

The stench of death permeated the castle—the scent sweetened by pleas of mercy being silenced by her men. Maeve closed her eyes and savored it—frowning at the bile she swallowed back.

Perhaps she *did* have some humanity left.

No thanks to Luther Rolfe.

She opened her eyes and met the cold, hard gaze of the former captain of her father's guard. Amazing. Even kneeling and facing death—his severed right hand still clutching his sword—he showed no fear.

No remorse.

Seven years hadn't changed him.

The same couldn't be said of her. Luther's betrayal had ensured that.

She shuddered at the memory always fresh in her mind—Luther's rough hands clutching and tearing her tender flesh—the searing pain until she'd passed out.

She'd come to—hours, perhaps days, later—her broken and used body trapped by the bloody remains of her younger sisters and parents—the ghastly image forever carved into her brain.

She still wasn't sure how she'd clawed her way out of the pit.

“Highness, I may have *slain* you in haste.” She pushed down the urge to cringe at Luther's appreciative gaze. “For such a homely child, you've certainly blossomed.” He gave her a pained smile. “I doubt you'll thank me. So,” he said, narrowing his eyes, “let's finish this. Unless you're planning on *staring* me to death.”

“No.”

She lifted her sword and smiled. Her blade arched down, severing flesh and bone—a spray of blood chasing the freed upward swing of her longsword as Luther's body crumpled to the ground.

Maeve dropped her sword and held her breath while his head rolled forward. She stared into his lifeless eyes, expecting to feel...something...anything other than guilt and self-loathing.

She sighed and turned away—sickened at knowing he'd made her what she was.