

# Maiden's Privilege

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*By Michael J. Allen*

Tala glanced around at the old woodsman's hut, tore a loaf and put half beside the old man's stew. "Now you eat all of that, Ol Pap."

Boyd's hand covered hers. The touch set gooseflesh rampant over her skin. She forced a smile and eased her hand away. Boyd hesitantly licked his lips. Great salt and pepper brows wagged. "Such a good, pretty girl you are."

Tala bent to fill his mug. He reached for her chest with palsied hands, in the process tipping the pitcher of ale over her dress.

"You clumsy old man," she said, brandishing the pitcher at him. "I ought to brain you."

Boyd shrugged. "It's your fault for making a man's blood gallop. I should wed you to my boy Eard, he'd breed you good."

Tala tightened her grip on the pitcher. "Earl got hanged five years ago, Boyd."

Boyd fell silent. His gaze wandered out the cottage window and out of focus. Tala found a scrap of linen and blotted at her dress.

"Best head home, girl," Boyd suddenly said. "The fog's rolling in thick tonight and the Red Star's glaring."

"Are you still trying to scare folks with that old story? I'm not to leave till I see you finish your stew."

"It ain't a story. Folk have disappeared beneath its malice."

Tala harrumphed. "They probably used the fog to escape our King's heel, but either way Ma said you wasn't eating."

"But the fog be malign under the red, be Wyrms' Warning."

"Enough! Ain't no such thing, but if you want me gone, stop gumming at me and eat."

"Tell you true," Boyd mumbled, "nothing a wyrm like better than to sink its teeth into a sweet little thing like you."