

CHAPTER 8--Going Home

Such Bliss...

Only to be interrupted by the knock on the door to their chamber. "Raheela, is that you?" though clear, Bran's voice was not happy. He wanted to stay in bed and continue exploring the newfound closeness with his lady love. As he was talking, she had buried back under the covers, trembling in fear of some invisible enemy. Damn! This was no way to reassure her that all was in order.

"My Lord, please come out quick. Your Lord Father is here and wants to see you. He is so worried about some message he got from you, that he will come up to your chamber, if you do not descend and show yourself..."

No way around it. Bran was dressed and exchanged places with Raheela, whom he now left in charge of the room, while he hurried down the stairs to welcome his father and calm the agitated spirits. When he closed on to his father's entourage, his mussed hair and unshaven countenance were disclaiming the truth of his statement that all was in order.

'Twas true that he was ready to move the same day to his keep, the one his father had given him to manage in his stead -- his inheritance to care for and enlarge through his chivalrous deeds. But nothing was in order, and most of all, he needed to convince his Lord Father of the urgency of his marriage to his little pet. *He had lain with her, she was his, and nobody could take her from him. He even had her mother's blessing.*

Bran wanted to talk with Lord Darcy alone, to explain why he had this urgency to wed, but definitely not in front of all the men of his father's entourage gathered around them. So he decided to invite his father to come upstairs to his chamber and have their council without unnecessary witnesses.

"Did you per chance break your fast this morrow my Lords? The inn has quite good fare and excellent ale. I will tell the innkeeper to serve you the meal in the main hall, and I will steal my father for only a moment to show him the pelt of the bear I met and killed in this past week's hunting."

Upon this, he caught the innkeeper's eye and went to talk to him aside from all others, to make sure that plenty of food and ale, but no information about him would be forthcoming. Then he urged his father to come with him upstairs to his room.

"What do you mean to show me the bear's pelt? Did you not say you were in need of my support and mayhap of a healer? What happens here, my son?"

"Come father and meet my two ladies and then we shall talk. I have no bear's pelt to show and 'tis one item I will have to acquire, as soon as possible, to make my story true."

In the same breath Bran continued:

"Father, I wish to marry the one I saved, and you will believe me when I say I love her and want only what is best for her. I know you were thinking to find me a wife fitting of our heritage and at the same time rich enough to help in my endeavors as knight and lord of the realm, but all I want just now is to make her happy and secure. Mostly secure... She needs a lot of care and she needs *me* most of all".

"Are you babbling my son? Never have I heard you talk so much, while saying so little. Who is this paragon and what is her story? And who is the healer that you prefer above the healer I brought with me? I expected you to ask first about the healer and after that, mayhap, think of the others' needs for food."

Thus talking, the two were at the door to the room where Bran had spent such blissful nights and quiet days; still, he was hesitant to bring his father to meet Adny and Raheela. He knocked at the door and Raheela's voice bade them to enter. She met them standing in front of the bed which had been put to order, and in which Adny's slim body was making only a slight mound. Adny was not visible, choosing to hide her face under the blankets.

"Are you the lady my son desires to marry in such hurry?" asked the puzzled baron.

The woman was not young, and though judging by her proud posture and shapely curves, she might be suitable, she kept her face covered with some kind of veil for her lower face and the hood of her cloak for her eyes, making this meeting one full of mystery, promising nothing good for his son.

"No my Lord, I be the healer". Her speech was compelling and suggesting a kind person behind the beautiful voice. "The young bride is not feeling well and is resting in the bed behind me".

"Bran, what is all this mysterious setup -- do you want to tell me the story, or should I obtain it by force?"

"No, no, no, no, ..." a new voice burst from under the pile of bed covers and Bran moved so fast, his father had scarcely time to see him streak towards the bed, where he gathered the wailing girl in his arms, bed covers included.

He then sat on the bed and crooning seemingly senseless endearments to his burden, promptly forgot about the two standing and watching in disbelief. Two shapely and very bare legs were to be seen from beneath the bundle, and on them some ugly red welts which made the baron gasp.

