



GOLDEN BOOTS © 2007 A. JANE ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## CHAPTER 1

He jerked up, sweat dripping down his body, howling. It wasn't until the bright morning sun hit him in the eyes that he snapped out of it.

*'Twas only a nightmare.*

He scrubbed his hands over his face, ignoring the morning stubble. He then rubbed his hand over his heart; the curse mark Rejina had placed there was hurting this morning. Yeryl and Zasara, ten years later and still he was haunted by that day. Would he forever feel the guilt, the responsibility of Easal's death?

He flopped back down, the covers pulled over his head, tempted to stay in bed; it would not be the first time. The rest of the year had become a little easier to deal with, but come the anniversary and it was as if it was happening all over again.

"Idrys, get up." Betrys appeared by her cousin's bed. She understood the guilt he felt, but hiding would not make it go away. She had tried it herself in the beginning and it hurt the same no matter what she did or where she was.

"No."

"Today is the masquerade for the king's birthday."

“I see no reason to attend.” He once more rubbed his hand over the mark. The only good thing about attending the Forty Days was that Easal’s mother had been banished from court. She had attempted to curse Usan and had earned the queen’s ire and was forbidden to ever return.

“If you miss one more Forty Days, the king will take away the nyn Caro lands and titles.”

“Would it not be all that I deserve?” But he knew that the king would do no such thing, nor would he ever allow him to.

“Easal would not wish you to do this.”

“Yes, he would, after the way I betrayed our friendship. I saw the look in his eyes that last day. He would want me to suffer.”

“That last day he was angry with us, yes, but the Easal we knew would want you to continue with your life.” She knew it was the curse mark talking. She was convinced that her cousin had somehow received a more concentrated dose of the curse. Right then, cursing Rejina back sounded very tempting, but curses could be tricky things. If not handled just right, a curse could come back at the caster three-fold.

“Were I not such a coward, I would join him in the afterlife.”

“That is not something he would want you to do.”

“How do you know that?”

“If he wanted you to join him in the afterlife, his spirit would have come back by now and killed you himself. Easal was not a vengeful person. Idrys...” She sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed her hand over her own mark. “Cousin, I feel the same guilt as you. Had I attended the wedding as Easal wanted, Gall would be the one dead instead of spending the rest of his life in that prison colony and Easal would be with us.”

He choked back the threatening cry of anguish burning in his throat.

“I too still have nightmares, especially this time of year. In eight days ‘twill be ten years exactly. I dread the day, and plan to spend it drinking until I pass out. Most welcome you are to join me.”

“Betrys, why did you not attend?”

“Because I was afraid I would harm Mair.” She stood and tossed the covers off of Idrys, unfazed by his nakedness. They had been raised together, their births only a couple months apart and their mothers had been twins. “Get that beautiful ass of yours out of bed, Vyr, or force it out I will and into a cold shower.”

“In moments like this you remind me of Aunt Fianna and a compliment that is not.” He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Join you I will, getting drunk as I have done almost every year.”

“Good.” She watched Idrys walk to his bath and quickly dashed away a tear. If there was some way to bring Easal back to life she would, but no such magik existed, none that would bring him back the way he was. Death was death and there was no changing it.

Idrys emerged wearing a maroon and gold brocade frock coat, black breeches and black boots; a maroon cavaliers hat with a long black feather attached to the side in his hand; the gold timetell Easal had given him for his eighteenth birthday tucked in the pocket of his coat, the chain attached to one of the buttons. The ensemble was the typical costume of an unattached Titledman.

Though he was not completely in fashion. He wore his midnight hair unfashionably long, and today it hung loose around his shoulders. The last few years, Titledmen were growing thick mustachios, curling them up at the ends, but Idrys preferred to scrape the stubble from his face.

“Now there is my handsome cousin.” Betryst came over and straightened his collar and brushed any lint off the coat.

