

Hatching A Heroine

Chapter 12

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Lonna lied on her stomach, small wings folded forward up over her chest, her stubby red tail lashing side to side. She kept turning the events of the night over and over in her head.

Melissa had called her beautiful. Even despite her being a half dragon, a runaway princess, and an all around mess... Melissa had called her beautiful.

So Lonna had kissed her.

And then Melissa had said she was a girl, and it felt like everything clicked into place. It felt like everything was exactly the way it was supposed to be...

Except Melissa didn't feel the same way. The moment Melissa asked about that kiss, Lonna knew that Melissa didn't feel it. Didn't want it. Didn't understand it.

Lonna loved Melissa. She'd been drawn to the heroine the moment she arrived, and only thinking Melissa was a man had stopped her from pursuing it. Now she knew Melissa was a woman.

She also knew that Melissa didn't feel the same way- she just saw Lonna as a friend. If that. Maybe she only saw Lonna as the one who dragged her into this mess. Maybe she even hated Lonna...

Except Melissa wasn't like that, was she? Unless she was, and Lonna was wrong, and... And she was hated.

Lonna sighed, shaking her head. She was getting nowhere, thinking like this. She needed to take a walk. She needed to clear her head.

Decision made, she rolled out of bed and onto her feet. Talith turned to face her, as she did so, opening his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand.

“Don’t want to hear it.”

“...I haven’t said anything yet,” Talith muttered, crossing his arms.

“I can hear it all, already. You think I’m being dumb. You think I definitely should stay put. And most of all, you think I should stop pining over someone who doesn’t want me.”

“I think anyone who doesn’t want you is an idiot,” Talith corrected. “...But maybe I was a bit... Harsh. On Melissa.”

Lonna stared at him, hard, while Talith shrugged his shoulders.

“I still don’t think she’s the heroine. And I don’t think anything good will come out of you two fighting your mother.”

“*Don’t* call her that,” Lonna demanded, glaring at her brother. “There’s only one woman I’ll ever consider my mother.”

“No,” Talith insisted, shaking his head slowly. “Sorissa did a lot to you. But she raised you for even longer than Maiar did. You can’t erase that.”

“I had only one mother! One! Not two, not three, *one*. And Sorissa killed her.”

Talith stared at Lonna for a moment, opening and closing his mouth. Then he lowered his head, staring at the ground. “Maiar wouldn’t want you to act out of revenge.”

“It’s not revenge. It’s for the well being of every person on this whole forsaken continent that Sorissa’s reign ends. You know that as well as I do.”

“What I know is that you’re the only family I have left. What I know is that family is important. What I *know* is that you shouldn’t have to take the lead in killing your own mother - whether or not you see her as your mom.”

“...I tried running away, Talith. I tried telling myself it didn’t need to be me. That someone else could summon the heroine, and take care of the threat. That it wasn’t my responsibility, just because I benefited from everything she did. But that was when I was thirteen. I’m twenty one, now, Talith - and I’m the only one who can lead the heroine to victory. So. I’m done running.”

Saying so, Lonna grabbed her cloak off the floor, slipping out the door and walking down the hallway. She passed Melissa’s room without stopping, simply slipping on her cloak and moving toward the manor’s front door.

She was done running. She really, truly was done with it. ...So long as she was only talking about Sorissa. If the conversation turned to Melissa, however - she couldn’t stop the kiss from flashing through her mind, again. The kiss, and Melissa’s confused words right afterward.

She needed a breath of fresh air. She needed to get out of the manor. And honestly, she needed a bite to eat. *She* hadn't been invited to dinner with the countess, after all. Of course, the servants would have brought her food if she'd asked but then she'd have had to eat under Talith's watchful stare. She wanted to be alone for a bit.

Unfortunately, Lonna didn't have much in the way of coinage. Talith had always handled that...

As a blacksmith, he'd made some decent money in their old life. By contrast, Lonna had still been living at home with their mother, doing little more to earn her keep than mending torn clothes. Not that it hadn't been appreciated - lapsi, like her mother and brother, were notoriously bad with needlework, or indeed anything that required a delicate touch.

