



A WOMAN'S HONOR

by Andreya Stuart

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CHAPTER 1

Eleanor hit the table in front of her father so hard that she heard the bones in her hands crack. She swept the maps and treaty drafts covering the table onto the floor and hurled the ink pot at the wall.

"I will not do it!" she shouted, pausing between each word. "I'll die first!"

"You will marry him," her father said again. His eyes were red from the days without sleep, and his face was gray with the bitterness of their defeat. He looked away. "We have no choice."

"How can you do this to me?" Eleanor's blood ran cold, her pulse pounded in her ears.

"We have summoned the priest - "

"No!" Eleanor took a step back. "You expect me to . . . be his wife? Share his bed? Bear his children?"

Revulsion made her stomach turn over. "I'll see him in hell first!"

Her father stood up, sudden fury making bright spots flare over cheekbones in an otherwise dead white face.

"By my last count four hundred men died defending this keep in the last day alone, another two hundred the day before. In the last year we have lost all of our fields, our women have been raped,

our children murdered. Why should not you be called upon to pay a price in this bloody war?"

His grief and anger rasped in his throat so Eleanor could hardly bear to hear him.

"You planned this campaign with your brother, insisted that we not parley when the Duke approached us, fought as a man fought though you never carried a blade - "

"You would never make a man pay this price!" she said desperately.

In an explosive movement he threw the heavy table over, making her jump back. He stepped forward to take her by the arm, fingers biting into her flesh.

"You are not a man! Would to God that I had remembered that a year past! Would to God that you had died in your brother's place! I would to God you had never been born!"

The world swam before Eleanor's eyes for a moment. She must be dreaming! Her father had never raised his voice to her, had coddled her since childhood.

"If we are to save a soul on our lands, you will marry the brute, share his bed, even sleep with his soldiers if he commands it. Not one more will die when we can make an tolerable peace at merely the price of a woman's honor."

The door flew open behind her. One of the Duke's men, stood in the open frame with his dagger drawn. Tall, white haired, face burned and wizened by years in the sun of a far off desert, he too looked as if he hadn't slept since time began. But then who had? The siege had lasted only a fortnight, but the last three days had been an unending assault. She saw that blood lust still lived in his pale eyes.

"My Lord and the Priest await us at the castle gate. Will she come?"

Her father shoved her so hard at the soldier that she almost fell at

his feet. "Take her."

Without preamble the man dragged her out of the room and down the spiral staircase that led to the main courtyard. She stumbled against rough walls, all but tumbled down stone steps, her hair flew in her face like silver spider webs.

When she was pulled into the midday sun her eyes ached. How many days since she had seen the light of day? Acrid smoke from the tar and arrows used to breach to walls assaulted her nose and made her wretch. Bodies littered the courtyard, hung from the battlements. She saw men carrying them out of the keep for burial in a mass grave. So many familiar faces.

As she reached the main gate, its drawbridge bloody from the hard fought assault this morning, she realized she was dressed in just a thin shift still plastered to her body by her brother's blood. She could not have picked a more fitting wedding gown to celebrate this hellish union.

She was shoved into place before the priest. The men still in the keep and the hundreds of the Duke's men still alive on the battlefield outside, all turned to watch her take her vows. Without exception their faces were hard as stone. They all knew peace would be at the price of her flesh and they all approved the sacrifice.

Beside her stood the Duke of Trevich. He was dark skinned from decades in the holy-land, was broadly built, and had coal black hair that clung to his sweat soaked face. He towered over all but the man who had dragged her from the keep. His disgust was obvious as he looked at her.

What must he see? A woman as ill-matched to a man like him as could be imagined. So fair skinned that blue veins could be seen in her hands, hair so pale as to be almost white, frame so slender that she could still have been taken for a child despite her seventeen summers. She was as Norman as the king, he as Saxon as a slave.



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Only her father's fierce look held her in place when she would have turned away.

The priest, the one who had baptized her and heard her confession since she was old enough to make it, stumbled through the ritual. She heard herself respond at the appropriate time, heard the Duke speak as well.

Her heart thudded with panic, growing louder with every passing minute until she felt as if the whole world must hear her fear. This must be a dream. Please God, she prayed, let me wake up!

When the priest stuttered to a stop, she looked up to heaven, praying that God might strike her dead rather than let live another moment as the duke's wife.

God gave her his judgment.

Her brother's head had been hacked off in the scant hours since he had died in her arms, and now it was stuck on a post that projected obscenely out over the bridge. It had a bit of red cloth tied around its neck, as though the horrid relic were a festive banner.

She vomited the little food she had taken that day onto the ground.

There was a moment's silence, then Lord Trevich's hand bit into her arm. He dragged her back across the bridge into the keep. Her bare feet slipped and slid in the blood. Over the bodies littering the courtyard, up the stairs, shins striking almost every step, she heard what sounded like a cavalcade of men behind her. After three flights of stairs he thrust her into her own room, onto her own bed.

She struggled up to see that there were three men in the room. The white-haired soldier who had summoned her to the wedding had his back to the door. A darker, slightly smaller soldier had moved behind the bed. The Duke stood before her. All their faces were hard with some unknown purpose.

Her husband moved first, pulling white linen from his pocket. He wrapped the cloth around his hand.

Without a word, he shoved her back until she fell onto the bed, The blond came from behind to pin her shoulders down. Her husband threw her shift up over her waist and forced her struggling legs apart. She felt his fingers, covered by the cloth, forced into her, felt something stretch and tear inside. She cried out in pain.

The tableaux froze for a horrible moment. Time enough for her to open her eyes, to see the dark one towering over her, expression at once angry and triumphant. The man guarding the door was watching her face, her husband's gaze was fixed firmly between her legs.

Her body arched as she began to fight again, shock fading to fury and fear.

The Duke pulled his hand away and she saw the linen was covered with her blood. He threw her shift down over her thighs and held the linen up for her to see. The soldier who had held her down at last let her sit up, but forced a hand over her mouth when she tried to speak.

Her husband dropped to his haunches so he could look into her face.

"Now, let's have it clear from the start." he said. "I have two men here who will say this was no true bedding. I will not be forced to wed a woman who hates me and who I have every reason to hate."

She could not believe her ears.

"You will live at my keep until I set you aside. At which time you will take orders as a nun. Do you understand?"

She tried to pull the hand covering her mouth away so she could spit obscenities at him. How could he think she would agree to such a thing? Betray her family! Hand her father's lands to him?

She would die first!

The Duke's eyes narrowed. "If you say a word to anyone before we leave this place today, or before I give you leave to, I swear," he paused as if to make sure she would hear him, "I will kill every man within twenty miles. And you," a blunt finger jabbed into her chest between her breasts, "your mother, and your father will be the first to die. I absolutely guarantee it."

She thought of his army waiting outside the castle, the dead still piled in the keep, the burned villages with hardly a man left to rebuild shelter for the winter. He could easily do as he said he would. She held their lives in her hands.

After a moment, the dark one took his hand away from her mouth. Her lips were cut because they had been dragged back and forth across her teeth during her struggles. It took her a moment to find her voice.

"Too dishonorable to rape your own wife," she managed to say. "You amaze me Duke." She licked her lips, feeling them swell. "Rest assured I will not betray your secret today. I would rather die than have you."

"Then I have saved us both some unnecessary concern." He said as he stood up. "You come from the stupidest, most barbaric family it has ever been my misfortune to know. You are a blight upon these lands and a curse upon your king. It is all I can do not to strike your heads from your shoulders and throw them to the dogs."

"I thought you preferred pikes to dogs," she spat.

"Would to God I had put your father's head on a pike a year past," he replied sharply.

He looked up at his men. "Gather everyone who isn't required to mop up this mess and let's get away from this hell hole."

His men gave their assent, and she was dragged to her feet, then out of the room, and then back down the stairs. She watched the

Duke shove the bloody rag he had pulled from between her legs into the hands of the priest. Her mother pressed her hands to her mouth as she stumbled by. Her father was nowhere to be seen.

"Bind her, and shove her in with the luggage," the Duke said. His orders were followed with alacrity and a few minutes later she sat in a wagon atop a shifting pile of rope and spears and in the company of two bodies wrapped in dirty cloaks. In a few minutes the soldiers and wagon set off.



Night fell before the march ended, and Eleanor's head ached with the endless jostling. She couldn't prevent herself from rolling or sliding about because her hands and feet were bound. Soon she was all but lying beside the two bodies being carried in the same cart.

When the wagon finally rattled to a stop, she was forgotten. She heard men starting fires, lamenting the lack of fresh game, cursing the damp ground and finally snoring. In the moonlight she tried to find a spear sharp enough to cut her bonds. She succeeded only in slicing her hand. She was struggling with the blood and the rope when she heard a voice.

is it possible to hate someone as much as I hate you?"

The Duke, in fresh clothes, stood at the end of the wagon. Moonlight illuminated the blood pouring from her hands onto her shift. It looked like black ink.

"I have been watching you for half an hour, hoping you would find a way to slit your own wrists."

She remained silent, pressing her hands together to try and stop the bleeding. It hurt beyond belief, and she wondered if he could

see her panic. She thought she was likely to bleed to death if he didn't help her, but she would rather die than ask him for aid.

With an oath, he stepped into the open-ended cart. He drew his dagger and cut the ropes on her hands and feet. The cold steel burned her skin where it touched. "I suppose a hundred well armed soldiers are a match for you even with your hands free."

He watched her struggling to rise, then cursed again. He grabbed her by an arm and jerked her onto her feet and out of the wagon. There he let her collapse, watched her tear her already tattered shift to make a bandage for her hand.

"They breed them hard in your family," he said standing over her.

She looked up. His back was to the moon and it blinded her. She couldn't find his eyes in the darkness that was his face.

"So easy to strike you down now-" he said, as if to himself.

"I am not afraid of you," she said in a curt voice. She stood up, putting her good hand against the wagon. "You should kill me now, for I vow you will never have a moment's peace while I live."

He laughed, the sound filling the night. Then he slapped her hard across the back. "Good!" he said as she stumbled to her knees. "I need someone to help me exercise my demons. I shall lie awake thinking of ways to make you pay for all we have lost-"

"You have lost?" She flew to her feet. She snatched at the dagger he had returned to his belt, and, to her surprise, she found it in her hand.

He stepped back as she raised it over her head. She held it there, frozen by uncertainty.

Should she kill him? Herself? Who did she hate more? How could she punish him if she were dead? How could he punish her if she was? Indecision held her immobile.

He stepped forward to retrieve the weapon.

"Perhaps, not so hard after all," he said as he sheathed the blade. He waited, as if he expected her to say something. When she didn't he took another step away.

"I still hate you," he said after a moment. "But I want to see you in warm clothes. Hating you as you are now is like hating a beaten dog."

She said nothing.

"Come on," he said, and led her away from the wagon.

They walked through the moonlit glen the party had stopped in, past campfires surrounded by sleeping men, some still fighting in their dreams. At one of the campfires he stopped, pulled a roll from under a sleeping youth's head. To her surprise the boy didn't even wake when his head hit the ground. The Duke led her back toward the trees of the surrounding wood.

He tossed her the bundle. "Care to change clothes? "

Warm clothes sounded like an impossible dream. She hesitated, then dropped the bundle to the ground. Without a word, she pulled her bloody shift over her head. It was all she wore. Her nude body gleamed white in the moonlight.

She unwrapped the bundle and pulled on the hose and the shirt. They were rough, crawling with lice, and they smelled foul. But they were warm. She picked up her shift and tucked it into her shirt, remembering that it had her brother's blood on it. It was all she had left.

"I've never seen a maid . . ." he paused, "undress so."

"I am no maid." She made the word a curse. "You saw to that. I am less than an animal, I would walk through this camp naked, and spread my legs for your men if they would have me. Be sure I would rather have them than you."

He was silent, as if stunned. Then he shook his head and led her back toward the camp. He brought her to his fire where the white-haired soldier and the smaller dark one slept, their hands curled

around blades as though they expected an attack in the middle of the night.

He jerked a leg off a half-eaten rabbit that still hung over the fire. He tossed it to her. He used his knife to pull flesh from its chest and put that into his own mouth.

"So," he said as he settled onto the ground. "I could wake up Alain here, and you would have him?"

"And the other too," she said nodding toward the dark haired one. It was strange how her words meant nothing to her, as if they were coming from someone else. "Wake them and I'll take them on. Let's put a bastard on your seat." She tossed a bone into the fire. "Any child I have while we are wed is yours in the eyes of God and the church, is it not?"

"And James too? " He cocked his head to one side. "I could simply kill you," he said.

"You could have done that this morning," she replied. "Obviously that is an unpalatable choice. You know that my people would never accept you if you did. This war would go on and on until neither of our keeps were left standing."

"Never is a long time, My Lady. Those people will forget you soon enough."

"No," she said.

"You sound certain."

"I am. You must be also, or I would be dead now. My whole family would be dead." And not just my brother, she thought, my magical brother who you slaughtered because we would not surrender to you. She could still see Eric's head on a pike, eyes open and staring. He had just died when she last saw him, before she was pulled away to tend to yet another dying man. He hadn't received last rights, so he died with all his sins upon him. He was in hell now, or perhaps purgatory.

What kind of men would take a body, slice off its head, thrust a

spear up into its brain, and hang it over the entrance to the man's own home?

She shuddered, allowed herself to slump against the sleeping soldier called James. Her head fell on his shoulder, so she and he were lying head to head. "I would kill myself if I thought having to slaughter every man, woman and child on our estates would be any kind of punishment for a man like you."

She tucked her hands into her armpits, curled into a ball. "But I'll live just to see if I can come up with something . . . better."



Robert watched the girl slide into sleep in amazement. What kind of creature was this?

A mad woman, surely. No more than a vicious dog. Less than human in every way. And of course she was his wife.

He tossed the bones of his meal into the fire and settled with his back against the log on which he had been seated.

What a god forsaken country! Had he fought for so long to come here? To defend an abandoned castle, barren, rocky land, people so long without governance that they lived like savages?

He had waited so long come to come home. It had cost him so very much.

Bile rose in his throat as he thought of the body that shared the girl's company on the weary journey home. His son. Just sixteen. Sixteen and so in love with his father's *noble profession* that he had fought to share in this battle. He had been assigned a station suitable for his age. He had left it behind to join the fray at the castle gate, and arrows had cut him down in minutes.

Robert stared at the moon that hung in the pale blue mist over the camp. He had promised his men peace in return for all the victories they had given him. They were all he had, and he was the only nobleman in the land they knew they could trust. Of course, by now they knew that triumph in the holylands counted for nothing, and they would have no ease for years to come. But they knew he would die for them and they were willing to return the favor.

His eyes dropped to the girl again. Christ, what a horror she was. But now the destruction would stop and he could make plans for the winter. With luck they all might survive. And in the spring, by God, the fields would yield if he had to sow every seed himself. He meant to have the prosperity and peace he had yearned for since his father's execution. And then, by God, he would find a beautiful, honorable, peaceful woman to share his bed and build his clan.



Eleanor woke the next morning to hear an oath at her ear. Her head dropped to the ground and she found a knife at her throat.

"Jesu! It's the girl!"

"Aye, you slept with my wife last night," said the Duke sitting up.
"Much joy may you have of her."

"I'd sooner lay with a dog."

"As you have done before," said the one called Alain with a laugh.

Barely awake, she found her voice, "I'll have the lot of you. Every man in camp." She said. "Except your lord who I hope to see dead before he spawns a true heir." She sat up, stiff beyond belief from

the cold and the hard ground.

"Every man of us?" asked Alain, his eyes hard with challenge. He fell on his back. "Have at it then wench. You will be dead before nightfall."

"No, no, we have been all through that." The Duke climbed to his feet. "If she dies we will have go back and kill all those people. Fair as it is to her, its unfair to them. Loyalty shouldn't be repaid so."

She looked at him. "So you have already discovered that my people are loyal." She dragged herself to her feet.

"You have no people," said the Duke. He fixed her with a hard look, a note of warning in his voice.

"Those people I don't have are very loyal to me, to my family, aren't they?" She raised her chin in defiance. "You must wonder why."

"Fear I suppose."

"Yes, fear makes them loyal," she said standing bushing the dirt off her clothes. "Fear of enemies that kill and maim. All those children who were made homeless and starving by your raids were immensely loyal to you before they died."

"Shut up." James was standing now, face red.

The Duke cut him off with a wave of his hand, dismissing the matter. "Let's get on the road. By nightfall we will be at the keep and we can lock her up somewhere." The Duke threw his cloak over his shoulders.

Eleanor shrugged, and turned away, walking back in the direction of the wagon.

"Where do you think you are going?" the Duke called.

"To ride with your dead," she called back. "They are the only men in your army fit to accompany me."

