

Magic's Daughter

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Prologue

The lone rider raced across the countryside, her thoughts outpacing the sweaty stallion whose saddle horn she squeezed.

In Selena's mind, she had already reached her destination, already delivered the devastating news to her father. The conversation played out differently each time she envisioned it. Sometimes, the man fell to the floor, weeping. In another version, he lost his temper and roared with fury—something she had never seen him do in reality.

As the cold wind pried tears from the corner of her tired eyes, Selena feared there was a first time for everything.

Only when she remembered to glance behind her to ascertain no one was following her, did she become aware that twilight had settled over the land. She had less than an hour before all evidence of the sun vanished.

And how many miles remained between her and the capital? Selena did not know the exact number, but it always took her father a week to make the trek by coach.

Angry with herself for not thinking of this more than an hour ago, when she had raced through a village whose name she had already forgotten, Selena reined in her mount. The horse, his wide frame heaving with every pant, dropped his head to the weeds that lined the well-trodden highway but stopped there, apparently too weary to feed.

Staring down at the horse, Selena felt a rumbling in her

own stomach. She had been a damned fool to leave home without any provisions, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

The urgency of her errand had dictated a swift departure.

Selena pulled her flimsy jacket tighter around her. The thing had been a birthday gift several years ago, yet it showed little signs of wear. With its gemstone-capped buttons and silken lining, it had likely cost her mother—cost the *family*—a small fortune, which was probably why Selena had not used it much until now. It was all appearance and no substance.

At that moment, she hated it more than ever.

Cold, hungry, thirsty, and so tired she feared she might topple from her mount, Selena considered her options. Even if there were a blanket in the saddlebag, it would not be enough to keep her from freezing in the night.

Yet she would not backtrack, and so she must go forward in hopes of finding shelter.

With some prodding, she was able to urge the poor beast into a walk. Fending off another wave of self-loathing—she was not one to act impulsively, not under normal circumstances—she wrenched her thoughts away from the events that had expelled her from her family castle and focused on the unfamiliar, desolate road. She scanned the horizon to her left and right, longing to see an isolated cottage.

Selena almost nodded off in the saddle twice before she spotted something her mind could not immediately understand. She squinted into the thick woods that had, at some point, appeared to her right.

Deep within the trees danced a flicker of light. She drew in the cold night air through her nose. Was that smoke she smelled or the symptom of a desperate mind? She halted her horse at the edge of the woods. Peering

through the tight wall of trees, she realized she was looking at a campfire.

Selena bit her lip, deep in thought. Then a brisk wind assailed her from behind, banishing all indecision.

She dismounted and winced when her sore limbs protested. The large liquid eyes of the horse watched her curiously. She began to lead the animal into the woods but stopped suddenly.

Anyone could have built the fire.

The stableman's warning about brigands rang in her ears. Her jacket alone betrayed her nobility. She carried little money, but being the daughter of a duke made her a lucrative find for any ne'er-do-well.

Selena wrapped the reigns around a low-hanging branch, patted her horse apologetically, and stepped into the shadow-filled forest. Stifling a yawn, she wended her way through the trees, keeping as silent as she could. At first, she could hear only the dried leaves crackling beneath her feet, but then, as the firelight grew brighter, she made out the sound of voices.

She paused, trying to hear what they were saying. The wind stole the words from her ears. Frowning, Selena went forward at a pace that would have shamed a slug. After what felt like an hour, she halted again.

The voices were quiet, but a quick glance around the broad trunk of a hickory revealed three men sitting around the campfire, over which hung a brace of conies. The smell was enough to make Selena's stomach growl, but she forgot her hunger at once.

One of the men was facing her, the flickering light playing upon his features.

Selena stifled a gasp and whirled around, leaning against the tree for support. Her heart pounding painfully, she forced her thoughts into some semblance of order.

Surely her eyes were playing tricks on her for what

were the odds she had stumbled upon someone she knew?

Taking a deep breath, she looked again. She expected the man's face to be different now, the mask that her hopeful imagination had molded for him destroyed by sheer logic. Yet the longer she watched him, the more she was certain she had been right.

By some bizarre coincidence, Uncle Will sat only a few yards away.

Almost dizzy with relief, Selena slipped out from behind the tree. She hesitated on the edge of the campsite, however. Everything she had ever heard about Willard O'Camber hinted—or downright insisted—he was a scoundrel. And though she trusted her mother's brother would not harm her, she worried about the kind of company he kept.

One of her uncle's companions had his back to her, so she examined the other, whose profile was cast in heavy shadow despite the firelight. A sudden thought struck Selena, and she held her breath. When her uncle spoke again, Selena distinctly heard him address one of the men by her father's name.

Now she did gasp. It must have been a loud one for all three men leaped to their feet, squinting in her direction.

"Who's there?" Willard demanded. "Come into the light or face my blade!"

He held a knife. So did the others. For a fleeting instant, Selena considered running away. On the one hand, she had found food, warmth, and a familiar face; on the other, she was not sure she was ready for this confrontation.

Selena came forward slowly. She held out her hands to show she was unarmed, her gaze stuck firmly to the blade in her uncle's hand.

"Wait a tick," Willard said. "I know you."

Selena allowed herself a sigh of relief. It had been

more than four years since she had seen her uncle, and she had feared he would not recognize her as easily as she had recognized him. She was on the verge of replying, saying something like “Yes, I am your niece,” but her words were nowhere to be found.

Now that he had turned around, Selena realized that she knew the *third* man as well.

“Selena Nelesti?” asked the fellow who had had his back to her earlier. “Could it truly be you?”

Her head was spinning. Physically and emotionally exhausted, Selena could only stare stupidly at the unexplainable group—her uncle, her father, and her former lover—for what must have been an eternity.

Uncle Will let out a laugh that made Selena flinch. “You know my niece?” he asked of the man she had once considered marrying.

Selena’s father said nothing. He lowered his weapon, but he did not sheath it. The third man—the man she hoped to never see again—kept his blade out and at the ready.

“What a pleasant surprise!” he said, a savage smile splaying his face, which had once been handsome but now appeared dirty and vile to her. “The Goddesses truly smile upon me tonight!”

“Piers, what’s going on?” Willard’s narrowed eyes danced between his cohort and his niece.

Selena might have told her uncle that the fellow’s name was not Piers, but she could not move. She stared into the eyes of the man who had, not so long ago, meant the world to her. Even now, a small part of her was glad to see he was alive and well.

“What’s going on?” her former fiancé asked. “In a word, revenge!”

Then the man Selena had loved above all others rushed forward, knife raised.