

## PRAISE FOR MELANIE DICKERSON

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“When it comes to happily-ever-afters, Melanie Dickerson is the undisputed queen of fairy-tale romance, and all I can say is—long live the queen! From start to finish *The Beautiful Pretender* is yet another brilliant gem in her crown, spinning a medieval love story that will steal you away—heart, soul, and sleep!”

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“I couldn’t stop reading! Melanie has done what so many other historical novelists have tried and failed: she’s created a heroine that is at once both smart and self-assured without seeming modern. A woman so fixed in her time and place that she is able to speak to ours as well.”

—SIRI MITCHELL, AUTHOR OF *FLIRTATION WALK* AND  
*CHATEAU OF ECHOES*, ON *THE BEAUTIFUL PRETENDER*

“Dickerson breathes life into the age-old story of Rapunzel, blending it seamlessly with the other YA novels she has written in this time and place . . . The character development is solid, and she captures religious medieval life splendidly.”

—BOOKLIST ON *THE GOLDEN BRAID*

“Readers who love getting lost in a fairy-tale romance will cheer for Rapunzel’s courage as she rises above her overwhelming past. The surprising way Dickerson weaves threads of this enchanting companion novel with those of her other Hagenheim stories is simply delightful. Her fans will love it.”

—JILL WILLIAMSON, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE BLOOD OF KINGS TRILOGY* AND *THE KINSMAN CHRONICLES*, ON *THE GOLDEN BRAID*

“Readers will find themselves supporting the romance between the sweet yet determined Odette and the insecure but hardworking Jorgen from the beginning. Dickerson spins a retelling of Robin Hood with emotionally compelling characters, offering hope that love may indeed conquer all as they unite in a shared desire to serve both the Lord and those in need.”

—RT BOOK REVIEWS, 4½ STARS, ON *THE HUNTRESS OF THORNBECK FOREST*

“Melanie Dickerson does it again! Full of danger, intrigue, and romance, this beautifully crafted story will transport you to another place and time.”

—SARAH E. LADD, AUTHOR OF *THE CURIOSITY KEEPER* AND *THE WHISPERS ON THE MOORS* SERIES, ON *THE HUNTRESS OF THORNBECK FOREST*

THE  
WARRIOR  
MAIDEN

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# THE WARRIOR MAIDEN

MELANIE  
DICKERSON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Warrior Maiden*

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## CHAPTER 4

EARLY SUMMER 1423  
VILLAGE OF MINDIUS, LITHUANIA

Galloping her horse past the big oak tree, Mulan pulled the bowstring taut. She aimed at the knothole with one eye closed and sent the arrow flying toward the target. It struck the tree but missed the knothole.

“Don’t shoot behind you!” Andrei flailed his skinny arms. “Keep the target in front of you.”

Shooting from a moving horse was much more difficult than when standing still, but she was improving. At least she’d escaped, for the moment, the cooking and cleaning chores. And practicing war skills kept her from facing the uncertain future—and her mother’s grief.

Her stomach churned.

“You put yourself at a disadvantage if you have to shoot behind you.” Andrei was only twelve years old, which was six years younger than Mulan, but he’d accompanied her father on his last two military campaigns as his attendant. “Shoot in front of you, before you reach the target.”

As an orphan, Andrei would only accept food from Mulan and her mother if he worked for it. Mulan enjoyed his company, as



he liked the same things she did—horses and archery. She learned war skills from him. He'd even taught her a bit about sword fighting, although she wasn't very good at that.

Mulan wheeled her horse around. Aksoma was sluggish and awkward at turning, unaccustomed as she was to war games. Perhaps Mulan should be training on her father's horse.

She dismounted and walked toward the tree. As she retrieved her arrow, placing it in the quiver strapped to her waist, she spotted a man in soldier's garb riding up the lane toward her home.

She glanced at Andrei. He bit his lip, unease lining his face.

Mulan dropped the longbow where she stood and raced up the hill.

At the back of the house, she could see straight through the back doorway to the front. Her mother stood in the threshold and greeted the soldier.

Mulan and Andrei stepped inside and hid behind Mother's painted wooden chest. Mulan slid her gaze to the curtain covering her parents' bedchamber door, concealing what was inside even as she concealed herself from the man at the front door.

"Greetings," the soldier answered. "Is Mikolai at home?"

Mulan held her breath at the mention of her father.

"He's not here now. Do you have a message for him?"

The soldier's expression never altered. "Is he likely to return soon?"

"No." Mother hid one arm behind her back, as if she didn't know what to do with it.

"Then tell him Butautas requires his service. He is to report to Vilkaviškis to join the army in fighting the Teutonic Knights who have besieged his ally's castle in Poland."

"His ally?"

"Duke Konrad of Zachev."

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Mother inclined her head in a nod. "Very well."

