



Temptation in Time



by Alexa Aames

To My Reader:

As a great fan of magic, history, and sensual romance, I loved writing this story, and I hope you'll enjoy reading it.

Ariana purred softly. She was being stroked just where she needed it most. She stretched, spreading her legs.

She wanted his mouth. He had such delicious, sensual lips.

He smiled, and his eyes, black as kohl, glinted with passion. "Ariana."

She woke with a start and sat up. Fear stabbed her heart. She was alone in her bed, but his touch had felt so real. She shivered. Was he getting closer? She pushed aside her panic, and, for a moment, the memory of his fingers caressing her sex, thrusting inside her came back. Her belly contracted with a throb of lust. She drew in a frustrated breath and exhaled audibly.

She climbed from the bed, marched over to the walnut dresser, and pulled out a pair of sweats. She yanked them on over her damp panties, thinking about the owner of the dark eyes and sensual lips... Marcus. They'd only met once, but he'd made an indelible impression on her. Sorcerers didn't come any sexier—or more infamous—than Marcus; he would be difficult for anyone to forget. She, on the other hand, probably wouldn't have made much of an impression on him if she hadn't vanished after stealing a kiss and, with it, some of his magical power.

It was hard to hide from him now. Even as far as she'd traveled, he could reach the landscape of her dreams. The slightest sexual arousal seemed to draw him to her subconscious like moth to flame, which was why she avoided the intimacy she craved, tried to suppress the passion he stirred. Even now, when the dream had faded, his molten power pulsed through her, linking them, his invisible presence still nearly palpable.

It had been eight years since she'd stolen that kiss. He'd already been dangerous. Just how powerful was he now? She shuddered to imagine.

Celibacy was the only way to stay concealed. Unfortunately, celibacy left a lot to be desired.



Ariana swayed her hips to the reggae beat that thrummed through her coffee shop as she stirred a couple of drops of coconut extract into the oversized black cup. "The Witch's Brew" was printed on the mug in pearly white letters.

"Here you go," Ariana said, smiling at the customer.

The customer winked at her and dropped a dollar into the tip jar without missing a beat in the conversation he was having on his cell phone.

Simon, owner of the reggae music and the longest, neatest dread locks in Ohio, danced out into the middle of the floor. He sashayed behind the counter, twirling her around. She laughed as the customers hooted with approval at the sight of her dancing with the Jamaican.

"Good news, boss lady," Simon said, after spinning her in another twirl.

"What's that?"

"Dr. Bob called from St. Luke's Hospital. He said to tell ya, leetle Angela is in remission."

"That's wonderful." Ariana said, beaming. Modern medicine was truly a marvel. Of course, a healing kiss never hurt either. As she danced, she glanced over at the calendar. She'd wait at least three weeks before she visited St. Luke's pediatric oncology ward again. This week, she'd volunteer at the Columbia burn unit. She'd heard on the news about a firefighter who'd been badly burned. The report had said he wasn't doing well, but she knew he still had a chance to recover. She would see to that. She puckered her lips and kissed the air. Life could be wonderful.



Ariana awoke twisted in her sheets and gasping for breath. She was wearing gray terrycloth short-shorts into which her fingers had apparently found their way. Damned erotic dreams. What was she supposed to do about them? Tie up her hands before she went to bed?

"Ariana."

Her breath caught in her throat. The whisper in her head had sounded far too real. She sat up, shaking off her unease. She would make herself a cup of chamomile tea and think about what to do. Maybe she could wear mittens to sleep.

She turned on the light and climbed from bed. Sighing slightly in annoyance, she pulled down the ribbed tank top that had ridden up during her nighttime exploits. She padded across the beige carpet, watching her feet as she made her way to the kitchen.

Then she saw them and froze. Black boots. Men's boots encasing a man's calves. Her heart began to hammer a protest in her chest.

Her gaze rolled up his body, muscular thighs in black tights gave way to a hard naked torso where two scars slashed their way up from his navel to his left nipple. A cloak the color of midnight hung from his broad shoulders and met with black wavy hair.

She knew whose face it would be, but she hesitated for a moment before looking. Dread and dizziness surrounded her. *Let it be a dream. Nay, a nightmare.*

His mouth was curved into a slight sneer. "Hello, little thief. It has been a very long time."

She reeled backward, turning from him. There was nowhere really to run to, but her body sprang toward even a momentary escape. He caught her shoulders, and she fell back against him. The shock of being pressed against his hard, hot body was compounded when he slid an arm around her torso and his hand cupped her breast. She gasped a protest, but he ignored it. He squeezed firmly and ran his thumb over her nipple, which pebbled into a firm bead at the erotic command of his touch. Her body suddenly felt heavy with need.

"Wait," she said breathlessly.

"Longer than I have already waited? I think not." His free arm coiled around her body like a snake.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"I intend to exact payment, my lady."

She opened her mouth to speak again, but fell silent at the sound of his deep rumbling voice speaking an ancient language. She didn't even have time to decipher the words before she felt the air rustle.

The breath was sucked from her lungs as a maelstrom claimed them. She felt her body twisted and pummeled by invisible forces, and her eyes could see nothing but blackness. *I'm dying. Please! Help me.*

A moment later, there was silence. She drew in her breath in hungry gasps and felt something hard and cold beneath her palms and knees.

"I'm blind," she said in a hoarse voice.

"It will pass."

"What have you done to me?"

He didn't answer.

She had a very bad feeling. The damp, chill air. The frigid stone. But no, going forward had been peaceful and smooth. Why should coming back have been so rough?

A blurred shadow of light began to form. She blinked several times. Then the room began to come into view. There was no mistaking it. He had dragged her through time. She shivered and then felt his magic swirl around her, warming her shoulders and arms. Physically, she felt more comfortable, but emotionally she wasn't reassured.

She sat back, buttocks resting on the bare soles of her feet. Her eyes darted around the huge bedchamber. The furniture was crude, made from sturdy chunks of wood that were fashioned into bed frame, table, chairs, and bench. "What year is it?" she asked, still clinging to a last bit of hope. Perhaps they were in a castle made to look like the days of old.

"1349."

"No," she whispered, putting her face in her hands.

"Aye."

She had never expected to see this time again. She had been beckoned to the future by a sweet witch, Lucy, who had determined that Ariana was the key to saving her daughter's life. Lucy had offered to send her back after the healing, but Ariana had been enthralled by the future and had chosen instead to live with Lucy and her family until she'd learned to manage on her own in the new time. In truth, she had always felt restless in the fourteenth century. It had been a relief to escape the weak role to which women were confined.

Ariana heard a door swing open behind her and looked up. An old woman shuffled in, eyes flicking over her.

"But who is this, my lord?" the servant asked. "And how did she come to be here?"

"Her name is Ariana, Joan. She's our guest."

"What strange garments are those that she wears?" the woman asked, crossing herself. She hurried over to the bed and pulled the fur coverlet loose.

A moment later it was draped around Ariana who smiled gratefully at the woman.

"My lord, whoever she be, she'll catch her death in this chamber. It is ice itself in here. I will fetch Morgan to light the hearth."

"Nay. I will build the fire. Just tell the cook I will want venison stew in a few hours."

"Aye, my lord. But I forgot meself for a moment. I will have Morgan build a fire in the lady's chamber. We will put her in one that overlooks the garden—"

"Nay."

"The water then—"

"For as long as she is here, the lady will stay in this bedchamber... with me."

Joan pursed disapproving lips and looked over at Ariana for some reaction. Ariana huddled in the soft fur. She agreed with Joan. Marcus proposed a

scandal by insisting they share a room, but who was there to object? Her family certainly must think her dead after an eight-year disappearance. She and Joan could object, but anyone who could cross time of his own power would not let the protests of a couple of women stop him from doing exactly as he pleased. Ariana was well and truly trapped... until she could think of a way to escape.

"A trunk then. Leastways so the lady has some proper clothes."

"Joan," Marcus growled.

"A trunk, at least," Joan said firmly, pounding her gnarled fist into her small palm. "You can change me to a toad if you will with that cursed magic of yours, but better that than being damned to hell for leaving a girl without clothes. Morgan will fetch a trunk." Joan turned and started toward the door.

"I would not bother to change you into a toad, Joan, for I fear the difference would be too little," he teased.

"Black devil," she grumbled, shuffling out.

Marcus tossed his head back and laughed. It was like warm rich cream spilling over her skin. She couldn't help but smile a little herself at the exchange. Despite the insults, there had been real warmth between the lord and his servant.

"And what do you have to smile over?" he mocked, leveling a black gaze on Ariana.

Defiantly, she tipped her chin up and ignored the question. She was afraid of him, but she wasn't going to let it show. She thought for a moment about his reputation. When most lords simply hired knights to fight for them, Marcus de Grey rode into battle himself, leading the attacks. He'd killed many men in hand-to-hand combat and was considered lethal and skilled with a sword. He'd also won a critical battle once when a terrible thunderstorm drove both armies from the battlefield long enough to allow for the timely arrival of reinforcements. There had been a lot of whispers that Marcus, whose own forces were outnumbered tenfold, had conjured the driving rain.

Ariana's father and his friends had certainly been bitter over the amount of land Marcus, despite his relative youth at the time, had been able to accumulate. His holdings were large indeed. Most men, it seemed to her, envied Marcus' wealth, feared his sword, and dreaded his magic, though they only half believed in the latter.

Marcus cleared his throat and drew her attention back to the present.

"You stole a kiss from me, my lady. I would have it back ... with interest."

Her body tingled. She knew he wasn't simply expecting a few kisses. He stretched out his hand and a fire roared to life in the hearth. *Showoff* she thought in annoyance, but was amazed at his power in spite of herself.

He walked over to a small wood table and poured some wine from a pitcher into a cup and drank. She realized she was thirsty too.

"I'd like some of that," she said, standing up.

"Come," he said with a beckoning wave of his hand.

She walked over, watching him warily. She tried not to be rattled by the full effect of his height. He loomed over her, dark and sinister. She held her hands out for the cup, but he ignored them. He put the rim to her mouth, a symbolic gesture, no doubt, to serve as a reminder that she was under his power now, and had no control beyond what he gave her. She fought not to roll her eyes in defiance of the power play. He tipped the cup and she drank, feeling oddly self-conscious under his gaze. The red wine was rich and sweet. She took a few swallows and wondered if she was going to feel less thirsty or more when she was done.

"Good," she said, trying to sound cheerful. She took a couple of steps back from him, despite the fact that she was starting to feel more at ease around him. "So I suppose you've been wondering why I stole that kiss and some of your magic." *A direct approach*, she thought, *will be best*.

He arched an eyebrow.

"Well, there was a very good reason, actually. A witch summoned me to the future. Her child was dying. It was a call into my dreams that I couldn't refuse, but my healing powers wouldn't have been enough. I needed stronger magic than my own."

"So you stole mine," he said wryly. He unhooked the emerald and onyx encrusted brooch at his throat and let the cloak slide off his shoulders.

Firelight flickered over his huge muscles. She tried to remember how men in 1349 built such bodies. It wasn't as if there were Gold's Gyms on every estate.

"I suppose you may be wondering," he said, mimicking her, "why I would continue to pursue you after such a long time."

"Well, yes. I do wonder about that."

"It is because I grew tired of the constant injury you do me when you wield my magic."

"Injury?" she echoed.

"Aye." He traced a line down one of the scars from his nipple to the place where it disappeared under the black fabric of the tights.

"Those? They're not from me. I couldn't have done that."

"A finger's span at a time. You did not stop your mission of healing at one child, did you? You drew on my power many, many times. The proof of it is

carved quite deeply into my flesh."

Oh, no. "I never meant to do that. Honestly, I had no idea," she said, crestfallen. She suddenly wished desperately that he'd found her sooner. The idea that she'd been the cause of that sinister pair of scars on his otherwise perfect body left her bereft of the joy she'd had from her healing.

He studied her expression. "Aye. Even magic in the name of good has a price."

"But—"

"I did, however, learn a great many things over the years. I learned that when I imagined your pretty face and the things I would one day do to your beautiful body... the pain was less troublesome." He hooked his fingers into the fur and unwound it from her.

Her body shivered at the cool air and the words that lingered on the air. *The things I would one day do to your beautiful body.* She wondered how fear and arousal could coexist within her so neatly.

Again, she felt his power sliding over her skin, warm, sensuous and dangerous. He walked over and flung the fur back down on the bed and then sat on the edge of it. He looked her over. She was quite aware of the fact that she was very nearly naked.

"Come here." It was a command, not a request.

She glanced around. She was in the middle of a powerful sorcerer's castle in the year 1349. Defiance wasn't really much of an option. There was no 9-1-1 service. Hell, there weren't even any telephones. There was just him and her and a few servants who were probably too terrified to defy him.

"Making me wait shows poor judgment, Ariana."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to compose herself. "I'm nervous. That's why I hesitate."

He waved a hand toward himself. "Come. I will not hurt you."

"Look, there's something you should know," she said, walking reluctantly toward him.

"Aye?"

"I've never been married." Saying she'd never been married would imply that she was still a virgin. Maybe he would be more careful if he believed that. Of course, she almost was still a virgin in the classic sense. She'd had one encounter where she'd "gone all the way" with a boyfriend. During the act, Marcus' power had roared over her and she'd actually seen his face in place of her boyfriend's. She'd gasped Marcus' name and had really felt as though he were about to materialize in the room. Her boyfriend of the moment had barely finished what he was doing before he'd had a jealous tantrum. Looking back she couldn't blame him, but at the time, she'd been so shaken that she hadn't even been able to reassure him that she didn't prefer the phantom Marcus to him. That relationship had ended quickly, but it had taught her an important lesson. Marcus' energy was fixated on her sexual arousal.

From then on, she'd used her mouth on various boyfriends, who'd assured her she was quite adept at performing oral sex, but she didn't allow them to reciprocate or to sexually arouse her. At first many of them had liked the arrangement, but over time, they came to realize that she was holding a part of herself back. Now, the cause of many of her failed relationships was standing across from her, his face completely unreadable.

She took a deep breath. "I know by the standards of the day I'm rather old to still be a maid, being twenty-four years old, but the future is different."

When she was within his reach, he pulled her forward so that she was standing in front of him. His knees flanked her. His powerful chest filled her vision and his nipples were dark brown and delicious-looking. The two scars did nothing to detract from how gorgeous he was. In some ways, the contrast of perfection and imperfection made each more pronounced.

"This garment is unnecessary," he said and smoothly pulled the tank top up and over her head. She blushed in shock and tried to step back, but he gripped her with his thighs, trapping her. He dropped the shirt on the floor and his eyes locked on hers. Desire tightened in the pit of her belly when his hands cupped her breasts. He glanced at her chest as he fondled her. "I suppose you have heard far too many times that these are perfect. It bears repeating unless your vanity will make me regret it." He looked back at her eyes.

"What?" she mumbled, feeling flushed and dazed, feeling like prey.

He brushed his thumbs over her nipples and sensations rippled through her. She arched her back slightly, jutting her chest forward.

"You are a brazen little thing," he said with a smirk.

She wanted to throttle him for smirking. His grip on her with his thighs had loosened, and she took a step backward. "Well, if you don't want me."

He laughed and pulled her back to him with an iron grip. "You need have no fear on that account." There was a feral light in his dark eyes as he studied her. "I think I like that you are bold. Offer me a kiss like the one you offered eight years ago."

"Aren't you worried that I'll steal more of your power?" she challenged, hoping she sounded confident and perhaps even a little dangerous in her own right. He would have no idea that her power was still as slight as it had ever been.

"Nay, I am not worried. At present, altogether different emotions have my attention." He bent his head and plucked at her nipple with his teeth.

"Oh," she said weakly. She should have been protesting loudly, but the moment was surreal and delicious, and it tampered with her good sense. He'd been a spirit, a presence, pursuing her through erotic moments for years. It seemed somehow right that she should finally be facing him, and that the lust that was always swirling should finally take form.

He sucked her entire areola into his mouth. It felt very good.

"Oh, my." She shifted her weight, rubbing her thighs together trying to create some friction. She could feel a throbbing pulse deep between her legs. She squirmed uncomfortably. She wanted him. "Marcus," she rasped.

"Aye, vixen," he whispered in a throaty rasp all his own. He moved her, slipping a knee between her thighs. He raised his leg so that she was straddling it. Solid pressure collided with her swollen sex.

She groaned softly. He'd taken her other nipple in his mouth and was suckling her. Then he started to bounce her on his thigh.

"Oh, God," she whispered, grabbing his shoulders.

He held her hips, controlling the movements of both her body and his. She rode his leg, leaning her pelvis forward so that every time she bounced back down, her troubled clit banged against his solid thigh.

She came hard, gasping his name and collapsing against him. He bit her nipple a little too sharply, making her cry out and pull back.

"Easy. Those are only on loan to you. I need them back," she said, panting.

Dark desire was blazing in his eyes as he looked over her face. "So little vixen, you recover from pleasure so quickly that you can tease again already? I believe that I am glad of that," he said, catching the flesh of her mons in his hand and squeezing a little roughly.

She gasped and backed off his thigh and away from his hand. "Be nice," she chided and retreated on wobbly legs.

"Was I not nice to you?" he mocked and caught her arm, stopping her from escaping his reach. There was danger rolling off him now in waves.

She felt the need to placate him and quickly. "Look, I know you didn't get your cookies, but just give me a minute to catch my breath, and I'll take care of you."

"My cookies?" he echoed quizzically.

