



A VILLAINOUS GOOSE GIRL RETELLING

BETRAYING KORTH

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND BOOK THREE

MARY MECHAM

CHAPTER 1



The sight of a beggar woman fleeing with her children from the king's guards set my insides to boiling with anger. The fact that homeless life on the streets was preferable to the so-called employment at the king's palace, it spelled out just how dire the situation in our kingdom was. I kept my facial features relaxed and eyes averted from the woman's pleading as the guards seized her children and forced them into shackles.

"What a fuss," Princess Odette sniffed to me as she passed, unfazed, by the woman's screams. "Honestly, she should be grateful we are saving her offspring from a life of crime and poverty."

Saving them? Is that what they were calling slavery now? King Raquel had refused to educate his citizens, stifled the economy through over-taxation so that gainful employment was nearly impossible to procure, then had the audacity to pretend that kidnapping children and forcing them into unpaid servitude was in any way helpful. His daughter, Odette, had bought into the lie without question. Why would she not, when she wanted for nothing and

had been raised in the lap of luxury? Such luxury was not afforded anyone else and was paid for through the blood, sweat, and tears of the oppressed citizens of Ebor.

When the smallest of the children squirmed free and attempted to dash back to his mother, one of the soldiers struck him around the ears. With a small cry, I dropped Odette's train and stepped toward the child. Odette immediately snapped for her guard, whose braided horsewhip whistled through the air and cracked against my back.

"Mind your place," Odette ordered.

Back stinging and biting my tongue against the pain, I returned to my position and continued to step sedately, maintaining the required three paces behind my mistress. *Not long now*, I reminded myself. Soon, we oppressed citizens would have our revenge. Hatred smoldered like a fire inside me, impossible to quench. It served to fuel me even when fatigue and exhaustion set in. Simple dissatisfaction or discontentment would never sustain anyone's ambition if they wanted to overthrow the sovereign ruler. It wasn't enough to desire change; they had to be willing to sacrifice their entire life for it, as I was.

"Our servants are the lucky ones," Odette continued, undisturbed by my silence and placidly indifferent expression. "We keep all of you fed, clothed, and housed without charging a single copper for it. I don't understand why anyone would *not* want their children to have that life. What a glorious opportunity, to be taken from life on the streets to being raised at a royal palace. Don't you think so, Dahlia?"

"Yes, Your Highness," I murmured meekly, keeping my eyes downcast.

The injustices being dealt to our people were becoming too great to bear quietly. How many more years would I be

forced to continue this sycophantic playacting? The royal family deserved a hanging for how they treated their subjects, and yet the pockets of the guards were lined deep while the other servants were given barely enough food to live on as payment for work that wore our fingers to the bone. Then, if they so much as breathed a word of complaint against their superiors, they were beaten or whipped. Even as Odette walked through the town, she was surrounded by a veritable army of guards and citizens scurried away in fear.

No one person should ever have the amount of unchecked power that the king did. It didn't matter how many people joined our underground rebellion if they were all too terrified of civil disobedience to do anything about it and were simply desperate for the next meal's bread to feed their families. My blood pulsed, hot and fast, through my veins all the way back to the palace as I held the train of Odette's long dress out of the sewage running in the gutters along the streets, hating everything about the woman I served, from her pointed, upturned nose to each of her prancing steps as she strode past her citizens who so clearly needed help.

"A correspondence from Haven Harbor, Your Highness," the footman said, bowing low and holding out a heavy envelope as we entered the palace.

Odette yawned and flicked her pale fingers at me. "Take it, Dahlia. You read it and tell me what it says. No need to hold my train here. At least it's clean where *I* live...more than those peasants can say."

I obeyed, submissively accepting the thick parchment and accompanying Odette up to her suite of richly furnished rooms. My back's smarting pain from the whipcrack had faded to a dull throb, but I felt the wet stain

spreading across the back of my dress, an injury that was all too common among the castle staff.

