



# NOCTURNE

By  
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New Concepts Publishing  
Lake Park, GA 31636  
[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

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*Chapter One*

Anne winced as the coach jolted into yet another pothole. After five days of having her teeth rattled and her bones jarred, she was heartily sick of travel, to the point where she wished for the journey to end. At the very least, she longed to reach the next hostel, where she could get a few hours of sleep on a stationary surface.

As if reading her mind, her cousin Edward said, "I'm beginning to think that there aren't any inns in this God-forsaken wasteland." He leaned over and peered out the window, perhaps hoping to catch a glimpse of lights in the darkness that had fallen over the countryside some hours before. But a fog had blown in from the sea, shrouding the wild, rough coast in a thick miasma that that coach's lamps did little to penetrate.

"I'm sorry that my future home is not more convenient," she remarked acidly.

Edward blinked, and his round face flushed sharply. "I'm sorry, Annie. I'm sure that Greymuir is a perfectly lovely place."

*Aside from the damp, and the wind, and the fog, and the fact that we haven't seen a tree in hours,* she thought, but didn't say. After all, it wasn't Edward's fault that she was being banished to the far corner of the kingdom, to wed a man she had never met.

Pain sliced through her at the thought, sharp as a knife in the heart, so that she had to catch her breath. *Robert ....*

But King Robert had found a new love, a new mistress. And this was her reward--a good marriage to a perfectly respectable baron, one whose father had been highly favored by King Matthew, before death had claimed them both. The match overjoyed her family, for it was said that all sorts of wealth had been showered on the previous baron. His son, no doubt, was quite well off.

*And after all, my family members aren't the ones who have to live in this "wasteland." Why shouldn't they be happy?*

"Oh--I think I see lights!" Edward exclaimed, in an attempt at cheeriness. And indeed, a moment later, the carriage began to slow. "Are we at the inn?"

"Nay, m'lord," the driver called down. "Just the toll gate."

"Curse it," Edward muttered and began to rummage in his bag for their travel papers. A moment later, the shadowy shape of the tollgate's wall loomed up out of the fog. Lanterns hung to either side of the imposing arch, casting a ruddy glow on the dark stone and making the shadows of the guards leap and dance.

As the coach rattled to a halt, a man emerged from the gatehouse, which stood close by the road, no doubt so that the occupants could remain sheltered from inclement weather while still keeping watch on the road. He opened the carriage door and peered inside. Although a heavy cloak swathed him against the damp air, Anne could see that he wore the uniform of a Knight of the Order of Virtue. "Names and papers," he said, sounding bored.

Anne frowned slightly at his tone. The Order of Virtue was charged with keeping the kingdom safe and peaceful. Such a slipshod manner was surely at odds with such an important task.

"Lady Anne Greensward," she said frostily, as he gave their papers only a desultory

glance.

"Greensward, eh?" The knight glanced at her with sudden interest, his eyes glittering from beneath the shadow of his hat. They lingered on her face and breasts, and she drew farther back into the carriage, wondering what he had heard about her.

A sudden scream split the air. "Help me! Whoever you are, please...."

The sound of a blow cut off the desperate plea. Shocked, Anne glanced at the knight, expecting him to do something. But he seemed uninterested.

"I say, what's that about?" Edward asked worriedly. "Is it coming from the gatehouse?"

The look on the knight's face turned hard. "That's none of your concern."

Anne narrowed her eyes. Clearly, someone was in distress, and if this so-called knight did not intend to intervene, it was up to others. "I'll be the judge of that," she said and pushed her way past before he could stop her.

The rocky ground bit through the delicate shoes she wore, but she ignored the discomfort as she strode toward the gatehouse. The screams had turned into desperate sobs, and when she reached the open door, she saw that their source was a young peasant woman. The bodice of her simple dress had been ripped open, so that it sagged to her waist. Two knights held her arms, while a third was busy pushing up her skirt.

Anne put her hand to her mouth in horror. "What--what is this?" At her shocked question, the knights' hold loosened on the maiden, who seized the opportunity to run.

She didn't get far. A step sounded behind Anne, and the maiden froze, whimpering. Turning, Anne saw the first knight approach from the direction of the carriage. The flickering lantern-light revealed an ugly look on his face.

"Well, boys, this is a night," he said with a nasty grin. "We've got ourselves quite a prize. This is none other than Anne Greensward. The King's Whore herself."

Anne stiffened, feeling blood rush to her face. "I am on my way to wed Baron Greymuir," she said, hoping that she sounded more confident than she felt. "I would advise you to watch your tongue, and let us go on our way."

Shadow and light played over the knight's face, showing a flash of teeth. "Oh, no. I don't think so. Not until you've paid the toll."

"I say!" Edward finally clambered out of the carriage. "What is this, then?"

"Nothing you need to interfere with," said the knight, turning toward the distraction.

Anne seized her chance. She ran at the knight, shoving him hard to get him out of the way. Her ploy didn't work, though. He was heavier than she had anticipated, and a gloved hand closed hard around her wrist, yanking her almost off her feet. Pain shot up her arm, and she kicked at the knight, but her heavy skirts fouled the blow.

"Oh no," he snarled and tightened his grip on her until she whimpered. "You aren't going yet, lassie."

Edward let out a bellow not unlike an enraged boar. "Let her go, cur! I demand...."

The sound of a hammer being cocked cut him off. Edward paled, staring fixedly at the pistol that had appeared as if by magic in the knight's free hand. "You don't make the demands here," the man said menacingly. "Now, get back in that coach and wait until we're done with the whore."

*No, this can't be. This isn't happening.*

"Forgive me, gentlemen," said a new voice. "But I don't think that either lady wishes to receive your attentions."

He stood atop the stone wall, a dark figure with a voluminous cloak blowing about his

shoulders. From head to foot, he was clad in black: boots, trousers, shirt, and vest. Sheathed daggers had been strapped across his chest, and a sword and brace of pistols hung from his belt. A heavy scarf wound around his neck, and the brim of a broad hat threw impenetrable shadows over his face.

The knight holding Anne's wrist let go, as if he had forgotten she existed. "Nocturne," he whispered, and fear edged the word. The pistol in his hand swung around, pointing at the stranger rather than Edward.

"Nocturne," murmured the maiden, who cowered against the wall. But when she said the word, it sounded like a benediction.

The stranger seemed unconcerned by the pistol now pointing at his heart. "Knights of Virtue--or so they call you. Do you think that you can compensate for your lack by taking the virtue of these ladies? I don't believe it works that way."

The pistol roared, the sound deafening at such close range. The rank smell of burned powder enveloped Anne, and she staggered away, thinking only that they couldn't waste the chance for escape the stranger had given them. She grabbed the arm of the other woman, supporting her, but before they could so much as take a step toward the coach, one of the knights let out a cry of horror.

The stranger still stood, as if no shot had ever been fired. *The knight missed*, Anne thought, feeling a surge of relief. *But how? He would have to be a terrible shot to miss at such a range.*

"It's true--Nocturne is impenetrable to bullets," one of the knights cried fearfully.

"Ridiculous!" shouted their commander, although he sounded equally afraid. "Shoot him, you fools! Shoot him!"

More pistols barked. The stranger--Nocturne--laughed, a sound that made the hair on Anne's neck stand up. In a single, fluid motion, he leapt down from the wall and drew his sword.

Their shot spent, the knights cast aside their pistols and charged him. Four on one was hardly honorable, but Nocturne seemed unconcerned. Sword in one hand, dagger in the other, he met their rush with one of his own.

Everything that happened next seemed to occur in a blur. Nocturne kicked the legs out from under one knight and then parried the saber thrust of another. Somehow, his knife found its way into the throat of a third, who fell gurgling and thrashing. His cloak swirled, blocking Anne's view. When it fell back, another knight lay on the ground, blood seeping from his chest.

The fourth knight ran, vanishing into the fog. Silence fell, broken only by the soft moans of the one who had been knocked down. Apparently, his knee had been shattered by the kick.

Nocturne bent and cleaned his blades on the cloak of one of the dead knights and then sheathed them. As he turned toward Anne, the lantern light made its way beneath the shadows of his hat.

*He has no face*, Anne thought, feeling oddly detached. Reaction was setting in, and she realized that all her limbs had begun to shake. The other woman clutched her hands hard, and Anne could feel her trembling as well. As for Edward, she didn't have to look at him to know that he was paralyzed with shock.

*It's up to me, then.* She forced herself to stand straight, staring at the void beneath the hat. No--not a void, she realized. There was a reflection there, of the lantern, of her own face in miniature. *It's a mask of some sort.* But black, dark as the very heart of night, and with no apparent holes for either vision or breath.

"I trust you ladies are well," the stranger said, touching one gloved finger to the brim of

his hat. His voice was deep and gravelly, like the sliding of rocks in a stream.

"Y-Yes." Anne swallowed hard, trying not to look at the bodies. "I suppose I must thank you, Mister ...?"

He chuckled. "You may call me Nocturne. As I see you are a stranger to this place, let me warn you--it is not safe to wander abroad at night. Nor during the day, if one is approaching the Knights of Virtue."

His sardonic tone broke through some of her shock. "These were not true knights. I shall report their conduct...."

Nocturne laughed, cutting her off. "Their conduct is well known and understood in high circles," he said harshly.

"That isn't so. When the Ministers are made aware of this incident...."

"I fear, my lady, that I do not have the time this evening to debate with you, especially as it seems you are either ignorant or evil," he said, so sharply that she shrank back from him. "So I shall bid you all good night."

Before she could react, he tossed what appeared to be a small, black ball in her direction. There came a bright flash, accompanied by a loud bang. A moment later, a cloud of choking smoke enveloped her, thicker than the fog. She jumped back with a gasp, inadvertently drawing the smoke into her lungs.

A strange lassitude gripped her instantly. Somehow, her knees were touching the cold ground, although she couldn't remember how she had gotten there. There came a faint tugging on the necklace about her throat, but the sensations seemed far away and unimportant....

"Anne? Annie, are you all right?"

Anne blinked and found herself staring into her cousin's anxious face. The smoke was gone--as was the mysterious stranger. "What ... what happened?" she asked. Her tongue felt thick, and her thoughts came only with great effort.

Edward's lips pressed together angrily. "I don't know. That ... that *person* threw something at us, and the next thing I knew, he was gone and we had all been robbed blind!"

Anne's fingers flew automatically to her throat but found nothing there but skin. Her necklace ... her rings ... all gone.

*A token of my love*, Robert had said when he had fastened the necklace about her throat. His lips had been warm against the skin of her neck, making her shiver. *Promise me that you shall think of me every time you wear it.*

Unexpected tears welled up in her eyes, and she found herself blinking them back. "I don't understand--why did that man save us--then steal from us?" she asked, desperate to focus on something other than the loss of her last remaining tie to the man she loved.

"They say he's a highwayman, m'lady," the young woman said timidly. Her pale hair was drawn back under a plain scarf, and the hand that held closed her ruined bodice was roughened from hard work.

"Aye, that he is," Edward huffed, apparently forgetting any gratitude he might have felt toward their rescuer. "And more--that bit of smoke and sleeping powder was caused by nothing natural. The man must be a rogue chymist!"

*Edward's right. What sort of place is Greymuir? First the knights, blighting the good name of their order, and now this. Chymistry. It seems that our highwayman has no qualms about all sorts of law-breaking.*

"It's a disgrace," Edward muttered. "The baron has let things slip. Perhaps the theft of the dowry will teach him a lesson or two!"

The young woman perked up at that. "Dowry? You're to be wed, m'lady?"

Anne nodded tiredly. "Yes. To the Baron Greymuir." The less said on that topic, the better. "What's your name?"

"Molly, m'lady." She reached out and touched Anne's hand lightly. "Thank you for stopping. I had gone to market to sell some eggs, and I was on my way home, when....," she trailed off and shuddered.

"Of course," Anne said and managed a kind smile. "Be assured that, as soon as I am settled in Greymuir, I will report this incident in full to Minister Gammon." Even though she could never again write to Robert, even though she would never return to court, she felt confident that she still had enough influence that her letter would make it to the Minister of War and Safety. "He'll be horrified to learn about these ruffians."

Molly didn't seem as certain about that, but she nodded anyway. *The poor girl. I don't know how these scoundrels managed to become knights, but she probably believes that all are as corrupt as they were.*

One of the horses let out a snort. The feeble lantern light showed the driver walking toward them, glancing about nervously as he did so. "M'lord? M'lady? We'd best be on our way."

Anne glanced briefly at one of the corpses. The sight sent a shiver through her and brought bile to her throat. "Yes. Have you much farther to go, Molly?"

"Aye, m'lady. I'm from the village outside Greymuir manor."

"Well, then, you might as well ride with us the rest of the way. Too bad none of us have any money left to pay for an inn tonight."

Molly hesitated and then gave her a half-smile. "Thank you, m'lady. And I still have my money from selling the eggs, though I don't know if it would be enough. Nocturne--they say he claims never to knowingly rob the poor. Begging your pardon, ma'am, sir."

Edward said nothing, but scowled furiously, as if he felt that the highwayman had given him a grave insult. As for Anne, once they were back in the carriage, she stared out the window into the night and considered the strange brigand.