"What in damnation did happen to the girl, Son? Answer now, before I take you to task!"

His bellow had a most immediate effect on the crying girl -- she retreated completely out of view, inside the blankets and Bran's arms, not a noise to be heard from her, as if she were there no more. This proof of his voice terrifying the poor chit, made the baron calm somewhat, and ask again in a more sedate voice:

"Who is she, and what did you save her from, my son, tell me before those men downstairs will come and see what is happening here -- you know the effect my full voice must have had on their senses!"

"Father, what you have seen is nothing yet" said Bran lowering the blanket from the girl's shoulders. The horror of the welts crisscrossing her back was too much even for a hardened man like the baron.

"What was she punished for, my son? Did she steal or murder another? How come you found her, and why do you feel you need to cover for her crime by marrying her?"

"Her only crime was to be in the way of the barbarian that did this and much more to her." Bran was so upset by his father's conclusion, he turned with the girl in his arms, so that his father could see her face carrying the shocking colors left in the wake of wanton brutality.

"I am insulting the barbarians -- this is work done in the name of Satan, by a man of unspeakable cruelty. I was there and with my own hand stopped his deed. And while saving her life, I swore to save her soul as well.

"Do you not see, Father, how terrified my Adny is, even of your raised voice? How could I let her go and meet normal, boisterous, noisy people, without my protection? How is she to survive among those who would wrongly judge her, just like you had a moment ago, thinking that it was a well met punishment, for a crime committed by this innocent?"

"My Lord, forgive us, but Adny must be treated, if we want her to heal" intervened Raheela. "Her skin must be softened before it dries and breaks again around the welts.

"Would you care to watch my Lord, or go and meet with your retainers downstairs while we finish this painful task?"

"And would you keep her secret, and accept that the story to be known by all, is about her meeting the bear that Bran was hunting and suffering grievous mauling before being saved by him?"

"And who may you be, healer with masked face? Where did my son find you, and how come you are into the secret that is to be kept from all but those of us here and now?"

"I was a slave of the man who intended to buy Adny for his house, my Lord, and her fate would have been even worse, were it not for your son's intervention. I was a healer before being captured and to my luck I was deemed good enough to look after her poor body.

"In all humility, I beg your permission to keep my name hidden for a while longer. The day will come when I will have to show my face to all, but until then, I would rather keep things as they are, if only you agree ..."

"There is more here than meets the eye. I would wait and watch you at work. And I would talk some more with my son. How can I, pray, give my blessing to a marriage that may bring shame to our name?"

"Father, there is no shame to be gathered from saving a life. Her torturer is dead at my hands and the slave trader is next door, under lock and key. He does not know Adny's name or family, nor does he care. He offered this lady healer, in exchange for his own freedom; he will be set free only after we leave the inn, so as not to find us ever again."

While they were talking as if Adny was not even there to hear, Raheela had started to spread the balm on her back, hiding her body from the baron's sight. She was content with the progress of her daughter's healing. She still had hope for Bran's father giving his blessing, without her having to reveal her name and family ties.

Slowly, the clamoring voice had subsided and Adny could make sense of the words she was hearing. Her beloved Bran was taking her side in the animated discussion and she could not even conceive of the time when she had not known him yet. To love him so much and to know him for nigh a sennight was a miracle for her. A miracle that took her from the darkness that was threatening to engulf her, right into the light of love.

She would do all she could, and her mother would teach her all she needed to know, to keep Bran happy and loving her forever. There was no other life for her, but to be his mate and look after his needs and pleasure...

She did have a father, but he was far away and, just now, she was afraid of his powerful voice and his domineering ways.

What if he does not agree to her marrying Bran? It was not to be considered. Bran would marry her tomorrow, she was sure of this fact, as she was sure of her own heart. But what if his father opposed their union to the bitter end? Would Bran still want her? No, this was not to be thought of. She would beg if need be, she would obey all conditions, all demands, only to be with Bran forever.