Once Odette was settled with a plate of sweets and a steaming teacup, I lowered myself into the hard wooden chair by her sofa, leaning forward so my back wouldn't press against the chair and aggravate my injury further. Even Odette's letter opener screamed wealth. The ivory handle had been carved to display flowers and hummingbirds, and the blade was trimmed with a silver finish with an emerald set into the handle's tip. What a fitting analogy for the royal family. Such a colossal waste of money when it could be replaced by something much more convenient and efficient. I set the letter opener down and shook out the contents of the envelope.

It was another letter from Odette's betrothed, Prince Korth of Haven Harbor. I scanned the note.

"See, this is another way that the servants here are luckier than those who live on the streets," Odette said as she watched my eyes skate from side to side before I flipped the parchment over to skim the back. "You know how to read and write. Never forget how fortunate you are!"

I didn't waste my breath pointing out that all citizens should know how to read, not just me, or that the only reason I had learned was because I'd attended all her tutoring sessions with her. Odette had been genuinely thrilled to discover that I'd learned to read... if only because I could read aloud any passages she didn't care to attend to and pen responses in her stead. She occasionally listened as she shoved more candied figs into her mouth, but it was half-hearted at best, and she usually pawned all responsibilities off on me.

"Prince Korth is requesting your presence so you can proceed with your wedding," I informed her. "He has

invited you and your attending servants to come to Haven Harbor immediately.”

Odette sniffed. “Papa will be pleased. He’s been overly eager to secure that alliance and doesn’t even care that it’s my future. No one thinks about me.”

“And what are your thoughts on the matter, my lady?”

She shrugged and picked at the tassels on one of her many cushions. “It has some potential, I suppose. Are there any more figs?”

I pushed my tongue against the roof of my mouth so it would hold back the words I longed to fling at her. Did she care more about procuring more candied figs than she did about the well-being of the kingdom she was heir to? Even if she was completely selfish and only cared for herself, which was the case, was she so shallow that she cared less about the identity of her future spouse than her next indulgence?

Keeping all these thoughts to myself, I checked the drawers, then crossed to the dumbwaiter, jotted down a note requesting more sugared figs to be sent up to Odette’s room, and placed the small stone over the note to hold it in place. I tugged on the rope three times, and after a moment’s pause, the small dumbwaiter began to lower. I watched its descent into the dark shaft below, wishing I had free time unencumbered by Odette’s demands to inspect the fascinating machine without distraction.

“More figs are on their way, Your Highness.”

Odette coiled a loose strand of her long blonde hair around her finger then released it, staring out at the window that opened onto the sea. “Relay the letter’s contents to Papa. I hope the figs come soon.” She sighed and stared out at the distant town. “I need something to comfort me after such devastating news.”

“As you wish, my lady.” I folded the letter and curtsied as I left her room, once to Odette then to each of the guards outside her door.

“Inform the kitchen staff if they don’t hurry with the figs, I shall have them whipped!” she called after me.

Devastating news. I wanted to snort my derision. Being sent to marry a prince who was sure to be just as stuffy, self-absorbed, and disgustingly rich as her father would certainly be devastating news to anyone who was familiar with the king and his loathsome daughter. But she would undoubtedly still be coddled and pampered, without having to do so much as lift a finger. How was that in any way devastating?

At least plans were in place to remove the odious pair from their positions of power, but it had its own set of struggles. Finding those who were sympathetic to the rebellion’s cause had been difficult enough, as any expression of dissatisfaction with the king could result in imprisonment or execution. Convincing anyone to join our rebellion was even more difficult. When we were constantly surrounded by well-fed armed guards, it was nearly impossible to think that we even had a sliver of a chance at overthrowing the king.

We had the desire to overthrow him. What we needed now was muscle and funding to back up our movement. No matter how worthy the cause, I couldn’t ask the people of Eboria to rise up against their oppressor until we could provide hope.

On my way to the king’s throne room, I passed a window and spotted the bread line that stretched out of the gates. Commoners, all dressed in ragged clothing with dirt streaked across their faces, waited until their family name

was recorded by a scribe so they could be handed a hard loaf of rye bread.