Nocturne had saved them--or had he? Had he truly acted out of kindness, or had he defended them from the knights only because it would allow him to rob them?

*He's a rogue chymist.* And therefore terribly dangerous. Although she knew nothing of the mysterious workings of chymistry, she did know that chymists possessed power beyond that of ordinary people. All were required to submit to the authority of the Minister of Chymistry, for otherwise how could ordinary people be protected from their sorcery?

Probably, the man had no conscience. Probably, he had done everything entirely for selfish reasons.

*But he didn't rob Molly.*

Anne shook her head. Edward was right--this Nocturne was a menace to public safety. Perhaps the baron would be willing to do something about him, especially since her dowry was now in the thief's pockets.

But the thought did not sit easily with her, and her dreams that night, when they finally stopped alongside the road and slept within the carriage, were troubled.

## Chapter Two

When the walls of Greymuir manor at last came into view, Anne felt her stomach twist into fearful knots.

They had spent an hour or two at an inn, just long enough to find food and clean up a bit. Molly offered to help Anne with her hair and dress, and she had gratefully accepted. "After all, it's your wedding day--you want to look your best for your new husband," Molly had said brightly.

*My new husband.* Anne reached automatically for the necklace that had hung so long around her throat, only to feel anew the pain of its loss. *How could this have happened? How could Robert no longer love me? What did I do that was so wrong?*

"Molly, tell me--what is Baron Greymuir like?" she asked, trying to calm her fears.

"I only know him to see him, of course, m'lady," Molly said with a smile. "But it's said that he's a kind man, he and his brother, both. The baron is a bookish type, or so I'm told--spends all day in the library."

Robert had hated libraries. The outdoors--that was where a man belonged, he said. Hunting and riding were the proper pursuits for virile males--and for their women. He had been so cross the day he had come to her chamber to find her lost in a book.

"That hardly matters," Edward said, giving Anne a quelling glare. She knew that she had acted improperly--one did not ask commoners for their opinions of the nobility, after all. "And what does it matter what he does with his time? He's rich enough to be allowed a few eccentricities."

Molly's brows arched in surprise. "Rich, m'lord? Who told you such a thing? Baron Greymuir has no money to speak of."

All the color drained from Edward's face. "W-what? No, you must be mistaken, girl. The late baron was a great friend to King Matthew, may his soul rest in peace. Everyone knows that the crown lavished gifts on the estate."

Molly shrank back into the carriage seat a little. "Forgive me, m'lord, and I'm not meaning to speak ill of the dead. But the late baron drank away what little he didn't lose through gambling. When he died in a fire, his sons didn't even have the funds to repair the damage to the manor."

The expression on Edward's face would have been amusing had the circumstances been less dire. The fact that this wedding would form a profitable alliance for her family had been the one bright spot in the whole affair, as far as Anne was concerned. To have even that taken away....

*Perhaps, if he is so poor, the baron will use the loss of the dowry as an excuse to cancel the wedding. Perhaps I can go home with Edward tonight.*

No, not home. Home was the court and Robert. But at least she could retreat to the house of her parents and live out a quiet life. *And if Robert changes his mind, I would be free for him,* whispered a treacherous portion of her heart that refused to entirely give up hope.

The coach rattled through a pair of heavy, iron gates set in a high wall, and the manor beyond came into view. Anne saw that Molly had spoken truthfully. Two-thirds of the edifice



looked inhabited, if perhaps a bit run-down. But the northern wing was clearly deserted. The windows were empty of glass, and the stones above them scorched from fire. The end farthest from the rest of the house had partially collapsed, charred timbers scrabbling at the sky like a skeletal hand.

Edward let out a whimper of dismay.

The driveway circled around a derelict fountain, to the main entrance of the manor. Wide steps descended from ancient oaken doors, banded in iron. At the foot of the stair stood a small crowd of people. One of them was a young, nervous-looking boy dressed as a footman. Two of the others were also obviously servants--an elderly man and woman, who probably served as the maid and butler, and possibly did the cooking as well.

A pair of young men, marginally better dressed than the rest, stood in front of the gathering. Molly leaned over and whispered, "The Baron is the tall one, m'lady."

As the coach drew to a halt, Anne studied the man with whom she would spend the rest of her life. Like Robert, he had long, golden hair, but there the similarities ended. Where Robert had been thick with muscle, this man was slender--gawky, even, like a heron. His long hair was drawn back into a neat ponytail, revealing an angular face set with a generous mouth. A pair of spectacles with small, round lenses shielded his blue eyes. The cobalt coat he wore was probably the best he owned, but it was worn at the elbows and the style was years out of date. The froth of lace on the throat and cuffs of his shirt was positively antique.

*Did Robert know?* Anne wondered in despair. Probably not. He did not concern himself overmuch with the details, relying on his advisors to keep track of such things. Surely he had believed that he was sending her away to a good marriage, not a life of poverty. *But someone knew. Someone had to know.*

Had her replacement put one of the ministers up to this? But why do that? Why humiliate Anne further, when she had already lost the only thing that mattered?

The footman--although calling him a "man" was quite a stretch--hurriedly stepped forward to open the door. As he stepped aside, the baron came forward and offered his hand to Anne. His fingers were long and slender, and when Anne put her hand in his, she was startled to feel the roughness of calluses.

"My lady," he said, bowing as he helped her down. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Alaric, Baron of Greymuir."

"How do you do?" she asked automatically, glad that the formalities of the situation gave her something rote to say. "Lady Anne Greensward. This is my cousin, Sir Edward."

"A pleasure." Alaric smiled at them--a warm smile that Anne decided might be a good sign. "This is my brother, Gerard."

Anne curtsied to the man who had waited on the steps. Gerard looked nothing like Alaric, instead being short and rather round. His hair was the color of mouse fur, and his pleasant face utterly forgettable. The only similarity was in the kindness of his smile. "My pleasure," Gerard said, bowing over her hand. He even sounded as though he meant it, although he had to be aware that any children she bore would supplant him in the succession.

*Then again, perhaps he has no interest in inheriting a pile of rubble.*

The round of introductions continued with the staff--there was Brown and Mrs. Brown, who between them fulfilled the duties of butler, housekeeper, and cook. The footman was John, who apparently normally served as a groom. Brown and Mrs. Brown had their own house in the village, but John lived above the stables.

Molly had emerged from the coach and stood quietly off to one side. When he saw her,

Alaric tipped his head slightly to one side, like a puzzled bird. "Molly, isn't it? From the village?"

"Aye, m'lord," she said with a curtsy.

"We took Molly in after some trouble on the road," Anne began, but Edward interrupted.

"Bandits, sir!" he raged. "And a tollgate manned by villains. First, the knights at the gate dared lay hands on these ladies, and then a thief robbed us! The dowry was stolen. If this is the way things are commonly run in the barony, then I am sorely disappointed."

"I understand your distress," Alaric said gravely. His smile had vanished, and his blue eyes seemed to darken. "I fear that the knights report directly to Minister Gammon. I have no authority to punish or discharge them, although I shall of course write a strong letter of protest to the Minister immediately. As for the thief, I accept responsibility. Greymuir is a large place, I fear, and mostly empty land, so it is difficult to catch such rascallions. I trust no one was hurt?"

He looked at Anne when he asked the last, and she shook her head. "No. We are all unscathed, save for Molly's dress." The torn bodice had been hastily repaired last night and showed a line of haphazard stitches up the front.

"Then she will be compensated," Alaric said, but Molly shook her head violently.

"Nay, m'lord, there's no need. The ... the highwayman was Nocturne."

"Ah." Alaric's face fell. "I fear that his depredations have been a plague on this barony for some time. The knights have done their best to catch him, of course, but no one has been able to do so yet. However, even though he may not have robbed Molly here, she should still be compensated for her trouble."

Sudden inspiration struck Anne at his words. Since it seemed that Alaric had no intention of calling off the wedding over the lost dowry--or believed that the crown wouldn't allow him to do so--she would need a lady's maid. *And it would be good to have a familiar face nearby.*

"I have need of a lady's maid," she said. "Molly, would you be so good as to accept the position? It would keep you from having to walk so far to the market just to sell eggs."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Anne realized her mistake. *I'm no one here.* At court, she'd had a powerful patron, and as much money as she needed. Once they were married, however, she would have only what Alaric chose to dole out to her. Given the state of the manor, she wasn't certain that they would be able to afford another servant, even if he wanted to give her one.

But Alaric only smiled. "How does that sound, Molly? You still live with your parents, don't you? Brown and Mrs. Brown could escort you home at nights."

Molly's eyes widened, and she curtsied so enthusiastically Anne worried she would injure herself. "Aye! Oh, thank you, m'lady, m'lord!"

"Well, then, your first duty will be to take your mistress' things to her room. Mrs. Brown will show you the way," Alaric said. As Molly scurried away, he turned to Anne, and for the first time uncertainty showed on his face. "John will go and inform Father Remy that you have arrived. He is of the Nichtbron sect--I hope that won't be a problem. I fear that Father Remy is the only priest near enough to call upon to perform the ceremony."

Anne shook her head automatically. At court, everyone was Hainobrian, because that was the sect the royal family adhered to. In truth, it meant little to her.

"Excellent. Gerard, if I might impose upon you, would you attend to Sir Edward for a few moments?" Alaric's blue eyes shifted to Anne's face, studying her thoughtfully. "I know it isn't customary, my lady, but I would like to have a few minutes of your time to speak privately before the ceremony."

Startled, she could only nod her acceptance. With a slight bow, Alaric offered her his arm. The worn velvet of his coat was warm under her fingers, and the muscles beneath felt surprisingly hard. He led her up the stairway, through the heavy door, and into her new home.

The interior matched the inhabitants: genteel, but a bit shabby. Although Anne could easily tell that the place had once been truly grand, darker spots on the wall panels showed where decorations had been removed, perhaps to sell. At least the furniture was clean and serviceable, if patched. The faint smell of dust and smoke permeated the halls, underlain by cedar and lavender. "Mrs. Brown will give you the full tour tomorrow," Alaric said as they walked through a series of halls. The carpet runners had faded with time and showed the wear of generations of feet. "Since it is--was--only my brother and I, we have closed down most of the south wing. You may have any rooms opened that you wish, of course."

They paused before a heavy door, banded in iron and bearing a bulky lock that looked as if it had rusted shut long ago. "The north wing is through this entrance," he said. "I fear that the fire that claimed my father's life left nothing but a gutted shell behind, and what little remains is dreadfully unstable. For your own safety, please do not venture past the door."

"Of course not." *As if anyone would wish to poke about in ashes and dust.*

"Excellent." He led her further down the corridor, then opened a tall, wide door and ushered her through.

A gasp escaped her when she saw what lay on the other side. The room was the largest she had yet seen in the house, its ceiling open all the way to the roof. Three of the walls were lined with books, while the fourth was supplied with wide, glass-paned doors that opened onto a patio. The smell of dust and old paper filled the air, and she tried to sneak a glimpse at a few of the titles, wondering if she would be allowed to touch them.

Alaric chuckled, and she realized that he had seen what she was up to. "This library is my favorite room in the house," he admitted, and she remembered what Molly had said about him being bookish. "Please, feel free to read whatever takes your fancy."

"Thank you, my lord." At least she wouldn't have to worry about running afoul of his temper simply because she preferred reading over hunting.

A number of comfortable chairs stood scattered about. He drew two close and gestured for her to sit. Once she did so, he sank down across from her, leaning over to fix her with an earnest look.

"I wished to speak with you before the ceremony, so that you could approach it with whatever peace of mind you might gather," he said with a lopsided smile. "I fear that today has been a bit of shock to you, has it not?"

Anne started to lie and then paused. At court, appearing anything less than pleased about every turn of events was an invitation to social disaster. Lies were the oil that kept the wheels of power turning smoothly. Even with Robert, she had hesitated to speak her mind, knowing that he would become annoyed if she admitted to being upset or unhappy. But if her husband-to-be was truly inviting honesty, it seemed wrong to begin their life together with a falsehood.

"Yes, my lord," she said cautiously. "I was told that King Matthew had given quite a bit of largesse to your father."

Alaric's wide mouth tightened slightly. "Indeed he did. But when my father died, he left us as you see."

"I did not mean to give offense or seem displeased...."

"No, you concealed it well." The smile returned, although only briefly. "Your cousin, however, is not so skilled an actor."

“He was greatly disappointed.”

“And you?”

Anne hesitated, uncertain how to answer. Telling him that she couldn't be disappointed because she expected nothing from this marriage, because the only man she had ever loved had already cast her aside for another ... well, it was hardly the thing to confess to a man on his wedding day.

“Forgive me,” Alaric said quietly, before she could formulate any response. “I should not have asked that. I can well guess how you are feeling.”

“Can you, my lord?” she asked and was surprised at the bitterness in her voice.

He paused, and she felt him studying her. For her part, she stared down at her hands, aching aware that the rings her love had given her were now in the possession of a brigand. *If he hasn't already sold them or melted them down.*

“Perhaps not,” Alaric said at last. “Neither of us asked for this marriage, my lady. A set of rooms has been prepared for you, and I shall not trouble you in them. Gerard has been my heir for a long time, and will continue to be so, even if he is less than enthusiastic about the position. He seems to feel that running the barony would interfere with his own career as a doctor.”

