

GODDESS OF FATE  
**RETRIEVAL**  
BOOK 1

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
**BRENDA COTHERN**

# Retrieval

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Book 1

Brenda Cothorn

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By Brenda Cothorn © 2015  
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## Dedication

To my husband who loves me even when the voices in my head take control and encouraged me to write Zarkina's story since she has been a part of me for over 35 years!

## Acknowledgement

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## Chapter One

The storm continued to rage. Its howling winds and sheets of icy rain fell in torrents, beating the cloaked figure crouched behind the fallen deadwood. Bones aching, sides cramping, and chest silently heaving, the figure was as still as deadwood itself while listening for the sounds of pursuit through the storm.

At home in the woods, the traveler could easily distinguish which sounds belonged from those that did not, over the cacophony of the raging storm. The figure was only slightly satisfied that the pursuers had given up the chase.

Lightning flashed and the cloaked figure began to count again, *one...two...three...four...* stopping only when the crash of thunder sounded. The storm was finally moving away.

Playing another round of lightning flash and count before turning, the traveler inspected the remote inn down the steep hill below. The two-story high inn was white washed in paint that appeared a dull gray through the darkness of the storm. The solid front porch held several rocking chairs that swayed back and forth gently in the wind. The windows at the front of the inn shone with the warm, pale glow of flickering firelight through the curtains but shutters on the second floor were closed to the storm. Next to the inn, the general store, also two-stories high, was closed up tight at this late hour. The traveler knew that behind the inn and store, stood a solid barn that was shared by both.

After several more flashes of lightning revealed nothing that shouldn't be, the drenched and exhausted figure began the slow decent down the forested hillside. Leaving no trace was not easy in the rain, but only a trained eye would know a tired traveler descended the leafy slope. Whatever trail was left behind, the storm would soon wash anyway. The field behind the inn was muddy and riddled with the remains of the fall corn harvest and navigating through the soaked earth took the last of the traveler's strength.

However, the thought of a hot meal and a few hours of desperately needed dry rest drove the weary figure on.

As the traveler entered the inn, a matronly innkeeper called out cheerily to someone in the kitchen.

"We've company! Bring some hot stew and some mint tea 'cause our friend here looks worse than a drowned river rat!"

Had the traveler not been so wet and worn out from the weather and flight from relentless pursuers, she may have smiled at old Marad's humor.

The wind howled against the sturdy walls of the Shiny Mug Inn, as though attempting to blow down the building like it was blowing the autumn leaves around outside. Rain lashed at the roof and glass panes seeking to gain access and caused a consistent *tap, tap, tap* noise to echo around the common room.

The hearth blazed with a cozy fire and heated the room was well. Atop the hearth sat an old water clock frozen in time. It was the only reminder of the drought and fires from the Dread Age. Its corners were charred from when the Inn had burned along with the few other buildings in what was once a village.

Marad and Sam, the store owner, were the only residents to rebuild. The Shiny Mug was all

Marad had and others decided that living so far from the cities was not for them anymore. Only merchants passed through the Shiny Mug now, along with a scattering of woodsmen.

The inn appeared just as the traveler remembered, as if frozen in time. The old wooden floors were worn but clean and seemed to have been waxed recently. The roughhewn walls were painted a pale blue and decorated with a few old, but well cared for, tapestries and a scattering of charcoal drawings.

Five handcrafted tables, along with matching chairs, sat around the common room with plenty of room to move between them. In one corner of the room was a small raised platform, with a single stool upon it, where traveling bards and tale-tellers could ply their trade. The smell of lavender laced oak wafted from the hearth and mingled with the smells of rabbit stew and mulberry loaves emanating from beyond the kitchen's swinging doors. As the traveler crossed the room to sit at the table closest to the hearth, she noticed a new rug gracing the foot of the stairs that led to the second floor.

Upon reaching the table, the traveler placed her pack at her feet along with her bow. She did not remove her wet cloak as it was the only thing that hid her and the sword that Marad would surely recognize.

