

Chapter One--Safire

The sky had cracks in it. Then the wind rose, and I blinked, startled, as the cracks moved and transformed into the writhing bare branches of the old oak. Shivering, I sat up and pulled my cloak around my shoulders. Dusk had crept across the fields with shadow feet while I was cloud watching. I should have been home an hour ago.

I stumbled up and shook the dust from my clothes. The blood stirred sluggishly in my veins, stinging my numb skin as I began to walk along the rutted wagon track. The moon hung low and huge over the smudged shapes of the trees. "Go away," I told it. "I'm already late enough as it is."

The house wasn't far. The track wound through two fields, stubby with wheat stalks, and then through a tangle of trees before it stopped at the edge of the cobbled courtyard. My breath made fog as I stared at the light spilling from the large front windows on the first story of the house. Father and my sister Dagmar were there now, eating. Grimacing from the cold, I plucked up my skirt and headed for the side door.

As I went across the courtyard, a horse whickered. I glanced toward the stable and froze. My father couldn't have done this to me. I had told him, insisted that he never invite that man again, at least when I was around. But did he listen? No. There stood the evidence, eating out of its feed bag, oblivious: Peregrine of Bara's horse.

Even in this light, no one could mistake that silver gray coat with the black stripe down the back. The biggest scoundrel on the coast had the loveliest horse. Peregrine. If I had known he was here for dinner, I would have stayed out in the field all night. I threw open the front door and slammed it as I tossed my cloak on a bench.

Dagmar hurried through a doorway, her blond hair piled on her head in an explosion of ringlets. She stopped and stared at me. I glanced down at myself, holding out my skirt. I wasn't dressed for

dinner--I wore my oldest frock and my slippers were covered with dirt.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "Dinner started a quarter hour ago, Safire."

"I forgot."

"You forgot! You're always forgetting--and look at you! Get upstairs and put on a decent frock. Father's going to throttle you. And do something about your hair . . ." her words trailed off as I sauntered to the mirror over the hall table.

I had to stand on tiptoe and lean over the table to get a good look at myself. Someone tall must have hung this mirror. I poked my tongue in my cheek. There was a long smudge of dirt running down the side of my face, and my freckles stood out worse than usual. My red curls, my best feature, were stringy. I turned and looked at her.

She stood there, hands fluttering limply at her sides. "Safire . . ."

"I like the way I look. It's fitting for our company." I tossed my hair and strode towards the banquet hall.

"Stop it." She reached for me. But I was already through the door.

Father glanced up from his place at the head of the table, a vein standing out under the wisps of fading gingery hair that drifted over his forehead. He usually had a ruddy complexion, but his skin looked positively crimson tonight. I faltered, taking a half step back. Then my gaze drifted to Peregrine. Bold blue eyes met mine in a look that could only be described as a leer. Lustful toad. My head high, I slid into my accustomed chair. "My apologies for my lateness. I was unavoidably detained."

"Obviously not by your lady's maid," father retorted, stabbing a piece of pheasant with his fork. "You look like you've been digging in the potato patch."

He must be really angry, to let Peregrine see his displeasure. "Father . . ." I began.

"Up to your chamber, Safire."

Biting my lip, I rose as Dagmar crept into the hall and silently took her seat.

"Now, Averal," Peregrine said, his voice slippery as oiled silk, "Don't tell me I'm to be deprived of your daughter's presence thrice in a fortnight. Last time I called she had a headache, and the time before that she had a fever."

"That's because you make me ill."

Father's face went purple. "Safire, you headstrong . . ." he choked.

I put my hands to my mouth. He was going to have apoplexy right here, just like Dagmar and I had always feared. And it was my fault. Tripping, I stumbled around the table, reaching for his shoulder. "Father, breathe. Just breathe." My fingers curled around his arm, and I felt the tight ropes of his muscles through his shirt. As I had done many times before, I concentrated on the tension, drawing it away from him and into me. Tonight, it was like swallowing a swarm of hornets. His shoulders jerked with the effort to exhale and inhale, a motion that gradually subsided to an even rhythm. But I backed away only when he raised his palm from the table. "Enough," he said gruffly. "Sit down, daughter."

