

# *A Captive of Wing and Feather*

## *Prologue*

### **Gabe: Adventure**

As soon as I was free of the small group of people lined up at the city gates, I nudged my mount into a gallop. It might not be a practical pace to hold for long, but I didn't care. After a whole winter of stifling inactivity, all I wanted was movement and the sight of the capital disappearing behind me.

My family had all known of my intention to leave, so I didn't feel bad about evading their farewells as I slipped out of the palace earlier. I knew them well enough to know that overnight at least one of them would have come up with a new excuse to try to keep me at home, and I didn't have the patience for it. Not with freedom so close.

I could no longer turn away or make excuses for the strangeness that gripped them—and the kingdom with them. Perhaps these rumors from the northern forests would lead me to more than just the missing princess.

Thoughts of Princess Adelaide inevitably reminded me of the two missives in the inner pocket of my jacket. I had taken to carrying them around on my person, as if they were talismans that could protect me from slipping into the same timidity that gripped my family. Jon was one of my oldest friends, and I could not turn my back on his request for help. Neither could I ignore a similar request from our most powerful neighbor.

It wasn't Jon's first letter, and I would have started out to look for Adelaide long before winter set in if I had not given in to the pleadings of my family. Dominic had never written me before, however, and I had not anticipated his recent letter backing up Jon's request that I take up the search.

I grinned ruefully to myself. I knew that Dominic had spent the cold months in his capital and had been surprised something as paltry as winter had caused the mighty Dominic to turn back from his search for his sister. And I had to admit his letter had initially done little to cast light on the topic. But my sisters had asked for news of Jon and Dominic's wives, and I had read part of the letters to them.

Pearl and Opal might only be fifteen and more than a little scared of their own shadows, but in some areas they had far more knowledge than me. Their excitement had made little sense until I insisted they lay the matter out plainly.

Jon had at least made clear that he was soon to experience his first foray into fatherhood—a rather terrifying prospect. But I had apparently been too obtuse to recognize the far more veiled hints in Dominic's words. Pearl and Opal had expressed no surprise at all to learn that Lily and Sophie were to experience motherhood together just as they had shared everything else. And they had even latched upon certain pronouncements made by Jon and declared their certainty that there was to be another generation of twins. Apparently the signs were all there—although they had lost me when they began speaking of Lily's growing belly and excessive

illness. As they prattled on about the number of weeks and the normal level of sickness, I could only be glad I had not been born a woman. The whole thing sounded utterly miserable.

But at least the news had allowed me to make a little more sense of the emotions that leaked through the words of the other princes. There were some things not even a king could control, and I had seen enough of the two couples' love to know how it would pain my friends to see their wives suffering. Or perhaps I was projecting somewhat when I interpreted their feelings of frustrated helplessness.

I probably should have guessed the news, in truth. Nothing but Sophie's need for his presence would tear Dominic away from the search for Adelaide, and I could imagine what it must have cost him to pen his request to me. But with our troops only recently withdrawn from the region, no doubt he would have hesitated to cross our border in his search anyway.

Reluctantly I reined my horse in, dropping to a more sustainable gait. My younger sisters had managed to cast light on why the search had been passed to me—but I still had no real hint of where the missing princess might be found. No one had received any certain word of her for five years.

Dominic and Sophie had originally held out hope that when news of Palinar's freedom spread, Adelaide would return of her own choice. When she did not, we all began to fear the possible reasons.

Of course, I didn't have quite the same level of concern as Dominic. And while I hadn't been so gauche as to ask for specifics of what had happened five years ago—when their kingdom was cursed and she disappeared—I had heard enough wild rumors to guess that Dominic felt some personal guilt in the matter above and beyond his natural concern for his sister.

It made me all the more determined to be the one to find her. She had always been kind to my sisters when we were children—despite their being three years younger than her—and if there was a chance she didn't want to see her brother, perhaps it was best if he wasn't the one to find her. And, of course, if she were being held against her will within my own lands, who better to right the wrong than me?

My mount must have picked up some of my pent-up energy because he broke into a trot without my urging. I let him go for some time before pulling him back to a walk. I might have let him trot longer, but a faint cry had reached my ears from somewhere to my right.

