



MEDIEVAL MISCHIEF

An Ellora's Cave publication written by

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. MEDIEVAL MISCHIEF has been rated HARD-R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Chapter 1

"Steady, Angel! No!"

The horse reared wildly in protest to her abrupt stop. The woman atop the mighty beast attempted to calm her, but it was to no avail. Within seconds, she was thrown into a grassy cushioned area and knocked out cold.

Avalon awoke slowly from her unconscious state. She could feel her muscles groaning in protest as she moved her head. She cautiously moved her arms then her legs, and everything seemed to be okay. "Thank God above," she whispered, as she struggled to her feet. She shook her long blond hair back from her face, and then turned to look for her horse. She looked around, moving very slowly, but she couldn't see the huge white stallion anywhere. She prayed silently that he had been uninjured, and was off somewhere munching on some tall grass, or taking a long drink. Avalon didn't relish walking back to the encampment.

She had not gone very far when she heard a noise off to her right. She froze instantly, all of her instincts on full alert. She knew she had not fallen terribly far from the castle, and the last thing she needed was to be found by the castle's outriders. Before she could react though, she realized that a tall man now stood before her, sword drawn. He resembled a shaggy wolf, or some such creature, with his long, dark-blond hair and full beard.

Avalon's breath caught in her throat at that moment. All of her worst fears came rushing at her. She often tested the boundaries of her sheltered existence, but her father's knights had always been nearby to protect her. And now, due to her own foolishness and bull-headedness, she was alone in the forest, and night was rapidly approaching. All of her mother's dreaded stories of what could

happen to a woman followed quickly and her hand moved to seek her weapon, never far from her reach. But she found that her sword had been knocked loose during her fall and wasn't hidden at her back as usual.

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The tall, blond man opposite her laughed when he saw her move for a weapon, and realized it was not there. Lord Brandeis had come into the woods unaccompanied by his knights in order for some peace and quiet, and to gather his last minute thoughts and concerns before the meeting tomorrow. His father had made all the arrangements, but at the last minute, he was chafing at the bit. He knew a man of twenty-eight was usually settled with a wife and children, especially one with his responsibilities.

To date he had never had the urge to settle with one woman, and the only reason he had agreed now was because his father's health was fading rapidly. An allegiance between his lands and those of Sir Arundel would enrich both of them beyond any other holding in the realm, save that of king. He knew also that many other lords would fear such power, and some might try and stop the marriage.

Brand moved closer to the woman, taking in her manly clothing. He had never seen a woman wearing leggings before, and he admitted that her legs did them more justice than any man's. He could see her full round breasts heaving beneath the thigh-length over tunic she was also wearing. Her hair, blond, he could see still in the rapidly diminishing light, was falling down about her face and shoulders.

He assumed she was from Sir Arundel's castle-keep because he was well acquainted with all the young, beautiful women of his lands, and he had never seen this one before. He wondered if the lass would be amenable to a quick tumble. He thought that perhaps a last fling might be in order.

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Avalon glared at the handsome man standing a few feet from her. He was quite tall and very broad across the shoulders, with muscular arms and chest. She could tell he was wealthy by the sumptuous clothing he was wearing. While it wasn't velvet, she had been taught to tell finely woven fabrics from cheap imitations. She glanced quickly to the left, and then to the right, weighing her chances of outrunning the man in front of her.

Brand laughed softly as he saw her looking around. "You'll never make it, my sweet. My legs are longer than yours." He lowered his sword, returning the impressive weapon to its scabbard. "There is a small cottage near here, sweet thing. Come with me and I'll make it worth your while." He withdrew a small leather bag and jingled it.

Avalon realized he thought she was a whore, and anger surged through her. What a bastard! She turned frantically, and started running as fast as her small feet would carry her. She saw the small cottage in the distance and thought if she could reach it, she might be able to bar the door...

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Brand launched himself and took her to the ground easily. He rolled with her, over and over. After several minutes of tussling about, Brand raised himself above her and held her legs easily with his own. Avalon managed to raise one hand and rake her fingernails down the side of his face. Brand howled angrily in pain. He fiercely and quickly subdued her struggles and pulled her to her feet. He pulled his belt free and bound her slender wrists together.

He pushed her inside the ramshackle cottage that was used for overnight hunting expeditions at times. He shoved her down onto the straw mattress that

sat in a corner of the small room. Seeing that wood had been left in the fireplace, he lit a fire with a modicum of effort. Slowly, brushing his hands free of any dirt or soot, he turned to face the angry woman sprawled on the mattress.

Even with dirt smudged on her face and her disheveled hair adorned with twigs and leaves, she was quite a beauty. Turning away from her glowering look, Brand wasn't sure if she was truly scared, or just angry at his besting her? Surveying the hunting cabin, he could tell it was rarely used. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a rope was hanging from a sturdy beam in the ceiling. He turned back to the woman and grabbed her hands, which were still bound in front of her. Without a word, he pulled her upwards and over to the hanging rope.

Avalon struggled to free herself, but he quickly exchanged the leather for the rope. In less than two minutes, Brand had her arms pulled above her head. He tightened the rope just enough so that she was stretched to her tiptoes. If she tried to kick him, she would only spin uselessly on the rope. He had never forced a woman, and he decided he would let this one go, after he had a bit of fun at her expense, of course.