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My hand clutched the charcoal stick, all the tautness inside me draining out on the paper in strong, black lines. It was a storm scene--a raging sea and jagged bolts of lightning and clouds pregnant with darkness. A bird struggled in the midst of the storm as it searched for solid ground. I paused over the last bedraggled feather and closed my eyes as I leaned against the rough boards of the stable wall. Finally, I was empty again, and what I wanted most in the world was my cozy bed with its goose down pillows and heavy quilt. Yawning, I set aside my sketch board and breathed the sweetness of hay and old leather and horse sweat.

The lantern flickered from a sudden draft as the door flew open. "I knew I'd find you out here in the animal pen," Dagmar exclaimed. "Oh, Safire--you've been messing with that nasty charcoal again. You know father hates that. It makes you look like a hearth sweep."

I sighed. "Leave me be."

"I won't. Someone needs to take you in hand."

"What do you want, Dagmar?" I hugged my knees.

"I want you to quit worrying father."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you always have to be the older sister? Leave me out of it for once.

Seriously, what do you want? Are you content marrying Selwyn, having his babies?"

"I suppose so." She shrugged. "What else is there?"

"But you don't even like him."

She shrugged again. "It's a great honor, Safire, marrying into the House of Landers. There's not a higher noble House at court. I could be doing worse."

"But . . ."

"And you--you could be doing worse than Peregrine."

"I could be doing better, too."

"Your pride's going to be the ruin of you. Ridiculous."

"I bet you wouldn't think it was so ridiculous if you had that horrid man breathing down your neck, asking to marry you."

"Peregrine of Bara is handsome, well-mannered, and high at court. Not to mention the fact he's dripping with coin."

"Dirty coin."

"That's not true. That was just a nasty rumor, and you know it. You're lucky that some man even wants to marry you, with how you carry on. I can just see you now, an old spinster wandering the hills, muttering to yourself and gathering witches' herbs. That is, if you're lucky. If you're unlucky, a serving wench or some dirty dockhand's mistress."

"To be honest, sister, I'd work as a tavern wench who served more in the beds than at the tables before I'd ever stoop to marry that man." I smiled and grabbed my sketch board under one arm as I got to my feet.

"I bet you would. I bet you would bring shame on the family, just to prove you could. Ruin everything father's done to build this House's position at court, just to prove you could. Father should have sent you to the convent." She picked up the lantern and followed me out of the stable, still talking. "You'll regret it, you know. In ten years, you'll regret it. But it will be too late then--no man will want you then."

I stopped in front of Peregrine's mount. He stood in the stable yard, languidly munching on some hay the groom had put out for him. I reached up and scratched the place between his ears. He tossed his head, neighing, and regarded me with dark, suspicious eyes. "Hello, Trident," I whispered. "Don't you remember me? I'm the one who told you to throw Peregrine."

"Safire, honestly . . ." Dagmar gasped.

"What is it?" I glanced around just as Peregrine stepped out of the shadows behind the stable door and strolled towards us, hands in his pockets.

Dagmar muttered something and fled to the house. Damn her--she knew I hated being alone with him. I shrank against the horse as he came closer, his boots echoing on the cobbles. He paused a few yards from where I stood.

"You like my horse?" he asked.

I met his stare with one of my own. "I suppose. He's a fine animal."

"He's yours."

"I already have a horse."

"Sell him then. Buy a new frock. Or better yet, save the coin for your future as a barmaid--you'll likely need it."

"You heard that?"

"Yes, I heard everything."

"Good."

Peregrine shrugged. "It's not anything I haven't heard from you before." He took a step closer,

and I shifted my sketch board so it was between us, a feeble shield. "Your father's practically promised me your hand, you know."

"He wouldn't do that, not without my consent."

"He doesn't need your consent, pet."

"If he wants to keep me as a daughter, he does. The answer is no, Peregrine. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"As many times as it takes for you to say yes."

