

This excerpt comes from the eighth chapter of a novel currently being written.

The book begins with Alana, a 17-year-old girl from our world, putting on her grandmother's ring and being transported to a different world.

Upon her arrival she is discovered by Mathan, her companion for the story, and informed that it is her duty to help save his country from a usurper, using the magical abilities that she now possesses through her grandmother's ring. Alana resists, disliking Mathan's cold manners immediately. He tells her that she either helps him, or he won't reveal the information he has to help her return home.

Reluctantly, Alana agrees and they set out on their journey north to stop the usurper, Tameo. They travel together under the guise of a young married couple.

Just before this scene opens they have defeated a group of soldiers sent to capture or kill them and bring them to Tameo. Wielding magic against the soldiers and riding for a full day has left Alana tired. She and Mathan are now trying to find a place to sleep for the evening.

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Just as the sun was falling below the trees in the west and Alana was nearly falling off her mare, Risa, from exhaustion, she and Mathan came around a bend to find the road intersected by a small dirt track off to the right.

Mathan slowed his gelding, Geer. Alana was grateful that Risa saw fit to do the same, since she couldn't get the reigns to work properly.

"There is probably a small farm down that lane," Mathan said, looking over at her. Alana noted distantly that he seemed concerned, his dark eyebrows coming together over his emerald eyes so that a small vertical crease formed

between them.

“Okay,” Alana said slowly. Her tired mind wasn’t working correctly; she couldn’t quite grasp what Mathan was trying to tell her. She blinked sluggishly, waiting for him to get to the point.

“We should see if they could harbor us for the night,” Mathan obliged. “You’re not going to make it any further this evening.”

“Oh, right,” Alana nodded, fighting to keep her eyes open in the deepening gloom of dusk.

Alana watched Mathan look at her for a moment, an assessing expression on his face. Then he dismounted, and walked over to stand by her left foot.

“Can you dismount?” he asked. Alana blinked at him. Of course she could dismount, but she didn’t know why she should.

“Why?”

“If you don’t, you’re going to fall off Risa. Come down now, please.”

Sighing, she kicked her foot out of the stirrup and swung her leg over Risa’s back. Unfortunately, she did so a little too forcefully for her stiff body to handle, and she suddenly found herself toppling backward toward the ground. Or rather, she would have, except Mathan was standing in the way. Instead of just falling off, Alana wound up falling on top of him, knocking both of them over in a very large, very tangled and winded clump.

“You are quite possibly,” Mathan groaned from somewhere beneath her, “the clumsiest person I have ever met.”

“Sorry,” Alana mumbled as she tried to sit up. Her efforts were met with a grunt of pain from Mathan. “Sorry,” she said again.

Deciding the best way to get up was to roll off of Mathan, Alana flung herself to her right, hearing Mathan groan again as her elbow hit something soft.

Once she had managed to roll herself over, Alana clambered

to her hands and knees, then to her feet. Looking around, she saw Mathan was still on the ground.

“Why are you still down there?”

“I have the strangest feeling that it might be safer than trying to get up.”

“Why?” Alana cocked her head to one side.

“Because I am fairly certain you managed to hit every tender spot on my body just now.”

“Every tender spot?” Alana raised her eyebrow wickedly. Mathan blushed a deep burning scarlet, his whole face, from the base of his throat to his hairline, right up to the tips of his ears, turning a dusky red color. Alana couldn’t help herself. She threw her head back and laughed.

“I don’t understand what’s so funny,” Mathan complained as he clambered to his feet, sounding strangely like a teenage boy.

“I just managed to make you blush,” Alana told him, poking him in the chest with a finger, her laugh having subsided to giggles.

“You act as if that’s a trial of some kind,” he replied, absently rubbing the spot where she had poked him.

“Well up until now I’d never managed it.”

“Yes, well. Shall we try and find our way to the farm now, if you’ve finished laughing at me?”

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Alan replied, taking Risa’s reigns from over the mare’s head and leading her toward Geer. “I was laughing at the fact that I made you blush.”

“Well perhaps you can postpone celebrating it until after we’ve convinced whoever owns this land to allow us to spend the night in their barn?”

“Oh fine, if you insist. Lead the way.”

“I need your hand.” Mathan said, making Alana stop in her tracks again.

“What?” she asked, blinking up at him a few times. Now that the adrenaline from falling had worn off, her head was back to feeling muzzy and she had trouble processing this

demand.

“I need your hand,” he repeated, extending his own, “to keep the farmer from seeing the ring.”

“Oh right.” Alana replied, realization dawning through her tired haze. Slowly, she held out her pale right hand, and Mathan carefully wrapped his large tan fingers around it. Alana hoped it had gotten dark enough now that he couldn’t see just how much she was blushing.