"His service is required."

"You said that already."

Mulan ducked her head out of sight, but she imagined the soldier giving Mother a sullen look.

"I shall return three days hence so Mikolai and I can travel together."

"In truth, Mikolai has been unwell. He may not be well enough when you return."

"Three days is all I can give him. See that he is ready, or else this property is forfeit to Butautas."

"Of course."

Mulan's stomach twisted. A wave of cold came over her now that she was still. The hose and long shirt, cinched at the waist—men's clothing that she wore when she rode her horse and practiced shooting—didn't keep her as warm as her layers of skirts. And her long black hair was tied at the back of her neck, allowing a breath of cool air to send a chill across her shoulders.

A few moments later, a horse snuffled and hooves sounded on the path, plodding away from their long, one-level stone-and-timber house.

Mulan and Andrei emerged from their hiding place. Mother met Mulan's gaze, then walked past them. She pushed open the chamber door and sighed as she stared in at the body they still had to prepare for burial. "Mikolai could not have chosen a worse time to die."



Evening had fallen and Mulan was helping Mother clean the kitchen when someone called out, "*Ponia Feodosia!*"

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Mulan ran to the front door. Her friend Agafia was trotting up the lane, breathing hard.

“Jankun is badly wounded.”

“*Motina!*” Mulan called over her shoulder.

Mother came as fast as her bad hip would allow. “What is it?”

“Jankun . . . needs your . . . healing salve,” Agafia huffed out, bending forward slightly, gulping air.

Mother grabbed a flask, closed the door behind her, and joined them on the lane. “Jankun has returned home?”

Agafia spoke quickly about her oldest brother as they walked, her face stoic and pinched. “His friends brought him home a few minutes ago. It took them a week to make the trip from Poland.”

“How bad is he?”

Agafia stared at her feet. “The priest gave him the last rites.”

“What happened?” Mulan spoke in a hushed voice as they made their way to the main road splitting the village in half, with homes and fields on either side of the rutted dirt path.

“He was captured by the Teutonic Knights. They tortured him, and when they felt he had told them everything he knew about the troops’ position and plans, they left him to die. Some of the other Lithuanian and Polish soldiers found him.”

They soon arrived at the small home Agafia shared with her family. Mulan steeled herself to see the worst.

Jankun was stretched out on a bed, unmoving. Swollen and bloody and bruised, his face was unrecognizable, though she had known him all her life. One of his eyes seemed to be missing, only a black hole remaining. Agafia had been her closest friend, and Jankun had been almost like a brother, once even defending her against the other boys in the village who taunted her because she looked different.

Jankun’s mother was unwrapping bloody bandages on his legs.

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Her eyes were big and round, her mouth agape. She stepped back to let Mulan's mother approach his bedside.

While Mother attended the young man, Agafia and Mulan went to sit in the corner of the room. Three young men from the village who had also gone to fight stood nearby. They must have brought him home.

Everyone silently watched as Mother held out the flask. She and Jankun's mother used their fingers to smear on the foul-smelling salve.

Tears streamed down Agafia's face. Mulan placed a hand on her shoulder. The only sound was the quiet crackle of the cook fire.

Mulan caught the eye of one of the young men. "What's the news of the battle?" she whispered. "Are we winning?"

He glanced at the door and moved in that direction. Mulan followed. When they were outside in the dim light of sunset, he said, "Our army retreated and is hoping for German reinforcements." He shook his head. "The captain fears the Teutonic Knights may continue conquering Polish territory and expand here next. They're brutal, stealing people's food, killing farmers and peasants if they tried to resist. And when they take prisoners, instead of trying to exchange them or putting them in prisons, they torture them."

His eyes took on a vacant look. "It's a miracle Jankun isn't dead. And they say when their grand master, Rusdorf, comes with more knights, there will be no stopping him."

The name Rusdorf was familiar. Her father and Andrei had told her stories about his fierceness on the battlefield, as well as his grudges toward certain people and his hatred for women.

"We will defeat him." Why had she said that? But she didn't want to take it back.

The young man's lip curled as he peered down at her. "Rusdorf wants land, castles, power. Thousands of trained fighters do his bidding, and his men are either hired mercenaries with no

conscience or think they're taking other people's land in the name of God. How can our smaller army defeat them?" He turned and went back into the house.

Mulan's heart sank. How indeed?

But a strange yearning stirred inside her. She wanted to fight against cruelty and injustice. The threat might be coming to her small Lithuanian village. She had to protect herself, her mother, and her people.

For now, though, the fight was far away. She could almost see that foreign land of Poland, the fields and forests that had become battlegrounds, where innocent people were starving and being killed by the invading force. She longed to help them, to defeat the enemy so they never came to endanger her own people.

But how was that possible? A woman, eighteen years old, was expected to marry, to have children, to cook and clean and sew, not fight.