Part of why she valued the cloak her mother had made so much was because it had taken Maiar so many tries to get it right. Her adoptive mother had refused all help, though. She'd wasted so much fabric, too. It was really a good thing that Lonna was the only one in the family that needed to eat, because they did *not* have much money to spare that month...

Remembering just how many times she'd been forced to eat potatoes during that period brought a small smile to Lonna's lips. It had been the same month she'd met Vellos, who went on to teach her how to sneak and steal.

Even back then, at barely fourteen years of age, she'd been thinking of how best to escape the castle if her mother ever came for her. Of how to survive, if she was abandoned. Of how to make sure she could stay alive, no matter what came. That was why she'd asked Vellos to teach her. She could only imagine what he'd seen in her eyes, to convince him to say yes.

Who'd have thought her first big mission would be sneaking *into* the castle, though? Stealing the summoning scroll. Bringing out the heroine. She'd done so many things her younger self never could have imagined.

She wondered if her adoptive mother would be proud, seeing her daughter like this... Or if, like Talith claimed, she'd have wanted Lonna to stay safe.

Not that it mattered. Her mother was dead. And soon enough, Sorissa would follow.

Then Lonna really would be an orphan...

Lonna shook the thought off, as she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Pressing herself against the wall, she peeked around the corner, to see two guards walking down the hall. Likely on patrol.

What were their orders, regarding Lonna? Were they meant to keep her here? Was she free to come and go as she pleased? Lonna wasn't sure she wanted to know. They were coming right toward her, though.

Looking about, Lonna's eyes locked on a small vase, standing on a pedestal. More importantly, she locked eyes on the shadow cast by that pedestal, and darted toward it. Wedging herself into the corner, between hallway and vase, she focused on draining all light from the area, until the spot was all but pitch black. Then, she bent the light around herself, making herself invisible - at the cost of not being able to see herself.

With a double layer of protection, all she had to do was wait until the guards walked past her. It was a trick she'd employed in the castle, letting patrol after patrol pass her by as she snuck toward the library. She was convinced it would work.

So she was quite surprised when a set of footsteps walked straight up the alcove, and *stopped*.

"Funny," came a dry, familiar voice. "I don't remember this alcove having quite so dark a shadow."

Lonna cursed under her breath, letting her magic fade so that she could glare up at the countess.

The countess responded with a smile, green eyes flicking across Lonna's countenance. "Your power to hide is impressive, Princess Lonna. But you went a little too far, with the shadow work."

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Lonna replied, rising up from a crouch to her full, somewhat unimpressive, height. “What are you doing out this late at night?”

“The guards alerted me the moment your door opened, Princess. I thought if I hurried, I might be able to catch you before you ran off into the night.”

“I’m not running,” Lonna told the woman, glaring now. “I’m just having a walk.”

“Considering your brother isn’t with you, I can only hope that’s true,” Liliath murmured. “That said - you are a guest in my home, and not a prisoner. So while I’d appreciate knowing your whereabouts, it’s hardly a requirement - you are, of course, free to go outside. Though I imagine there’s talk of the princess all up and down the street, at this point.”

“Good thing I don’t look like much of a princess, then,” Lonna retorted, with a small shrug.

In truth, Liliath had a point. She could hide her wings, her tail, and her horns - but not her yellow eyes, or sharp canines. Even if she wore a hood, there might be people who’d recognize her.

It wasn’t like she was in danger, though. The smart ones would be too scared of what her mother would do, and the stupid ones...

Well. She could take care of herself.

“I imagine you *can* take care of yourself,” Liliath laughed, as if reading Lonna’s mind. “I would ask you to go easy on my people, though, if trouble were to arise.”

“...You really care about them?” Lonna asked, frowning. “I always thought nobles were too busy living it up to care about what happened to the people on their lands.”

“Perhaps some are,” Liliath answered, shrugging her shoulders. “I always thought it was foolish to ignore the needs of those who feed us. Which is why I’ll ask you again to go easy on them.”

“Fine. If that’s all? I kind of wanted to go out a bit.” She glanced toward the end of the hallway, where the guards had stopped to gape. When Liliath’s own eyes flicked to them they snapped to attention, and a small smile touched Liliath’s face.

“Not quite all,” Liliath informed Lonna, reaching for her belt. Lonna tensed as Liliath’s fingers brushed past her sword hilt, but that wasn’t what she grabbed. Instead, she pulled from her belt a small pouch, which she tossed to Lonna.

