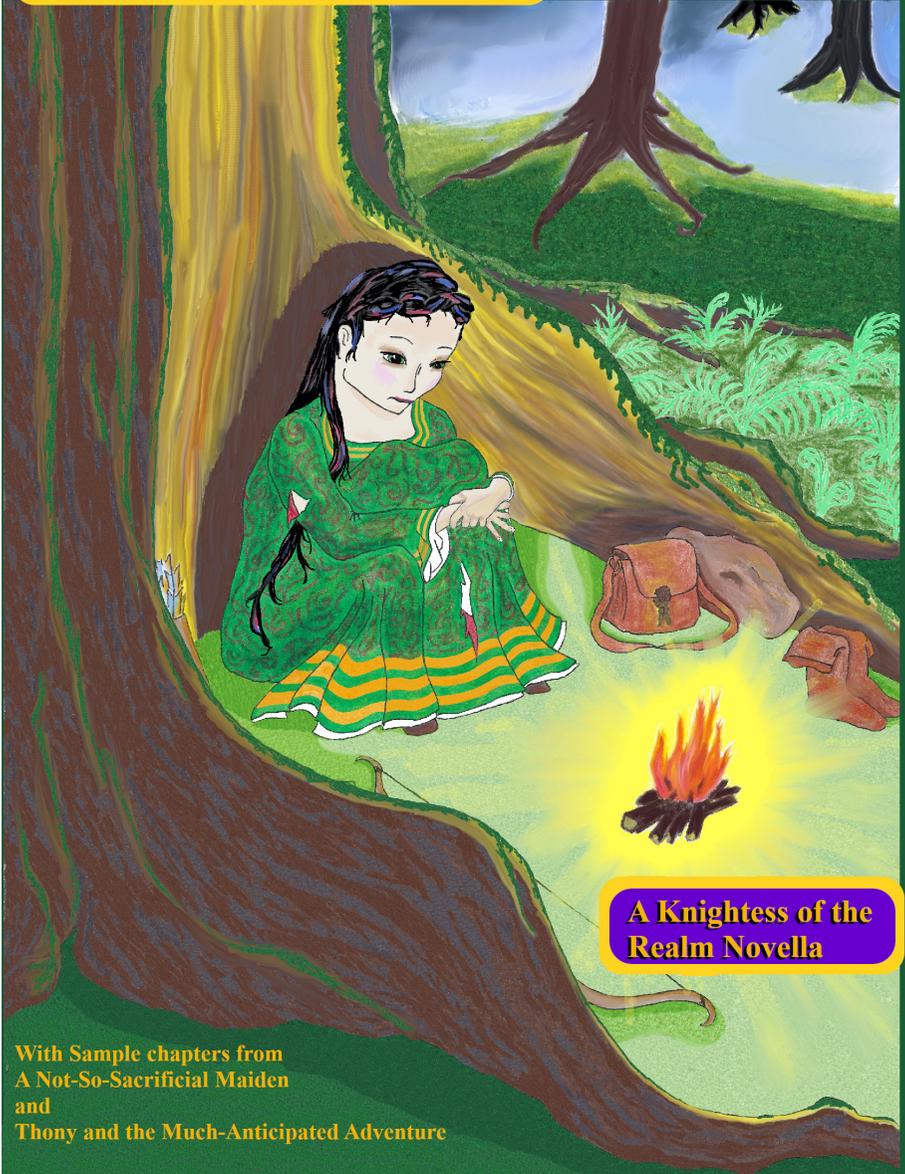


SNEAK PEEK EXCERPT OF THE NOVELLA!!!

Out of the Woods ...Hopefully

YA



A Knightess of the
Realm Novella

With Sample chapters from
A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden
and
Thony and the Much-Anticipated Adventure

KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA



It shouldn't have been that impossible a task to find the Road.

They'd been *on* the bloody thing when they were attacked, after all, and while Karana hadn't paid a great deal of attention to the direction she'd fled, she hadn't run for *that* far before stopping.

Well. She didn't *think* she had.

She'd been... rather less aware of the passage of time than she should have been.

Karana closed her eyes. It didn't help. In fact, the images that seemed permanently burned into her eyelids only became sharper. And none of it helped with the need to survive.

Images... and the sounds that seemed to echo in her ears.

It was her task now to manage the economic disaster Henig had wrought and the King and his nobles ignored. And maybe even extract a little justice for her murdered family.

And to do all of that she needed to survive, to find the Road, and to make it back to the people whom she could convince to do things to make all of that happen.

There was no staying still after all.

She had responsibilities.

OUT OF THE WOODS...

HOPEFULLY

*(a prequel novella to
A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden:
Book One of the Knightess of the Realm)*

*Including sample chapters from
A Not-So Sacrificial Maiden*



*THONY and the
Much-Anticipated Adventure*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

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*For my younger children...
who wanted more Karana that they
could read.*

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Out of the Woods... Hopefully

(a Knightess of the Realm Novella excerpt)

KARANA WASN'T SURE IF THE fact that this tree was large enough for her to huddle between the wall-like heights of its roots was reassuring or... the opposite. It kept the wind off at least. And the ground wasn't so thick with roots that she hadn't been able to dig a small fire-pit, though it was shallower than she'd prefer and she'd had to use the excavated dirt to build it up on the far side. At least that let her see the small blaze, but shielded it from becoming a beacon to whatever might be Out There; she was counting on the smell of the fire to keep wild animals away... wild humans might be another story.