Marriage was the only way Mulan could take care of her mother.

She hastened to clean the crumbs of her breakfast roll off the table, avoiding her mother's gaze.

"Algirdas is healthy and strong, does not drink too much wine, and you'll never starve with him as your husband."

Mulan understood why her mother wanted her to marry Algirdas. But he smelled of his profession—bloody meat. He was not as old as her other prospects, and he was wealthy enough to take care of her and her mother when Butautas cast them out of their home. Except . . . she had always dreamed of leaving her village and seeing other places, doing something important.

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But dreams could not keep her or her mother dry, safe, and fed.

“Algirdas is a hard worker,” Mother said. “Try not to judge him until you’ve spent some time with him.” She limped to the cupboard where a small barrel of spiced beer was stored.

Mulan placed the bread on the table, along with a knife and some butter. She took the cup of spiced beer from her mother’s hand and carried it to the table, then ran back as Mother filled the other cup from the barrel’s spout.

“There’s no need to hurry.” Mother got that look on her face—pursed lips, brows drawn together.

“Yes, Mother. I shall walk as slowly and gracefully as a swimming swan when Algirdas comes calling.”

“Hmm.” Mother still wore that worried look.

Mulan said a quick prayer and then saw the pigs wandering into the front entryway of the house.

“Shoo!” She bounded toward them and swatted the air with her hands. But the pigs were not as eager to leave as she was to get them out. As she pushed the sow’s shoulder, one of the piglets darted between Mulan legs. She tried to step over it, but her foot caught on its portly body. She pitched forward and landed on her hands and knees on the stone floor.

Mulan jumped up and looked down at her pale blue kirtle. Her heart thudded at the mud stains marring the beautiful fine linen fabric of her best dress. Her wide headband had fallen askew, and she pushed it up.

A heavy sigh sounded behind her. Mulan turned to see her mother standing there, hands braced on her hips.

“It’s not so bad. I don’t think he’ll even notice.” Mulan snatched up a cleaning cloth. “Perhaps I can wipe most of it off.”

Her stomach churned at the memory that sprang to mind of

her father yelling at her. She must have been only about six or seven years old, and her mother had been teaching her to make *cepelinai*. She was carrying the bowl of curd with which to fill the potato dumplings and spilled the creamy cheese all over the floor.

“Clumsy! Wasteful!” her father yelled. “Can you do nothing without spilling?”

His words still stung, even though twelve years had passed. Was it true? Was she so clumsy she could do nothing?

Mother seized the broom and used it to guide the pigs out the door while Mulan rubbed furiously at her dress with the wet cloth. But her rubbing did little to get rid of the stains. She didn't have another gown nearly so fine. Her next best one had a stain from spilling soup on it, and another had a hole burned in it from when she'd stoked the fire a little too vigorously and a hot ember flew out. She did have the green gown that was so tight she could barely breathe in it. “Should I go change?”

“No time. I see him coming up the path.” Mother gestured toward the door. “You go greet him.”

Mulan threw the cleaning cloth behind the cupboard, adjusted the embroidered belt that encircled her waist, and hurried to the door. *Move slowly. Take a deep breath.*

She jerked open the door.

Algirdas wore a plain gray shirt that laced up in the front and was open at the throat. His hair was slicked back with some sort of grease, and he carried a bulging hemp-cloth bag.

“Greetings.” Mulan forced a smile.

He nodded and held up the bag. “Two fresh hares for your larder.”

“My mother and I thank you.” Mulan took the bag from his hand. “Please come in.”

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His gaze flickered over her dress, pausing a moment on the stains. Then he stepped inside.

*So he saw the stains on my dress.* Men didn't care about such things, did they? Perhaps she could impress him with something else.

Algirdas sat at the small table where Mother, who was all smiles, had directed him.

"Feodosia, it is good to see you looking well," Algirdas said, but his words were stilted, as if he'd practiced them. "And how is Mikolai?"

"Mikolai has not been feeling well." Mother stared down at the table while she spoke, something she did when she was not being forthcoming. "But we want to hear about you, Algirdas. All is well with your mother, I trust?"

"Thank you, yes. Mother complains of a pain in her shoulder, but she is otherwise well, and business is good."

Mulan sat beside Mother, across from Algirdas, and he stared at her face. No one spoke. What did one say to a butcher? Ask him about his favorite cuts of meat?

"Your sister just had a baby, is that not true?" Mother asked.

"Yes, her fourth. Mother only had two survive beyond infancy, but she is very pleased that all of my sister's babies have lived."

"Children are a gift from the Lord." Mother said the words cheerfully enough, but then an almost imperceptible grimace flickered over her face.

"Mulan is from the Orient, is she not?" Algirdas was still studying her face. "I think I've heard a story about Mikolai finding her as a small child after a battle and bringing her to you. Is that right?"

