

Son of a King

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This is a work of fiction, and any
resemblance to people (living or dead) is
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For Paul, the warrior
And Beth, the woman he loves

Son of a King

CHAPTER ONE

Gwen Myer

Son of a King

Rockton Marsh followed up his escape from Gwen Myer by falling off a cliff and landing in a hedge of brambles. One minute, he was riding hard away from the soldiers hunting him, the next minute he was flying like a great bird. Only his unholy luck saved him from getting thorns in the face. He stared up at the great tree canopy and cursed under his breath as thorns from the hedge dug uncomfortably into his skin through the worn edges of his tunic. Bella his overgrown nag didn't move from her spot at the top of the cliff though her ears twitched forward and back. Her dark eyes watched him as he lay there in the brambles.

Rockton was a mostly easy going man, except when he wasn't. For most of his adulthood he had wandered through Fairhaven making a living with only his wits and the skills of his sword. He traveled from Keep to Keep following a restless prompting he could not explain. He attempted to hide his intelligence behind a careless facade of humor and his parentage by cutting his hair. He decided it would be better to have a poor sense of style than for his compatriots to discover he was an illegitimate son of the King. He didn't have

Son of a King

any great love for the King. He didn't know him and if the truth were to be known he wanted to keep it that way.

Voices distracted him from his thoughts. Through the cover of the bush he heard the terrified muffled cries of a woman and the rough laughter of her captors, and felt his normally slow temper start to heat. Slowly, thanking whatever deity it was that made him lucky enough to land in the hedge and not on his head, he slithered towards the sounds.

The woman in the clearing was gagged and bound hand and foot with strange silver cords. Her dress was an impossible shade of moonlight and sparkled with the lone shaft of sunlight through the cover of the leaves and she was beautiful, almost inhumanly beautiful. In spite of the bruise that marked her cheek and the terror in her eyes, beauty that called to Rockton like a siren. One man held her head—his hands threaded through her curls, using them like ropes to hold her still. The second man was kneeling between her legs and pulling on her dress while she struggled, her terrified cries muffled by the gag in her mouth.

Both wore the livery of Gwen Myer.

Son of a King

“Well now, Missy,” the man between her legs announced as he leaned forward ignoring her struggles, “What say you I just take this belt and we get down to business?”

“Why should you get all the fun?” whined his compatriot. The woman turned her head and tried fruitlessly to yank her hair free.

Rockton felt a chill go down his spine. The man kneeling between the unwilling woman’s legs was the Sargent in charge of the soldiers at Gwen Myer. Rockton remembered him clearly from his interview at Gwen Myer.

The Lord of Gwen Myer had looked at him with an odd expression when he said he wanted to work as a soldier. Then he passed Rockton off to the Sargent at Arms with orders to ‘keep an eye on the man’. Rockton knew he had not been meant to hear the orders. He was not supposed to notice how the other men were armed and watching him either, careful to herd him into the great hall without appearing to do so. But Rockton had ears like a cat’s, an inner sense that was never wrong about danger and an unholy luck. It should have been the perfect position for a man like him,

Son of a King

a restless sword for hire, but something about the watching alarmed Rockton.

At first, he thought his instincts were playing tricks on him. Then, Rockton ate his meal at the long tables with the rest of the servants. Some instinct made Rockton play sleight of hand with the trenchers and mugs at the table. He gave one soldier his meal and another his mug. It did not comfort him when both of the men fell asleep at the table. He hid his growing uneasiness by playing careful games of chance with the soldiers, careful because even though he did have unholy luck, he didn't want others to think he was cheating to win and run him through. He won money off them, but left it on the table as payment for the meal and a night of not sleeping in the open. By the time the evening was over, he knew that still small voice was not going to let up, that this was going to turn out like the last two Keeps he had visited.

Before the sun was even a thought in the sky the next morning, Rockton decided to leave the Keep. That was when he discovered that the keep was barred and guarded in more ways than one. It took him

Son of a King

nearly an hour to find an escape route—a hidden bolt hole in the stables. He was careful to cover his nag's hooves with rags and wrap his tack with cloths to keep the sound from traveling and to sneak away as silently as he was able from Gwen Myer's high walls. As soon as he and his horse were out of arrow range, he felt that instinct relax subtly.

