

GABRIELLE MATHIEU

GIRL
OF
FIRE



BERONA'S QUEST

CHAPTER 1

Summer, Year 597, Country of Trea, Berona

I WOKE UP BEFORE the sun rose, a bitter taste in my mouth, dried tears scratching my cheeks. I had concealed my sorrow and doubt from Father, meeting his reprimands with defiance. I would not marry any of the men he had suggested, though I was nearly eighteen. Not that I didn't want a man. But the heroic tales that I begged my mother for had formed my taste. I dreamt of a bold suitor with flashing eyes—a man light on his feet who would whirl me dancing to our wedding bed.

I huddled under the blanket, wide awake and still angry. My belly ached. A sharp cramp pierced me. As if the restless night hadn't been enough, my moon time had arrived. The trickle of blood forced me to leave the warmth of the pallet I shared with my little sister. I slipped out from under the covers, grabbed a rag, and pulled on a tunic, before stumbling out of our cottage into the dawn coolness.

The sky was the sullen color of an old bruise, the stars invisible. I blinked in surprise. A fog wreathed the trees by the creek, though it was summer. It wended and slithered, like the coils of snakes, flickering, white, thick. I was suddenly afraid to leave the safety of our yard.

But the winch by the well needed oiling. If I raised a bucket of water, the screech would set the dog to barking and rouse the household.

So I pulled on my boots and walked toward the river down by the ghostly trees, a little unsteady on my legs. I didn't like the look of things. My feet dragged, but the slick of blood on my legs kept me going.

I shivered as I got nearer, the wet creeping into my bones, my back feeling heavy and my legs sodden. The chatter of the river sounded like a thousand mocking voices. I couldn't tell where the blood was anymore; it was blending with the mist, and my thoughts felt cloudy. Only the quickening beat of my heart made sense now.

Danger. Run.

I liked danger, scrambling up rocky peaks, creeping to peek at a black bear and her cubs, climbing to the very top of the pines.

This was different.

My mouth felt dry. The mist thickened and clotted over the swirl of the water. I couldn't look away. I couldn't move.

There was a ripple in the fog. Like thread pulling a shroud tight around a corpse, the vapor coalesced, and a strand of greenish hair fluttered in the close air. Then came the flash of eyes in a glowering face, stark glowing pits, pitiless and empty as starvation. A long thin body emerged from the river, pale like a snake's belly, dugs pointy with dark nipples. Her spectral face was ageless, thin lips stretched back to show a row of needle-sharp fangs. Outstretched hands ended in sharp claws, poised to rip out my throat. The wings were translucent shadows, held high, a raised threat. The water flowed around her, bubbling and seething.

She hissed. "I found you."

My voice trembled. "What do you want from me? Do you mean me harm?"

She slithered to the shallow reeds by the bank, so close now. Her fell breath was like a musty cave; her eyes made me twist and turn inside like a man on a gibbet, still hoping to escape

his fate. This creature was no mere witch, no pallid ghost. She had to be a demon. I wanted to run, but my knees had turned to water.

“I will destroy you.”

The cold fury in her eyes bored into me like a knife, grasping and squeezing my heart. My breath came short. I shook, expecting the strike of her claws, the fastening of those sharp teeth about my neck. My arms came up to ward her but met with empty air. She had not moved toward me.

I took a step back, then another, wondering when she would pounce. “How have I offended you?”

I felt her rage sweep over me like a wave of dark water. “Your existence is an offense.” She rose from the waters of the river bank, taller than any man, and looked down on me, considering. “You are a mere whelp, a lone child blundering through a terrible vast darkness.”

In that moment I felt utterly deserted, more alone than I ever had in my life. I closed my eyes to block out the terrible words as tears trickled down my face. My heart ached. I fell onto my knees, panting, close to the dank earth, which smelled like worms.

“There is no one to protect you. No one to love you. There is only crushing, endless pain.”

My head spun from her threats. It took me a moment to recover. I had a gentle mother, and a father who raised me right. What would he think, to see me beggared on my knees? I forced myself to my feet. She had not left the water.

A memory came, of being small and holding my newly born sister. My mother had lain exhausted, smiling. Father knelt next to her, wiping the sweat off her face.

“I am not alone,” I said.

“You think your father will protect you? I have the gift of prophecy. You *will* be alone. In your hour of need there will be no one. I can spare you disappointment and heartbreak.” The

water of the river gleamed, darker than I'd ever seen it. Her next words were soft, almost kind. "I can grant you an easy death."

I swayed, the sound of the river swishing in my ears, the soft whorls of moving water putting me into a trance. But the current flowed the wrong way now. The shock woke me.

"I need no favors from a demon," I spat out. She was tall and winged. Could I outrun her? I looked around for something—anything, to use as a weapon. Just driftwood. Why had I left my slingshot at home?

Her voice was slow poison, spelling out my doom. "There will be no hearth for you, no home, no friends. All those you hold dear, I will destroy, because of *you*."

The sun's first ray slanted through the trees, a kiss of orange on the earth.

She blinked, and the spell broke. I scrambled up the embankment, clawing at the ground. The root of the willow tree tripped me before I could run, and I fell hard. I could almost feel her warm breath tickle my neck. Where was she?

She stretched from the very edge of the river, neck extended, teeth snapping at air. Her bunching wings, her taut sinews, spoke of her frustration. Her prey was out of reach.

Can she not leave the water?

I wasn't taking a chance. I ran so hard that branches tore at me, and stones bruised my feet through the soles of my boots.