitehall, I can help you.” He held his hand out again. “You may live if you come with me. If you stay to fight today, ‘tis possible you’ll die. Like your parents.”