It was surprisingly heavy, when Lonna caught it. “This is...?”

“Coin. Fifty crowns to be precise - it should be more than enough to try a few of the local delicacies.”

“It should be enough to buy a local *house*,” Lonna replied, staring at the bag.

“Why, by the trees, are you giving me all this?”

“...The guards informed me that you were haggling for clothes when they found you.”

“Yeah. And?”

“If you’re to be seen as the queen, at the end of all this, you need to present yourself as one *now*,” Liliath explained. “The people who see you as the princess, as you walk down the street - they should see you as a figure of wealth and power. They should not remember you as the girl who couldn’t even afford a nice dress.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but I’m not exactly the type that exudes royal presence.” Not that this stopped this from slipping the pouch under her cloak, and into a pocket.

“It’s never too late to learn,” was Liliath’s response, a small smile on her lips. “Now - I believe we both had somewhere to go?”

Lonna nodded, slowly, walking past the guards, down the hallway, and out the door.

There were another two guards outside, who glanced at her curiously at Lonna as she exited, but otherwise said nothing.

“...Guess slipping out unnoticed was never going to happen,” Lonna muttered to herself, walking down the steps of the manor, and toward the town.

“Tell me what these are called again?” Lonna asked, staring suspiciously at the plate of food the tavern keeper had given her.

“Kraken balls,” the man responded, for the third time that evening. A tall man, whose thickset arms were covered in hair, he glared down at the cloaked figure who’d taken up a stool at the bar and ordered a plate of his “finest food.”

“But they’re not actually... you know... Testicles, right?” Lonna asked. “You promise, right? Because I will eat most things, but even I have *some* standards.”

“Like I could afford to serve a set of *those*,” the man snorted, shaking his head. “Look. Eat them or don’t. I have other customers to see to.”

Lonna responded by poking one of the lightly breaded balls with her finger. Then, with a bit of hesitation, she popped it into her mouth.

It was delicious. Juicy and warm, and more than filling, by the time she’d finished eating the first she was already reaching for the second. By the time she had finished the fifth, she had already ordered a second plate. It was only after eating her third that she finally slipped out of the tavern, belly full and belt

pouch... not at all lighter. In fact, since she'd received change in helms and caps, it was actually a bit heavier than when she'd entered.

“What am I supposed to do with this sort of money, anyway?” she groused to herself, shaking her head as she walked down the road. She supposed she should be saving it for the journey. She did hope to avoid going into too many more towns, but it wasn't like they could avoid people altogether during the journey. Money might very well come in handy. Even if they hunted their own food, and built their own shelter, there was a chance of their clothes getting torn beyond repair or one of them falling sick and needing medicine, or just... Anything, really.

She was lost in thought, thinking of all the potential uses for her coin, when she bumped into a figure even smaller than she was, sending them sprawling across the ground.

Instantly, another figure stepped out of the shadows, this one just ever so slightly taller than Lonna herself. “What do you think you're doing, walking without looking where you're going?” the new person demanded. “If you've hurt my brother - I'll... I'll report you to the authorities! I'll make you pay for his medical bills! I'll-”

“Relax,” Lonna interrupted, rolling her eyes at the tirade. The girl giving it to her couldn't have been more than thirteen. She was dirty, filthy really, and her clothes were so covered in patchwork that it was impossible to tell what color the

original clothes had been. Her cheeks were gaunt, seeming to indicate she'd gone a while without food.

Her brother, lying on the floor, looked *almost* the same. A touch less thin, perhaps. Most likely the girl was doing her best to keep him fed, at cost to herself. He was also moaning, faintly, and clutching at his arm. "It hurts..." he whispered. "It hurts..."

Lonna did not speak, choosing instead to study the boy. She did know a simple healing spell. It wasn't much, but it would work on minor injuries. She could use it on the boy... but speedy healing took it out of a person, and it didn't seem like he had much to give.

Besides which, as someone who'd undergone quite a bit of pain herself, it was pretty obvious to Lonna that the boy was faking.