She chuckled. "Just an expression." She would beat him at his own game. He lusted after her. She lusted after him. They would simply get it out of their system and then he would get bored and send her back home. He'd be happy to be rid of her when he saw how ill suited she was to his time. She'd show him she was too bold now for the 1300s. *Showhim bold*, she thought. "Take off the rest of your clothes and I'll blow your mind... and the rest of you."

"What?"

"I'll suck you." She would never normally have allowed herself to make such an offer to a stranger, no matter how attractive he was, but doing so gave her a heady kind of feeling, as though she were powerfully uninhibited.

She stole a glance at Marcus. If he was amazed by the brazen statement, he didn't show it. He stood and, without hesitation, stripped.

She stared at him. "Of course," she muttered derisively. His cock was monstrous.

"Does something trouble you?" he asked without guile.

He was thick and ten or eleven inches long, and his balls hung heavy and full below his majestic cock. Her jaw was going to get quite the workout. Too bad it was 1349; he could have been the envy of any male locker room. "Your body is amazing," she murmured absently.

"I am so glad you approve. I conjured it especially for you," he said dryly.

She laughed softly and wondered for a moment if he really had magically enhanced himself. Was that possible? She glanced over the rest of him. He was probably six-five and covered in thick muscles that looked like he could take down an ox. No, probably no enhancement, she decided. His genitals were the same scale as the rest of him.

She took a deep breath. "Okay. Lie on the bed, and we'll see what happens."

He didn't move. "You seem to doubt your skill suddenly," he said, seeming hesitant.

"No, no, I'm very good at this, but you're sort of super-sized." *I can't exactly whip out my tonsils and set them aside to make more room.*

"What?"

"Never mind, medieval man, just lay back."

"What did you call me?"

"You realize," she said, looking him up and down slowly, "if I weren't so sure that it would be silly, I'd say you were stalling. Don't tell me the big bad sorcerer is afraid of a girl half his size."

He chuckled at that. "Let us say that, to my mind, you are known as someone who takes more than is offered. Perhaps having your teeth around something that I value does not put me at ease."

"Well, if I got carried away, you could just magically reattach it, right?"

His face fell.

She roared with laughter. "I'm kidding. Joking. Really."

He grabbed her arms and flung her gently onto the bed. "It turns out that I am not interested in your mouth anymore."

"Wait," she yelled, wrestling with his strong hands as they slid her shorts off. Jesus, he was strong. She lost the battle and was nude. "Wait, Marcus, please," she begged.

He had pried her legs open, but he paused there. "What am I waiting for, vixen?"

"I'm not ready. If you do it like this, you'll hurt me."

"No more than you deserve," he grumbled, but his index fingertip slid over her cleft carefully. He held up the finger and rubbed it against his thumb, demonstrating the glistening moisture on it. "You seem ready to me."

She *was* wet, dammit, but she wasn't mentally ready for a full assault by the battering ram between his legs. She bucked away from his hand and scampered toward the far bedpost.

The lust blazing in his eyes said he wouldn't let her escape very far. She needed to maintain some control over the situation to keep him from unleashing his inner predator, which seemed to be lurking just below the surface. Given their relative sizes, should he decide he'd waited long enough, no amount of resistance on her part would slow things down.

He held out his hand to her, like a cat stretching a paw slowly toward a mouse. She realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled shakily.

"I just need a few minutes to warm up," she said quickly. "I promise not to bite you... at all. Just lie back."

He narrowed his eyes, but then sighed heavily and let his hand fall to the bed. "The slightest nick, I warn you, and I will not show an ounce of mercy."

"Trust me."

He frowned, but lay back.

Thank God, she thought.

Marcus settled back onto fur and studied Ariana through partially lowered lids. This game of hers where she used her mouth would never work, but he wouldn't bother to tell her that. Since he'd been a teenager, women had, on occasion, tried to pleasure him thus. Whenever he became excited, he thrust too hard and gagged them. At which point, he would have to pull out, raise them up and bury himself in their tight channels.

He looked down the line of Ariana's body. She had a very pretty mound. Light brown curls that matched her long hair. The skin of her long legs was the color of sand and so supple. His phallus throbbed. He had wanted her forever. Having her in the flesh was almost too intense.

She had moved to her hands and knees. He groaned at the picture that made. Her breasts so ripe and full dangled tantalizingly from her chest. With one hand she nudged his legs further apart making more room for her to settle between them.

He cooperated without comment, preferring to concentrate on memorizing the lines of her body. For years, he'd had only glimpses of her in his mind. How many times had he felt that searing pain as she drew power from him, only to have it followed by an aching erection as he felt her phantom lips on his mouth or his cheek? Those lips, soft as rose petals. Sweet as apples. How many times had he soiled the sheets spending his erections into them while imagining her naked body? But there was no longer any need to imagine. She was in his grasp. His will was that she would never escape it again.

The rose petal lips were close to him now. A bead of moisture had formed on the head of his phallus, and she was licking it clean with soft strokes from her velvety tongue. The perfect globes of her bottom had risen above the rest of her body as she bent over him. His mouth was hungry for that bottom and for what lay beneath it. She could play her little game of licking him and then he would devour her. By morning, she would belong to him in ways she could never refute.

She moved her mouth lower. Feather strokes of her tongue over his sac made his muscles twitch. He was intensely aroused and grew restless in his desire to be satisfied. Just as he was ready to growl for her to get on with things, she took half the sac into her mouth and sucked on it. She squeezed the other half between her left hand's fingertips. Her right hand came up to grip his erection firmly at the base. She stroked up and down.

The combination of sensations was maddening. He groaned deeply. More cream was leaking from him. It dripped down and ran over her delicate hand. She rubbed the moisture back along the length of him.

Every muscle in his body seemed to be tensing at her command. His hips even thrust up a fraction as she teased him. He tried to stay calm and in control. He wanted to savor this. Trying to distract himself, he studied her back and bottom, but that only made the flames inside him lick higher.

"Mmm," she purred. The sound she made in her throat as she licked the fluid from him made him want to roar. She was kneading his sac with both hands now and sucking on the head of him, pressing the tip of her tongue into his slit and soaking up the juice as it leaked. She sucked, making noises as though he were some delicacy that she was enjoying.

He moaned loudly, clutching the fur in his fists.

She released him for a moment, dropping a few sucking kisses along the sides of his member. When her mouth was positioned over him again, she licked once and murmured almost absently, "Beautiful."

Death. She thinks to tease me 'til I be dead. What other reason could there be for the way she approached his member? Women, he suspected, never enjoyed fornication in the same way men did, and certainly not while using their mouths on a man's phallus, but she seemed to relish it. It excited him to

near exploding.

She took him deep into her mouth and created a sensation like none he'd ever felt. He groaned uncontrollably. She slid up and down, caressing him with her lips and tongue as her head moved.

He could not stand another moment. He began thrusting wildly. It was exquisite. Wet, hot, and tight. He roared and suddenly his seed gushed forth. She never released him. She kept sucking and swallowing and milking him until he was completely spent.

'Tis certain. She means to kill me. Oh, happy death.



Ariana was pleased with herself. She had slain the monster and its owner in one. Marcus lay sprawled on his back, looking as beautiful as anyone she'd ever seen. She was tempted to drop a kiss on his gorgeous cheek, but she dared not touch him.

I dare not touch him ? Careful, Ariana, you 're starting to sound like you belong back in this century, and you don't. Let's not forget about cappuccinos, dark chocolate truffle balls, and hot and cold running water. For heaven's sake, Pride and Prejudice hasn 't even been written yet. You've got to get back to the 21st century.

Ariana pulled on her tank and short-shorts and then one of Marcus' big shirts that hit her at the knees. Now what she needed was to find Marcus' books. Somewhere in the castle, he probably had a place where he wrote down notes and spells. And somewhere in those notes was information about how he'd zipped to the year 2005 to capture her.

She sighed at herself. She had talked extensively with the witch who'd brought her forth the first time, but she hadn't revealed the details of the spell once Ariana told her she wanted to stay in the future. Even if she did find the spell, she wasn't sure she could make it work. Her only true magical talent was healing. She had had only limited success with other spells she'd tried over the years. Of course, she had to try.

She walked softly to the door and opened it carefully, stealing a glance back at Marcus. He was safely unconscious. Something tender in her chest tugged at her. Since the kiss, he'd always been a part of her life, more vivid than any of her memories. And now that she had him in the flesh, she found that she was anxious to leave his time, but not so anxious to leave him. *Stop it. He's dangerous. And that was just sex. Nothing more.*

The entire hall was silent as a tomb. She moved as quietly as she could. Minutes passed as she peeked into various chambers, but none of them looked remotely like a library or a study.

"What are you looking for?" Marcus' deep voice demanded.

She jumped and turned to find him directly behind her, still naked. How had he gotten so close without her hearing him? Magic? Just how powerful was he?

Well, he'd come back and forth through time. That probably made him pretty powerful. *Damn.*

"Nothing," she lied, widening her eyes to look as innocent as possible. "I was just exploring."

"Not much of an exploration if you keep to the corridor," he commented, catching her arm in his hand and turning her back toward his bedchamber.

"Um, listen, I'm kind of hungry. I know you're probably tired. If you just point me toward the kitchen, I'll find it."

He slid a hand over her stomach. "Hard to believe you could be hungry this soon with a belly full of me."

She blushed. Damn him for making her blush. She wasn't some little maiden. She was a modern woman. For 1349, she was supposed to be scandalous and unflappable.

Maybe he hadn't noticed her blush. She slid her eyes over to check him out in her peripheral vision. He was grinning. He'd seen. *I may have to hate him.*

They returned to his huge bedchamber again. She flopped down on the bench near the fireplace and folded her arms across her chest. She bolstered her resolve to be outrageous and then announced, "You know, semen is full of carbohydrates. That's why it doesn't keep one full for long. I would like something substantial to eat." Surely *that* would shock him.

He drew his brows together. "What?"

"I'm hungry."

He waved off her reply. "Food is coming. Before—what did you say?"

"Semen, your seed, it's full of carbohydrates."

"What is a carbo-hydrate?"

"They're, well..." She suddenly realized she didn't know exactly how to explain. Invisible components of food? Microbiology and a host of other scientific discoveries reeled through her mind. He was looking at her expectantly. *What am I? A biochemist?* she snapped silently in frustration. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter."

He studied her.

"A lot of things have been learned. There's too much you don't know. It would take too long to explain."

"I see."

She winced, realizing by his tone that she'd insulted him. She supposed that she *had* called him ignorant, but she'd been just as ignorant before she'd gone forward. "It's just that a lot of things have changed in the future."

"I am sure of it," he said and walked over. He pulled her to her feet and then yanked the long shirt that she was wearing up and over her head.

"Hey," she protested.

He hauled the tank off too, exposing her breasts.

"*I said* HEY!"

"Now is not a good time to shout at me, Ariana," he said casually.

She tilted her head quizzically. "I'll bite. Why not now?"

"You will definitely *not* bite," he said, walking her toward the bed.

"You know, I'm not really in the mood to have relations with you."

"I would not expect you to be," he said, casting a predatory sideways glance at her breasts, which were bouncing as she walked.

"But you're so virile, you're going to put me in the mood?" she asked as derisively as possible. Actually, just looking at him did put her in the mood, but she wasn't going to admit it.

"Nay," he said.

No? "Great, so you're going to rape me?" she snapped. *Fat chance with his yummy body.* Maybe she could act all weepy afterward to make him feel guilty. Treacherous to be sure, but it might give her leverage and get her back to the future. Could she be a cruel deceptive bitch to regain her life and her freedom? Unfortunately, something inside her said that no, she would have to find another way.

"Rape? Nay."

Well, that's a relief.

"I'm going to punish you."

She whipped her head to look at him. "What?" she stammered, immediately trying to apply her feet to the floor as brakes.

He simply lifted her off the ground and carried her the rest of the way.

"Wait a minute!" she yelled as he dropped her on the bed.

A moment later, she was struggling in earnest. It was entirely undignified. Yelling, kicking, rolling about. When he finally pinned her underneath him with his crushing strength, she realized that he'd been letting her fight, probably to wear herself out. Damn him.

"When I left, I was just looking for books! I wasn't going to set fire to anything or kill anyone. I was looking for a library," she said between gasps of breath. She hated the fearful pleading note in her voice.

"Calm yourself," he said soothingly.

Recovering, she narrowed her eyes. *Just catch your breath and reason with him*, she told herself.

He bent his head and kissed the bounding pulse in her neck. She could feel his rock-hard erection against her belly.

"You excite me so much, vixen, I worry for your safety," he whispered.

"I worry for it too," she grumbled.

He chuckled, licking over her pulse. Hot tendrils of lust curled inside her.

"Can you please not do that while we're trying to have a conversation?"

"Why not?"

She frowned, knowing that he was purposely toying with her. "Because I'm trying to concentrate and..." she trailed off as his teeth bit her skin gently. Flames licked up between her legs. "And you're not helping."

"When did I ever claim my intent was to help you?" he asked in a low teasing tone.

"Never," she agreed softly, twisting a hand free so that she could run her fingers through his hair. It was softer than it looked. "Such silky hair," she mumbled absently.

He moved down to suck on her breast. She sighed. It felt great when he did that.

Without warning, he rolled onto his back, panting, and stared up at the ceiling.

She looked him over. "Problem?" she asked.

"I have finally realized your true identity."

"Ah."

"Mistress of the devil."

She smiled. She rather liked being considered cool enough to be *that* wicked. "But I thought *you* were the devil," she teased.

"So did I," he said with a slightly bemused tone.

She giggled. "Don't worry. I won't turn my evil powers on you."

"Too late," he said, running a hand down one of his scars.

Her smile faded. "That was an accident. Really."

"I believe you."

"You do?" She liked the curve of his mouth, sensual yet strong.

"If I did not, you would already be dead."

She shivered. He really was as dangerous as everyone said. She couldn't let herself forget that, no matter how handsome he was. "You thought about killing me?"

"Nay. Sometimes during the pain I wished you dead, but I never thought about killing you. That is a different thing entirely."

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she said, trailing a finger over the scar. Why did she feel like tracing it with her tongue? Why did she feel like soothing away any hurt she may have caused him? "Very sorry, Marcus."

"Good." He moved so that he was sitting up and then gestured to his lap.

"What?" she asked, thinking his intentions could be a couple of different things. She was game for a lap dance. The alternative... no.

"Lie across my lap."

Dammit. "Why?"

"Because I have told you to do so."

Her heart was fluttering like a caged bird's wings. Why did he have to look so dangerous and gorgeous at the same time... and so damned resolute, like no matter how long it took, he was going to do exactly what he wanted to her.

"How about if I suck you instead?" she asked, crawling toward him with a seductive smile. No man could resist the magic of her mouth.

He caught her arms and slid her across his body too far to do what she had in mind. "Perhaps afterward," he said.

"Damn you!" she snapped. She tried to push herself up and couldn't. His hands held her in place. One hot palm on her back, one hot palm on her backside.

"It is the prerogative of lovers to spank their women when they have been wicked."

"That is not true!" she argued, pressing up onto her elbows. She had to arch her back just to get her shoulders off the bed. She turned her head to look at him, feeling ridiculously helpless.

His hand started to knead her buttocks intimately, which caused sharp pangs of lust in her lower body. "You look very beautiful with your face so flushed."

"Husbands and fathers and sometimes brothers have the right to beat their women. You are none of those things to me," she protested breathlessly.

His fingers delved down so that they were caressing her sex through the shorts. Hot juices started to pool.

"I am the lord of this castle. My word is law on this land. You stole from me. You injured me. If my justice is to simply warm your backside with my hand, you should be grateful."

Things were getting very foggy. Her mind wanted to argue. Her body wanted to submit to touching or spanking or whatever his hands had in mind.

"Marcus, please." She'd wanted to make one more attempt at reasoning with him, but her voice had sounded entirely too breathy. She couldn't even

convince her own ears that she wanted to escape.

He slid the hand into her shorts and a finger stroked her wet cleft. Her labia twitched anxiously.

"Put your head down, Ariana." His voice was so smooth.

She let her shoulders fall back down, her forehead resting on her forearms. She felt him sliding the shorts off. The cool air teased her exposed backside. She wiggled nervously and heard a very low groan from above her. Good, let him be as excited as she was... then he would take her rather than spank her. She was hot and sticky, and suddenly she didn't want to wait any more.

She heard rather than felt the first slap. Two more fell before she could even react to the hot stinging pain. When she did try to push herself up, he simply put a hand between her shoulder blades and forced her back down.

She gasped a protest.

His voice was calm, not angry. "Every time you cause me to stop, I will begin again from one."

She garbled an angry response. And the sting came again. Damn him to hell for the devil he was! Smack. She struggled to be still. There was no one to rescue her from him. Smack. She didn't want him to start over hundreds of times from one. Smack. She was utterly helpless.

Warmth suffused through her buttocks and down between her thighs. With her face and breasts buried decadently into the fur, she started to sink into the rhythm. Her soft cries came from deeper in her body.

Then the cadence of the swats slowed. Her buttocks were scalding and she writhed against his lap. His erection was as hard as ever. The terrible thing was that even in her humiliation she didn't know what to feel. She was as aroused by it as she was furious. And all the tumultuous emotions were tangled up inside her.

Marcus's hand stopped and slid down so that he gently cupped her sex. Her whole body was shaking with fury and desire. "Easy, love," he said, rubbing a finger back and forth over her, sending Shockwaves coursing into the swollen wet vortex of her sex.