I turned Cobalt's head in that direction and left the road, my main purpose immediately thrust aside. The vague rumor I was following of strange goings on in the forest had provided no specific location, so I had no set route in mind. My only plan was to travel north and then search through each town and village, and I intended to embrace every adventure I found along the way. So although I had yet to hit the trees, I saw no reason to turn my back on this one.

The panicked voice called out again, and with my bearings set, I kicked my mount into a canter. We shot across the fields and down a small slope, a young woman in simple clothes coming into view.

I grinned. Excellent. A damsel in distress. Perfect practice for when I found Princess Adelaide.

As soon as she saw me, she waved frantically, beckoning for me to come closer. But despite the panic on her face, I could see no threat. No one else was in sight, and the small

farmhouse and larger barn some distance behind her looked well-kept, if not especially prosperous. The only sound to disturb the stillness was the lowing of a cow.

I pulled Cobalt to a halt, still scanning the surrounding area for danger. When I spotted nothing, I slid down to stand beside the woman, my hand reaching instinctively for the bow across my back. The movement was hampered, however, by her desperate fingers which clamped onto my arm.

“Please!” she gasped. “Please, you must help me!”

“Certainly, madam,” I said. “Are you in some sort of danger?”

I had barely finished the words when a fainter cry sounded, high and filled with tears.

“Mama! Mama!”

I spun around as the woman said, “My son. It’s my son.”

From his voice, the child must be very young, but I could see no sign of him. The woman’s fingers still clutched at me, however, and she began to drag me to one side.

I went willingly enough, knowing Cobalt was too well-trained to wander away. The mother only let go of my arm when we reached a section of rocky ground tucked just behind the barn. A copse of trees stood a short distance further on, but in front of them, a number of large rocks thrust from the ground, leaning haphazardly against each other.

“Mama!” The tearful voice came again from among the rocks and understanding filled me. Such an obstacle would have presented far too tempting a target for me in my younger years as well.

“I only turned my back for a moment,” the young mother said, tears in her voice now as well. “I don’t know how he even managed to get the door of the house open to make his escape. But he’s always desperate to get outside—and among the rocks if he can possibly manage it.”

I leaped onto the lowest of them, scrambling up from there, following the sounds that had now turned into wails. I had nearly reached the highest point when I came close to putting my foot into a deep crevice. Pulling back just in time, I peered down into it.

The cries stopped, the grubby, tear-stained face looking up at me with shock. After a moment, the small child blinked and then burst into fresh wails when he realized I wasn’t his mama.

“I’m here,” the mother said, having climbed up behind me and now thrusting her face over the gap so her son could see her. “I’m here.” I could hear her valiant attempt to interject reassurance into her panicked voice.

The child had dark hair and large, dark eyes, and he calmed somewhat at his mother’s presence. Now that I had seen him, I could understand her confusion—he looked more baby than child and couldn’t have been long walking, let alone climbing.

Despite the charged emotions around me, I couldn’t help a smile. A bold adventurer, then. I liked his style.

“I can’t reach him,” the mother said, turning to me. “My arms aren’t long enough. And he’s much too small to grasp onto a rope. I couldn’t bear to leave him here alone, but my husband is working on a distant field this morning and—” She broke off to choke down a sob. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t happened along.”

“Fortunate timing, indeed,” I said bracingly. “You see if you can keep him calm, and I’ll do my best to have him out of there as fast as may be.”

The woman nodded and turned back to the child, cooing reassurances down at him, and adjuring him to be a brave boy. Draping herself across the rocks, she reached her hands down toward him, but her fingers came just short of his as he reached up toward her.

Narrowing my eyes, I took a moment to examine the shape of the rocks. After a moment, I jumped across to the other side, clambering a short way to a spot where I could securely wedge my body. Crouched awkwardly among the rough stone, I leaned over the crevice, my upper chest supported by the edge and both my arms dangling down.

Unlike the mother, I wasn't directly above the boy, but my position put me a little lower. Combined with my longer arms, I managed to clasp my fingers around one little wrist. My instinct was to tug, hard, but I restrained it. I still remembered all too vividly the time I had dislocated Opal's shoulder on a visit back home at the age of ten. I had been swinging her around by one hand—much to the five-year-old's delight—when the accident had occurred.

Instead, I pulled gently, hoping to bring him close enough for my other reaching arm to latch onto his second wrist. The boy didn't budge, however, instead breaking into piercing screams.