"Only God can wait that long. I suggest you take your suit elsewhere." I ducked beneath Trident's head, giving him one last pat before I headed for the house.

"There is nowhere else for me to take it, Safire."

I whirled on him. "I hate you. I always will. Now leave. How much plainer can I make myself?"

"How can you hate me? I haven't done anything except bring you presents you don't accept."

"It's not anything you've done," I spat. "It's what you're thinking of doing every time you look at me. It's disgusting."

"If that was all I wanted you for, I wouldn't be offering marriage." His voice lowered to a silky hiss as he leaned closer. "And a true maid wouldn't know what I was thinking when I look at you."

I slapped him, but he only chuckled, grabbing my arm. I wrinkled my nose at the overpowering scent of ambergris, an earthy sweetness that reminded me of the dust from the carved wooden saints in the ancient parish church, the scent of centuries-old driftwood slowly decaying. It was something only I could sense. When I had first met him two years before, I had told Dagmar that he reeked of ambergris cologne. She had given me her best older sister look and said that all she smelled was soap and expensive pipe weed, proper gentleman smells, and that I must have a cold. So I had said no more of it. If mother had been alive, she would have sensed the ambergris too, but mother had been dead for over a year by the time we met Peregrine.

"How dare you--let go of me!"

"Is everything all right, Lady Safire?" Boltan, our head groom, appeared in the stable doorway, holding a carriage whip. Peregrine instantly released my arm.

"Everything's fine, thank you, Boltan. Sir Bara was just leaving." I glared at Peregrine as he mounted Trident.

"Groom," he said curtly as he pointed at the hitching post. Boltan undid the reins and tossed them to Peregrine.

"Anything to speed your departure, sir." Boltan's tone was insolently bland.

"You had best keep a civil tongue in your head," Peregrine snapped before he turned to me. "I'll have a ring for you soon, sweet. Whatever you want."

"Pearls from the moon and gold from the sun and rubies made from the heart you don't possess. Then I might consider it. And how dare you upbraid Boltan?"

"Good night, Safire. You're in my dreams," he finished with a leer.

I was hunting some clever retort when Trident wheeled around and galloped to the road, carrying his master away into the night. Boltan and I stared after him long after he had vanished, the sound of hooves slowly fading.

Boltan shook his silvered head, lowering the whip. "Don't take his ring, my lady. He's a bad one."

I sighed. "Tell my father that." Forcing myself to more cheerful subjects, I said, "Has Strawberry had her carrot yet?" Strawberry was my mare, a fiery little chestnut with a white star on her forehead.

"Now you know she only takes carrots from you."

"You don't break them up in small enough pieces, that's all. Here, let me show you." We headed into the stable.

The next day, I pretended a headache and stayed in my chamber all morning, sketching madly. Sometimes in the afternoons, telling the others I was going for a ride to the cliffs near the shore, I would gallop to Calcors and try to sell my drawings at the market there. At first, it had been difficult. Few people besides me liked my storm scenes or my faces wailing in bottles or my studies of dead birds. But when I started drawing flowers and landscapes with cows grazing and other nice, proper things, I actually managed to sell a few, always passing them off as the work of my nonexistent brother. I signed everything S. Marsh--if I had put S. of Long Marsh, everyone would have known I came from a minor noble House, and some would have recognized the name and known it was a minor noble House with no sons.

There came a knock at the door. It was several moments before I glanced up from the sketch of the tomcat chasing mice on the paper before me. I added one last tuft to his ears, then picked up the drawing just as the knock sounded again, louder this time. Likely it was Dagmar, come to nag. "Just a moment," I yelled as I stowed the drawing in the trunk. I thought I caught the cat's tail twitching out of the corner of my eye as the shadow of the descending trunk lid overtook the sketch. I lifted the lid, curious, but the sketch was still, like any other sketch in the full light. Of course it was still. Shadows always made drawings seem alive--for an instant. I shook my head at my own silly fancy and let the lid slam down.

Father opened the door. "Dear God," he muttered. "I come here to reprimand you for one misbehavior and find you committing another. You're hopeless."