She moaned between quiet sobs. Then he repositioned their bodies so that she was on her knees with her forehead on her arms and he was directly behind her.

He kissed her buttocks softly while fingering her damp curls. "Come now, do not cry, lest you make me think that I really hurt you."

Being spanked had hurt, but the pain was lost now in other sensations. His fingers agitated her clit until her hips began to jerk back and forth.

"Such sweet tender meat," he groaned, biting the swollen right cheek of her ass.

She cried out, moving forward. She was too sore for him to bite her there, even though it forced the sexual tension in her body somehow higher.

Then she felt him dip his head and nuzzle her sex. Inhaling her scent and licking and suckling her. She moaned from deep in her knotted belly. He licked back and forth between her legs, coming closer to her sex with each pass. *Oh God! It's too much. Please.* His tongue became increasingly demanding, delving into her. It was like being devoured alive.

She became frantic, pushing back against his mouth, pumping her hips. "Please, Marcus," she begged. "Please let me..."

He took a tender cheek in each hand and spread her open. She shuddered uncontrollably. His ravenous mouth plundered her until she was weeping at the exquisite torture of it.

Finally, he moved so that he was lying next to her, one arm under her body, one behind her back. Fingers from both hands pushed into her sex. She cried out, but then she started to move again almost instantly and with twice as much fury. She was driven by a lust the likes of which she'd never felt before. She shuddered at the penetration. His fingers were forcing her open. The moisture of her excitement seeped out as she ground her sex forward, the hard aching knot pressing against his palm. One of his wet fingers slid to her back hole, testing it. She was gasping so hard that she couldn't object, and somehow she didn't want to. Her body was his. He could do whatever he pleased. She would submit. His finger pushed into her bottom. Pleasure ripped through her.

Sensations exploded. She heard herself screaming, felt her hips bucking. And all the while, his fingers thrust into both tight openings, overcoming the hard spasms to continuously invade her. She rode crashing waves of orgasms for what seemed an impossible length of time then she collapsed onto the bed, his fingers still buried inside her. Full body trembling overtook her.

His fingers glided out and she twitched a few times trying to get used to being empty again. When she'd caught her breath, he kissed her shoulder.

"Does my lady love me or hate me?" he asked gently.

"Both," she gulped.

She twisted onto her side so that she was facing him. She looked up into his dark eyes. "And what of my lord? Does he love me or hate me?"

"He has loved you since the day he met you. Why should this day be any different?"

She smiled slowly and pushed a damp lock of hair back from her face. "You exaggerate, but it was a good answer anyway."

"I never exaggerate." There was a remarkable tenderness in his eyes now as he looked at her.

She arched a sardonic brow. "You wished me dead some days," she reminded him.

"Aye, because I loved you and could not have you. And because you raped the power from me and, in so doing, ripped my flesh open. But more than all that even, I wished it because you hid from me constantly... day and night for eight frustrating years I searched endlessly. Plague is kinder to its victims than you, Ariana."

"If I'm so horrible why do you claim to love me?"

"For the same reason all men love women. Because they can not help it."

She leaned forward and bit his nipple gently. "Poor besotted men," she teased.

"Aye."

Exhaustion seemed to descend as nightfall might, coming on slowly then suddenly complete. She closed her eyes.



Ariana woke to the sound of voices. She realized that a servant had entered. She also realized that when Marcus had climbed from bed he had not bothered to cover her up, or perhaps she had slid from under the fur while she slept. The result was the same. She was lying on her side, the front of her curled against the soft fur, but her back and buttocks were completely exposed.

"She has a pretty backside," Marcus said in a conversational tone.

"Aye, my lord."

"That pink color you see is because I tenderized it with my open hand before I made a meal of it."

Bastard! Smug, arrogant bastard!

The boy chuckled.

"She makes a tempting morsel," Marcus added with slow thoughtfulness. She could imagine the young servant giving him a conspiratorial grin. *Damn them both to hell!* She was going to kill Marcus.

"But anyone who fancies a piece will lose his life for his trouble if he acts on that impulse." Marcus' tone was low and ominous.

"My lord, I would not," the boy said soberly.

"Nay? Well, others might. I do not wish to spill blood where it might be avoided. Pass the word, Morgan. She belongs to me and none other."

"Aye, my lord."

She listened to the soft footfalls and the opening and closing of the door before she let out her strangled cry of frustration. "I'm awake!" She twisted under the cover onto her other side and propped up on an elbow so she could glare at him properly.

"Aye."

"How could you leave me uncovered in front of a stranger?" she snapped.

He simply smiled at her. She sat up, right onto her "tenderized backside."

"Ouch," she complained indignantly, moving back onto her side.

He grinned, glancing at her buttocks. "Sore?" he asked innocently.

She straightened up onto her knees, putting her hands onto her rump. "Yes. Is the barbarian pleased with himself on that account?"

"Most," he said with a smile.

She jabbed the air toward him with her index finger. "Well, I hope you got that out of your system. It was the first and last time."

He shook his head and folded his arms across his chest with smug amusement. He could not mean to spank her again!

"When you are strong enough to stop me from doing it, then you may be the one to say it will not happen again."

"You've had your revenge," she said, lips pouting.

"The ghosts of my enemies will be quick to point out that my revenge feels quite a bit different than that."

She drew her brows together, considering. "Well then, why did you do it, if not for revenge?"

"So many reasons," he said with a wicked smile.

"You made me cry."

His smile faded and he looked, for a moment, wholly contrite. "You are not hurt. Not really." He sounded a little like he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

"That is not the point. You spanked me against my will and then let some servant boy see me naked. That's pretty close to unforgivable."

"I had my reasons for that."

"Let's hear them."

He strolled over and sat on the edge of the bed.

"They will see, at some point, that you have a little magic of your own. So it is necessary that they understand who masters whom lest they make a mistake with their allegiance."

"You let that boy know that you spanked me and you left me exposed like some sex toy to show him that you dominate me? So that he wouldn't be confused about whom he serves?" she asked incredulously. "I don't believe that. Like you said, you're lord of these lands. No one here will ever side with me over you."

"People are soft-hearted. If I were a boy and a beautiful lady magically appeared and then asked for my help to escape a castle, would loyalty win over infatuation? I can not say. I might be particularly tempted to help her if I thought the master were under her spell, and, as such, less of a threat. Also, if I thought the lady might fall in love with me, she would be hard to resist. Let us not forget how innocent you can look, Ariana. I was already a man, twice as wary as the next, when I let you steal that kiss. I felt the trouble of it before I ever lowered my head, but lower my head I did."

"If you knew, then why did you?"

"Because the kiss mattered more than the trouble."

"It was just a kiss," she lied.

"Nay." He shook his head slowly for emphasis.

It gave her a strange thrill to hear him acknowledge that the amazing kiss, born of deception, had been something special to him too, despite its terrible consequences. She remembered that moment. He'd been half in shadow and breathtakingly gorgeous. And even though he was dangerous, and even though she doubted her enchantment would work, she had had to kiss him. Something in her soul had demanded it. The feel of those supple lips, the taste of him, were things she had never forgotten. They had haunted her dreams for years.

He spoke, drawing her from her reverie. "And you are every bit as dangerous to that boy as you were to me. More so, because I had no dangerous rival to vanquish as I pursued you. Others, however, have me to cast aside, for I am a deadly impediment to any who wants to claim you."

"I am not dangerous to young boys," she said furiously. But even as she'd been about to say that she didn't use people, the words froze in her throat. How could she say that when she'd used him?

I only use people for very good reasons, she thought, trying to rationalize.

Like getting your freedom back? a small voice queried in her head. She pushed it away. She wouldn't have used the boy and put him in danger of incurring Marcus' wrath. Not even to get her freedom back.

"You could have been dangerous to him. Now, it is less likely."

"Because you let him see that you had beaten me?"

"Nay, because I let him see that you'd allowed it."

Allowed it! Like some wanton whore? She gasped and flew from the bed. She snatched his shirt from the floor and pulled it over her head. She ran to the door, but he got there ahead of her and stood in front of it.

"I didn't let you do it!" she fumed. "As you said, it's not like I could have stopped you."

"Nay." He smiled slowly. "But you have a very strong voice. You could have screamed loud enough for them to hear and wonder what I was doing. Instead you were quiet, except for the screams of passion. And afterward he finds you sleeping in my bed, sweetly sated, not cowering in the corner weeping."

Her face scalded with humiliation. She struck him with all her might and tried to drag him away from the door.

He was as immobile as a mountain. She rained down blows on his chest. "Let me out!" she screamed. She grimaced at the growing pain in her fists.

He frowned and caught her wrists, effectively stopping her violent tirade. "Take care before you hurt yourself."

"You will let me out!" She was shaking with rage, but she stood where he held her without trying to break free.

"Nay. I have waited many years to talk to you. You will not escape so easily."

"Easily? You call this easy?" she spat. "You kidnapped me from my apartment, dragged me back to a past that I don't want, flaunted me as your whore to the servants, and plundered my body and reputation so that I'll never be sought as a wife if I'm forced to live in this wretched time." Boy, she had really

thrown in the kitchen sink. As if she wanted to marry a man from this century anyway. Still, she had known that it was a good accusation to throw at him. Women had value as wives. Men didn't want wives who'd dallied with other men. Marcus knew that.

His face clouded, and his voice softened. "Was it all done so badly? If you despise me, why do you call to me in your dreams?"

"I don't." Even as she denied it though, she wondered. She'd let herself believe that he was pursuing her and that she didn't like it, that she was forced to endure it, but on some level she knew she wanted him too.

"You do. Most nights. Sometimes you even speak to me."

"I do not." Tears of frustration pooled in her eyes. "I have a different life than this. I don't want this." Her voice had started strong, but finished weak. Had she unknowingly reached across time for him through their magical connection? She blinked the tears away.

"I will not presume to tell you what you feel, Ariana. That is for you to unravel for yourself."

The anger leaked out of her. His hands rubbed her arms comfortingly.

"Let me explain something. If I took things too far today then it is because I have had eight years to live alone in my fantasies of you with no one to temper them. And if I let a boy see too much then it was probably partly to protect him, but also to show you off to him."

"To show off my nakedness?" she asked, bewildered.

He shrugged. "I have not taken a lover in a very long time. And I never took a wife. This castle has been waiting for a mistress since the day you ruined me for other women. Perhaps, I wanted to show off the body of the woman for whom I had been waiting years."

A little part of her heart soared at hearing that she had ruined him for any other woman. It was a wildly romantic thing for someone to say, especially someone like him who had never been known for anything but danger. Still, there was no getting around the fact that he'd gone too far.

"But don't you see what you've done in the process? You've made me your whore. No one here will ever respect me now."

He scowled. "No one here will ever dare disrespect you. Whether you are wife or mistress, disrespecting you will be a punishable offense, and the punishment will be severe. I will make it clear to them."

She shivered. There was the danger again, emanating from him. She put a hand on his arm. "No, Marcus. I don't want you to threaten them. That will make me even more of a pariah." She drew her hand back and took a slow deep breath, wondering if it were ill advised to command him on the treatment of his own servants. "And no more talk of killing people over words or stolen kisses. You are entirely too violent."

"I am not violent toward you."

She arched a brow. "Shall I show you my backside?"

"Aye, as often as possible."

She rolled her eyes.

"That was not violence," he said stubbornly.

"What, pray tell, was it then?"

"Loveplay."

"Then after dinner I will get Joan and Morgan to get me some rope and a horsewhip. I'll tie you up, and we can see how you feel about violence as foreplay."

Marcus walked over to a basin to wash his hands. "What do you think, Marcus? Is that a good idea about the horsewhip?"

He didn't bother to look up. "Nay."

She couldn't help but smile to herself, glancing at his muscular arms. Of course, the game was only fun for him if he got to be the one who dominated it. She thought about men knocking each other down on football fields and beating each other in boxing rings. Strong men liked to show off their strength and power. In 650 years, they hadn't changed.

Marcus sat down at the small table and uncovered the serving bowl of stew. He ladled it out into their dishes. She washed and then sat down gingerly across from him. He poured wine into goblets and set one next to her. He lifted his, drinking.

"So, it took you eight years to get me here. Other than beating me and showing off my naked ass to the servants do you have any other plans?"

He choked down the wine in his mouth and grimaced at her. "For someone who claims dissatisfaction at having been laid across my lap and spanked, you bait me as though you would prefer it to eating dinner."

She pouted and then wondered at herself. In 2005, she *never* pouted. Of course, in 2005, men who made her angry were dumped or fired as the case may be. What could she do but pout in 1349?

They ate quietly, each lost in thought. The venison stew wasn't bad, but she found herself craving enchiladas. *Shame about the newworld not being discovered yet*, she thought wryly.

She put her head in her hands, suddenly overwhelmed at the loss of her life in the future. Had she ever been a part of Marcus' time? Cognitively, she knew that she had, but it was so difficult to feel anything now but that she was out of place. Out of time.

When she looked up, she found he was watching her. She cleared her throat. "How is my family?" she asked.

"Your father is well. He has a new wife."

Her mother had died in childbirth with her younger brother when Ariana had been four. Sometimes she tried to remember what her mother looked like, but it was difficult. As for her father, they had never been close. He thought girls were silly creatures, useful only in creating alliances through marriage.

"Plague swept through and claimed both your older brothers and their families."

She digested that for a moment, feeling sad, but also oddly detached. They had not been part of her life for a long time. In the future, she'd come to terms with all her family being long dead.

"Marcus, there's no plague in 2005."

"There's no plague here either, right now."

"And women don't die in childbirth anymore, at least not in the country where I was living. Well, once in a while... but only very rarely. Never as often as they do now. And if a babe is born too soon, they just put it in a little warmer and do everything for it until it gets big enough to go home. By the end it's as good as a full-grown one."

"If the healing powers are so good in the future, why did they need you to steal magic from me?"

"I'm not saying people don't ever get sick. But it's different there. Everything is different; it's better." There she'd said it. She waited for a response. None came. "Marcus, did you hear what I said?"

"Aye."

"Well?"

"If you think to go back, you had best get working on your magic because the power it takes to get there is considerable."

"You did it."

"Aye."

"So you could take me back." *And even come with me if you wanted to.*

"What I could do and what I will do are separate things, Ariana."

"I knew it," she said, pushing the stew away and standing up. "This is why I hate it here. Women are a cross between property and prisoners."

He sighed. "This is our time. We were born to it. We belong here, for good or ill. It was unnatural for you to live there."

She shook her head. "If you really loved me, you would want me to be happy."

"I do want that."

"Then take me back."

"Nay. I just brought you here. You will grant me time to make you happy here."

"It won't work."

"Perhaps not, but I would have the time all the same." He reached out a long arm, catching her and pulling her onto his lap. She struggled a moment and then settled, sighing deeply at her defeat. The solidness of his body felt good to her, and she rested her head against his shoulder. All the changes were too overwhelming. Leaning against him made her feel better, more anchored. "I have only ever had two really great days in this century," she murmured absently.

"Tell me about them," he urged softly.

"There was one day eight years ago when I snuck away from home to find a young earl with black hair and black magic. I tricked him into an enchanted kiss."

He smiled. "And the other day?"

"The other day was today." She wondered immediately where that answer had come from. Somewhere in her subconscious?

"That is good news. On the morrow, I do not intend to let anyone see you naked nor to spank you," he said in a gentle teasing voice. "So it promises to be a third good day for you."

She smiled though there was a lingering trace of melancholy in her mood. He stroked her breast through the fabric of his shirt. She didn't encourage him, but she didn't pull away either. Marcus kissed her cheek and continued to touch her softly, coaxing her toward desire.

"All will be well," he murmured hypnotically.

Moments passed. His hand cupped her breast more firmly. Liquid lust formed between her thighs. She kissed his shoulder and moved her hip against his erection. He pulled the shirt off her, bending his head to swirl his tongue over her nipple at the same time his fingers went down to play between her legs.

Within moments, she was arching her back and spreading her legs apart to give him better access. Dark need shone in his eyes.

"I liked the whimpering kitten who let me spank her and feast on her flesh. But I also like the vixen who arches her back and spreads herself open for me."

He pulled his slick fingers free and slid an arm under her knees, then stood up and carried her to the bed, setting her down gently.

She let her legs fall apart, awash in sensations. The soft fur under her, the ache in her buttocks, the hot, tight anticipation between her lower lips. She could feel moisture seeping out of her and down the crease of her buttocks. The smaller hole hidden there twitched, and she recalled the way he'd violated her there so deliciously. She had always been shy to even think about being penetrated that way, but he'd claimed that part of her as easily as he claimed her everywhere else.

Marcus crawled on the bed and over her. She felt the swollen tip of him between her lower lips. He rubbed her slick entrance a few times, lubricating himself. Then with delectable pressure, he pushed the head inside. It stretched the inflamed tissue, but the sensation of searing pain was immediately overcome by the warm pulsating penetration that she realized her body desperately craved.

She gasped and arched, reaching, wanting more of him. He let himself glide deeper and deeper into her body until he was tucked against her womb, and it felt strange yet amazingly intimate to her. She liked the sensation, but knew he wasn't all the way in.

"I'm hurting you," he murmured, pulling out.

"No," she cried, trying to draw him back.

"Ariana, I can see the pain on your face. The morrow will be soon enough."

"Not pain. Just soreness." It was almost inexplicable how much her body wanted his. She stroked him with her fingers. "Please, Marcus. I want you. Come back."