“What may I ask are you wearing? And why is there a blasted bird in your hair?” He looked at her and she was wearing some frothy green top cinched under her breasts with a wide gold belt. The rest hung down past her hips and had bell sleeves. She also wore some strange looking, pouffy-thighed breeches and tall, over-the-knee black boots. And of course, there was that strange looking bird attached to her hair.

She snorted. “I am representing Zasara.”

“If she were a pirate.”

“Very well, my interpretation of Zasara.”

“If she were a pirate.”

“Mayhap she is.” She turned, brushed her burgundy wine hair away from her face. “Shall we go? My carriage waits outside.”

“Your husband, does he ride with you?” If that imbecile were riding in the carriage, he would take his horse.

“No. Bure annoyed Queen Rhedyn the week previous and attend the masquerade, he may not.”

“Lucky him.”

The problem with the masquerade was that it lasted all day and the Titled had to arrive in costume. Most were of the opinion that the king enjoyed tormenting his subjects, as he never arrived until dinner was served. On top of that, several years ago, the king had outlawed magikal travel to the palace after some young Titledman, attempting to show off to his friends, had landed on top of him.

“What did he do? Mayhap I should try it.” He offered his arm to his cousin and escorted her from his bedroom as he felt like walking instead of teleporting.

“He spilled his wine on the queen’s dress and then attempted to dab it off. He ripped her sleeve when she tried to shove him away. I suspect in his ministrations that he fondled her breasts.”

“Mayhap ‘tis time to ask the king to dissolve your marriage to that fool.”

“I think he did it deliberately.”

“Even more reason to end your marriage. Happy you are not and have had to resort to adopting a child.”

“I love my daughter. More people should adopt children.”

“I agree and I enjoy little Zeti, but she is not van Wyrn. You might show her certain things, but she cannot know all that you do. As the van Wyrn, ‘tis your duty to pass on *your* knowledge of the Keepers to the next generation. For as long as there have been Keepers, there have been van Wyrns leading them.”

Betrys sighed for it was an old argument. “Afraid of me most men are. ‘Twould be hard to find a husband who could or would deal with a van Wyrn, let alone *the* van Wyrn.”

“Then mayhap, you should mix your magikal essence with another Keeper. Then you need not worry.”

Stepping out of his home after navigating the long, winding halls and numerous staircases, he noticed that his steward was already busy directing the staff. He had a footman loading one of several large trunks onto the back of the carriage. Obviously, Betrys had already instructed his staff to pack his belongings.

He handed her up into the carriage and then followed, sitting across from her. He had to keep from smiling as he watched her settle in her seat. The bird in her hair was truly ridiculous and so were her breeches.

“Mayhap, I would like a man in my bed,” she continued the conversation now that they were in more relative privacy. Hearing the okay from the butler, that everything was loaded up, she rapped a cane against the roof, letting her driver know to start on their journey.

“So find a lover, since we know that your husband lacks in that area.”

“Not that he lacks, he finds it with another. Has been since the day after our wedding two years ago.”

“Fuck, Betryst. You must ask the king for a dissolution of your marriage. You should have done it long ago. Unacceptable are Bure’s actions and that you put up with them surprises me.”

“So you find it acceptable for me to find a lover, but that my husband keeps a mistress...?”

“Bure is a worthless man, and well you know it. He only has a mistress because he has your money to spend upon her. Had he no money, no woman would want him. Still do I not understand why you married him when I know your heart was not engaged.” He watched her look out the window. “Or ‘twas engaged elsewhere and unable to be requited?”

“Not all get love matches, Idrys.”

“That might be so, but what did Bure have to offer you? He was a Resan with hardly two coins to rub together and a small estate in the Northern Mountains of Artezán. The soil there is useless to grow crops and the animals it can sustain are tough. Nor are their coats worth much for sheering or tanning. The only thing to recommend the Northern Mountains is the mining and yet his land has not a mine.”

“His mother was a Keeper.”