CHAPTER 2

As the Duke had predicted, they rode into the keep that night. The last five miles had taken six hours since they rode by moonlight, and the horses stumbled at every turn.

Eleanor sat in the cart battered and bruised, but working hard to look content. The bodies had begun to smell and she was feeling more than a little ill. But she rode with their dead. Dead important enough to be taken from the field of battle to be buried two days ride away. She would defile their grief as they defiled hers.

When the cart stopped in the stable yard inside the keep, she stood up and walked over the bodies to stand on the dirt in the moonlight. She watched the men rush about, stabling the horses, saw the Duke and his two attendants approach.

"Get the men to lay them out in the great hall," he said to Alain. "See if the women can find clean clothes for them in my room."

"Lop off their heads and post them on the battlements," she mimicked his manner. She wondered if her brother had been buried yet. Was there a man left to turn a shovel of dirt for him?

The Duke turned and shoved her to the ground. He nodded to James. "And have her thrown in the South tower. I never want to hear of her again." The bitterness in his voice told Eleanor her barb had hit its mark.



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The tower turned out to be the remnant of an old keep that had been incorporated into the outer wall of a newer, Norman structure. The lowest floor was barely the height of a man and opened into the stables. Stored hay and grain rested on packed dirt, and dried onions hung from the low ceiling. A ladder and a small circular opening served as a rudimentary stair case.

The second floor of the structure was a single empty room above the first. It was almost as tall as it was wide, and the light of a single lamp did little to illuminate its rock walls, rough wooden floor, or the slender ladder that climbed to the third story.

The upper floor of the tower was also a single empty chamber. It had narrow slits for windows, and a small, charred hearth on one wall. When they took the ladder away from the entrance to her room, there was a fifteen-foot fall beneath her feet. Eleanor heard James post two soldiers in the room below hers, and order a watch around the clock.

It seemed she was to be a prisoner of more than her wedding vows.

The open windows of her room admitted all the cold night air, so sleep was impossible. Huddled against one wall, Eleanor had time to wonder why they hadn't thrown her in some nice warm dungeon. As dawn filled the sky, she decided that the Duke could not be seen abusing his wife just days after the wedding.

The fiction that she was his bride, and that the breach would be sealed with an heir to both estates, must be maintained until his men were strong enough to complete the occupation of her lands. Before next harvest he would write to Rome that their marriage was a farce. Guards would swear he never came to her in her

tower, and she would have no child in her belly to belie his words.

She hated him more every minute.



At midday she woke to hear the ladder coming up through the hole. One of the guards appeared with a trencher of bread and meat and a flagon. She watched him set the food beside the hole, then descend back down to the second floor. The ladder was pulled away again.

She contemplated the trencher, and her stomach tightened. She reached into her shirt to pull out her blood-spattered shift, felt its stiffness, examined its red-brown stains.

Eric's blood, her blood, the blood of the dying she had tended. She had bathed in blood, her woolen gown had been stiff with it when she had taken it off. The maid had been sent to bring her a new one. The men had brought her brother to her when she was still only half dressed. No one had noticed.

She buried her face in the cloth. What a gruesome moment of her brother, the noblest man on earth. How had they come to this?

When the Duke's men came, just after nightfall, the trencher was still there. She sat in the darkness, watching the guard place the new trencher and take away the old one.



"She is starving herself," said Alain. "She did not eat yesterday, or this morning."

"Drinking?" Robert asked as he moved his queen across the board.

"Neither," said Alain.

"She will eat when she gets hungry," said James, taking the queen with his bishop.

Robert took the Bishop with a pawn.

"Three days without water-" said Alain.

"Four or five if you don't move much, and it is cold," said James.

"We will wait," said Robert.



The wonderful thing about starving yourself, thought Eleanor on the morning of the fourth day, was that after a time you stopped being hungry and just waited to die. It took a long time, and it hurt a lot, but hunger and thirst could be conquered.

She heard, with some interest, the rattle of the ladder being moved into place. Instead of the usual guard, she saw first Alain, then James, then the Duke coming through the floor.

She struggled into a sitting position. She would have stood if she could. One should meet one's enemies on one's feet.

"We are getting to be old friends," she said after a couple of attempts at speech. It was hard to talk after so long without water.

She turned her head toward Alain. "Will you have me now soldier? Put your babe in your master's place one day?" She spread her legs a little and laughed. Dressed in ragged leggings and a

jerkin, crawling with lice, smelling to high heaven, she was worthy of her captors at last.

The Duke's face was hard. "We can force you to eat," he said.

She sighed. "I've been thinking about that for four days. I believe that it will just make your position worse. So much screaming and vomiting"

Alain turned to the Duke. "They will think you poisoned her."

She managed a smile. "I think so."

The Duke moved closer and crouched down. "What do you want?"

She found another smile. "You know," she said.

He stood, watched her for a while. Turned to James. "Get her a bath, fresh clothes, a bed and some bedding, and snatch Mary from the kitchens as a maid." He turned to Alain. "Get some men to lash the ladders so she won't break her neck going up and down. When it is all arranged, bring up some food and she will eat it."

This time the smile was easier to find. "Exactly so," she said softly.

"Why are you giving into this?" Alain asked as she closed her eyes.

"What makes you think she's going to eat now?" James interrupted.

"Because she has won. If she dies, we killed her. If she appears to be imprisoned then any misfortune that comes to her will be laid at my door."

The Duke shook his head and turned to climb back down the ladder. "Would that I could ship her to the convent today," he said as he disappeared.

CHAPTER 3

"Wake up My Lady," a young voice was saying. "You must wake up!"

Eleanor managed to open her eyes. A child sat beside her, mopping her brow with a damp cloth. A pretty thing. Ten? Twelve? With bright red hair.

She looked around the room. Hangings over the windows, a bed, bedding, everything just as he had said.

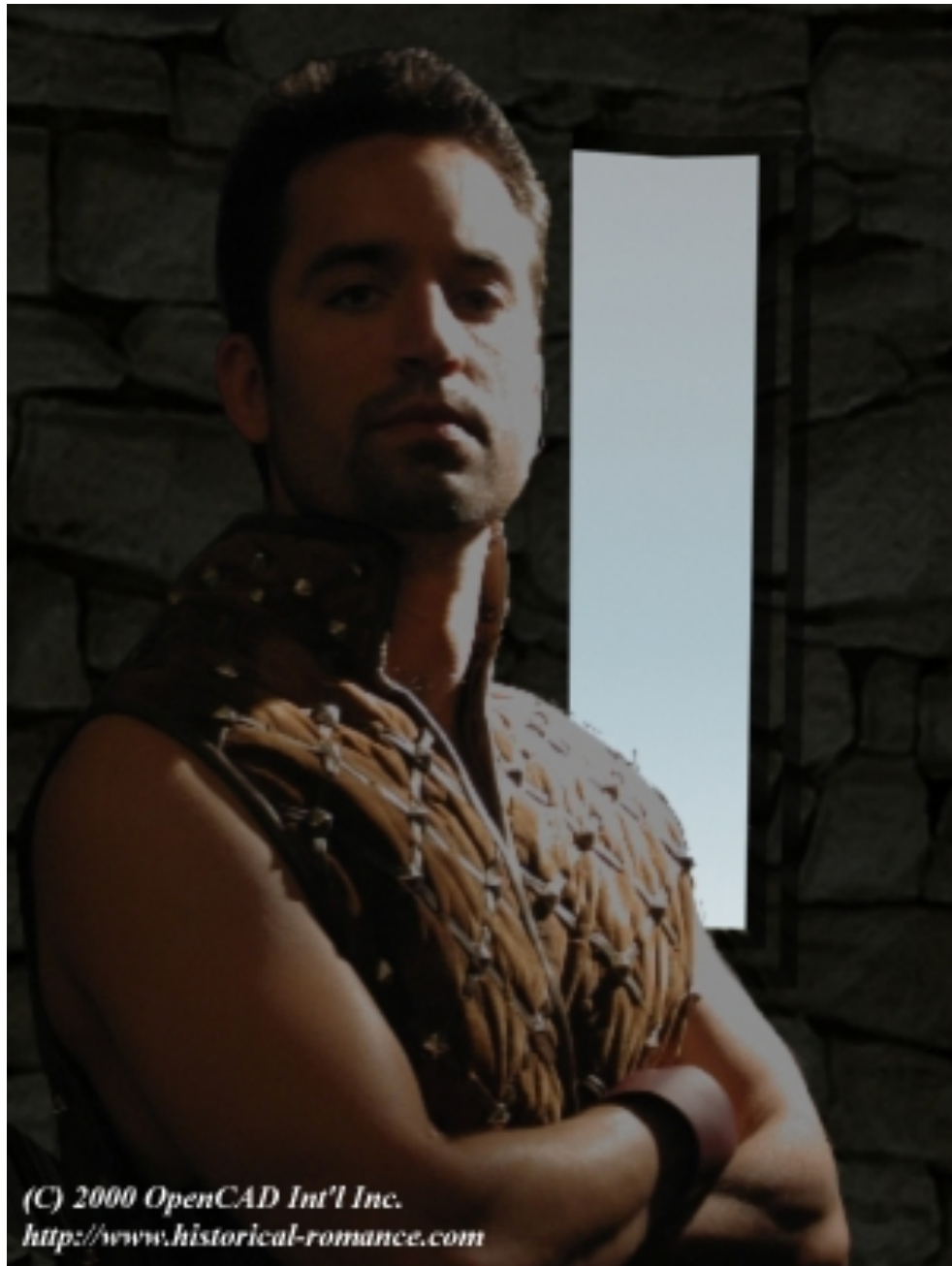
"Please take some broth, My Lady!" The child held a spoon to her lips. "Please don't die."

Eleanor wanted to laugh at her desperate tone. She opened her mouth and took the broth, swallowed slowly. She took another, and another, and another until the cup was empty and the child stood. The relief was evident on her face.

"Thank you My Lady," she said. "I was sore worried."

She found words. "Your lord might prefer it if I died . . ."

The child looked shocked. "No, My Lady, No! No one wants that!"



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Eleanor found sudden tears pricking at her eyes. It was sheer agony to hear a kind word in this nightmare that had become her life. Once started the tears wouldn't stop, and she turned her head away to hide them.

The child backed away, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry My Lady. I'm so sorry-." Then she darted from the room as if the devil himself were after her.



Mary ran through the great hall to where the Duke sat before the fire. She stepped over his great dogs, and put her hand on his arm. She must have startled him, because he jumped a little.

"I said I was sorry! I didn't mean to! I don't know what I did!" she put her hands over her face. "I didn't mean to!"

"What is wrong, child?" The Duke gently pulled her hands down.

"She's crying, but I don't know why? I must have hurt her."

Alain started to rise. "She's probably dying."

James followed the motion, "More like she has another trick up her sleeve."

"Quiet," said the Duke. He pulled Mary closer. She looked more and more like Alain's wife as she grew. It was hard to think of her as the only one of the children to survive. Four dead, five? "Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

"I was shaking her, trying to make her wake up. I waited ever so long for her to wake up. But she didn't. And so I shook her. Then she ate all the broth. Then she started crying. I don't know why." Mary had started to cry as well. "I never meant to hurt her!."

"No food or water for five days will tie your stomach in knots,"

said Alain.

"Are you sure that's all that happened? Think hard." The Duke held up his hand to silence them.

"I told her not to die," said Mary, puzzling it out. "And she said . . you wanted her dead.." She paused, confused, looked up to meet the Duke's eyes. "Why did she say that? You are trying to help her! We all want to help her!"

"What did you say?" The Duke prodded her.

"I said no one should die, and then she started crying." Mary looked at him through her tears. "Why is she so sad?"

The Duke picked the child up, pulled her into his lap. She was small for her age, and still young enough to cuddle. "Many people in her family have died, and she misses them. I'm hoping you can help her feel better by being kind to her."

"I will do my best," said Mary earnestly. "I know people who have died too."

"Yes, we all do," said the Duke, thinking of his son. "Now run back to her, and help her drink some more. She needs food and water to heal. Tomorrow she may be a little better."

Mary slipped from the Duke's lap without a word. In moments she was across the hall on her way back to the tower.



"If that creature weren't weak as a kitten, I've have Mary away from her," said Alain. "I will not have her caught up in that woman's schemes."

Robert ran a finger across his lips. "She'll be safe enough. Leave her be for a while yet."

"Hard to imagine she was afraid of dying," said James. "She seemed quite ready to go."

"She did, didn't she," said Robert. Amusement made him smile a little. The girl had a will of iron, no doubt about that. Was there a heart in the beast as well?

"Alain," he said after a time, "See if you can get Beth to put the child in something she wore last year, and to stop giving her baths."

"What?" Alain looked startled.

"I want to see what she does next,".



By afternoon of the following day, Eleanor was sitting upright, and could carry broth in a spoon to her own mouth. The little girl, Mary, seemed all too eager to fetch anything she asked for, and had even brought up three kittens that were now wandering across the bed. Eleanor couldn't find the heart to make the girl keep her distance, or to chastise her for being less than the perfect maid. She was dressed in rags, and seemed completely unaware of the dirt on her face. So poor . . .

"Is there anything I can get you?" asked Mary for the third time in the last half hour.

"No, Mary. I'm just a little tired," said Eleanor, pushing the cat Mary had named Sooty on the floor. "Do you have any brothers or sisters to play with?"

Mary's face darkened. "They all died," she said. "I am the only one left."

Eleanor, determined not to let the child affect her, said "Do you have any friends you play with then?"

Mary smiled. "Oh yes. Do you want me to bring them to you?" She stood up, as if ready to go down the ladder and bring back children instead of kittens.

Eleanor laughed. "No, I just want you to go play so I can take a nap."

Mary, blushed, then turned away. She started walking toward the ladder with her head down.

Eleanor, called out to her as she put a foot on the ladder. "Come back tonight and you can share my bed. Its warm and I don't take up much space."

The child brightened a bit. "I will tell my Mother," she said.

Well, keeping the child out of the stable or the sooty fireplace or wherever she slept was just a little kindness. You couldn't wage war on children, could you?

The tears threatened again as she remembered the children's bodies in the spring. She found two of them, along with their mother, lying on the road. One of the dozens of families that had been burned out of their homes and died searching for food. They should have been planting this year's seed.

Well, *she* couldn't make war on children at any rate.



Two days later she was able to move about the room, and was eating solid food. Early in the morning she stripped her bed and dropped all the bedclothes and ticking through the floor. She told Mary to tell the guards to have it washed and have the kitchen bring her a tub for a bath.

"The only basin big enough is the Duke's copper bath," she said, a quaver in her voice.

"Tell them to bring that, and enough water to fill it to the brim.

"To the brim?"

"With hot water. The hottest they can make, and tell them I want strong soap."

"Why?" The girl looked as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"We are covered with vermin, and I mean to kill them."

By late afternoon she was sitting in the tub, her head soapy and her eyes closed. She had scrubbed Mary until her skin was red and her hair started to come out, and had sent her away dressed in a cut up sheet she had sown into a simple dress by hand. She looked like a little ghost climbing up and down the ladder.

With a sigh, Eleanor rinsed her hair. After three washes, she hoped the lice were gone.



She had just risen from the water when she heard someone on the ladder. She debated diving back into the tub, then steeled herself to turn around.

"Today I think Alain and James would have you," said the Duke.
"You look well."

"You mean when I am not covered in my brother's blood and have not bathed for a week because there wasn't enough water to drink, let alone wash?" She made no attempt to cover herself, though she found herself uncomfortable with his regard.

"Yes, when you are not covered in your brother's blood and you have had a bath, you look lovely." The Duke completed his climb. "Do you want James and Alain to come up so you can make your usual offer?"

"You decide," said Eleanor, feeling the blood rise to her face.

"Come on up," he said. And a moment later Alain and James were in the room.

"Well, my friends?" said the Duke. "Will you have her today?"

"Too thin," said James, looking away.

"Reminds me of the Saracen wench who tried to kill me," said Alain. "Not to mention that I'm married to the cook and she will poison us all if I stray."

Unable to bear the embarrassment any longer, Eleanor pulled on the simple gown Mary had brought her. It was at least twice as big around as she required, though it fell only to just below her knees. "Maybe next time I will suit you better," she managed to say. It was an effort of will to meet their eyes.

There was a pause that Eleanor didn't try to fill. The Duke, apparently in good humor, finally took it upon himself to break the silence. "Your mother wrote a letter asking after you. I thought you would want to reply." He held out the folded parchment, its red seal already fragmented.

"You read it," she said.

"Of course. And I will read your reply as well."

"So you can stop me from raising an army in a letter to my grieving mother?"

His face grew hard, then he drew a breath. "So I know if I should

raise my army to defeat you. Rest assured that I will send whatever you write without a change. You know what will happen if you say the wrong thing."