He slid inside her tentatively and not as deeply as the first time. She lifted her hips, but didn't succeed in taking more of him inside. He was bracing himself so that he couldn't get too deep. The way he held himself back was making her insane. He slid in and out slowly. With his thick cock, he did hit a sweet spot, and she started to purr, but she wanted more.

"Marcus?"

"What, my love?"

She ran her hand along the sweat-slick skin over his ribs. "Where is the ... oh. Where's the man who spanked me earlier?"

"Locked up so he does not hurt you."

"But, Marcus—" She panted. "That's who the vixen wants."

His eyebrows shot up. "She—you do?"

"Not to get spanked. Just let him loose to take us... me."

"You mean you want me to be rougher?" he asked incredulously.

"Just a little. Can you do that?"

"Aye, angel. As rough as you like." As if to prove it, he shifted his weight, grabbing an ass cheek in each hand and pulling her down onto his big cock. The triple sensation of him squeezing her sore backside, driving deep through aching flesh and striking deep inside her, made her wail and writhe.

"You want me to stop?" he asked.

"Nn-not if you value your life," she stammered.

That unleashed the beast. He dropped her to the bed and hoisted up her legs, which allowed him to thrust deeper inside her.

"Oh, God. Oh, please. Ooooh!" Pleasure exploded, flames igniting inside her. As her spasms greedily sucked him, his cock continued its relentless battering. She dug her fingers into the flesh of his back, trying to hold on. A second orgasm gripped her hot on the heels of the first.

"Oh, Marcus. Oh, yes." She moaned long and loud.

"Aye, vixen." His handsome face was a mask of determination.

Sweat rained down on her and she felt every ounce of his male power concentrated inside her. And then it burst out of him like a dam had broken. He poured a molten river into her vault, thick wet heat pooling and then running down from where they were still joined.

Her rosette asshole puckered and unpuckered at the teasing sensation. She eased her shaking legs down to rest on the bed and felt the damp matted

fur under her.

"We ruined the fur," she mumbled absently.

His breath came and went in quick rushes. "What do I care for a fur when I am dead and in heaven?" He lowered himself to rest on the bed, sliding free of her. He lay on his side, looking her over, then reached down and lifted her right leg, crossing it over the left.

"What are you doing?"

"Closing your body."

"Why?"

"So my seed can take root in your womb."

Oh boy. "Now, you want a baby?"

"Aye. It is an idea that I have lately considered a good one."

"Uh huh."

"It came to me while I was inside you."

"So, you've given it long and serious consideration then," she said sarcastically, though a part of her was strangely tempted by the idea.

"When a man's loins are so strongly inspired by a woman's, the thought comes quite naturally I assure you. Suddenly, I would like to swell this belly," he said, running his hand over her stomach possessively. "And these breasts," he said, kissing the lower curve of the breast closest to him. "There is time for at least five or six fat babies to come of us."

"Five or six," she echoed incredulously.

"Aye," he said, his tongue sliding over her nipple. "And having your belly big with child will save you."

"From what?"

"From being laid out over my lap and being spanked."

"We already decided you weren't going to do that again."

"I do not recall having said such. Even if I had, I would have thought better of it now."

"Why?"

"Any innocent who can tell me to use her more roughly can surely handle a few measured swats on her rear."

"That's different. When I wanted more earlier, I was caught up in the moment."

"Aye? So, that is the difference?" he asked rhetorically with a wicked grin. "I will remember to get you excited then before I begin next time. Now, let me have a look at my afternoon's work," he said, flipping her onto her stomach. He trailed a finger over each cheek. "Not even pink anymore. Earlier they were blushing like roses. And I noticed that there was plenty of dew between the petals right after I gave them their color."

She blushed in spite of herself and was glad he couldn't see her face. He dipped a finger down between her legs and into her vagina.

"Marcus," she growled in warning.

A second finger slipped into her. She bit her lip as the wave of excitement started to rise again. Without meaning to, she pushed back against his fingers. She exhaled in a sharp whoosh as pleasure flicked through her. His fingers stroked her slowly until she started to grind her hips. Then he pulled them out unexpectedly. She whimpered a protest, but he ignored it and went about the task of bunching the fur up under her belly and repositioning her so that her knees were fully bent and turned out on opposite sides of her body.

She moaned out loud at the feeling of being left completely open by the position he'd posed her in. She was aware that he was somewhere behind her, looking her over.

"If there be a more succulent piece of fruit than you, I do not know it," he said in his rich baritone. He dipped his head and began sucking moisture from her.

She gasped, pushing back against his mouth. He bit gently on her swollen labia. Then his fingers played inside her for a few moments.

"Marcus," she pleaded.

"Aye." His fingers slid out and up to her bottom. "You have only been a little stretched here," he said.

Her heart hammered in anticipation. She was moving her hips and his fingers were slippery, but surprise still bit at her when he pushed those fingers inside. All her sensations concentrated directly on the ring he was violating. It was more uncomfortable with two fingers, but the penetration was also more intense.

He slid the fingers in and out slowly. The rosette gripped them hungrily, puckering and unpuckering like a greedy mouth. Then his tongue went back to work below, licking her dripping slit from clit to hole.

"Marcus. Oh God, Marcus. Please."

His tongue lapped at her opening. The fingertips of the hand that wasn't fingering her ass moved to vibrate against her clitoris. He played her body like an instrument, and for him, it sang.

She cried out as she came, shuddering all over. Afterward, when he left her clit and cleft alone to the cool air, she started to move her knees in.

"Nay," he said, pushing down firmly on her lower back, causing her knees to buckle and slide out and her belly to come to rest back on the lumped up fur.

She was wide open to him still and his fingers started to slip in and out of her ass again, but this time more roughly and with more pressure. She gasped repeatedly, juices dripping again from the front. Then she felt the monstrous bulb of his cock bumping her vulva. Her whole ass contracted in anticipation, and she moaned.

"Aye. Again." Then the bulb bored its way into her inch by stretching inch.

She could feel him impaling her on both sides of the septum that separated the lower parts of her. She was laid desperately open to him and he was using it to his full advantage.

In and out. In and out. Both holes throbbing. Her whole body exhausted, sweaty, and trembling, trying to be obedient to him as he beckoned her to the ultimate pleasure again.

And then his cock thrusts got rougher, deeper. They shook her from the inside.

A hard and unrelenting orgasm grabbed her, gripping her sex and ass first and then every other part of her. It took him a few more minutes to spill inside her. Again he came with a geyser of seed drenching everything.

He pulled out finally and she rolled onto her side, trembling. She'd never known that anything could feel so intense. Her body was so tired and yet part of her wanted to stay awake, to wrap her arms around him and to hold him close to her all night ... or maybe forever. It was so hard to sort out her feelings and harder still to stay awake.

He kissed her neck and shoulders before he disappeared from the bed. Her breathing slowed to normal and she drifted in and out of sleep for a while before she realized he was lifting her up.

"Rest. I need rest, Marcus." She tried to focus her eyes on him.

He chuckled. "I know, angel. Close your eyes."

She felt herself being set into warm water.

"Look at the poor thing. What have ye done to her?" Joan's voice clucked at Marcus in the distance.

Ariana wanted to smile, but she was too tired. She was floating. Soft bristles were scrubbing her and then she was cold, but Marcus' chest was warm against her.



Ariana woke in the morning and stretched languidly. The bed smelled clean and fresh and the fur, which had been soiled by so much sex was gone. She looked around the bedchamber. The fire was roaring, but otherwise it was quiet and still. Her only thought was ... *where is he?*

She climbed from the bed. She paused when she found that clothes had been laid carefully over the bench for her. She smiled at the old-fashioned garments. No thong silk panties in 1349. She dressed in the yellow gown, which was a bit too large, and brushed her hair quickly. She wanted to see Marcus.

Just as she was walking toward the door, it opened. Joan hurried in. "He said you were awake. And already dressed, I see."

"How did he know I was awake?" she asked, looking around.

"He knows things," Joan said, then dropped her voice lower. "Black devil, 'e is."

Ariana smiled, which caused Joan to look her over suspiciously.

"And ye, plucked from God knows where, to be to him I know not what." Her eyes flickered around the bedchamber with disapproval. "He says we must be kind to ye or be punished, but I say—"

So he had threatened them even though she'd told him not to do it. Ariana shook her head in annoyance. "You do not have to be nice to me, Joan. I am not his wife and therefore not your mistress. You will treat me as you think I deserve, and I will not get you into trouble with him for it."

Joan looked her over and sniffed. "He sent me to help ye dress, but you being already dressed, we go to the next. He would have ye have this key."

She widened her eyes. "What does it open?"

"A book chamber for ye. Though why a lady be wantin' books I could not say."

"Show me," Ariana said, clutching the old woman's arm in excitement.

Joan nodded and led her out. The old woman was surprisingly spry and moved quickly. They came to a door at the end of the corridor.

Ariana unlocked it and pushed it open. It was a beautiful, richly appointed little room, cozy with tapestries, a fireplace, and a desk. And on a stand near the hearth there was a small box shaped like a chest.

"What's that?" Ariana asked, strolling over to it.

"He goes too far," Joan grumbled.

Ariana opened the lid of the box and gasped. Jewels to make Harry Winston green with envy.

"Is it not enough that he makes the men drag all this in here this morn so ye can have a book chamber? Now he gives ye her jewelry."

"Whose? Whose is it?"

"His mother's," Joan snapped.

"Is she dead?"

"Aye, but her jewelry were meant to go to the new mistress of this castle."

Not to some harlot he conjured up, Ariana thought, adding in her mind what Joan did not say. For some reason, she didn't mind Joan's disapproval. She liked the woman and thought that they might eventually become friends. "So, Joan, this chamber was created today? There is another library or study that Marcus uses?"

Joan clucked at her use of Marcus' given name. Ariana simply waited.

"Aye."

"Where is the lord's room like this?"

"If he wants ye to know, he will tell ye."

"All right," Ariana said with a dismissive wave of her hand. She wanted to be alone in the study to look at what volumes he'd loaned her. Books in 1349 were extremely rare and valuable.

"Will ye break your fast soon?" Joan asked.

"Yes, soon."

Ariana shivered at the coolness of the chamber and instantly the little hearth roared to life. Joan shouted with fright and ran from the chamber. *Marcus*, Ariana thought and smiled. It wasn't only the fire's warmth that surrounded her, so too, did Marcus's power. She basked in the heat for a moment, liking the feel of his magic. She shook her head at herself. She couldn't let herself get too cozy with him. It would make it too hard on them both when she left.

She sunk down with a book on philosophy. She wasn't sure how much time had passed when she felt him nearby. She looked up and found his tall frame leaning against the doorway, studying her. He looked deliciously handsome as always.

"Hello," she said with a smile.

His eyes scanned the books that were arranged around her. Then he cast a glance at the ornate box.

"I knew you would prefer the books."

"I can use the books while I'm here. The jewelry is lovely, but it must go to your wife."

"I agree. The jewelry must go to my wife."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I am not resigned to staying in this century. I promised you some time, but it won't be forever. Then I'll be gone again."

"Let us presume that you do go back. Then, by your time, I will be long dead and of no consequence. It will not matter that you were married to me in this time."

"That's true."

"Now let us consider the opposite, that you never go back. Is there anyone in this time that you would prefer as a husband?"

"Well, I haven't met everyone yet," she teased.

He folded his arms across his chest and gave her a stern look. "Let us save time. Is there any man from this time that you think you might seek to marry

who could survive me trying to kill him, as I surely could not stop myself from trying to do?"

She chuckled. "No, you're certainly the most lethal person that I've ever met in either century." He was altogether too dark and too possessive, and what she really wished was that she didn't find that so damn attractive.

"And do you think, barring my interference, that any would have you after the way I have been with you in my bedchamber, the way I've claimed you as mine?"

She couldn't stop the heat from rising in her cheeks at the recollection of all the ways he'd had her in that bedchamber. "No. Through your body's use of mine, you have seen to it that I am totally without value in this society."

His eyes snapped angrily. "Do not repeat that... ever."

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"That you have no value. I will not tolerate that sentiment from anyone, not even you."

"I didn't say I believed that I have no value. I said that, as I am now, this society would consider me without value."

"I am of this time. And I find that I value you more than my riches, my title or my land."

"Do you? Truly?" she asked slowly.

"Aye."

That thrilled her in ways too numerous to name and it occurred to her that maybe the small part of her that was in love with Marcus might not have to be without him. What if she could convince him to come with her to live in the future? If he really wanted her more than anything, he might do it.

"You want me to marry you?"

"Is that not what I have just been saying?" he demanded.

"I have terms," she said.

"What terms?" he asked suspiciously and widened his stance as if he were about to face some physical threat.

"I want you to teach me your magic."

"So that you can leave me? Nay," he said, shaking his head.

"Marcus," she said, getting up and walking over to him.

"Nay."

"If I marry you, it will give you total power over me. To do that, I would have to trust you a great deal."

"You should trust me. I will love and protect you like no other could."

"I would like to, but love, to my mind, shouldn't be a selfish thing. If you love me then you may try to tempt me to stay here, but you won't keep me prisoner. I'll give you time, and you'll give me knowledge. And one day, I'll choose between this time and the future. And maybe, if we care for each other enough, you will decide to be with me in whatever time I choose."

"If we care for each other enough? Do you admit then that you care for me some already?"

She glanced at her hands and then back up at him. "I'm not sure. I only know that it feels right to be near you. Even when I woke this morning alone in your bed, I found that I did not like to be separated from you."

"But you stayed in this chamber. You did not come looking for me."

"I didn't need to leave here to look for you. You were here. All around me. Besides, I knew you would come for me when you were ready."

"I came for you long after I was ready," he admitted.

She smiled, liking to hear that he had longed to see her. She poked her head into the corridor and looked both ways. Then she took a step back and pulled him into the room. She closed the door and locked it.

"Tell me your thoughts," Marcus said, appraising her with a look.

"I was thinking that it's very nice and cozy here with the fire. If no one is around, we could lie down on the rug and let our bodies say good morning to each other." She smiled at him seductively, and, by the way he licked his lips, she knew they would be naked soon.

"I would have something first."

"What?" she asked curiously.

"A gift from you."

She narrowed her eyes. If he was thinking about spanking her, she Was going to be furious. Not that the idea didn't have a certain allure to it, but that definitely felt like a night game.

"Tell me then," she said.

"A kiss."

As soon as he said it she realized that she had not kissed him yet... not really. She had caressed his body with her mouth, but she had neglected his lips. She studied his face and suddenly understood that he'd been waiting for her to kiss him. It pricked at something tender inside her that a kiss from her was so important to him, that he elevated it as a gift above the sex that she offered on the rug.

"Sit," she said, blinking the tears that inexplicably burned her eyes.

He sat down and she moved to him. She sat on his lap, putting her arms around his neck. His eyes never left her mouth. It made her heart beat quicker. She licked her lower lip to moisten it and then moved her mouth near his. They were so close that she could smell the spices on his breath, mint and cloves.

She put her mouth to his, brushing his lips with hers. Her fingers slid into his hair and gently urged his head forward. And then she was kissing him, their lips pressed together, her tongue caressing him slowly. He relaxed, as though he'd been tense, preparing himself in case she withheld what she'd promised.

She kissed him tenderly and was glad that he let her. His arms were draped around her, warming her, but he didn't grip her as though to toss her on the floor and ravish her. He was content with what she offered. And a thought came to her, of a real gift she could give him.

She drew back so that their lips barely touched and she whispered words very like the ones she'd whispered all those years ago... only different. And when she pressed her mouth into his again, the power rose. The golden tendrils of her fragile magic uncurled and released the midnight strands of his. Marcus' power retracted back across her lips and into him. She felt suddenly empty and lost. A cold hollow place in her chest cried out for his power to be put back, but she only had a second to register her own reaction before Marcus reacted.

He broke the kiss, breathlessly. His hands clutched her arms tightly, making her wince. "Why? Why did you do that?" he demanded. There was something that sounded almost like anguish in his voice.

"I... I wanted to give you a gift... like the kiss," she said hesitantly. She didn't understand what she'd done wrong. "To give back what I stole from you," she added softly.

He loosened his grip, tipping his head back and shaking it. Finally, he laughed mirthlessly.

"What?"

"Ariana," he said, looking back at her face. "Is it possible that you still do not understand?"

"It is possible and quite probable," she snapped, not liking the implication that she was dense.

"The strength of your magic is like the strength of your body when compared to mine. You could never take what I did not yield."

She drew her eyebrows together skeptically. "But I tricked you. Your magic was stronger, but I distracted you with the kiss so I could steal a little strand of it."

"When you were but fourteen, you used your magic for the first time. I was hundreds of miles away, but I felt it. I was aware of you from then on. On the night you finally came for that kiss, I felt you approach when your horse could not even be seen. I waited for you. When you were too scared to seek me out, I sought you out and found you in the garden. I answered your smiles and put you at ease whenever your nervousness threatened to make you back away from me. You stole nothing. You were not capable of it. You kissed me and I gave you what you wished for."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

"Because, in all the world, I love nothing so much as you."

His words thrilled yet terrified her. "I was a stranger to you," she said. He shook his head. "I was," she whispered. "And you understood magic very well by then. You must have known it would fracture your power and leave you vulnerable, that I could hurt you by using it as I did unknowingly."

"Aye, I understood the risk... though I could not have anticipated how far you would journey with it."

She stared at him thoughtfully. She wanted him to love her, but she dreaded it too. Marcus wasn't the sort of person to prove that he loved something by setting it free. He would use his power to try to keep her, and his power was considerable.

