

Rogue Prince - New Camelot Book One

Chapter 1

The searing shaft of daylight drove forge-heated spikes through Darren's closed eyelids. An ale induced headache immediately formed and rumbled between his temples like a galloping charge of heavily armored destriers. The fist pounding on his bedroom chamber added a hundred-fold to his pain. Whoever was interrupting his morning's sleep had better have a good excuse or he was going to kill him and throw the body into the moat outside his turret window.

After disentangling himself from the snarled linens, he eased out from under the sleeping kitchen maid, found his braes and slipped them on. Kicking aside empty pewter plates and tankards, he stumbled to the oaken door and yanked it open.

His bloodshot eyes peered at the court messenger. Out of a parched throat he croaked, "What, by the snarls in Merlin's beard, do you want?"

The uniformed man leered at him. "The King and Queen demand Prince Wolfrick's appearance before the court. It appears Wolfrick has plucked the fruit belonging to Duke Adolph. Get the prince dressed and presentable before Adolph destroys the castle in anger. The Queen has him in a containment pen, but we don't think it's going to hold much longer."

Darren cocked his head and squinted, his ears trying to process the unbelievable words that came out of the messenger's snaggle-toothed mouth. He shook his head then grabbed the turning courier's tunic in a tight fist. "Wait. Wait. Wait. What was that about Duke Adolph?"

"You heard me, Bastard. Lady Constance is Adolph's betrothed. Adolph wanted the lands that come with her dowry and now her father is threatening to renege on the deal. The Queen is so angry; she's turned the lords and ladies of the court into walking icicles."

The courier's narrow lips lifted into a malicious grin. "You're free ride has come to an end with Wolfrick's latest romp. Not even your glib tongue is going to save him from their majesties fury and Adolph's revenge."

Darren slammed the door in the laughing man's face. He snatched a linen under-tunic over his tussled head then reached for his outer-tunic emblazoned with the New Camelot emblem of a leaping stag. His mind raced furiously as he shoved his feet into leather, hand-tooled boots. A groan escaped his lips as he sorted the ramifications. Dallying with a royal's wife or fiancée could, in extreme circumstances, render the serious repercussions of hanging, dismemberment and quartering. Sometimes, the matter was settled by a duel to the death or first blood, as a salve to wounded pride and honor. It was the offended lord's prerogative to select the means of punishment once the perpetrator was judged guilty.

Had it been anyone but Duke Adolph's fiancé, the matter would most likely end with severe chastisement and banishment for him and Wolfrick, once again, and a significant payoff to the offended lord to drop the charges.

He released an oath under his breath. Any sensible lord would take the bribe, with the blessing of the Goddess Danu, but not Adolph; for it was Adolph who had the most to gain from Wolfrick's demise. A spark of hope ignited in his breast. Surely, Duke Adolph would not want to cause a riff between him and his brother, between him and the most powerful sorceress in the land? Even if he lusted for revenge, that sword swung both ways. Adolph may take Wolfrick's life, but he'd be forever looking over his shoulder for Queen Bardou and King Gunnolf to strike back.

Anguished helplessness roiled in Darren's gut. Wolfrick had finally managed to put himself in a position most deadly. The possession of New Camelot's throne teetered on a dark abyss and that abyss was named Wolfrick Asarlaís's, King Gunnolf's only male heir to New Camelot.

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Prince Wolfrick's eyes fluttered open, widening at the sight of the pink nipple before him. His red-rimmed eyes blinked as two brain cells not sodden with wine connected and he remembered whom he had taken to bed last night. Ah, yes. His lips twitched in a satisfied grin. He had awoken on the plump breast of Lady Constance. A feline stretch behind him lifted his lecherous features. Arabella, the court's most skilled prostitute and his father's favorite, laid a languorous arm across his chest and snuggled closer to his heat. He'd almost forgotten about the second woman he'd enjoyed. Now this was the way to avoid a hangover—two delicious ladies to see to his every pleasure.

He and Darren had grabbed several bottles and slipped away from the royal banquet last night. Darren had disappeared into the shadows with a buxom kitchen wench. As pre-designated, Lady Constance discretely left the banquet hall and met him in the corridor to the royal family's chambers. Arabella's tentative rap on his door was the prelude to a frolicsome threesome. The night couldn't have been more pleasurable on his first night home from exile.

He puffed a breath of air onto the pink nipple and watched with satisfaction as it came to attention for him.

Constance moaned, "Wolfrick, you were magnificent." Her eyes still closed with sated lust and sleep, she curled her fingers into his locks and kissed him. Not to be outdone, Lady Arabella

rose up on her elbow and peppered sweet kisses over his nape and back. The sensations heated his blood and reawakened his appetite.