“What did you think I meant?” Mathan asked, looking down at her as they walked the dirt track.

“I . . . don’t know,” Alana mumbled.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

Mathan didn’t say anything, so the silence elapsed as they walked. It was getting darker with every step they took, and as it grew darker, more noises started drifting to her from the forest. It had gotten so dark after a time that Mathan and Alana had started discussing whether he should risk making some light of his own. Just as they were coming to a decision, they stepped from the woods into a large clearing that held several structures, light flickering in the windows of the two smaller buildings.

Alana tried to make out the details of the buildings, but didn’t have much success. She could tell that they were small, one story structures, and made of wood without a foundation. They looked rectangular, with maybe two or three rooms each.

“At least they’re still up,” Mathan said, leading Alana and Geer toward the larger of the two houses. It seemed that the darkness settled more deeply around them with light in view.

To Alana, the last of the walk to the cottage seemed to drag on almost as long as that walk to the Bahati village a few nights before. She stumbled enough times that Mathan finally seemed to grow tired of it, because he released her hand and wrapped his left arm around her waist, pulling her close enough that she could lean on him to keep from tripping and

wrapping his light cloak around her shoulders.

Alana wanted to protest, but as had happened so many times before, she was too tired to manage it. Instead, she found herself sagging against Mathan's lean side, working as hard as she could to keep her head up. Besides, the night was becoming chilly and she found comfort in the warmth from his body and his cloak.

At long last, they were at the door of the larger cottage. It stood under a small porch held up by two beams. The whole structure was the rich brown of stained wood.

"Stand for a moment," Mathan said, carefully disentangling himself from Alana and helping her lean against Risa's side. Alana watched blearily as he walked to the door of the cottage and knocked sharply three times. He stepped back and waited for an answer.

It took several moments for the answer to come. The door was cautiously pulled open by a silver-haired man holding a long knife in one hand while shielding his body with the door.

"Who is it?" he growled, glancing over Mathan suspiciously, then out to where Alana stood with the horses.

"My apologies for disturbing you sir," Mathan said, "but I was hoping you might have room in your stable for my wife and me."

"Benat, who is it?" asked a creaky woman's voice from behind the door. Another face appeared behind the man's, a silver-haired woman, the owner of the voice. She looked at Mathan then saw Alana.

"Benat, you old fool. Why are you keeping this poor couple on their feet? Can't you see the girl's about to fall over from exhaustion?"

"And how are we to know whether to trust them, Meerta?" Benat asked her.

"Do they look like they could ransack our farm, all on their own and half dead with weariness?" Meerta replied sharply. "Now quit your squawking and take the horses."

After a quick moment and a swat from Meerta, Benat did

as he was told, muttering as Meerta turned back to Mathan and said, "You best take your wife, dear. I don't think she can walk, and she certainly won't be able to climb into the loft. Best carry her into the barn. We'll put you up in one of the empty stalls. It's warm enough now that you two should be fine with a thick blanket. I'll fetch that. Go on, get your wife." And with a wave of her hand toward Alana, she bustled back into the house.

Mathan came back to Alana as Benat relieved her of Geer and Risa's reigns.

"Come dear," Mathan said to her, "Do you think you can walk?"

"I—" Alana started to say, but at that moment, Meerta came back through the door of the cottage with a large blanket over one arm and a lamp in the other hand.

"Why is your wife still standing?" she demanded, her dark eyes flashing at Mathan.

Mathan, ever knowing when not to pick a fight, turned and placed a hand on the small of Alana's back.

"What--?" Alana began to ask, but was stopped when Mathan scooped her legs into his other arm, tucking her snug against his well-muscled chest. She squeaked in surprise.

"I'll apologize profusely later," Mathan breathed into her auburn hair, as he turned to follow Meerta and Benat toward the barn.

"Mmm," Alana sighed against his shoulder, too tired to scold him, as she should. Instead, she snuggled deeper into Mathan's warmth, and listened to the crunching of his boots on the path.

It took a few minutes for Benat to make a bed out of the straw in the barn that met Meerta's satisfaction. While she fussed, Mathan continued to hold Alana against his chest. It went on long enough that Alana finally dozed off. She only reawakened when Mathan set her down on top of the blanket-covered straw some time later.

She began to mumble something, but Mathan shushed her,

saying, "Go back to sleep. Benat's taking care of the horses. Meerta insisted that I stay with you. Rest now. It's been a very long day."