I crossed my blackened hands behind me. "I thought you were off to Calcors on business this morning."

"That business has been delayed." He began to pace. "Your behavior last night shames your mother's memory."

"Don't mention her, father. It's not in good taste to use the dead to shame your children."

"It's also not in good taste to insult a guest at your father's table."

"Even if that guest happens to be a lustful toad?"

"Safire, I wouldn't let a man who was dishonorable court one of my daughters."

"What about a poor man? Would you let a poor man court me?"

He stopped and looked at me. "You're young, so young, and you don't understand. If you had brothers, I wouldn't worry so much. They could take care of you when I'm gone, make certain you married well."

"Married well"--what does that mean, exactly?" I crossed my arms, not minding the smears of charcoal on my sleeves.

"You know it means money, so don't goad me." His tone grew harsher as he began to pace again. "Money and the security that comes with it. I would be a poor father indeed if I didn't leave my daughters with some provision for the future."

"Father, don't talk like this." My voice trembled. "You have years left."

"Like your mother?"

"Don't," I whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to make you understand." He sighed. "You know, I thought you would be the easy one. My bright little Safire, so like your mother. Then she died, and I lost you. I let you grow wild, stubborn, unwomanly. Now you make all those odd sketches, wallow in the animal mess. Then you go lie in fields for hours and brood all the time. It's not natural."

I hated that word--brood--it made me sound like a chicken hatching eggs. I laughed suddenly, having an image of myself with droopy tail feathers and a sign that read don't disturb--she's brooding tied around my neck.

"Don't laugh," he snapped. "Not about this. The estate is in debt up to the roof, and there's no humor in that."

"In debt to whom?"

He shifted, realizing he had said too much. "It's not your concern, sweet."

"I know you owe the Landers. Who else?"

"I said it's not your concern."

A sudden, horrible thought came to me, and I blurted out, "Peregrine? Are you in debt to Peregrine?"

He hesitated an instant too long before he answered. "No, of course not."

"Oh no. No, father. How could you think of selling me to that, that scoundrel to settle a few debts . . ." I sank down on the bed, my breath coming in shallow gasps.

"No, never, Safire. Not like that. I would never force you to marry someone you were so opposed to." He sat down on the bed beside me and put his hand on my shoulder. I shied away. "I just want to see you settled, taken care of. Like Dagmar."

"Not him," I said through clenched teeth. "Never him. I'd go to the convent first."

"You made that clear last night." Father's tone was dry. "I hoped . . . well, never mind what I hoped. If you hate him so, I won't let him see you anymore. All right?" I nodded as he squeezed my shoulders. "Now, listen. I'll not let you go to the convent either. Sweet, how would you like to go to court?"

I swallowed. "Court? But I thought there wasn't enough money for me to go yet, not so soon after Dagmar."

"Shh, don't worry about that. It's just a few new frocks, really. I'll get Boltan to take you, so we won't have to hire a coach. The court treasury pays the rest, and I'll give you an allowance for the small expenses. Though if I find out you've spent it on drawing paper, I'll cut it off."

I smiled secretly to myself. Father was so naive. For months now I'd been selling my sketches and using the money to buy more supplies, and he still had no idea. Some of the coin I had saved up made a nice little stash in the corner of my wardrobe--for what I didn't know. Sometimes I ran the silvers and coppers between my fingers and counted them not because I was mercenary exactly but because they were mine, and I had earned them. I had never been able to say that about anything

before in my life except my sketches, and even they had been drawn on paper bought by others until now.

"In fact, if the Sullays pay what they promised for our winter stores, I might be able to send both you and Dagmar to court for the spring at least, if not the summer," father said.

"Dagmar?" I groaned inwardly, already foreseeing early curfews, lots of sisterly advice, and no fun.

"Dagmar's been to court before. She can watch out for you."

"Father, I'm eighteen now . . ."

"Barely eighteen."

"I can take care of myself."

"Would you rather stay home, marry Peregrine?"

"No."

"Well then." He stood up, his hand sliding off my shoulder. "It's settled. You and Dagmar will go to court together."