She sipped her cooling mint tea that Marad had brought her and was thankful that Marad was not a nosy, chatty sort of innkeeper. The matronly innkeeper knew just by looking at her customers who wanted to be left in peace and who she could chat up.

Beads of water along the traveler's hooded head reflected the firelight and danced every time she sipped from her ceramic mug. Warmth slowly seeped back into her cold, travel weary bones as she tried to decide whether or not it was safe to get a room for the night.

Listening to the raging storm outside had her torn. Storms were best for covering tracks, but she did not look forward to sleeping on the wet ground another night or two until she could reach the home place. Her lead was sufficient on her pursuers, but if she didn't keep it that way, they may yet catch her. Without rest, they surely would. For the umpteenth time, her mind replayed the events that were the cause of her mad flight.

The contract from the Merchants Guild was a standard one: Guide five merchants through the Broken Arrow Mountains safely from Nomel to Clovir.

She had completed similar contracts for the Guild before and was actually one of their most used guides due to her reasonable fee and reliability. She knew the Broken Arrow range like the back of her hand; from its 'arrowhead' to the north where it met with the Chill Wind Sea, down along its 'shaft' to the break at Twin Sisters Peaks, all the way to the 'fletching' that made up the southeast and southwest of the range. On a map the range looked exactly like a broken arrow running from the north to the south.

There were three passes through the range and all were treacherous, even in the best of weather. The range was continually snow peaked from just south of the Sisters to the Chill Wind. Only the fletching's bared their backs for part of the year.

The quickest route from Nomel to Clovir was through the Sisters, which was perfect for the guide as it was time for her annual trip to the home place. The merchants were friendly enough and they followed her directions and took her warnings seriously. The Guild provided two guards for this trip which was normal for the size of the party. She had worked with Doogan before and liked the grizzled old guard, but Rekah was new to her. He was about her age and aside from catching him eyeing her up along the trip, he seemed like any other guard that worked for the Guild.

*How wrong I was,* she thought.

They were one day through the Sisters on the Clovir side of the range when the attack occurred. Attacks along the passes of the Broken Arrow were all but unheard of as it was difficult enough just to cross the range, let alone try to waylay travelers.

The party was caught by surprise just as they were making camp for the eve at one of the guide's regular stopping points. She had just finished building the fire when she heard the unmistakable twang of a crossbow. She hit the ground near her pack and grabbed her bow while yelling "Down" to

the merchants. From the corner of her eye, she registered them ducking to the ground but not before one of them took a bolt to the chest.

The guide was up and running for the cover of the limited trees before the next twang cut through the air. Another merchant went down. Ogres, hobgoblins, and dwarves were known to live in the Arrow but she never had any problems with them before.

From the sparse cover of the trees, she now knew why. Men were her problem, not the natives. Five men to be exact. *Six*, she corrected herself, thinking of Rekah's betrayal.

She watched as Rekah engaged Doogan, much to his surprise. Two armed men flanked the old guard and the guide didn't hesitate to put an arrow in one of them before trying to locate the crossbowman. He was the threat and old Doogan seemed to have Rekah and the other man well in hand. She scanned the tree line waiting to catch a glimpse of metal. It didn't reveal itself. Another merchant took a bolt, this time in the neck. *There*, she located the marksman.

The guide brought up her bow, pulled the cord to her cheek, and breathed in deeply. As her vision seemed to tunnel to her target, she visualized her arrow cutting through the air to strike true. At the end of her exhale, she released the cord and seconds later heard the satisfying grunt when her arrow struck home, taking the bandit just below his Adam's apple. As she turned her attention back to Doogan and the merchants, she was horrified to see that another merchant was down and slowly bleeding into the frozen ground.

Doogan had taken out what she hoped was the last bandit and was furiously trying to keep Rekah at bay. In his panicked state, the last merchant started to rise and flee. It was his undoing as a second bandit stepped out of the tree line and cut him down.

Before the guide could raise her bow to assist the old guard, the fatal blow was struck. Rekah's blade protruded out of Doogan's back just below his right shoulder blade.

"Find her, we need her alive." Rekah thrust his blade into Doogan one final time as she heard him order the bandits. Four more armored men broke from the cover of the trees and spread out to begin their search.