Moving across the room, he squatted down in front of the fireplace and took his time stoking the fire. He considered his plan carefully. While he was not an inordinately proud man, he had received more than enough proof, since the age of twelve, that women found him attractive. The only protest he ever heard from a wench he had bedded was "don't go!" If he used his usual seductive techniques and she succumbed to his usual persuasive ways, then he wouldn't be forcing her after all, he told himself.

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When he stood and began walking back toward Avalon, he casually pulled a knife from its decorative scabbard at his waist. He pulled his shirt off, setting aside his weapons for the moment. Her dark blue eyes widened with fear, and

something else, as he moved over to her. The firelight glinted off his broad, tanned and lightly furred chest. His muscles rippled with movement, and he looked as if he were a well-trained knight of the realm, instead of the usual vagabond-type frequently caught plundering her father's forest. His clothing could be cast-offs and therefore belie his true position in life as well.

Avalon felt her body responding, as it had when he had wrestled her struggling body into submission when he caught her. She had been aroused, and she didn't want to admit it then, or now. Logically, she argued that she shouldn't be feeling such things. She angrily kicked out at him, and lost her footing and spun on the rope. This only made her angrier, with herself and at the handsome stranger.

Biting back the curse words she wanted to hurl at him, she took a deep breath, thinking that perhaps she could reason with the stranger. "If you let me go, I won't tell anyone. I promise," she told him haughtily.

Brand laughed as he moved his hands forward to her slender waist, stopping her spinning. His strong hands felt hot through the thin material as he turned her to face him. He paused to remove the twigs and leaves caught in her hair.

"I don't care if you do tell anyone." He raised his right hand and stroked it lightly down the side of her face, cupping her chin. His eyes fixed on her full, parted lips. Avalon watched his eyes deliberately move down her body. They stopped and stared at her heaving, large, round breasts as she struggled to calm her rapid breathing. He saw the flash of anger in her eyes.

"My words anger you, do they not? I bet if you could just get one hand free you would scratch my eyes out, wouldn't you?"

Avalon nearly spit at him. His words were just taunting her! He was toying with her, damn it! He would regret this day...

"You are very beautiful."

Avalon stared in disbelief as the handsome stranger reached out to lightly caress his hand down the side of her face. He stroked one finger across her lower lip, but pulled it back suddenly when she tried to bite it. Avalon growled in frustration, which grew as the man grinned down at her.

“Are you afraid of me?”

Avalon shook her head vehemently in reply, not wanting to bandy words with him. The more he spoke, the more Avalon realized that he probably wasn't a vagabond or a peasant in spite of his overgrown hair and beard. Perhaps the clothes were not cast-offs from his employer, as she had thought earlier. But why was a well-spoken, finely dressed man who was hairy enough to be a hermit rambling about in her father's woods if not poaching?

Brand moved his hand to rest over her heart. Avalon felt the heat of his hand, the weight of it. Her heart was pounding wildly beneath it, and from somewhere deep in hidden womanly places came the unbidden desire for him to lower his hand, and possess her breast. Her eyelids drifted down, as her senses were bombarded by sensual and erotic overload.

His hand though, moved back up to cup her chin. Her eyes flew open and she met his gaze. “Very beautiful,” he murmured softly. “How many men have told you that before?” he whispered to her, just before he covered her lips with his own.

Avalon felt his hot mouth capture hers, his tongue forcing its way inside her wet, hot mouth. She tried to bite him, but he withdrew, as if sensing her plan. He stepped away for a moment, his next words both alarming and arousing her.

“I think you need a bit of taming, my sweet.”

Avalon shook her head, trying to clear it of the sensual fog. Brand moved to stand behind her. He didn't speak or move for several moments and then she felt him grabbing her top; the next second she heard the fabric tearing in the silence of the room. Instantly, she felt the cool air against her skin.

With her heart racing even faster, Avalon shouted over her shoulder to the man. "If you hurt me, my father will kill you! And he won't make it an easy death either. He'll torture you for hours—no, days—on end until you weep for the relief that only death could bring!"

Breathing heavily, Avalon became aware that her shirt hung limply, held in place by her uplifted arms. A moment later, instead of a whip, or a striking blow of some kind, she felt his strong hand, with its slightly roughened skin, gliding lightly downward, from neck to waist, over her soft skin.

"Such lovely skin, my sweet. It would be a shame to mark it."

Avalon gasped at his words. His touch aroused her senses, and his words aroused her even more. What was wrong with her, she wondered in confusion. She had to get out of here, before she did something she would regret. She couldn't keep the pleading tone from her voice as she spoke. "My father will pay you, if you let me go."

She felt the man's hand pause at her waist. Perhaps the temptation of money would be greater than his lust. But Brand put both hands on her hips and moved to stand close behind her. He pulled her tight to his body, letting her feel his hardness pressed against her soft buttocks. Avalon tensed as she felt his hard body pressed so intimately against hers. His movement made her totally aware of the hard cock moving against her fully rounded ass cheeks. There was no way that Avalon could stop the soft moan that escaped her lips at the same time her ass wiggled and pressed against him.