"Yes." Mother looked down at the table again.

"Why did you never give her a Lithuanian name? *Mulan* doesn't sound Lithuanian."

“The first time I saw her, I asked her what her name was. She said ‘Mulan.’ And Mikolai said, ‘If the child knows her name, then we’ll not be changing it.’ So Mulan has always been her name.” Mother smiled.

Queasiness flipped Mulan’s stomach. Was her Oriental appearance—black hair, slightly darker skin, and almond-shaped eyes—unpleasant to Algirdas? Certain boys in the village had taunted her, calling her “Mongol,” and even some women looked askance at her, as if they disapproved of her. But Mother always told her she was beautiful, and even her father when asked had grunted and said, “You are not an ugly girl.”

But when Mulan was around twelve years old, she discovered that the story her mother had told her about being found as a child by her father after a battle had been false. She heard her parents arguing, and the next morning she asked her mother about it.

“Truth is, your mother was a woman Mikolai met when he was fighting east of here, a woman from the Orient. And when she died, she left a child—you—about three years old. Your father brought you to me, knowing how much I longed for a child.”

Mulan and her mother had agreed not to tell anyone else the truth. Let them believe she’d been a foundling, the result of war.

Algirdas eyed the tankard of spiced beer nearest him. Mother looked at Mulan, raised her brows, then looked at the cup.

Mulan extended her hand and plastered on a smile. “Please, have some of Mother’s delicious spiced beer.”

“Mulan helped me make it,” Mother was quick to point out.

They all picked up the cups in front of them and took a drink. Mother glanced at her, then at the bread on the table.

“Have some bread.” Mulan stood and reached for the knife. “I shall slice it for us.” Holding the loaf of bread in one hand and the

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knife in the other, she sawed through the bread. As she encountered the tough bottom crust of the loaf, she sawed extra hard. She broke through, and her elbow bumped into her cup and it tipped over. Beer splashed onto the floor and her feet—and Algirdas's too.

“Oh, I'm so sorry.” Mulan ran to get a cleaning cloth. She came hastening back, and when she had almost reached where Algirdas was sitting, her foot touched the puddle of beer and shot out from under her.

She flailed her arms, trying to grab anything that might keep her from falling. Algirdas reached out, and she grabbed for his arm but missed. She hit the floor on her back.

“Are you all right?” Algirdas stood over her.

She blinked up at him. He reached toward her. She took his hand and pulled herself up.

“That was not as graceful as a swimming swan.” She tried to laugh, but her face was warming. How could she make a fool of herself with Algirdas there to speak about marriage? And her dress was certainly ruined now, covered in spiced beer.

Algirdas was staring at her. In the meantime her mother must have finished slicing the bread because a slice lay on the table in front of each of them. Her mother was wiping the floor with the cloth Mulan had retrieved.

“Eat some bread and butter,” Mother urged in her cheerful voice. “We will have some *šaltibarščiai* soon.”

Mulan released an inward groan, wishing Algirdas wouldn't stay for dinner. But she didn't have the luxury of wanting him to leave. Her mother would have nowhere to go if Mulan didn't marry someone who would take them both in. They only had two days before they'd be forced to tell Butautas's guardsman that her father was dead and there was no one to take his place.

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Mulan did her best to stand primly and properly as her mother finished cleaning up the spilled beer. But as soon as Mulan sat on the wooden bench, she felt how soaked her gown was. "Excuse me. I shall return in a moment."

Once she was behind the curtain separating her sleeping chamber from the rest of the house, she grabbed the soaked hem and yanked it over her head. *How could I have embarrassed myself so soon?*

She kicked the soiled gown into a corner, then shed the rest of her garments and added them to the pile. Her body reeked of spiced beer, so she grabbed a cloth from the basin of water and wiped herself down. She donned her second-best gown and took a deep breath. She was ready, but she pressed her hands to her head. *Do I have to do this?*

She said a wordless prayer and walked back out.

"A pig will bleed all over," Algirdas said to Mother, "but the secret is to wait overnight, letting it drain, before cutting it up."

"There is Mulan. Dear one, can you spoon up the soup for us?"

Mulan walked over to the pot with the cold beet soup and ladled hearty portions into three wooden bowls. She brought the bowls over to the table one by one. *Please don't let me spill it.* Algirdas was staring at her but averted his gaze when she met his eyes.

Mother asked Algirdas to say a prayer over the food.

"You are Christians, then?" The butcher glanced from Mother to Mulan.

"We are. My family converted when I was a young girl."

They all bowed their heads, and Algirdas said a rote prayer of thanks and dedication in the name of Jesus. Then they began to eat.