"Now ask me if I regret my decision," he said.

"Do you?"

He stared into her eyes, soul bare. "Nay."

The walls she'd been trying to build around her heart came crumbling down. He was there, everywhere at once. She couldn't keep him out. "Why not?" she whispered, thinking of the vicious scars on his chest and abdomen.

"Because just as my body wants to be connected to yours, so does my soul. Putting my magic inside you connected us."

She knew he was right, but there was more to it than that. She shook her head slowly.

"Aye, it did," he said.

"Yes, I know that, but it doesn't explain why you wanted to bind us together through your power. Something connected us before you gave me your magic. Or else how could you have been aware of me years before we met? Were you aware of anyone who cast a spell?"

"Nay. Only you."

"Then there was something between us, even before the kiss." She thought of the way she'd known who he was before he'd told her. She'd watched him approach her in the garden and she'd recognized his magic as if she'd already claimed a piece of it. It should have seemed strange to her at the time, but it hadn't. His presence had been too overwhelming for her to notice anything else.

"Fate then," he said with a shrug.

A chill ran through her, and she shivered. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly.

"You can not be cold."

"No. Just scared."

"What frightens you? Fate?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why? We can have love and passion, and I will always protect you. What is there to fear?"

"Because if fate means us to be tied together and I can never convince you to go forward with me again, it means that I will be trapped here for the rest of my life... that I'll never again see the amazing world of the future that I loved so much."

He sighed. "Let us concern ourselves with this century for the present. I have had word that the king requires my presence in London. You will come with me, and we will marry there."

She slid away from him and took a step back. It was all happening so fast, too fast. Marcus stood. He reached for and caught her. She took another partial step back, but he held her arm firmly.

"You have nothing to fear from me, Ariana. I would as soon have the heart cut from my body as see harm come to you."

"That is what I fear," she whispered, looking at the place where his hand held her arm and then back to his face.

He raised his eyebrows in question.

"Don't you think I see what you're doing? You'll bind us together in every way possible so that my will has no significance at all."

"Your happiness means something to me. I offer you more than obsession. If I only wanted to imprison you I could do that without taking you to the king. No one even knows you live. I could keep you with me forever without marriage."

"Maybe you want marriage to legitimize your children, the ones you've already told me you want me to give you."

He smiled and brought his free hand to her face, ran a fingertip along her jaw, drawing an involuntary shiver from her. "Perhaps you are right." His voice was soft and low, with a dark sensuous edge. "Love should not make me thus. I find that I have intentions that go beyond reason." His hand dropped, and he held her by both shoulders. "Understand me though. I love you and will have you for a wife. Tell me if you are willing yet to try to tame me through marriage because I must go to London. If you are not ready to accept a betrothal, you may stay here and await my return."

The room was spinning slowly around her. His power hung on the air and weighed down on her more heavily than his hands on her shoulders. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, you can think about it while I make love to you. Whether you come with me to London or not, I need you now, once more before the journey."

She blinked as he took a step forward. "I'm sore," she mumbled. She didn't really care about the soreness. The emotions of the situation were what gave her pause.

He pulled off his shirt and smiled. "And if I thought that you were troubled by it I might reconsider, but that is not what troubles you." He reached over and grasped the fabric of her gown. "Also I find that I want you to feel the effects of my hard use of your body so that you will think of me while I am gone."

She trembled as he undressed her, half from wanting to flee and half from wanting to stay.

Moments later she was lying naked on her back, legs splayed. The hearth was crackling with heat, but that wasn't the main reason she felt such overwhelming warmth. Marcus' tongue licked her nipples slowly. When he bit down gently she undulated slowly beneath his body. She heard his sharp intake of breath and felt him move. His glorious cock Pushed slowly into her damp folds.

He held himself still and stared down at her face. She shifted her hips wantonly, encouraging him to move. A faint smile played at the corners of his mouth. He pressed deeper into the wet cavern of her sex, bumping against her womb. She gasped and dug her nails into his lower back. A hot knot of desire had formed in her belly and answered the pressure of him inside her.

"Marcus," she pleaded.

"Deny that you belong to me," he challenged.

She wrapped her legs around him and pushed her heels against his taut buttocks.

"Nay?" he teased. "If you will not deny it, then acknowledge it, and I will give you what we both want."

It was almost impossible not to scream in the affirmative. Every cell in her body from the neck down was begging her to bend to his will and admit the truth...that she belonged to him and always had. She bit her lip to keep herself from answering. There was still a small part of her that wanted to resist him, to resist this century, this life.

His palms were flat on the floor on either side of her and he held himself up so that he could study her face. His gaze fell hungrily on her mouth.

"Marcus," she said very softly. She wanted him to strain to hear her so that he would get closer.

He lowered his upper body until their chests were pressed together, soft breasts against hard muscle.

"What, my love?" he whispered.

She slid her arms around his neck and ran the tip of her tongue over his earlobe. She felt his low growl vibrate through his chest.

She ran a fingernail lightly over the skin of his neck from the base of his skull down to the start of his back. She felt his body tense at the sensation. "Does it feel good to be so deep inside me?" she asked.

She gasped at the power that roared from him and broke over their bodies. Instantly, he withdrew and thrust deeper. She lost her breath over and over as he ravaged her, teeth against her throat, hips slamming forward. Only his arms protected her. He had wrapped them around her so that she didn't bang against the floor.

Waves of orgasm crashed over her, cresting unmercifully, such intense pleasure, it bordered on pain. Finally, he spent himself in her plush passage, the thick heat of his body filling her and bathing his organ as she pulsed around him. He held her to him, and twisted and rolled so that she was lying on top of him.

Her body rose and fell with his deep breaths, and he reached down, cupping a buttock in each hand possessively. Neither of them made any move to separate their lower bodies.

"Are you... "

"What?" she asked, lifting her head from his chest to look at his face.

"You are not hurt." The words were spoken as a statement, but she felt the question in them nonetheless.

"No, I'm not hurt."

He sighed with relief. "I knew that you were not. You did not try to stop me."

She placed a gentle kiss over his ribs and then looked back at him. "I'm not hurt," she repeated and felt some of the tension leave him.

"I confess I do not understand how you escape it. You feel so soft. You have such fragile, delicate bones." He ran a hand up her spine. "I worry that I will crush you beneath me." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "And you are no help to me. In the moments when I am fighting the hardest to maintain control, you taunt me and tempt me. 'Does it feel good to be so deep inside me?' How can you say such things to me?" he asked with mock disgust.

She smiled. "I wanted you to move."

"You wanted to break my control," he observed dourly.

"Yes, and it worked quite nicely."

"Aye. You would do well to exercise caution, Ariana. Such violent couplings as come from unleashing me thus could one day leave you hurt."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because I trust you. And instinctively your body knows how much mine can take."

He snorted skeptically. "All my body knows instinctively is that it wants to pound yours into submission." He lifted his hand and slapped her bottom playfully. "Only my mind shudders at the possibility that you might be injured. To really hurt you would make me miserable."

"Well, I'm not hurt, so it's a moot point."

"You know a good wife should temper her husband. She should be a comfort to him, not a vixen that turns him to a beast."

"Then it's lucky that I'm not your wife." She bent her head and nipped his nipple with her teeth. She felt his cock stir.

She moved so that she was sitting upright, his powerful body stretched below her. She took a deep breath and reached her hands toward the ceiling,

arching slightly as she stretched. She knew he was watching her and felt his body's response inside her to the tantalizing image she made.

She lowered her arms and looked back at him. His eyes were hooded with desire. She ran a nail over his hard belly, tracing a line around his navel. She leaned slightly forward and then moved back and forth by fractions over his groin. The movement ground her clit into his pelvic bone and made her purr.

His cock lengthened and turned rigid. She caught her breath and moved forward to partially ease him out of her. In her current position, full penetration was too deep. She glanced at his face, but didn't find anything smug in his expression.

She slid slowly up and down, watching him. The connection between their eyes was as intimate as the connection between their bodies. He held himself still, but she could feel the tension building. She rode up and down on his cock, gaining confidence with each stroke.

He closed his eyes finally and fisted his hands at his sides. She loved the illusion of power that it gave her, and she moved more frantically. Soon, she felt her insides jarred as she came down completely on him.

She breathed rather than said his name. "Marcus." His eyes fluttered open.

"Let me... oh!" she gasped, feeling the shudders start. Her inner walls clutched and sucked him as she rose and fell back into position.

As the orgasm eased, she slowed her movement.

He moved restlessly beneath her. "Come now," he said in a soft rasp. "If you raise a beast to ride it, you should do so until he can be ridden no more." He moved his hips so that he slid in and out by small degrees.

She leaned forward to lie on his chest. "I just need a moment."

"So do I," he said with a harsh chuckle. He grabbed her hips and rolled them so that she was under him again.

She grimaced at the first powerful thrust. She actually was very sore now that she took a moment to consider how she felt.

"Marcus," she whispered.

He looked down at her.

"Gently."

He immediately slowed his movement. It took several long moments before he spilled his seed, and it was the most careful joining they'd had so far. Afterward, he slid out immediately and lowered himself to press a kiss on her mons. She squirmed at the ticklish sensation.

He moved to lie next to her and kissed the side of her face. "Ariana, we must be wed."

She didn't answer.

"I would give you time if I could," he said and ran a hand over her belly. "But there are two reasons we should not wait. The first is that it can only be a matter of days before you are with child, if you are not already."

She knew he was right, but wasn't ready to think about that yet. "And the second?"

"Postponing what is inevitable is a proposition that begs trouble. We will be married, and you will come to accept the idea afterward. Postponing will only give you more time to be torn between your differing desires."

"And what if I never come to accept it? What if, over time, this passion we have cools and I'm left with a marriage that I wasn't ready for and didn't want? What then?" Her voice had started at a normal volume, but had risen by the end.

"You must trust me to make you happy," he said calmly.

"Why should I?" she snapped as she sat up. "All you're interested in is keeping me with you. If you really cared about what I want, you'd give me the choice of going back to my other life in the future."

He sighed heavily and rolled away. He stood up and retrieved his clothes. "Get dressed, Ariana. We go to London to see the king."



The London of the 1300s was certainly nothing compared to the staggering technology of the twenty-first century, but Ariana felt intimidated nonetheless. It wasn't so much the crowded streets as the fact that she felt like an alien creature, isolated and lonely even among the bustling people.

Marcus had been on horseback during the journey. When they'd first started out, he'd put her in front of him on his mount, and she'd reveled in the intimacy. They could speak quietly to each other and even steal a kiss when the rest of the retinue was focused on other things. Once they'd left his lands, however, he hadn't let her ride with him anymore. She'd had to alternate between being on horseback in a lady's mount or riding in the wagon. The increased distance between them shouldn't have made her uneasy, but it did. He was like a touchstone for her now, the only person who shared in the knowledge of who she was and where she'd been. Anyone else that she told about her experiences would think her mad. In addition, her body longed for his. The warmth and strength of him reassured her when she was nervous.

Inside the confines of the city she had to concentrate very hard not to reach out for him. At the moment, she stood frozen on the steps that led into the dressmaker's shop she was to visit. Marcus had explained that he was going to see the king first and would ask for a private audience to introduce her.

"Please take me with you. I can wait in the hall while you speak to him," she begged.

He smiled at her gently. "It pleases me that you hesitate to leave my side, Ariana, but that borrowed gown will not suffice. You are in need of something finer for an audience with the king. Madame Traineau will see to clothing you and then Morgan will take you and your maid to the inn to rest."

"And you'll rejoin us there as soon as you can," she said firmly, as if trying to convince herself.

Marcus inclined his head.

She took a deep breath and nodded. She needed to pull herself together. She'd been shy when she'd left this century, but she wasn't that teenager anymore she reminded herself. She wondered for a moment if Marcus had put some spell on her to make her not want to be away from him. She narrowed her eyes and appraised him. No, she realized, it wasn't that sort of power that drew her to him. It was more subtle. It was the way the sunlight made his jet hair gleam, the gentle but firm way he handled his horse, the unflagging masculinity he exuded in everything he did and the unguarded smiles he offered her when no one else could see him. There was a part of her that didn't want him just for a half an hour of great sex. There was a part of her that wanted him for always.

The door opened and a woman, shaped like a little white pigeon, clapped her hands together in delight at the sight of them.

Marcus introduced the dressmaker to Ariana and gave Madame Traineau instructions on the sort of wardrobe he would be purchasing on her behalf. Immediately thereafter, Marcus rode off and the group broke up with Morgan directing one of the men to the inn while he secured the horses for himself, Ariana, and her silent young maid.

Madame Traineau hustled her inside and the time passed quickly. The dressmaker and her assistants were extremely efficient. Alterations were made on one of the gowns while she waited so that she could wear it to the inn. The soft blue wool gown was lovely, but the undergarments were a bit stiff and uncomfortable compared to the satin and silk that she wore in the future.

Back at the inn, she had some supper and then retired to her room. The maid Joan had assigned to her, Agnes, was terribly shy and only said "Aye, my lady" or "Nay, my lady" as Ariana asked her questions while she attended her.

"Well, it's—" Ariana stopped herself from saying, "It's getting late." She was having trouble policing her speech. "It grows late. Let us retire."

They had no sooner begun their preparations when there was a knock at the door. She looked up as Agnes strode over and opened it a crack. Ariana couldn't make out the words and raised her eyebrows expectantly when Agnes closed the door and turned. The girl was blushing a remarkable shade of dark pink as she walked back to Ariana.

"Well?" Ariana asked.

Agnes studied her hands and whispered. "My lord has returned. He says that he wishes to speak to you in his room. You—" Agnes faltered and her eyes flicked up for a second and then fell again. "That is he says... "

"What? What did he say?"

"He says you will not need me to accompany you." The girl wrung her hands and repeated, "He says."

Ariana smiled and placed a gentle kiss on the flustered girl's forehead. The girl looked up in surprise at the gesture and Ariana chided herself for being overly familiar. Then the girl smiled meekly and Ariana felt better about it. People were entirely too formal with each other in 1349. If she were forced to stay, she would try to break those barriers down.

"What are we to do, my lady? If you go, I fear he will ruin you. If you do not go, I fear he will punish us."

Ariana smoothed down Agnes's stringy wheat-colored hair. "It's very late and we have this whole side of the inn to ourselves. If I go to him, no one will see me."

Agnes wrung her hands nervously. "Will you go alone?"

"Yes, and you mustn't worry. I can handle him. You just go ahead to bed."

Ariana waved at her to do as she was instructed and then went to the door. She opened it and looked up and down the hall before stealing out of the room. She went to the next door and opened it, but she froze in the doorway at the sight of Morgan attending to Marcus who was in a tub full of steaming water.

"Close the door," Marcus said as he scrubbed his arms.

Ariana stepped in and closed it, glancing between the servant and his master. Morgan, to his credit, acted like nothing was amiss.

She realized suddenly why Marcus always smelled so much better than the other people in the fourteenth century; he was fastidious about bathing. She supposed it helped that he had plenty of servants and plenty of magic to fill tubs with hot water.

"You may go, Morgan. I will finish myself and call for the bath to be emptied much later."

"Aye, my lord." Morgan hurried to the door and exited without looking back.

"You will make us the scandal of London, Marcus."

"My servants would never breathe a word of what goes on between us. Come and scrub my back," he said, looking her over.

"What do you think of my new gown?" she asked as she strolled toward him. The dark hair of his chest was matted against the swell of his muscles. He looked altogether edible.

"Very nice. Take it off so you don't get it wet."

"What do you have in mind?" she asked softly.

"For you to join me in this tub."

She looked at the door. "Will we be disturbed, do you think?"

"Nay," he said and caught her wrist when she was within his reach. He lifted the wrist and kissed her palm, making her shiver. He looked up at her through his dark lashes and murmured against her skin. "All day my mind was preoccupied with this moment, the moment when I would be alone with you and could take my pleasure again. Undress for me."

She tried to draw her hand back, but he didn't release it. "You must let go of me if you want me to undress."

He hesitated as if he didn't relish letting go of her even for a moment. She could feel the heat gathering inside her. He placed a rough kiss on the inside of her wrist and then relinquished it.

She took a shaky step back and removed her clothes. The raw hunger in his eyes made her almost weak with anticipation. He'd moved so that he was kneeling in the water.

She stood still, admiring the way he looked with the candlelight reflected off his glistening body. His powerful erection rose from the dripping thatch of wet hair. He leaned forward and caught her upper arms, dragging her forward. His mouth latched onto her pert pink nipple and he sucked desperately. He gripped her buttocks and she found her belly pressed to the rim of the tub.

He moved to the other breast, and she let her head fall back as she enjoyed the sensations, his arms cool and wet against her sides, his mouth hot and wet around her nipple, the cool dry air circling her. She put a hand on his head and slid her fingers into the silken strands of his hair. He groaned at the touch.

Suddenly, he let her go and stood up. He towered over her for a split second and then lifted her and set her down so she was standing in warm water in front of him. He turned her so that her back was to him and then pushed down on her shoulders as he descended into the water. They were both on their knees and he leaned forward and bit the place where her neck met her shoulder.

She gasped and tried to pull away from the sharp sensation, but his arms captured and held her. She could feel his stiff cock pressed insistently against her back. His mouth fed on her, alternately biting and sucking. Hot burning pleasure and pain seared her skin. He cupped her breasts, pinching the nipples. She was helpless, and she liked it.

She whimpered, feeling moisture leak from her lower lips. "Marcus, please."