Idrys shook his head. “As I mentioned, mayhap you should combine your magikal essence with another woman from the Keepers and then you would be free to find a husband of your choosing, or just a lover.”

The Keepers were a mysterious and powerful group of women who kept the knowledge of Zasara that was long forgotten, never known, the forbidden. The van Wyrn women were long associated with the Keepers, were in fact the Elders of the mysterious group, and knew things that most people, even other Keepers, could not nor would not ever conceive of.

“You might be right.”

“Betryst... Cousin, I would see you happy.”

“As I would you.” She continued to look out the window and could see the eastern towers of the palace as they were the tallest. “Do you remember when we would explore the towers of the palace?”

“I do.” Easal had once kissed him in one and he had punched him for it. The look of hurt on Easal’s face... Easal didn’t speak to him for over a month, but then just sat down next to him one day, everything forgotten. Well, after Easal punched him, *then* everything was forgotten.

Idrys closed his eyes willing away the memory. But it wouldn’t leave. He had punched Easal for kissing him because it caused his prick to grow hard. It had frightened him, for he remembered the time when he was seven and Prince Morhg cornered him in the old barn. It hadn’t helped that Easal’s prick had been hard as well, the bulge nudging him in the stomach.

“Easal once kissed me in one,” Betrys murmured.

“What?” He opened his eyes and looked at his cousin, his eyes drawn to the bird.

“He kissed me once while we explored.” She laughed shaking her head. “I punched him.”

“Why?”

“I always thought him more my brother than stepbrother. Plus, I think he was deciding if he enjoyed kissing a girl.”

“What did he do when you punched him?” He felt an unreasonable spurt of jealousy that Easal had kissed his cousin as well. It was his shame to bear.

“He laughed. Said I knew not how to punch and so instructed me on the proper way. I had tucked my thumb under my fingers and apparently ‘tis not correct.”

“That way leads to a broken thumb.”

“So he explained. I then punched him in the proper manner. He still laughed and then we went to find you.”

They heard the clattering of hooves on stone as the horses trotted through the gates of the palace.

Idrys looked out the window. “‘Tis a sea of feathers.”

“Feathers are such silly fashion on the men.”

“These are on the women.”

“If they ever decide to bring bells into fashion, I will get myself banished. I swear it.”

Idrys laughed, thinking he would attempt to get himself banished as well. It would cause quite the headache to be subjected to the constant tinkling sounds. He hated going as it was, why

torment himself further.

When the carriage stopped, he tied on his black eye-mask and then leapt to the ground. Turning, he took Betryst's hand and helped her down; she had tied on a sparkling green eye-mask. He tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and entered the palace—their bags to be unloaded and taken up to their apartments by palace servants.

“Lucky you are, Cousin, that I love you. Look forward to this I do not.”

“You once enjoyed your position in society, Vyr.”

“Once.” He noticed a man with a slight limp wearing a black eye-mask heading towards them. “Is that Naru Bastan approaching us?”

“’Tis indeed he.”

“I think he has feelings for you.”

“He is Watcher and off limits to me.”

“Too bad. I recall from our days at Alton Academy that his intellect is rather well endowed,” he teased her.

Before she could turn the teasing on him, the Naru was stepping before them.

“High Grace.” Naru Bastan zyn Bry nodded his head to Idrys using the proper title of address from a lower ranking Titledman to a Dusal or Dusalla. Naru and Nari were the lowest ranking titles given by a monarch and Dusal and Dusalla were the highest after prince and princess. He looked at Betryst and bowed his head. “High Grace.”

“Naru Bastan, ‘tis good to see you.” Betryst offered her hand.

“And you. They have started the dancing early this year and wondering I was if you might be enticed to join me for the waltz?”

“I would like that very much.” She looked to her cousin. “Vyr, do you mind?”

“Of course not. Go, enjoy yourself. I shall go find a dark corner and hide myself.”

“Idrys...”

