

Excerpt: One Hot Knight

A Knightly Challenge

By

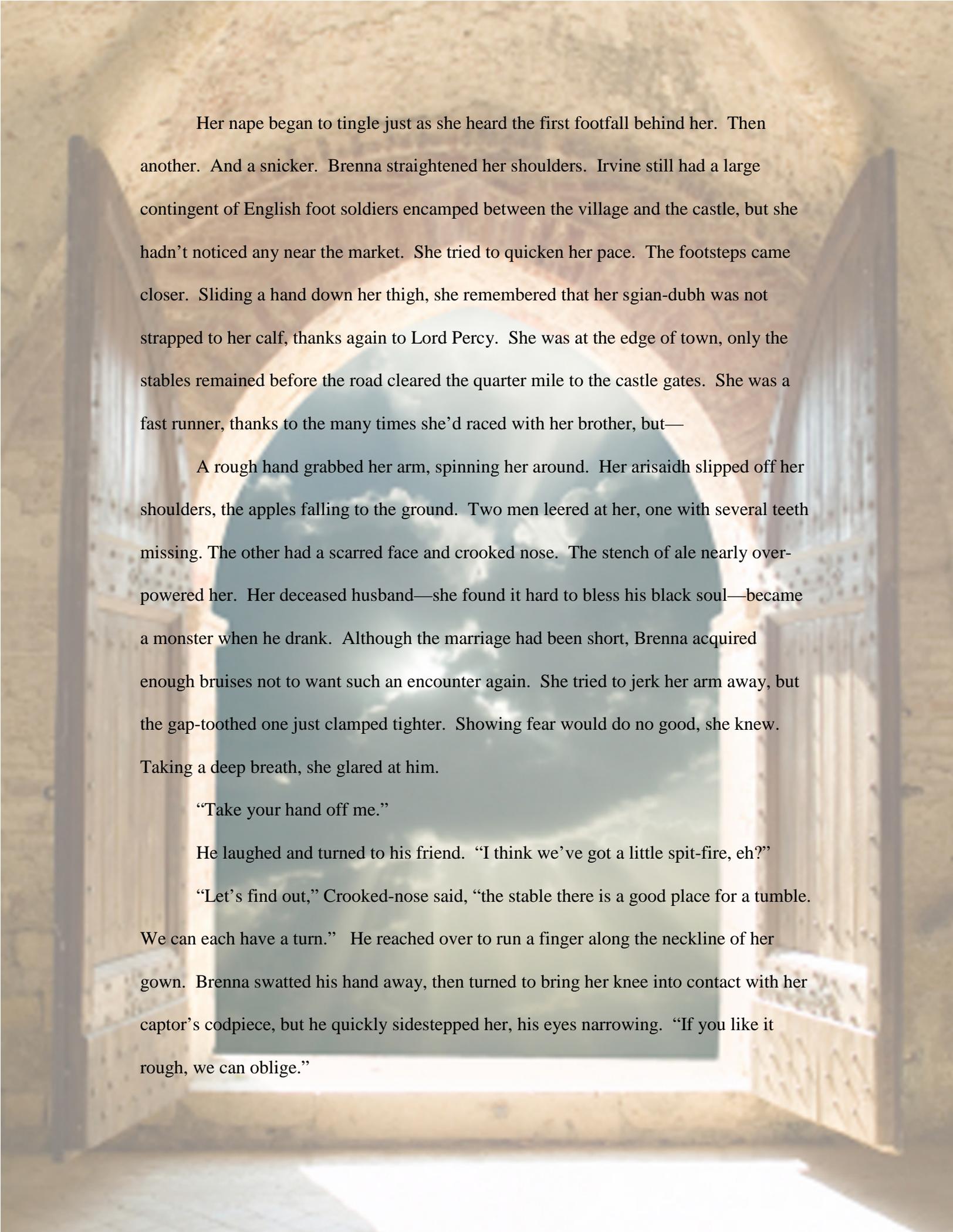
Cynthia Breeding

Scotland, 1297

“Go on with ye, lads! I’ll be but a wee minute behind!” Brenna Montgomerie waved at the four young boys struggling to carry sacks of flour from the mill up the muddy castle road and muttered a curse under her breath at the despised English who had invaded Seagate Castle. Not only had they taken her father and every other noble hostage, but they carted off able-bodied ghillies as well, leaving old men and young boys to do the work. As if the massacre at Berwick hadn’t been enough last year, old Longshanks was determined to grind the Scots into dust on the western coast as well.

