

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top and a long black skirt, is climbing a dark, craggy rock face. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the viewer. In the background, a large, bright full moon hangs in a dark, starry sky. Below the moon, a body of water is visible, with a small white sailing ship on the left and a dark cliffside on the right. The overall scene is set at night.

A SPY SCHOOL 12 DANCING PRINCESSES

TRAINING SHADOWS

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND BOOK SIX

MARY MECHAM

TRAINING SHADOWS

SAMPLE CHAPTER



MARY MECHAM

PROLOGUE



(THREE YEARS EARLIER)

The overhang's rocks under my fingers were warm from the blazing afternoon sun, but the salty wind gusting over from across the ocean was cool enough to make my young fingers stiffen slightly. I pressed my bare toes against the precarious foothold I'd found and hauled myself higher, testing each hold before trusting it enough to let it take my full body weight.

I turned to let the sun's rays beat against my face and smiled for a moment before my face twinged in pain and I relaxed my expression, closing my eyes. Below me, the waves crashed over each other in a soothing rhythm that helped me time my breathing and movements. If I fell, as I had more times than I cared to admit, the waves would catch me and I'd have a rather chilly swim back to shore.

I glanced upward again, tracing a path for the last few feet, when a shadow shifted above me. Marco's head appeared over the edge—quickly, then not quite as far as it could have. His curly brown hair was wind-tossed so it looked even more tangled than normal, and even from here, I could see the tension in his jaw. He didn't quite lean

out over the edge, but rather flattened himself against the ground, and I knew he had to have his legs all hooked around some tree or rock. A singular hand braced the edge, fingers gripping so tightly that his knuckles were pale. The moment he made eye contact, his head disappeared again.

“You know,” he called, his voice loud enough to carry down to me, “it’s a lot easier to just walk up the mountain trail. You’d save a lot of energy by getting up here my way.”

“I like climbing,” I called back. “Your way is boring.”

“Just be safe. How much longer will you need?”

“I’m almost there,” I grunted, heaving my body up a few more feet as I scaled the rock face. After another minute, I reached out and grabbed the knotted roots at the top of the mountain, then finished climbing the last little bit and rolled onto the grassy outcropping, sighing and allowing my body to relax against the ground.

“Can we move a little farther back?” Marco asked nervously. He had already scooted backward and had his hand clutched around a tree.

“Scared?” I teased.

“Absolutely. Aren’t you?”

I joined him farther away from the edge. “Not anymore. Once you’ve fallen a few times, then you just learn that you can swim back to shore then try again.”

“Or walk up the very nice trail that’s on the ground instead of scaling a thirty foot cliff.”

I smiled then winced as I remembered my face, so tried to sit up and pull my hair over to hide the bruise, but it was too late.

Marco frowned. “What happened? Was it him again?”

“No! No, I just fell climbing.”

“That bruise is shaped like a hand.” He gently touched

the discolored skin on my cheek. “Why don’t you leave? No one should be forced live like that.”

“Where would I go?” I asked, my voice flat and wooden. The triumph of climbing the cliff from a few moments before faded as the memories of that morning tried to push their way in. “It’s not like any place will just take me in and I can’t leave Mama.”

“There has to be somewhere,” he protested. “You could come and stay with me and my brothers.”

I shook my head. “You’re starting your apprenticeship tomorrow morning. You can’t take me along as you learn to be a famous merchant.”

“I could ask the ship’s captain to hire you. The oceans just re-opened for trade. I’m sure they need some cooks or something like that. We could find a position for you. Maybe we’ll need a spy who likes to climb cliffs for fun.”

I pulled up a few blades of grass and released them, watching as they swirled away on the breeze, away from the ocean that would take Marco away the next day.

“I appreciate the offer, Marco, I really do. But I can’t leave my mother. She and I have always figured things out in the past and we will again.”

“I don’t have to go,” Marco said. “I could find a different—”

“You can’t stay. You have an incredible opportunity with this apprenticeship and you can’t give it up. I’ll be all right.” I bumped his shoulder. “At least when I climb, Papa can’t follow. He says climbing makes him dizzy.”

“Then I’ll make my fortune and come back to find you. You can’t climb forever.” Marco took my hand. “We could report him, you know. I’m sure the Nightsworn wouldn’t allow—”

“No,” I said quickly. “Don’t report him. It would take

days for any message to reach the mainland, and if he found out...I don't think it would go well for me or Mama."

"But you need protection."

I swallowed. "He's usually not that bad. He just had too many drinks last night. He'll say sorry tomorrow."

"Marina..." He dragged a hand down his face. "I hate leaving you like this. Do you have any plan at all?"

"Mama has been applying for a scholarship to Rosehaven Hall every year for me. Maybe I will get in and move there. Papa won't be upset to have one less mouth to feed."

"Isn't Rosehaven Hall that school for princesses near the lake? The boarding school?"

"That's the one. It isn't just for princesses though. It's for anyone who can afford the tuition and they always open one or two scholarship spots each year. Mama has been tutoring me every day so I can pass the entrance exam, if they ever accept my application."

Marco didn't say anything and I could almost feel his skepticism weighing down the air.

"I know it's a long shot," I told him, a note of pleading in my voice. "But it's a chance. We never thought you'd be apprenticed to the Arkwright Trading Company either, and here you are, starting in the morning. Just imagine, this time tomorrow, you could be on your way toward Eboria or Haven Harbor or off to explore a new land." The invisible bands around my chest constricted even more. How I'd miss him. "You're going to be the best trader from Halthorp to Mount Woreal."

I refused to let my voice quaver. Marco would never leave if I cried.

"I'll come back for you," Marco said again. "I promise. You get into that school and I'll come back for you."