“I am fine. One of us should enjoy the masquerade.” He waved her off and then wove his way through the crowd, ignoring those that hailed him, as he was indeed looking for that darkened corner.

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“Is your cousin well?” Bastan led Betryst onto the dance floor, joining the whirling couples.

“I dragged him here with the threat that His Majesty would take titles and land from him if he missed another Forty Days.”

“I doubt that our king would do such a thing. Especially to a nyn Caro. The nyn Caros are a Royal House after all. I believe tenth in line to the throne.”

“Correct, but I needed a threat with some viability.” She looked away from the inquiring violet eyes of the Naru. “This time of year is most difficult. He agreed to get drunk with me in a week’s time.”

Bastan remembered well that day ten years ago. He had been one of the men who took Mair into custody. He had seen the sudden influx of black clouds and the strikes of lightning and wanted to investigate, but his superior insisted they continue with their orders. He wished many times that he had disobeyed that idiot; he was sure the king would have forgiven his insubordination.

“Betryst...High Grace...”

“You may address me as Betryst. We’ve known each other since our schooling years; I would like to think we are friends.”

Yes, friends—it was all they could be. “Would you care for a walk out in the gardens?”

“I would like that very much.”

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He slipped into the palace with ease, surprised to see that the charms had not been changed over the years. He watched the Titled from his vantage point on the mezzanine of the ballroom as they mingled and danced. He looked for the one he had come for, wondering if he would be there. Several could pass and so he decided the only way to find out for sure was to venture amongst them.

He made sure that his eye-mask was secure over his scarred features and entered the mix of costumed and uncostumed Titled, although all wore masks. His golden boots flashed in the light of thousands of candles, the golden-red beard covering the lower half of his face and his long, sun streaked hair did the same.

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He drew the eyes of men and women alike. He might not be as handsome as he once was, but he still drew appreciative looks and he willingly took advantage of it. He had a fine form, which, he was sure, helped and why he showed it off with the tight breeches and jerkin; he wore the leather vest without shirt underneath, showing off his sun-bronzed skin.

He flashed a brilliant smile at a woman and she fluttered the fan she carried as she offered him her free hand. He took it and brought it up to his lips.

“Care for a dance, mistress?” he asked, his voice a flowing deep timber with slight raspy quality to it.

“I would indeed.”

He escorted the scantily clad woman out onto the dance floor for his first dance of the evening. After the woman with the fan, he danced with several other ladies. He even took out several men onto the floor to liven things up.

In fact, he was causing quite the stir, everyone wondering just who he was.

Many of his partners had asked, “Who are you supposed to be?”

He offered each a teasing grin and told them the truth. “That charming rogue of a pirate, Golden Boots, of course.”

They had all laughed; certain he was fooling. If they chose to believe he was teasing, then he let them.

Looking at his gold timetell—a prime piece he had lifted from the King of Mylo’s grandson two years ago—he noticed it was getting late. Offering a smile of regret to the young man hoping for a dance, he then disappeared into the crowd, needing to get back to the business of why he came.

His quarry wasn’t within the ballroom, so he journeyed outside onto the terrace. Not seeing him there, he started down the stairs into the garden. Not finding him in the garden proper, he was considering giving up the search, believing his quarry hadn’t attended again this year. But before leaving, he decided to check the whole of the garden. He rounded the bend that would lead to the farthest corner with only the light of the triple moons to guide him down the path.

Hearing voices, he slowed his step and walked without sound, not wanting to disturb anyone in case it was a tryst. Instead of lovers, he came upon Prince Morhg assaulting a Titledman. He held him against the garden wall; a beefy arm across the poor man’s neck and his

large hand was savagely fondling the man's cock.

"Pretty, pretty Idrys," Morhg purred. "You are going to be a much sweeter fuck this time 'round." He licked his victim's cheek, adding insult to injury.

"You sick bastard," the man hissed. "This time better you kill me, for pleasure will I take exposing you for the child rapist you are, and even greater pleasure will I take leading the mob to execute you."