Avalon gasped again, feeling wetness gathering between her pussy lips at being treated so roughly. After a lifetime of being catered to, this man's roughness should have been alarming her, scaring her into hysterics and swoons. Instead, she felt her breasts swelling with her arousal and could tell her nipples had budded into tight awareness as well. She knew that she was losing control and running out of time. It was time for a final plea.

"I am a maid, sir! You must not take from me what belongs to my future husband!"

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Brand smiled behind her, and then without warning he jerked at her leggings and pulled them all the way down to her knees. Listening as the woman gasped in surprise, he inhaled deeply. There was no missing the sweet scent of her womanly desire in the air. There was no doubt in his mind that if he probed between her thighs, he would feel her pussy nicely wet and eager.

Her words and her demand did not surprise him. If anything it aroused him even more. The thought of penetrating her hot little body for the first time, ever, was almost too hot to handle. Instead of replying, he moved his hands to cup her round, full buttocks. She couldn't stop the soft moan that escaped her lips, and Brand felt his own tension and need escalate. He squeezed the flesh firmly when he heard her soft cry, which was followed by another soft sound, this time a definite moan of womanly arousal.

Brand released her flesh and moved around to face her. Her top hung limply, but it concealed her full breasts and the tops of her thighs from him. He moved his hands to shift the fabric slightly. It was much more exciting to explore her flesh first and then view what he had been handling, he decided.

"Like this, your shirt still maintains your secrets," Brand told her softly. His hands lightly touched her soft belly and then moved upward. "What will I find hidden beneath a man's tunic?" He cupped her large breasts in his palms, squeezing the sensitive globes.

"Oh, dear God!" Avalon cried out involuntarily.

Brand felt her taut nipples beading up even tighter as he squeezed her. He watched her face, which she had turned to the side. But she couldn't hide her reactions to his touch that easily.

Brand could see the woman struggled to fight her own emotions as she felt his hands on her body. He held her breasts firmly, kneading them, squeezing them. He stopped to jiggle them slightly, as if weighing them. He softly praised her hard nipples when he moved to touch them with his fingertips. Each nipple was squeezed lightly and then more firmly. Avalon cried out at the sensations overwhelming her young body.

Without warning, his one hand deserted her right breast, and moved down over her soft belly. Brand stroked and caressed his way slowly, feeling no need to rush through this seduction. He couldn't hide the shock of surprise he felt a moment later as he cupped his hand over her womanly mound.

He'd been imagining what her bush might look like. He'd seen many different types since the kitchen maid initiated him at the age of twelve. Serving in the Crusades, he'd even enjoyed several dark-eyed beauties. Their surprise had been their completely hairless mounds. Thinking about a blond shaggy rug to drag his fingers through, he was more than a little surprised to find her completely hairless.

Brand looked up into her wide, dark blue eyes. His fingers were stroking her shaven lips. "You are full of surprises, sweet. I can hardly wait to discover what other secrets you hold for me." He moved his fingers and found her flesh was wet with her arousal fluids. He stared into her eyes as he stroked the wet skin folds, insinuating his fingers between them. "I see you like playing around."

He pulled his hands from her soft, warm body. For a moment he paused to look at the wetness covering his fingers. Then he looked up and smiled at her. His smile turned into a grin when Avalon blushed brightly. He put his hands at the neckline of her shirt and ripped it downward. He pushed the material to the

sides and gazed at what had to be the most magnificent pair of breasts he had ever seen.

Her breasts were large for her small body, and perfectly round. They were firm, full and still pert, jutting proudly from her chest. Her nipples were a soft pink color, and tightly distended, begging for his mouth to suck them. He didn't pause but leaned down and took her right nipple deep inside his mouth, sucking and pulling on the sensitive nubbin. He cupped her left breast while he sucked the right. He licked the tight nipple in his mouth, and when he bit it lightly, she cried out in desire. He lifted his head and gave her left breast a quick fondle and a squeeze before stepping back to stare at her lush body.

"Good God, woman! I want to bed you so much..." Brand released his hard cock from his leggings and stepped close to her. He held her head in his hands and kissed her deeply, seeking her tongue with his own. He pressed his hot, near-to-bursting cock against her soft belly. One hand moved down between her thighs. He found her secret pleasure point and began teasing her until soft, delicious moans and cries were escaping her mouth in between his kisses.

He deftly inserted one finger between her soft shaven lips, while continuing to pleasure her special place with his thumb. He moved his other hand to her breast, squeezing and plumping that globe to further sensitivity. He moved a second finger inside of her softness, testing her readiness, still teasing and arousing her further.

He whispered against her open mouth, "Say no and I will stop, my sweet. Say yes, and I will take us to heaven."

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Avalon felt his hand between her thighs, his fingers making her his slave to command. Her breasts were so tender and aroused that even the slight feel of his chest hair could make her cry out yet again. She opened her mouth to deny him,

but the word “yes” is the one that they both heard in the silence of the room. Brand jerked her leggings all the way off and then pulled her feet from the ground. Only his hands and the rope suspended her, as he slid her upward to his waist. Then slowly, he raised her legs to surround his hips and slid her body down. He paused at the soft, pink flesh of her pussy, pushing slowly, gently.