Alana didn't protest. Instead, she moved until she was comfortable, still snug against Mathan's side - he insisted that Meerta was still fussing around and watching them - then fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Alana woke slowly the next morning, blinking several times in the bright sunlight streaming in through an open window somewhere nearby. It took her a few moments to understand where she was. Bit by bit the events of the previous day came into focus. She remembered leaving the Elderberry Inn in Gressings, stopping for lunch and practicing her magic with Mathan, the soldiers attacking, Mathan fighting the leader and winning, leaving the clearing, and even most of the ride that afternoon. The events of the previous night were less clear however, coming only in fragments through a fog of Alana's exhaustion.

She remembered coming to a farm and asking for shelter. After the walk up the dirt track though, things became hazy. She had a notion of an insistent older woman, a warm blanket, being carried to the barn, but none of the images seemed to fit together.

While she was trying to sort out her jumbled memories, Mathan's square-jawed face appeared around the side of the stall in which she lay. Seeing that she was awake, he stepped into the stall. Alana noticed that his clothes were very wrinkled and his black hair had been smoothed down with water, so that now it clung to his forehead instead of falling into his dark green eyes like normal. There were bits of straw on his breeches, but not his tunic.

Seeing his rumpled state, Alana thought for the first time of what she must look like, having spent the night on a pile

of straw after a day of riding and falling in the dirt. She could just imagine how tangled her own wavy hair must be, the dark circles under her own pale green eyes, the smudges of dirt on her pale cheeks, blotting out some of her many freckles. She tried to sit up, but found that moving her arms and head was nearly impossible. Now that she thought about it, just blinking up at the very tall Mathan took a significant amount of effort.

“Let me,” Mathan said, coming over and helping her to sit up. Alana tried to fight the blush that spread up her neck and cheeks from needing Mathan’s assistance, but she knew it was useless; her fair skin was already bright red.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked once she settled against the wall of the barn.

“Like all the dumb clichés there are about being weak and tired,” Alana replied with a huff; Mathan raised an eyebrow. “We have all of these overused sayings in my world about a person being tired. There are tons of them. There are ones about kittens, and overcooked noodles, and burning candles, and more. And I’m pretty sure all of them apply to me at the moment.”

“Well, you did perform a large amount of magic yesterday, then rode for half a day after that. I’m not surprised that you are tired. I would be tired. I am tired.”

“Well that makes me feel so much better, especially because I can clearly see how weak you are.” Crossing her arms over her chest was slightly less dramatic than she’d been going for, since it happened in slow motion.

“Now I know you can’t be that tired,” Mathan replied, a mischievous tone in his voice. “You are being sarcastic again.” Alana’s eyes narrowed in her patented glare.

They probably would have kept up their bickering if Meerta hadn’t fluttered into the barn then, calling loudly, “Good morning!” She came to stand in the door, beaming down at them while holding a steaming breakfast tray of sticky rolls, preserves of some kind, and porridge with a cup of water on

the side.

Now that she was more awake, Alana got the chance to really look at the little woman. She was shorter than Alana, probably standing no taller than her chin, with a mass of frizzy gray curls tucked under a blue kerchief. She was thin, though not brittle looking. She looked as if she'd seen plenty of lean times, but had held her own. She moved in a sort of shuffling flutter, her arms tucked in close to her sides, her feet hidden by her dove blue skirt. Her grey eyes were bright with cheer, and she seemed completely oblivious to the fact that Alana was still scowling ever so slightly at Mathan.

"And how'd you sleep, love?" Meerta asked Alana, coming over and placing the tray gingerly on the girl's lap.

"Well, thank you," Alana replied, surveying the breakfast.

"Good, good," Meerta clucked, stepping back. "You gave us such a fright last night, you were so tired. Your husband never did tell us what happened."

Alana glanced up at Mathan, trying to take a cue on their story from him, but he was as still-faced as ever.

"We've been traveling to Elida," Alana said carefully. "We'd stopped to rest the horses and eat a midday meal when we were attacked by a roving band of soldiers. They nearly killed us both, but thankfully, my husband is an excellent swordsman. We managed to flee, but the excitement was just too much for me after so many days traveling."

"Oh my!" Meerta gasped. "Well I'm pleased you got away. We're happy to help you. Benat and I know all too well what it feels like to be attacked by soldiers. A group of them came through the other day. Took the little that Benat and I had laid away, and our cow too. Don't you worry, though. You're safe here. They got all they could already, no need for them to come back."

Meerta patted Alana's hand, then turned and flitted out of the stall. And suddenly Alana found that she no longer wanted to eat.

"Mathan," she whispered, looking up at him, "We should go.

Now.”

“You’re in no condition to travel.”