"Take it away," she said. "My parents were dead to me the day they gave me to you."

The Duke was silent. Then he opened the letter and said, "My Darling Daughter, we have heard such distressing news of you, that you are ill or dying. We pray that it is not true. Your father has stopped making confession or taking the sacrament. We are gathering grain for the winter. Your Duke has sent us some of what we need in your name, for which we thank you. He has sent food to several villages and I am sure you arranged it-"

"You sent them food? Why would you feed my people?"

The Duke's face grew hard again. "You have no people." He emphasized each word.

Eleanor responded in the same stilted manner. "Because you say a thing does not make it so." She would not suffer him to speak to her as if she were a fool.

"Your father's lands are mine. His people are mine. You have nothing." The Duke had lowered the letter he was reading, and was staring at her fixedly.

"Then why bother to marry me?" She felt the blood rise to her face. She answered her own question before he could speak. "Because you know that the people themselves decide who to support, who to fight and who to die for. You burnt their crops, your murdered my brother, and marrying me was the only way to stop the battle from raging through the winter."

"A battle I would have won."

"What use is a blighted land without men to farm or defend it?" She stood up. "You think the battle is over and you have taken all. One day soon you will wish you had never been born."

The Duke had her by the arms in an instant. He shook her hard

and threw her on wooden bed. He towered over her, face red. "I spared your life, and the lives of your worthless parents when I could have killed you all. And you wish to make war on me?"

"It would have been a *mercy* to kill us all." She managed a choking laugh. "See me in my misery, trapped in the land of my enemies, soon to be sold into the slavery of a convent. See my father, refusing confession and the sacrament, because my brother died with all his sins and he wishes to join him in hell. Kill my mother, the woman who had four sons and lost them *all* to disease and war. We *long* to die," she said sitting up, "and our people long to *fight*. How many have you killed with your stupid war? Do you even know the number? Did you think you bought their loyalty with your slaughter? "

"My war?" he looked incredulous.

"You brought your army with you from the crusades and started your battle for our lands in your first fortnight. Not a moment's peace have we had, has anyone had, since you came. Your own people should rise against you and throw you down-"

"Have a care!" said Alain. "Calling for us to fight our liege lord is treason against the king himself."

The Duke, clearly mastering his rage with great effort, threw her letter down. "Write your mother. Tell her you are well fed and well treated here. Tell her you will see her near Midwinter. These things are no more than the truth."

"What about the messenger, My Lord." James took a step forward.

"Your mother's messenger awaits your reply, and was tasked to see you before he left. Pen your letter now and he will be brought to you so you can put it in his hands."

"Will you not read it first My Lord?" she asked. "Lest I raise my army?"

"I am sick to the death of the sight of you. Write what you will to

your mother. Weak as we are, my army can lay waste to your father's lands. I am all but past caring who lives or dies."



A moment later, she was alone, her mother's letter open on the floor.

Mary returned, breathless and rosy-cheeked, while Eleanor was writing her response. Two drafts lay on the floor, one full of apologies, the other covered with military plans. Now she confronted the blank page.

"Are you hungry, My Lady?" asked Mary. "I can bring you food." She stooped to pick up one of the two fallen pages, opened it to see the characters scrawled across it. "What are you doing?"

Eleanor, seeing that she had the one with the bones of a hopeless military campaign, took it away from her gently. "My mother wrote to me, and I am writing back."

"You can write?" The child was clearly incredulous.

"Yes, my . . . Father taught me," said Eleanor. It was hard to say the words. The hours she had spent with her father first learning to fashion letters, then pouring over books, had been the happiest days of her life. Three of her brothers had been alive then, and yet she had been by far the brightest of his students. But, then she didn't spend hours in the tilt yard-getting knocked off her horse which was bound to make a boy stupid.

"But you are a . . . woman," said the child. "I never knew a woman could write.

Eleanor turned to regard the child with a wrinkled brow. "Why should we not write? We have fingers to hold the pen."

"But how do you learn to write?" Mary crept forward to stare at the paper and the inkwell.

"Its an easy thing," said Eleanor. "You just put down the words you say on paper."

"Will you teach me?" Mary looked up. "I am very smart. My mother says so. She says I can learn anything."

Eleanor was silent. Her affection for this child could become a problem. On the other hand, what harm could come from a few afternoons spent spilling ink on the paper. "Perhaps I will teach you some things."

"I want to know everything," said Mary, having picked up the other page. Handing it to Eleanor, her eyes were as big as twin moons, her smile as wide as the sky. "I want you to teach me everything."

Eleanor pulled the child into her arms, and planted a kiss on her brow. "Run along you pretty thing. I have a letter to write."

Marry skipped away and Eleanor turned back to the task at hand. She wrote "Dearest Mother. I am well fed and well cared for. We shall be coming for a visit around Midwinter. Tell Father that I love him as I love you. Tell him, some how, all will be well. Eleanor."

An hour later she heard someone on the ladder, and looked over to find Alain emerging from the floor. Behind him followed the messenger. She was shocked to see it was not one of the men of her own estate, but a junior page belonging to Lord Armstrong. His lands bordered both her own and the Duke's to the north. Lord Armstrong had been the first to warn them of the Duke's possession of the lands to her west, land that had lain all but fallow for a generation. The property had reverted to the king upon the execution of their previous tenant.

"My Lady," said the page, making his bow. "I was sent to see that you are well. Rumors abound of your mistreatment and the strange affairs of this keep."

Eleanor rubbed her forehead, buying time while she thought of a response. Why had Lord Armstrong sent a man to her if not to offer aid. What could she say of her position that would give him a way to help her. "I am . . . unharmed," she said.

"Are you happy here?" the page turned slightly to indicate Alain.

"I am well fed and well treated."

"We need assurance that the Duke treats you as a true wife."

"I do not understand," she said after a pause.

"Does he share your bed?" the page seemed determined to have an answer.

Alain replied before she could. "Tell her mother and father that all is as it should be." He was standing behind the page and gave Eleanor a hard look.

"I would hear it from her."

Eleanor pondered for a moment. Finally, she replied. "Tell your master that all is he and I would have it." She didn't have to feign her discomfort. She had met Lord Armstrong, twenty years her senior, only a few times. He had spoken to her twice in the last year.

On the first occasion he had warned them of the Duke's arrival, on the second he had offered for her hand. She had rejected his request as politely as possible. She was certain that she had no need of a husband to defend her family's estates. It was one of the many things she had been wrong about.

"I shall tell him your words, My Lady." The page took the letter she held out to him, then descended the ladder without another word. Alain stayed behind.

"You spoke strangely to him," he said.

"What would you have had me say?"

"I know not. Your words were as they should be, but there was something wrong . . ." He looked perplexed.

"Go report to your master what you will. I care not. Your suspicions overtake you." She turned her back to him and stuffed the stopper in the ink pot. She heard him descend the ladder as well.

Between the Duke's estates and her own lands ran a long strips of fertile land on either side of the river. Since her father was a boy, her family had taken the rents and provided succor to the villages on both sides of the water. The Duke claimed the lands were his, but the deed was unclear. Lord Armstrong had warned that the Duke would not be denied what he thought belonged to him. He was well known as a warrior, and what he desired he would have.

Her father and brother had spoken with the Duke only once, and they had parted acrimoniously. Two days later, the villages on both sides of the river were burned to the ground, their inhabitants run down or thrown into hiding. The fields had been torched, seed destroyed. The Duke had made it clear that he would have the disputed lands, or they would lie fallow.

She and her brother had planned the first counter attack, driving deep into his lands to burn a village not ten miles from his keep. They refrained from destroying fields, with some thought of sparing his people a hungry winter, but his next raid had proved they could not afford to be merciful. He had killed every man, woman and child in one of their villages that lay near the northern border. She could still remember the charred bodies lying in the shells of burned out cottages. Now villages throughout both their territories were destroyed, and there was not a field left to harvest.

Lord Armstrong, she suspected, would find a way to aid her. He had hinted early on that they must stand together against the Duke or all would be lost. After the last year's war, he must know that her family would stand with him. But the only way to join the lands was through marriage, which could only be contemplated if she were free to marry.

If Lord Armstrong attacked the Duke's keep, it would be a simple matter for the Duke to rape her, thus consummating the union.

She would be his wife indeed then, and all she owned as her father's only heir would belong to him.

Lord Armstrong would have to bide his time and hope she kept her virtue until he could somehow arrange her rescue.

She shook her head. Lord Armstrong was cautious, rarely willing to expose himself to risk. He was known for being shrewd, but never brave. A man for well laid plans and careful execution like her father, not a man of action. She had little hope that he would make a move before the spring, by which time the Duke would have secured his position and taken by force what he refused to gain through an heir.



Night had fallen and she was contemplating her stripped bed, when she heard another man on the ladder. James came up, holding one end of a rope. Seconds later pulled up a basket full of bedding and a new feather mattress. Not what she had sent to the laundry, but newer, finer things.

"My Lord says it will be two days before your bedding is dry. He bids you use these until then." Without another word, he was gone, taking the rope and basket with him.

She sat on the wooden bed frame contemplating the room. A copper bath, new bedclothes, pen and paper, it was looking more and more like home. The thought made her strangely sad.



CHAPTER 4

The next day the Duke climbed up the stairs to find her seated on the bare floor surrounded by four little girls wielding sharpened feathers in a sea of black ink. She was making them write the first five characters of the alphabet over and over again. Mary had started on her name.

"Why teach them to write?" he asked.

"It is all part of my plan to torment you," she replied.

"I am sure it is," he said. "Somehow I am certain that it will annoy me greatly."

She did not let herself smile. "Why have you come?"

"I have some cloth that might be used to make clothes for you, if dressing in rags is no longer part of your plan."

"You want me to look more like a wife, you mean," she said.

"If it suits you," he replied.

"Bright cloth? Silk? Satin?" she paused, "Perhaps some plain cloth? I would like to make dresses for myself and my friends." She gestured at the children.

"Indeed. But we have a seamstress-"

"The girls and I can make what we need."

The children were listening now.

"Suit yourself," he said, stepping back onto the ladder. "I'll have

the chests brought to your room."

Not long after his visit three chests arrived in her room, each over filled with fabric in all the colors of the rainbow. The girls held their breath as she pulled yard after yard out and laid it on the bed. She found silk thread, needles, even sharp blades for cutting. On a whim she asked each child which they preferred, and before long had put them to work making dresses. The gowns would not be very well made, but what did that matter? They all worked late into the night with diligence she had never seen in children, and by morning there were five dresses finished.



She was wearing hers when the Duke and Alain appeared in her room.

The Duke appeared to be caught between fury and amusement. "You knew," he began before he was fully in the room, "I meant that cloth for you-"

"Surely not, My Lord. I am in mourning. As you may have heard, my brother died recently, so I have no use for fine clothes."

"But those girls surely have no need-"

"No need? They were wearing rags. And they will remember those gowns for a lifetime. Who needs such fine things more than those lovely little girls?" Eleanor looked up to find Alain smiling. He tried to hide it at first, then gave up.

"That cloth came from Constantinople, its worth a fortune," the Duke tried again.

"Then sell it to feed your people as I would. Or cut it to clothe your children as I did." She stood up. "I care nothing for these things."

The Duke said nothing, apparently stunned. "Do you buy the loyalty of your people with these gestures?"

She laughed, "Can one buy the loyalty of *your* subjects with a few pretty gowns?"

He shook his head, as if to brush away her words, then looked at her again. "Do you want to see how much trouble you can make for me at dinner tonight? You can see the havoc those dresses are creating."

She laughed and laughed until the tears rolled down her face and then faded into real tears. She covered her face to blot out his evident surprise. He must think her mad. She missed Eric and her father who would have enjoyed this farce as much as she. Eric was lying with the worms and her father was a broken man. When she looked up, the Duke and his guard were gone.



"The children went to bed," said the Duke when she appeared before the fire in the great hall. It was past midnight. Alain had gone to his bed, and James was sleeping a few feet away. Many slept in the great hall, now that the winter was coming on, so they were by no means alone.

"I feared as much," said Eleanor. "It seems Mary has deserted me."

"Her mother fears you have too much influence over her. The gown was the last straw. Mary refuses to take it off."

Eleanor felt her heart sink a little, then nodded her head. "I see."

"She will sleep with her mother from now on, but will wait on you during the day."

Eleanor nodded. "And the other girls?" she asked.

"They can come to you, if you will have them. I care not. Teach them all to write for all I care, and to do sums. It is useless to make them learn things they will never need to know, but what harm can it do?"

Eleanor didn't answer him. If he thought well-schooled children were trouble free he should spend a day or two at her father's keep where every instruction was debated before it was carried out. Perhaps in a decade or two she would have her revenge. Pity she would not be here to see it.

She saw the chessboard before him and knelt to finger the pieces. They were crudely made, as was most of the furniture. Too much time at war meant too little time to craft comforts.

"Do you play?" he asked.

She nodded. She played well.

"Well enough to vex me?"

She smiled.

He began setting up the pieces for a fresh game and she sat down on the floor to arrange her own.

She, having taken white, advanced her pawn two spaces forward from her king. "Are we allowed to be seen so? Amusing ourselves? Will not someone think that you have bedded me by morning?"

"No one who knows you," he replied. He matched her pawn. "We have two dozen witnesses who would wake if we were to *amuse* ourselves."

"Tell me," he said as the game progressed, "What do the vermin in your family do of a night. Hack the legs off spiders? Pull the wings off flies?"

She moved a piece that made him choose between a bishop and his queen. "Yes," she replied, "and we torture small dogs." After

he favored his queen, she took the Bishop. "What do your men do of an evening? Discuss all the rapes and murders they have committed in your service."

"Yes," he replied, shifting his body so he could lean over the board. "A decade in the Demascus gives them a great deal to talk about."

"There sounds nothing so holy about the holyland," she replied. "I have always thought so."

"And I as well," he said. "Nothing holy at all."

"It's a pity that you did not die there. King Henry wouldn't have had to repay you with these lands were it not for all those glorious campaigns."

"Is that why I was exiled to these cold, damp territories? In payment for years of devoted service?" He took her queen.

"So I was told," she replied, staring at the board. She took his knight.

"Perhaps he gave me these lands because he loathed my father who he executed. Or because he feared that a bastard son exiled for half a life to the cesspool of a far off war might decide, upon his return, that his celebrated army was good for more than butchering the unfaithful," he took her bishop.

She said nothing for a time, contemplating his words. "So he set you and your savages upon us to save himself and we haven't had a moment's peace since." She moved her remaining bishop into a position that jeopardized his queen and his king simultaneously. He moved his King and she took his Queen. "I hate you both."

"I hate you too," he replied moving his rook forward.

She moved, and this time her bishop forced him to make an unpalatable choice between his rook and his king. He moved his king and his rook left the board. In two more moves she had him in checkmate.

She stood up. "You are a dismal player," she said. "You don't think ahead at all. I don't know why that surprises me."

"Care to play again tomorrow?" he asked. "I am sorely vexed now, which should please you."

She shrugged. "If I can think of no better way to tax you." As she left the room she heard him swear.



Robert stared at the board. The girl was full of surprises. She played well, her mind always several moves ahead. So . . . rational, precise, reasoned. Nothing at all like the woman he knew her to be. It puzzled him.

What on earth was he to make of this creature? A sworn enemy who gave dresses to little girls and had tears to shed when she heard a kind word? A woman with the discipline required to starve herself until she lay on the border between life and death and yet completely without the guile required to hold her tongue or even tell him honeyed lies in the hope that she could strike him down later. She was like one of his soldiers, loyal to the death, taking always the most difficult road to her ends.

He shook his head. Pity she was so broken by her past. Had she been whole she would have made some man a remarkable bride.



The next day Eleanor left her room at dawn. Without Mary beside her, her bed was cold. And she was tired of days without sun. She

noted that the guards in the room below hers were still sleeping. She stepped over them on her way to the second ladder.

The inner court was still in darkness, and when she walked in the main hall she saw that everyone there was sleeping as well. The Duke slumbered in his chair and she took a moment to study him.

At rest, he was an undeniably handsome man. Strong features evenly placed, coal black hair caught behind his head with a strip of leather, a white shirt open to expose a fair portion of his broad chest. His hands were scarred, but he had all his fingers. They lay limp on thighs hard from years in the saddle. Even asleep he looked ready to command, regal some how, even noble. The devil must look so.

She left him sleeping after deciding, once again, not to kill him.

She wandered around the public rooms in the keep, until she finally found her way into the kitchen. She was surprised to see Mary and what had to be her mother awake. They were kneading dough.

"Do you need another pair of hands," she asked the stout redhead. The kitchens were warm, the stoves already fired so this woman had been up for several hours. She must have come from a farm family. The pile of dough to be turned into loaves appeared insurmountable in the dim light.