“Dahlia! Come in,” the king called. I approached, a false smile on my face as I eyed the man I loathed more than any other. He had tried in vain to hide his receding hair by combing it over his balding spot and insisted on dying his oily hair and mustache to deepest black in an attempt to conceal the grey hair that was speckled throughout. He was also the only man I knew who wore a girdle, as it was easier to have his attending servants strap him into a man’s girdle to hide his slightly paunchy belly rather than to trim his liking for heavy foods.

“My daughter’s handmaiden,” he explained to the man at his left as I entered. “Did you know her family has been in the employ of the royal family for several generations now? Her grandmother was the nursemaid to my younger brother, may he rest in peace, and her father is one of our men-at-arms. Isn’t that right, Dahlia?”

“It is, Your Majesty.” I curtsied to everyone and kept my eyes fixed on the expensive rug where all the noblemen were rubbing their dirt-covered shoes. Securing me my position as personal handmaiden to the princess had taken my family four generations of infiltrating the castle’s ranks. “Her Highness Princess Odette has just received a correspondence from Haven Harbor.” I held the parchment out. One of the page boys on duty leapt to take the letter from me and pass it over. “Prince Korth is prepared to receive her and begin preparations for their wedding.”

King Raquel took it and scanned it, lips puckered as he read. Finally, a broad smile spread over his face. “Very well, Dahlia, prepare her things for the voyage. You and Odette and any other servants she wishes to take with her can set sail as early as next week.”

As I bowed my head and curtsied my way out of the room, I overheard one of the military officials say, “A union with Haven Harbor is the perfect additional security we’ve been seeking, Your Highness. We must discourage any more civil unrest like we experienced over the winter.”

“Yes, Haven Harbor’s naval fleet single-handedly solved that siren crisis,” mused Raquel. “It will be particularly advantageous to have their military—” The rest of his words were cut off as the heavy door thudded shut.

I could barely breathe as I made my way back to Odette’s suite. Of course Raquel’s first thought was about strengthening their military position when he already had an iron grip on all the resources in the kingdom. What else could he take away from us?

Curdy, who was busy polishing one of the silver vases in a recessed alcove, spotted me and winked. “Midnight?” After being continually assigned to a wide variety of tasks, he had become a jack-of-all-trades, and most fortunately, he was well-liked by the king and often given special privileges. The sandy-haired young man had only recently joined our rebellion and showed great promise for furthering our cause.

I looked around in a panic and pitched my voice low. “You can’t ask me that. Anyone could hear.”

He rolled his eyes. “They will assume we are meeting up for a secret tryst or something.” Then he grinned wickedly. “Which I’m open to if you are, but—”

“Shh!” I clapped a hand over his mouth. “Use the signal next time, but yes. Midnight.”

He pulled my hand off his mouth and pressed a kiss to the back of my knuckles. “See you later then, you little minx, you!”

I sighed in exasperation. Perhaps having Curdy join the

rebellion had not been such a great idea after all. He and his big mouth were going to get us into trouble.

Night was falling in earnest by the time I re-entered Odette's quarters.

"Your father said—"

"Bring me my figs," Odette interrupted, her voice snippy and lips pouted out. "They arrived nearly a quarter of an hour ago and it's getting dark. Light the lamps. I ought to have the staff whipped for not sending them earlier."

Obediently, I crossed to the dumbwaiter, opened the flaps and withdrew the covered silver dish. It would have been easy for Odette to get it herself, but no, she would rather wait in the growing darkness until someone else could fetch things for her and perform even the simplest of tasks, and now was considering having innocent kitchen maids whipped for her own laziness.

"See them?" Odette pointed her finger out the window at where the tail end of the bread line was still wrapped around the castle. "They are likely to be fed before I am, and yet they continue to complain, complain, complain." She yawned. "Papa is right; they're too stupid to educate and too lazy to care about finding real work."

It wasn't until she was well supplied with her figs and I had lit her fireplace that I broached the subject of her engagement again. "Your father said you can set sail for Haven Harbor next week."