Brenna sighed, pushed her unruly auburn curls off her face, and turned back to the market square, making her way to the fresh produce area. She’d spied a vendor selling early-season apples and knew how much her younger brother and sister loved them. It was little enough she could do for them since they had to stay hidden from the English in an old sea cave near the entrance to the harbor.

Her own mouth watered at the sight of the apples, but she only had coin for two, thanks to the English Lord Percy locking their coinage in one of his trunks. Biting back another oath, she tucked the apples carefully in a fold of her arisaidh and started toward the castle. English carts had created ruts in the road, making the footing treacherous.

The background of the page is a photograph of a stone archway. The arch is made of light-colored stone and is flanked by two wooden doors with intricate carvings. Through the arch, a bright outdoor scene is visible, featuring a path leading into the distance under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The lighting is warm, suggesting a sunny day.

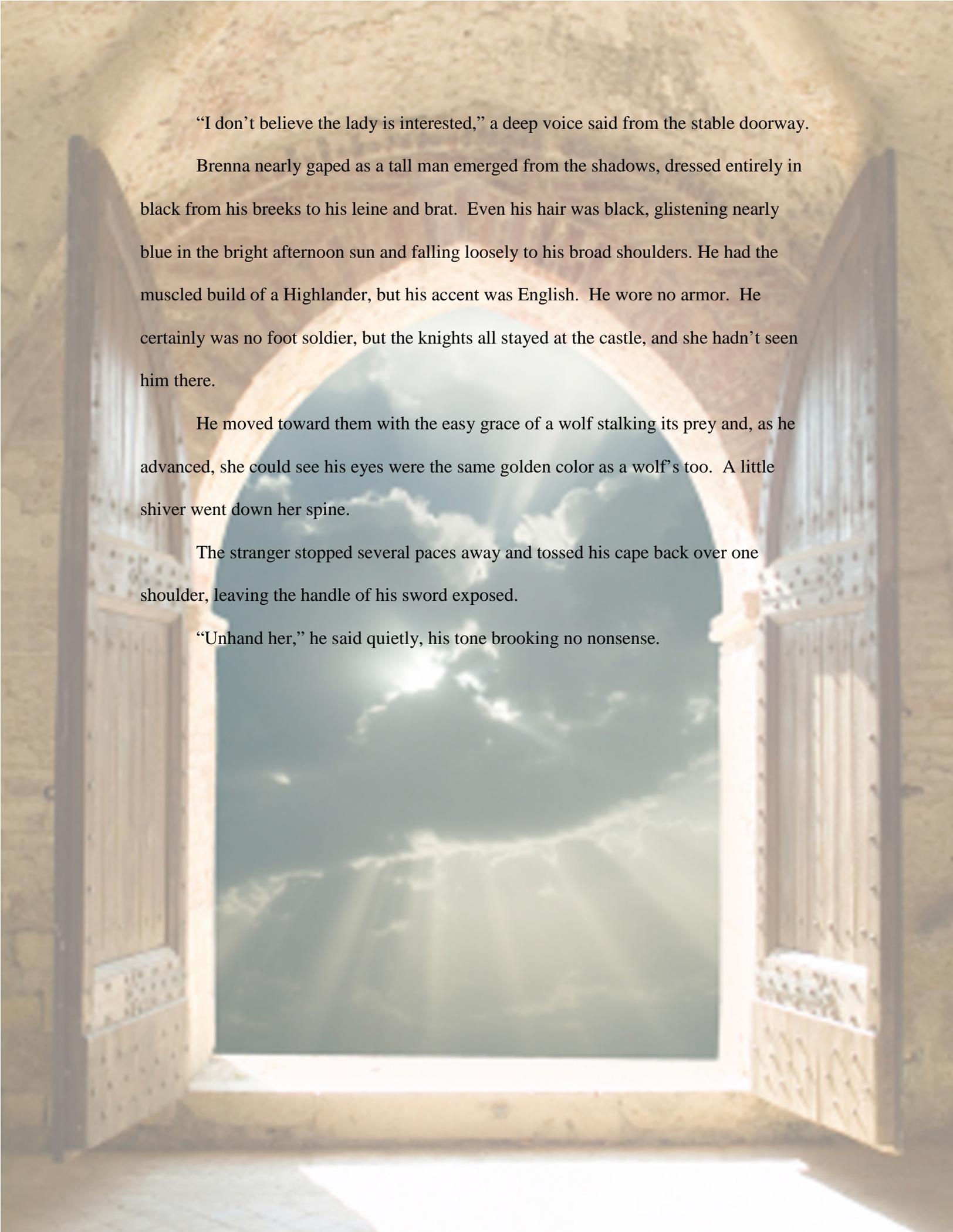
Her nape began to tingle just as she heard the first footfall behind her. Then another. And a snicker. Brenna straightened her shoulders. Irvine still had a large contingent of English foot soldiers encamped between the village and the castle, but she hadn't noticed any near the market. She tried to quicken her pace. The footsteps came closer. Sliding a hand down her thigh, she remembered that her sgian-dubh was not strapped to her calf, thanks again to Lord Percy. She was at the edge of town, only the stables remained before the road cleared the quarter mile to the castle gates. She was a fast runner, thanks to the many times she'd raced with her brother, but—