*So that's why he didn't seem worried about any potential offspring,* Anne thought, but without rancor. “I appreciate your consideration, my lord,” she said. At least she wouldn't spend the ceremony dreading the bed waiting at the end of it. She remembered what the knight had called her--the King's Whore--and was glad that Alaric, at least, would not treat her as one.

*The King's Whore--no doubt he wasn't lying when he said he didn't seek out this marriage.*

“For my part, I will not trouble you over any accommodations you might have,” she added. *So if your mistress was dreading the arrival of a wife, you can set her mind at ease as well.*

“Thank you, my lady,” he said. “Might I ask a single question of a personal nature?”

Anne glanced at him warily but could hardly refuse. “Yes.”

“Were there any children?”

It hurt, although she had thought it a pain long gone. The only way she had disappointed her family was by failing to produce a royal bastard, whose marriage prospects would have been excellent when the child came of age. Every noble house wanted blood ties to the crown, and marrying the king's illegitimate offspring was the easiest way to get them. “No, my lord. No children.”

He simply nodded, then rose from his seat in a single, lithe motion. “Well, then. Shall I escort you to your rooms so that you may prepare?”

## Chapter Three

The old priest stood at one end of the entry hall, which had been decorated for the ceremony with candles and a few brightly colored ribbons. He dressed in a simple brown robe tied with a rough rope belt with sandals on his feet. The lid of his right eye drooped oddly, and Anne wondered if he had suffered some sort of affliction, and if he could see at all out of the eye.

Alaric had changed into a rusty black coat for the ceremony. The cut emphasized his height and made him look more like a heron than ever. His voice was calm when he recited his vows--not joyful, but not openly unhappy, either. As for Anne, she had heard horror stories of weddings where the bride burst into tears in the middle and was glad that she was able to comport herself better. Of course, if Alaric had proved to be a brute, she might have easily been one of those weeping ladies.

The dinner after was probably elaborate by Greymuir standards, with three courses plus dessert. At court, she reflected wryly as she ate roast peasant rubbed with herbs, anything less than seven courses barely qualified as a meal. At least she would have less trouble maintaining her figure now.

Edward made a number of toasts and was soon far into his cups. Alaric and Gerard had both sipped their wine only sparingly, Anne noted, and remembered Molly's tale of their drunken father. Perhaps they had learned from his poor example.

Conversation turned to the latest war, with Edward holding forth loudly on his opinion of all foreigners. Alaric and Gerard gave murmured replies, their faces carefully neutral. At last, Father Remy rose to take his leave. As Gerard moved to escort him, the father said, "Will I be seeing you tomorrow as usual, Alaric? You are allowed to have one day off, you know, especially after your wedding."

Anne felt herself flush slightly. But Alaric only gave Remy a tired smile. "I'll be there, Father."

Edward frowned at the door after the priest had left. "What was that about?"

"Gerard, John, and I take a cart of food each week to the temple to help feed the indigent," Alaric explained.

Edward peered at him through an alcohol-induced haze, and then snorted. "Well, no wonder you don't have any money, giving food away to bleeding lazy thieves!"

Anne saw Alaric stiffen. They were seated side by side, and she could feel the tension in him even through the air. His mouth had flattened, his eyes darkened, and she wondered if he would say something, or if he would hold his tongue for her sake.

"It's an act of kindness," she said quietly.

The tension diffused, transmuted into surprise as if by chymistry. The corner of Alaric's mouth twitched up slightly. "Thank you, my lady wife. Will you come with us, then?"

She didn't want to. Bumping along in a cart, handing out food to a bunch of grubby wanderers, no matter how pitiable ... that was the sort of thing people like Brother Remy were for, wasn't it? "Perhaps next time," she temporized, "I'm tired from the journey."

"Of course. Forgive me." But she somehow felt as if Alaric was disappointed, as if she had failed some test.

*I defended you, she thought irritably. Even though Edward had a good point--if the food is extra from the estate, we could sell it and fix up the manor.*

Talk turned to other things, and at last Edward staggered off to bed. Anne rose, feeling suddenly nervous. What if Alaric had changed his mind about forgoing his marital rights? "I'm going to retire for the night, my lord husband."

"Of course." He waved a negligent hand, but it seemed his thoughts were far away. "I often stay up late. Please, do not let my insomnia trouble you."

She nodded, grateful, and started for the door. But before she reached it, she remembered a question she had wanted to ask earlier. "Father Remy--what happened to his eye?"

That seemed to draw back Alaric's attention. He looked at her solemnly, down the length of the great table, which could have seated ten times their small party. "As I said before, he is a Nichtbron. Clergy of the order forswear all earthly possessions and devote themselves to good works. In particular, they help the poor and sickly." He paused a moment, transferring his gaze to the mostly-full wine glass in front of him. "That makes some people very angry, my lady. I do not know if they see selfless souls such as Father Remy and secretly feel their own consciences pricked, or if they believe that by foregoing material wealth themselves, the Nichtbron must wish everyone else to do the same. Perhaps it doesn't matter. The result is that the Nichtbron, who devote their entire lives to others, are among the most hated of all the orders.

"You must be wondering what this has to do with your question. It is simply that, for reasons of his own, my father came upon Remy one night many years ago and beat him so severely that he almost died. He lost the sight in the eye and much of the control over the eyelid. For a long time, he could not smile on that side, either."

Anne felt cold. If something such as that had happened to her, would she have ever felt like smiling again, with either side of her mouth? "And yet he is willing to come here?"

"Aye, my lady wife. Because Remy understands that I cannot choose the color of my hair, or my height, which is that of my father. But I can choose my actions, and those are not of him at all."

There was pain there, in those carefully chosen words, in the way Alaric failed to look at her. It made her wonder what the old baron had been like, and how it had passed that he had been such good friends with King Matthew if he had been such a monster. But she was a virtual stranger to her husband, and that seemed too private a question.

"Goodnight, my lord," she said instead and shut the door behind her.

\* \* \* \*

*Anne, Baroness Greymuir*

*Your letter was received the tenth of this month. Please allow me to offer some corrections to the content.*

*The so-called "incident" with the Knights of Virtue did not occur. Rather, the knights were slain while valiantly defending your party against a band of traitors and foreign agents led by the villain known only as "Nocturne." Although most of the rogues were brought to justice, "Nocturne" escaped and continues to plot mischief against our beloved kingdom.*

*Any further deviations from this account, either spoken aloud or committed to paper, will of course be viewed as treasonous, as they are nothing more than base lies promoted by those who wish to give aid to our enemies.*

*Sincerely,*

*Howard Gammon, Minister of War and Safety*

Anne sat silently in the library as night fell, the letter held loosely in her hand. Three weeks had passed since her wedding, and she had settled into her new home. At first, the days had been busy, as she learned the habits of the other occupants of the house and applied herself to arranging her suite of rooms to her liking. But as time had gone by, she had found herself increasingly bored.

The books had helped fill the gap somewhat. Alaric had been better than his word, and indeed they had settled into a ritual where they spent the hours between dinner and bed sitting together in the library, reading in a silence that had become comfortable.

That was her only diversion, however. The days at court had been spent attending parties, or hunting and hawking with the king, or with the preparations of her person and dress that would most please Robert. Here ... there was none of that.

And so she had been excited when a messenger came to deliver a letter from the capitol. For a moment, her heart had even believed that it might be a note from Robert, telling her that he had changed his mind, that he still loved her. Or even just that he thought of her from time to time....

She had not expected this.

*"You are either ignorant or evil,"* said Nocturne's gravelly voice from her memories.

And: *"Their conduct is well known and understood in high circles."*

Her hands slowly clenched, crumpling the letter. *He cannot be right. A thief--a brigand--he can't be right.*

And yet it seemed that he was.

The sound of the knocker banging on the front door echoed through the house. All of the servants had left for their own homes already, and John, who lived above the stables, had the night off. Grateful for the distraction of a visitor, Anne tucked the letter into her reticule and hurried to answer the door.

Gerard was already there when she arrived, talking to a flustered-looking man. "It's my Lizzy," the man was saying. He held a plain cap in his hands and twisted it violently in his agitation. "She's got a fever, m'lord, a terrible fever, and I'm afeared for her life, I am. She's all I've got left in this world, after her mum passed on."

Gerard gave the man an encouraging smile and patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Will. Just let me get a few things, and I'll be right with you."

"I don't have a cart--I had to walk."

"We'll take our phaeton, Will. Just let me get my things."

The distraught man nodded, pathetically grateful, and Gerard turned away, noticing Anne. "Oh, Anne! I didn't know you were here."

"I heard the knock," Anne explained. "Is everything all right?"

"A patient in need," Gerard said. His chubby face had taken on a grave expression now that he was away from Will. "One of our tenant farmers. I'll be back quite late, I'm afraid. Will you be all right alone?"

The news that they were the only two in the house came as a surprise to her. "Where is Alaric?" she asked automatically, then wished she hadn't. She had promised him on the first day that she wouldn't interfere with any accommodations he might have with a mistress. "No--never mind. I take it that he's out." Sudden inspiration struck. Here was her way of getting free of the manor, at least for a little while. "I'll go with you and keep you company on the trip back."

Gerard hesitated. "It's a long ride, and the night is chill," he said slowly.

"But you seemed concerned about me staying here alone. This way, I'll be safe with you. And if you need any assistance tending the patient, I can help you." She glanced at the man in the doorway and lowered her voice. "Will seems too upset to be of much help in that area."

Gerard's affable face took on an expression of sorrow. "Indeed. Elizabeth is his only child--two others were lost before they were a year old, and another carried the mother into death with it. Very well, Anne. But I warn you, a sickbed is sometimes an unpleasant place to be."

She swallowed hard at the thought but raised her chin slightly. "I will do what is required."

"All right, then." The customary broad smile found its way back to his round face, and he hurried off to find his medical kit.

Within a short span of time, they were bumping along down the road. Night had fallen, and the full moon rode high, peeking out of the occasional raft of clouds. The horses were less than pleased at having to go out in the dark, but Gerard and Will had managed to get them into harness, and now they pulled the phaeton behind them at a good clip. Anne huddled in a blanket; the wind was cold in the unprotected carriage, and she wished that she had thought to put on a heavier dress before they left.

The cottage sat in the midst of rye fields, and even in the moonlight Anne could see that the green shoots were growing well. But although the fields looked prosperous, the cottage seemed to have the tumbledown air of everything else in Greymuir. The walls had been inexpertly patched, and the thatching of the roof sagged in places. A scrawny-looking dog barked desultorily, and then put its head back down on its paws.

Inside the small cottage, the air was still and heavy, and the faint smell of vomit made Anne's stomach turn. The girl lay in a bed in the main room, near to the fire, her body tiny and frail against the covers. The labored sound of her breathing filled the air, thick and wet with congestion. Gerard went to her immediately, speaking to her in a gentle, teasing voice that called up the ghost of a smile.

"Will she be all right?" Will asked from the doorway, seeming afraid to come further inside, as if he might disturb some magic.

"Allow me to finish my examination," Gerard said calmly. He put his hand to the girl's forehead and then pressed a finger to her wrist while checking his pocket watch. "Anne, would you be so good as to help Will boil some water for an infusion?"

Anne took that as a veiled request to keep Will occupied and out of Gerard's way. "Of course," she said. "Show me the kitchen, Will."

The kitchen was a small cramped room off the main chamber. Seeming in a daze, Will found a kettle and put it on, stoking the fire with such haphazard jabs of the poker that a chunk of smoldering peat fell out onto the floor.

When the kettle began to whistle, Anne took it, fearful that Will might spill the boiling water on himself. As she approached the sickbed, Gerard straightened, casually slipping something into his pocket. "Excellent, Anne. Thank you." He poured the water into a bowl and began to rummage in his bag for whatever he meant to steep in it. "Would you be so kind as to make some tea for us all? I think it will help steady Will's nerves and will chase out the cold in my bones, at least."

*He doesn't want me to see what he's doing,* she thought, surprised. She had never been under the impression that doctors were particularly secretive about their arts--the ones at court had not been, at least.



“Very well,” she said, trying not to let on that she knew the truth of his request. As she went back into the kitchen, she heard a faint hissing sound, followed by a splash, as if something had been dropped into the bowl. A moment later, a wild, clean smell filled the air.

Will immediately brought out the tea tin at her request. Only a few old leaves remained at the bottom, and she wondered if something had caused a delayed shipment, or if worry for his daughter’s illness had left the farmer too distracted to remember to buy any fresh. When the weak tea was done brewing, Anne carried a cup out to Gerard and then returned to the kitchen to sit with Will. He drank his cup almost without seeming to notice what he was doing, and Anne’s few attempts at distracting conversation fell flat. As they sat across the scarred table from one another in silence, she studied his frayed and patched clothing. Like everything else in Greymuir, this little farm and its inhabitants seemed to have fallen on hard times, and she wondered if some calamity had befallen the barony in the recent past.