She took her place at the table and pulled a handful from the white mountain. In a few minutes she had shaped her first loaf and moved onto her second.

Mary spoke first, "Look at her go!" she said. "Mama, she is even better than you!"

Eleanor laughed. "Hush Mary. I have only to fold the dough, not mix it. I'm a terrible cook and a worse baker."

Mary's mother made no reply. They worked in silence until all the dough had been turned to loaves and Mary's mother began loading them into the fire.

Eleanor left the room without a word, feeling homesick. Like Mary, she had grown up in the kitchens along side the cook. Her mother had protested at first, but her father had permitted it on the grounds it would help her keep a home one day. Perhaps it would make her useful in the convent.

She took herself in the stables where she saw chickens nesting in the straw. She examined the horses, looking for one she might steal when she ran away. A giant bay was most attractive, but it looked to be a war horse. That one would obey no one but its master. The stable boys were fast asleep, curled in little balls and covered with hay like kittens.

When she tried mount the stairs on the inner wall in preparation for a tour of the battlements, a fierce looking guard appeared at the top to stop her.

"Am I not the chatlain of this castle?" she asked as he raised his blade.

He said nothing, but his expression was hard.

"I may walk where I will, may I not?"

He shook his head. Another soldier came to stand behind him. His expression murderous. Clearly they still held her to be their enemy. They were wise.

Without a word she backed down the stairs and turned toward the castle gate. Through it she could see the woods and the smoke from a small village a mile away. There was frost on the grass and it looked silver in the daylight. Her home, less than two days away, would not look so different this time of day, except that everyone would be awake and at work by now. Not that there was anyone left to work.

It was clear that the Duke's men would be starving by Midwinter. They were soldiers. If they didn't have anyone to kill, they slept late.

She returned to her room with a smile on her face.



That evening, close on midnight, she returned to the great hall to find James sleeping in the Duke's chair before the fire. She looked about the room and found the Duke at a long trestle table in the corner. The chessboard before him was illuminated by a single candle. She approached and saw that he was studying a moment from the previous night's game.

"I expected to see you at dinner, since you spent the day out and about," he said without looking up.

"Your soldiers seem suspicious of me. I thought it wise to avoid them when they are massed," she moved to stand with her back against the wall.

"If you mean they will not let you wander the battlements looking for weakness, you must forgive them. " He moved a piece.

"Let us have a new game," she said. "There is no point dwelling on last night's failure."

He began to move the pieces into position without a word. He looked pensive.

"You are wondering if I found any," she said as he worked.

"Weaknesses, you mean?" he slid aside to make room for her on the bench. The opposing bench had a sleeping man on it so she settled herself beside the Duke uncomfortably. It was strange to sit so closely with a man she despised, hard not to notice that he smelled clean and that his clothes were newly washed, and his teeth were even and white. Or that he towered over her even when they sat. She must appear a white mouse beside him, all fair hair and pale skin, so small and thin as to disappear.



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"I wonder if you would parley with a woman," she said, advancing her knight's pawn a pace.

She felt him tense, and saw him open by moving his king's pawn forward a space.

"What on earth could you have to offer me that I don't already have?" he asked as she moved her Knight out.

"Information that could help you and your men survive the winter," she replied.

"And why would you give this information to me, hating me as you do?" He advanced a Bishop.

"You have many things my people need," she said. "They too will have difficulty surviving this winter."

He turned his head to meet her eyes. "You have no people," he said. "I know it is hard to believe, but you must accept it." He took her knight.

She was silent, wishing she could rise to the bait. "By Easter, you too will have no people unless I help you."

"I can keep myself well enough," he said.

"Why do your men follow you when you are so stupid?" she asked, starting to stand up.

He stopped her by laying a hand on her arm, put another on her shoulder to press her back into her seat. "Do not walk away from me," he said. "I have not given you leave to go." He did not appear angry, but he did not release her until she relaxed into her seat.

She advanced a pawn.

He moved out a bishop, and she took it.

"If you do not tell me your plan, the people you left behind will suffer. If you tell me what you have in mind, I may decide to help them." He advanced another pawn.

"So, I bargain with no assurances," she shrugged. "As you wish. Though the next time I come to treat with you, I will demand more. You will know how important my advice can be."

He waved his hand as he studied the board, brushing away her words.

She took a deep breath and began. "If you keep all these great lugs lying about before the first snowfall, then try to feed their fat faces through the winter, I don't see how any one in the keep can survive. Get them out at dawn each day and have them scour the woods for game we can salt." she stopped, waiting for him to speak. When he didn't, she went on.

"Further, many of *your* people are starving already. Send men to bring all you can find to the castle. Collect whatever livestock they have in your keep and put them into the woods to collect firewood. You will need all your resources in one place so you can defend and manage them."

"We have no room in the keep for thousands of women and children, nor is there shelter without. They are better in their homes," he moved a piece.

She ignored the board. "You are trying to collect the merely hundreds that *have* no homes!" Why was he so stupid. "Put soldiers to work building shelter for those you find. You have a stand of wood close by. What you build needn't do more than keep the warm in and the snow out for a single winter. Come spring they can build new homes."

"Women and children can build new homes?"

"Soldiers!" she pounded the table and rattled the pieces. "Don't you see? You can't make war anymore! You can't keep an army here to defend your castle, because all your wealth lies outside its gates!" She took a breath, forced herself to speak more softly.

"Surely you see that."

"What makes you think my men will do these things you ask?"

"They are soldiers, and they will do what you tell them."

He was silent.

She tried again, "You have perhaps a thousand women across your lands without husbands, and well more than a thousand soldiers without wives. This wretched war of yours-"

"Of mine?" he brushed his hand against his mouth as if bidding it to be silent.

"Your men must be put to sheltering these women and breeding you sons. Is that not why you brought them here? Is that not what you promised them?" She turned to face him. "I can tell you what to do, step by step if you don't understand."

He was silent, staring at her. With great care he lay a hand on her arm. His other hand came behind her neck, and he pulled her forward. His lips were careful as they brushed across hers. Her heart seemed to stop, she couldn't draw a breath. His touch was like fire, like the sun itself caressing her skin.

Then, a sudden image of him came. She saw him on her wedding day, bloody, with battle lust in his eye. She tried to pull away, but he held her until she stilled.

He moved forward again, his tongue caressed her lips, parted them. His hand slid along her arm, fell to her breast, explored it through the thin cloth. His thumb worried a nipple until it grew taut. She wanted him to stop, and yet she thought she would die when he did. With a deep breath, he drew away.

She stared at him, in wonder.

"I don't believe I need hear more to implement your plan," he said. His eyes were unreadable pools. "What did you want in trade?"

"There is . . ." she began, then stopped, wondering at herself. All

she wanted to do want to lift her hand to his cheek, to feel his skin slide beneath her fingers. "There is a man, one of just a few, who survives in my keep. He is old, and lame, but wise. I want you to order half of your men to go to my father's castle, and to follow his instructions. I want my people to survive the winter as well."

"You have no people," he said, shaking his head. "You must understand." His dark eyes never left hers. "It is wrong not to surrender when you have lost."

His words were cruel, but he seemed intent to be kind.

She ignored his words, returning to the task at hand. "Will you do as I ask?"

"Why should I not put them at your father's service?"

"My father has no head for such things," she said. "Surely you knew. Did you not speak with him?"

"He seemed a reasonable man," said the Duke.

"He is very reasonable, and he makes well considered decisions. But in a situation where immediate action must be taken, he is-" She stopped.

"Go on," he said.

"He depends on old Amrick, who lives in his keep," she finished lamely.

The Duke nodded. "He was fortunate, then, to have your brother to carry out his campaign against us. He seemed *quite* capable of making quick decisions. I remember thinking him brilliant upon occasion. Or was that Amrick?"

"My brother, Eric" she whispered. "He was very clever."

He smiled, eyes glittering. "Clever enough to let his sister plan his campaigns I think." He stood up, and put a foot on the bench beside her. "So there you are, my enemy. I wondered about you for so long. Cruel, fearless, always the unexpected. It had to be someone who knew nothing of war-"

"We knew enough to bring your army to its knees!" she said rising. How dare he call *her* cruel! "And I know enough to-"

He laid a finger across her mouth.

"You cannot lead the people you left behind anymore-"

"How dare you!" She shoved his hand away, and her voice rose. She heard men stir around her. "I care for every man, woman and child on my lands. I know them all by name. Can you say the same?" She flew back from the table when he tried to take her arm. "How many of *your* people will die this winter because you will not trouble yourself to feed them. How many of these men here? And all to spite me!"

She reached forward to sweep all the chess pieces off the board and onto the floor. By this time every man in the room was wide awake, and some were rising. "This is no game we play!"

"I do not need your help to protect my men." he said advancing. He shoved her hard and she fell back against the wall. When she opened her mouth to speak again, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her from the room. James fell into step behind them.

In the dark hall he pushed her back against the wall, and leaned forward to whisper. "Never question my right to lead. I would have to kill any man who spoke as you just did." His soft voice belied his harsh actions. He acted as though he were rebuking a child.

"I don't-"

"And don't tell me you don't care if I kill you," he said. "I am past believing it. You care too much about all those you would leave behind. You would even shut your mouth to save them."

She bit back her words of reproach, swallowed her pride. "I was wrong," she managed to say. "Will you do as I . . . suggest?"

The Duke said nothing for a moment, studying her. "Yes. I and a detachment will leave the keep tomorrow, and we will be gone for a fortnight. While I am gone, Alain will dispatch men to this

Amrick, and will send men to gather up the homeless from both lands. He will oversee the construction of some kind of shelter, though I am unconvinced that anything serviceable can be built before the first snow fall."

Eleanor could not believe her ears.

"I wish I could trust you to stay out of trouble while I am gone," he said.

"I have no quarrel with Alain," said Eleanor. "While he serves my purpose, I shall serve him."

The Duke shook his head. "You are a ridiculous creature." In a moment he had disappeared into the darkness of the hall, leaving her to make her own way back to her room.

CHAPTER 5

The next day Eleanor found that she had five girls and two young boys in her room when it came to time to teach letters. Apparently the keep cleric had died while visiting one of the outlying villages. The boys had been sent to her to learn to write their names, and to do sums since there was no one else to teach them.

Because there was no paper, and because the ink was all but gone, she made them write with charred sticks on the floor. The result was a floor black with soot, and four children who could write their name. After two hours of what passed as instruction, she sent them off to find useful employment.

She had no idea why she was instructing these children. It was surely a waste of time when she would be gone in just a few months. But when they were so eager to learn, and so happy with the result of their labor, it was hard to send them away. Perhaps it would do them some good some day.

Once they were gone she went in search of Alain. When she found him, he was walking across the courtyard before the front gate. She had to run to catch up with him.

"Sirrah," she said as she touched his arm.

He looked down first in surprise, then in suspicion.

"Can you put me to work? I have nothing to do."



"I have no time to amuse you," he said curtly.

"I can work in the kitchens, or sew," she said. "I want to help, if you will let me."

"See if Mary's mother will have you then." He strode off through the open gate without another word.

Eleanor sighed. Working with Mary's mother would have been her last choice. She turned and walked slowly toward the kitchens. She was happy to find them bustling with activity. Perhaps she could go unnoticed.

She stepped into the room and walked toward a pile of dead chickens waiting to be plucked. Before she had picked one up, there was silence all around her. She turned to find twelve pairs of eyes staring at her. Mary's mother, left the spit turning in the fire to approach her. Mary, turning the spit, sat still and silent, eyes wide.

"I . . ." Eleanor began, then wondered if she should speak first.

"What do ye want?" Mary's mother demanded. "I'll not have ye struttin' about me kitchen while there be work to be done."

Eleanor nodded. "If you please," she said, "I will work in the laundry, or the scullery, or anywhere you will have me." When Mary's mother said nothing, she said, "Alain said I could work for you."

The woman's face turned even redder than it already was, and she looked furious. Then she glanced about as if seeking the opinion of the serving women around her. She scowled. "Do the chickens," she said, "and mind to clean them wi' salt." She stomped away, and began shouting orders to the other women.

Eleanor plucked, gutted and cleaned the twenty birds, then stuck them on several spits to go over the fire. Then, she scoured her work area with salt and water as her mother's cook had taught.

Mary's mother, seeing that she was finished, put her to the task of kneading bread dough, then had her take a mop to the floor. Before long it was nightfall, and she heard the great hall filling with men. The women were filling platters with food and she moved to help them.

"Nay," said Mary's mother, moving to stop her, "ye cannae serve the men. 'Twould not look well."

Eleanor nodded. Of course she couldn't serve her husband's men. As chatlain, she should be served by them. In her father's house she had sometimes served at her parent's table, but here she was above them all.

"I . . ." before she could say anything, Mary's mother had turned away to enter the great hall. Eleanor made herself a plate and returned to her room where she ate alone.



The next morning she rose before dawn and crept down to look out the castle gate. In the half-light she saw that some twenty trees had been felled. Some had been split to create half logs. She wondered what kind of structure they planned to build. Without finished lumber that had been smoothed and cured, whatever they made would be crude. There would be gaps in the walls, and unless those gaps were filled the structures wouldn't hold any warmth at all.

She was still standing near the gate, meditating about this when she turned something move behind her. She turned to find a young man advancing. He had only one hand, and in that hand he had a short sword.

She screamed and turned to find that there was nowhere to go. The gate was closed. She spun around to find him jabbing the

blade toward her midriff. His face was as white as snow, eyes dark pits.

She screamed again and tried to grab his arm. In a moment she was on the ground, and he had fallen her. He tried to lay the arm without a hand across her throat while she struggled to grasp the hand with a blade. He had just dropped the weapon in order to grasp her hands when someone jerked the boy up by his collar.

"Rob!" Alain shook the young man by the neck like a dog shaking a rabbit. "You fool. What have ye gone and done?"

"He . . He. . ." Eleanor couldn't catch her breath. She rolled on to her feet, dimly aware that she was covered in mud and that her dress clung to her like a second skin. "He tried to kill me."

"Sure an' he did not!" said Alain.

"What?" she demanded. Suddenly she noticed that she was surrounded by a dozen men, all staring at her fixedly.

"He would not try to kill his Lord's wife," Alain gave the boy an extra shake, "For he knows the Duke would hang him."

Eleanor crossed her arms over her chest, and tried to force herself to be calm. Alain clearly did not want the boy dead. On the other hand, she couldn't very well overlook an attempt to kill her. Christ! This was a madhouse. "What was he trying to do then?" She asked in a shaky voice.

"Rob hasn't been himself since his pa died," Alain stared at her. "an' he lost his hand."

"I see," said Eleanor. She looked around at the men, most of whom looked ready to take up where the boy left off. She was past knowing how to cope with all this, and she was starting to shake. Whatever Alain wanted would probably be what the Duke desired, and she had promised to be accommodating while he was gone. "Well, I certainly hope he feels better soon," she said with as much tolerance as she could muster.

She stumbled out of the circle of men and ran back toward her

tower. In a few minutes she was in her room, seated on the floor before the fire, shivering.

Half an hour later, Mary appeared to tell her that hot water would be brought to fill her bath. She lingered a little longer to make sure that Eleanor wasn't crying.

"Rob's a good boy," she said. "A good friend. I don't know why he knocked you down."

Eleanor stifled her surprise. Was that to be the tale then?

"He has been ever so sad since his pa died. And Ma said he's had a brain fever cause of his arm." Mary sidled closer. "He's a good boy-"

"I'm sure he is," said Eleanor. "Can you make sure that the children come late today. I have to bathe-"

"Yes, My Lady."

"And can you run and make sure they bring soap for my bath?" Eleanor was hard put to think of ways to get rid of the child. But she didn't want to hear about poor Rob anymore.

"Yes, My Lady," and then Mary was gone, darting down the ladder like a rabbit down a hole.

Eleanor rested her head against her knees. God, she wanted to go home. In fact, she wanted to wake up from this bad dream that started almost a year ago, when the Duke burnt the first village. Nothing after that made any sense at all. Least of all her being miles from home, covered head to toe in mud, with dozens of men who wanted her dead. Nothing she did made any difference. On second thought, that wasn't true. Everything she did made things worse.

When the bath water came, she found herself wondering if it was possible to drown oneself on purpose. Things would be so much easier that way.



Two weeks came and went, and then three and still the Duke had not returned from his journey. It was edging on mid November, and his men had gathered up a fair number of people who had been burned out of their homes in the last few months. Some still had livestock, stores of grain, and some meager belongings, while others had been living like animals in the charred shells of their houses.

Eleanor often rose early to peer out the gate to look at the ongoing construction. Alain had his men building long, low huts, and had ordered the women and children to fill the gaps between the wood with mud and straw. The dwellings were very crude, and it would be impossible to build more when the ground grew harder, but they were better than nothing at all.