"I must say that this holds nae sport," Golden Boots called out; the prince looked over at him, a snarl on his face. "Ah, that is how you like it then. To abuse those smaller than you, which would be everyone considering you are a giant. Care to try *me* out? I can offer much more of a fight than that puny fish."

"Have you no idea whom you address so rudely?"

"The sick fuck who cannot get laid unless he rapes another. Unpopular you must be not to get laid with a face such as yours. Never have I that trouble, and considered pretty, I am not." He summoned a short sword with a kris blade to his hand; it was in truth, an ancient family weapon. "Come on, I promise, I am quite fun."

The Prince refused to release his prey. "I am busy, and my type you are not."

"Then I shall put it another way, release him or I will kill you."

"You would not dare. I am Prince Morhg, heir to the throne of Artezán."

"I care not if you are prince or commoner. I am Golden Boots and do as I will. Now release him."

"The notorious pirate?"

"The one and only." He bowed with flourish, mocking the prince.

Morhg dropped his captive after dosing him with a sleep spell and charged the pirate. The pirate turned out to be faster. Golden Boots ducked Morhg's charge and from his victim's side watched as Morhg dropped, having been stabbed through the heart.

Golden Boots knelt down and checked on the unconscious man. He removed the mask covering his face and smiled. He caressed the man's angular face, enjoying the slight stubble of growth under his fingers.

"Found you I have and so take you I will." He hefted the man over his shoulder and got ready to teleport to his boat.

"Put him down."

The pirate turned around and eyed the woman. Was that a bird in her hair? He kept from rolling his eyes. “Ah, a van Wyrn. ‘Tis a pity I have nae time to pit skills with you.”

“I said put him down,” Betrys growled, blue sparking energy surrounding her hands.

“And you wish to make me?” He raised his hand and caused the energy around her hands to extinguish. “You will have to do better than that.” He flashed her an arrogant smile.

Betrys took a step forward, her heart squeezed in her chest. She knew that smile, the way that one tooth overlapped the one next to it just so. “Brother?”

“Brother? I am nae one’s sibling.”

“Easal?”

“Was a man abandoned by those who were supposed to have loved him best. If you will excuse me, I have a prior appointment and running late I am.”

“Wait...”

“You may wish to be inside, van Wyrn, when the Prince’s body is found, as it could be hard to explain what you were doing in the area. Oh, and feel free to inform your Watcher friend, the one with the limp, that I, Golden Boots, took the vile bastard’s life and offer nae regrets.”

Boots called up his magik before the woman could say anything more and teleported aboard his boat, *The Argyn Ot*, shouting to his crew to set sail. He took his captive into his quarters and laid him out on the bed, caressing the beautiful face once more.

“Idrys...you betrayed me worse than anyone else, as you had owned my heart. This time you will not hurt me, for my heart is my own now and never again will I be so foolish as to trust you with it. When I am done taking my vengeance, ‘twill be you who feels the pain of a broken heart, not I.”

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Idrys awoke from the sleep spell and groaned, his body hurting. Why was the room rolling? He opened his eyes and looked around. He found a pair of golden boots shining in the corner of the room. His eyes drifted up, but the owner of the boots was in shadow.

“Where am I?”

“You are aboard my boat, High Grace. When we reach our destination there will be a healing bath made ready for you.”

“Most appreciated, that would be. Might I ask who you are?”

The pirate stood and bowed at the waist, still in shadow, staying in shadow. “I am Golden Boots. You may call me Boots.”

Idrys groaned as his bruised cock had risen to full staff from the sound of the pirate’s dark voice. Confused, he tried to will away the painful erection. He wasn’t attracted to men...at least not since Easal—and that voice, the deep, throaty rumble, was not how he remembered Easal’s voice.

Wanting to see his captor, he tried to stare through the shadow but could see naught save a glint of the candle light on facial hair.

The boat suddenly rose and then fell, sending his stomach roiling. He groaned again and passed out.