Avalon surprised them both by tightening her legs and jerking his body into her own. She cried out at his complete entrance, but the feelings of his hard flesh, enveloped within her own, seemed too much. As she spasmed and her muscles tightened and gave way around his manhood, she continued to cry and sigh softly. Her body jerked in his arms as she reached the peak of climax and she forgot the loss of her virginity and how this changed her life.

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Feeling her soft wetness sucking him in was more than Brand could control and he began thrusting between her white thighs. The first thrust past her maidenhead had been sweeter than he had thought. Each time was better than the last. He lowered his head to kiss her open mouth and then shot his load deep within her soft body. He relaxed his grip on her legs and they slowly slid down. His soft cock slid from her body, making a loud, wet sound in the silence of the room.

Brand reluctantly stepped away from this woman, whose name he had not even learned before he took her. He let his eyes travel over her body. Her breasts were jiggling from her still rapid breathing, her nipples wet from his sucking mouth. Her pussy lips were wet and glistening with arousal and he could see his cum beginning to leak from her body. He didn't think it possible, but he wanted her again. Grabbing his knife, he quickly cut the rope holding her arms. He lifted her spent body and laid her down on the mattress.

Lying beside her, he trailed one hand over her softly parted lips, then down her neck. He paused and cupped her closest breast. He watched as he squeezed her soft, supple flesh. He smiled as her nipple budded up again, perhaps even more distended than before. He loved long nipples like hers. He loved to suck a woman's tit for hours. Just then he realized that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to fall asleep sucking this woman's tit. He wanted to wake with his head on her breasts, her nipples just a moment away from being sucked back into his eager mouth.

Brand knew he should wait to give her nearly virgin body time to recover, but his cock was rock hard again. The argument to wait was short-lived. He moved over the silent woman and eased himself back within her soft, wet flesh. Her tightness was sweet, and she seemed to suck his hardness within her body, holding him tight. When he pulled back to thrust into her again, he could feel her muscles pulling, squeezing his body. It didn't take long, with her cunt muscles milking his cock, and he again came deep within her body. Exhausted, he fell onto the bed beside her, asleep almost before he hit the mattress.

Chapter 2

Avalon left Brand while he slept. She had no idea how long they had been together. Each time he touched her she didn't care about life beyond the cottage walls. It had been painful leaving him, which she told herself was ridiculous. This man had tied her up and taken her virginity. This fueled her walk back to the castle.

She entered through a secret entrance that only a few close confidantes of her father were aware of also. Through it one could escape the castle, if it were to be attacked and overrun, to waiting boats moored at the well-hidden docks that had been built in the caves below. She didn't want to be seen by anyone until she had time to clean up once again. She had taken the man's shirt. Her hair was a mess, and she was afraid that someone who knew her might be able to tell what had happened to her.

She entered her room silently, offering up a silent prayer that she had not yet seen anyone. She closed the door, so it barely creaked on its hinges. She started to breathe a sigh of relief, when behind her she heard a soft "hrmph." Startled, Avalon turned and found her cousin Althea, sitting on her bed, legs and arms folded.

"Damn, Al! You scared me."

The other woman stood and walked over to her slightly younger cousin. "Me! I have spent the entire afternoon, and a good portion of the evening, lying to everyone that you were ill, and couldn't be seen by anyone. I have been worried half out of my mind over where you were, and afraid to tell anyone."

“So, you invented some illness for me, Al? That was very nice of you.” Avalon turned away from her cousin, and started kicking off her shoes, then pulling off her tight leggings. She pulled the shirt off over her head. It was only when Althea gasped, that she paused. She looked down and saw the love-bite marks that adorned her neck and breasts.

She started to turn toward her bathing corner, when she caught a glimpse of her naked body in the mirror. She saw that her own blood was staining her inner thighs. Damn! The evidence of her escapade was obvious. She didn’t wait for her cousin to say anything further, but rushed over to the large bathing tub. She poured some water from a pitcher, and grabbed a small cloth. Quickly Avalon washed her inner thighs and then grabbed a robe to cover her body.

She then turned back to face her inquisitor. Her cousin Althea was the most beautiful woman she had ever known. Althea had been married, and then her young husband had been killed in a freak accident. Since Althea’s husband was a younger son, they had still been living with his parents. Avalon had begged her father to write and ask Althea to move back with them, and she had. Althea had been very grateful to do so, actually. She had gotten along with her in-laws, but after her husband’s death, and not having had any children yet, she had felt like an outsider.

Althea was happy to come back to her uncle’s home. She had taken over the housekeeper’s job, and the care of Avalon. It had been a good arrangement all around. She had not let anyone see her fears that once Avalon was married, there would no longer be a place for her, once again.

Althea grabbed the younger woman’s upper arms, holding her firmly, staring into her face. “My God, Avalon! What have you gone and done? You are to meet your fiancé today!”

Avalon felt tears well up in her eyes. Tears that she had not allowed since she had met the stranger in the forest yesterday soon spilled over and rained down her cheeks. Althea pulled her close and hugged the younger woman.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. You won’t be the first bride to go to her wedding bed not ‘intact.’ There are lots of ways around that...don’t worry, Avalon. I will talk to old Esme today, and get what we will need.”