Mulan's mind kept drifting to Algirdas. What kind of husband

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would he be? Would he be kind to her and her mother? He owned a large house—a little larger than this one—a short walk from his butcher shop. He was not handsome, but she'd always thought that didn't matter if the man was kind. She would probably get used to the gamy smells of the butcher shop and not even notice them, especially if she felt he loved her. After all, she didn't mind the way horses smelled. She adored Aksoma even when, after galloping through the pasture, her mare stank of sweat and dung.

"Mulan?" Her mother was staring at her. "Algirdas just asked if you'd like to get married seven days hence."

"Uh . . . in seven days?" She gaped first at Mother, then at Algirdas. His expression was noncommittal, as if he was not sure he even wanted her assent.

She noted a mole on the side of his cheek, a black hair growing out of it. "I . . . y-yes." She could always change her answer later, could she not?

Algirdas grunted. "You'll have to listen when I speak to you and cook and clean and mend my mother's and my clothes."

A giggle bubbled up into her throat. Was this how he treated her before he even married her? Listing her duties, as if he were hiring a servant? The urge to laugh vanished, and her insides sank toward the floor. Was she to be treated even worse than her father treated Mother?

But she nodded, hoping to hasten his departure.

He slurped another bite of soup, then scraped the wooden bowl with his wooden spoon.

"Would you like some more?" The ridiculous urge to laugh came over her again. She cleared her throat.

His nondescript blue-green eyes met hers. Her stomach twisted.

"You may come to visit me at the shop tomorrow if you wish."

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He stood up and nodded at her mother. "I thank you." Then he nodded at Mulan—no, he was looking her up and down before his gaze came to rest on her face. "I bid you a good day."

Mulan watched him turn and saunter toward the door. Mother nudged her arm, and she hurried after him.

"Good day." She stood by the threshold as he made his way down the path from the house. He didn't turn around to acknowledge her.

A heaviness settled on her shoulders. How could she marry this man? But how could she allow her mother to be homeless? As soon as Butautas's soldier returned in two days, he'd discover her father was dead and he'd force them out of the house she and her mother had lived in for sixteen years.

An idea, more muddy than clear, wiggled its way into her thoughts, as if it had been waiting for the right moment.

Mulan's fingertips tingled. Mother would never agree to it.

But perhaps Mulan could convince her it was a better way out of their predicament than marrying Algirdas. Because she'd rather do anything, she suddenly realized, than marry that man. And she could appeal to her mother's religious zeal by reminding her of the prophecies.

Mulan filled her lungs with air, then let the deep breath out slowly. Could she do this? Hadn't she been preparing most of her life? She couldn't stop the smile that spread over her face.

But if she failed, her mother would have nowhere to go, and Mulan could never show her face in Mindius again.



## CHAPTER 2

EARLY SUMMER 1423  
HAGENHEIM, GERMANY

Wolfgang's heart beat faster as he and his brother Steffan strode through the castle to meet their father in the library. Would he finally get to do what he'd been training for his whole life?

Father stood by the window, a shaft of late-day sun streaming into the room. Steffan, who was older by a year and a half, was silent, so Wolfgang stepped forward.

"Father. Gerhard said you wanted to speak with us."

Father turned to look at them, and Wolfgang had never noticed before how deep the wrinkles around Father's eyes were.

"I do." Father spoke a bit about the weather, about how it would be getting warmer soon with the onset of summer. Then Father's sober, almost severe expression returned.

"Wolfgang. Steffan. You've both been training with my knights since you were young boys."

"But because you wouldn't send us to train in another lord's castle, we may never be knighted." Steffan spat the words out, his eyelids drooping low over his blue eyes.

“We’ve been over this before. Your mother had suffered the loss of your sister, and when the accident happened involving you two and the shepherd’s little boy . . . I thought it best to keep you both at home. I feared you were not mature enough.” Father’s gruff voice hardened. “I’m sorry you can’t seem to understand or forgive that. Even though, at twenty-two years, you are well old enough.”

Steffan glared at the wall behind Father.

“Father, do you have some news for us?” Wolfgang pointed at the missive his father held.

“*Ja.*” He moved closer to them. “The Teutonic Knights have been burning fields and killing innocent people in Poland, trying to take over the region controlled by a longtime ally of Hagenheim: Duke Konrad of Zachev. I’m dispatching a group of knights and soldiers to help defend his castle and his people. The Teutonic Knights are gathering an even bigger force to—”

Steffan stepped in front of Father. “Shouldn’t we be helping the Teutonic Knights instead?” He folded his arms across his chest. “After all, they represent God and the Church and are our German brothers, and what do we truly know of this Polish Konrad?”

Father seemed to study Steffan. He spoke in a low, deliberate tone. “You know how I feel about the Teutonic Knights. They may have begun with hearts to do good, but for more than a hundred years, they’ve used their affiliation with the Church as an excuse to oppress and dominate, to take land that rightfully belongs to others. And they could set their sights on German lands next if someone doesn’t stop them.”