The solid oak door slammed the granite walls of his inner bedroom sending thunder ricocheting through his skull. High-pitched squeals of surprised embarrassment drove away all chances of a satisfactory outcome. Darren's irritated voice chafed him as he chastised him.

“Zounds, you foolish blackguard! Do you know what you did last night?”

In answer, Wolfrick waved with a flourish to the two women in his bed grabbing for linens to cover their naked figures.

Bemused, he reclined his now aching head and watched his squire race around the room frantically separating the jumble of courtly dress. “My good man and companion in debauchery, what has you so agitated this morning?”

The tall, muscled servant threw various articles of clothing at him. Darren was barely dressed himself. His under tunic was on inside out, his hose were not firmly secured to his braes, and his outer tunic and girdle were thrown over his broad shoulders in wrinkled layers.

“The queen and king are in the main hall with Duke Adolph. The tension is so high errant power is flying everywhere. The royal family is frantically setting out wards to protect the court from stray bolts.” Darren kicked aside a pair of wine bottles and found a green velvet tunic embroidered with a gold stag under the bed.

Wolfrick sat up exposing a broad chest lightly dusted with dark curly hair. Shoving a stray lock of raven black hair out of his blue-green eyes, he slipped out of the bed and donned the clothes as Darren threw them at him.

“And why does this concern me?” Wolfrick bent over the bed and slowly kissed each of his companions as Darren searched for the state crown under layers of entangled hose and garments.

“Their majesties have summoned you. And I might add she is furious.”

Wolfrick froze in his sensual administrations. “Summoned me? What for? What did I do this time to incur my parent’s wrath?” He slipped on his hose and secured them to his braes.

Darren pointed to Lady Constance. “Her. She is Duke Adolph’s betrothed.”

“What?” Wolfrick looked at the round brown orbs peering over the edge of the bed sheet. “You’re my uncle’s betrothed?”

“Well,” she hedged, “the marriage contract was signed but we haven’t held the ceremony, let alone consummated the wedding vows.”

Wolfrick’s suddenly rubber legs dropped him on the edge of the bed, the implications of his lustful night of passion turning his dissipated face chalk white.

He held a trembling hand to Darren. “I didn’t know. I really didn’t.”

Darren snarled back. “Don’t apologize to me. If you’d stopped getting exiled, you’d know what was going on at court.”

Ducking to avoid a girdle embroidered with gold threads flying towards his head caused the room to spin around. The rapid reversal of blood flow made Wolfrick dizzy. Or, was it the copious amounts of wine he drank last night impairing his weak legs? He grabbed the bedpost for stability. He’d just made love to a royal’s fiancée. Not just any royal. Oh, no he had to sleep with the fiancée of the most feared warrior in New Camelot—Duke Adolph. Men had been executed for a much lesser affront. Happenstance, this warrior was his uncle, next in line to the Asarlaís throne if the king’s son was incapacitated or . . . deceased.

He took a quick look in the burnished copper mirror hanging from the wall as he donned his over tunic and secured his girdle. Aye, he looked like he'd had a good tumble. He needed a shave and a comb to be presentable. A massive roar of thunder shook the castle. Maybe later—if he was still alive.

Darren's thin-lipped mouth confirmed his possible lack of future. "Wolfrick, when you get down there, don't be an ass and remember everything your father taught you. Adolph is foaming at the mouth. He's positively rabid. If you get distracted, he'll eat you alive."

"What about her?" Wolfrick pointed a finger to the trembling Constance.

"I'll get both of them to their chambers." Darren grabbed an ivory handled sword enclosed in a jewel-encrusted scabbard. "Here, take this with you. You may stand a chance if he asks for mortal combat and Danu overlooks all your transgressions."

Wolfrick's grey face settled into grim lines. "I can't. Even if I should win, Adolph's men would..." He tossed the sword onto the bed. "No I just can't. I won't give him a reason for a coup."

"Then don't rely on your fighting skills and magic. Use your brains and be apologetic."

Wolfrick stomped his feet into soft leather boots custom made out of deer hide and tried to ignore the nausea roiling in his stomach.

"And whatever you do, do not further anger the queen and king." Darren's last words of caution caused him to pause.

"How angry is she?"

The angst in Darren's eyes spoke volumes. "You've gone too far this time, my liege."

Wolfrick winced at the emotion reflected out of eyes so much like his own. He straightened his back and vowed he would go down like the royal he was. He donned a cocky grin and flicked a two-finger salute to his squire and best friend. Only friend, come to think of it. He clasped Darren on the shoulder with false promise.

“Don’t worry, squire. All will be well.”

The two of them had had many an escapade since coming out of swaddling. Had Darren been born on the right side of the bed, he’d have been recognized as his brother. Unfortunately, the king’s bastard was stripped of his magical power and not given royal status. It was a small concession to appease the powerful sorceress-queen.