Eventually, Gerard called them back out into the main room, where he sat by the bed, holding the girl’s hands. Her eyes were closed in sleep, and her breathing was even and regular, without the raspy sound it had evidenced earlier.

“I think she will recover,” Gerard said, and Will let out a sob of relief. The bowl by the bed was empty, but a stoppered bottle of dark glass had appeared from the depths of the bag, and Anne guessed it now held the infusion. “Give her a single spoonful of this tonic each hour until the bottle is empty. It is vitally important that you do so, understand?”

Will nodded mutely, and Gerard stood up and patted him on the shoulder. “We’ll be on our way, then. If Lizzy should get worse, send for me directly.”

Once they were outside again, Anne breathed deeply of the clean night air. “What herbs did you use in your tonic?” she asked as Gerard clucked his tongue and started the horses forward.

“Oh, a bit of this, a bit of that,” he said with a disarming smile. “The ailment was a common one, and the tonic usually works well against it.”

“I see.” Anne hesitated, wondering if she should broach the subject. “You didn’t mention payment.”

Gerard cast her a rueful smile. “What would they pay with, Anne?”

“I don’t understand why Will is so poor. The fields seem to do well.” She gestured at the moonlit shoots all around them.

“Indeed, they do. But most of the grain you see will be collected as taxes at the harvest. What little is left will barely be enough to keep Will and Lizzy fed.”

They rode in silence for a time after that. Past the fields, trees closed in around the lane, the only wood of any size in the entire barony. Clouds at last shrouded the moon completely, and soon the only light came from the lanterns swaying at the front of the phaeton. An owl crossed the lane in front of them, nothing more than a ghostly shadow gliding on silent wings.

Light showed suddenly through the trees, coming from a bend in the lane behind them. “Someone else is abroad late,” Anne remarked, peering in the direction of the flickering lamps.

Gerard stiffened. “Damnation,” he muttered, then cast her a swift glance of apology. “Forgive me, Anne.”

His reaction worried her far more than a simple curse. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There are very few innocent travelers abroad at night in these troubled times. The only ones who travel the dark roads with any regularity are the Knights of Virtue, or other agents of the crown.”

A part of her wanted to protest that any agents of the crown were employed for the

protection of the kingdom and that honest folk had nothing to fear. But the memory of the letter tucked into her reticule stilled her tongue. Instead, she said, "I wrote a letter to Minister Gammon after my experiences on the journey here. I don't think my account pleased him."

"I see." Gerard hesitated, glancing about the wood. "I want you to jump out of the carriage and hide."

"Jump out of the carriage?"

His mouth tightened. "Please, Anne. If they are looking for you ... even if they aren't, even if this has nothing to do with your letter, I fear that I would not be able to protect you. I would prefer if you hide and let them pass. I'll come back for you as soon as I may."

*This is insane.* Jumping out of a moving carriage, hiding in the dark woods like a frightened girl--what had her life come to?

"Quickly--they'll be in sight in moments!"

Silently uttering a curse of her own, Anne gathered up her skirts, flung open the door, and leapt out.

Fortunately, the phaeton had been moving at a sedate pace. Even so, she stumbled on the dusty road, tripped, and fell. Pain shot up her arm as a stone gashed her palm, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

As soon as she was clear, Gerard snapped the reins, urging the horses to a faster pace. Silently reflecting on how foolish she was going to feel if it turned out that they were being followed by nothing more sinister than a fish cart, Anne blindly stumbled into the trees. Branches scratched her cheeks and snarled her hair, and vines dragged at her feet. As soon as she judged herself to be well off the road, she stopped and waited.

She didn't wait long. Almost as soon as she had paused, she heard the jingle of a harness, saw the gleam of lanterns. A group of riders came up, and she saw the familiar symbol of the Order of Virtue on their cloaks.

"Hold up," one said, raising his lantern higher. "There are tracks here. Somebody went into the woods. A woman, by the size of them."

The blood froze in Anne's veins, and it was all she could do to hold still. Trying to flee would only make noise and get her caught faster. She had to rely on the dark and silence to conceal her.

One of the other knights snorted. "What are you saying, Crowley--that the King's Whore would run off into the woods? Mess up her pretty dress?"

*Listen to him, she willed the rest. I'm not here. Please, God, I'm not here.*

"The carriage is getting away," said a third. "Crowley, you and Jeffries check the woods. The rest of you, come with me."

The main bulk of the knights left in a thunder of hooves and rattle of harness. The remaining two dismounted, one holding up his lantern to scan the forest verge while Crowley went down on his knees to inspect her tracks more closely.

*No. Please, no. What am I going to do?*

Crowley rose again, still studying the ground. "Come on," he said and started into the woods. Only a few more feet, and they would spot her.

*I have to run. I have to.* But she felt frozen, rooted to the ground. There was no outrunning them, she knew, no way to defend herself....

A hand clamped down over her mouth from behind, too suddenly for her to get out a scream. "Don't move," murmured a familiar, gravelly voice in her ear.

*Nocturne.*

Her back was pressed against his chest, so she felt his movements as he groped for something at his belt. A moment later, he flung a small sphere away from them, toward the road. It flashed and glittered, unnaturally bright in the darkness.

“What was that?” Crowley demanded, spinning around.

“Damn me--it looks like gold! D’you think the whore dropped a bauble when she ran?”

Both knights left the wood to inspect the glittering sphere. But as they leaned over it, a puff of smoke suddenly exploded out from it, straight into their faces. They clutched their throats, gagging and coughing, then slowly slumped to the ground. Of the golden sphere, there was no remaining trace.

“They won’t be waking up anytime soon,” Nocturne said, letting go of her. Anne quickly stepped away from him. “Still, I wouldn’t advise walking up the road, in case the rest of them return.”

He took a tiny lantern from his belt and pulled back the shutter. Rather than the flickering light of oil, it put out a steady, red-tinged glow that seemed to come from no source she could see.

*More chymistry*, she thought, and felt a shiver walk up her back.

“M-my thanks,” she forced herself to say. “But I fear that you will be disappointed--you stole all the jewelry I had, along with my dowry, at our last encounter.”

The blank mask beneath the hat gave her no indication of his mood, but she thought she heard a whispery laugh. “Indeed. I suggest, my lady, that if you wish to berate me, you do so farther from the road. As I said, the other knights may return at any time. Follow me, if you wish.”

He started off with a swirl of cloak, as if it was nothing to him whether she followed or not. For a moment, she simply stared at his retreating back, wondering whether or not to trust him. He had now saved her twice, and robbed her once, and there was no knowing whether he had any darker intentions in luring her away.

*I’d trust his intentions over those of the knights.* Gathering her cumbersome skirts, she hurried after him.

By the time they reached the other side of the woods, her skirts were in tatters and brambles had scraped every exposed inch of skin. *I think he led me through every briar patch in the countryside*, she thought grumpily.

The soil here was thin over the bedrock, and the moon shone on exposed outcroppings. A ring of ancient dolmens stood mournfully atop a hill that was a little too regular to be of nature’s making. The wind blew in from the sea, carrying with it the scent of brine and seaweed. Near the dolmens stood a black horse, whose head swung around as they emerged from the trees. For a moment, Anne thought it was a natural beast, and then she saw the hellish red glow of its eyes.

“A daemon,” she gasped, stopping in her tracks.

“Indeed.” The rogue sounded almost pleased. He lifted his hand, and the creature ambled over. As it drew closer, she realized that the horse was made not from flesh but of metal. “I created the shell out of brass, painted it with black enamel to make it a bit less conspicuous, and then conjured up an earth daemon to inhabit it. They aren’t as flashy as fire or air daemons, but they have a slow strength and are incredibly loyal when treated well.”

“So you admit to being a rogue chymist as well as a thief,” she said, feeling vaguely surprised that he should be so open about it.

“Should I be caught by agents of the crown, the charge of illegal chymistry will be the least of my worries,” he said dryly. “Now, my lady, perhaps you would like to tell me why the

knights were looking for you?"

Anne hesitated, watching him carefully. The blank mask gave her no clue to his thoughts. Indeed, had she not seen the faint reflection from the lantern he carried, she would have thought that there was nothing but a void beneath his hat. "After our last encounter, I wrote a letter," she said at last.

"Really? Allow me to guess--you wrote to your dear friend, Minister Gammon, and told him that his knights had not paid you the proper respect."

For some reason, his words made her flush. "He is not my friend, dear or otherwise," she said icily. "I knew him only as Robert's--that is, as one of the king's advisors."

"I see. I suppose you were too busy securing what gold and jewels you could get from the king to cushion your life after your inevitable dismissal."

The words stung, the more so because it was hardly the first time the accusation had been leveled at her. "That's a filthy lie! I loved Robert!"

Her hands flew to her mouth, aghast. What was wrong with her, admitting such a thing to a stranger--and a brigand, no less? What did his opinion of her matter?

Nocturne stilled at her words, cocking his head slightly to one side. She thought that he was staring at her from behind his disguise, and the scrutiny made her feel as if she was no more to him than a bug.

"Then I pity you," he said at last. "In love with a foolish boy who has spent his entire life surrounded by those who tell him only what he wishes to hear so that no thought ever troubles his tiny brain."

Outrage filled her, and before she knew what she was doing, she stepped forward and slapped him. Her hand struck the metal mask, and pain shot through her wrist. "Lies--all of it lies!"

The memory of the first moment she had seen Robert came back to her, clear and acute as though it had been hours ago instead of months. She had only been at court for a few days and had come out to see the royal hunting party return from the game preserves outside the city. Robert had been mounted on a fiery steed, his golden hair gleaming in the sun, his handsome face alight with a boyish smile. Staring at him, at his good looks and muscular body, she had realized that he wasn't just a king--he was a hero.

Blinking against tears, she cradled her stinging hand. Nocturne had not so much as flinched at the blow. "King Robert is a great man," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I would not expect a villain such as yourself to understand."

"You are right, my lady." Mockery edged his gravelly voice. "I do not understand a man who spends all his time hunting, hawking, and bedding attractive, if naïve, women, while his kingdom suffers through one war after another. I do not understand a man who is content to hear only the lies his advisors tell him and never troubles himself to actually leave his sheltered existence and see for himself how his people fare. I do not understand a man who has declared war on no less than four separate nations, spilling the blood of thousands of his own people who fight bravely in his defense. I do not understand a man who cannot be troubled to look for a peaceful solution--or, at the least, to join them on the battlefield. You are quite correct. I cannot understand the ways of so great a man."

Anger tore through her. How dare he say such things? "You pretend to be so righteous, but you are nothing but a common brigand! Tell me, when you stole my necklace, a thing I cherished because it had been given to me as a token of love, did you use it to buy whiskey? To play cards? Or does it hang around the neck of some tavern doxy?"

"I am not in the habit of visiting doxies, in taverns or elsewhere. Had I realized that it held sentimental value for you, I would have left it."

She didn't believe him for a moment. "But how convenient for you that the money is already spent."

He hesitated and then shrugged as if he had come to some decision. "If you must know what became of your jewelry--and your dowry--then it has most likely been exchanged for food or materials to build shelter for the indigent. The Nichtbron order are not in the habit of questioning the provenance of donations, believing that God works in mysterious ways."

His words stole her anger. "You truly gave it all away?"

"Why shouldn't I? I am a simple thief, of simple needs." He bowed mockingly to her. "Of course, tonight's treasure is not so easily disposed of."

"I suppose not." She glanced uneasily around the deserted moor. "What are your plans for me? Will you hold me to extort ransom from my husband, since I have nothing of my own left for you to steal?"

Nocturne chuckled, and she had to resist the urge to slap him again. *Perhaps a good kick to the shins would be more successful, anyway.*

"Greymuir has little more money than his peasants," he said dismissively. "My plans for you were to simply return you to your own doorstep, as it seems that you are willfully ignorant rather than deliberately evil. But I have decided to strike a bargain with you instead. I will take you home, unharmed, if you give me your word to do me a single favor."

"I am not a whore, sir, even if they call me one," she said, drawing the tattered remains of her dignity around her.

Although she couldn't see his face, she sensed that she had caught him off his guard. "Oh no, my lady, not that sort of favor. I am no Knight of Virtue, after all. If I take you home, you will leave the manor and go among the people of Greymuir. You will look upon the faces of the most wretched and ask them for their stories. And you will listen, and you will pay attention to what you see."

It was a strange request. "And what else?" she asked, certain that there had to be more.

He paused, cocking his head to one side again, as if thinking deeply. "You will agree to meet with me again and tell me what--if anything--you have learned."

"Meet with you--a known brigand!"

"Those are my terms. If you do not accept them, I will leave you here to find your way back to the manor on your own. Or meet up with the knights, if that is your fate."

*Surely he wouldn't abandon me, after going to such trouble to rescue me.* But it occurred to her suddenly that she might in turn ask a favor of him.

*No, I can't. The man is an outlaw. I can't believe I'm even considering it.*

"I agree," she said at last. "On one condition."

"And that is?"

"I remember how well you fought at the tollgate. And tonight, it was clear you have other tricks as well. I'm not asking you to share those ... but I would like for you to show me how to defend myself."