"Aye, vixen, tell me what you want," he growled.

"Inside me," she said between tortured breaths. "Please. I can't wait."

"Nor I," he groaned and pushed her forward. She grasped the rim of the tub, her body bent in submission. He cupped her sex in front and she felt his organ probing her cleft. She wanted him deeply planted there. She spread her knees wide, opening for him, her thighs bumping against the sides of the tub. He pushed forward until his thick length was imprisoned snugly inside her.

"Oh, God," she panted as he started to move. Water sloshed around her lower body. He held her hips and drove in and out. The warm water swirled and caressed her. She arched, dipping her breasts into the water as she pushed back against him.

He roared and the thrusts became more frenzied. Twice she buckled, and her body sunk deep in the water. He withdrew suddenly, causing her to cry out in protest. She felt herself being lifted out of the tub.

She dangled from his arms, water dropping from her limbs and splattering on the wood floor as if she were a sopping rag doll. He gently set her down and she flipped over onto her back, stretching out on the floor, arms and thighs wide open and welcoming. She stared up at him as he positioned himself between her legs and drove deep inside the moist cavern that waited for him.

He lowered his body onto hers until she was almost smothered by the wet heat of his chest. She gripped his lower body with her legs, her bottom rising off the floor as he fought to withdraw so that he could plunge again.

She wailed as she came, but he didn't seem to hear. He continued to pummel her unabated until he finally roared and his cock jerked in a series of hard spasms. Thick warmth pooled inside her, and she felt her womb throb with satisfaction. Her body belonged to his. It was amazing and frightening. And absolutely right.

She turned her face, rubbing her cheek against his chest before she nipped his thick right pectoral muscle. He didn't cringe or pull back as she assaulted him with her teeth. Wanting a reaction, she bit him hard enough that she knew that even he would get a bruise.

"Are you taking your revenge?" he asked in the deep lush voice that she loved.

"Just reminding you that I'm here," she teased.

"I can assure you, my lady, it had not escaped my attention." He moved onto hands and knees. "Come let me wash you before the water is too cold." He picked her up and set her back in the bath. He climbed in behind her. She sat completely still, as if she were a compliant child, while he gently washed every inch of her.

When they finished, he took her to his bed and curled his warm body around hers. He spoke low in her ear. "I will take you to the king tomorrow morning. He asks me to ride with a small contingent of knights to Scotland to deal with some trouble there. It will not take me long. I would not be surprised if he invites you to stay at court until my return. If he does, you will do so. It will be the safest place for you while I am gone."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"I told him that you have no family that we know of and that you have no memory of your childhood. You were living for several years with a family on my lands. The clothes you wore and your speech when you arrived told them you must have been noble-born, but you had had a bad fever and the attempts to find your family were in vain."

"Did he believe that?"

"I can not say. Edward is no fool, but my assistance in the form of both coin and sword has been valuable to him. I think he will not trouble himself much to find the truth."

"Will I use Ariana as my name?"

"You were never at court, were you?"

"No."

"And your father... 'tis years since he was last there I think. Aye, we may use your name. I prefer that we do use your real name, for it will be recorded when we marry. I should not like to have a false name used for that."

"So the king wasn't bothered by you marrying a woman of no apparent relations?"

"If he was, he did not show it." She was quiet for a moment, thinking that things were moving forward at an alarming clip. Once she was married to Marcus, there would be no turning back. He would own her and he certainly wouldn't be inclined to help her leave him then. Was she ready to let go of the future? The way he looked, so utterly gorgeous, certainly made a compelling argument for staying, but would they really be happy when the heat of sexual desire cooled? Could she ever really be content living with so many limits on her life?

As if he knew her will's silent protest, his arm tightened around her possessively.

"I should go back to my room," she said. "It would not do for us to be caught together."

"Nay, it would not, but we are nearly betrothed, and I find that I do not wish to be without you. Sleep, my love, and I will awaken you before dawn."

Her small hand gripped his muscled forearm. "Marcus?"

"Aye?" he murmured. His mouth was close to her head and his breath brushed against her hair.

"Will you promise me something?"

"Aye. At the moment, most anything you wish, I expect."

"Will you promise to always treat me well, even if you tire of me?"

"I will never tire of you, Ariana. I could not do it when I wished to, so I certainly do not expect to now that I do not. But if it pleases you to hear it then have my assurance, I will never treat you badly."

"It's easy to think you'd never get tired of me when I'm twenty-four. One day though, I'll be older and your body won't crave mine the way it does now. Maybe you'll see someone younger that you want. Promise me, you'll take me back to the other time before you take up with someone else."

He was silent.

"Promise," she said, poking him in the ribs.

"Nay."

She pulled herself out of his embrace and sat up. "You won't make that promise?"

He rolled onto his back and folded his arms across his chest. "Nay," he said bitterly.

"So if you decide to take up with someone else, you just expect me to suffer in silence?"

He sat bolt upright, facing her, and she felt his fury riding on the air. "If I were inclined to betray you with another woman, I would not be the man who lies with you right now. A promise that I make tonight could have very little value to that man."

"You could still make it... to ease my mind."

"Why should I when you offend me, not only by your assumption that I will betray you, but also because you injure me with your lack of feeling?"

"My lack of feeling?" she snapped. "I don't think I could stand it if you were with someone else—"

"Aye, your pride would not endure it."

"That's right. Men aren't the only ones who have pride. I know this time tolerates very little of that in women, but I have been elsewhere, and I do have my pride. Indeed it is the only thing I have left to me at present."

He punched his fist into the bed, then leapt out of it. "Am I not allowed a little pride as well, Ariana? How do you think it affects me when you beg for promises that would separate us rather than those that would keep us together? You could have asked me for a promise that I would always be faithful, but you do not ask for that. Must you torment me thusly when I am so unable to defend myself?"

"God grant me an enemy I can run my sword through," he cursed, clenching his fists at his sides. He looked at her with wild eyes. "I am weak with love for you. It brings me to my very knees," he snarled. He slashed the air with his hand and the floor beneath him split with a horrible cracking sound. He stopped and stared down in surprise at the seam created by the split. He shook his head and then looked up at her. His voice was low but tightly controlled. "It is a dagger that you thrust into my heart with your indifference. If you are wise, you will not attack me with it again this night."

"I am not indifferent to you," she whispered truthfully.

"Are you not?" he asked bitterly. "Forgive me if it does not thrill me overmuch to be second in your heart after that precious other life you had in the future."

She sighed and put her head in her hands. "I can't help what I feel." She tried hard not to cry, but the tears came anyway.

She felt him sit next to her and gather her into his arms. She could feel that his anger was gone. "I am sorry," he said in a low firm voice. "Forgive me, Ariana." He stroked her back gently. "I have no right to demand anything from you. I kidnapped you from a life that made you happy. It is understandable that you do not trust me. I have exposed you to naught but my selfishness and jealousy from the first moment I retrieved you. I have no right to you. I know it. But even as I say the words my throat tries to close and prevent them being said."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Still, I will take you back. God help me, I promise I will. Only let me beg a promise from you first. Give me a little time. It is misery for me without you. Please stay with me until I can work up the courage to let you go. I could not bear losing you today, but, in time, I will prepare myself. I swear it."

"Yes," she said, wiping away her tears.

"What?" he asked.

"Yes I'll stay for a while." She paused. If he could compromise, so could she. At the moment it wasn't even difficult since she couldn't think of anything in the future that she'd miss half as much as him. It was crazy to be so in love with him in such a short time, but there it was. "Maybe for a very long while."

He crushed her to his chest and kissed her deeply then he set her away from him. "Now tell me about the other place. I would know what you loved so much about that time. Perhaps I can create the like for you here."

"You're powerful, Marcus, but I don't think even you are that powerful," she said, taking in a sniffing breath. "Anyway, I'm tired of talking. I should get some sleep; I don't want to be puffy-eyed when I meet the king."

"There is a good deal of time until morning."

She rolled her eyes and lay back on the bed. "We need sleep, Marcus."

He sighed. "Aye." He crawled on to the bed next to her and curled her back against his chest. She slid her hand down and intertwined their fingers. As she closed her eyes, she felt his warm lips brush against neck.

"Are you very tired then?"

She smiled. "No, not very."

He turned her in his arms and looked into her eyes. "We are quite well suited," he said, pressing his erection against her belly.

She put her arms around his neck. "Why? Because you like making love to me and I let you do it often?"

"Aye," he said with a grin. "And because you've an appetite for it to nearly match my own."

"Is that possible, do you think?" she teased.

"As possible as traveling through time, I suppose."

She nodded. "Unlikely, but possible," she whispered before she kissed him.



Ariana's gown was blush-colored and only minimally embellished, but very elegant. The real allure was in the cut of the fabric and the way it caressed her slim curves. Marcus had been stealing glances at her, and she guessed by the look in his eyes that he must have felt that his coin had been well spent.

She followed him through the labyrinth of palace hallways and didn't even hesitate when they stopped in an alcove. She looked up at him expectantly as he took her face in his hands. He kissed her slowly.

He looked over his shoulder to be sure that no one else was nearby and then he kissed her again with a dark hunger that bruised her lips. He leaned back taking a deep breath and looking at her for a moment. "There is nothing about you that does not bewitch me."

She smiled at him, tracing the line of his jaw with her fingertip. "Ditto."

"What?"

"It means that I feel the same way about you," she explained softly. "The king awaits," she added when he seemed inclined to steal another kiss and possibly more.

"Aye," he said, drawing her out of the corner.

They met a page in the last hallway who took them past the guards posted outside the door of the king's chambers. As soon as she stepped inside, she knew there would be trouble.

"Blackmoor," her mother's brother, Walter, said with a smile. "It has been too long." Then his smile faded. "Ariana?" He strode forward on long thin legs and stopped in front of her, peering with great interest at her face. "Richard de Causton's daughter, Ariana? Aye, it is. We had given you up for dead. Where have you been, girl?" Her uncle's sharp features converged with suspicion, and he turned his face to scrutinize Marcus. "Explain how my niece comes to be in your company, sir."

There was a murmur of excitement among the group in attendance, and the king stepped forward. She only had a moment to think that Edward's brown mustache was far too long before the king turned to Marcus and said, "It appears that the identity of the lady has been discovered."

"So it would seem," Marcus said mildly. He shrugged broad shoulders. "I am steadfast in my intent, Your Majesty. Knowing her identity, you can have no objection to the match."

"She has been missing for years... stolen from her father's house," her uncle snapped in outrage. "She must be returned."

"I did not steal her from her father's house," Marcus said calmly. "And she is well beyond the age of consent. Certainly I will be happy to take her to visit her family, and they will be welcome at Blackmoor."

Her uncle whirled on his heel to face her. "Come, girl, speak up. Did the earl kidnap you?"

"Nay," she said firmly.

"Then what happened to you?" All the men in the room turned their gazes upon her. She struggled to remember the story Marcus had concocted.

"I had a fever, which stole my memory from me," she stammered. "I was living with a family."

"What family?" he asked.

She couldn't remember the names of the peasants with whom she was supposed to have lived. She glanced at Marcus, begging him to send her the names telepathically, though she knew that that was not one of his gifts. Nothing came.

The king narrowed his brown eyebrows. "You must remember the family," he said. "Blackmoor told me you lived with them for some years."

"I—" she stammered. "Forgive me. My memory is very poor."

"Poisoned," Walter hissed. "Or bewitched. No girl of a mere four and twenty years is feeble. Your Majesty, I entreat you. Return her to her family where no outside influence may work evil on her mind."

She felt a swell of power in the room, and it choked the breath from her. She turned her head instantly to Marcus, but he was focused on where her uncle and King Edward were standing together. They had lowered their voices and were talking over what should happen to her. The king had the power to take her from Marcus, to deny the marriage and betroth her to someone else if that alliance would gain him more.

Ariana could feel Marcus' rage and power building at the possibility.

Her skin tingled. It was amazing that no one in the room seemed to feel the magic rising. A thick black mist gathered and floated toward the men. Her skin burned as if she were standing too close to a blazing hearth.

She felt Marcus's will; no man, not even a king, would stand in his way. She knew what was about to happen. She saw in her mind's eye the king and her uncle fall and then the guards running Marcus through with their swords. A desperate panic took hold of her. She had to prevent him from striking, but she didn't know how.

Marcus spoke. "Your Majesty, I have been your faithful servant for many years. This woman chooses me and I choose her."

"Aye, Marcus," Edward said. "We have known each other many years. And in these many years, I have heard rumors of strange occurrences in conjunction with your person."

"Am I accused of sorcery?" Marcus asked mildly, but she felt his underlying passion taking hold. To ask such a question was mockery and threat mixed

together. Toying with the sovereign could only bring about his own destruction. Marcus raised his hand, poised like a snake to strike.

She could think of only one way to draw Marcus's attention from the king; she must draw it to herself. She fisted her hands and then opened her mind forcefully sending what power she had outward in a kaleidoscope to Marcus. At the same moment, she said his name and pretended to swoon.

As she fell, she tried to keep herself from wincing. No one was close enough to catch her, and she knew she would strike the stone floor very hard.

Marcus caught her. He must have flung himself forward and slid to land beneath her because her head was cradled in his lap.

When she opened her eyes, there was a sea of concerned male faces above her.

"Are you all right, my dear?" the king asked gravely.

"She is not well," her uncle murmured.

She was tempted to tell them that she was pregnant with Marcus' baby. That would certainly end the debate over whether they should be married. If she were pregnant, feeble or not, she and Marcus would have to be married. She worried though, about retribution. Husbands died in battle. Her family might decide to have their revenge and Marcus' land in the process. Her father could be ruthlessly practical at times.

Edward cleared his throat and looked her over. "She will rest, and we will summon her family. Lord Blackmoor will ride to Scotland as planned and upon his return, he will have my decision."

So the king had found a way to use Marcus while still reserving the right to defy his wishes. Clever Edward.

They began to lift her away from him, but Marcus moved swiftly and held her body cradled to his chest as he stood. The king cocked an eyebrow, but allowed him to take her to her room with her uncle chaperoning the journey. In the bed chamber, she squeezed Marcus's hand as he started to back away from her. "Be safe," she said softly.

His face was silent thunder. "I shall return for you with all haste," Marcus promised her. She felt a distinct chill as he left the room.



Marcus' absence stretched for weeks, leaving Ariana sullen with longing. Her father, who had always been prejudiced against Marcus, was easily worked on by her uncle. They were determined that Marcus would not have her when he did return. She found the pair of them and her new stepmother tedious. When she'd been younger, her father had intended for her to marry his friend, Lord Darlinge, who was sixteen years older than she. Apparently while she was gone, Darlinge had married and been widowed by the plague. Her father seemed to think they would still make a good match despite her argument that she wanted to marry Marcus. She suspected her father's insistence had to do with a long-coveted parcel of land that he expected to get from Darlinge.

She had no idea what the king's decision would be with regard to Marcus' suit. He needed Marcus to suppress the conflicts within his kingdom, but an alliance with her father and Darlinge would also benefit the king. Of course, if Edward defied Marcus, the consequences for the king might be severe, monarch or no.

Ariana doubted that weeks without access to her body was going to bring Marcus home in good humor. Her dreams had become increasingly dark and erotic. She wondered if he were sending messages to her subconscious or if the dreams were the product of her own imagination. She couldn't deny that she missed him desperately. There was a dull ache in her breast that nothing seemed to ease.

Court should have been a good diversion for her attention, but it wasn't. It was peculiar and isolating not to be allowed to join the men as they discussed things like the primitive bank networks created by the Florentines. She wanted to play the prophet and tell them how international banking would evolve over the centuries, but she didn't. And their disdain for members of the merchant class who were using money to buy land and to move up within the societal strata infuriated her. To her mind, the meritocracy in America was far superior to any of the world's aristocracies, but she was not allowed to offer her opinion. *I am a stranger in my own land*, she thought countless times. Conversation with the women didn't interest her. They were consumed with gossip and fished for details about her past and the time she'd spent with Marcus. They sniffed scandal and were anxious to have the whole story. She did her best to avoid them, spending most of her time in her chamber or in the garden, waiting and wishing for Marcus, the only person who truly knew her, the only person she could talk to.

She was sitting quietly in the garden when she finally overheard that the Earl of Blackmoor was in the castle. She froze for a moment and then leapt to her feet. She crossed to the fluttering ladies who were talking. She pushed back an ivy vine and leaned close to where they sat on the white stone bench.

"Where is he? The earl, where is he?"

"In a private audience with the king," one of the women drawled softly.

She heard the echoes of their laughter as she ran to find Marcus. She didn't remember passing the halls that led to the king's chambers, she only knew that she raced to get there. She panted as she sat down on a bench across from the door to the antechamber.

She waited for what felt like hours and then the door swung open. She saw the people who were waiting to see the king. And then she saw Marcus.

She'd forgotten how big he was. He filled the doorway. He had weeks' worth of a black beard and his hair hung past his shoulders in thick waves. He looked like a menacing barbarian.

He stopped when he saw her and blinked. "Are you real or apparition?" he asked in his soft baritone. She hopped off the bench and into his arms. "Still

light as a feather, but flesh despite that fact," he said with a chuckle.

"Is it good news then? Will he let you have me?"

"Nay," he said with a rueful smile. "He has found that stalling is a better tactic. While he delays in his decision, he may use me to his full advantage and placate your father and Darlinge. The king realies, you see, that I will do anything that he commands to secure the right to marry you. Now he sends me to France."