She wanted to say so, but words did not come to her, her voice too weak and troubled, and tears poured out of her eyes, making Bran aware of her turmoil. His arms gathered the blanket around her shoulders and his mouth closed on her brow in butterfly kisses that were meant to tell her not to worry.

"Father, Adny's mother gave us her blessing. Would you withhold yours? We would be married tomorrow, to make sure that nobody can come between us anymore. How would you say?"

"Her mother gave you her blessing, and you never saw none but this lady healer from the time you sent me the message and until now?"

"My son, are you telling me, this healer is the mother? A slave and a girl marked to be a slave? These are the two ladies you wanted me to meet?" Strangely lowered, the baron's voice was more threatening than his bellow.

"Please, my Lord, I will obey Bran in all, please do not separate us, my Lord, please ..." the voice came muffled from the embrace that held Adny at Bran's chest.

"My Lord, 'tis true I be her mother, 'tis true we are well born stricken by misfortune. I cannot show my true face to you, before showing myself to my wedded husband. I beg of you, there will be no dishonor from this marriage and by God's will they love each other, which is seldom found in marriages among our kind. Please, I beg you my Lord, let them be together. If later you may decide to ask for an annulment ..."

No, no, no, no ... Adny could not stop the cry of pain to the thought of an annulment, and hot tears of hopelessness ran down her face unchecked.

Bran's father would not let them be together, he did not want to forgive her sins, he thought it was her fault all that had befallen her.

No hope, only darkness, bleak and cold, enveloped her in its folds and she lost all consciousness.

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The light trying to penetrate the darkness was from a candle, held so close to her face, she could feel the heat from the flame.

Did they want to burn her? Adny's eyes popped open in her scare, trying to see who was behind the flame.

It was no flame, only a ray of sunshine blinding her and warming her at the same time. Raheela was holding a cup to her mouth and was begging her to drink, Bran's hands were supporting her, and she could hear a man's steps coming and going in the room behind Raheela.

Bran's father? What happened? She was still feeling cold and miserable, but Raheela's brew was already warming her, and the fog was slowly rising from her mind.

She still did not know if anything had changed, or if she was still not allowed to be with Bran as his wife. Was she permitted to be with him in any other way? She would keep her word and obey her Bran's father in all but one -- she could not be separated from Bran!

Her hands found Bran's and she strained to convey her desire, by holding onto him with all her power. Her eyes searched his for an answer, a smile, anything but this uncertainty.

"Shhh my pet, all is as should be; Father agreed to our marriage. A priest will bless our union tomorrow, and no man will ever be able to part us".

"I still believe you should think about this decision more. I take your word, my Lady, of your good heritage and all, but it is the men of the family who should give their agreement, not a woman! I sure want to have this mystery solved, as soon as possible, and an end put to this mummery.

"I will go down and tell all, that you are to marry the girl you have saved from sure death, and that she is too sick to receive guests and well-wishers for the time being. We'll wait for you and go with you to your keep my Son, so not a soul will question my decision to support your choice of wife, though there will be talking, I have no doubt."

Raheela's clothing, with pantaloons under flowing robes, were large on Adny, but at such short notice, comfortable clothing was more important

than a good fit while her body was still covered in the painful welts reminding them of her tragic fate.

Once the baron, Bran's father, had given his approval, his support was total; all his companions were convinced that Adny's suffering had been at the bear's claws and were attentive with her, wishing her a rapid healing. Thus she was reverting slowly to her old smiling self, reassured by Bran's continuous presence, by her mother's care, as well as by everybody's good will.

Next morn, they started on the trek to Fernham after breaking their fast. Bran led the procession astride his destrier, while holding Adny on his lap. It was a wearisome trek for her feeble state and she was glad when, towards the evening, they could see the family keep in the distance.

A one-tower keep of sturdy stone, built to resist attackers, it had three levels to accommodate the people living in it. Up on the hill, it looked like a finger pointing to heaven and Adny felt it would be her haven, away from all fears and trouble.