*Too many*, she thought with a sad sigh and sent a silent prayer to speed along the souls of the now lost party. The guide turned and fled.

No matter how many times she replayed the events, she could not see what she could have done differently to save those merchants and the Guild guard. There had been just too many against them. The more she thought about it the more she was convinced that the attackers were not just bandits, but instead hired sell-swords. Their armor and weapons were too well kept.

*Why had Rekah ordered the men to take her alive?*

Her mind was spinning and she was getting nowhere in her exhausted state. Slowly she rose and approached Marad, knowing that her cloak would be no protection when she requested a room for the evening.

"A room if you please," the cloaked woman requested, her voice raw from her flight down the mountain. She already knew what Marad's reply would be. *How many times had she heard the motherly innkeeper give it to travelers while she was growing up?*

"Happy to oblige ye, I would be, but I no do business with those I nay can see. Your troubles are ye own, but I will know who sleeps under me own roof," Marad said in her cheery motherly demeanor and waited for the traveler to remove her hood.

Bracing herself for what she knew would be coming; the cloaked traveler slowly, and reluctantly, raised her hands to the sides of her hood and lowered it. Before her hood even settled to rest upon her back, the innkeeper gave a loud delighted squeal.

"Zarki? Zarki girl, is that you child? It is!? You're a moon cycle early! We be expecting ye next cycle but oh how ye be a sight for these tired ol' eyes!

Marad was chuckling as she made her way around the counter and before Zarkina could react, she found herself enveloped in a motherly embrace. Returning the embrace, Zarkina remembered all of

the trips she and Calthar had made to the inn over the years.

Cal would bring her to listen to the rare traveling bards or minstrels. But mostly they would come to visit with Marad and Jed. Many days and nights had been spent with the old innkeepers. It still pained Zarkina thinking of Cal, she still missed him so. It had been seven seasons since she'd placed her adopted father, mentor, and friend in the ground, but every year she returned to the cabin of her youth to pay homage.

Zarkina still had doubts as to whether or not she should chance endangering those whom were like family instead of continuing home. Marad was the closest thing to a mother Zarkina had known and she would never forgive herself if her troubles brought her and Jed ill fortune. She smiled as she pulled away from Marad and leaned wearily against the counter that also served as the inn's standing bar.

"No contracts were scheduled for the next moon cycle so I took one early. I had some trouble up at the Sisters, Marad, and a story for another time, so I will only be staying till dawn. I promise to come back and visit after seeing Cal."

Marad frowned when Zarkina mentioned trouble but didn't press for more information. "Well, you're here now, m'girl, let's get ye some warm stew and a hot bath to warm dem bones. Where is Jed?" Marad said to herself. "Jed, where's that stew?"

Marad yelled toward the kitchen then turned back to Zarkina, "His hearing t'aint what it used to be lass, I better go see what's keeping him, and your room is ready. Get yeself a good hot soak and I'll bring along the stew. Go on now."

As Marad approached the kitchen, Zarkina called out, "I think I'll just head up to bed; the food can wait till morning."

"Ye sure m'girl?" Marad smiled with concern.

"Aye Marad, sleep is what I need most."

"Alright then, ye know where everything is, holler if ye dona." Marad turned and went through the kitchen doors.

As Zarkina ascended the stairs, she was smiling to herself when she automatically stepped over the third step from the top. No sooner had her foot landed on the second step down; she lifted it and placed it back on the third. Applying normal pressure, the step made the expected squeal as the rusted nails ground against the wood. Satisfied that Jed hadn't fixed the squeaking stair, she continued on.

Finding her room was not at all hard, for the inn only had four rooms on the upper floor. As she entered 'her' room, she looked around. Everything in the room was the same as when she visited the year before. A small straw filled mattress on a pallet, a wash basin, a mirror, a single chair and small table completed the furnishings. Faded blue curtains that were once vibrant and deeper shade of blue surrounded the room's lone window that would allow her an escape route should she find herself in need of one.