Avalon wiped her fingers over her cheeks, drying her tears. She knew the old witch well. She had spent many hours with her, learning many of her spells and tricks and old stories. Her father would have had a fit if he had known, but she and Althea had decided what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

Althea brushed her hands down over her dress, moving toward the bedroom door. “Have a more thorough wash up, Avalon, and then lie down until I get back. Just hope I don’t run into your father!” Althea hurried out of the room.

Avalon moved over to the water and began using some of Althea’s scented soap to wash away the grime from the day and night before. She looked at herself in the mirror, and felt like she was someone different from the woman she’d been yesterday, when she had last looked into the glass. Her face was the same, her hair, her body, even though the bite marks that dotted her breasts and neck were turning from red, to a bruised color now.

She knew she would have to find something else to wear for the engagement party planned for later. The deep décolletage of the dress Althea had sewn for her would never do now. She would have a hard time explaining to her father, let alone her fiancé, just how she came to have those teeth marks on her breasts and neck.

Sighing deeply, she washed her arms, chest, and finally moved to wash between her thighs. She was very tender there as she stroked the cloth over her tender shaved lips. She remembered the surprise the man had shown as he had

caressed her smooth flesh. He had seemed to be even more passionately inflamed after his discovery, she realized.

Her fingers touched her skin lightly, and then she dropped the cloth in the bowl, and returned to stroke her pussy lips with her fingers. She closed her eyes for a moment, as she remembered how his fingers had felt, touching her, caressing her. She had been frightened, and then aroused. She felt the wetness once again on her fingers, that he had praised her for yesterday. She knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't help moving her fingers deeper and finding her secret pleasure point. The same place he had touched, making her shout in amazement, and pleasure. She wanted to feel again what he had made her feel.

She stopped abruptly, feeling ashamed at first. She should never have gone out yesterday. Most disturbing was that now she thought she should have fought him more, not given in like some lovesick slut. Yes, she thought. Maybe that is what I really am! I am a slut! Am I the kind of woman who craves the touch of a man, any man? Oh God, she cried out finally, and ran across the room, and threw herself onto her bed naked. Filled with doubts and fears about her future, and herself, she finally cried herself to a fitful sleep.

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It was late afternoon when Althea woke her. She was surprised she had slept so long. Althea prodded her along, washing her hair, helping her to finish bathing, and finally, dressing her in her gown, which would serve as her wedding gown after the engagement party dinner. The service would be held at midnight, as was the custom here. Avalon started to protest about wearing the dress, but she saw that Althea had once again been thinking ahead of her. Althea had cleverly made a lace insert for the dress, which would conceal her marked breasts and neck. What her husband might say after the ceremony, Avalon didn't know.

* * * * *

The castle was ablaze with light. Everyone present was dressed elegantly, and richly, displaying their finery and their jewels. Lord Brandeis was seated at the main table with his future father-in-law, dreading the moment he would meet his bride-to-be. All he could think about was the woman he had met in the forest the day before. She was in his blood, making him hard every time he remembered their brief time together. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine her beauty before him: her full breasts, her lush lips, and that wonderful hairless pussy.

Dear God! She had surprised him every step of the way. He had looked for her for hours, including sending several search parties out for her. He would have her again, even though he was to be married. During his searching for the errant young woman, Brand had thought it all out. He would take her back with him. She would be his mistress. Many men had a wife and a mistress. He would arrange quarters for her. He would get his bride with child, and then all his time would be free for his mistress. He smiled to himself as he listened to Sir Arundel, and sipped the heady wine being served. He might get drunk after all, he decided. That just might help him get through the night.

He had tried to learn about his future bride, but no one had been very forthcoming with information. And that convinced him she must be the "kind nature and lovely eyes" type of woman, rather than a rare beauty. Just then he heard a commotion at the end of the hall. Two women entered the room together.

Both of the women were gowned similarly, in fine velvet dresses, and one was of course, veiled according to custom. The other woman though, Brand couldn't help but notice, was a true beauty. She was blond, beautifully formed, and something about her seemed familiar to him, but he couldn't decide what.

He heard his lead knight and best friend, Sir Gandalf, gasp as the two women moved closer.

Surprised at his friend's reaction, Brand turned and saw that Gandalf was staring quite lustfully at the unveiled woman. He couldn't help but wonder if Gandalf was about to be smitten. He usually steered clear of ladies, and consorted with women who knew the rules. Perhaps they would be returning with three women, he thought, instead of just his own bride, and hopefully, his future mistress.

Sir Arundel was standing, which brought Brand and Gandalf to their feet. His future father-in-law was introducing his daughter, Avalon, and her cousin, Althea.

Brand reluctantly dragged his eyes from Althea to look at the other woman, his bride-to-be. He couldn't see through her thick white veil, which infuriated him, but he held his anger in check. Damnation! He couldn't see what color of hair his future wife possessed. For a moment, he remembered long golden hair. Unenthusiastically, he took the hand she proffered to him.

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Avalon had dreaded this moment for months, and now she was face to face with her future husband. He was clean-shaven, with his hair cut quite short. He was very handsome, or she was sure many women had thought so before her. He was tall, very broad of shoulders, with muscular chest and arms. He enfolded her hand entirely within his own. It wasn't until he spoke that the shudders shook her body.

