

CHAPTER TEN—BANDITS!

Aimie rode behind Dragor the next morning in a foul humor. An icy breeze dispersed some of the heavy-hanging clouds to reveal jagged, rock-strewn terrain ahead. They continued to wind their way around a cliff face that stretched out of sight into the mist lingering above.

She was furious, but she couldn't understand why. What did it matter if the stupid knight was betrothed?

No, she was angry because he'd fed them his little "feel sorry for me, I'm an orphan" story, then just as she was starting to care—wham!

It made no difference to her, of course. Indeed, perhaps his fiancé would consider employing Aimie as a handmaiden. Imagine her, a tavern girl, waiting on the upcoming queen. Her future would be set for life.

Instead of serving greasy travelers, she'd be serving a fine, perfumed lady.

Connell's wife.

She clenched her jaw, refusing to dwell on it any further. Instead, she glared at Dragor's broad back. He seemed as moody as the knight had become, and as sullen as she. Or, perhaps he was simply cold, as he never wore more above the waist other than his skimpy leather vest, though the crazy warrior displayed no sign of discomfort. Shivering, she wrapped her cloak tighter about her throat, clutching at the unicorn pin beneath the folded flap. It felt comforting beneath her fingers, perhaps because it was all she had to remind her of her mother. She wondered again how it had come into possession of her family.

A deafening rumble of thunder boomed, startling her and spooking Smokey, who snorted and tossed his head from side to side. As she patted his neck murmuring soothing nonsense in his ear, a jagged bolt of lightning struck a nearby boulder, splitting it into two with an unsettling cracking sound.

Dragor's voice roared through the howling wind. "Ipicetta's flaming bones, we're in for it now!"

The heavens opened up to a torrential downpour. Heavy clouds settled, submerging them again within dense fog as rain poured in waves, drenching them in seconds. Another *boom* of thunder echoed all around them, then another. Jagged flashes of lightning lit up the sky until yellow spots flashed before Aimie's eyes and she had to squint hard to clear them. The wind gusted with the ferocity of a charging bear, tugging at her sodden clothing and nearly toppling her from her horse. Her nose wrinkled from a damp, acrid burning odor that permeated the air.

Dragor burst out laughing, the deluge somehow restoring his good humor. Simpleton! He spread his arms far apart and looked up into the sky, embracing the cascading downpour across his body as he cried out, "Ah, how Dragor needed a shower to wash the dust from his skin!"

Connell raised his voice to outdo the wind. "Be careful it doesn't scrub the skin from your bones."

Aimie pursed her lips. Strangely enough, the twinkle in his voice had returned as well. Perhaps he'd just finished a wonderful daydream about his betrothed.

"Don't worry, delicate one," Dragor said, "we'll find shelter for the night."

"*You* don't appear to require any, you bloodless barbarian," Connell said.

Dragor snorted. "Me? Ha! Dragor once slept in the middle of a snowstorm, naked, wounded, and bleeding to death until they found him late the following day. Had some hot soup and a bath and went back into battle. Led me men to a glorious victory."

Aimie tried hard to repress a giggle, but it burst out anyway. She hoped the rising and falling cadence of the wind masked it from her companions. "That's a lie."

Dragor looked back with raised eyebrows. "What! A warrior never lies."

Connell coughed.

Dragor offered a half shrug. "Well, perhaps Dragor exaggerates a wee bit now and then."

Connell's voice started to rasp from speaking so loud. "Some shelter, warrior?"

His teeth were chattering, but Aimie resisted the urge to feel sorry for the stupid, shivering knight, ignoring the fact she was warm beneath his extra tunic.

The wind stilled, providing welcome relief from its relentless buffeting and noise. The dull ringing in Aimie's ears faded, and she heard the urgent patter of raindrops striking rock.

"Well, there's bound to be a cave around here somewhere," Dragor said. "Mountains like these are full of them."

"You mean *magik* mountains?" Aimie said.

Dragor spat. "Even magik mountains have caves, lassie. It's a...mountain mandate of some sort."

Aimie smirked at the warrior's self-expressed expertise, as though he rode across magik mountains every day.

"Caves sometimes have occupants," Connell said.

"So what? We can persuade whatever it is to share." Dragor laughed, holding his arms up to the sky while catching raindrops in his mouth, reins wrapped around the pommel. "Ah, fresh air, clean rain. What more could a man desire?"

"To be far from a lunatic like you." Connell clutched his cloak tight about his shoulders. "Could you at least put on a full tunic and pretend you need it? I'm trying to hold onto my pride, you know, but you make me appear a milksop."

"Forget yer pride and take off yer shirt, lad," Dragor said. "Ye're cold because those wrappings ye're wearing are all wet. Ye need to strip down to the bare skin, so the water runs freely off of yer body instead of soaking it."

Connell laughed. "Nonsense! I've lost my pride, but still have my brains to show for it. Yours ran out of your head along with all that blasted water."

Dragor started to reply, but stopped and pointed ahead with a dripping finger. "Look over there, a cave."

Aimie stared as hard as she could, but was unable to discern any opening in the face of the sheer mountain wall.

Connell shielded his eyes from the rain with his hand and squinted. "Ah, I see it, but barely. Well done."

Dragor led them around several piles of broken rocks to a depression leading into the mountain. An overhanging slab of rock covered the mouth of a cave, perfect for shielding their horses from the storm. The knight and the warrior tethered the horses in place outside the cave opening and cautioned Aimie to remain with the animals while they scouted inside.

She made a sour face as they disappeared, then dismounted and huddled against the cave mouth, draping her tunic over her head and face, feeling wet, cold, and miserable. Had the inn truly been so bad? At least it had a fireplace to warm her hands and a dry bed to sleep in.

A few minutes later she heard their footsteps approaching, crunching over wet gravel.

Aimie kept her face lowered. “Well, is the cave safe, then, or too dry for your liking?”

Her eyes widened. *Wet* gravel? From inside the dry cave? No, the rain-muffled footsteps came from the trail—

Aimie snatched the tunic from her face. There stood a group of filthy, desperate-looking men, leering at her in depraved delight.

Aimie drew breath to scream but something struck her head. Raucous laughter followed her to the ground until their echoes faded into blackness.