Odette pulled the scrap of fabric she always carried with her out of her pocket and fiddled with it. I spotted her tracing a finger along the three dark spots that stained the cloth that she refused to have washed. Why she had such a sentimental attachment to something so dirty when she otherwise scorned dirt was beyond me. But I supposed that

when one was born to royalty, it was permissible to be contradictory and hypocritical and never be called out for it.

“Prince Korth seems to be wealthy,” I probed, playing to Odette’s love of luxury as I lit the oil lamps on each surface. “And your father said his kingdom’s navy is the best there is.”

Odette yawned. “I’m tired,” she pouted. “Bring me my nightdress.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” I helped her into her night clothes, pulled out all the pins that had secured her blonde hair into place during the day, and plaited it down her back.

“Your hair is the same color as mine,” Odette noted, still fiddling with her scrap of fabric as she stared at our reflections in her vanity’s mirror.

“It is,” I agreed demurely, glancing up. Her nose upturned at a sharper angle than my own, and her lips were thinner, but otherwise we looked surprisingly similar, with slim figures and nearly identical heights.

“Do you think yourself as attractive as I am?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Of course not, Your Highness. You’re much prettier than anyone I know,” I answered mechanically.

Odette smiled smugly. “I know. Korth will be pleased when he meets me.”

“He will. Shall I read to you?”

“Not tonight. Play the harp instead.”

I acquiesced and strummed the harp while Odette climbed into bed and stared at the silky gossamer canopy that hung over her bed. I kept a close eye on the moon to track how late it was, and when Odette finally fell asleep, I was able to slip quietly out of the room. Now was when my true work began.

CHAPTER 2



“We should just kill them now before they have the chance to align with a nation that is possibly even more powerful,” Curdy grouched from his position leaning against the damp wall in the cellar.

“Murder creates martyrs,” I mused, pacing the room around the three dozen co-conspirators. “And that’s something no rebellion can afford.”

“So you expect us to start a war without any bloodshed?” Curdy rubbed his thumbs against his temples. “That’s impossible. Isn’t the whole point of this to kill the royals?”

“Eventually, yes,” I agreed. “But it’s too precarious right now. If we tip our hand too soon, then we will lose all the progress we’ve made over the last few years.”

“Over the last several decades,” my father amended. At the sound of his voice, everyone straightened, ears perked and ready to listen to the leader of the rebellion. “The royal family has always been suspicious and won’t let just anyone work in close proximity to them. It has taken the majority of us generations to secure higher positions within

the palace. We cannot act until enough of us are in place that we cannot be stopped.”

Murmurs of agreement rolled around the dark wine cellar, lit only by a few guttering candles placed on low tables. The dim light coming from waist height created a ghostly effect on our faces, a fitting representation for the dark deeds we were plotting.

“There is another alternative to taking down the king first,” Declan rumbled. He had a gravelly voice that made the hair at the back of my neck stand on end. If I didn’t know the scarred, middle-aged man was on my side, I would’ve been terrified of him. Everyone listened raptly as he slowly turned his head to ensure he had everyone’s undivided attention.

“With the recent siren treaty in place, the seas have been reopened. Dahlia reported that Princess Odette will be journeying to marry her betrothed, Prince Korth of Haven Harbor.”

“Our people are in slavery, and you want us to think about some entitled royal’s wedding?” Curdy angrily blurted out.

“I agree,” Garrik piped up. “Who cares who she marries? Good riddance to her, I say.”

Declan studied Curdy and Garrik for several long moments, then his eyes roved over the other men present—Thad, Edric, Simon, Steele, and so many others assembled, all eager for our government’s downfall. “You wish for the king’s daughter to form a strong political alliance with the only nation whose navy was capable of taming sirens? What would happen to all the oppressed when our government grows even stronger? You think that her marrying someone with connections to a powerful military will *help* our cause?”

Silence fell as we all digested this information. The ever-increasing political unrest would erupt soon unless the king joined with a stronger kingdom and quashed the rebellion in its infancy. How I'd longed for the simmering insurgence to boil into open revolt. Under new leadership, we would be able to free those forced into servitude and usher in a new era in which everyone could be seen as equal. We might even be able to elect our own officials. Surely, no monarch could ever be trusted. Power always corrupted. We didn't need another dictatorship; we needed checks and balances.