His voice! Oh God, Avalon realized. He was the man...Dear Lord! Avalon cursed silently. Her future husband was the stranger in the forest yesterday. He had shaved off his beard and moustache, and cut what had been shoulder length, very blond hair. It was now a much darker color. But his voice was the same. She

would never forget that voice, which sounded like rough velvet! Perfectly cultured, but with an edge.

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Holding her hand, Brand felt her body shudder. He wondered at her reaction. He knew he was attractive to most women, or he had been told so often enough. So why the strange reaction, he wondered. He became aware that the other woman was trying to ignore Gandalf's very obvious attentions, and hovering over her charge. Obviously the two women were very close. He moved quickly and separated the two women by seating his bride in his chair, thereby placing her between himself and her father.

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Avalon felt like the sea was washing over her head with her every breath. She feared she might be drowning, without any water around her. Or maybe she was just going insane? Surely the fates couldn't be this cruel to her! Was she to truly marry the man who had taken her virginity just yesterday and made her enjoy it?

She could not denounce him to her father, for that would reveal her own lack of virginity. And while it didn't seem fair to her, she knew that she would be blamed, not the man next to her. She moved unconsciously forward in her chair, as if to escape, when Brand's hand covered her own. She froze instantly, feeling his heat seep into her body, heating her blood, firing her emotions. All he had done was lightly touch her hand, and she could feel her womanhood heating, opening up and wetting itself. Her body wanted him again, that much was obvious to her.

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Brand listened to what Sir Arundel was saying, but was aware of the woman next to him. He could feel the trembling of her body through her hand. He wondered at what could cause such fear. Surely she didn't fear the marriage bed that much! If that were the case, then he knew his married life was going to be hell! He became even more determined to find the woman from the forest.

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Avalon never knew how she made it through the rest of the night. The dinner passed slowly, followed by the party, drinking, and finally the wedding ceremony by candlelight at midnight. Her trembling had increased as the night wore on. She couldn't get away long enough to seek out Althea and get her advice. So, when the ceremony ended, and it was time for her husband to raise her veil and kiss her, Avalon took the only course of action she had been able to come up with in her scrambled thoughts. She fainted.

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Brand, as surprised and shocked as everyone else, had caught her a scant moment before she hit the ground. He held her in his arms, demanding to be shown to their room. With quite an entourage following, Sir Arundel led the way to the chambers he had instructed to be prepared for his daughter to share with her husband, until their departure for his home. Brand settled the woman on the coverlet of the large bed, and shifted his hands to lift the veil.

Althea pushed past him. She picked up her cousin's seemingly limp hand. Not sure what to do next, she felt Avalon squeeze her hand tightly. Something was going on, she quickly decided. She needed to speak to Avalon alone.

"Please!" Althea nearly shouted above the raised voices. "Everyone must leave us alone. I will see to her..."

Brand stood firm. "She is my wife. I will stay with you."

Althea felt the tensing in Avalon's hand, and tried again. "No, really. I will take care of her. I'll come for you as soon as she awakens."

Brand looked from the supine, still veiled form on the bed, to where the two women's hands met, then on up to Althea's face. He was suspicious after looking into her eyes. There was more than a strong suspicion suddenly that the woman, or both women, were hiding something.

"I'll wait in the hall, just outside the chamber door." He turned, and had everyone else leave. Once in the hall, he made everyone return to the party, even her father. Gandalf, though, refused to leave.

Brand folded his arms across his chest, and leaned back against the wall. Gandalf smiled at him. "It doesn't bode too well, my friend, for the bride to faint before you even get in the bed."

Brand frowned at his friend's jest. There was something that didn't seem quite right, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. He decided to deflect his friend's interest in his nuptials.

"I noticed you were paying a lot of attention to my wife's cousin during dinner," he spoke, and then realized he had referred to Avalon as his wife. He frowned at how easily the word had tripped off his lips.

Gandalf smiled. "I must admit, my old friend, she is a very tempting morsel. She is a widow, you know. Beyond that, I couldn't get much more out of her. I gather though that the two women are very close. She kept her eye on you two like a hawk all evening."

Brand half-listened to his friend, but was still trying to hear any sounds from inside the room. He suddenly heard the shuffling of feet. He thrust away from

the wall, and threw open the door to the bedchamber. He and Gandalf watched in surprise, as Althea appeared to be helping his wife climb out the window.

“What the hell...” Brand shouted.

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Both women turned in guilty surprise. Avalon had her skirt hiked up and was trying to reach a familiar foothold that she had used before to escape from some of the rooms in her father's castle. Althea blushed brightly at being caught in aiding her cousin escape. But once Avalon had told Althea who her husband was, she had realized that she had to help her escape “the rapist.”

“You!” Brand shouted, then rushed across the room to grab Avalon's arm before she could completely disappear out the window.

Chapter 3

Avalon had taken the veil off, so she could see clearly in her flight. Althea tried to pull Brand away from Avalon, but Gandalf grabbed her arms, and pulled her back, into his arms. Both watched as Brand hauled Avalon back into the bedroom.