Everything was as clean as if Marad knew she would be arriving early and would have a guest, even at this time of year when most travelers stayed home and the merchants did the same.

Zarkina tossed her bag to the floor under the window and she pictured the view outside the window that she remembered. This was the back part of the inn, above the kitchen and her favorite guest room. Below the window, she knew, was the roof that covered the rear porch and in the distance she knew she would make out the barn even through the swirling of rain, leaves, and twigs.

A slight push on the window opened it a crack and let in the cool cold air. Zarkina opened the shutters and smiled as memories of lying on the back roof as a child to stargaze filtered through her mind.

The rain was slowing but the wind continued to rage. Satisfied that the window and shutters could still be opened, she closed both before she turned and walked to the chair. Removing her cloak and spreading it out to dry almost seemed a useless thing to attempt but she did it anyway. Next, she removed her weapons: two daggers, a bow, quiver, and Cal's sword which she never went anywhere

without.

With practiced ease, she removed her knee-high leather boots. As she moved to the looking glass she began to undress, dropping her leather breast plate, under-tunic, and pants to the floor as she went. She had not seen her own reflection in a long time. What it showed her was of little surprise. She had acquired several new bruises and welts in her flight from Rekah and his lackeys.

Shrugging off these, she remembered Cal's saying, "*Yer body will heal girl and be stronger for it, remember that pain jest means yer alive.*" She couldn't help but smile at the memory.

Several old scars covered her lithe muscular form. Some had healed from stitching, those she could reach, and others had not healed so prettily. With a tired sigh, she began to unbind her not so tightly braided auburn hair. Zarkina removed a comb from her pack and began the laborious task of detangling. She rarely wore her hair loose for hair to the waist only got in the way of drawing a sword or the string of a bow, not to mention it caught on everything she passed by in the wood.

Quite a few times she had considered cutting her deep red tresses, but then she would remember how much Cal had loved them. He never said why but she was sure it was because her mother had the same long red hair. After re-braiding her hair, she took the cloth from the basin, foregoing the hot soak Marad suggested, and began to wash the dirt of the road and flight from her.

As she bathed, her mind once again returned to the Sisters and the attack from Rekah and his men. She had no enemies, aside from the occasional goblin, hobgoblin or gnoll tribe that she may have crossed paths with in the wood.

She was a reliable and resourceful guide and until this attack, had never lost a patron. Suddenly, she froze in mid-swipe down her lean leg. Cal. His death was no accident and she never found the reason he was killed. The day Cal died remained a vivid memory for her.

Zarkina was outside cleaning the three small hares she had trapped earlier in the day, waiting for Cal to return home. When he staggered into the clearing in front of their cabin, Zarkina was shocked to see the quickly spreading red stain on his chest. She leapt up and ran to him just as his sword dropped from his hand and he to his knees.

"Cal! Cal!" she screamed as she caught him by the shoulders and laid him to the ground. Blood was already beginning to leak in a small line from the corner of his mouth. The wound was fatal and somewhere deep in her mind she realized this, but she still tried desperately to stop the flow from his chest. Within seconds she had her tunic off and was pressing the homespun weave to his gaping chest wound. Cal's own tunic was slashed in several places and not in the way of a natural beast. No bear or wolf had caused these wounds, she knew, but clearly a blade or possibly an axe. Cal gripped her fourteen summer's old hand with surprising strength as he pressed his ring into it before trying to hand her his sword. His eyes bored deeply into hers and spoke of both love and fear.

"Run" was all he managed to say through the bubbling of blood in his mouth before his gaze became fixed on her tear stained face. Years of following Cal's orders overruled her shock and she grabbed the sword by Cal's side before she fled into the woods surrounding their cabin. For two ten-days she lived in those woods, never staying in one hiding place for long and checking on the home place every few days.

Never before in her young life had she felt such pain. The hurt in her chest was almost unbearable and just when she thought it would overwhelm her, she would hear her father's voice saying, "*Pain means you're alive.*" She didn't want to live without Cal but as the days passed and she continued to scout the cabin and surrounding area for Cal's attackers, the pain turned into something more. Anger.

