

Deleted Scene from *Blood Magic & Brandy*

Originally, I had Rane skip out early to go meet the ambassador from Teruelle without an entourage. But that slowed the pace of the first few chapters, so I just had her shirking her duties at the exact right time to drop out of a tree and land on Nevar. The unfortunate part was less of Jadran in the first couple of chapters. I like him and there may be a novella in his future.

Sunny's easy gait ate up the miles. An hour later, Rane saw the dust cloud kicked up by the contingent of guards. Jadran urged his horse into a gallop to meet her, thunder on his face.

"Was it worth it, Your Highness?" he demanded, pulling up his mount next to hers.

Sunny was the opposite of Bash. The mare liked anyone with a spare lump of sugar or an apple to offer. Sunny gave the other horse a nuzzle. Yes, her Sunny was a harlot of the first order.

"I think so, Captain."

Rane had followed the carriage as best she could once she'd located it on the road. It was a sturdy vehicle, the horses well-cared for, but not ostentatious. No wasted money on an impractical coach. The driver wasn't cruel but didn't seem pleased to be on a journey. This could be for many reasons, and she couldn't discount the possibility he didn't care for his employers.

Rane bit her lip at the thought of Nevar's muscular body under hers again. She couldn't seem to get the feel of him out of her mind. This was no time for simple lust. This was a time for reason and restraint. She was on a diplomatic mission, and lusting after the ambassador was decidedly a bad idea.

Her twenty-first birthday was so close. With her formal investiture on the horizon, she had to think about her future, which was intimately entwined with the good of her kingdom. She didn't get the opportunity for simple, no-strings relationships anymore. When she married, it wouldn't be for love. She would marry for peace, or for trade, or for power. A young lord from a middling county in the neighboring kingdom would gain her country nothing.

"Your Highness, the king placed me in charge of your safety on this mission. I can't very well do that when you go on unsupervised sorties."

"I am perfectly capable of ensuring my own safety. You've seen to that. And it's not like there aren't two more heirs. If I go, at least I won't have to put up with all this nonsense anymore."

"It would be my head on the chopping block should I return without you. I like it right where it is, Princess."

Rane grinned wryly at the captain. She certainly didn't want anyone else to pay for her decisions.

"Fair point. They'll be here shortly. I have just enough time to change."

She dismounted, and a guard hurried over to take Sunny's reins. Rane pulled the rumpled mess of her dress out of the saddlebag and shook it out, making it marginally better. She whistled for Bash and headed into the trees.

Bootsteps approached as she slid on her shoes, fully dressed. She looked up at Captain Jadran, his face now relaxed upon seeing her dressed appropriately for the

occasion. When would they realize she was, in fact, grown up and able to make good decisions?

“Scouts say they should be here in a few moments.” His eyes narrowed. “Is that dirt on your face?”

She stuck her tongue at him and pulled the mirror out from the saddlebag once again. Licking her fingers, she rubbed them at the streak of grime on her right cheek.

“There. A proper damn princess.”

Jadran heaved a sigh but couldn’t keep his mouth from twitching up. They all tried so hard, but being a lady just wasn’t in the cards for her. She’d always want to ride, hunt, and fight. Too bad the kingdom couldn’t go to Betony.

Rane ran her hands down her skirt, straightening it once more before mounting Sunny. She walked her horse to the center of the road, Bash at her heels, and took her place in front of the formation. The captain joined her, keeping his horse a step behind and to her left. They waited for the approaching carriage train, a cloud of dust over the next ridge.