Within an hour he heard the odd shouts at the keep and knew he was being hunted. The alarm and the hunting didn't make sense to him, but then lots of things about the Keeps in the North of Fairhaven were not making sense to him. Gwen Myer was the third Keep in the last six months that raised the hairs on his neck for the subtle wrongness that surrounded the lands. The King needed to know that something was brewing in the North, but Rockton was not going to be the one to tell the man. First, the King didn't know he existed, a fact Rockton had reinforced with his determined absence from the Capital. Second, what King needed an illegitimate son to ride up to the castle and announce that war was brewing in the North? That was just a bad idea for his continued health and longevity.

Son of a King

The woman's caught sight of Rockton lying in the bushes. He put a finger to his lips. Then he carefully slithered out of the bush and hid behind the huge tree trunk. The trees in these forests were larger than normal, larger than any he had ever seen, which made it easy for him to hide.

Taking a deep centering breath, he pulled his sword and rushed into the clearing. He didn't announce himself or demand justice —only fools would do something like that, and he wanted to survive the encounter with his head on his shoulders. He simply rushed up to the man working at putting himself between the woman's legs and ran him through.

Adrenaline made his breath harsh as he pulled the man's body off her and threw him to the side. She stared at him, horror and shock on her face. He shrugged it off and reached around her to pull her out of the grasp of the second soldier but the man's hands were tangled tightly in her hair. The man couldn't get to his sword, but it also meant Rockton could not rescue her from her captor. With a deep breath, Rockton took his sword and hacked off her hair to free her. He threw the woman over his

shoulder like a prize pheasant and charged out of the clearing, around the bramble bush and up the goat track that appeared to him on the side of the hill.

Behind him, the soldier started hollering hysterically. Rockton was a little surprised the soldier wasn't charging out of the clearing after them brandishing a sword, but he wasn't about to question his luck.

Bella just looked at him in resignation when he charged up with a woman dangling over his shoulder like a game bird and sighed tolerantly as he scrambled onto her back, his sword still in hand. Then, Rockton turned the horse and rode away from the clearing. It took him a moment to sheath his sword one handed, and then swing the woman, still silent, in front of him. She sat on the horse regally, without moving or struggling. While they rode through the forests, the trees seemed to part for them. Rockton frowned but he didn't question it. Eventually, the screams of rage behind them faded, muffled in the distance by bushes and trees.

When Rockton thought they were far enough away, he slowed his horse to a stop.

Son of a King

The woman he held in his arms had not moved the whole ride. "I'm going to take these ropes off you now." He held her still as he climbed off the horse, and then carefully placed her on the soft moss. He frowned at the unusual ropes. "Sorry, my lady. It seemed a better idea to ride hard than to untie you." He pulled the gag away from her mouth.

She frowned at him. "Who are you?"

He bowed a little and bent so he could loosen the ropes on her feet, carefully working the knots loose. "Rockton Marsh at your service, sword for hire, sometimes thief."

Her eyes widened at the word thief. "Well, Rockton Marsh, I thank you for the rescue. My father will reward you greatly for keeping me safe."

"No need for reward." Rockton told her as he started to work on the one tying her hands behind her back. "I am not interested in gold and I don't need any obligations to tie me down."

"I don't think what you want is going to matter to him." She replied dryly. "My father tends to do as he wishes in spite of the rest of us." She rubbed the circulation back

into her hands and stood up.

Rockton looked at how her hair curled poorly on one side of her face and then down to the ground on the other side. In spite of the hard ride, her hair did not have a tangle or twig. Noticing his gaze, she shrugged. "Better hair than dead."

"I don't think dead was what those men had in mind," Rockton muttered. Since thinking about what almost happened to her made him angry again, he stood up and went back to check on Bella.

Her chin lifted. "No. You do not understand. After they were finished, I would have been held as a hostage at Gwen Myer, and then I would have died when they had no more use for me."

He froze at the mention of Gwen Myer.

"Why would someone want to keep you as a hostage at Gwen Myer?"

"The Lord of the Manor wants my dad to help him overthrow the King," she replied.

At the mention of overthrowing the King, Rockton's back stiffened. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. "And why would the Lord of Gwen Myer think your father could help overthrow the King?"

"My father is the King of the Fae."