

Winter's Tale

My name is Winter and I'm a gambler. There, I said it. That bothers many people. You should hear the comments I get. "It's not ladylike." "It's not becoming for a woman" or my favorite "What does your mother think?" Frankly, to quote the American, Rhett Butler "I don't give a damn" My mother would have married me off to a rich neighbor. "He would dress you in silks and satins, dear." Never mind that I would have needed the silk and satin to cover the bruises he would have left on my body. I knew of his peculiar pleasures and wanted no part of them.

It was my uncle who taught me statistics, probability and gaming theory. He recognized in his young niece a keen mathematical mind and although society would never have tolerated a woman in the halls of advanced learning he fed my passion for mathematics. Little did either of us realize, all those years ago, that he was teaching me survival skills that would afford me a comfortable, if somewhat precarious, living.

When my mother told me it was marry or leave, I left and will likely never see home again.



On this night I was in the tavern in a small village relieving the local gentry of their silver. Tonight the game of choice was cards. By twos and threes they came as they had heard that there was a lady playing for high stakes and like all men saw that as their chance to take advantage of their natural superiority and make some quick and easy silvers. Not only do I know the odds on all the games more completely than they ever will, I can usually read their expressions and body language like an open book while giving away nothing with my own demeanor.

Earlier in the evening she came in and took a seat against the wall where without calling attention to herself she could watch those who entered or left. She was dressed as a warrior and wore her sword with the easy air of one who has grown up with that weapon in her hand. She had a mug of ale and was taking her time drinking it. Clearly she was being careful not to lose her reason to the drink.

I hadn't given her a lot of thought until I heard men at the table next to me speculating.

“Do you think she's the one the watch is hunting?”

“Don't know but she seems to answer the description.”

“Should we go and notify the watch.”

“He'll be here soon enough, probably in the next glass, and if it's she he'll deal with her.”

The next glass didn't leave me a lot of time. In other towns, on other nights, men had taken offense at losing



to a woman and had set the watch on me for cheating. I know what being sought by the watch is like. I casually approached the lady's table and asked for a word.

“You must leave, lady, the watch will be here soon and is looking for you.”

She looked up at me and I was struck by her beauty.



“Will you help me?”

“Of course, Lady, if I can.”

“My horse is in the stable. They may be watching for me there to take me when I go to fetch him. I paid the stable boy well. If you would find the stable boy and tell him Isar will need her horse soon and to bring him out, saddle him and give him to you, I'll meet you in the stable yard.”

I made my way to a side door as though I was on my way to the outbuildings but as soon as the door closed behind me I hurried to the stable to find the boy who worked there. Fortune smiled on me as he was outside enjoying the cool air and escaping the heat and smells of the stable.

“Are you the stable keeper?”

“Of course, why do you ask?”

“Lady Isar sent me. She asks you to saddle her horse and have it ready for her soon. I can then hold it for her until she comes.”



I'm sure it didn't take him more than a quarter glass to fetch Isar's horse, saddle him and have him ready to leave but to me, standing and waiting and knowing that the watch would be here soon it seemed like forever. Finally, he emerged from the stable leading one of the most stunning horses I have ever seen. One worthy of his rider.

One moment I was standing with her horse and waiting for her and the next she was beside me. I did not hear her come. I did not sense her presence until she spoke.

“Is he ready?”

“He is, lady. You must flee this place.”

“I appreciate your concern but I will be fine. Take care of yourself. If you were seen with me you may have more trouble than you know.”



She mounted her horse, urged him to an easy trot and was gone. I didn't hear her. Once she left the interior of the stable yard I didn't see her. She was just gone. I was still standing and wondering when the watch arrived. I was prepared to answer questions about the lady Isar. I was decidedly not prepared for our actual exchange.

“Hold there!”

“Sir.”



“Are you the lady called Winter?”

“I am”

“You are charged with cheating at games.”

I put on my gaming face. All sweetness and innocence.

“Who charges me?”

“Our Lord Mayor”

“A large man? Thin hair? Expensive clothing?”

“You remember him then?”

“I do. He is a particularly inept gambler. Know two things. 1) I do not cheat. 2) Playing against him there is no temptation to cheat.”

I thought I saw a small smile and continued

“Have you ever played against him?”

“I have.”

“Has he ever beaten you?”

The smile broadened.

“Rarely.”

Sensing an advantage I pressed on.

“I thought as much.”

He considered that for a moment.



“How much did he lose to you?”

“7 coppers and 12 silvers”

“That is a sum he can well afford. Mostly, I think that losing to you injured his ego.”

I thought that as well. I suggested

“If it helps, I'm planning to be on the first coach out tomorrow.”

This was my first lie. I didn't know where the first coach went much less intended to be on it but at the moment my objective was to stay out of his gaol and if being on that coach would help then I would be on that coach and deal with the destination when I arrived there.

He thought that over long enough that I was truly getting worried.

“If I find you here tomorrow evening I will need to arrest you, Lady Winter.”

“I will be long gone from here by tomorrow evening.” I could not have been more sincere.

The next morning I was on the first coach out.

I have not seen the Lady Isar since.

I sometimes wonder, were the men I heard talking really talking about Isar or were they talking about me?

I will never know...