"And why would you even ask for such a thing?"

Anne swallowed against the sudden memory of fear. "Because when the knights were coming for me tonight, I was helpless," she said quietly. "And because that same helplessness is forcing me to accept your bargain now. If I could do more, even if only wield a dagger, I would tell you to go to hell and take my chances."

Nocturne laughed at the irony. "I see. Very well, then, my lady, I accept."

The lack of argument made her suspicious. "Word of this will get to no one, do you understand? It would bring scandal on my husband, who is a kind man, and I will not tolerate that."

Nocturne gave her a mocking bow, his cloak sweeping about him like a living shadow. "You hardly have need to worry about that, seeing as how such talk would give me away to those who would see me hung. Indeed, the fact that I still live should assure you, my lady, that I am the very soul of discretion."

\* \* \* \*

He placed her on his horse that was no horse. At first, she felt some trepidation at drawing so close to the daemon, but it merely regarded her with an incurious eye. *What sort of intelligence does it have?* she wondered. *Did it understand our conversation? Does it know that its master has agreed to help me?*

Nocturne mounted behind her, the motion full of practiced grace. His cloak swirled and then settled around them both. His thighs pressed against her, lean and firm, and she felt her cheeks heat. No doubt he would have laughed had he been able to see that--the King's Whore, blushing at the nearness of a man.

Robert would no doubt have taken the opportunity to feel her breasts, but the outlaw merely reached past her to take up the reins. "Hold on," he advised, and she clung to the saddle horn as the mechanical horse surged into motion.

The daemon's gait was similar to that of a living animal but smoother and far faster. In a shorter time than she would have thought possible, the darkened bulk of the manor appeared on the horizon. As the daemon slowed, Anne scanned the windows with growing concern. "I don't see any lights. Gerard hasn't returned yet."

Nocturne said nothing, but she thought his hand tightened on the rein. They came to a halt near one of the dolmens that littered the landscape, this one nothing more than a ruin, the stones scattered haphazardly by the elements and time. "Forgive me for not taking you to your door," he said, mockery again edging his voice.

She slid down and stood looking up at him. As before, the blankness below his hat told her nothing. "Thank you. For everything."

He touched the brim of his hat. "Don't forget our bargain. I'll let you know when and where to meet me."

Without another word, he flicked the reins in his gloved hand. The daemon snorted, and Anne caught a whiff of hot brass. Then it was galloping off, at an angle to the road, moving faster than any living horse could dream of running. Within moments, daemon and rider had vanished from sight.

Not knowing what else to do, Anne went inside the manor and lit the lamps in the entryway. Gerard was out there somewhere, perhaps looking for her, perhaps hurt, perhaps ... but no, she would not consider that. Silently praying that Nocturne might be motivated to help Gerard as well, she dragged a chair into the hall and sat down to wait.

\* \* \* \*

In the gray hour before dawn, Anne was awakened by the opening of the door. The light fell over Gerard's battered and bruised face, and her heart almost stuttered to a stop. He was supported by a taller man, and for a moment she thought that Nocturne had indeed gone to find her brother-in-law, until she realized that it was Alaric who held him.

"Gerard," she said, starting towards them. The feeling of helplessness was back, and she

hated it more than ever.

Gerard blinked swollen eyes. "Anne. I'm glad to see you're all right," he managed to say, even though his lower lip was split and blood crusted his chin.

"Tea and brandy, if you please, wife," Alaric said. He was supporting most of Gerard's weight, and his face was drawn and pale with worry. "I'll get him to the divan in the sitting room."

Anne went to the kitchen, knowing that Mrs. Brown would never approve of the intrusion on her domain, and searched for the requested items. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Gerard's battered face again and wondered what the rest of him looked like.

*They beat him. Poor, amiable Gerard, who wouldn't hurt a fly. They beat him because of me.*

Her hands were shaking with suppressed rage by the time she carried the tea service into the sitting room. Gerard lay swathed in blankets near the fire. Alaric sat by him, gently washing the blood from his face. When she entered, her husband glanced up and flashed her a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"Of course." She set down the tray and turned to look down on the brothers. "The knights did this, didn't they?"

Gerard tried to smile, but it clearly hurt his mouth. "I'm fine. Just a few bruises."

"They attacked you!"

"Did they say why?" Alaric asked.

There came a space of silence. Then Anne answered, since it seemed Gerard wasn't going to. "This was meant as a warning to me, wasn't it? I got a response to the letter I sent Minister Gammon." At Alaric's questioning look, she dug it out of her reticule and handed it to him. He read it in silence and then sighed, his shoulders slumping.

"This is my fault," Anne said unhappily. "Gerard, I'm so sorry."

"Nonsense. I'm just glad that you're all right."

"How did you escape?" Alaric asked. He had been staring morosely into the fire, but the gaze he turned on her now was keen.

For a moment, she hesitated. She didn't want to lie to him, not when he had shown her nothing but kindness. But giving away Nocturne ... the letter from Gammon was enough to convince her that the bandit would be made into a scapegoat for whatever mischief the knights wished.

"I hid in the woods," she said, looking at the edge of one of the blankets instead of at her husband. "They missed me in the dark. When I was certain they were gone, I headed off through the wood and came out on the moor. From there, it was a simple walk back."

"You were very lucky, then," Alaric said gravely.

"Yes. I was."

He stirred slightly and glanced at Gerard. "I'll tend my brother, if you wish to sleep. You've had a long night."

Anne wondered if he felt guilty over having been away, in the arms of his mistress, when his brother was being threatened and beaten. "This was not your fault, my lord," she said, hoping that she didn't tread too close to the edge of their mutual agreement.

He looked at her swiftly, as if he expected to see some revelation on her face. Whatever he had thought to see, his expression relaxed after a moment, and he smiled wanly. "Nor yours."

She nodded, although she wasn't certain she believed it, and gave them both a low curtsy, before leaving them for what little remained of the night.

## Chapter Four

After only an hour or two of sleep, Molly knocked on Anne's door, waking her to dress for the day. "I heard what happened from Lord Gerard, m'lady," she blurted as soon as Anne admitted her. "Are you all right?"

"Quite all right. How is Gerard this morning?"

Molly shook her head as she set about combing out Anne's long hair. "Looks like he was run over by a herd of cattle, m'lady, all purple and bruised up. But says he'll be fine, that nothing's broken, only cracked."

Anne sighed. That did sound like Gerard.

"He's just disappointed that he won't be able to go help out at the temple as he usually does," Molly went on. "Although I dare say Lord Alaric's able enough to load and unload the cart, they could use the extra hands for distributing the goods."

*It seems that I may have an opportunity to make good on my promise to Nocturne sooner than I thought.* "I see. Molly, will you be so good as to run and tell Lord Alaric that I will take his brother's place today?"

\* \* \* \*

Anne waited silently by an ancient, dolmen-crowned barrow near the ocean cliffs. The wind was cold, even though spring was far advanced, and she pulled her dark cloak more closely about her. Earlier that day, she had received a letter that appeared to be from Edward, only to discover on opening it that it was in fact a note from Nocturne. The outlaw had instructed her to meet him here at midnight.

As soon as she was certain that Alaric and Gerard were asleep, she had put on her most nondescript dress and slipped out. Although the thought of wandering alone across the moor had frightened her, she had forced herself to continue past the gates and into the desolation that lay between the manor and the sea. Every shadow had taken on the likeness of a lurking knight, or some other less defined terror. And yet she had persevered, until she found herself here.

*And Nocturne? Where is he?* If he failed to make their appointment, she would be furious.

Just as she began to think that he wasn't going to appear, she caught sight of movement on the horizon. The swiftness of the steed assured her that it was the daemon long before it was close enough to see the glow of its hellish eyes. As it drew up, Nocturne stared down at her from the saddle.

"You came alone," he said.

"Wasn't I meant to?" she snapped, irked by the greeting.

"I can hardly be too trusting, now can I? You would hardly be the first lovely woman to be used as bait in a trap."

She folded her arms over her chest, annoyed that he seemed to think her so dishonorable. "Well, I'm here. Although I wouldn't have come, if I had known you would spend the time insulting me."

"By calling you lovely? Do forgive me." He leapt down from the horse and gave her a deep bow, flourishing his cape as he did so. "Did you do as I asked?"



Anne swallowed against the thickness in her throat that memory invoked. "I ... I did. Last week, after you saved me ... I went to Father Remy's mission with my husband to feed the indigent."

"And?"

"I ... I didn't think there would be so many children." She turned away from him, closing her eyes against the memory of huge, hungry eyes.

"Indeed. And did you ask them how they had come to such straits?"

"Some of them had fathers who had been killed in the wars."

"I see. And this is how your beloved Robert and his ilk repay the dead, by letting their widows and children be turned out onto the streets." She heard the soft swish of cloth as he drew nearer. The faint scent of sandalwood soap came to her unexpectedly, and she almost laughed at the incongruous normality of it. No doubt even outlaws bathed on occasion. "And the others?"

"Some of them were hurting because of the taxes. But the taxes are necessary for the wars. The soldiers have to be fed."

He sighed, and she heard him move away again. "The soldiers are only an excuse, my lady. The poorest grain is doled out to them in meager portions, while the best part of the harvest is sold off to enrich the pockets of those ministers charged with overseeing the distribution."

"How can I believe what you say is true?"

"That is a question. Why don't you write the ministers and ask?"

She smiled bitterly at the humor. "Indeed. Very well, sir, I have kept my part of the bargain. Now it is time for you to keep yours."

"Indeed. And fortunately for you, I am an honorable thief."

She turned back to see him unhook a scabbard from the saddle of the daemon horse. "This should be light enough for you," he said and presented the hilt to her. Cautiously, she set her hand on the hilt and drew the saber. It's edge was blunt, though, and a cap covered the tip.

"You promised!" she exclaimed, wondering if it would hurt if she battered him about the head with it.

"And I am keeping my promise. Surely you don't expect to begin with live steel, do you? The goal is to teach you to defend yourself, not to kill you, or have you kill yourself through clumsiness."

His tone stung, and she straightened. "I am not clumsy."

"Well, then, here is your chance to prove it," he said. Somehow, she suspected that he was smiling behind the mask.

\* \* \* \*

An hour before dawn, Anne dragged herself tiredly into bed. *I hate him*, she thought, wincing as a muscle in her arm cramped. Nocturne had proved to be a brutal taskmaster, driving her far beyond her limits, demanding perfection in each step before she was allowed to continue to the next.

"*You're terrible*," he had said dispassionately when he finally called a halt to the torment. "*But someday soon you'll be good, or at least competent.*"

*Bastard.*

They had arranged a new system as well. He would leave a note beneath the fallen dolmen behind the manor the next time he was ready to see her. She would have to check daily or risk missing him. And he had been absolutely clear that, should she miss a single appointment, there would be no more.

*Twice bastard. Maybe I should have turned him over to the knights instead.* She winced

as she found yet another bruise. It was indeed fortunate that Alaric wasn't sharing her bed--at least she didn't have to worry about inventing any excuses as to why she looked as if she had been beaten.

*Robert would have been horrified to see a bruise, she realized, in the muzzy state that comes before sleep. Everything had to be perfect for him. Perfect and happy. No sadness. What would he say if he could have seen those children at the mission? Could I have made him see?*

*It was the fault of the ministers--that was all. They kept him ignorant, told him lies. And he believes them, because it means he can go back to hunting and doesn't have to think about anything.*

God, was that true? Was he hiding from the truth, deliberately refusing to look at the real conditions away from court as Nocturne insisted?

*But Nocturne doesn't know what it's like in the palace.* The court was a world unto itself, a fantasy populated by vipers. It was so easy to be caught up in all the petty little games, to think that the course of the world depended on being invited to the right parties.

*Tell that to the orphans.*

Damn Nocturne.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon, Alaric came to her while she sat in the library. The tall windows were open, and a warm breeze blew through. Outside, the gray-brown moors were slowly blushing green, and the song of birds fluted from every stunted bush. Gerard had made himself comfortable on the patio outside, immersed in a book that looked to be an herbarium from the drawings she had glimpsed when checking on him. The bruises on his face had faded from purple to livid green and yellow, and some of the stiffness had gone from his movements, although he still had trouble climbing stairs.

Anne had been fighting to stay awake all afternoon. Molly had come in shortly after dawn, not knowing that her mistress had snatched an hour or two of sleep at the most. It had been difficult to pretend alertness at the breakfast table, and Anne worried that too many late nights would eventually give her away.

Alaric's tall shadow snapped her out of a light doze. "Good afternoon, my wife," he said and bowed elegantly. "May I inquire whether you have any interest in riding?"

"Some," she said, recalling the endless hours that she had been required to ride along with one of Robert's hunting parties, listening to the death squeals of terrified beasts and pretending to admire the vicious hounds he adored.

"As it is the first warm day of the season, I thought to ride the grounds and see what needs put right after the winter storms. Your company would be welcome, if you wish it. Yours as well, Gerard," he added, glancing out onto the patio.

Gerard waved a hand. "I couldn't get up on a horse if my life depended on it, brother. Besides, I hate riding horseback, even when I'm not stiff as a stone. Why gallop about on top of the brute when we have a perfectly serviceable carriage?"

