

FALL FAR FROM THE TREE

Amy McNulty



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Chapter One: Rohesia

I'd lived only five winters the first time I saw an infant drowned.

Father's hand lay lightly on my shoulder as the horse jostled us slightly, shaking her head and whipping the tips of her silky black mane across my eyes. Father noticed the instinct that took over, the mere moment my eyelids closed despite how hard I'd fought to keep them open. "Watch, Rohesia. Burn the moment into your mind."

The shrieking woman held aloft by two soldiers kicked her legs, sending her skirt upward. I noticed the mud that collected along the hem, the strands of straw-colored hair that escaped her kerchief and swung wildly across her mouth. The hair blew with each shriek like curtains in the breeze, the skirt a gale that tore through a field of wheat, the woman the only source of movement beyond the scuffing hooves of the horses beside me.

"The child, Rohesia. Not the mother."

The soldier by the river tossed the tattered cloth that had wrapped the baby to the ground and held the crying infant as far out in front of him as his stocky arms would allow. One gauntlet supported the baby's head and neck, the other gripped the child's body loosely, and I saw one impossibly small leg kick upward vainly.

The horse tossed her mane again, whipping the black hair across my eyes, but I leaned sideways and turned my head away so I wouldn't close them. Father let go of the reins with one hand and ran his fingers through the horse's mane gently, his voice almost a whisper. "Settle

down, Sunset.” He placed the same fingers atop my head, patting my scalp as he tugged on Sunset’s reins, leading her sideways so my gaze was forced again to fall upon the soldier and the infant at the side of the river. “Can you see? Can you see the child?”

I tried to speak, but my voice caught in my throat. I swallowed and forced the sound out, the word I knew he wanted to hear. “Yes.” I did not say that Sunset’s ears flickered across my view, sometimes blocking what the soldier held in his hands. I wasn’t allowed to be comforted by such a thing.

“What do you see?”

I clenched my teeth. There could only be one answer. “Black hair. Golden skin.” I took a deep breath. “The eyes...” I couldn’t see them clearly from Sunset’s back, but there could be no other reason Father would show me the scene.

“Black,” Father finished for me. He pulled too hard on my hair, causing my scalp to twinge slightly. He didn’t say the rest, what I knew he would only imply: *Like yours. Hair, skin and eyes that you and no one else on this island shares. You and no one else but that baby.*

“Please! Have mercy! She’s just a child!” The woman still kicked, forcing the words out between shrieks.

From behind me, Father’s composed voice answered the woman. “There is no mercy for traitors.” He spoke louder. “Send the outsider back where it came from.”

I couldn’t blink, but part of me prayed that Sunset would whip her mane across my face to shield me, to comfort me. But I learned long ago there was no one who would ever comfort me. No one but Father. That’s what he told me. That’s what I knew.

The soldier bent to the river and placed the screaming bundle atop it. The current tore the bundle from his gauntlets, and I watched as the mess of black hair floated further and further

away, as if the river were as eager to rid our isle of the child as Father was. For a moment, I thought perhaps it would make its way back home. The child was too far for me to hear its screaming. Perhaps it kept crying. Perhaps it would cry all the way home. But it was the kicking leg, the tiny kicking leg that brought me back to the truth of what I'd witnessed. Just as the baby reached the horizon, just as I was sure it would drown far beyond where I could ever see it, the tiny leg stopped and faltered, descended and vanished from view.

“Apparently the outsiders don't want it, either.” Father gripped Sunset's reins with both hands and pulled her back to face the shrieking woman. I blinked, giving my eyes relief at last from the sting.

The woman slumped at the side of the river, the soldiers stepping back to mount their own horses. “Demon!” she sobbed quietly. “Bastard!”

“This is what happens when you shelter an outsider,” said Father. “When you let him into your home, shelter him in your heart.” I looked up at Father and saw his gaze turned off to the sky, at the moon that appeared against the blue, the moon that had come out even before the sun had finished setting.

He pulled Sunset's reins, turning her back, back to the heart of the duchy, back to the castle. I slipped my fingers through her mane and gripped tightly, afraid that if I fell into the river then, the waters would sweep me up to join the child who was just like me.

Father nodded at the soldier who'd placed the baby in the river as the man stepped beside us. “If she has nothing more to say about the outsider who left that child within her, let her join it.”

The soldier said nothing. I couldn't tell if there was any life at all in his eyes.

Father whipped the reins and Sunset was off. I exhaled as we put the river behind us.

“Demon!” I heard the woman scream behind us. “Your rule is hypocrisy!”

Hypocrisy. The other words I knew, but that was one I’d never heard before. I turned my head, trying to lean around Father to get one last look—

As if he’d heard my thoughts, Father answered the question I’d never dare ask. “She means she doesn’t think it’s right that I killed her baby and let you live.”