As Zarkina channeled her hurt into a more useful emotion, she resolved not to waste Cal's warning. When the cabin remained unvisited and no sign of intruders graced the surrounding wood after two ten-days, Zarkina returned and buried her beloved father. She laid him to rest behind the cabin under the lone redwood where he liked to smoke his pipe in the evenings. She left no marker as the redwood itself would be enough. With a tear stained face, Zarkina gathered some things from the cabin, locked it up tight, and made her way to the Shiny Mug.

Marad and Jed were just as shocked and heartbroken as Zarkina when she shared the news. They wanted her to stay with them and said fourteen was too young to be alone in the world. She knew that life at an Inn was not for her and still needed to heed Cal's warning to run. So run she did, to the 'fletchings' to live off the mountain range and hire herself out as a guide. It was only her promise to Marad and her love for Cal that had her returning to the home place annually.

*Could the same person responsible for Cal's murder be behind the attack on her now?* Her mind swirled and she couldn't think straight through her exhaustion. She needed rest and would puzzle out the mystery in the morning.

Feeling clean for the first time in weeks, she redressed in her soggy garments and began to rearm herself before attempting to get what little rest she could. With a dagger in her boot and one at her waist, where one would expect to find a dagger, she was still one dagger short for her wrist sheath, but that could be replaced once she got to the cabin.

Having lost the blade during her flight, it was of no great concern to her. Cal's sword, *my sword now*, she silently corrected herself, lay next to her upon the pallet while she left her bow and quiver to lay upon her pack.

Lying upon the straw filled pallet, she got as comfortable as she could and began to drift into a light sleep. She didn't have any of the strange dreams that had been plaguing her recently, but something woke her.

As she lay in the dark trying to decide what it was, she realized it was the quiet of the night. Zarkina rose from the pallet and moved silently toward the window she had left open. She pushed the shutters wide to allow the cool winter air to come in.

The storm had subsided and she could see the barn clearly now. There were additional horses that hadn't been present when she opened the window and shutters earlier. Quietly, she put on her damp cloak, and shouldered her bag and quiver before grabbing her bow and strapping the sword to her back. As she moved to the window and fully opened it, she heard the tread of a booted foot on the squeaky stair and silently thanked the Gods again, that Jed hadn't fixed the loose step.

They had found her, but how she did not know. *Dragon's breath! So much for a few hours of dry rest.* She was sure she had lost them in her flight through the wood. Zarkina moved silently through the open window, the cloaked woman descended onto the rain soaked planks of the inn's roof. She hoped that the old inn roof would still support her light frame and make no noise to give her away. Zarkina lowered herself over the darkest edge and dropped into a quiet crouch. She listened for signs that she might have been detected and hearing none, Zarkina rose and turned to flee into the cloud filled night.

She startled when she saw a man standing directly in front of her as she turned. He was large, very large, and from what she could see from the barn's dim light, he was also well armored beneath his hooded travel cloak.

*Ah hells, the leader of the sell-swords it seems.* She had to suppress her urge to smile. As she turned away to flee, the man reached out and grabbed her right wrist. This was his first mistake although he didn't know it yet. Like many of her opponents in the past, he assumed her right hand was her primary weapon hand. It was a mistake that generally turned out to be fatal for her opponents. Although right handed in every other aspect, she had been trained by Cal to be left handed with the sword and most opponents wouldn't notice which way the sword lay upon her back.

"Don't," the stranger said, in a very quiet, deep voice.

*Don't what? Run? Zarkina thought. I wouldn't dream of it.*

She would end this chase once and for all, right here, right now. Zarkina stood without a sound, showing him fear laced eyes and looked from the man's hooded face to his hand upon her wrist then back to his face again. She could not see his eyes under the deep cowl of his hood, but as she made no move to resist his grip or flee, the stranger loosened his hold. This had been what she was waiting for and she couldn't suppress a smile at the hooded stranger.