Alaric smiled. "Of course. Anne?"

At least a ride would serve to wake her up. "That would be wonderful, husband. Let me change into something more suitable."

\* \* \* \*

Less than an hour later, Anne directed her horse after Alaric as they left the house behind. The ladies' saddle she was using was old but well-cared for and had belonged to the late Baroness Greymuir, who had preceded her husband in death by several years.

As Alaric had promised, the day was glorious. Warm breezes teased the flowers awake, and the smell of damp earth and new growth hung heavy in the air. In the distance, cows lowed plaintively.

When they reached a boundary fence, made up of nothing more than piled rock with no mortar, they turned and rode side-by-side along it. Anne glanced over at her companion. The wind had teased his golden hair out of its tail, and strands blew wildly about his face. As if he felt the weight of her gaze on him, he turned towards her. Sunlight flashed off his spectacles, hiding his eyes.

"Are you content here, Anne?" he asked. "Do you wish that there was some way for you to return to the court?"

The question caught her off-guard. Since her arrival, they had carefully avoided speaking of her former life, and she wondered what had prompted him to pick today to broach the subject.

"There is no way for me to return, even if I wished it," she said quietly, ignoring his first question. "So I try not to think of it."

"I fear that you are terribly unhappy." He reined in and stared off across the landscape. "Greymuir is a harsh land at times, and strangers seldom find it beautiful. I wouldn't blame you if you spent every moment trying to think of some favor you could do, some service you might perform, that would open the door of this prison and let you go back to civilization."

*Ah, but there is a favor I could do,* she thought, stifling the urge to laugh. Her poor husband had no notion that his wife was meeting with a dangerous criminal. If she turned Nocturne over to the authorities, that would be enough to erase the mark against her name in the ministry records. It might even earn her a place in society again.

The mere idea of betraying Nocturne made her stomach turn sour. He might be a thief, but at least he was a principled one. *And if not for him, I might never have opened my eyes to the truth of things.*

"There would be no point," she said at last. Her previous conversation with Nocturne came back to her, and she wondered whether one confession made a second easier. "There is something I want you to know, husband. What I did was done for love. Not for material gain, or social climbing, or even out of hopes of a good marriage when my time was done. And ... now that I have been away from court for a while ... I begin to see things differently. I begin to wonder if my heart has been foolish."

The smile he gave her was tinged with sadness. "It is said that love makes fools even of the wisest of us. There is no crime in that."

A bit to her own surprise, she found herself smiling back at him. "Some would disagree. But thank you. I hold you in high regard, Alaric. You have been a friend to me during a time when I needed one badly."

"Then I am glad to have been of service." He bowed his head to her. "Shall we continue on our rounds?"

## Chapter Five

“Again! Don’t hold back!” Nocturne roared as Anne stumbled back. “Don’t back off every time I deflect your attack--do you think the knights are going to allow you to stop and consider your next move?”

Anne’s lips drew back in a silent snarl. Spring had given way to Greymuir’s version of summer, and the night was warm enough that sweat stuck her hair to her forehead. She swung at him again. As usual, he blocked her attack, but since she had been expecting this, she immediately came back with a counter.

“Good!” he shouted. “Keep that up! Give me no quarter!”

Thrust, parry, riposte. Then, she saw it--the thing she had been looking for, ever since he had begun to train her. An opening.

She sent her blade through his guard, her heart soaring with triumph. But he twisted violently to one side, swinging his cloak in between them. Her saber struck the cloth and was deflected as surely as if she had hit metal. A moment later, she felt the capped tip of his weapon against her throat.

“Excellent,” he said. After training with him for months now, she could pick up on the inflections in his voice and knew that he was smiling.

“You cheated,” she complained. “I would have had you if not for the cloak. What have you done to it?”

“Just a bit of chymistry,” he said, spreading it out for her to inspect. “The material is coated with a substance that makes it impervious to metal.”

“Which is why the bullets didn’t hit you, the night at the tollgate.”

“Precisely.” He gave her a bow, like an actor enjoying a compliment on his performance.

“And the mask is chymical, as well.”

“It would be rather difficult for me to breathe if it was not. Drink some water, and we shall rest for a moment.”

He unclipped a flask from the daemon’s saddle and passed it to her. She took a long pull on it, glad for the coolness of water against her parched throat. When she was done, he returned it to the saddle.

“You must need a drink, as well,” she said, gesturing to his clothing, which concealed every inch of his skin. “That costume of yours must be abominably hot.”

“Alas, despite the mask’s other virtues, it is not permeable to liquids.”

She scowled at him, wondering if he was simply being stubborn. “Be reasonable, Nocturne. Take the mask off and drink. It isn’t as if I’m going to recognize you.”

“Are you so sure? I could be ... hmm, I believe the baron has a footman, yes?”

“John?” Anne burst out laughing.

“Is it so impossible to believe?”

“Considering that it would take two of him to make one of you, then yes, it is.” She shook her head, still smiling. “And to answer your question, yes, I am sure. For one thing, you are clearly a man of means.”

“Am I?”

"You speak as an educated man. And I doubt the chymical components you used to make the cloak, mask, and daemon-horse were simply lying on the roadside for you to pick up. You would have had to buy them. Given that most everyone I have met in the barony are either of the peasantry or are Nichtbron brothers, it seems clear that you are unknown to me."

He bowed again. "Indeed, I cannot dispute your reasoning. On the other hand, if you were to see my face, you might later be able to pick me out among a number of suspects, should I be so unfortunate as to fall under suspicion."

It hurt. "Do you truly think I would betray you?" she asked quietly.

Sudden silence fell between them. Nocturne's head was turned towards her, and she stared at where she guessed his eyes to be, wishing that she could see them, if only to read what might be passing in their depths. Then he looked away, the movement betraying discomfort and possibly embarrassment as well.

"At first, I believed you a spy," he said at length. His gravelly voice was pitched low, so that she could barely hear him above the distant sounds of wind and wave. "Even though your actions at the tollgate seemed to argue otherwise, it still seemed impossible that the woman who had been the king's lover would be anything but the eyes and ears of the ministers. The first night you met me here, I expected a trap or an ambush."

"Then why did you come at all?"

"Because I hoped I was wrong." There was self-deprecation in the words, the hint of what might have been a rueful smile. "Forgive me, Annie, but I cannot reveal my face. This is a dangerous game I play, and I cannot afford to be too trusting. Not even when I wish that I could believe in you with all my heart."

For a moment, they stood in a frozen tableau, with only the slight movement of his cloak in the wind to break the illusion that they were both carved from stone. Anne was acutely aware of her heartbeat. If she laid her hand against his chest, would she feel his pulse in time with her own? Would his arms around her be gentle or rough?

*This is madness.* Somehow, she tore her gaze from him, forced herself to walk a few feet away. "I understand, sir," she said against the constriction in her throat. "You have done me a great favor by agreeing to teach me. My suggestion that you remove your mask was poor repayment for your kindness. I won't do it again."

He cleared his throat and straightened, as if shrugging off some thought. "See that you don't," he said, but she thought his harshness was an attempt to break the moment that had so unexpectedly caught them both. "*En garde.*"

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Anne was making her way to breakfast when the sound of voices in hushed argument stopped her. Her room was on the second floor, and she had been almost at the landing when the angry tone of the words gave her pause. Peering cautiously around the corner, she spotted Gerard and Alaric standing near the foot of the stairs in the hall below.

Gerard's face was creased with worry, all of his usual cheerful demeanor wiped away. "Have you lost your senses?" he hissed, reaching out to grab Alaric's arm. "You risk too much! Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love her!" Alaric snarled.

From her point of observation, Anne was unable to see Alaric's face. Gerard, however, stared at his brother in shock for a long moment. His hand loosened its hold on Alaric's coat. Alaric pulled roughly free and strode away, his boots sending echoes along the corridors.

Anne leaned back against the wall, staring blankly ahead of her. A portrait of some long-

dead baron gazed back, and with an odd feeling of detachment she noticed that it was in desperate need of cleaning.

*They were arguing about Alaric's mistress, she realized. But why? What risk was Gerard speaking of?*

The unknown woman might be pregnant. Was Alaric considering setting Anne aside and marrying his mistress to legitimize a child?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. There were a thousand other foolish things Alaric could do, and he would hardly be the first. But Gerard ... had sounded *afraid*. Angry, yes, but there had been real fear in his voice. What could Alaric have done that would frighten his brother so?

*"I love her."* Hadn't Alaric himself said that love made one do foolish things? And, whatever he might be doing, could she blame him, given the mistakes she had made for the sake of that emotion?

Gradually, she realized that she felt as if iron bands had tightened about her chest, making it hard to breathe, and that tears had gathered behind her eyes. Now that *was* foolish. She had suspected from the start that Alaric had a mistress, and he had never pretended to have any interest in her as a woman. Why should it trouble her now to hear that he was in love? Truthfully, she ought to be glad that he was, for it spoke better about his character. At least he wasn't treating his mistress as a thing that could be disposed of when he grew tired of her.

*Perhaps I'm jealous because Robert never had such feelings for me. Perhaps I'm just envious that this other woman has the heart of her lover, when I never managed such a thing. That must be it.*

But the reasoning sounded hollow, even to her.

\* \* \* \*

*Dear Anne,*

*I have wonderful news! It seems that I will be able to see in person how married life has suited you. You may have heard that King Robert is giving a few of the Royal Jewels, including the ruby scepter that was owned by his grandfather, to the Glorious Temple in Fishire, which neighbors your own lovely barony. I asked if I might accompany the caravan as far as Greymuir and have received permission to do so. I expect to see you late in the evening on the 13<sup>th</sup>.*

*Your loving cousin,  
Edward*

\* \* \* \*

Satisfied that Molly was well on her way to setting one of the unused rooms to rights so that Edward would have somewhere to sleep, Anne hurried downstairs. Mrs. Brown would be in the kitchen, preparing a special dinner to greet their guest, and she wanted to make a last check and make certain that nothing was lacking. She knew that Edward had some misgivings when he had left after the wedding, and she wanted to show him that she had adapted to life in Greymuir and that he need not worry for her.

As she crossed the entry hall, she was startled to see Alaric standing by the door, pulling on his cloak. "Is something amiss?" she asked, pausing.

He hesitated, and she thought she saw a flash of guilt on his face. "I'm sorry, Anne. But I have urgent business elsewhere tonight. Please, give my regards to your cousin."

Humiliation poured through her veins, mixing with shock. The fact that he had been vague as to the nature of his business suggested that he was going to visit his mistress. Up until

now, he had always been discreet. She couldn't believe that he would shame her like this. *At least when I was a mistress, there was no wife to shame. At least I never asked Robert to abandon his other duties to cater to my needs.*

"And what am I to tell Edward when he inquires as to your whereabouts?" she asked frostily.

Her tone brought him up short, and for a moment he met her steady gaze. There was desperation in his blue eyes behind their protective lenses. Then he looked away and opened the door. "Tell him whatever you wish," he said shortly and shut the door behind him.

Anne's hands clenched, and she imagined finding a saber and showing him just what she could now do with it. *How could he do this to me?*

The question was all-too-familiar. It had been the same that she had asked when Robert had left her.

*Men. I hate them all.* Robert, Alaric, Nocturne--all men that she had trusted, only to be rewarded with less regard than they would have given a dog.

Her blood boiling, she stalked down the hall to the library, where Gerard sat reading by the window. "As your brother cannot be bothered to greet my relations, you will be the host tonight," she informed him coldly.

Gerard's head snapped up. "Alaric's gone out? Where?"

"He didn't say. Hopefully, to straight to hell," she retorted and stormed out of the room. But as she made her way toward the kitchen, she realized that, although Gerard had been shocked and unhappy, there had been another emotion on his face as well.

Fear.

\* \* \* \*

"A shame your husband couldn't join us tonight," Edward said, deftly pulling the leg from a stuffed pheasant.

"Indeed," Anne agreed neutrally, making certain that her face remained a pleasant mask. Gerard seemed to be making the same effort, and between them she thought that Edward might not realize anything was amiss.

*Although it would serve Alaric right if I told Edward the truth.* It wasn't her rude husband that she was protecting, though, but rather Edward himself. Letting him worry about her, when he could do nothing to alter her circumstances, would be cruel.

"How long will you be staying, Edward?" Gerard asked. "Perhaps Alaric's business will be concluded tomorrow, and he will return."

"Three days and then I must be off again," Edward said regretfully. "But it was worth the trip to see how Annie was doing. What did you say Alaric was about?"

"He was called away to judge a boundary dispute between two farmers of the barony," Gerard lied smoothly. Anne only just managed to avoid casting him a startled glance--she would never have guessed that affable, open Gerard would be able to spin falsehoods so glibly.

Edward frowned slightly. "And this couldn't wait until tomorrow morning?" he asked in a tone that suggested he was ready to take offense.

"Sadly, blood has already been shed over the matter. Alaric feared it might escalate to murder if something wasn't done immediately. He was very sorry to depart so abruptly."

Anne stabbed a bit of meat viciously, imagining that it belonged to Alaric's privates. Gerard must have noticed the gesture because he cleared his throat and immediately changed the topic of conversation.