I swallowed, faced forward, and stared at the castle. I focused on the rapid clopping of Sunset’s hooves, straining to put the muffled screaming far, far behind me.

“Lady Rohesia. His lordship wouldn’t approve of you taking this rather, uh, *scenic* route.”

Leave it to the sniveling swine to refer to streets covered in fish guts and dog shit as ‘scenic.’ Sherrod ran his knobby fingers through his limp straw hair, somehow managing to stain his grease-covered fingertips with yet another layer of grime with the gesture. Father often warned me to stay a good few feet in front of the man unless I hoped to wake up with a coating of white flakes and scabs on my scalp the next morning. He had his uses, but companionship was not one of them. Nor was stalking.

I stuck my right hand out to stop Sherrod from overtaking me, my left wrapping around my sword hilt. “We’re not here to pick posies, Sherrod.” I nudged the tip of my steel-toed boot forward so I could lean around the corner for a better look. “Father won’t care how I got here, so long as I get the job done.”

I didn’t have to turn around to imagine the pinched look on Sherrod’s face, the way he ran his tongue across his protruding front tooth whenever something bothered him. “But may I

ask why the stealth was so necessary?” he asked. “Why couldn’t we take a band of soldiers and just march right up to the dock, swords extended—”

“Quiet,” I hissed, leaning back and retreating to the safety of the alley. I pulled my blade out slightly. A sailor pulling on one of the ropes that rolled the barrels down the plank had stopped to wipe his brow, and his gaze had wandered too close to our alley for my liking.

“My lady,” Sherrod tried to speak softly, but the best he could manage was sounding like a man told to whisper while screaming, “you’ve seen only seventeen winters, and are perhaps not quite as familiar with the, uh, position of leadership as you may think, and the duke’s guard is at your command—”

“As are you,” I reminded him. “And your sole command now is to refrain from speaking.”

Sherrod’s tongue whipped out and smeared saliva all across his upper lip. Even with his mouth shut, his tooth bulged out, as if it couldn’t be contained behind his lips, like most of the refuse the steward felt compelled to tell me. Satisfied he’d keep his tongue occupied with his lips for the time being, I leaned back around the corner for a better view of the newly-arrived ship.

The Duke’s Favor was an old ship with golden sails, marking it as a trading vessel under the protection of the duchy’s lordship. I’d read up on it before I left that morning, although I’d been familiar with its most recent captain, who’d often dined with Father. It was supposed to supply the duchy with rice, opium and spices, and had done so faithfully for decades, since the time of my father’s father. But Father had received word by pigeon that Captain Tierny had died of fever after they made port, and the ship was late. Too late. Families had gone hungry, and divans had started demanding more gold for their opium, causing a bit of a problem with inflation. Father had put an end to it all by hanging a few divan owners in the market, a reminder

to the people that greed would not be tolerated when others go hungry. He'd had to ration the rice, too, and supplement what was left with some of the grain from our fields, but there was never enough wheat to feed the people.

I counted the men pulling the barrels and watched the one who seemed to be shouting the orders. The new captain. Father said the man was softer than Tierny, and younger, too. That wouldn't bode well for what I was there to do. At least, it wouldn't bode well for the new captain.

There were forty-two men on and around the ship that I could see. The rest of the fifty—forty-nine, I suppose, disregarding Tierny—could be below decks or dead at sea. Or if they were too loyal to Tierny, to the duchy... Dead by mutiny.

"My lady," scream-whispered Sherrod from behind me. The simple command of keeping his mouth shut was never bound to last long. "What's the point of skulking in the shadows? Do you even know what to look for?"

"Yes, I do." I smiled, watching as a row of the barrels broke free of the ropes, rolling freely off the side of the plank and thudding to the ground. There was one that bounced and rolled further than the others, causing the captain and a few of the men pulling the barrels to panic and chase it down before it could fall into the harbor.

I straightened my back and slid my sword all the way back into its scabbard. I took a step forward, noticed a bit of dirt on my shoulder plate and stopped to flick it away. I felt Sherrod slam into the back of me, his nose crunching against my cape and jingling the mail beneath my chest plate. I turned, grabbing my cape and inspecting it for a Sherrod-shaped dirt imprint. Finding a dark spot, I glared down at the steward as he took a step back.

He ran his tongue over his tooth twice. “I’m so sorry, Lady Rohesia.” He bent his head and averted his eyes to the shit beneath our feet, as if willing himself to sink into the muck. “I thought we were going—”

“Four feet.”

Sherrod wrung his hands together, pausing to wipe the sweat that accumulated on them across the front of his tunic. “Pardon?” He dared to look up.