Darren spoke rapidly as they strode away from the royal living quarters down smoky torch lit passages to the main hall.

“Duke Adolph has ambitions. Lady Constance’s dowry was his means to gain the land along the river. Your little liaison has decreased her value to a mere pittance.”

Wolfrick chuckled. “I assure you, there was nothing little about it.”

Darren cuffed him. “Idiot! Quit acting like you have maggots in your head. Your neck and probably mine are on the chopping block. Get serious.”

The closer he got to the throne room, the more static Wolfrick felt. The air was supercharged. The stench of ozone from discharged lightning permeated the hall.

“Your uncle is the king’s most loyal liegeman. He’d already gotten approval from the Council for the union. Both families were happy with the match.”

A burst of stray power overhead showered him with burning ash. He quickly brushed the smoldering embers off his tunic. Somebody was losing control of their powers. Not a good thing in a crowded assembly of nobles who couldn't defend themselves against errant magic.

“With this marriage he would be one of the wealthiest knights in the kingdom. Now all he has is a ruined bride and the humiliation of being cuckold. He wants your manhood tacked to his stable wall.”

Wolfrick took a quick peek around the stone corner into the great hall to assess what he was up against. Queen Bardou sat at King Gunnolf's right hand in their ermine covered chairs-of-state. His uncle stood on a small dais within an electrified containment field to the right of the queen. The knight's deep-set eyes burned with bloodlust. Wolfrick hoped the electrified cage was strong enough to hold him while he pleaded his case.

The air temperature around him plummeted. The queen had seen him and this was her way of letting him know she was displeased. He straightened his shoulders even more. He refused to show his fear.

His breath puffed out like miniature clouds as he marched up to the royal couple. The crowded assembly parted to let him through. Depending on the individual's feeling towards him, their faces held spiteful satisfaction or tearful despair. The temperature continued to drop as he crossed the slate floor until his teeth were chattering. He upped the intensity of his protective shields with a quick spell. The air around him shimmered like a distant mirage and the temperature became tolerable once more.

He looked around at those in attendance. Adolph had his premier guard armed and stationed at the exits and in close proximity to the royal family. *Goddess, help me*, he begged.

One wrong move from him and his family's blood would seep between the smooth stones of the court floor.

He ignored the throng of nobles closest to the royal couple and gave a false bravado bow to his parents. "Majesties." Then he turned to his uncle and bowed lower, "Duke Adolph."

"Not enough subservience." The queen's voice was as cold as wind scouring mountaintops in the dead of winter. An invisible hand slapped him, sending him painfully to his hands and knees.

He shook the bright lights floating before him away. So much for protection spells.

"A more fitting position for a dog," she snarled. The opulently dressed court buzzed with murmurs and catcalls.

He looked up to his father with a silent plea for leniency in his eyes. He noticed King Gunnolf's beard and heavy mane of hair was more laced with silver than the last time he was in court. His father's visage, closely mirroring his own, was tired with deeply lined wrinkles from countless nights of worrying over his kingdom and his relationship with his wife. Awareness shook him to his core. His father had grown old.

The King's eyes darted to Adolph's men lounging near Wolfrick's sisters and their husbands and shook his head ever so slightly. Wolfrick felt a fist clutch his stomach and squeeze.

He jerked with the loud retort of the Lord Chamberlain beating his staff of authority on the floor for silence. The man's deep stentorian voice rang out across the assembly.

"Prince Wolfrick, you have been accused of seducing Duke Adolph's betrothed. How do you plead?"

Wolfrick's head turned slowly to his mother. The only show of emotion in the creamy complexion of her face was the disgust glittering in her eyes. Judge, jury and executioner, she waived a bejeweled hand inviting him to stand.

He was in an untenable position; damned if he fought, damned if he didn't. Wolfrick felt a surge of anger course through his blood. He would not be subjected to this farce of a trial. He did nothing wrong but please a willing maiden. It was her responsibility to tell him she was betrothed. In a fit of pique, he shouted out, "I plead not guilty."

The court erupted in speculation. Their voices buzzed like a disrupted hornet's nest. From the corner of his eye, he saw Darren put his large hands over his face in dismay and shake his head. The Lord Chamberlain pounded his staff with zeal. He bellowed out over the crowd's head, "Witnesses said you led Lady Constance from the banquet hall to your chambers where she stayed all night."

"I said I did not seduce her. I did not say I didn't bed her."

The hall exploded in laughter. Adolph's face turned purple with raging malevolence. Deadly balls of purple power rolled down his arms and swirled within the containment field. His father's face was equally livid. Purple eruptions of flame spiked from his fingertips. The queen remained emotionless and deadly calm in a sea of court chaos. He'd never seen her so still and quiet. For the first time since Darren woke him, he felt the cold fingers of fear. Something bad was going to happen and it wasn't going to be in his best interests.