Althea felt heat steal through her as she felt the strength of Gandalf's hard body pressing into her back. His hands had moved, and his arms encircled her now, just beneath her small breasts. Each ragged breath she took caused them to move against the hard muscled forearms binding her to him. She struggled and wiggled against him to break free, but that only caused her to become intensely aware of his hard manhood pressing into her soft buttocks. She had felt a pull to this strong, brusque man from the minute she had seen him in the hallway. But she didn't want to be attracted to him! Especially now that she knew he was a friend to a rapist!

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Brand jerked Avalon back into the room. "Where is my wife?"

Avalon and Althea glanced at each other. This only angered Brand more.

"Damn you, woman! Where is my wife? Tell me now, or I will make you wish..."

Avalon glared right back at him. "Or what? You'll rape me again?"

Silence filled the room. Stunned, Gandalf relaxed his hold on Althea, and she broke free. She rushed over, and began hitting Brand. "Let her go, you fiend! You defiler of innocent women! Release her!"

Brand had enough trouble trying to hold onto the squirming Avalon. He was glad when his friend once again took the other woman back into his arms. Brand gritted his teeth and glared at the woman that still fired his passion. Even now, he was as hard as a rock, even though he was angry with her. He should have been worried about his wife, not contemplating tossing this wildcat on her back and having her again. His mind was full of thoughts of how it had felt to be buried deep inside this woman's shaven pussy. He wanted to hold and squeeze her tits again. He wanted to suck her nipples deep into his mouth. He wanted...

Brand shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you, woman!"

Avalon glared right back at him. Despite her anger, Brand sensed that her passion was rising just as quickly as his was. "You stupid, ignorant moron!" Avalon shouted back at him. "I am your wife! Why do you think I was trying to escape?"

Brand slowly relaxed his hold on her arm. Avalon jerked free of him. She turned to glare at Gandalf. "Release my cousin, you oaf!" Her voice demanded he comply. Avalon could be quite the "lady of the manor" when she needed to be. Gandalf slowly relaxed his hold on Althea, but not before he ran his hands lingeringly along her arms. Althea shivered in arousal at his touch. But she hurried over to stand next to Avalon.

"What were you doing in the forest unaccompanied?" Brand demanded of his new wife, his voice hoarse.

Avalon tossed her long hair defiantly back over her shoulders, raised her chin and looked down her nose at him. "The same thing you were, apparently. I wanted to be alone."

"Your father should not have allowed you to leave the keep without guards," Brand answered her accusingly.

Althea stepped forward. "We didn't know she had gone until it was dark out. By then, I didn't want to raise an alarm..." Her voice trailed away when Lord Brandeis turned his glare on her.

"Leave us alone, Gandalf. Take Lady Althea down to the main hall."

"No!" Althea evaded Gandalf's hand. "I won't leave Avalon alone with you."

Brand smiled, reaching out to grab Avalon's hand, holding up the ring he had placed on her finger such a short time ago. He had not noticed the ring when he had first accused her. "She is my wife. Now, get out, both of you! Tell her father she is fine, by the way. And no one is to disturb us until morning."

Avalon gasped at his words, and Althea opened her mouth to protest. But Gandalf grabbed her arm and pulled her forcefully from the room. Avalon glared at her husband. "I see your man is as much a bully and brute as you are."

Brand flushed brightly at her words. He wasn't proud of how he had acted yesterday with her. But her resistance, he reminded himself, had quickly faded. And the second and third times he had taken her, she had not resisted him at all. And the fourth time, she had been the one to awaken him. He smiled slowly as he recalled that last time.

Avalon stamped her foot angrily, seeing the look on his face. "Stop it!"

Brand smiled at her. "Stop what, *wife*?"

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Avalon turned angrily away from him. She didn't want to be reminded of any of their time together. Just looking at him was arousing her again. She sat down huffily on the side of the bed. Nothing was going as it should, she thought. She felt the bed move beside her. She turned and saw he had sat down next to her.

"A fine mess we have here, my sweet, isn't it?" Brand spoke softly. "We have no choice but to go forward, you know. We can't tell anyone what happened between us yesterday. It would only hurt and disgrace our parents, which neither of us would want to do, would we?"

Avalon heard his words and nodded. He was right. The time to speak up had been before the wedding, not now. She turned to look at him. She saw the clear blueness of his eyes, his curving mouth. She remembered the way his mouth had trailed over her skin, kissing her, nipping her tender spots. She squirmed on the bed.

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Brand lifted his hand to stroke along her jaw line. He wanted her, no matter who she was. He held her eyes as he bent slowly towards her. Very lightly, he touched his mouth to hers. Her lips trembled as they met his, and then softened, opening. His tongue swept inside, finding heat within. Kissing her deeply, he leaned into her and pressed until they were lying back upon the bed. Slowly, gently, almost as if he'd done this countless times before, his hand left her jaw, and moved down over her upper chest, to finally cup her full breast. He stroked the globe tenderly, gently.

He shifted them farther onto the bed as Avalon moved into his touch, her hips moving restlessly on the covers beneath them. He easily found the fastenings of her gown and released them. Avalon gasped when she felt the cool air of the room touch her now naked breasts. Before she could move, though, Brand lowered his head to kiss and suckle at her bountiful breasts.