She spent the mornings with her group of now eight avid students. Mary proved effective at drilling children on lessons she had previously mastered. It was strange to watch her walking others through the twenty-six letters she had just learned. She seemed older already to Eleanor, and filled with purpose. But perhaps a young girl of twelve moving fast toward womanhood would change in such a way.

In the afternoons Eleanor helped in the kitchens. She noted that there was no more food to cook, and every day there were more people to cook for. Mary's mother, Ann, made no attempt to know her better, and seemed to resent her daily appearance. But she put her to work when she came, and that was enough for the time being.

At dusk one evening, Eleanor was walking across the courtyard. Dinner was going on in the great hall, but she could not bear to eat with the Duke's men. She heard screams from outside the gate

and veered toward toward the sound. On the other side of the thick iron bars she saw an old woman on the ground. She was covering her head with bleeding hands, as children threw stones at her.

"Open the gate!" she shouted. When nothing happened, she ran back a few feet to the gatehouse. A soldier, not much taller than she, was eating his supper.

"Open the gate!" she ordered again.

He looked away, ignoring her.

"You listen to me! You open that gate or I will have my husband hang you. Do you understand. I am the chatlain of this castle and I speak with his authority. Open the gate!" She could hear the woman screaming still, but her voice was losing strength.

"I got no call to take yer orders," he said, looking uncomfortable. "The Duke said we needn't do as you say."

"Are you willing to bet your life on that?" she asked. "Open the gate."

He put down his food and began turning the wheel to raise the huge gate. She was under it before it was a quarter of the way up. She ran toward the children, most of whom were probably Mary's age if not older. When she stood between the old women and the small army, the children looked ready to stone her as well. Only the appearance of Alain and the gatekeeper sent them away.

The old woman was unconscious. She turned to Alain.

"May I have her placed in the room below mine?" she inquired.

"She is a witch," said Alain.

Eleanor shook her head in amazement. "She is an old woman. If she were a witch surely those children would be dead by now."

Alain looked at her for a moment, shook his head, then called up to the battlements. In a few minutes men appeared to carry the woman into the keep.



The Duke returned the next day. Advance scouts appeared first, warning that he was arriving with thirty head of cattle and two-dozen pigs. Alain ordered that the courtyard should be cleared for the livestock until a larger pen could be built outside the castle walls.

Eleanor, having set Mary to the task of caring for the old woman until she was well enough to care for herself, was standing in the stables when the Duke rode in. He looked dirty and exhausted.

"Who did you have to kill to get all those animals?" she asked as he threw his reins to a stable boy and dismounted.

"Several hundred Saracens," he said. "I paid for them."

"Paid for them?" Eleanor was taken back. That must have cost a fortune.

"Our neighbors can be generous when we pay in gold," he said. "Except for Lord Armstrong. An old friend of yours it appears."

Eleanor stepped back into the shadows. "We are . . . acquainted," she said. "He offered for me once."

The Duke leaned against the wall of the stable, pulled off his glove, rubbed his eye against the back of his hand. "He claims you were betrothed."

Eleanor said nothing.

"Your father swore you had no pre-contract." He looked up.

"Perhaps Lord Armstrong remembers differently," she had to tread carefully here. "Since we are married, it is of little moment."

"So I said to him. And he said we had no true marriage and he would appeal to have our vows annulled."

Well, that was an interesting turn of events. Eleanor saw the jaws of the trap closing on the Duke just as he did. Have her for a true wife, or have her married to another. Both options would be unacceptable for he hated her and yet meant to have her lands.

"Did you see my father?" she asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes. He seemed . . . well," he said. "A bit older perhaps. We had little enough to say to one another."

"I suppose so," said Eleanor.

"If you will pardon me, My Lady," here he gave her a mock bow, "I will depart to get clean and have some food. I have no doubt that you have been or will be involved in such mischief as will bring us together again." Without another word he left her, and she heard cheers when he entered the great hall.



That night, unable to stay away, Eleanor crept down into the great hall to see if she might find him waiting for her. It was a silly notion, for she knew he must be exhausted, and yet she felt she had to see for herself.

The great hall, more full than it had been for weeks with the return of his party, was dark except for a low fire that burned on the giant hearth. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust and for her to make sense of what she saw.

The Duke was indeed awake, and so was the young lady on his lap. He was kissing her with every evidence of passion. Her neck arched with her desire. His hand had unlaced her bodice and had entered her gown to mold a breast in hard fingers.

As if aware, some how, that he was being watched, he looked

toward the doorway. Eleanor made no move to step out of his sight. While she watched he stood with the girl in his arms, and walked across the room, He passed her as he entered the hall, and a moment later she heard his step on the stairs. She returned to her tower with her face red and her hands shaped into hard fists. She hated him with every fiber of her being.



Hours later, Robert stared at the darkness over his head. The girl still slept beside him, well satisfied for the time being, though morning would surely rouse her passion again.

A pity he couldn't forget his wife. He had kissed Eleanor weeks ago, and the memory still burned in his flesh like a brand. She had welcomed him at first, a virgin surrendering to her first kiss. She had tried to break away then, perhaps remembering that they were sworn enemies, but he had stopped her. She had accepted his remaining caresses with wonder, even ardor. The thought still stirred him over and over again.

She was a pretty lass, no doubt about that. But he had more than enough experience with pretty young women to know that there was something more to what he felt. Something in him wanted to believe she was . . . human, wanted to make her whole.

He shook his head. What misery lay in that direction. He would never, could never forgive what he had seen in the months before he lay siege to her father's castle. If she played any part in their bloody, vicious campaign at all, she was a woman entirely without a conscience.

Passion was not a new emotion for him, and he knew his perverse desire for the girl would ebb away. It would just be hell until it did.



"I do believe I summoned you an hour ago," he said. He had climbed, once again, into her bower. This time only Alain was at his side.

"I do not come when you call," she said. "I come when I want to see you."

She was working on another dress. She had only three now. One had been damaged by the unfortunate Rob during his attack.

"While I was away, you were attacked," he said.

"No," she replied.

"No what?" the Duke inquired, looking irritated. "You were not attacked? "

"No," she replied. "I was not."

"Alain here seems to think you were." The Duke looked to Alain for confirmation.

"Well," said Eleanor, "Perhaps he should tell you all about it. He appears to know more than I do."

The Duke shook his head, and went. "Also, it appears you offered to hang a man on my behalf."

"I told your gate man to open the gate or you would hang him for me," she said, not looking up from her sewing. "An old woman was being stoned, I meant to put a stop to it, and I did."

"Yes," said the Duke, "I have seen her below."

"So our little talk is at an end," she said.

"Well, it will be when I tell you that you are not to give orders to my men," he said. "You have no authority here."

She did look up at this. "I shall try to remember that," she said, "the next time an old woman is being stoned to death on your doorstep."

"Do," said the Duke. "And one other thing," he said as he turned to go, "stay out of the kitchens."

"No," she replied as he put his first foot on the ladder.

He removed it, then turned around. His sigh was audible. "My wife cannot serve in the kitchens."

"I am not your wife, and if I were I would spend a great deal of time in the kitchens," she said. "I cause you little enough trouble there, and you have no reason to stop me."

He shook his head, looked at Alain and shrugged. "Do as you please," he said. "But don't annoy the cook."

"I am very careful not to annoy the cook. She is an admirable woman," said Eleanor. "I like her very much. When I go home, I shall ask if she wants to come with me. Our cook would love to see -"

"What do you mean, go home?" The Duke had stopped his descent again.

"At midwinter I promised my mother that we would visit her," said Eleanor, "just as you instructed. Our cook is old, and I thought your cook might like -"

"My wife will be staying here," said Alain.

"Your wife?" Eleanor asked.

"Mary is my daughter," said Alain.

Eleanor felt her cheeks burn, but she managed a nod. "You are a lucky man, with such a clever wife and daughter."

"I am," he replied with a slight bow.

"Your duke should be so fortunate," she said, turning back to her work.

The Duke said, "God save me from intelligent women." He and Alain were laughing as they left the room.



Despite Eleanor's avowal to the Duke that she would return to the kitchens whenever she pleased, she found herself disinclined to go back. Mary's mother, Alain's wife, didn't want her there, and the Duke's mistress was one of the women who worked there.

And in any case, why make the effort when it clearly gave her no benefit? The children appreciated her presence, and she would continue to instruct them as long as they showed any interest at all, but she had decided to abandon all pretense of being more than a prisoner of this castle. It served only the Duke's purposes, and she didn't want to please him.

Since she had so much time on her hands, she took an interest in the old woman she had rescued. Her name was Maggie. To her surprise, she was remarkably learned. It was easy to understand why people thought she was a witch. She seemed to know a great deal about healing. As soon as she was well enough to speak she requested herbs from the kitchen garden. With Mary's help she brewed a poltice that seemed to stop the wounds on her body from festering. In fact she recovered in record time.

"My mother had second sight," said Maggie, one day as they sat together. "My father was grandfather to Lord Armstrong. While he lived, we had a house and a small garden where my mother grew herbs. When he died, she practiced healing. When she died, I tried to carry on."

"How came you to live on these lands?" Eleanor asked. She was stitching yet another gown for lack of better occupation.

"The current Lord felt no need to maintain his grandfather's by

blow. When my mother died, he sent me on my way. Since then I've wandered from village to village." She paused, as if waiting for Eleanor to say something. When she didn't, the old woman spoke again. "I am not a witch," she said almost defiantly. "I harm no one with what my mother taught me."

"I am sure you don't," said Eleanor.

"I have done good in my time," said the old woman, her hands kneading the rough coverings of her bed. "I don't know why they hate me."

"I don't either," said Eleanor. "Perhaps you will find a way to change their minds."

The old woman shook her head, "I don't have the sight, but I know I won't live long enough to be welcome anywhere, or to pass on what I know. My mother's people were always well thought of, but their kind is long dead. I am the last and the world will be well rid of me."

Eleanor put aside her sewing and took the woman's hand. "I am hardly a friend worth having, but I am your friend. Let us hope for the best and plan for the worst. Mayhap we'll find our way yet."

When she left the room, the woman was sleeping, her face wearing the remnant of a smile. Eleanor, far less hopeful despite her words, climbed back to the top of her tower.



After seven days, the Duke appeared in her room. To her surprise, he was alone.

"Will not this private visit make it difficult for you to disown me?" she said when he appeared. "I thought we were never to be unattended."

"James is at the bottom of the ladder, and I will come no closer," said the Duke. He was dressed in a loose white shirt and dark britches. His boots were mud spattered as though he had spent the day walking. The weather had turned cold, and snow had started to fall. Perhaps he had been checking on the hundreds of people who now sheltered just outside his walls. "I wanted to speak with you privately."

"So, speak," she said. She was sitting on the floor before the fire, her sewing long ago set aside.

"Have you decided to vex me by not leaving your tower?" he asked. "Only the children see you anymore."

She shrugged. What did it matter whether or not anyone saw her? She was a prisoner here. Why should she pretend otherwise?

"Has someone done something to frighten you?" he asked. He looked perplexed, almost concerned. "Are you afraid to leave here?"

She shook her head. Why did she feel tears pricking at her eyes? She should find something cruel to say to him, should convince him that she was still committed to his destruction. But all she really wanted to do was to go home and never see him again. It was hard to believe that such a simple thing was impossible.

He left the ladder and came toward her. He crouched down to look in her face. "Are you ill?" he asked.

She shook her head, wishing he would move away. All she could think of while he sat there was of the way he kissed that woman in the great hall, how he carried her away to his bed.

"Well, you are vexing me greatly now," he said. "I must confess, this is the most successful ploy yet."

"I am just miserable," she said. "Leave me alone."

He shook his head. A slow hand came forward to raise her chin, and he leaned forward to kiss her. Her lips parted of their own volition, and she brought one hand to touch his face.

When at last he broke the kiss, she wrapped her arms around her knees and turned her head away. She had not shed tears for her brother, nor for her father, and she would not shed them for herself. She heard him walk away and descend the ladder. It was a long time before she rose and went to bed.



When Robert reached the bottom of the ladder, he found James watching him. Without a word he moved to the second ladder and descended it with James just behind. In the darkness of the storage room, James put a hand on his shoulder.

He turned around slowly. "Yes?" he asked. "Did you have something to say?"

"Do you know what you are playing at with that girl?" James made no effort to hide his censure. "You know what she is."

"What she is . . ." mused the Duke. "Do I know what she is?"

"Oh, come on!" James stepped away.

"I know what I thought she was. A lunatic harridan past all reason or decency." he paused. "Now I am not certain of anything."

"Do you remember that you even had a son?" James said sharply.

"I remember," replied the Duke. He made no attempt to hide his fury at the question.

"Do you see what's happening between you?"

The Duke said nothing, used the heel of a hand to rub his eyes. "She is broken inside, like me. Grieving, hopeless, isolated,

guilty. God-" he shook his head. "I will not have her to wive. Calm yourself."

James grunted with a humourless laugh. "Love lorn. Lost in that . . . creature."

The Duke looked up to meet his eyes. "I am quite aware that she shares the weight of this stupid, evil war with the rest of her family. Allow me a moment's . . . compassion for the damned."

James said nothing, his expression betraying his contempt.

The Duke threw his hands in the air. "You know nothing at all of the girl or what I think of her and yet you claim to judge us both!"

"I know what I see, what we all see. Rumors already abound-"

"Fine!" said the Duke sharply. "You amuse her then. A game of chess every now and again, a moment's conversation. Since we all know what *you* think of her, we need fear no rumours of impropriety."

"Oh, no. You won't saddle me with her-"

"Afraid you will find out she's nothing but a girl?" the Duke laughed.

James made a noise in his throat, then left the storeroom without another word.



The next afternoon, James arrived in Eleanor's room, the crude chessboard and a sack of pieces in his hand. "I have been instructed to amuse you," he said.

"I don't want to be amused," said Eleanor.

"The Duke would have you beat me at chess before dinner," he

said, standing at the top of the ladder. He looked angry, almost defiant, as he stood there.

"Tell the Duke-

"Let us just play a game and put it behind us," said James. "I have no desire to run back and forth between you and my Lord carrying messages."

"As you wish," said Eleanor.

He sat where he was and began setting the board. She soon joined him, taking the dark pieces he offered her.

Without a word they began to play, and she was surprised to discover that he played rather well. It made her wonder how he had come to be so good at the game, but then she supposed that a soldier's life had many empty hours to fill. One couldn't be killing all the time. When she won, it was by the grace of God, and she told him so.

"You play better than your master," she said.

He swept the pieces into the bag and collected his board. "That is why he beats me every game.

She looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean? I've beaten him easily every time!"

James looked irritated, as though he had expected as much. "Then I suppose you will have to ask him why he let you win," he said as he moved toward the ladder. "He is rarely so kind to his opponents."



CHAPTER 6

Yule came and went, and Eleanor made dolls for the girls who visited her every day, and gloves for the little boys. In return they gave her strange gifts of wilted flowers and bone knives. She also made a gown for Maggie to replace the only dress the woman owned, and provided her with pen and ink so she could begin drawing pictures of the plants she would put in her garden if she had one. At the bottom of each Eleanor would write how the plant was to be planted, prepared and used. She planned to give the book to her father, who had made similar books for himself in the past. Perhaps one day he would forgive her.

On Christmas Eve the Duke appeared to invite her to the festivities in the great hall, but she declined his invitation. This was not a year for celebration or a time to be joyful.

Each moment she felt more longing for home and the past she could never bring alive again.

Two days after Christmas, he came to give her his gift.

"I thought we could leave tomorrow to visit your parents," he said. Once again he spoke while standing on the ladder, as if afraid to enter the room.

She couldn't stop the smile that flew to her face. No matter how many horrible memories filled her mind from the last few weeks

at home, she knew she would be happier there. Better to grieve with people who loved her than with strangers who wished her dead.

"It will take two days, and we will have to ride. Do you have any warm clothes to wear?"

"I have only what you have given me," she said.

"We have nothing suitable for a woman to ride in, and we can't carry you in a litter."

"If you could find me some warm, *clean* britches and a pair of boots, I might make do," she said.

"You can't be seen in public wearing britches," he said.

She shook her head in disbelief. He and most of his men had seen her wearing far less. But she might as well appease him or he would just decide to cancel the visit altogether. "I shall wear them under my dress for warmth."

"Well enough," he said, then descended the ladder.



The next morning Eleanor and the Duke they set out with a dozen soldiers including Alain and James. As if by agreement, they fell into the rear of the party. He was the first to speak.

"You ride well," he said.

"Very," she replied, feeling something of herself since she was on her way home at last. "Care to race?"

"If you dare try such a thing, I shall knock you off your horse," he said amiably. "I have no desire to chase you through the woods."

She smiled by way of reply.