So... the tree was being useful. But, dammit, if it and all its brethren weren't so huge and identical, she might have found the Road by now. The thick canopy of leaves that seemed to be hundreds of feet overhead blocked the sky so thoroughly

that she never had more than a sense of day and night – telling the direction of dawn from sunset was impossible. The stupid things had no lower *branches* either, and at circumferences that would take five or ten men – of Lord *Andros*' height – to encircle, and no branches till several times a man's height, Karana couldn't climb up for a better look either, despite her vaunted sailor's climbing skills. She hadn't retractable nails like a cat to make her own hand- and footholds after all.

And even if she managed to climb up, she was terribly afraid that all there would be to see was... more trees.

It still shouldn't have been *that* impossible a task to find the Road. They'd been *on* the bloody thing when they were attacked, after all, and while Karana hadn't paid a great deal of attention to the direction she'd fled, she hadn't run for *that* far before stopping.

Well. She didn't *think* she had.

She'd been... rather less aware of the passage of time than she should have been.

Glumly, she considered the small pile of supplies she'd managed to salvage. There had been more – *much* more – and likely there hadn't been reason to flee so long after the perpetrators had left. Likely she should have taken more than this – as her parents and other companions would have all wanted her to do – but she'd been unable to think straight.

Of course, she had also assumed that she wouldn't have to fend for herself more than a day or two. Lord Jaycoff Torvalds – her father-in-law-to-be – sent patrols down this northern branch of the King's Road regularly she'd been told. Patrols led by his sons – one of whom was to be her husband. And they'd only been a half-day's carriage-ride from Thimblestone Keep, Lord Torvald's home, anyways.

What Karana *hadn't* counted on was that after passing a

handful of these huge boles every direction would look the same. Even the sharply sloping ground that she'd become accustomed to as they made their way into the mountains had been no help here. The ground went up, then down, then up again, sharp cuts for streams and inexplicable outcroppings seeming to arise simply to confound her. She would swear that they weren't there when she tried to retrace her steps.

Her 'plan', such as it was, had been to flee the scene of the... massacre... There was really no other word to properly describe what had happened. Thence to circle around back to a different part of the Road and await one of those patrols.

Instead, she'd gotten lost and had spent a bloody *week* trying to find the Road at all.

The few undamaged food items she'd snagged had finally run out, even though she'd been supplementing them with berries and familiar plants. Not that there were that many of those in this cold, northern forest. She reminded herself that the vegetation wasn't *wrong*, it was appropriate to its climate. It was *she* who was misplaced.

So. What did she have?

In the flickering light of her tiny fire, Karana laid out her meager supplies.

No food – she'd used it up this morning and made do on what she could scrounge throughout the day. She'd walked until it wasn't safe to continue – just enough light to find her refuge and build her fire – because if she didn't find the Road *today*, what was she going to do?

Well, she hadn't found the Road. And what she was going to *do* was survive until she *did*.

Or until someone came looking and found her. The co-Heads of House Metreedi couldn't be slaughtered along with

all their escort, and their daughter and Heir vanish without a trace, a half-day's carriage ride from Thimblestone Keep. Lord Jaycoff should have searchers out by now. The *King* should have searchers out – there had been time enough to send a message to Tallspire, if not receive a message back.

Tallspire – oh, dear Goddess. Uncle Andry would be there for the Midsummer Council by now. He was Papa's first cousin and closest friend and all but another father to Karana. She should be there to comfort him when he had the news.

Dammit, *he* should be *here* to comfort *her*.

Or better yet, Papa and Mama should have heeded his advice and never accepted the betrothal contract or attempted this ill-fated journey. Then she'd be home safe in Wave with *them* and all the out-cousins who had served as caravan-guards and drivers would still be alive... and maybe her cousin, Sameer, would actually have managed to escape his overprotective grandmother and aunt and come across the sea from Pardasia to celebrate her sixteenth birthday as he'd promised. As long as she was weaving pretty fantasies.

Instead, she had on the silly northern lady's gown that Papa had insisted she wear to be presented to her new in-laws-to-be when they'd woken up in the wayside inn that Midsummer morning. A birthday present, he'd called the overly-decorated thing while he and Mama had overdressed in their own northern-style couture. Lorabelle would have laughed at this outfit – it was clear from the way the seams were done that Papa hadn't had Moreno's make the dress, though their family was dressed almost exclusively by Lorabelle's family's clothing business.

The gown was ragged now, having had to be cut free from too many thorn bushes in the last week. Karana had kept wearing it – washing it out in streams when she could – in hopes

that the damaged finery would lend credence to her claims of identity when she finally ran into *people*.

She still had the jewelry that she'd been wearing that morning. Most of the specialty-made items concealed a secret – lockpicks in her bangles, for example. Her signet ring – that Papa had given her a few years ago – was the only piece that was just what it looked like. Most of her jewelry had been left behind, however. She hadn't thought to take any of it when she fled...

She had the pair of stiletto knives that had hidden so well beneath those voluminous skirts – Papa had wanted her to play a proper northern maiden, so he'd banned the other, more useful, things she might have carried on her person another time.

She had the small, elegant pouch to hold coins and comb and a mirror. The mirror was smashed – she had no idea how that had happened, but the glass fragments seemed embedded in the fabric of the pouch. She'd need to find a different way to carry things before she injured herself.

Those... were all she had that was her own.

Karana closed her eyes before looking at the rest. It didn't help. In fact, the images that seemed permanently burned into her eyelids only became sharper. And none of it helped with the need to survive.

Images... and the sounds that seemed to echo in her ears.

Curious about Karana?
Check out the book that follows this prequel:

***A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden:
Book One of the Knightess of the Realm***



Or, for more YA fantasy
by Kerridwen Mangala McNamara,
try the Prankster Prince series:

***Book One:
Thony and the Much-Anticipated Adventure***

Book Two:
Thony Goes Astray!
(in the Deep, Dark, and Dangerous Fairy Wood)

And - coming before Summer 2024 -

***Book Three:
So You Want to Be a Hero?***