“They claim they are Christianizing the pagans in Livonia and Lithuania and—”

“Those countries are now officially Christian. You know this.” Father’s jaw flexed and his lips pressed in a hard line. “If you wish

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to travel with the rest of my men, you will ready yourselves. They leave tomorrow morning for Poland.”

“Yes, Father.” Wolfgang nodded.

Steffan smirked. “Will Mother allow it?”

Wolfgang’s shoulders tensed, and he felt the urge to take a step back, to distance himself from Father’s anger—and from the object of it.

Father’s gaze never left Steffan’s. Finally he spoke. “Son, I don’t know where your anger and rebellion come from, but if you’re unable to control it, your attitude may land you in more trouble than my title and fortune can extricate you from.”

Steffan’s cheeks grew red. Wolfgang held his breath, waiting to see how his brother would react.

“I love both of you, and your mother and I’ll be praying for your wisdom and safety in battle.”

As usual, Wolfgang found himself wishing he could do something to help make peace between Steffan and their father.

Steffan’s chest rose and fell with rapid breaths. Then, without speaking, he turned on his heel and left the room.

Wolfgang met his father’s eye. “I shall watch over him the best I can.”

Father heaved a sigh. “He’s not your responsibility, son. But I would be grateful to God to have you both come back to us alive and well.” He clapped his hand on Wolfgang’s shoulder.

Wolfgang bowed his head, and his father prayed over him. “God in heaven, Your power knows no bounds and Your love for Your children is endless. Bless my son Wolfgang and bring glory to Your great name through him. Let him be mighty in battle, gracious in defeat, and humble in obedience to Your decrees. Protect him and protect Steffan, and forge in them the character

and nature of Jesus. I pray this in the name of Jesus the Son. Amen.”

Wolfgang and his father made the sign of the cross over their chests and then embraced, perhaps for the last time for a very long while.

When Wolfgang left the library, Steffan was waiting for him. “I’m going to join the Teutonic Knights.”

“Did you not hear what Father said?”

“Unlike you, I don’t wholeheartedly swallow everything Father says. Besides”—Steffan’s lip curled—“I want glory and honor in battle. What glory is there in defending the castle of some foreign ally? How am I to rise in power and status that way? With the Teutonic Knights I can become a marshal, a commander, or even the grand master and be declared a grand prince by the pope.” Steffan smiled. “Why would I give up that ambition to obey the man who thwarted the dream we’ve had since we were small boys, to be true knights of the realm?”

“Steffan, you know Father cares about us. Besides, we could be knighted by Duke Konrad if we impress him with our valor and skill in battle.”

Steffan speared him with a cold glare. “Believe what you want, but after we leave Hagenheim, no one will be able to stop me from joining the Teutonic Knights.”

Wolfgang’s chest felt hollow as he watched his brother stride away. Would he be forced to fight his brother on the battlefield?



Mulan strode down the dirt street searching for Andrei. She only had one day before Butautas’s guardsman returned, so she moved

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with haste toward the makeshift shack at the edge of their village. When she drew near the trees that surrounded it, she heard a noise behind her.

“If it isn’t the Hun girl.”

Mulan froze, then made a slow turn. Dilgunos stood there, a rock the size of her fist in his hand. He tossed the rock up, then caught it, while two boys stood beside him.

Her stomach sank but she lifted her head, placed a hand on her hip, and focused her eyes on his. “I am not a Hun.”

“Then what are you?”

The boys on either side of him laughed.

“My father is Mikolai the Lithuanian and my mother is Feodosia the Lithuanian, so that makes me Lithuanian.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“Your hearing is faulty.” Her heart beat hard and stole her breath, but she had to pretend to be confident. Although they were all younger than she was, they were larger.

“I think it’s your lineage that’s faulty.” Dilgunos was glaring now, his smile gone.

She didn’t have time for this. “Go away unless there’s something you want.”

“No one tells us to go away,” one of Dilgunos’s friends said.

“A little too high and mighty for a girl.” The overgrown boy glanced to one friend, then the other. “What do you think? Shall we show the Mongol girl not to talk to us that way?”

A frisson of fear snaked through Mulan’s middle. She glanced around, but no one seemed to be on the street, no one she could call on to help her. Algirdas’s butcher shop was not far away, but perhaps she could rid herself of the boys on her own without becoming beholden to the man.

MELANIE DICKERSON

She caught sight of Andrei. Unfortunately, he was too far down the street to get to her before the boys.

To her right was the rock outcropping. She ran toward it, climbed up about the space of her own height, but above that, the face of it was nearly straight up with few crevices or footholds. But she kept going. It was as if her desperation enabled her to see the holds she needed. She scurried up the rock face while the boys yelled insults at her from below.

