

*Lindsay Townsend*

*A KNIGHT'S CAPTIVE – Excerpt*

"Rot in hell and back!" Marc bawled, bringing his sword round in a close, lethal arc that raised sparks on the bastard's belt buckle and rent a bloody welt across his chest. "No sanctuary here - you are dead!"

He stamped on the jerking creature and raised his sword, aiming for the heart, when a low moan beside him had him tumbling to his knees to guard her. At the same instant, her two attackers crawled away, stumbling through the door and out.

Marc let them go. Dropping his sword, he gathered Sunniva into his arms, whispering over and over in Breton, "You are alive. Safe. Safe, my angel. Safe."

He had been so afraid she was harmed that having her trembling but whole beneath his hands was overwhelming. Tears stormed into his eyes, swiftly followed by rage.

Where was her father? Her brothers? Where were the useless escorts, meant to protect?

"Hush, hush," he crooned, rocking her back and forth as he struggled to keep his own grief and anger in check.

He dared not look at her too closely while he had tears in his eyes and looked so unmanned, but the warrior's sense in him told him she was not fatally hurt in the flesh. He could smell no blood or sickness on her and though she shook, she did not grimace or writhe in pain.

The injury to herself, however: her integrity, trust, humor, spirit - Marc furiously blinked away the moisture in his eyes as he prayed that Sunniva would soon recover and forget.

"King Christ, ruler of heaven, let her not be afflicted by night terrors, as my poor Isabella is. Let her know peace."

He should be raising the alarm, since none of the other fools of the pilgrim party seemed to have realized yet that anything was amiss. He should be returning to his own three. In a breath, his memory went back to the fire that had carried off his elder brother Roland and his wife: on that dreadful night he had cradled his niece Alde in his arms, even as he was now clutching Sunniva; he remembered how his and Alde's tears had mingled as they clung to each other.

Sunniva did not cling. She was still too stunned to do anything save take great gasping breaths and shiver. There was a dark, welling bruise on the left side of her cheek and her eye was puckering, threatening to close altogether. Tears had streamed down her face; he saw them glistening near her nose and quivering lips. Such a red, soft mouth -

"Do you hurt anywhere else?" he asked softly, relieved when she shook her head. Longing to wipe away her tears, he held her close.

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