After dinner, they retired to the drawing room for coffee. Shortly after that, Gerard

excused himself, leaving Anne and Edward alone.

"I trust your journey wasn't too unpleasant?" she asked her cousin, trying to find some topic that would take her mind off Alaric.

"Oh, indeed." Edward glanced around as if he suspected there were spies hiding behind the drapes and leaned forwards. "I have something to tell you--I'm sure it will delight you. But you must promise to repeat my words to no one."

Wondering what Edward could possibly know of a confidential nature, Anne nodded. "Of course."

"Well, then. I don't mean to cast aspersions on your husband, but there has been something of an outbreak of lawlessness in his barony, and he seems unable to stem it. I'm speaking of that villain Nocturne, of course."

Anne felt as if her heart had stumbled. "Nocturne? What has this to do with him?"

"The story has been put about that the King is sending some valuable gifts to the Fishire Temple, as I'm sure you're aware. But what you don't know, what I didn't know, until I joined the convoy, is that there are no gifts being made. The whole thing is an elaborate trap meant to catch this highwayman in the act!"

*No. God, no.*

Edward frowned. "You look pale, cousin. Do you need me to fetch you a glass of wine?"

"N-no. I'm fine," Anne managed to say around the cold lump that had lodged in her throat. "But ... Nocturne saved us from the knights at the tollgate, Edward. Surely that would be grounds for leniency...."

Now it was Edward's turn to blanch. "Th-that was all a misunderstanding, Anne. Those men weren't really knights--they were Nocturne's own henchmen, disguised as knights."

She stared at him, shocked to see sweat beading along his broad forehead. "Did Minister Gammon threaten you, Edward?"

"N-no. No, of course not." He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow nervously. "Just setting the story straight, that's all."

"Setting the story straight?" she exclaimed. "Edward, have you forgotten that I was there? I saw the actions of the knights and those of Nocturne. Whatever lies you have been ordered to tell, you can hardly expect them to work on me!"

Edward's color faded even further, making her worried that he might pass out. "Anne, please. There's nothing we can do about it. Causing a fuss will only bring trouble down on us and won't change the situation. Surely you don't intend to sacrifice everything you have built here in order to defend the name of some brigand."

The resolution that already lay half-formed in her heart crystallized at his words. *No. I intend to do far more than that.*

"Please excuse me, cousin," she said, rising to her feet. "I find that I am weary of this conversation. I think I shall find my bed."

Edward seemed relieved. "Yes, Anne, that would probably be for the best. We'll retire now, and never speak of this again."

He would be far less relieved if he knew what she had planned, she reflected grimly as she strode from the drawing room. Nocturne was in danger. The knights had tired of his activities and had set a trap, using bait that he wouldn't be able to resist. The chance to steal such a prize was bound to draw him out....

*I must warn him.* But how? He always contacted her, not the other way around. With no real clues to his identity, she didn't even know where to start looking for him.



The only place she knew he would be, for certain, would be the site of the ambush itself.  
*If the knights catch me, they'll kill me.*

*But what other choice do I have? Shall I remain here with Edward, pretending that everything is all right while an honorable man goes to his death?*

*What have I been training all these months for, then? I wanted to be able to defend myself against the knights, should I have to face them again. If I meant to stay here and hide, why did I ask Nocturne to teach me in the first place?*

There were a few precautions that she could take against discovery, at least. Silently thanking luck that Alaric had chosen to flit off tonight after all, she stole down the corridors to his suite at the opposite end of the house, near the burned north wing. She had never been inside his private rooms, and the light of her lantern showed her a cluttered space with large, dark furniture. The scent of sandalwood soap hung in the air.

Throwing open his wardrobe, she snatched out trousers, shirt, and coat without regard to their condition or color. All were far too long, and she was forced to roll up the sleeves and pants legs to keep them from tripping her.

The trousers felt strange on her legs, but she ignored her discomfort, racing back to her own chambers to snatch up her longest cloak. Once donned, it hid the unorthodox clothing beneath. Stuffing a broad-brimmed hat and a handkerchief into a pouch, she hurried down the stairs.

In the stables, John came down the ladder from his room in response to her call, his eyes bleary with sleep. "M'lady?"

"A horse, John, at once," she said, making certain that her cloak concealed her clothing from his gaze. To her relief, the boy didn't question her demand, only saddled a horse and brought it to her. Thanking him, she took the bridle and walked it out rather than mounting. No doubt John thought her mad to be riding out alone at this time of night, she reflected wryly, but that was the least of her problems.

Once she was past the gates and onto the road, she let the cloak fall open and mounted. She tucked her long hair up under the hat, tied the handkerchief over her face so that only her eyes showed, and urged the horse into a gallop.

*Please don't let me be too late.*

Edward had mentioned earlier that the convoy had stopped at the only nearby inn, intending to rest the horses and dine before continuing on into the night. Before his revelation, she had wondered at their haste, that they wouldn't stop long enough to spend the night indoors. Now, of course, it all made perfect sense.

The horse beneath her seemed slow as a snail, and she wished desperately for the speed of Nocturne's daemon. The moon rose higher, illuminating the road, and from time to time she saw the distant lights of farmhouses. But no convoy. No Nocturne.

*Please, let me be right about this. Please. I couldn't bear it if something happened to him.*

As she crested a low rise, she at last saw the convoy ahead of her, which had halted near a bridge over a small stream. Riding toward it, down the hill in front of her, was a dark shape dressed in cloak and hat, mounted on a tireless black steed. He held a pistol out in front of him and seemed already in the process of robbing the convoy.

Nocturne.

Drawing all her breath, she screamed so loud she felt her throat tear, "*Nocturne! It's a trap!*"

Several things seemed to happen at once. Nocturne spun his daemon mount instantly,

veering away from the column. A dozen pistols barked, a cloud of acrid smoke rising from them. Nocturne's body jerked sharply, and his steed surged into a gallop, heading out across the moors.

Anne sent her horse after it, praying that it would hold up, that she wouldn't be overtaken by the knights. But as she headed away from the site of the trap, she realized that a fog was rolling in quickly. Although fogs were common here, this one seemed to be forming with unnatural speed.

*More of Nocturne's chymistry? Does he have a daemon of the air or the water acting on his behalf as well?*

Whatever the cause, within a few moments the fog had thickened so that Anne could see only a few feet in front of her. Although that meant the knights were unlikely to catch her, it also meant that she might easily become lost. Her mount slowed, picking its way carefully over the tussock-strewn earth, and she let it have its head. Nocturne knew that she was here--no doubt he would find and guide her.

As time passed, the damp fog soaked into her clothing, making her shiver. Sounds seemed muffled, and she was no longer certain of her direction without the moon to guide her. Nocturne failed to appear, and she wondered if she dared call out for the outlaw, or if the knights were still nearby.

Then a dark shape loomed out of the fog, so suddenly that her heart skipped a beat. A black head swung towards her, and she saw the faint glow of the daemon's fiery eyes. There was no rider on its back, but at its feet lay a crumpled shape.

Anne scrambled down from her own steed and ran to where Nocturne sprawled on the ground. His breathing sounded raspy, gurgling, and filled her with fear. "You're hurt," she said accusingly.

He stirred, just enough to roll over on his back, and a small cry of pain escaped him. "Shot," he managed to say.

Cold settled in her bones as she knelt by him. "But your cloak repels bullets."

"Unfortunately ... only if ... it is between the ... bullet and myself," he whispered. Then a racking cough shook him, accompanied by a wet sound.

*The mask isn't permeable to liquid, she remembered. He could drown in his own blood.*

She slipped one arm around him, supporting his shoulders in an attempt to ease his breathing. Silently hoping that he would forgive her, she reached out with her free hand, felt the edge of the mask's strap beneath his hat, and pulled both off in a single motion.

Long, golden hair spilled free, and she saw a faint spark as the light from the daemon's eyes reflected off glass spectacle lenses. Nocturne gasped in a drought of clean air, throwing his head back, and Anne found herself staring into the face of her husband.

## Chapter Six

*No wonder he wouldn't take off his mask*, was her first, nonsensical, thought. Followed by: *He didn't tell me. He's played me for a fool.*

Alaric coughed again, and she saw blood on his lips. It was bright red--the shot must have penetrated a lung. "We have to get you back to the manor. Does Gerard know about Nocturne?"

Alaric closed his eyes, as if he no longer had the strength to keep them open. "Yes."

"Then come on. Can you stand with my help?"

Somehow, she managed to get him to his feet, his arm draped around her shoulder for support. But gazing up at the daemon's high back, she realized that there was no way to get him mounted again.

As if it understood her concern, the daemon knelt, allowing her to help Alaric into the saddle. When he seemed secure, she climbed on behind him, and the daemon surged to its feet. Alaric slumped against its metal neck, and Anne put her arms around him, lest he fall off.

"Take us home, daemon," she ordered, although she didn't know if it would obey anyone by its master. "To the manor house. Please."

It sprang forward, and she clung to Alaric, afraid that he might be killed if he fell off at such a speed. His long hair whipped back into her eyes, and her hat blew off, so she pressed her face into his back to shield it from the wind. Although the fog was impenetrable to her, the daemon seemed to have no such troubles, and ran as if it knew precisely where it was going. She sincerely hoped that it did. If they were galloping towards a cliff, she wouldn't know about it until after they were already over the edge.

The fog thinned as they drew nearer the manor, and the daemon slowed when its walls came into view. So late, everyone was abed, and no lights showed. "We're home, Alaric," she said, hoping that he was still conscious.

At her words, he roused slightly, lifting his head. His breathing was still labored, although at least it had grown no worse. "The north wing. There is an entrance ... no one will see."

"I thought you said the north wing was dangerous."

He shook his head and let out a gasp of pain. "Lied."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around," she observed. Alaric bowed his head and didn't answer.

They passed through the gates, the daemon's hooves eerily noiseless on the gravel drive, and went towards the ruin of the north wing. The daemon came to a halt in front of what appeared to be a pile of fallen rubble. "Push the boards aside," Alaric instructed, his voice barely above a whisper. Anne slid off the daemon and grasped one of the sooty, charred timbers. It was surprisingly light, and when she had moved it aside, she glimpsed a cunningly-hidden doorway.

Getting Alaric inside wasn't easy; she had to take most of his weight, and his height made things even more awkward. The small circle of light from his chymical lantern showed her a neglected hallway stretching away on the other side of the door. Although there was little dust on the floor, indicating he had been passing this way quite a bit, cobwebs festooned the ceiling, and the air smelled of old smoke, rot, and mold.

Alaric's legs gave out altogether halfway along the corridor. Her heart hammering in fear, Anne gently eased him to the rotting carpet. "I'll go get Gerard," she told him and started to stand up.

Gloved fingers wrapped around her wrist with surprising strength. Looking down, she found him staring at her solemnly. "I'm sorry, Annie," he whispered. Blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

"You can apologize later," she said shakily. Pulling free, she dashed back out the hidden door.

Although it would have been quicker to go through the house, she didn't know the layout of the north wing, nor was she certain that the entire structure was safe after so many years of neglect. Silently thanking providence that all of the house servants went home to the village at night, she slipped through the main door and headed for Gerard's rooms on the second floor.

It took him a while to answer her urgent knocking. "I say," he mumbled, opening the door. "Do you have any idea what time of the ... good Lord!"

Anne winced, realizing for the first time what she must look like. Her hair tumbled wild and loose around her shoulders, and her stolen clothes were stained with mud and blood. "Alaric's been hurt. I'm afraid he's dying!"

Her voice caught on the last word, and she felt as if a fist had punched her in the chest. *Dying. Oh, God.*

Gerard's eyes widened, all sleep gone from them instantly. "Where is he?"

"In the north wing."

He asked no further questions, instead pausing only long enough to grab his medical kit. With his night robe flapping around his knees, he hurried down the hall to the old door, which Anne had been warned away from on her first day in the house. Taking a heavy key from his pocket, he unlocked the door and pushed it open.

On the other side lay a hall that, while neglected as the other she had been in, was nowhere near the ruin she had been told. "He's on the lower floor," she said, and Gerard nodded and led the way to the stairs.

Alaric roused slightly as they approached, mumbling something incoherent. Gerard bent to examine his brother, and Anne saw the frown line between his eyes deepen as he pulled Alaric's shirt free. "We don't dare move him at this juncture," he said quietly. "Would you be so kind as to find some extra blankets and pillows to make him a bed?"

"Of course." She started away and then paused. "Will he be all right?"

Grief and a sort of weariness passed over Gerard's round face. "I don't know, Anne. I don't know."

\* \* \* \*

Dawn was breaking when Gerard finally emerged from the north wing. After bringing him the requested items, Anne had slipped back to her room and changed into her normal clothing, just in case Edward took it into his head to wander about in the night. Not knowing what else to do with the bloody shirt and coat, she had hidden her disguise in the bottom of Alaric's wardrobe.

Gerard had advised that she sleep, but that had been out of the question. So instead, she had settled down on the floor outside the door, keeping watch. Now, she raised her head fearfully and scanned her brother-in-law's face. "Is he ... will he ...?"