She was nearly to the top when her hand slipped, then her foot. With only one toehold keeping her from plunging to the ground, she reached frantically and clutched the tiniest crack with the tips of her fingers. The boys laughed and taunted.

*If I fall, God, let me fall right on their heads.*

The rough rock surface scraped her fingertips, but she held on and managed to pull her body up and find the next hand- and toeholds. She finally reached the top and scrambled over the edge.

Mulan lay on her stomach, her breath heaving in gasps. She closed her eyes to whisper, "Thank You, God." That was terrifying, but she was alive.

The boys' taunts had ceased. Were they running around the side of the rocks to catch her? She peeked over the side and looked down. The boys were nowhere to be seen, but Andrei was standing below.

Her friend motioned with his hand. "Come down," he called in a loud whisper. "They're coming for you."

Andrei had accompanied her father to battle, but he was younger and much smaller than the band of bully boys who taunted her.

There was no time to go around the sloping side of the large rock. She'd have to go back down the way she'd come up.

She lowered her feet off the edge of the rock and finally found

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a toehold. It was actually a bit harder going down than coming up since she couldn't see as well where to place her feet. But finally she slid the last few feet and landed on the ground beside Andrei.

"Let's go hide." He ran and she followed him. They raced around the side of the blacksmith's shop and sank into the tall grass.

They were silent as Mulan waited for her breathing to slow. Andrei's face was streaked with dirt and his shirt was torn in more than one place. When he came home with Father after a battle, he would sleep in his own makeshift abode just outside the village.

"Your fingers are bleeding." Andrei took the cork out of his flask he kept tethered to his belt. He took her hand and poured water over the tips of her fingers.

"That's all right. I am well." Mulan let the water drip on the ground. "I was coming to find you, to ask you some questions."

"Me?"

"You have been with Mikolai when he fought the Teutonic Knights. Will you teach me how to behave like a soldier?"

"Why would you want to know that?" Andrei's sandy-brown brows drew together.

"I want to take Mikolai's place."

Andrei frowned at her. "You are talking nonsense."

"Now that Mikolai is dead, Mother will have to forfeit her house to Butautas since Father didn't have a son who could fight in his stead. As soon as he discovers Father is dead, Butautas will throw Mother out and give her house to someone else. Mother found me a husband—Algirdas the butcher—but I cannot marry him. So I must fight in Father's stead."

Andrei raised his brows. "You want to go and fight the Teutonic Knights?" He shook his head. "You'll never survive."

"I'm glad to hear your confidence in me."

MELANIE DICKERSON

“How could you fool people into believing you are a man? Your hair comes all the way to your waist.”

“I’ll cut my hair.”

“You also have other . . . things that might be difficult to hide.” Andrei’s cheeks turned red.

“My *things* are not large, so they won’t be that difficult to hide.”

“Also, you may be good at archery, but you’re small and you’re just not as strong as a man. What will happen if the truth is discovered?”

Mulan’s heart sank. These were the fearful thoughts that had been darting through her own head. But something rose inside her. Courage?

More likely desperation.

“I can do it. I just need a little help and information from you. Father was a seasoned soldier, but I can . . . well, I can pretend to be his son, ready to learn to be a seasoned soldier.”

“That’s not how it works. They will expect you to already know what you’re doing, to be able to fight with a sword. They will assume you’ve been training all your life to take your father’s place.”

“I have been training at archery all my life, and I’m a very good rider. Besides, don’t they need longbowmen even more than knights and swordsmen? What is the worst thing that could happen?”

“They could discover you are a woman, send you home in disgrace, and take your mother’s house anyway. Or do worse things to you. You don’t know how crude some of these men are. Besides, it’s against Church law for a woman to wear men’s garments and pretend to be a man.”

Being excommunicated was the worst thing that could happen to anyone. But wasn’t she an exception to that law because of the prophecies made by the priest and the friar?

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“And who knows how the other soldiers will react when they find out you’ve fooled them. The last time I went with Mikolai, there was one man who couldn’t fight, and during a training exercise, he started crying. The knight in charge ran him through with his sword. He simply wiped off his blade and said, ‘There’s no crying in war.’”

Mulan pushed back a strand of hair. “Then I’ll be sure not to cry.”



Wolfgang and the other soldiers and knights from Hagenheim had almost reached the Polish border. Tonight they would bed down on the Margrave of Thornbeck’s land, as he was an ally of Wolfgang’s father.

All afternoon Steffan had ridden his horse like a madman, galloping far ahead, then coming back looking amused. Steffan didn’t like to talk about anything serious, but Wolfgang was determined to force him to talk tonight.

Wolfgang watched where Steffan placed his blanket. He laid his right beside it and then went to make certain his horse was brushed down and fed. When he returned, Steffan was laughing and drinking wine with two other men. *Ach*, but he was not willing to wait halfway into the night until Steffan was done drinking.

