

WILD PET
Historical Romance

by

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Published in Canada
February 2005

Available in the following formats:

PDF = ISBN 0-9737850-0-4

LIT = ISBN 0-9737850-1-2

PRC = ISBN 0-9737850-2-0

EXE = ISBN 0-9737850-3-9

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She would like to hear your comments or suggestions,

Thank you, and Enjoy.

PROLOGUE

In the full light, the opening in the mountain was almost invisible; but at this hour of the night, it was nigh impossible to find it. Several shadows closed in upon this forsaken corner of the woods, and noiselessly entered the crevice leading to the *cursed* caves inside. The local legends served them very well, for their business could not withstand the light of the day.

A whispering voice ordered: "The Master is waiting. He ordered to have all weapons left with us. You'll get them back after he leaves. Keep very silent."

The shadows nodded and continued their way inside the mountain's bowels, to the next chamber that was barely illuminated by a high placed torch. The Master, a tall man in a large cloak with a hood that hid his head and kept his face in total darkness, stood in front of a massive, natural pillar, as if he did not trust his servants and needed to have his back protected at all times. His voice was carefully muffled to avoid recognition. A knight, or even a lord, the Master always kept his identity a secret. None could say for sure who he was.

"You are the last, and you are late. I will not waste my time to find out why. If your motives are not good enough you will be dealt with, as you well know." The threat was clear, for his minions knew his cruelty only too well. They were all of same character -- looking only for pleasure and gain, and getting to it by any means, including murder.

"A messenger has come to Ashcroft, to announce the return of their Lord from the war. Alas, he did not reach the castle." Snickers let the Master know that he was well understood. "'Tis time to get your colors from hiding and wear them when you're sure you won't be recognized. Let the villeins believe 'tis Lord Ashcroft's men doing the 'good deeds' that keep us in money. Never let yourselves get caught, for I promise you will die before getting asked who you are. And do not snatch any more women or children from Fernham, or they may forget their fear and come to search the caves for the 'lost ones'. You will leave as usual, after I'm well and far away from here. The guards will take care that you obey." As the men

cowered in the darkness the torch bearer left the rocky chamber, lighting the way for their Master. They would wait till one of the guards would come to let them out of their temporary prison. That, or death...

* * *

"Father! You cannot!", his daughter's voice sounded in his mind. "Mother is alive. I tell you, she is alive, pray do not forsake her." Tears of grief running freely on her face, his beautiful daughter begged him, her image forever etched in his mind. "Pray, Father, do not stop searching for her... Father... I beg of you..."

Armand De Marmore, the mighty Lord Ashcroft, was powerless in the face of misfortune -- his pregnant wife lost to him, his daughter hating him for his decision to stop a futile quest... For months now he had been desperately looking for his wife with absolutely no results, while his mind searched the past for clues.

He remembered how he had prayed to the Almighty for mercy. Mercy for himself facing the terrible battle awaiting them all on that summer day of 1298; mercy for his wife and daughter, if his fate were to be death...

"Of Thee, Heavenly Lord," was how his plea went, "I humbly pray on this morn, before battle and death. I pray for my soul, and for the might to conquer my hate of killing. For, Lord, 'tis either me or them, and I have to think of my sweet wife and darling daughter..."

"Lord, if I should die, 'tis the women who will suffer, for I would be in Thy presence and my pain would be gone. Pray, help them endure the loss with bravery, and to go on with their lives, in love and peace..."

On his knees, his hands clasped and head bowed, facing the cross he'd made in a hurry by thrusting his sword deep into the moist soil, he prayed for life, for love. Wisps of fog hid the marshy landscape, and only his murmured prayers came to disturb the unearthly silence.

"Lord in Heaven, pray take pity on my wife Isabelle and our daughter, Adrienne. Thy Will be done, now and forever, Amen."

He then stood up and crossed himself, but did not move for another long moment. His eyes closed, his hands resting on the pommel of his sword, he let his precious images of love and joy from his past flash before

him, thus gathering strength for the will to survive. Before long, he opened clear eyes. He would find the power to finish the day alive. God willing, he would return to his home and his loved ones.

He'd left his home in the care of Sir Louvain, their faithful steward and dear friend. Sir Louvain was one of the few left behind when King Edward's call at arms had sounded. He was of an age with Lord Armand, but having suffered a terrible hunting injury during the previous year was not yet completely recovered. Firm in Armand's mind sounded their last words exchanged before parting:

"My friend, I entrust you with the care of my most prized possessions."

"Be without a worry, my Lord, your wife and daughter will be safe with me while you are away. Just do come back in good time and all will be well."

Then, the voice of his second in command had called from the white fog, interrupting his reverie:

"My Lord, 'tis time to join the men. They need to hear your call to battle."

* * *

That day was inscribed like a firebrand onto his mind for, to the present day, Armand still had nightmares. At Falkirk, in June of the year 1298, many lords and knights from both camps left their blood on the field of battle. Their enemies, the Scots led by William Wallace, stood as a formidable force, their army grouped in four masses of pikes which repulsed all English attacks with nary a loss for themselves. The right and left wings of the English army had attacked the Scots from both flanks at once, but without success.

Lord Armand was with the king's main body of knights and witnessed the King's fury at his inept commanders:

"'Tis folly, my Lords. If they will not die in battle I will kill them myself for squandering my forces so uselessly. Send messengers to stop these wasteful attacks. We need to destroy the enemy -- first the pikers. Put

the archers up front to get as many of those hardheaded Scots as possible before we attack again. And a bonus for each archer who hits one of the leaders."

Armand remembered how King Edward himself ordered his knights to wait, while his archers decimated the tight formations of Scots. Even after that, the fight that followed was bloody, with numerous deaths and many grievously wounded on both sides.

Lord Armand's men entered the battle after the archers had finished their job, and fought with much valor, thus winning the king's recognition. Faithful comrades, as well as his own steady training for such events, saw him unscathed through this terrible day. And mayhap, also just plain, sheer luck, or... the will of God.

It was an extremely costly victory for King Edward.

But what was the price for Armand himself now that his life had been spared? He wondered -- had he traded his well-being for that of his beloved wife's?