“But we can’t take anything from them!” Alana insisted. “They’ve already been ransacked by Tameo’s people.” Her voice had gone a little hoarse. She felt a prickle in her eyes and a lump form in the back of her throat.

“Alana,” Mathan leaned forward, placing his hand on hers, “be calm. I already planned to compensate them for taking us in. I promise. Please, stop worrying. You need to eat and to rest.”

Alana looked at Mathan, searching his face, only inches from hers. It took a moment, but suddenly Alana became aware of how close he was. For some reason she found this more uncomfortable than any of the times they had pretended to be married. This was real proximity, not the show they put on for everyone else. She felt the blush burn her cheeks and saw in his eyes the instant that Mathan realized this.

He jerked back, almost snatching his hand from atop hers, a ruddy tint burning on his cheeks again.

Alana stared at the tray on her lap, sure that she was evaporating the water with the heat coming off her face. Looking at the food again made her stomach rumble. Remembering how hungry she was helped Alana put aside her misgivings about taking food from Meerta and Benat and she began to eat. She was half-finished with the porridge before she remembered to ask Mathan if he’d eaten.

“Yes,” he replied, “I ate while you were still sleeping.”

“Oh, okay.”

As she was finishing off the last of the sweet roll, Meerta appeared again.

“We should get you out into the sun,” the older woman said. “It’ll do you good, help your strength to return.”

Alana nodded, her mouth still full of sweet bread. When she’d finished chewing, Meerta looked at Mathan and said, “Now then, help her up.”

Mathan bent down, lifting Alana under the arms as she slowly stood. It took a few moments, but eventually she was on her feet, though Mathan had to keep an arm around her waist to prevent her from falling over. Now that she'd eaten, Alana was feeling slightly stronger.

"Come on you two," Meerta called from the main part of the barn.

Alana took cautious steps, testing to make sure she wasn't going to collapse with each one as Mathan held her firmly around the waist with his left arm and grasped her right hand in his, supporting most of her weight.

They eventually made it to the door of the small barn, and Alana began to feel a little steadier. Looking out, she saw that Meerta had laid a green and yellow blanket under a large walnut tree growing between the cottage and the barn. Mathan helped Alana over to it and settled her softly, so that her back was against the trunk of the large tree, facing the rows of trees that took up the entire back half of the clearing.

"Meerta, what do you grow here?" Alana asked, once she was settled.

"We grow nuts. All manner, as you can see," the other woman answered, flapping her arm toward the rows of trees. "Now I've got washing to do. You just rest. Mathan can help Benat with some chores. Go on then boy." Mathan brought her a small book of Mascarán poetry he'd brought with them, then went to help Benat and his son. Alana was left to her own devices for the time.

The day passed slowly, Alana spending the majority of it under the walnut tree, moving with the shadow of the tree, reading poetry off and on. Meerta seemed to have been right about the sun. She felt her strength trickling back slowly as she watched the birds flit between the branches of the trees in the grove. She wondered what kind of trees they were. Almost all of them were flowering in varying shades of pink and cream, clouding the air with a strong perfume when the wind shifted toward her.

Turning her gaze to the rest of the farm, Alana could see a small paddock, two cottages, and the barn she had been in. Alana figured that before it had been stolen, the cow must have lived in the paddock. Now there was a brown goat and a couple of grayish brown sheep cropping the late spring grass, occasionally bleating at each other.

The barn was small, just large enough to shelter three or four animals on a stormy night and hold some hay or straw in the loft for the year. Both of the cottages were simple buildings, each only one room, with a small chimney on one side. It was a small farm, but it had an overwhelming sense of peace and cheer about it. It was a well-loved place, Alana could see that in how clean and well kept everything was.

Sometime around midday, Alana nodded off, dozing in the warmth of the sun filtering through the branches of the walnut tree. Meerta, bringing her a meal of bread and cheese, woke her sometime later. Alana ate it gratefully, then went back to resting and watching the farm.

By the time the sun was touching the tops of the trees on the western horizon, Alana felt almost normal again. Benat, Mathan, Meerta, their son and their very pregnant daughter-in-law joined her on the blanket for the evening meal of more sticky rolls and vegetable stew. Afterward, Alana carefully stood and helped Meerta and the daughter wash the dishes in the small basin inside her hut.

Once they finished, she went back to the barn and, after saying a quick good night to Mathan, settled in for the night. Laying her head on the soft blanket-covered straw, she began to drift to sleep with the scent of the nut trees wafting in through the open window above her head. As she fell asleep, Alana's thoughts turned strangely to the moment that morning when Mathan had leaned close, the soft caress of his breath on her cheek, the golden flecks in his green eyes glinting in the sunlight, the sudden realization of his nearness. Before she could think about it any more, sleep came.