I let my cape fall, and it swished, blowing air back and rustling Sherrod’s greasy hair. I leaned forward, sticking a gloved finger toward his chest, too repulsed to touch it. “You stay four feet behind me at all times. Or is that a problem?”

Sherrod took four exaggerated steps back, his eyes back on the grime below us. “No! Of course not. I mean, of course. I’m so sorry. I have no excuse—”

“Enough.” I turned back, my cape swishing once more behind me. “I better not hear you speak. I don’t even want to realize you’re there.”

To emphasize the point, I paused, daring Sherrod to speak in acquiescence. He didn’t. A shame. I’d have liked to remind him that I’d outgrown him, in more ways than one.

I stepped forward into the docking bay, my head held high, my feet slamming into the cobblestones and wood with more force than necessary. I turned a few heads as I weaved my way through the men still attending the remainder of the barrels, stepping over the taut rope a few of them held without acknowledging them or letting my back or shoulders slouch in the slightest. By the time I’d made my way across the crowd of sailors, only the crew and captain attending to the lighter barrel hadn’t noticed me. They finished tilting it upward, a few stopping to wipe their brows. The captain crouched beside it, his lips moving.

“Does opium often talk back to you, Captain? That is, when you’re not inhaling it?”

The captain's shoulders stiffened. Unfortunately, I didn't hold the advantage long. The captain rolled his shoulders, relaxing as he stood. His face—weather-worn and caked in lines, but not entirely displeasing—lit up with a grin that slithered its way across his features.

“I wouldn't know about opium,” he said, placing his right hand on his waist, not-so-subtly close to his blade's hilt. “I never mix business with pleasure.” He laid his left hand on the barrel casually. “And besides, this here's spices that's doing the talking.”

I sniffed the air, searching for the telltale giveaway of cinnamon and nutmeg, but the air smelled like nothing but rotten fish and sea salt. A gust of wind that changed direction and a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye demanded my attention. “Seems to me like your spices are bobbing in the sea, Captain.”

Like sheep, the captain and the crew looked at once into the harbor. I watched, pleased as the grin dropped off the captain's face and he shouted orders to retrieve the barrel that they hadn't bothered to save from rolling into the waters. The captain was the only one left attending the barrel atop which he still rested his forearm. He smiled again, moving his other hand from his belt to wipe his brow of excess moisture. He laughed. “Two squalls on the return trip, and not a scratch on 'em. Two minutes with this lot, and we lose two barrels.” He pointed at the men scrambling to throw a rope down to the floating barrel, but I refused to follow his gesture.

“I don't recall ever having this problem when Captain Tierny led 'the lot.’” I jutted my chin toward him. “I don't think we've had the pleasure.”

“I was about to say the same myself. Captain Hann of the Duke's Favor, at your service.” The captain bowed deeply, removing his hat and revealing the thinning dark hair clinging to his scalp. He fastened his hat back on his head, careful to leave his left arm on the barrel all the while. His eyes drifted over my head, to somewhere behind me. “And you. I'd have thought to

call the soldiers over immediately, but I know that fellow, and I can't imagine him trailing behind an outsider dressed to battle an army."

I clenched my jaw and waited for Sherrod to confirm the acquaintance. But of course, I'd warned him not to speak, and he had chosen this one inopportune moment to decide to follow my commands. Whatever it took for him to make my life more difficult.

I gave up and spoke his name. "Sherrod." Silence. This was getting ridiculous. The captain's grin twisted, resembling something closer to a genuine smirk. I turned and saw the useless man face first on the ground, one foot in the air dangling from the taut rope above him. The remaining sailors holding the rope were frozen in what was probably confusion, neither continuing to pull down the barrels or offering at all to help the steward. I couldn't say I blamed them.

"He's been that way a few minutes," said the captain coolly. "You might want to see if he conked his head in the fall."

The captain still leaned casually on the barrel, scuffing his boot on the dock and examining his boot toe. If he thought I was going to turn my back on him long enough to help someone who would be no use to me whatsoever, he was grossly underestimating me. "He doesn't have much there to injure."

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Is this how the duke rewards such ardent devotion?"

I smiled, doing my best to echo the sculptured grin Hann had. "There's no reason for the duke to reward what's expected of all men. And I'm not my father." I nodded toward the barrel as I let my left hand pull my sword a little out of its sheath, calling attention to gesture. "Open the barrel, Captain."

Hann laughed, letting his forearm fall from the top of the barrel at last as he threw his hands in the air and then crossed his arms, trying a bit too hard to seem casual. “The duke is so hard up for soldiers, he sends his own daughter to pick up the delivery? Is he that eager to get his first cut of opium and spices?”