There was a pause, and then he spoke again. "Care to play a game to night?"

She knew he referred to chess, and she shrugged. "No. You are a cheat."

"You won every time!" he protested.

"Because you let me," she said, "and I still don't know why."

It was his turn to smile.

"Why did you let me win?" she asked. "You didn't even try to beat me."

"Too many reasons to count," he said, smile fading. "I suppose I wanted to know more about you."

"And you learned something by letting me beat you at chess?"

"It is just another form of combat. All strategy, and no bloodshed. I've spent a lifetime fighting. Watching you win let me study my opponent."

His smile began to fade.

"And what did you learn about me?" she was almost afraid to ask. This was the longest conversation they had ever held, and she didn't want to see it end.

He looked toward her. "Perhaps I will tell you another day."

"When I am in the nunnery," she said, feigning indifference. "Another old woman among many. I will hardly care what you think of me then."

"Maybe you will be happy there," he said. "You won't be despised for your learning-"

She turned her horse aside and drove it into a trot. A moment later she was riding beside Alain. With as much bravery as she could muster, she struck up a conversation about Mary, and soon they were warily engaged in comparing their impressions. She was surprised to find him almost genial. She couldn't call him a friend, but she felt he didn't hate her quite as much as the others did.



That night they made camp shortly after sun down. The days were so short that the long night stretched out ahead of them like a vast desert. Fortunately the skies were clear which meant no snow would fall. It would just be incredibly cold.

Like the rest of the company, Eleanor wrapped herself in her cloak, one originally belonging to the Duke, and settled herself before one of the campfires. Looking around the quiet woods covered with snow, she wondered how far they were from the glen where the Duke's men had camped on the day he had taken her from her home. The thought brought back memories of deep despair and grief beyond knowing. How long would it be before she could think of the past without unutterable sorrow?

She noted the men had settled themselves around the remaining two campfires, which meant she had this one to herself. She wondered if it were merely because they hated her, or because her status merited some privacy. Either way, it seemed she would spend the evening in solitude.

"Time to eat," said the Duke, dropping down beside her.

"We have only salt meat and bread, and some ale to wash it down with, but it is better than snow."

She took the food, and admitted to herself that she was happy for his company.

"We should reach your father's keep tomorrow afternoon, before sun down."

"We are making good time," she said with her mouth full.

"We aren't traveling with so many this time, and we have no wounded to accommodate."

She nodded her assent. His every word sounded like a reproach.

She sought for a topic of conversation, wondering what they could discuss that would make her seem as aloof as he did. It came to her in an instant.

"Will you marry that girl when I am gone?" she asked.

"What girl?" said the Duke, turning to look at her with some surprise.

"You know," she said, "the dark one I saw you with. She is pretty, I think. And she suits you." After he set her aside, he would want to marry, have children.

"I do not want to talk about this with you," said the Duke. "Surely there is something else-"

"Why not? Do you not love her?" Eleanor would not be denied.

"How can you not love her? She is beautiful, a good worker-"

"That's what I want in a wife, a good worker," the Duke laughed, shaking his head.

"Well, what do you want?" Eleanor asked.

"My Lady," said the Duke after a pause, "I do not want to leave you by this fire alone, but I will not discuss this with you."

"I suppose," said Eleanor, feeling strangely distant from herself, "I would rather be left alone."

When he made no attempt to rise, she stood and moved herself to the opposite side of the fire. She set herself to ignoring him, to allowing her mind to fall into the flames, where it was always warm.

"This cannot be," said the Duke after a time.

She raised her head.

"You must not love me."

"What?" she was surprised into speech. "I do not love you, I hate you."

"I am glad to hear it. Because I will not have you to wife." He was watching her, eyes dark.

"I believe you have mentioned that before," she said. "As I have mentioned that I would rather die than have you for a husband."

"We are back to dying again?" he asked. "I thought we had moved past that particular threat."

"I save it only for extremities," she said.

"I have lost the desire to punish you-" he went on, as if explaining his position in an argument.

"Momentarily," she interjected.

"Momentarily," he agreed. "But there is nothing more."

"Nor could there be," she continued. "If I have to choose between the convent and you, the sisters will have a new novice."

"I just wanted to be clear," said the Duke, rising.

"Yes," said Eleanor. "Clarity is for the best."



They rode into her keep in the late afternoon as the Duke had predicted.

As they crossed the drawbridge her eyes rose reflectively to the castle gate where her brother's head had hung on a pike. She

could still see it there in her imagination, overlooking her wedding vows.

There were more men in the courtyard than she would have expected, and when she dismounted she didn't recognize any of the stable boys.

Were these the Duke's men?

Her mother met her at the door to the great hall, and she entered to find that an effort had been made to mark her arrival as a joyful occasion.

Boughs of evergreen hung from the peaked walls, and candles burned in the sconces. She could see that places for a dinner were being laid, and her mother had even put out the fine linen table coverings and silver candles.

"I am glad to have you home, at last," said her mother, pulling her close. "We have missed you so."

Eleanor could not speak, so overwhelmed was she with emotion. How long had she waited to hear those words? How could she ever bear to part from here again?

"Where is my father?" Eleanor said, looking around. When she turned to her mother, she saw that her face had fallen.

"In his study," she said. "He rarely leaves there now."

"With your permission, I would go to him," said Eleanor.

There was so much she had to say, and the sooner she started the sooner the weight would leave her heart.

She ran up the steps leaving her mother and the Duke's party in the hall.

She found her father in his study, one of his great books open upon his desk. Without a word she ran to him, and knelt at his feet.

She lay her head on his knee.

"I am so sorry, father. I never meant things to come out this way."

His hand brushed softly across her hair, fell to her cheek where it lingered.

"Its not your fault my dear, it is mine."

"No!" she said, looking up. "I thought I could win, but it was impossible-"

"Impossible for us to do alone. But with the right allies we might have prevailed." Her father's voice sounded both sorrowful and distant, as if he was remembering something from a dream. "I only hope we can set it right some how."

Eleanor rose to her feet. "We will make it as right as we can," she told her father, taking his frail hand in both of her own. "Somehow we will make it better than it is."

He nodded, as if hearing a voice from far away.

"I love you, father, and I am truly sorry."

She saw a single tear slip down his face, and left the room before she began to cry.

Without waiting for the duke, she wandered through the castle. Her memories furnished it with the laughter of her brothers and the bodies of the dead and dying.

All times seem to come together into a single moment, at once more beautiful and more horrifying than anything she had ever known before. Her parent's dreams had turned to nightmares in this keep.

A ladies maid told her where Eric had been buried, and she ran to the chapel. The stone looked newer and more roughly hewn than those of the older graves, but in a few decades it would be smooth with old grief and forgotten misery.

She lay beside the stone, and put her hand upon it. It was there that the Duke found her.

"Lord Armstrong is here," he said without preamble.

"Why?" she asked without sitting up.

"I came to ask you," he replied. "I was unaware of your close acquaintance with this man."

"He has come to us before," said Eleanor. She neglected to mention that it was usually when he wanted to complain about overuse of irrigation water, or sheep that went missing. "I suppose my parents will make him welcome."

The Duke was silent, studying her. "I do not like this strange happenstance," he said after a long pause. "If ill comes of it, be assured that you will be the one to pay."

"As always," she said, closing her eyes.

She heard him leave the chapel, and she began to pray for the soul of her brother.



Lord Armstrong sat to her father's right at the high table during the feast. Though they spoke very little to one another, Eleanor sensed that some strange relationship had grown between them in the last months.

She had never particularly liked Lord Armstrong, he seemed rather contentious as a rule.

Still, in the months after the Duke's arrival, and the attacks on the first few villages, he had offered to marry her and to protect her family's lands as his own. She had declined his offer because he was almost twenty years her senior and because she and her brother had felt certain they could defend themselves. But, she felt Armstrong had made his offer with the best of intentions.

After all, their families had lived in peace for generations.

She and the Duke sat to her father's left, while her mother sat to her right. They faced the more than seventy soldiers and servants who shared the belated yule dinner with them. She noted that many of the faces were strange, and that Lord Armstrong's company was larger than she might have expected.

Her husband said hardly a word throughout dinner. His face was pale, his eyes dark. She knew he longed to leave this place, and she knew it was right that he should. This was her home and he was not welcome here.

When the dinner was over, she rose and walked toward the stables. The Duke followed her without a word. As she made to step through the door, he put a hand on her arm.

"I left my gift for my father in my saddlebag," she said before he could ask.

"The book the witch wrote?"

"Please stop calling her that or she will be burned," Eleanor said, somewhat vexed.

"I will come with you," said the Duke, following her out into the dark courtyard. They crossed the moonlit area and walked into the shadow of the stables.

So few lights burned at night that it took her time to find where her saddle had been placed. She pulled the pages from it and saw they were not much worse for wear. It wasn't much of a gift, but it was all she had to offer.

She turned to ask the Duke if he cared to see it, only to find him missing. She began to search the stable for him, but found her father instead.

"My dear, you must come with me," he said gently.

"Where is the Duke?"

"Come," he said, taking her arm. His touch was gentle but insistent, and she went with him despite her confusion.

He led her back to his study, where she found Lord Armstrong and her mother.

"My dear," said Lord Armstrong with a bow, "I am so glad to see you. We couldn't speak before, but it does my heart good to see you well." His blue eyes were as pale as a winter sky. "Thank you," said Eleanor, mystified.

"We have not much time, and so I must be . . . indelicate," Lord Armstrong moved toward her. He looked well for a man of forty, broad and tall. She had thought of him as old once, but suddenly he seemed not much older than the Duke. It was easy to see that he had been a solider once, and despite the lines in his face and the grey in his hair, his square shoulders bespoke the strength of a younger man.

"Is your marriage with the Duke . . . a true marriage?"

"Do I share his bed?" Eleanor interpreted. Her heart started to pound in her chest.

"Indeed . . . have you ever lain with him?" Lord Armstrong came to stand by her father's table. "Or has he made you a dishonorable union?"

"Why do you ask?" Eleanor tried to still the shaking of her hands by pressing them together.

"Because of the pre-contract," said her father. He was glassy eyed, standing by his shelf of books. He looked on her adoringly. "You were betrothed to Lord Armstrong in the spring."

"Why didn't you tell the Duke this?" asked Eleanor.

"Because he would never have stopped . . . the killing," said her father.

Eleanor looked to her mother for confirmation, but saw only fear in her eyes.

"I remember no contract," she said.

"It was written between your father and I, after you sent your

rejection. We decided that despite your wishes, we should unite our lands through marriage."

"But I am . . . married to the Duke," said Eleanor.

Lord Armstrong picked up a document from the table. "Sign this, and your marriage will be annulled. It says that you have not lain with your husband, and that you were coerced into speaking your vows. This is no more than the truth."

Her father moved closer, "Then you can marry Lord Armstrong as you were sworn to do."

Eleanor stood before them, blood pounding in her ears, mind whirling with indecision. What on earth should she do? The idea of never having to return to the Duke's castle, of being able to come home whenever she wished, was too wonderful to be believed. The notion that she might escape the convent, perhaps marry, have children, grow old in her own home was all but unthinkable. She did not want Lord Armstrong as a husband, but when compared to perpetual virtue and loneliness as a bride of Christ, he was an acceptable alternative.

But the horror of rekindling this war was all but unthinkable. So many had died, and so many more would fall if she agreed to this plan. It was treacherous to consider breaking her promise to the Duke, and yet was not his every act one of treachery? A dishonorable peace made with her as the sacrifice? Her family's lands stolen? Making her a prisoner rather than a wife?

She took up the pen almost before she knew it. Her hand, of its own volition, wrote her name on document declaring her marriage a lie. She signed a second copy for her father. When she was done, she wiped her hands on her dress, feeling like Herod trying to wash away the blood of Christ.

"My dear, we must depart immediately," said Lord Armstrong. You are not safe here while this place is surrounded by his men."

"What about my parents?"

"Go, my dear," said her mother. "We will be fine." The fear in her eyes belied her words.

"Yes," said her father. "God shall protect us."

She watched Lord Armstrong fold one of the documents she had signed and saw him place it under his shirt, close to his skin. He took her by the arm, and led her out the door into the hall.

In another moment they were climbing down the servants stair. She noted that four of his men, weapons drawn, had fallen in step with them before they reached the ground.

In the stables, they put her on a horse. They looked surprised when she stripped off the dress that covered the jerkin and leggings she wore for warmth, then sat astride. She had no intention of being captured because she could not keep her seat or because her gown caught on a branch.

The castle gate was open, and their horses hooves had been muffled so they made little sound as they rode through it. As soon as they passed through the gates, Lord Armstrong and his men beat their mounts into a gallop. She followed their lead and soon was running ahead of them. There was some advantage to weighing half what a full-grown man did.



Eleanor knew from the start that they were doomed. The ride had all the characteristics of a nightmare. The moon was high, and they rode like shadows toward Lord Armstrong's keep. Lord Armstrong probably expected the Duke to gather an army and lay siege to his castle, but Eleanor knew the Duke would never delay his revenge so long. He would take them tonight,

She heard the pursuit long before she saw any evidence of it.

At first it was just an occasional call, or an extra hoof beat carried on the wind. But soon it was a thunder, and she knew the Duke and his men were on their heels.

She was farthest ahead, Lord Armstrong just behind, his men staying back in order to protect them. When she heard the first man fall from his horse, she wheeled about, all but colliding with Lord Armstrong. To her surprise, he did not stop, but rode past her, driving onward though his men were now fully engaged with the Duke's.

Though she had seen the carnage after a battle, she had never witnessed mortal combat. Her unwilling eyes were riveted on the execution of Armstrong's men.

The Duke had knocked a man off his horse, and after a short exchange, swept his blade through half his torso. His victim fell, split in half, screaming. His blood was black in the moonlight.

The Duke then turned and ran his blade through one of the two men James was fighting. James lopped the head off the other with one long stroke. It rolled along the snowy ground until it fell into a little creek.

The last man was served by Alain. Moving inside his guard, he drove a dagger through his belly and up into his chest. The man crumpled into a heap.

The Duke mounted his horse and walked it toward her.

She made no attempt to run away.

For a moment he stared at her, and then he backhanded her so hard she was knocked off her mount. She lay on the snowy ground, stunned. He took the reins of her horse and threw them to James.

"Tell the men we are at war," he said. "Lord Armstrong won't wait out the winter. He will attack as soon as he can."

James and Alain nodded. Moments later they were galloping back toward her keep.



"Get up," he said.

"You are not my husband," she said.

"So I read," he removed the document she had left with her father from his shirt. "I would say a pre-contract, lack of consummation, and coerced wedding vows should be sufficient to have the marriage annulled. In fact, I could not have asked for better."

She said nothing.

"Get up. I don't want to kill you here," he said.

She rolled onto her side, then climbed to her feet.

Her head was spinning and her jaw ached.

"Give me your hand."

With a sense of hopelessness, she complied. In one swift movement he pulled her onto his horse in front of him. Then he nudged his the animal into a walk. They did not turn in the direction of her home, nor, she thought, in the direction of his, but moved deeper into the woods. Perhaps he really meant to kill her. She leaned her head back against him, and prayed that it wouldn't hurt much.

"So now we need have no secrets," he said as they picked their way through the black and white landscape.

She nodded.

"I can tell you that I want you as I have never wanted another woman." He brought his lips to her ears. "Sometimes I want to tear you apart and make you scream for me. Sometimes I want to father a race of warriors upon you."

She closed her eyes, felt the whisper of his breath warming her neck.

"I long to open you."

"Please stop," she said, afraid to hear his words.

They had come to a burned out cottage. The roof was half-gone, but three walls remained. He dismounted and pulled her down with him.

He looped the reins of his horse over a low branch, then moved them into the meager shelter. He turned her to face him.

"Take off your clothes as you did the night you offered to sleep with all the men in my army."

She shook her head.

"Are you afraid of a single man? Where is your courage now, my little soldier?"

His back was to the open wall of the house, moonlight lit him from behind. She remembered when she had first seen him thus.

"Show me yourself as you did when you took a bath before me," he said. "Let me see you, like some white witch, in the moonlight."

He waited, as if knowing she would comply.

She lowered her head and unlaced the jerkin she wore. She pulled it off and the moonlight painted her body silver, her breasts were pear-shaped mounds made hard by the cold.

"The rest," he said, watching.

She untied the britches, pulled off the boots, stood before him naked. The cold was inhuman. It burned her skin, she felt the heat rushing from her body, seeping out through her pores. But she would do whatever he said.

He approached, pulled her into his arms. Where he touched, her body caught fire. His hands followed the swell of her hips, the

curve of her buttocks, crept into the cleft between her legs.