A rough hand grabbed her arm, spinning her around. Her arisaidh slipped off her shoulders, the apples falling to the ground. Two men leered at her, one with several teeth missing. The other had a scarred face and crooked nose. The stench of ale nearly overpowered her. Her deceased husband—she found it hard to bless his black soul—became a monster when he drank. Although the marriage had been short, Brenna acquired enough bruises not to want such an encounter again. She tried to jerk her arm away, but the gap-toothed one just clamped tighter. Showing fear would do no good, she knew. Taking a deep breath, she glared at him.

“Take your hand off me.”

He laughed and turned to his friend. “I think we've got a little spit-fire, eh?”

“Let's find out,” Crooked-nose said, “the stable there is a good place for a tumble. We can each have a turn.” He reached over to run a finger along the neckline of her gown. Brenna swatted his hand away, then turned to bring her knee into contact with her captor's codpiece, but he quickly sidestepped her, his eyes narrowing. “If you like it rough, we can oblige.”

A stone archway with two open wooden doors. The doors are made of light-colored wood with decorative patterns. The archway is set into a textured stone wall. Through the archway, a bright, cloudy sky is visible, with sunlight streaming through the clouds. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

“I don’t believe the lady is interested,” a deep voice said from the stable doorway.

Brenna nearly gaped as a tall man emerged from the shadows, dressed entirely in black from his breeks to his leine and brat. Even his hair was black, glistening nearly blue in the bright afternoon sun and falling loosely to his broad shoulders. He had the muscled build of a Highlander, but his accent was English. He wore no armor. He certainly was no foot soldier, but the knights all stayed at the castle, and she hadn’t seen him there.

He moved toward them with the easy grace of a wolf stalking its prey and, as he advanced, she could see his eyes were the same golden color as a wolf’s too. A little shiver went down her spine.

The stranger stopped several paces away and tossed his cape back over one shoulder, leaving the handle of his sword exposed.

“Unhand her,” he said quietly, his tone brooking no nonsense.