I stopped instantly, looking quickly up at his mother. She looked back at me, her face white.

"I think he must be stuck," I said. "Wedged in somehow."

I looked back down again, straining my neck to try to see him from every angle.

"Yes! There. See his ankle." I frowned down at it. "His foot is caught under that overhang. I'm going to have to try to pull him from the other side."

I pushed myself up, the rough rock scraping the skin on both hands, and clambered along until I was on the child's other side, across the crevice from his mother. The rock was higher here, however, and when I reached down, I couldn't get a firm enough grasp on the boy.

With a sigh, I pulled myself up again and placing one hand on the rock on either side of the crevice, I ignored the pain from the sharp stones digging into my palms and swung my legs down into the gap.

The mother gave a small shriek.

"Don't you get stuck as well," she cried.

I smiled up at her. "Have some faith, madam. I spent my childhood engaged in similar pursuits to your son, so I'm not without practice."

Despite my easy words, it was a tight fit for my adult body, and I pressed each foot tightly against the side, preventing either of them from slipping deeper in where they might become wedged as the boy's had done.

Only when I felt as secure as possible, did I reach forward and grasp the boy. Gripping him under his arms, I pulled him gently toward me, jiggling him slightly when I felt his foot catch. This time he didn't cry, bravely holding the tears back now that he could feel an adult's hands steadying him.

"A little to the left," his mother said.

I pulled him slightly in that direction and felt the moment his foot slipped free. I must have been exerting more force than I realized, however, because as the rock released him, his body crashed back into me, nearly causing me to lose my footing.

The mother cried out again, and before I could react, had reached down and grabbed the boy from my arms, pulling him free of the crevice.

"Stay there," I called.

With my burden gone, I used my arms to catch myself just as one boot slipped free. Swinging my foot up, I pressed it against a faint lip of rock and used the uneven surface to push me up and out. A few moments of scrabbling against the stone, and I had emerged completely—unscathed but for a few scrapes and a small loss of dignity. I vaulted down to the clear ground before turning around and reaching up with both arms.

“Here, pass him down to me.”

The mother, now clutching the boy against her chest, both his arms wrapped tightly around her neck, climbed down a little lower and then prized him free. I expected him to cry as she half handed, half dropped him down to me, but he actually laughed—a sweet, high-pitched giggle.

I set him on the ground, dropping to one knee to examine the ankle that had been caught. The skin looked red, and he had several patches of grazed skin, but he appeared to be holding his weight equally on both feet.

“I think he has escaped mostly unharmed,” I said.

“Horsey!”

The boy, who had been gazing curiously at me, had now discovered Cobalt, still standing where I had left him. He took off running toward him, and I had to take several long strides before I could catch him and return him to his mother. Cobalt had less patience for the antics of young children than I did.

“His courage certainly seems to be undaunted.” I grinned at the mother.

Tears still tracked down her cheeks as she pressed several kisses against his hair and cheeks, but they seemed to be tears of gratitude now.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you, thank you. I only wish we had gold so I might give you a reward for your kindness. But I’m afraid a warm meal and a bed in the barn for as long as you might need one is all we have to offer.”

“Oh.” For a moment surprise rendered me silent. She didn’t realize who I was. In the urgency of the moment, I hadn’t given our respective identities a thought, and I wasn’t offended now, either—just taken aback. I knew I should have had an honor guard with me, at least, but I had no desire to be weighted down with any of the royal guard—not when they all displayed the same aversion to action as my family. Still, I had thought that here, so close to the capital...

“I really am so very grateful,” she said, looking contrite, so I hurried to reassure her.

“I need no reward, I assure you, madam. Your gratitude is thanks enough. And indeed my day’s journey has only just begun, and I must be on my way. But thank you for your generous offer.”

I had to repeat myself several times before she could be convinced that I didn’t even intend to stay for a meal, but I had no desire to take any of their food when I had plenty of my own in my saddlebags, and plenty of gold to buy more.

She kept a tight hold on her child as I wished them both the best and swung back up onto Cobalt. As I rode back across the fields, I raised an arm in farewell, an interesting thought beating around my brain. The woman’s lack of recognition had given me an intriguing idea, and the stinging in my hands where they gripped the reins did nothing to dull the anticipation that filled me.

At last nothing stood between me and adventure.