He removed his long riding cape, wrapped it around her shoulders. In a single movement he swept her up and carried her farther into the structure, to the remains of a bench-like bed. He lay her upon it, then came beside her, fully dressed, his head propped on one hand. His free hand sought the cleft between her thighs again.

"Open for me," he said, and she parted her legs. She felt his fingers enter her, remembered another day when he had entered her so. Her back arched, and she turned her head toward him.

She felt him untying his britches, and in a moment he was between her legs. With little preamble, he entered her, and her back arched at the sudden heat. He put his hands beneath her head. He kissed her once, gently, exploring the warmth of her mouth. He deepened the kiss as he began to move. She felt him fill her on every stroke, and she moaned against his mouth. His motion became harder, more insistent, and her hips rolled under him. She opened her legs wider to let him fill her more deeply until she could take no more.

She felt her heart stop, heard her breath catch in her throat, he had become the entire world in a moment of cold bliss. She could not hold enough of him. She felt his seed spill inside her, heard him gasp, and she wrapped her legs around his back to pull him deeper still.

He rolled away from her, stood, closed his clothing. She sat up, rested her head on her knees.

"You are truly my wife now. At least until your other husband hangs me. I suppose I can have you whenever I like," he said.

She said nothing.

"If it weren't for all the people that were going to die," he said, "I might admit that I much prefer things as they are now." He paused as if in thought. "Perhaps I can sate my fever for you before I die."

She nodded. Better to be his whore than a ghost in his keep.

"Can you speak?"

"Yes," she said.

"Have you nothing to say?"

She looked up at him. "What would you have me say, My Lord?"

She looked up at him. Should she offer an apology for thwarting his plan to betray her family? Should she taunt him with the prospect of his own demise? Should she beg for her life or demand her freedom? Words could not express her misery.

He reached down to offer her a hand up. She stood, and he walked the few feet required to retrieve her clothes. He returned to hand her the jerkin. After she had pulled it on, he gave her the britches. She stepped into them and laced them up. Then she pulled on the boots.

"Since you have come to me, you have tried to force me to punish you," he said. "At every turn you drove me to it and I always turned away."

She said nothing.

"Now, I'm going to oblige you," he said.

She looked up. Once again his face was lost in darkness.

"I'm taking you back to my keep so you can watch a massacre."

He mounted his horse, and offered her a hand. She let him pull her up before him, and then they set off for home.



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CHAPTER 7

They rode into the Duke's keep the next evening at dusk. She slipped off the horse and onto the ground and he dismounted after her. He tossed his reins to one of the stable boys. Around the courtyard men and women went about their business, as if unaware that she had betrayed them.

She turned to ask the Duke for an explanation, but before she could speak Alain appeared, face grim. He didn't look at her at all.

"My Lord," he said, "I've prepared the men to expect an attack within the week. They are making fortifications now."

The Duke nodded.

"I don't know what arrangements can be made for those living outside the walls. We can bring only some portion of them within the gates-

"Leave them be," said the Duke. "When the battle is near, we will send them away to starve in the woods. For the time being they may as well keep warm."

Eleanor felt tears prick behind her eyes.

James appeared. He didn't spare her a look either, but she could feel his cold hate fill the air around her. "My Lord, we cannot withstand a siege of more than a few days if we do not cut back to

half rations-

"We won't withstand a siege in any case," said the Duke waving his hand to dismiss the suggestion. He looked tired in the moonlight.

"What other preparations shall we make?" asked James. He glanced at her then. "Shall we build a scaffold?"

The Duke responded with a sharp laugh. "For the girl? Hang her and we won't even have a hostage." He shook his head. "Be assured that if you build a scaffold we will be the only ones to swing from it."

"You can't mean-" James turned to stare at her. "After what she did?"

"For the time being she is our hostage and my wife. In a few days, of course, she will be Armstrong's wife." The Duke glanced at her then. "I mean to send her to him well used."

The expressions on the faces of both men hardened. They obviously didn't approve of their lord's decision.

"We will make what preparations we can in the full knowledge that the cause is hopeless. What other choice do we have?" He took a moment to look in both their eyes. "In the meantime you will continue to keep word of her treachery to yourself lest Rob or another like him decide to kill the girl. I might try to buy some lives with her."

He led her into the keep, and she noted that the room stilled upon her appearance. As they picked their way through the filled benches and around the trestle tables there was utter silence. When they exited the room to climb the stairs to his room, she heard a dull roar of voices erupt from the hall.

"There may have been a pre-contract and perhaps your vows were forced," he said as he led her up the stairs to his room, "but by the time he has you the Duke will know our union was consummated. I do not envy you your first few weeks in Lord Armstrong's bed."

He opened the door to his room and she followed him in.

His room was decorated with hangings and deep carpets from the holy-land. A fire was burning on the hearth, and incense wafted through the room. She had never seen such luxury.

Without a word he began removing his clothes. Firelight played across the planes of his massive shoulders, curled down the curve of his back, slipped down to caress his buttocks and thighs. He turned to her when he was naked, and she looked away.

He came to stand before her, close enough that she could feel his breath stir her hair. He didn't touch her.

"Is it not strange that I am the only man to have accepted your offer in all this time?" His hand came to caress her arm. "I do want to put a bastard in you."

She turned away, feeling tears fill her eyes.

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her in an embrace.

"I lost my son you know," he said, resting his chin on her head. "You lost your brother and I lost my son."

She shook her head as if to deny his words.

"At least I think he was my son. I was sixteen when his mother gave him to me. She was my first and I suppose I loved her. The boy and I, it could be said, grew up together. He came with me to Damascus and he followed me here. He insisted on fighting the battle at your keep."

She turned to bury her head in his chest, tears poured down her face.

He was one of the dead you rode here with. The other was Alain's brother.

She broke away and put her hands over her ears. She couldn't bear any more.

"I promised my men peace-" he spoke again. She could hear him

despite her hands, "and I brought them death."

She turned to face him. "Peace? Then how could you kill all those people?" she asked, words choking her as she uttered them. "You killed everyone, threw their bodies in the river-

"I killed them?" he asked. "You killed them! And scorched the earth and burned the grain to keep us from having our share of the river lands."

She shook her head. "You lie," she sobbed. "You lie!"

He looked at her in amazement, then sat down on the bed with a thump. He buried his head in his hands. "I am a fool," he said softly. "Such a fool."

"What?" she said, startled by his words.

"It was Armstrong," he said, rubbing his eyes. He looked up at her. "He burned the lands to set us against each other."

"He wanted to marry me-" she protested. "he wouldn't kill my people."

"You declined. So he decided to force your hand, to force all our hands."

The Duke shook his head, "I should have known. Your father was no military man, and your brother was a boy parading as a soldier. It had to be Armstrong." He looked at her. "When you signed those documents, he took ownership of all our lands."

Stunned past speech, Eleanor went to sit on the hearth with her back to the fire. Could Lord Armstrong really have authored so much destruction? He must be overjoyed to see how well she had played into his hands, carrying out his bloody war so he could take all without any losses to speak of.

If she had not been so willing to believe that the Duke was a murderer, if she hadn't begun burning his fields-

"Stop," said the Duke. He had come to stand before her. "It does not matter any more." He offered her his hand. When she took it,

he pulled her to her feet. He began to undress her. In moments she was naked before him.

He brushed his lips across hers, once, twice, again. "Nothing matters any more," he whispered. "I just want to have you again." He pulled her toward the bed, then tumbled her down upon it. "I do not care if I live or die anymore."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed her lips to his, felt him stir between her legs. His weight crushed her, flesh burned her skin. She pressed the palms of her hands against his face, feeling the stubble grate against them.

In moments he was within her, driving into her with passion that made her back arch with pleasure. She couldn't take him deep enough, couldn't hold enough of him. When she felt his seed pour into her, the world fell away into darkness.



When she woke, he was tickling her nose with her own hair, a smile playing on his lips.

She brushed his hand away, closing her eyes again.

"Do you suppose if you were to give me a son he would have this silver hair?" he asked. "Pale as moonlight, fine as spider web."

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"He would be a formidable warrior," he said, "Perhaps even strong enough to bring peace to this godforsaken land."

She said nothing, watching him.

"If I get a son on you, will you promise me to make sure he is raised well?"

"I can't stand this," she said, trying to roll out of bed.

He held her down until she stilled, then lay his head upon her chest. "Stay with me. I do not want to be alone."



Morning found Eleanor in Maggie's room, legs folded under her as she told all that had happened in the few days they had been apart.

"Surely you see that this is not all your doing," said Maggie. "Lord Armstrong deceived you-"

"I was wrong to be deceived. My brother and I were wrong to burn those villages. I was wrong to betray . . . everyone by making my mark on a petition to Rome.." Eleanor was past tears, past anything except contemplating all she might have done differently. "And there is no way to put things right."

Maggie cocked her head to one side as if considering her words. "Perhaps that is not quite true."

"What?" Eleanor asked, startled.

"Lord Armstrong's brother joined the clergy. If Lord Armstrong were to die, his brother would be the new lord. It would take weeks to fetch him, and I doubt he would carry on his brother's war."

"What are you saying? That if we kill him first in battle-"

"Not in battle," said Maggie. "Its too late then. Before the battle. Once the battle rages nothing can stop the killing until one side or the other is defeated."

"What are you suggesting?" Eleanor could hardly believe her ears.

Maggie shook her head. "It's a foul plan, and impossible to carry

out."

"Murder?" Eleanor asked.

Maggie stood, and then pulled a box of old clothes from under her bed. She retrieved a small vial from the bottom of the box and held it up. "Belladonna," she said. "I meant to take it myself if . . . they forced me to leave here. I am past tired of living," She handed the vial to Eleanor.

"I don not know how to use it . . ." Eleanor said after a time.

"Put it in his food, or better in some wine. It has a foul taste so he must drink it quickly."

Eleanor stood, stepped away from the woman. "I don't know if I can do this," she said. "This is murder."

Maggie shook her head, smiled a little. "I couldn't do it twenty years past when he threw me from my home, not caring if I starved or were burned for a witch." She looked up. "I don't know if I could do it even now."

Eleanor left the room, the vial clutched in her hands.



Eleanor walked through the keep, mentally accessing the men, what fortifications remained, how long the food would last. As the Duke had said, they would hold out for a few days, but they were no match for a well fed, well rested army.

She walked to the gate and stared at the hundreds of people in the field outside the walls. Some were cooking, others washing. Children huddled in the makeshift shelters, too ill-clad to play in the foot of snow outside.

The Duke found her staring through the gate, James and Alain in

tow. Their faces were suspicious, his patient.

"Some of my men feel that you should be confined until after the battle."

"Is one woman such a threat?" she asked.

He looked over his shoulder at the two men, then smiled. "If that woman is you, My Lady."

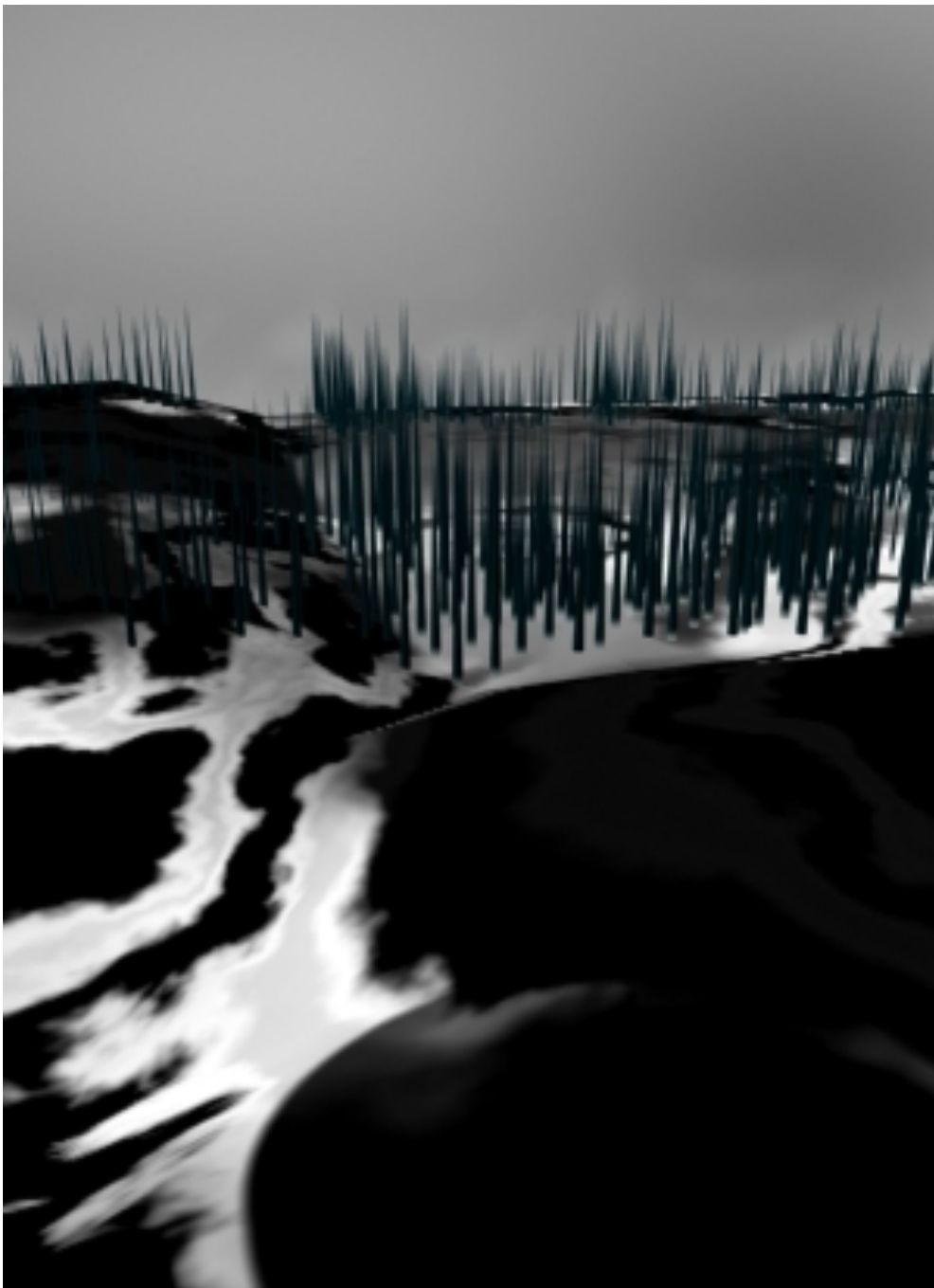
"I will do whatever you want to me do," she said.

"Stay in my room. I will put guards outside to protect you, or to protect us as the case may be." He smiled again. "We have word that Armstrong is camped in the forest half a day's ride from here. He will probably attack in the morning."

"Why are you smiling?" she asked, horrified.

"I came here to find rest for myself and my men after years of battle. It looks like its about to arrive in the form of Armstrong's army. There is some irony in this."

She left him without a word, climbing the two flights of stairs to his room. She pushed aside a hanging that covered the window facing the forest. Could Lord Armstrong really be waiting there? The answer came in the form of smoke drifting up from the trees near the horizon.



CHAPTER 8

Eleanor crouched in the icy water of the creek, Her clothes were sodden, and she couldn't stop shaking from the cold. She had crept for several miles along the waterway toward where she guessed Lord Armstrong and his men were camped. She hoped the cold didn't kill her before she had a chance to poison him.

When night had fallen, she had used all the silks she could find in the room to create a makeshift rope. She tied one end of the rope to the bed and lowered the other out the window. It was too dark to be sure how far it extended into the darkness, but she assumed it would be more than half way to the surface of the moat.

Though the window was too narrow for a man, just an arrow slit really, she managed to wriggle through it and let herself down inch by slow inch. She reached the end of the rope while still twenty feet in the air. The skin of ice over the water sparkled in the intermittent moonlight. She seemed to fall forever when she let go, and when she hit the water it felt like knives stabbing into her body.

She scrambled up the bank then crept toward the line of people leaving the encampments outside the castle. The Duke had ordered them to clear the area in preparation for the morning's battle. A mile or two later they passed by a creek she remembered from her father's maps. It curled up into the wood east of his castle. She assumed Lord Armstrong's army would make camp near water.



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But she had been walking for what seemed like miles and she had yet to see any sign of what must be a substantial army. Where could they be? She wanted nothing so much as to climb up a bank and curl up into a ball. With luck she would be frozen solid by morning. But the faces of all those who would die if she failed in her quest swam before her eyes. It had to stop. This had to be the end. Once Amstong was dead, she would be able to rest. Her heart lurched a little at the thought of never seeing the Duke again. She wondered if he would miss her a little.



The Duke ran a hand along the wall as he came down the stairs. He still could not believe it. A vision of the clumsily tied fabric falling away into darkness hid behind his eyes. Every bone in his body ached with despair. He was past anger, past hate, had descended into grief.