"So what's the plan?" Lonna asked, eyes flicking to the girl. "Talk up how much trouble I'll get in with the guards, and then demand I hand over some coins to keep your silence? Or maybe he was supposed to steal my purse when I bent down to give him a look over?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!" the girl insisted, but her voice cracked ever so faintly.

Lonna smiled, in response. "Tell your brother to get up. I'll pay for you two to get a bath, and some food in you, but that's it. I don't respond to extortion."

The boy had stopped moaning, at some point. Now he was staring fearfully up at Lonna, while his big sister walked cautiously around Lonna to reach her brother.

“Who are you?” the girl demanded after a moment. “If - if you really think we’re trying to cheat you, why are you helping us?”

“Because I feel like it,” was Lonna’s blithe answer, rolling her eyes as she did so. She wasn’t going to say it was because they looked too pathetic to ignore. “Also, you seriously need to work on your con artistry. What if I didn’t even have any coin on me? What if I refused to pay? Did you even have a backup plan?”

“I... I’m not admitting to anything,” was the girl’s response. She lifted her chin as she spoke, staring defiantly. “I’m not going to let you trick me into-”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say,” Lonna interrupted, rolling her eyes again. “For now, we’re getting you to a bath. And then some food...”

“The public baths are closed,” the girl replied, in return, frowning. “They closed hours ago.”

“...Fine then. I didn’t want to do this, but...” The girl flinched back at Lonna’s words, but all Lonna did was crouch on the ground and start to etch some symbols onto the road with a piece of chalk. “Relax, would you? It’s a basic cleaning spell. I use it on myself all the time.” Saying so, she regarded the symbols

she had drawn for a moment, gave a firm nod, and then bisected the symbols with a circle.

“Stand in here,” Lonna ordered, but the girl only stared back at her with defiance in her eyes. “For the love of the Majesty Trees, do I need to show you it’s safe?” she demanded, stepping into the circle herself. Bending down to touch the first symbol she had drawn, she poured energy through the drawn lines, causing a flash of light.

When the light cleared, every speck of dirt that Lonna had picked up during her travels had disappeared from her, leaving her clean and refreshed.

“Now you,” Lonna insisted, stepping out of the circle.

“...Why would you do this for us?” the girl asked, for the second time.

“Just get in the circle, before I change my mind.”

The girl glanced at her brother, who was still laying on the ground. Her brother looked back, fear and wonder lighting up his eyes in equal measure. After a moment’s hesitation, the girl stepped into the circle, and Lonna lit it up again.

When the light cleared, the girl’s dress was a patchwork, but her skin was clear and her brown hair was no longer matted and filthy. She looked at herself, wonder in her eyes for a moment, before giving her brother and a firm nod.

Soon both of them were clean. Which meant now Lonna only had to deal with the fact that they were starving.

“Now that you’re clean, it should be easy enough to get you fed,” Lonna declared, turning away from them and gesturing for them to follow her. Although her back was to them, she could still sense their presence with magic, and knew they were standing stock still.

The boy was the first to break, getting to his feet and starting after Lonna.

“Bek...” the girl protested.

“I’m hungry, Travi,” Bek responded. “I know you don’t trust strangers, but... I don’t think she’s a bad person...”

Travi hesitated a moment, but then she jogged up to grab Lonna’s hand.

“Please,” she begged. “Slow down? Bek can’t walk very fast...”

“Fiiiiine,” Lonna sighed, slowing her pace and resisting the urge to smile.

“But only because we’re not going very far.”

Their destination was an inn, right next to the tavern from earlier. The innkeeper had been getting ready for bed, from the nightgown she was wearing, but her scowl turned into a smile when Lonna held up a crown and asked for a room with two beds, and some food.

Soon, Travi was poking at her own kraken ball with a finger, sniffing it suspiciously, and then popping it into her mouth. Only after chewing and swallowing did she finally nod to Bek, who eagerly bit into his without a single complaint or worry.

He probably didn't even realize his sister had been checking for poison.

"So how'd you two end up living on the streets?" Lonna asked, after the siblings had eaten enough to fill their shrunken bellies. "Town seems prosperous enough - does the countess not have an orphanage?"

"No, there is one," Bec told her.

Travi shot her brother a glare, and then sighed. "There is one," she confirmed. "But it's only for citizens. Our mother was a traveling merchant - she died of illness, while visiting the city. She left us some money - but it ran out quickly..."