"No!" she nearly shouted. She slapped his chest as if it were his fault. "No. You will not leave me here again."

He hugged her to him and whispered in her ear so that the guards could not hear. "Nay, I will not."

She looked up at him expectantly. He drew her down the hall and when they rounded a corner, he pulled her into an alcove. She waited for him to speak, but he just stared at her. "Well?" she asked.

"It feels an age since I have stood this near to you. Allow me to savor it for a moment."

She smiled at him. It was gratifying to know that she'd been missed too, but she only had a moment to bask in the thought before he swept her up in his arms and kissed her until she was half dazed. After he set her down, it took her a moment to focus on what he was saying.

"... I could not come for you because I could not sense exactly where you were without the magic connecting us. Take a bit of my power with a kiss that I may return at will and take you from this place."

"Yes," she said, grabbing a handful of his long hair and pulling his face down. She murmured the words and tasted his lips, his beard tickling her skin. Lust poured over her as he kissed her, and his power slithered deep into her body, stretching and filling her with crackling heat. She shuddered, thrilled at the renewed depth of their magical connection. *You are mine. I am yours. Forever.*

"At such moments, I know not if you be angel or maid. I know only that I would draw my sword on the devil himself for the taste of your lips."

She could not find her voice to tell him that she felt just as overwhelmed by the taste of him. He ran a hand over her cheek, their faces still close together.

"Let me die with your kiss on my mouth, and I swear I will not despair in death."

The thought that the king could continue to send him into battles where he might indeed be killed struck her like a hammer to the chest. She felt tears in her eyes, but blinked them away, determined not to let fear destroy her joy at seeing him. "I hope it does not come to that very soon. You are young, my lord. I think there is time yet for kissing without death hot on your heels."

He tipped his head back and laughed. "Forgive me, my lady. My heart runs away with me at sight of you. I have known naught but trouble and swordplay for too long."

"Then kiss me again and remember that you are safe in my arms now."

"So much time spent at court, you sound like you are of this time again."

"Does that please you?"

"The manner of your speech matters little, but, aye, you please me... in the sight and sound and smell of you. And most especially the feel of you. That pleases me very much."

He pressed his lips to hers, and let his tongue explore her mouth. The kiss started soft, but then turned rougher with emotions so raw they made her tremble. The small invasion of her mouth was a promise, an echo of the ways he had already and would again invade her body given the chance. And she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

There was a noise behind him, and he drew back slowly. She tried to hold on to him, but he extracted himself from her grasp with a soft laugh of delight at her reluctance to let him go. He looked over his shoulder and waved at the pair of young knights who were standing behind him.

"We will return the lady to her chamber," the light-haired one said.

Marcus turned and took a step toward them. He towered over them and looked at least ten years older than either of them, but they stood their ground with grave expressions.

"Marcus," she said, catching his hand as she stepped around him.

"Aye, my lady?" He looked from her face down to where she held his hand and then back to her face again.

"I missed you. Do not stay away so long again."

"I will do my best," he said and understanding passed between them. She would go now, with the promise that he would retrieve her very soon.

"Come, my lady," one of the knights said, taking her free arm.

"One moment," she said, trying to pull her arm from the knight's grasp.

"Nay, come now—" he began.

"Take your hand off her, boy, or lose it," Marcus growled.

The young knight puffed his chest out like a preening peacock. Marcus' boot caught him in the gut, driving him back. Her arm slipped free of the stunned knight's grip as he fell. He scrambled to get up, but found the tip of Marcus' sword on his chest, pinning him down.

Marcus' gaze swiveled to the other knight whose hand was on his own sword hilt.

"Draw that sword, and I will spill your blood," Marcus said with an icy calm that underscored his very serious intent. Marcus turned his head a fraction of an inch toward her and he winked. "Now then, my lady, your escorts have decided that you may take your time and speak to me for as long as you like."

She fought not to smile. She was afraid that if she and Marcus seemed to be laughing at them, the young men might decide that death was more palatable than ridicule.

"I only wanted to tell you one thing," she said, fighting to keep her voice neutral.

"Aye, go ahead."

"It is private, my lord. Bend down a little so that only your ear may hear."

He studied the knights as he bent his head.

"I love you," she whispered.

His eyes widened, and then he sheathed his sword in a single fluid motion. He turned to her and pulled her into his arms. She felt her feet leave the ground. He buried his lips in her hair, kissing her several times.

"Marcus," she gasped. Both knights had drawn their swords and were jabbing him in the back and flank.

He hugged her tighter to him. "Tell me again."

"You need to put me down," she said eyeing the pair of younger men who looked just as murderous as Marcus had a moment before.

"Tell me again first. These pups won't run me through for kissing you, for they would have trouble explaining to their king why his favorite instrument of death was stabbed in the back. I killed forty men at Crecy. He will not take my loss lightly when I have promised to kill double that number of Frenchmen upon my return to battle there." His voice was confident, and the knights stopped their prodding.

"My Lord, you will unhand that lady that we may escort her back to her chamber... for that too was an order from the king," the shorter, darker of the two knights said soberly.

Marcus grinned. "If you value my life, you will tell me again quickly. Your escorts grow impatient."

"I love you," she said softly.

His onyx eyes glittered with happiness. "And I, you," he returned equally softly. He set her on her feet then and took a step back in withdrawal. He placed his hands on his head as if to signify that he wouldn't hinder the young knights any further.

They eyed him suspiciously, waving impatiently for her to precede them down the hall.

"Soon," Marcus called after her.

She glanced back to see his brilliant white smile, framed as it was between the midnight black hair of his mustache and beard.



Marcus materialized at Ariana's bedside. The partial darkness didn't hinder him. Now that she was connected to him once more through his power, he could feel her and find her wherever she was.

She was still asleep and serenely beautiful. He stood over her for several moments, just feasting on her with his eyes. It gave him unmitigated joy to be in her presence. It also squeezed his heart because he knew it would not be for long.

Then, as if she could feel him too, she opened her eyes and focused them on him.

"Hello, Marcus," she said with a sleepy smile. She sat up slowly. "You're supposed to be on your way to France."

"The king agreed to let me have a few days of rest before I leave."

She rubbed her eyes. She was so small, so fragile. And yet she could withstand whatever his body offered. It amazed him.

"I want to go with you to France," she mumbled.

"Nay," he said with a short laugh. "Much as it drives me mad to have you away from me, even I would not take you to a battlefield."

"I want to be with you. I think I may have a talent for concealment. I concentrated hard and made a piece of parchment disappear for several minutes. You can teach me and protect me while I learn."

He shook his head.

She reached over and touched his arm softly. "It's not safe for me here."

"In what way not safe?"

"Darlinge comes often. The king insists that I see him when he comes."

Marcus waved a dismissive hand. "To placate your father and uncle. My help is more important to the king than Darlinge will ever be."

She looked down at her hands and he knew that there was something she wasn't telling him. A little curl of fear twisted inside him. He was afraid of nothing, save losing her.

He gripped her chin gently and turned her face up to his. "What more troubles you about staying at court?"

"You must promise not to do anything rash."

"You have my promise."

"I think the king is interested in me."

He raised his eyebrows. "In what way?"

"Twice I've been brought to him. He claims that he wishes to see to my comfort at court, but he could do so without giving me a private audience. It seems to me he could send someone to check on me."

Marcus frowned. She was right. Edward was quite practical and endlessly busy. He wouldn't bother to hold an audience with someone unless he so desired. On the other hand, Edward wasn't known for wasting his time in the wooing of innocent young women.

"What did the two of you talk about?"

She shrugged. "It was odd really. He asked how I was doing. I told him the truth."

"Which was?"

"That I missed you. That I was anxious for your return and that I was hopeful that he would agree to us getting married."

"How did he respond?"

"It was awkward. He nodded, but didn't really answer. He asked me questions about you. He wanted to know what you're like in unguarded moments. I think he admires you, but he's wary of you too."

As well he should be if he meets with you alone.

"He's not very good with women, I don't think. I don't find him charming."

"Kings and fighting men do not have much practice, I'm afraid. We are bound to disappoint."

"We?" she echoed and shook her head. "I don't put you in a category with him."

"No?" Marcus had never been considered charming any more than the king had.

"When I talk to you, you listen. I like being in your company." That warmed his whole body.

"But the king is distracted. It's fairly clear that he doesn't think that a woman has anything interesting or important to say. During the second audience with him, I just stopped trying to make conversation. I sat there in silence, and so did he. And just when I was fighting the urge to roll my eyes and ask if I were dismissed, he squeezed my hand and told me that I was not to tell anyone about our meetings. I haven't seen him since then, but the queen is leaving in a few days. And you go to France."

Anger tightened his muscles. Was Edward really trying to seduce Ariana? If so, Marcus would have to stop him, but there was no easy way to circumvent Edward's power while he was alive. *I may have to kill him.*

"We should leave this time. There's no easy way to defy him here," Ariana said.

He sighed. She had almost read his mind, though her solution was different. "I could protect you best by sending you back to the time I stole you from. Then you would be free of all the men who wish to imprison you," he conceded.

"Including you?" she asked.

He nodded and held his breath. He wanted her to forbid him to send her away.

"We should both go," she said, moving so that she was kneeling upright. Her bright eyes implored him.

"I can not live there," he said regretfully. Much as he wanted to be with her, there was nothing for him in the future. She'd told him nobility no longer ruled and that there were no knights left. A man could not even hire out his sword. Indeed, men did not even carry swords. It had taken him years to perfect his technique. To know that the weapons of the future were as foreign to him as some languages unsettled him. A great many things about her favored time

unsettled him.

"Why not?"

"I would have no title or property."

"I didn't have anything when I went there. The—"

"You're a woman. A woman may rely on others for her keep. A man must make his own way."

"You could do it after you got used to things and learned how they are there. It's easy to make a living there, for someone who's willing to work hard. There are a lot of things you could do. And if you were willing to sell your mother's jewelry it would net you a small fortune. You'd have wealth to start out with." She swung her long soft hair over her shoulder and climbed off the bed. She moved close to him, her intoxicating scent reaching his nostrils.

He took a step back so that it would be easier to concentrate. "I do not belong there."

She smiled at him bewitchingly and tugged the shift up to reveal her shapely calves. "I thought we belonged together." She pulled the shift slightly higher to show her knees. "The king's set on sending you off to get murdered. My family's ready to marry me off to someone else. Back in the future we could be free. We could get married and live however we wanted. No one could demand you go to fight. No one could take me away from you. We could be together every night." She pulled the shift over her head, revealing her naked body to him.

His cock stiffened instantly. She stepped forward boldly and placed her palms against his chest.

"Think of it, Marcus. There would be no waiting for a king's blessing which may never come. Haven't you waited long enough to claim my body? All those years of trying to find me, wasn't that long enough?" She stretched her arms over her head. Her breasts rose a few inches closer to his mouth. "You could have me in your bed every night. You could do whatever you wanted to me," she whispered.

The blood roared in his ears, and he bent his head to take one succulent nipple between his lips. Ariana slid her fingers into his hair, stroking his scalp sensuously. His arms wrapped around her as if they had a will of their own, and he straightened up, lifting her from the floor. He suckled her hungrily until she was writhing.

Her sweet voice drifted to his ears, begging him to make love to her. His body screamed for him to comply. There was no use resisting, and he carried her to the bed and dropped her on it. He shed his clothes quickly, tearing things in his haste.

As he climbed on the bed, she spread her glorious thighs to welcome him home. He didn't hesitate. He took his phallus, heavy with blood and probed her moist slit with it. He found the entrance and sunk down into her body. For several moments, he didn't move. It felt so good to be inside her that he had to savor the sensation.

Then she struggled beneath him, trying to move her hips. He had her lower body pinned, and he smiled down at her. "Patience," he teased.

"No," she pouted and slapped his arms in frustration.

He grabbed her wrists and pinioned them above her head. She twisted furiously and he watched her face flush with the exertion and her breasts bounce as she struggled to free her arms. His staff grew longer and more rigid inside her.

Finally she went still, panting from the fruitless battle. "Damn you, Marcus," she snapped, her eyes glittering in the low light.

"Nay, vixen, no cursing. You must beg me for what you want. And very sweetly if you want the task done properly."

His teasing had the desired effect. She began to struggle again in earnest, and she cursed him vehemently. He laughed softly, bending to nip the peak of her breast. Her moan was louder than was strictly safe if they wanted to avoid discovery. He moved his mouth over hers to swallow the sounds she made as he started to grind his pelvis into hers. She continued to move beneath him as if she were something wild that needed to be tamed. It drove him to new heights of pleasure.

He groaned deeply as he felt her tight walls contract around him. He moved so that he could see her face as she tipped her head back and gasped for breath. He loved the way she looked, completely vulnerable in her ecstasy.

Moments later, he reached his own ecstasy, spending inside her hot folds. He collapsed on top of her soft body for a moment, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin against his.

He felt her try to move her head and he eased himself up and off her. He drew her wrists, which he was still holding, up to his lips and kissed one then the other and laid them gently on the bed.

She stared up at him. "I hope he's as beautiful as you are," she said.

"Who?"

"The baby we just made."

He froze and looked down at her belly as if it would be glowing or showing some other telltale sign. He shook his head at himself. He had known enough women to know that a woman could not feel anything as soon as this. He looked back at her face and arched a skeptical eyebrow. "You need not tease me, Ariana, with phantom infants. I will not leave you here unprotected."

She levered herself up on her elbows to look at him and smiled. "I know that. You couldn't see your face when I told you that I loved you, but I could. You'll never leave me, and I'll never leave you. Nothing will separate our two hearts. Not even a king." She spoke with such conviction. It took his breath away to

hear her proclaim that they would be together forever.

He ran a hand through his damp hair and marveled again at her ability to surprise and overwhelm him. She was just one small woman, not particularly formidable. He could pin her to the bed as easily as take a breath, and yet she held his soul in the palm of her hand just as effortlessly. He marveled at the nature of love that it could make men and women partners in such an elegant dance where each partner controlled and pleased the other.

"And, by the way, I wasn't teasing you," she said.

He came off his palms, straightening up onto his knees and looked down at her belly.

"How do you know my child is in there?"

She placed her hand flat against her abdomen, just below the belly button. "I feel the tingle of your power inside me. It feels very much like when I took that wisp of power from you during the kiss."

He backed up on his knees and leaned down, face near her navel. He nudged her hand up with his nose and kissed the place where it had been resting. She touched the top of his head and twisted a lock of his hair around her finger.

"Hardly any men wear long hair in the future."

"If you prefer it shorter, I will cut it for you," he said, licking her lower belly.

"You will *not* cut it. I like it long."

"What of my beard? Shall I cut that? If not, I fear we may get tangled up down here," he teased as he rubbed his chin languidly over her mound.

She laughed. "You are very wicked."

He tilted his head down and bit the fleshy pad gently. She sucked in a breath in surprise. The sound of her gasp pleased him.

He moved his arms, pushing her thighs further apart. "Open for me. I would like to give my child a kiss."

"Marcus," she murmured in a breathless voice. He smiled just before he slid his tongue inside her.



Ariana pulled the cloak tight about her shoulders and followed Marcus into the royal chapel.

"What are we doing here?" she whispered when she saw the priest and her father standing together near the altar.

"We are to be betrothed."

Her heart started to pound in excited anticipation. She studied her father's grim expression. Could it be true? "He agreed?"

"He did."

"What of the king?"

"He will agree also."

"Marcus, what have you done?" She looked up at his handsome face as he shrugged. He was as dark as the devil's own, and therefore not capable of looking truly innocent, but, at the moment, Marcus's face was open and agreeable... as if he hadn't had to use threats or violence to get his own way in the matter of their engagement. She narrowed her eyes.

"How did you convince my father?" she demanded.

His fingertips inconspicuously brushed the fabric of her dress over her belly, reminding her of the secret life she hid there. "Does it matter?" he asked.

She hesitated for only a second. Whatever he'd done to bring about the engagement, it was worth it. After all, her father looked perfectly healthy; Marcus hadn't spilled anyone's blood. And they *were* meant to be together. "No, it doesn't matter."

He led her to the priest who looked rather dazed, but he performed his part flawlessly. Marcus sealed the betrothal with a kiss and then a marriage gift. The fabric was soft and intricately patterned. Cloth was valuable, and this was more so than most, exotic as it was. Some merchant had traveled for weeks or months to bring it from some faraway place to England.

"It's beautiful. I love you," she whispered against his lips. Power arced between them, making her skin tingle from the inside.

Her father snorted. "I shall expect payment within a fortnight as you promised, Blackmoor. I trust you will not sample the goods and then say the cost is too high."

She gasped at the crude statement, but Marcus kissed the side of her mouth gently before turning his head to look at her father. "It is you who set the cost too low."

Her father's eyes widened at that, but Marcus turned from him and led her down the chapel's aisle and out the door.

"So we are promised," she said happily.

"Aye." He ran a fingertip along her jaw. "Your skin glows. The moon must be jealous of your radiance and the sun will soon follow."

"It must be the pregnancy," she whispered.

"Then I must keep you always with child." He strode to his horse and mounted it. He reached down and picked her up, setting her sideways in front of him.

"Will the king be angry about the betrothal?"

Marcus shrugged and rode out into the field behind the chapel.

"Now, what are you about?" she asked as he stopped the horse and slid down.

"I mean to sample the goods," he said, flashing a grin.

"What, here?" she gasped as he lifted her from the horse.

He nodded. "Why not? The morning sun is warm and high enough to give God a view of the union He blessed today."