"Then what do you suggest?" I asked. "She leaves in less than a week's time."

"She may be back pretty soon once her fiancé realizes how annoying she is," Curdy put in, which earned a few laughs.

"That's assuming that her fiancé isn't equally odious," I returned. "We all know how all royalty are."

Declan leered evilly. "You're her handmaiden, though."

"So? I'm not like her."

"You're familiar with the princess's habits, mannerisms, and duties."

"I am." I had an inkling of what Declan was getting at, and the thought made my heart pound.

"You even have a slight resemblance to her," Declan continued, widening his eyes to the others in the cellar, trying to get them to understand. "Her fiancé hasn't seen her since before the siren plague began ten years ago. And didn't you say that she has you compose her letters to him?"

"You want me to take her place," I stated baldly. "But what purpose would that serve? Why don't we just kill her

on the journey and be done with it? We could claim that the sirens took her life en route.”

Father cut in. “You said it yourself, Dahlia. *Murder creates martyrs*. We want to rally people to our cause, not set them against us.”

“So, you want Dahlia to go marry some prince?” Curdy asked, a sudden biting edge to his voice.

Garrik shrugged. “Why not? We can take over the crew on the way to Haven Harbor, pass Dahlia off as the princess, and she can win the prince’s allegiance. Then, instead of contending with an additional armada, we’ll have them on our side.”

Father nodded slowly. “It’s a good plan.”

I thought quickly. There were flaws in this plan, many of them. But if we were going to stage a coup, it would be best to make the attempt on a smaller scale in a distant land rather than trying to overtake the entire palace with far too few of us rebels against well-fed and trained soldiers. Then there was the prospect of an army that could help liberate us...all it would cost was my willingness to seduce a royal and ensure his loyalty.

Oddly, the notion of marrying a stranger whom I would undoubtedly despise didn’t bother me in the slightest. My life’s work was to overthrow the king in order to free my people from bondage. It had been so since the cradle. Lying, cheating, stealing...these were all a mere means to an end, and selfishly, I much preferred an undesirable marriage to dirtying my hands with some of the more bloodthirsty plans that had been proposed in the past. For all my long list of crimes, I’d never killed anyone.

Curdy’s glare was likely to burn a hole in the side of my head, and Father’s jaw locked with tension. I remained silent, still assessing the viability of the plan.

“I could go instead,” Trina offered, but her proposition was instantly met with a flood of disagreement.

“You’re a cook. Dahlia’s the princess’s personal handmaiden. She’s been training for something like this for her entire life,” Steele objected.

“Odette already trusts Dahlia; it would look suspicious if you tried to go,” Thad added.

“Dahlia’s prettier. We need the prince to like her if we want to have any chance of accessing his army, and he will know her penmanship if she’s been writing to him. You can’t even read.”

“Silence!” Father hissed in his commanding voice. We all quieted down, anxiously looking around for any sign of a guard. Had we been overheard? For several tense minutes, we listened to the scurrying of rats in the corners of the cellar as we tried to ascertain if our treasonous group had been discovered. Mother, the dedicated lookout, poked her head into the room to give a slight shake of her head to signify that no one was coming.

In a low voice that was barely more than a whisper, I said, “I’ll do it. Odette already intends for me to accompany her to Haven Harbor, and I don’t think we’ll get a better opportunity. It will take some planning, but if we succeed, we could have the might of Haven Harbor at our backs when we do finally move to overthrow our government.”

“What about the princess after we stage the mutiny?” Curdy asked. “Are you going to kill her?”

“No.” A cruel smile lifted my lips. “But I’m very interested to see how she enjoys the same kind of life she has imposed on so many others.”

As we closed the meeting, we all moved in unison, first touching our earlobes, then lips, and finally our foreheads.

MARY MECHAM

“Hear all, speak none, remember always,” we chanted. “In shadows we thrive; with unity we rise.”

READY TO READ MORE?



See what happens to Dahlia and the rebellion once she voyages to Haven Harbor and meets Prince Korth! This book is available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