The Lord Chamberlain's staff pounded the floor. "Quiet," he roared. The crowd ignored him until the queen stood. Silence settled in the room like a shroud over the dead.

“Account for yourself.” Her words lashed across his back. He studied her face, trying to get a feel for her emotional state. Oh, yeah. That’s right. She didn’t have any for him. Okay. What state of mind was she in? Her dark fathomless eyes bore into his. He could see the flecks of glaciers shining from them. It was the look she gave those who threatened her kingdom before she killed them. Lethal. She was in a lethal mood.

If he was going down, he wasn’t going alone. It would be nice to have some beautiful talented company to join him in Donn’s netherworld. Despite his brain ordering him to shut up and offer profuse apologies, his mouth opened with its normal satirical nimbleness.

“I think I performed quite well. If you don’t believe me, ask Lady Arabella if she and Lady Constance have any complaints. They were both with me last night.”

An invisible fist from his father knocked him back to the floor. He slid backwards across the pavers on his leather braes. Their majesties combined magical force held him pinned down when he struggled to rise.

The collective astounded intake from the crowd sucked the air out of the chamber. All heads turned to the king. His square-jawed face was a granite mask. If Wolfrick had any hopes of getting a reprieve from his father, he’d just lost it. The king turned to his queen and nodded.

“Impudent whelp.” The purple balls circling Adolph’s powerful arms ripped through the containment field. Everywhere they hit, massive chunks of rocks burst into flesh cutting shards. Courtesans and sycophants ducked and sought protection from their deadly impact. The ruling family waved their hands and quickly established protective shielding that captured and rendered the projectiles inert.

The queen hissed at her brother-in-law, “Control yourself before you hurt the innocents.”

Adolph released a lip-curling sneer. He growled, "There are no innocents in this court."

King Gunnolf took Queen Bardou's hand into his. The royal pair approached Wolfrick and looked down their noses at him.

Wolfrick stared up into the disappointment in his father's eyes. The resigned look that followed was a painful reminder of what a failure he was. He gave his father a regretful shrug at being such a disappointment then a curt nod, accepting their punishment.

The court held their collective breath. It was so quiet in the large chamber, not even the swish of silken garments could be heard. King Gunnolf pronounced the sentence. "Duke Adolph is entitled to your execution. Whereas, he'd have his revenge, he recognizes that you are our sole male heir. Because he is your uncle and loyal to the crown, he has graciously agreed to another, we think, more fitting punishment."

Wolfrick struggled fruitlessly to get up from the floor. Why hadn't he listened to the Druids and learned more about magic manipulation? His mother held her free hand out. Her magic held him prone on the floor.

"Sit. Stay." A brittle laugh escaped from her lips. For the first time in twenty years, she actually smiled at him. It did not reach her hard unforgiving eyes. He got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. This was going to be much worse than he'd originally thought.

His father continued. "We are sending you away from New Camelot to the realm of the Old World without your powers. There you will stay until you find someone who can lift the curse."

"Curse? What curse?"

Queen Bardou explained. "Until you find someone to love more than you love yourself, you will remain a dog as befits your behavior."

“A dog? What do you mean, ‘a dog?’”

From his parents’ united hands, an opaque red fog came forward and wrapped around him. Excruciating pain pulled every muscle, sinew and bone apart; the agony of it was overwhelming, forcing him to lie on the floor and writhe. His neck arched; scream after scream came forth until he thought he would go mad. Through the torture, he could hear Adolph’s harsh laughter; deep and rumbling like the roar of a distant sea, it washed over him. After what seemed an eternity, the pain ebbed away, leaving him trembling in shock.

“My lord!” Darren’s voice broke through the haze surrounding him. Gentle hands lifted his head and torso. “Wolfrick, what have they done to you?”

Wolfrick looked down the length of his body. He was covered in coarse grey fur. He lifted his arms. Paws! He screamed but instead a man’s voice, a terrified howl left his throat.

Tears ran down Darren’s upturned face. “My liege, he won’t survive. He knows not how to fend for himself.”

King Gunnolf placed a firm hand on Darren’s shoulder. “That is why you are going with him. You will watch over and protect him. You will make sure the prince does not come to any serious harm.”

Wolfrick looked on in horror as his half-brother went through the same torturous transformation. When the haze cleared, a large raven trembled on the floor. Darren cawed and flapped his wings as he tried to establish balance in his new form.

A bird was going to protect him from the humans and see to his needs? He closed his eyes and let his shaggy head fall to the hard cold floor. He was doomed.