Lightning fast, Zarkina spun toward the stranger so that she had his right arm wrapped behind her back and was subsequently so close that he could not reach the dagger at his waist. Her left hand gripped the dagger from her waist, blade pointed toward her elbow and came to rest directly at the stranger's throat while her right hand was now holding the stranger's as he had held hers. To any onlooker, they would appear to be in a lover's embrace which was exactly what the move was called. As expected, it happened so fast, the hooded man had no time to react to the surprise attack.

"Now you will stop chasing me," she whispered just inches from the hooded man's face before making the killing blow.

However, the blow never reached its mark. The next thing she knew she was on her back in the mud looking up at the strangely calm man who was looking down at her through his shadowed hood. He stood statue still as if her attack had never happened. Her surprise and shock not only at the counter attack, which she had never experienced before, but at the stranger's calm stance, kept her lying there in the mud just looking back into the hooded gaze.

"Don't," he repeated to the stunned and silent woman as he offered her a hand to help her rise.

*What manner of man is this, who so casually offers his hand to one who would have just as soon seen him dead? Seems the sell-sword leader had the manners of a noble...strange.*

Seeing that she ignored the gloved hand offered to her, the man returned it to his side. Slowly, Zarkina rose, while keeping a wary eye upon the man who should be lying in a pool of his own blood and muddy water. A sound behind her made her glance over her shoulder. Two more men, equally equipped and dressed as the man in front of her, approached.

*No escape now,* she sighed and turned back to face the dark stranger who reached down to pick up her backpack and bow.

"Come," he said to her before turning away with no regard for his own safety by exposing his back to her while making his way toward the dimly lit barn.

Zarkina could only stare in disbelief and numbly sheath her dagger. He must have sensed that she was not following him because he turned back to her.

"Follow," he said, as if talking to an imbecile before turning and resuming his way to the barn.

Resigned that she had no other choice, wet and mud covered, Zarkina did just that while the two men fell in behind her.

Inside the dimly lit barn, Zarkina could see two more men dressed in the same attire as the hooded stranger and the two that followed behind her. As Zarkina was trying to figure out the best plan of action to escape her latest predicament, one of the two men stepped forward.

"The mounts are ready, sir" he stated plainly as he handed over the reins to a tall black stallion.

The hooded stranger began to check over his horse, double checking the bridle and saddlebags to his satisfaction before mounting up. Zarkina stood with a neutral expression upon her angular face while she watched the three other men follow suit. The last man handed her the reins to a beautiful chocolate colored mare.

He offered her a small smile as he cupped his hands for her to mount, "M'Lady?"

Zarkina stood dumbfounded as she could not understand why they would offer her a mount that she could easily use to escape them.

*And what makes them think I am a lady?*

She studied the men in the lantern lit barn and what she saw only confounded her more. These were well armored men, all dressed in the same type of armor with well cared for weapons. Matching travel cloaks draped their backs and the only thing to differentiate them seemed to be the helms that hung loosely from their saddle horns. There was no crest or other adornment to indicate service or rank amongst them but clearly the largest of the men, the man who thwarted her Embrace, was their leader. The mounts were of the finest quality and even the saddle bags and travel gear appeared to be above par.

Her contemplation was broken by the hooded leader, "Mount."

Glancing from the man before her to the stranger upon his midnight black stallion then back

again, Zarkina continue to stand beside the mare.

“I am Dwitt, M’Lady. Please let me assist you in mounting,” he said as he continued to smile at her. He was a short man, compared to the leader, and only stood about an inch taller than her. Dwitt was stocky and had dark brown eyes that held a hint of mirth in them. She instantly had the impression that he was one who enjoyed smiling.

Seeing no escape, but knowing that her chances would increase upon the mare, she let Dwitt assist her to mount. Zarkina knew not where they were going, nor who these men were.

*They do not seem to be the sell-swords from the pass, but if not them, then who?*

She had no idea. What she did know was that they were intent on taking her somewhere and she doubted it was to the home place. She also knew, however, that she had no intention of finding out where that other place may be.

Without a word, the party began to move out into the cloud covered twilight of morning. Two men in front, two men behind, and the hooded stranger rode silently next to her. Zarkina was already thinking of a plan to escape. She could do nothing but go along...for now.