Gerard's eyes looked bruised, and weariness deepened the lines around his mouth. Blood stained his night robe, and his hand shook slightly as he pulled the door to behind him.

Nevertheless, he managed a faint smile for her. "Alaric will recover."

Anne closed her eyes in silent thanks, feeling as if bands of iron had loosened from around her heart. "Thank you. I was afraid...."

"So was I," he said wryly. "His wounds will heal rapidly, but he has lost a great deal of blood. I think it best if he remains hidden for the duration of Edward's stay."

*Either Alaric wasn't hurt as badly as I thought, or....* "You used chymistry, didn't you? Both tonight and when you attended Lizzy. That was why you didn't want me in the room that night."

Gerard sighed and passed his hand over his eyes. "Yes. There are certain daemons--very tiny ones--that feed on infection, which is how I was able to clear Lizzy's lungs of her sickness. Others can be used to cauterize veins, even if the bleeding is deep within the body, without causing damage to the surrounding tissue."

"I have never heard of such things," she said, impressed. "You must be a great chymist."

Gerard laughed, but there was bitterness in the sound. "No, I'm not, actually. I don't have half the talent Alaric does."

"But surely the ministry chymists...."

"The things I have done are well-known to them," Gerard replied tiredly. "So many could easily be healed by them, but that is not the work the crown gives them. The excuse is that what can heal can also kill, and so it is best to keep the knowledge secret from the general populace."

"Then how did you learn of it?"

"Our mother knew some chymistry, and we have found books here and there, forbidden texts, which have taught us more."

Anne nodded and bit her lip. "Do any of the servants know you are chymists?"

"No. Until tonight, it has been a secret shared only between Alaric and me."

"You can trust me, Gerard. Surely you know that I would never betray either of you."

He smiled wanly. "I had hoped so, but after so long ... well, I would be lying if I said that I was comfortable with this turn of events. I think Alaric has wanted to tell you for some time, though. He was asking for you, by the way. Will you go to him?"

She found her husband in a musty side room on the bottom floor of the abandoned wing. He lay amidst the pile of blankets and pillows, his skin so drained of color that the linen looked yellowed in comparison. His golden hair was unbound for once and spread across the pillow in a rough tangle. His spectacles perched on a dusty table, and the myopic blue eyes that looked at her seemed oddly vulnerable without them.

She paused at the door, suddenly uncertain whether she should enter the room. "Gerard said you wished to speak with me."

Alaric struggled to sit up, the blankets slipping down to reveal bandages swathed around his chest, then collapsed back with a wince. "Yes. I wanted to thank you for saving my life. How did you know it was a trap?"

His voice was soft, without strength. A sudden desire to go to him, to put her arms around him and assure herself that he was alive and well, struck her with urgent force. She resisted, instead, turning away slightly to focus on the room. Cobwebs draped everything, and the smell of old burning hung strongly on the damp air. "Edward told me. Unfortunately, he waited until it was almost too late."

"It wasn't, though." He shifted slightly, drawing her attention to him. "Annie ... I'm sorry. I understand that you must be terribly angry with me."

"Don't." She held up her hand to forestall him. "We'll have this conversation later, when

you've healed. I would feel guilty about shouting at a sick man, after all." And so saying, she turned and left him alone.

\* \* \* \*

Anne stayed away for the next three days.

A part of her wanted to go to him, desperately so. To make certain that he was all right, to help ease the loneliness of having to spend so many hours in concealment. At first, she used Edward as an excuse. Having already been forced to fabricate reasons for Alaric's extended absence, she told herself that she couldn't afford to do anything to make her cousin even more suspicious.

Yet she knew that, had Nocturne and Alaric been two separate men as she had believed, she would have risked a great deal to be at the side of either one.

*He didn't trust me. Every night when we fought one another over crossed sabers, he was laughing at me. Every day when we sat across the breakfast table, he was thinking what a fool I am.*

And yet, what was it Nocturne had said? *"I cannot afford to be too trusting. Not even when I wish that I could believe in you with all my heart."*

Had he believed that she would turn him in? Had he truly thought that anger over the truth would cause her to betray her husband and her friend?

*I've already been a fool for one man. I won't be one again. I don't care what he thinks. I don't care.*

But she did.

The morning after Edward's departure, Gerard settled himself across from her at the breakfast table. After carefully glancing about to make certain they would not be overheard by the servants, he said, "Alaric will rejoin us this afternoon."

Anne poked listlessly at the eggs on her plate, wondering if she was ready to face her husband again. "That's good news."

"Anne ... my brother has great regard for you."

Her mouth twisted into a grim smile. "Such regard that he has lied to me, even when there was no longer any need."

Gerard sighed. "I believe that he feared your anger, if you learned that he had lied in the first place. And yet ... he told me that you had come very close to guessing his identity. He actually seemed proud of that. I told him that he was a fool to take delight in such a thing, that he ought to rethink what he was doing. That he was taking a terrible risk. But he wouldn't listen to me." He hesitated, then leaned across the table and rested his fingers on the back of her hand.

"Anne ... please, don't be angry. Alaric told me this morning that he expected you to leave with Edward. He fears that you hate him now."

"I don't hate him."

"Then tell him that. No matter how justified your fury ... tell him that, at least."

\* \* \* \*

After breakfast, she went alone to the library. It was raining, and the steady tap of water against the windows was oddly comforting. The world outside seemed composed of shades of gray: land, sky, and water.

She remembered the conversation between the brothers that she had overheard. At the time, she had believed that they had been speaking of Alaric's mistress. Now, though, she knew that there had never been such a person. During his absences, he had been acting under the guise of Nocturne, not finding pleasure in a woman's arms.

*"You risk too much! Why are you doing this?"*

*"Because I love her!"*

*No wonder Gerard seemed so shocked, Anne reflected. A man in love with his own wife.*

How long she stood alone, staring at the rain, she didn't know. Eventually, however, she heard the door click open. Alaric stood there, leaning heavily on a cane. Although she thought that he was still a bit pale, his hair was neat and his clothing concealed any bandages.

"May I join you, my lady?" he inquired diffidently.

"Please do."

His movements were stiff as he shut the door behind him. "Are you well?" she asked, worried suddenly that her absence had caused him to move about before he should have.

"Well enough. Better than I have any right to be, at least." A brief smile quirked his generous mouth, then was gone. "I'm sore, of course, and breathing is occasionally a bit on the painful side." He paused, his hand tightening slightly on the cane. "So. I believe that there was some shouting you wanted to do."

"No shouting." Feeling oddly nervous, she crossed the room until she stood only a few inches away from him. His eyes were beautiful, she thought, like bits of the sky brought down to the earth. "I'm glad you're all right, Alaric. When I saw that you had been shot ... it was the worst moment of my life. Worse even than the day I was informed that Robert no longer desired my company."

He cocked his head to the side, puzzled, and she recognized the gesture from Nocturne as well. "It was Nocturne you saw hurt, though. Not me."

"If Nocturne holds half of my heart, and Alaric the other, then doesn't that make a whole?"

He took a quick sip of indrawn breath. For the first time since the day they had met, he seemed utterly at a loss. So she took action instead, standing up on tiptoe to press her lips against his.

The cane fell from his hand, clattering against the floor, and he wrapped his arms around her. She could feel the heat of his body through the layers of clothing and bandage that separated them, could feel him trembling with suppressed desire. "Annie," he whispered, brushing his lips over her ear, her hair.

She tipped her head back, slipping her fingers through his hair and pulling it loose of its tail. "I love you, husband," she said.

He drew back, and she realized that she had managed to surprise him again. "I love you, too, Annie. I've wanted to tell you--to tell you everything--but I couldn't. I'm so sorry."

She laid a finger gently against his lips. "Hush. We'll discuss it later. For now, I'd rather less apologizing and more kissing."

He kissed her again, frantically, as if he would die without tasting her. She pushed his coat off his shoulders, then found the buttons on his shirt, and relieved him of that as well. Bandages swathed the lower part of his ribs, so she ran her hands over his shoulders, feeling a tracery of scars over lean muscles. She wondered if the scars meant that this hadn't been his first narrow escape as Nocturne, or if they predated his clandestine activities.

He explored her in turn, sliding his hands over her back, her shoulders, then tracing a path down to her breasts. His thumbs glided over her nipples, teasing them into nubs. The warmth of his touch through the fabric of her dress made her ache to feel it against her skin instead. "Alaric," she whispered, but his name came out as a moan.

She felt his hands tremble slightly as he found the lacings of her dress and began to untie

them. The dress was a simple one and took little to get out of, leaving her only in her chemise. His blue eyes traveled over her, their gaze hungry, and she felt an answering ache within herself. "What do you want, husband?" she murmured as she reached up and slowly began to undo the lacings of the gauzy chemise.

His gaze followed her progress with the lacings as if he was unable to look away. When the garment joined her dress on the floor, he swallowed visibly. Very carefully, he reached out and ran his fingers over her skin, across her belly, and up over her breasts. When he bent his head to one taste one nipple, his long hair felt like silk, and she gasped involuntarily at the touch.

"I want to please you, Annie," he whispered against her skin. "Not the least because I would prefer this be only the first of many, many times."

"Yes," she groaned, although whether she was agreeing or urging him on, even she was not certain. Her fingers tangled in his hair as he licked and nibbled and then slid down across the lattice of his belly to tug at his trousers' fastening.

He gasped when she touched him. Wild with desire, she slid down to her knees, kissing him as she went. He joined her on the floor, wrapping his arms around her and rolling her onto her back. Eager and aching for completion, she slid her legs around his waist, pulling him down and into her.

They both cried out when he entered her. Anne arched her back, urging him deeper, her whole body shaking as an unexpected climax gripped her. Alaric drew back a little to gaze at her, a look of surprise and wonderment showing in his passion-dark eyes. "Closer," she panted, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling him tight against her, so that his hair fell across her face and his skin burned against hers. For a moment, she thought he would resist; then, he cried out her name, his body stiffening as his own climax seized him.

Outside, thunder boomed. Drowsy and content, Anne closed her eyes, absently running her hand through his long hair. Alaric kissed her softly, tenderly, and then moved to shift off her. The faint hitch of his breath made her open her eyes again. "Are you all right? I wasn't thinking-your wound."

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "I wasn't even aware of it at the time, although I'll probably pay for it later." He traced her features gently with his fingertips. "Now this truly is my favorite room."

She laughed at that. "We should probably move soon, though, in case someone comes in."

"True. Or I could just lock the door."

The wicked edge to his grin sent fire through her blood. Kissing him again, she whispered, "What a splendid idea."

\* \* \* \*

*Dear Anne,*

*Thank you for the lovely time you showed me in your new home. I hope to return and see you again soon.*

*I have heard the most wonderful news and wanted to share it with you immediately. It seems that the trap succeeded, and the villain Nocturne was slain by the knights! I'm sure this will put your mind at ease to know that your barony is now safe from his depredations.*

*Your loving cousin,  
Edward*



\* \* \* \*

Anne led her horse around the dolmen just as Nocturne was saddling his daemon. "You seem rather spry for a dead man," she remarked.

It had been well over a month since the night of the trap. Although he wasn't entirely healed, Alaric had at last reached the point where Gerard had grudgingly given permission for him to ride out again.

At the sound of Anne's voice, he turned sharply. "Anne?" he asked, in Nocturne's gravelly tones. She wondered if the mask disguised his voice as well as his face. "What are you doing here? And why are you dressed like that?"

She had spent a good deal of the month in his arms. The rest of the time, however, had been spent sewing secretly in her room. The result was the costume she now wore: a man's trousers, shirt, and coat, all in black or gray. She had borrowed a broad-brimmed hat from Alaric's wardrobe and tied a dark handkerchief over her face. At her hip hung the saber that had been his gift to her in thanks for saving his life.

"I thought you were a clever man," she said with a smile as she came up to him. "I would think the answer would be obvious, but as it seems I am wrong, I'll explain things to you. I am riding with you."

"But..."

"Why else did you teach me as you did?"

He pulled off his mask and scowled at her. "So that you could protect yourself, not so that you could join me in robbing the tax collector."

"But you didn't just teach me to defend myself did you?" she asked quietly. "You taught me to seek the truth of things. To face it, even if it was far more uncomfortable than my pleasant illusions. You taught me to recognize injustice and to do something about it." She reached out and gently laid her hand on his chest where a scar marked the wound that had almost ended his life. "You taught me to resist evil, even if it meant doing so to my last breath."

A rueful smile passed over his face. "You were too good a student, I think. I would not see you endanger yourself, Annie."

"So long as things continue as they are, I'm already in danger, aren't I? Of course, you could use your chymistry to make me a cloak like yours, if you're so worried. A mask might be a good addition as well. Not to mention a daemon steed--I fear you'll far outpace this poor fellow."

For a moment, she thought he was going to argue further. Then, abruptly, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "How could I not love you with my every breath? Very well, my lady wife. I concede the victory to you."

"Thank you. Shall we go assault the tax collector, then?"

He bowed with a sweep of his hat and then mounted up. She followed suit, and side-by-side Nocturne and his lady rode off across the moors.

The End