He entered the great hall, stepping over men who were just making preparations for sleep now that evening was coming on. Alain and James were in a corner pouring over a map and scratching plans into the rough wood of a trestle table.

"She's gone," he said as he approached. The words tasted like lead in his mouth.

James was the first to rise. "Where?"

"How long?" demanded Alain.

"I don't know," he said to Alain. "Presumably to Lord Armstrong's camp," he added to James.

Alain and James said nothing, waiting for him to speak. Their faces were gray, expressions grim in the flickering shadows of the

great hall.

"Stop her," said the Duke without looking up. He left the hall while James and Alain called out to assemble their hunting party.



Eleanor could hear Armstrong's sentries calling to one another through the trees. Laughter echoed from the center of the camp, and she even heard a few men singing. ♦ This army knew the weakness of its enemy and was prepared for an easy victory. God willing, she would surprise them with defeat.

Of course, this assumed that she could reach Lord Armstrong without being killed by one of his guards first. She took a deep breath and started up the slope of the creek toward the voices.

In less than an hour she stood before what she assumed was Lord Armstrong's tent, her arm twisted behind her back.

"If y've lied to me, I'll gut you," said the taller of the two men as he shoved her passed the men guarding the entrance.

Lord Armstrong was holding a map up to a lamp. Around him, several thick carpets covered the ground, and a half eaten meal sat near a raised pallet on his right. Two large chests were open, spilling their contents around the room. One held clothes, the other armor and weapons.

Lord Armstrong turned at her entrance. At first his, gray face tightened with irritation at the unannounced interruption, then his eyes widened in surprise. A moment later they narrowed with suspicion.

"How came you here?" he asked.

"I . . . escaped," she said. "I had to get away. They were going to .

. . hang me."

Lord Armstrong rolled up his map and dropped it behind the bed. He looked at the men behind her and nodded in her direction.

"She came by the creek," said the more senior of her escorts. "Swore she were yer . . . wife."

"You have more lives than a cat, My Lady," said Lord Armstrong with a slight bow. He waved his hand to dismiss his men. "I am surprised the Duke would keep you so carelessly."

Eleanor struggled for composure. How must she act? Afraid, angry, confident, fearful? Lord Armstrong knew her very little, they had spoken only a few times. What would serve her best?

"I am cold, My Lord," she said, after a moment's pause. That at least was true. Surely, it was best to keep to the truth until a lie seemed completely necessary.

He turned to pick up a dark wool blanket draped over the bed. He handed it to her without a word.

She wrapped the blanket around her shivering body and sat on the bed. "They did not keep me carelessly," she said. "It is only by the grace of God that I stand before you."

He watched her for a moment, then turned and moved to lean against the nearby table with his arms crossed. "Tell me how such a miracle came to be, My Lady." He made no effort to hide his suspicion.

Eleanor took a deep breath, then went over her escape in some detail. She omitted only whose room she had departed from.

"I am surprised that you were not killed shortly after our last meeting," he said after she finished. "Or harmed in . . . some other way." His look left her no doubt as to the way in which he assumed she had been harmed.

"If the Duke kills me, he has no claim to my father's lands and he loses a hostage in tomorrow's engagement. For," as she said with

a meaningful look, "he knows you need me in order to lay claim to my father's estates. I suspect this is why he did not hang me nor rape me himself."

"He means to parley with me then-" Armstrong raised an eyebrow.

"My Lord-" Eleanor interrupted him, "Can you not offer your wife a meal or even something to drink? Am I a prisoner you must interrogate?"

Armstrong nodded his assent. "I will have my men take you to a safer place where you can eat and drink." He straightened and motioned at her to rise.

"Indeed, My Lord," said Eleanor, feeling her heart drop. She stood up slowly, as if prepared to obey his order. It was all going wrong. She wouldn't see him again before the battle started. Everything would be lost!

She took a few steps, then stopped. She turned abruptly to find him close on her heels, as if he had planned to speak to the guards as she exited the tent.

"My Lord," she said in a low voice. "I would not have you think me forward, but I have a question."

"Yes, what is it?" he sounded a little impatient, as if eager to be rid of her.

"Is not a betrothal consummated considered a marriage by the church?"

His eyes sharpened. "Yes," he said slowly.

"Tomorrow, by the church's law, do you not make war on my husband? Though the union is not . . . complete, I understand that as things stand, without a ruling from the church, he is in all ways, my lawful husband."

"Yes," he said again, even more slowly.

"If we consummate our vows and you find me . . . a maiden, then

would you not be, in the eyes of the church, my true husband? This would make tomorrow's . . . engagement justified on its face."

He nodded.

"Could you not then seize the Duke's lands as forfeit, retaining the rents until adjudicated by the king's courts in the spring?

He nodded again.

She waited.

"So you would have us . . . consummate our marriage," he said.

She looked at the ground in an attempt to hide her revulsion and her fear. "As you might imagine, I wish to have my future settled once and for all."

She looked up to find him watching her, blue eyes piercing. "As you wish, My Lady." A long hand came to touch her cheek. He leaned forward to press his lips upon hers. His lips were soft. His breath was fetid. She endured the kiss as long as she was able, then pulled away.

"My Lord, might we share a glass of wine . . . my courage deserts me." In truth her knees were hardly able to hold her up. She pulled the blanket tighter about her. The vial of belladonna was in a pouch she had tied to the cord that held up her leggings. How on earth would she give it to him if he wouldn't drink with her?

"As you wish," he said. He nodded at a half bottle of wine that sat on the camp table. There were two flagons beside it, one half full.

Using the blanket to cloak her movements, she retrieved the vial from the pouch. Her heart was pounding as she dumped the contents into the half filled flagon, and then filled both to the brim. She let the blanket fall as she turned to offer him the poisoned cup. When he took it, she raised her cup slightly, as if in a toast. He matched her movement. She closed her eyes and drank the whole draught at once, hoping he would do the same.

She opened her eyes, and placed her cup on the table behind her. She looked up as he approached, saw him place his apparently untouched cup beside hers.

"I take only a glass of wine a day, and that with water," he said. "I suffer greatly from rich food and drink."

Her heart started pounding in her chest and she felt the blood drain from her face. It was clear that she could not poison him and it was just as clear that she could not let him survive the night. It was also obvious that he would expect her to consummate their betrothal, and that he would discover she was no maid. When he discovered this, he would have her removed from his chamber and perhaps killed. In any case his assault on the Duke's castle would go on as planned.

He seemed to think her strange manner related to a virgin's fears of the marriage bed. His hands came to the cord that tied her jerkin closed. In moments he had bared her to the waist and his long, dry hands were shaping her breasts.

She looked up to find his pale face growing red, eyes becoming dark.

His hands slid down her trunk to the cord that held up her hose. He untied them and the hose fell to her feet. He pulled her forward and she stepped out of them and out of the sodden shoes that clung to her feet.

They were frozen for a moment as he looked at her.

"It seems I made a good bargain with your father," he said at last. "He gave me a beautiful and resourceful bride."

Panic overtook her. It became difficult to breathe. Her eyes jumped to the bed, mind filling with visions of what would happen there in just a few moments. She couldn't think of anything to say that might change the course of events. Her eyes took in the rough fabric of the camp bed, the trencher of half eaten food below it. There had to be some way to escape!

On the trencher was a knife, a short silver dagger! Armstrong, like most lords, probably ate with the same utensil at every meal. He left it on the plate because he hadn't finished eating the half loaf of bread or remains of the meat.

"You have no cause to fear me, My Lady," said Armstrong. He pulled her into his arms and began kissing her again. It seemed his ardor had increased substantially, and she was now hard put not to cry out as his hands worried the rose tips of her breasts. She made herself accept his advances, knowing that to fight him now would end any hope she had of killing him before the morrow.

At last he did carry her to the cot, and she watched him undress. His body was broad and strong, the muscles falling only a little with age. When he was naked, he came to kneel beside her, lips finding first her mouth, then her breasts.

"My Lord!" she whispered. "The blanket!"

He raised his head to look at her, eyes glazed with lust.

"What if someone should . . . enter?" she said.

He grunted something, and rose to retrieve the blanket. While his back was to her she caught up the dagger from the plate and thrust it under the pillow. When he returned, she parted her legs and he fell atop her, pulling the blanket over them both.

He shifted to kiss her mouth again and she slipped her hand under her pillow.

He rose up, shifting his body so he could enter her, and then she struck. Using all her strength she buried the sharp blade in his throat. He had only time to grunt in surprise before she pulled the blade toward her, making it impossible for him to ever make another sound. His body twisted and turned atop hers.

A guard pulled the flap aside and stuck his head into the tent. Seeing what he presumed to be his master tugging his new wife, he pulled his head out again just as swiftly.



At long last it was over. Armstrong's body stilled and Eleanor slid out from under him. She was coated in his blood. It covered her face and hair, ran over her breasts, under her arms, between her legs. She wretched once, then wretched again. She threw up the wine she had taken. The acrid smell of vomit filled the room.

She stumbled to her clothes, dragged them on with shaking hands. They slipped and slid over the blood. Once dressed, she gingerly moved toward the body and used the blood sodden blanket to cover it. With luck it might remain undisturbed for several hours. She hoped the guards would think he slept.

She crept to the side of the tent behind the open trunks. She lay on the ground and used the knife to cut a small slit in the canvas. It was dark, and the camp had quieted. It was close on midnight, perhaps later, and even the most confident of soldiers had probably retired for the evening, seeking rest for the morning slaughter.

She used the knife to cut a much longer slit, then she rolled into the gap between Armstrong's tent and another close to it. In an instant she was on her feet, darting into the trees that surrounded the camp.



Eleanor made her way back to the creek and started to follow it toward the Duke's castle. She did not expect a warm welcome there. She doubted that either the duke or his men would give her

a chance to explain her disappearance. They knew her to be a traitor, after all.

And, in any case, she had broken her wedding vows and murdered a man in cold blood. By any measure she was doomed to die.

But, whatever happened, she wished to see the Duke again. She wanted to be certain that no harm would befall him, that his people would remain safe, that he would care for those she left behind. If she knew that, she felt she could suffer whatever happened to her with some peace of mind. The months of killing would be over at last.

She hadn't gone more than a mile down the creek when she heard riders pelting toward her. At first she couldn't determine the direction from which they approached and she turned around and around in the creek. At last she realized they were coming from the direction in which she was headed, and she started to run the opposite direction. It was probably one of Armstrong's scouting parties returning to the camp. She scanned the edges of the creek for shelter, but the trees were sparse here.

She heard the whistle of the arrow before she felt its impact and she dropped into the stream when it struck. It felt like fire burning through her chest. She heard horses hooves striking the water around her, and then someone grabbed her by her jerkin and pulled her out of the water. He held her up, and the movement of the arrow in her chest made her cry out.

"We have her," said James.

Alain dismounted, splashing into the water beside her. She saw he was dressed for battle in thick leather armor and worn mail. Without a word he reached forward to grasp the arrow in her chest from both sides. He snapped the head off with one hand and jerked it out of her body through her back with the other.

She screamed in agony.

"Ride her back," said Alain. "I'll scout up ahead."

James nodded. In a moment he had her riding before him on his horse, and they set off at a canter toward the castle. She fainted before they had ridden more than a mile.



James dropped her onto the dirt inside the castle courtyard. She rolled over onto her back and stared up into the cold winter sky. When, she wondered, would the torment end? How long would it be before she was with her brother in eternity?

"Where was she?"

She heard the familiar voice speak, tried to lift her head to see the Duke.

"She had not reached their camp yet."

"She was wounded?"

"We brought her down lest she raise an alarm."

The Duke approached, knelt beside her. She did not see anger in his face, only resignation, as if he had known he would find her thus one day.

She raised her hand to touch his leg. It was hard to speak. Her chest felt heavy, ached with every breath. "Checkmate," she whispered, and then smiled. She hoped he would take her meaning, but knew it didn't matter. He would understand soon enough, and she would be dead shortly in any case.

He slipped an arm under her head and under her knees and lifted her. She fainted before he had taken two steps.



She woke again as he was undressing her. Felt him cut away the clothes matted to her body with Armstrong's blood.

"What the hell happened to you?" he said softly. His hands roved around her body looking for another wound. Finding none, he probed the chest wound which no longer bled at all. He used a cloth and cool water from the pitcher to bathe her, rolling her gently to look at her back.

He looked perplexed for a moment, then covered her. He left the room and a few minutes later he returned with Margaret.

The old woman dropped to her knees beside the bed, sobbing.

"I knew ye couldn't do it," she said. "I knew they would catch ye."

The duke jerked the old woman up by her dress.

"You knew she would betray us and you said nothing?" He looked furious, face hard, hands clenched into fists.

"She went to kill Lord Armstrong," said Margaret in surprise.

"What?" His voice grew louder.

"She was to . . . poison him," Margaret stepped back as if he feared she would strike her.

The Duke looked down at her, eyes narrowing. "Did you poison him?"

Eleanor shook her head.

"You failed?" he asked. His expression softened.

She shook her head again, then closed her eyes. She could take only tiny breaths now, and every one felt like she was being stabbed. Consciousness ebbed away as she listened to them speak.

"My Lord, she will die soon unless we help her," said Margaret.

Eleanor didn't hear the Duke's response because she felt the world fall away before he made it.



Eleanor was surprised to wake at all, much less in the company of the Duke, James and Alain. She was packed in blankets and hot bricks, and something heavy and hot lay under the bandage on her chest. She tried to sit up, but the effort made blackness creep behind her eyes. At least she could breathe, she reflected.

"Can you speak now?" the Duke asked. He looked angry.

"Yes," Eleanor whispered after a moment, surprised to find that she could.

"Did you kill Lord Armstrong?"

She nodded.

James and Alain looked at the Duke, faces also grim.

"How?"

"I . . . cut his throat," said Eleanor softly.

"While you . . . consorted with him?" the Duke looked more furious by the moment.

She looked away, unable to face him, then nodded.

Alain and James both spoke at once. "As we told you," said James.

"It is all over the Earl's camp," said Alain. "They are calling for her head. They want to hang her."

"She murdered him in cold blood, My Lord."

Eleanor turned her head back toward the men.

The Duke was silent, watching her. "No," he said firmly. "She did not."

"You just heard her confession!" said James.

"No, and neither did you," he said, turning.

"She was *seen*, My Lord!" Alain looked pained. "Neither the church nor the King's law countenance murder."

"She was defending her honor?" suggested the Duke.

"She *asked* to be taken to the Earl when she entered the camp," said James. "She told the men she was his betrothed."

"No!" said the Duke. "I am not making myself clear. My wife will not hang for the murder of Lord Armstrong. She made no confession. Do you understand me?" He gave each of the men a hard look. "I say she never reached his camp, that you shot her with an arrow before she could. I say that another woman, perhaps a jilted lover, or even a boy dressed as a woman, committed this crime."

"My Lord!" Alain lay a hand upon the Duke's shoulder.

The Duke threw it off.

"She did what she had to do to save the keep," said the Duke. "And I do not care if she has slept with all of Christendom or killed half the men in the kingdom! She is my wife and I will have her."

"I cannot-"

"James," said the Duke, turning to face him, "though you are like a brother to me, be assured I will strike your head from your shoulders if you say another word of this to anyone." He glanced at Alain, "She saved you, saved us all from the gibbet or worse. Mary, Ann, all the children. Does she deserve to die for that?"

The two men were silent for a long time. ♦ Alain nodded his assent first, and James turned to look at Eleanor for a moment,

then reluctantly nodded as well.

"Tell the men to scour the woods for our people," said the Duke.

"No reason for them to spend another night in the cold."

The men left the room slowly.

The Duke sat beside her on the bed, ignoring her gasp of discomfort. He lay a hand upon her head and ruffled her hair.

"This is the end, isn't it?" he asked. "You *are* going to become a model wife soon, and bear me a bevy of fine sons."

She nodded her assent and found herself smiling.

"That is good," he said, "because I think we both deserve some rest."



Eleanor walked at his side through the castle gate. The long winter was over, and an amble through the nearby wood promised that spring was not far off. She smiled a little as her husband continued to rant.

"I suppose it is impossible for you to let me handle this on my own," the Duke said with some irritation. "You must play a role in every decision, second guess every-"

"I only said you should not go to court in the fall," she interrupted. "You have more important matters to attend."

"More important than answering the new king's summons." He scowled. "Do you plan to have me in the fields gathering the grain?"

Eleanor smiled, then shrugged. "I thought you might wish to see the birth of your child."

The duke stopped, pulled her back into his arms when she would have continued walking. She closed her eyes when he held her hard against his chest. She felt a shudder pass through him and her heart felt ready to burst. How was it possible to love anyone so much?

"Right as always," he said after a long time. "The king will have to wait."

THE END