"You best not mock God, Marcus."

"I certainly do not. I made my promise in His chapel, did I not?" He caught her arms and pulled her to him.

The kiss that followed made her mind fuzzy and her legs weak. He lowered her to the ground. Moments later, he'd moved her skirts up and slid into her, seating himself deeply. She purred in his ear, gripping his shoulders. It took less than a dozen strokes for the spasms to start.

As the passion ebbed and flowed, she heard a sound, something like the cracking of a twig. Had the horse wandered near? She grasped the back of his neck. "I heard something."

"Tis my heart." He bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. His tongue thrust in her mouth echoing the invasion of his smooth hard erection. A few moments later she felt his warm fluids mixing with hers.

Afterward, they lay together still and spent until he finally adjusted his clothes and then hers. He stood and lifted her to her feet, kissing the top of her head. "There may be whispers at the castle. You will not let it trouble you."

"What whispers?"

"We were seen."

What? What! "The noise I heard?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you stop when you heard them coming?"

"I arranged for us to be seen."

Her mouth fell open in shock.

"Betrothals are not necessarily binding except when the union is consummated. No one, not even King Edward, will be able to interfere now that I have had you and there are witnesses to it."

She slapped his arm. "You put the worst plotters to shame."

"I did what I must to keep you with me."

"You could have told me what you had planned."

"I was not sure you would have the nerve to go through with it."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, pinching the skin. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I'm your wife now. No more plans that you don't tell me about. We share everything from now on." He stared at her. "Promise me."

"Aye, but not because you are my wife," he said, putting her hand over his left chest. "Because you are my heart."

And you mine. She smiled and pulled him down for a kiss then shook her head. "We were seen making love in a field less than an hour after our betrothal. At court, they will think us consumed with lust and completely shameless."

"Aye. They have been trying to learn of my true nature for years. Today, they have their wish."

She laughed. "But you've dragged me down with you. We're a pair now," she said, walking over to the horse and running a hand over its sleek flank.

Marcus dropped a kiss on her head and remounted the horse. He took her arms and pulled her up in front of him, and they rode back to the castle at a full gallop. Ariana kept her head high and the wind in her face, feeling free for the first time in ages. She decided that love was very liberating and quite magical in its own right.



"I will escort Ariana to Blackmoor and then continue on to France," Marcus said.

Edward's eyes were steady and cold as they measured him.

"You mean to take her to Blackmoor before the wedding?"

"I do. She is already my wife."

"I had heard that," the king said, walking over to the table and taking up a goblet of wine. He took a drink. "You seemed quite anxious to make it so." A bit of amusement showed on Edward's face. "I trust from now on we will not have you frightening the field mice."

Marcus laughed. "Nay. I am done with fields."

"Except battlefields, I trust."

"Aye. As I said, I go to France as planned."

"Your young wife must be nervous about you leaving so soon. Are you sure it would not be better to leave her here? Court can offer distractions."

Their eyes locked. He wondered if Edward were baiting him. "She prefers to wait at our home."

"To worry alone?"

"Nay. She does not fear for my life. Ariana believes me to be indestructible."

"Touched as you are with the devil's magic?" Edward asked curiously.

"Nay, I do not believe that is what she thinks, but then I am newlymarried and she is a mystery still."

"A mystery and, yet, you risk much to claim her."

Marcus shrugged. "It is a love match. She is for me as England is for you."

Edward glanced out the window. "If that is so, then fortune has smiled upon you, my friend. Take your wife home."



Many weeks had passed since Marcus had left Blackmoor for France. The rigors and ravages of the battlefield had not left him free to use magic to visit Ariana's bed during the time away and she was on his mind constantly, though lately it was concern more than lust that made him wish to see her. As he rode home with his men, he worried that she was not well. One of his men had lost a wife in childbirth while they were fighting. Marcus had been thinking about that often since they'd heard. Normally such news didn't affect him, but now that he had a young wife of his own, who carried his child, he couldn't help but be troubled by it. He shuddered at his dark thoughts and shook them off. She must be well. If she were ill, surely she'd have drawn power from him to heal herself, and he would have felt it.

When he reached the castle, he dismounted quickly and hurried up the stone steps. "Ariana!" he called.

Joan stepped into his path. "My lord, you are home."

"Aye, where is my lady?"

"She is resting after tending the stable master's wife."

"My wife is well?"

"Aye. Only tired."

"What ails Cathy?" Marcus asked, wondering after the stable master's wife.

"She lost another babe and the fever left her poorly."

Marcus' heart nearly stopped for a moment. He did not want to hear about women losing babes or being consumed with fever from childbed.

"At first Cathy would not eat except when your lady sat with her. So she went to her every day. The girl, Cathy, is better now, but the lady, Ariana, needs her rest, so ye can just come with me—"

"Joan," Marcus growled. "I want to see her."

"And ye will not tax her overmuch?" Joan demanded.

"Nay."

Joan stepped out of his way. He liked to see Joan protective of Ariana. She had obviously won over the castle while he was gone. He wasn't surprised. It was impossible not to love his wife. He hurried down the hall to their bedchamber.

He found her sitting up on the bed with parchment and quill in hand. Her face lit up when she saw him, and she quickly discarded what she was doing in favor of coming to him. He caught her in his arms and hugged her to him.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Oh, aye. A few scratches from battle."

She lifted his hands to her lips and kissed them.

"Joan tells me that a fever swept through. I never felt you draw power from me to heal the sick. Why not?"

"There were too many. And I was afraid to pull power from you while you were in battle. I didn't want you to get distracted and maybe get hurt." She paused and looked at the floor, then sighed. "I'd better tell you before you hear it from someone else and rage at them. I was sick myself for a few days, but I'm fine. The baby's fine."

"You?" he murmured, feeling cold dread wash over him. "You should have drawn power to heal yourself. It would not distract me enough to endanger me," he lied. He would rather fall in battle than come home to find her dead. He never wanted her to hesitate to save herself at his expense. "You must promise me to always tend yourself no matter what—" His words trailed off as she shook her head.

"I can't heal myself. The power doesn't work that way. I can only help other people."

He swallowed hard. Healing was not one of his gifts. If she were to bleed overmuch or to get a fever in childbirth, she would slip away from him. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought to ask her about this before. He had just assumed she could draw power from him when she needed it to tend herself.

He had plenty of strength to give her, but it seemed that it would do them no good. His mind searched for a solution. He would not lose her. He cared for nothing else, save keeping her safe.

Then her talk of the future came to him. She had said that women survived the childbed there. He had resisted the idea of going to the future because it seemed unnatural for them to live there, but he could not accept her death in childbirth or from one of the many illnesses that swept through...

"Marcus," she said, softly touching his arm. "I am well."

"Aye," he said.

"So tell me what happened in France," she said with a bright smile.

"We won all of our battles," he said absently, looking her over. She looked hale. She looked beautiful.

"I wanted you to do well in battle, but maybe not that well. Edward will want to send you back over there while I want to keep you here with me," she said, sliding her hands onto his shoulders. She kissed him, making the thoughts fly from his head. "I missed you," she said.

He stared at her mouth. "And I you." He kissed her again. "Welcome me home. Then there is something I wish us to discuss."



Southern Italy in late summer was hot and sultry, but Marcus liked the breeze from the Mediterranean so he'd turned off the air conditioning and opened the bedroom windows overlooking the terrace. He set down his pencil, studying the sketch. Another big house. Each time he started a new design, he planned to draw something modest in size, but whenever he took pencil in hand he produced a mansion. A leftover addiction to grandeur from the days he'd lived in a castle, he supposed. Still, the intimacy of the places they lived in now suited him very well. There was really no need for places larger than four thousand square feet when there were no servants to house.

"What time is it?" Ariana mumbled.

He took a sip of the rich Italian burgundy and glanced over at his wife. Her diaphanous nightgown matched the billowing sheers that the wind was blowing into the bedroom. "Late."

"Then why am I awake?" she wondered.

"Because you slept through most of the day," he said with a slow smile.

"It's so warm." She moved and her full breasts strained against the front of the gown.

He licked his lips as his cock stirred to life. He stood. Her gaze was heavy-lidded as he pulled the white v-neck t-shirt over his head. He tossed the shirt on the desk chair and unzipped his jeans. He shoved them and the briefs he wore underneath down and off. His cock stood proud and ready against his stomach.

"Is that for me?" she teased.

"Who else?" he asked, walking over to the nightstand. He lifted the bottle of olive oil he'd put there earlier and dripped some into his hand.

"Olive oil?" she asked. Her eyes were open now.

"Certainly olive oil. We're in Italy," he said by way of mock explanation. He rubbed the oil up and down the length of his erection.

Her hand went to her swollen belly as if to protect their unborn child from its fiendish father. "Why do we need oil, Marcus?"

"Why do you think?" he asked, the edges of his mouth twitching up as he climbed on the bed.

"I'm still sore from the last time I let you."

He slapped her backside playfully. "You are not. That was a week ago."

"You're too big for that kind of sex. When are you going to accept that fact?"

When your protests turn sincere, he thought, but held his tongue.

"And," she added, "at the moment, I'm too big to be crawling around on all fours."

"You can lie on your back if you prefer," he said with a casual shrug. She was toying with him. They'd had every kind of sex that he could think of... or that he could read about. The twenty-first century was amazing; almost anyone could have a library full of books. In 1349, it hadn't been very long since parchment had been invented and books were scarce treasures. Now, they were plentiful, and he could learn anything he wished to know about, airplanes, architecture, electricity, war, history, and, of course, sex.

"Will you be gentle?" she asked.

"If my lady likes," he said amiably.

"Well, enjoy yourself. This is probably the last time I'll let you do it."

"As you wish," he said, suppressing a smile.

She moved onto her hands and knees. He slid the nightgown up, exposing her round bottom. Childbearing had made her curves fuller and more luscious. And the hormones made her crave sex almost much as he did.

He studied the picture she made from his vantage point. Her ripe belly hanging down, framed by her smooth thighs. Plump sex pink and puffy, glistening with excited moisture. And her buttocks twitching, hiding the tight rosette between them.

He gripped her cheeks and spread them. That movement alone made her sway and moan. He rubbed the tip of his cock back and forth over the ring, oiling it and applying steady pressure.

Her body trembled slightly as if fearful. His cock bobbed impatiently, her show of nervousness whetting his appetite. He pushed against her insistently until she relaxed. He gripped her hip with one hand, holding her firmly as he moved the dark purple, bulbous head inside. She whimpered.

He had only partially impaled her, but he waited. The ring was stretched taut around his thick cock. The sight of it turned him on as much as the feel. He slid his hand around her and rubbed the bud of her clitoris, making it stiffen and protrude past its hood.

"Oh God, Marcus," she moaned. "I can't." Even as she said the words she pushed back against him.

His eyes rolled back at the sensation of being held so tightly inside her body.

"Please," she cried, moving forward and then back, burying him inside her bottom. He took a deep breath, fighting the urge to thrust. He always let her set the pace in the beginning.

He crushed her clit against her pelvic bone until she was gasping and begging him to make her come. Her first orgasm always gave him license to move as he wanted. Caught up in her own pleasure, she spasmed around him, but never tried to resist him.

He thrust back and forth, very gently at first and then more forcefully as she pushed her bottom hard against him. His balls tightened as they pressed against her hungry sex. He pushed two fingers into her creamy vagina, gripping her in front with his hand even as he sundered her back hole.

She shuddered and sobbed, making all his muscles contract. She was so good at playing the reluctant innocent, coaxing him to dominate her. His scrotum burned and the flames licked up from stem to cock tip.

She cried out again, and the ring throbbed around him, pulsing like a heartbeat. He groaned, thrusting deep and gushing boiling seed into her.

He softened and slipped out, and she fell down onto her side, panting. He leaned over to kiss her and found that her lashes were wet with tears. His heart constricted with guilt.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

She smiled and shook her head at him. "I'm fine. It's just intense."

"I won't do it again." She laughed softly, sniffing at the same time. "Yes, you will."

"I won't if you don't want me to," he protested.

"That's the problem, Marcus. I will want you to. I like the way it makes me feel to let you have me that way."

He leaned forward and kissed her damp cheeks, savoring the salty taste. "I don't want to hurt you."

She ran a finger over one of the scars on his chest. "Sometimes a little pain is the price of something great." He glanced down at the scars. They'd faded for a while until she'd gone back to magical healing. Now she had more control over her power and she could draw some from him without opening wounds, but the old scars sometimes became red and ached when she worked. He'd decided that a little soreness was a small price to pay for healing people and for seeing Ariana so happy.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said.

She nodded, and he covered her up. He closed the windows and French doors and locked them, then strode over to the main door to the bedroom and unlocked it. He slipped into the hall and put the air conditioner on before returning to the master bathroom.

The cool shower felt good on his skin. He never seemed to get over the magic of turning a knob and having hot water spray out. He washed slowly and then rinsed for several minutes. Shades of heaven... having sex with his beautiful wife and taking a long shower afterward. He toweled himself off and strolled back out into the bedroom.

"Marc! Marc!" The insistent high-pitched voice rang out from beyond the door.

Shaking his head, he yanked on his jeans. He zipped carefully and then strode out of the bedroom, down the hall and into the nursery. He flicked the switch and flooded the room with light. In one crib, his eleven-month-old son was lying on his back, sucking his thumb and, no doubt, dreaming of Mommy, his favorite person. In the crib on the opposite side of the room, his black-haired two-year-old daughter tilted her head and chirped, "Marc."

He rolled his eyes and picked her up. "Not Marc. Daddy," he corrected. When she'd been younger, he'd taken her with him everywhere. She'd heard so many people call him Marc that she refused to call him "Daddy" as if that were not his real name, but some alias that she was too smart to fall for.

"Want it," she said, pointing to Cameron's bottle.

"That's your brother's bottle. You want your—"

"Want it!" Jessica snapped, holding out her hand. The bottle wobbled.

"Hey," he said in a low growl and carried her out of the room. He'd bound her powers, but not tightly enough. She had felt it when he bound them completely, and she screamed endlessly until he released them. She seemed to feel magic as well as her mother could. The trouble was that Jessica hadn't just inherited minor powers like Ariana's. She'd also gotten universe-cracking magic from him.

"Mommy, baby," she said.

He wondered wryly why Ariana got to be Mommy and he got to be Marc. "Mommy and the baby are sleeping. It's late."

"Wash machine?"

He chuckled. "Nay."

"Aye," she chirped, making him laugh harder. He'd gotten used to saying yes and no, but when she'd been learning to talk, he'd still slipped often.

He'd also been fascinated with the washer and dryer and had frequently taken her into the laundry room of their American house to watch the clothes get tossed about.

"Mommy, baby!" she called.

"Shhh!" he admonished.

"Mommy! Baby!" she screamed.

"Hey," he growled, frowning at her.

She giggled, sending her dark curls into a dance. She clutched his arm. "Mommy. Now," she added impatiently.

Once upon a time, grown men had cowered before his displeasure. Clearly those days were gone, he thought wryly.

He glanced at the bedroom door in surprise as it opened. Ariana stood, framed in a halo of light. Her hair was wet. She'd apparently taken a shower too.

"Mommy," Jessica squealed happily, thrusting her arms out.

"Hi, pumpkin," Ariana cooed, taking the squirming child from him. She kissed Jessica's cheek and carried her into the bedroom.

"Ariana," Marcus said.

"Yes?" she asked, taking the child over to the bed. "We've had this discussion." He had a rule; babies who'd fled the womb weren't welcome in his bed since they prevented the exact acts to which they owed their existence.

"Uh huh." Ariana climbed into bed with the babbling toddler. He leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms across his chest.

"Bed, Marc," Jessica chirped.

"Yes, come to bed, Sweetheart," Ariana encouraged sweetly.

He tried to be strong, but when his wife beckoned him again and offered him a kiss, he found his feet moving of their own accord. He lay down on the bed and accepted Ariana's soft kiss, swearing to himself that he wouldn't let them overrule him on the bed rule again. He'd have to lay down the law... unless of course Ariana widened her bright eyes in the way that always left him unable to deny her anything.

As sleep threatened to overtake him, his mind drifted to their first kiss and to even earlier when he'd first become aware of her. Fate had whispered to him, and he'd done as he was bade. He'd waited for Ariana for most of his life, and she had been worth the wait and more. The life they shared made him happy in ways he'd never dreamed possible. He ran a hand fondly over his daughter's hair.

"Sleepy, Marc," she said.

"Then go to sleep."

Ariana rolled over and looked into his eyes. She smiled at him. "When she falls asleep, you can put her back in her crib."

"Will I have a reason to put her back there?" he asked, reaching over to stroke Ariana's swollen belly. She put her hand over his, intertwining their fingers.

"Maybe," she teased. Her lids lowered, and she sighed contentedly.

"I love you," he whispered, and Ariana smiled as she drifted off to sleep. He watched her breathe.

Aye, Fate, there is no better matchmaker than you.

About the Author:

Alexa Aames likes to spend her free time reading, traveling, writing, and flirting. She has, thus far, not been on a time-travel adventure herself, but would be interested if anyone knows of a good tour. As this is her first publication, she is terribly excited to have readers and would be delighted to hear from them. She can be reached at alexaaames@hotmail.com or via her publisher, Red Sage. Many thanks to publisher, Alexandria Kendall, and editor, Judith Pich, for giving writers the opportunity to tell diverse stories to the wonderful Secrets readership. And special thanks to David for being a good friend and this story's first reader.