Wolfgang strode up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. “Brother, I need to talk to you.”

Steffan turned and looked at him, as did the men with him. “But I don’t need to talk to you.”

The other men raised their brows and waited.

Wolfgang expelled a breath. “Excuse us, men.” He took Steffan by the arm and led him away a few steps.

Steffan snatched his arm away. “What do you want?” Wine sloshed out of his cup and onto Steffan’s hand.

“I want to know what is wrong with you.”

“Nothing is wrong with me.”

“You know how you are when you drink too much wine—you do foolish things.”

“You’re not my father.”

“You have been angry and unreasonable since you were eight years old, when that boy—”

“Shut your mouth.” Steffan grabbed Wolfgang’s neck, digging his thumb into his throat.

Wolfgang took hold of Steffan’s wrist and pried his fingers off, then shoved him.

Steffan shot him a venomous look and stalked away.

Perhaps that had not been the best way to get his brother to listen to him. Wolfgang groaned. He went to his bedding and lay down. Aware that several men had witnessed the unfortunate exchange between Steffan and him, he laid his arm over his eyes.

His brother had drifted further and further away from Wolfgang and his family over the last few years. Truthfully, though he and Steffan had spent so much time together as boys, they hadn’t had a real conversation about what had happened in a long time.

Steffan refused to talk about it, refused to talk about anything that made him uncomfortable. He held in every thought and every emotion—except anger—and had only accepted Wolfgang’s company if he went along with Steffan’s less-than-noble antics, like teasing their sisters or playing some prank on an unsuspecting person.

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When Wolfgang had started passing more time with his father and older brother Valten and stopped going along with Steffan's foolish impulses, their relationship deteriorated quickly.

Wolfgang had felt so guilty since that terrible day when everything changed and the world no longer seemed like a safe or joyful place. His initial thought was that they should tell their father exactly what they had done, but Steffan had been furious, had even threatened him with violence if he ever told anyone. And since Wolfgang had always looked up to Steffan as older and wiser and stronger, he never told.

But instead of fading from his mind, the secret seemed to grow bigger. He no longer had any doubt that the secret was eating at Steffan, too, making him do the foolish things he did. And yet . . . what had the secret done to Wolfgang? He felt the same shame as Steffan, but he had not become angry, nor had he rebelled against Father as Steffan had done. Had he gone the opposite direction?

Steffan often accused him of never having his own opinion, of always believing whatever Father said. Was Steffan right? Was Wolfgang so afraid of disappointing his parents that he could not be his own man? Was he afraid to disagree? But he had proved himself a capable soldier, had he not? He was no weakling, and was it not wise to listen to his father?

He let out a deep sigh. Neither of them had escaped the effects of what had happened. But it seemed too late now to tell anyone about it. After all, it was so long ago, and there was nothing anyone could do to make it right. But he also didn't want his brother hurting himself and everyone who loved him.

Wolfgang would wait until Steffan came to sleep, and then he would try to talk to him again. Steffan seemed determined to defect to the enemy, and Wolfgang had to stop him.

A while later, most of the other soldiers had bedded down. Finally Steffan arrived. But he grabbed his blanket off the ground and started rolling it up.

“Where are you going?” Wolfgang sprang up to stand before Steffan.

“Away.” Steffan wouldn’t look at him.

Wolfgang’s stomach churned. “Away where?”

Steffan turned a crooked grin on him. “I’m joining the German Order of Teutonic Knights.”

Wolfgang’s voice vibrated as he said, “Are you willing to fight against your friends from Hagenheim? Your own brother?”

“The Teutonic Knights are our German brothers, knights who have consecrated themselves to God and the Church. They are just as convinced that they’re doing right as you are. Who’s to say who’s right and who’s wrong?” He shrugged.

“That’s only an excuse to go your own way, to rebel against Father.”

Steffan blew out a noisy breath. “As if I still care what Father thinks. I am my own man now. Unlike you.”

“Listen. We can still be knighted. If we distinguish ourselves in battle, Duke Konrad might knight us and grant us land.”

“Duke Konrad! Who is he compared to the Teutonic Knights? I can join them and not have to beg for some foreign duke’s favor.”

A heavy stone pressed against Wolfgang’s chest. “No matter what I say, you won’t listen because your heart is hardened to reason.”

“Face the truth, Wolfgang. From now on we’re no longer brothers. We are enemies.” With that Steffan snapped around and stalked toward the horses, leaving the ground next to Wolfgang’s bedding as empty as if he’d never been there.

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The heat deserted Wolfgang and was replaced with a cold, heavy feeling. Should he go after him? What good would it do? Steffan would not listen.

Wolfgang closed his eyes. *O God, I don't know what else I can do. But You can do anything. Please help him come to his senses.*