"We don't even have enough to pay the entrance fee if we leave the city," Bek added, ignoring his sister's glare as he volunteered more information.

"So in other words you're stuck," Lonna murmured. "Not enough money to get anywhere, and if you even try you won't be able to get into town again. That right?"

The siblings nodded as one.

Lonna sighed. "I know a farming village - in the Mirra Valley. Your mom ever take you out that way?"

Travi and Bek exchanged glances, both shrugging haplessly.

“...Guess not. It’s pretty small. But. If you can find your way there, I’m sure the villagers would help you out. If no one else will, you could find someone named Vellos - mention my name, and he’ll take you in.”

“Thanks,” the girl murmured, “But I don’t even know how we’d get there.”

“You’ll need to book passage, of course,” Lonna responded, shrugging her shoulders. “I’ll leave you a few gold coins. Enough for the trip.”

“...Why?” Travi asked, suspicion evident in her voice. “And don’t tell me it’s-”

“Because I feel like it?” Lonna suggested, cracking a small smile. “Maybe I just know what it’s like to be hungry and alone. You’re doing a good job looking after your brother... but it shouldn’t all be up to you. You’re a kid, too, you know.”

“Am not,” Travi protested. “I’m thirteen.”

“Yeah?” Lonna asked, pursing her lips. “Well then, miss thirteen year old, you should know enough about the world to know you never turn down a helping hand when it’s offered.”

“I know enough to know nothing’s free,” Travi replied, eyes stubbornly locked on Lonna’s. “What do you want from us?”

“...Someone took me in, once, when I was thirteen and alone. Maybe I’m just returning the favor, the best I can.” The response was more honest than Lonna had intended, and she found herself averting her gaze from the girl.

The suspicion in the girl's eyes seemed to grow worse, from that, and after a moment Lonna sighed. "How about this, then: I want to know about the runaway princess."

"The... runaway princess?" Travi asked, blinking in surprise. "You mean Princess Lonna?"

"That's the one," Lonna confirmed, a small smile on her lips. "I heard she's in town."

"I heard rumors," Travi admitted, "But..."

"I hear she eats children," Bec whispered, voice low. "I hear she swoops in through windows on dragon wings and eats children who don't listen to their mothers..."

"She does not," Travi insisted, but her voice shook faintly. "I heard she *is* part dragon, though... She sounds terrifying."

"Not the sort of person you'd want to meet on a dark night, huh?" Lonna asked.

Both siblings shook their heads.

"Why do you want to know about her?" Travi asked.

"I don't know. Guess I just..."

"Felt like it?" Travi suggested.

“Yeah. Something like that.” Lonna gave back an easy grin. “Anyway. Mirra Village, in the Mirra Valley. Book yourself passage with a merchant heading that way - and tell them...” Lonna hesitated, here. She’d said to give her name, but after that conversation...

“Tell them L with the red hair sent you,” she decided, at last.

“Ell?” Travi asked, a little suspicious. Slowly, though, she nodded. “And you’ll really leave us coin for the trip? Just because you feel like it?”

“And in return for what you know about the princess,” Lonna reminded her. “I want to hear everything you have to say about her.”

As it turned out, Travi had a lot to say about Princess Lonna. Stories about how she’d eat children notwithstanding, there were tales about she could burn people to a crisp with her breath, and how her bloodcurdling scream announced certain death. Not to mention the stories that she’d only run away so that she could sneak about as Sorissa’s eyes and ears.

Lonna listened to them all, burning into her mind just how people saw her. Just what she was up against, if she did become queen.

Eventually, Bek let out a yawn, and Lonna held out a hand. “That’s.. Enough stories for tonight,” she told them, a small, strained, smile on her lips. “You should get some rest.”

Travi nodded, stifling her own yawn.

Despite the room having two beds, the children curled up on a single mattress.

Lonna, for her part, blew out the lantern before moving toward the door. In the doorway, though, she hesitated, remembering her promise to leave them coin. She wasn't sure how much was needed for the journey, though. "...Trees forsake it. I never was good with money..." she muttered to herself, before sighing and reaching into her cloak.

Not knowing how much they'd need, she withdrew a handful of crowns from the bag.

The rest of the purse, she left for the children.