“No, the duke, as you phrased it, never ‘mixes business with pleasure.’” I pulled my sword out further, knowing the sun would gleam off the metal and draw the captain’s eyes toward it. “You’re late, Captain. Too late. And smuggling outsiders.”

Before I could fully pull the sword from its scabbard, I flicked my right hand. The small dagger I kept there slipped out, and I wrapped my fingers around its hilt. The captain fumbled for a moment but drew his sword in time to cross with mine, but by then, my dagger had already slipped into his arm. He shouted and his sword faltered, drooping slightly. He gritted his teeth and raised the sword back upward to move more in tune with mine. “You missed.”

I grabbed my sword with both hands and spun, tearing it free from his weakened resistance and bringing it down toward his shoulder. He dodged, rolling out of the way but grunting as the dagger hit the deck and slid further into his arm, and my sword reached its intended target: the barrel. The wood that chipped off was no bigger than the size of my hand, but I didn’t need to see more to recognize the eye that stared back out at me. The dark brown, almost black iris.

The captain scrambled to his feet, sweat pouring down his brow, his hat crooked and in shambles on his head. His arms shook as he struggled to lift his sword out in front of him, his boots slipping on the wood dampened by blowing seawater. “How could you let your father do this?” The words were difficult for him to get past his purpling lips. “You’re one of them.”

I let myself look one more time at the eye that peeked out from the chip I'd made in the barrel. It darted from me to the captain and back again. I wondered, not for the first time, what an outsider found so appealing about the duchy, knowing what fate would likely have in store for them there. But Father could be generous to his people. Perhaps the risk was worth it to them.

"Captain, you're mistaken." I swapped my sword into my weaker hand, reaching into the pouch at my waist and sliding out the thin silver tool I kept hidden there. Hann flinched but dragged himself protectively in front of the barrel, draping that same elbow on the top, no longer from some futile effort to appear casual but because every step he took was enough to send a weaker man sprawling headfirst to the deck, where he would never get up again. I watched his struggle, thinking of how pathetically he'd tried to fool me with wide grins and teasing. "My feet have never touched soil outside of the duchy. You're more of an outsider than I am."

I brought the flute to my mouth and blew three notes. The notes hung in the air for a moment, reverberating into silence. And then the hooves began to echo on the stones leading to the docks, the clomp of foot soldiers stomping in time to an unsung melody.

"You... bitch..." Hann's legs gave way, and he struggled in vain to stand as his weight collapsed down on top of them. His sword fell numbly from his fingers, clattering to the ground.

I slid the flute back into my pouch and bent forward, ripping the dagger out of the captain's shoulder. "If Ytoile exists, perhaps you'll give Her my regards. Unless you're sent flying into the flame kingdom." I wiped what remained of the blood and poison from the dagger's blade against the top of the barrel.

Hann's eyes fluttered shut and his shoulders slumped forward. "Hypo... crisy..."

Yes, yes. It was sort of a death cry for these types. The whole line was left unsaid: "Your whole existence is hypocrisy."

I straightened my shoulders and turned, sparing one last look for the quaking eyeball seen through the hole in the barrel. The soldiers I'd summoned from the town square were engaged in battle with the remaining sailors, although their armor put them in little danger from the ragtag attack of whittling knives and daggers. I walked back in the direction I'd come, paying no attention to the cries of anger and pain that erupted all around me.

I gazed at the tip of my sword and the scratch in the metal the barrel had put there. The blade was lined with such scratches, the metal almost dangerously close to cracking into pieces. I slid the blade into its scabbard and reached down toward Sherrod, grabbing him roughly under the armpit and dragging him to his feet, feeling his weight tug at the tendons in my arm but determined not to let the strain show on my face. His foot twisted and freed itself from the rope just as his eyelids fluttered open.

"My lady?" His eyes had sort of a glossy look as they darted back and forth wildly, searching my face and what I presumed to be the men gathering behind me. Convenient that he knock himself out while I made my inspection. Too convenient.

"We're done here, Sherrod." I gave him another tug and lurched forward, ignoring the pain in my sword arm. When at last the steward heaved himself up entirely and made a great show of dusting off his tunic, I rolled my eyes and gladly let go of his armpit.

"Was his lordship right about the captain then, my lady?"

I wiped my moistened glove against my cape. "Father is always right, Sherrod."

"Let them take you for a fool, Rohesia," Father had instructed. "It lowers their guard, and it's more fun to see them act brash before they squirm."

"It's just a matter of toying with your prey before you slaughter it."

I stepped aside into a puddle to avoid the swinging sword of the nearest soldier, washing away the shit and dirt on my boot in the jumble of blood and sea water.