

TUMBLING after

CHAPTER ONE

GILLIAN STOOD AT the window in the front of her house and stared at the rain swept street before it. Three horses had passed by already that morning. The riders atop the poor beasts' backs were covered in tarpaulin cloaks and wide brimmed hats to keep what wet from their eyes as they could. News had come earlier in the week that war was far reaching across the kingdom. All able-bodied youths were being called to arms.

Not the youths, for youths implied both men and women.

Only the boys were to be pulled into the fray, the girls left behind for whatever came after the fighting stopped. Boys and men but never the women who fed and sheltered and fought just as hard for their livelihoods as their comrades.

Already the older gentlemen had been hauled off to the front.

Soon they would come for the rest, for Jaq, taken away to some field where he would be handed a sword and taught to thrust and parry that the meager instructions might save his life, and she would be left alone in her village to await news of her...*friend*.

Over the years, the village had grown smaller and smaller. Most of the people who once lived in town had moved further into the country, the king's call for more farmers and the incentives that came with them meant that where once only corn fields grew around their town, now there were more and more plants eating away at the countryside. Cows and goats and sheep paraded down the main street from one farm to another, and that was not counting the great caravans that came to take the butchered meats to the city in the east, nor the grains that were gathered for the nobles to eat.

Always the nobles who ruled them all and demanded the poor townsfolks' compliance with whatever battles they sought to fight.

Gillian did not want Jaq to go to war. She did not want to be left behind if he had no other choice.

He was a brother to her, had been for all her life, was, perhaps, even more if she were to be honest with herself over the same.

But even more than losing her friend, she feared the being left behind.

She couldn't remember a day that she and Jaq had not run amok through their homes. "Terrors," the cobbler always called them, but it was said with a smile and a crust of bread thrown from the baker as they passed by. Gillian knew every mud pit and rabbit burrow down every street and had jumped in as many as Jaq over time. Her hair had needed to be shorn to the roots at least five or six times in her childhood from some such adventure or other. But then she'd been told she was "grown-up" and not allowed to wear trousers anymore, nor race behind Jaq on horseback or on foot for fear that her gown might take a spot. Her mother always thought that Gillian would go to the king's ball and catch the eye of a noble someday.

Gillian wanted no other eye to light upon her than the one she already claimed as her friend.

She jumped at the speckled clattering of rocks against the window she'd been staring out.

Jaq laughed out in the rain at the hand she raised to her heart in demure discomfiture.

Her mother was in the kitchen and her father, well, who knew where the old man was these days, but he wasn't expected until late into the night.

Plenty of time to flee her house and wash whatever mud might come from her flight from her hair later.

What her parents didn't know and all that rot...