He cupped the full globes eagerly, caressing them tenderly, lovingly. He suckled her nipples until they were beaded up tight and long. Each nipple glistened wetly in the candlelight of the room. Brand raised his head to gaze at her body. He praised her, telling her how beautiful she was. He raised her skirt

to her waist, and his hand again explored her pussy lips. He smiled when he felt the wetness there. He kissed her deeply as his fingers moved inside her.

Avalon moaned and shifted to accommodate his every move. She lay wantonly on the covers, her thighs widespread, dress pushed above her waist, and her bodice shoved down so her breasts were bared to his gaze and mouth. She couldn't stop the soft cries that were escaping her, as he touched her smooth lips, and moved his fingers within her body. His touch set her body on fire once again. She felt overwhelmed by emotions. She should fight him, shouldn't she? But her mind told her no...he was her husband, after all. And she had been taught that all good wives "submit" to their husband. But what her body was feeling was so much more than submission.

Brand sucked her nipples eagerly while he moved his fingers, first one, and then two, inside her narrow passage. She was so tight, but as he worked her, he could feel her body relaxing even more. He used the wetness of her secretions to slip a third finger in. Avalon's soft cries of desire told him where she liked to be touched the most. She was so close to reaching the pinnacle of her desire!

He wanted to be inside her again. But he also wanted her to realize her desire for him was not something she could control. He raised his head from her luscious breasts and kissed her open mouth deeply. His tongue stroked hers. He was surprised when she moved her tongue against his, and then she actually sucked his tongue into her mouth. His cock got even harder in response to her simplest touch.

Brand pulled away from her slightly, but Avalon's eyes remained closed as he took her higher and higher. Her hips thrashed on the bed below him, and her moans were music to his ears. But he wanted more from her. He leaned back down and lightly bit her lower lip. Avalon's eyes darted open in surprise. He could see the passion fog that clouded her gaze. He moved one finger to her clit

to tease her, and he saw her jerk in response, her eyes glued to his own, now widely aware.

When Brand spoke next, his voice was very husky. "Yes," he told her softly. "See me. Know that you are mine to touch, as I want." He waited and his fingers paused until he saw full awareness creep into her eyes. And then he resumed his erotic and teasing touches to her tender flesh. Avalon squirmed to get away, but he held her fast to the bed. And then his touch alone held her in place.

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Avalon gasped, wanting to move away, but unable to budge from his erotic touch. Even though his eyes were gazing into hers, almost seeing her soul, she couldn't move away from what he was giving her and how he was making her feel. And then, the waves broke over her so suddenly, she gasped. She felt her body, her emotions, flying toward the heavens out of her control. His eyes held hers steadily as her body jerked beneath him, and her soft womanly folds spasmed around his fingers, flooding his hand with wetness. Her cries filled the silent room.

Avalon heard his voice as if from a great distance. "Yes, my sweet wife. You are *mine*! I will touch you whenever I want, and you will come just as you have now. You will not be able to resist me. Your body will betray what your mind tells you to do."

Brand watched her face as his words penetrated her euphoric fog. As he saw true comprehension dawn in her eyes, he slowly withdrew his fingers, and then kissed her lips softly. "Sleep for now, my pet. We will deal with all the problems later." Brand pulled her close, ignoring his own raging arousal, for the present.

Chapter 4

Althea pulled free of Gandalf as soon as they reached the main hall. She felt totally frustrated at having been hauled away from her dearest friend, and guilty that she should have fought harder to stay with her, protect her. But she had also felt drawn to the big, strong giant that had worked so strenuously at keeping her away from her cousin all afternoon and evening. She had tried to remain aloof from his attentions before the wedding, but something about him had slowly worn her down.

She had soon found herself smiling at his little jokes, and finally laughing out loud. As the time passed before the ceremony there were several times their hands would touch and Althea felt her pulse pounding, and her breathing became unsteady. She had worked at avoiding any prolonged contact with this big bear of a man. Sitting at the table, she lost track of how many glasses of wine she drank. When she least expected it, he asked her to dance with him. While they were holding hands, she glanced up, and their eyes met, then held. Dear Lord! Althea felt the zing of attraction and arousal strike through her body like a lightning bolt. The minstrel music suddenly seemed barely audible over the buzzing in her ears.

Althea stumbled in shock as the feelings rushed through her, followed immediately by her comprehension of their meaning. Gandalf caught her against his chest. The feeling of her sensitive breasts, already peaking in excitement, pressed to his hard broad chest, didn't help her composure. She struggled to catch her breath, and finally shoved herself nervously from his arms.

Without warning, Althea turned and left the main hall, nearly running into the small garden, which she, and with begrudged help from Avalon, had carefully cultivated over the years. She hurried to the farthest corner of the garden, and sat down on the bench there. She could feel her breath rushing in and out, and fanned herself with her hand, trying to cool the fevered flush that had risen to her face.

She heard the twigs being crushed beneath his feet just a moment before Gandalf found her hiding place. His soft brown eyes searched her face worriedly. "Are you all right, milady? Did I step on your foot?"

Althea choked back her laughter that it could be something as simple as an injured foot that had caused her to flee from this man's arms so suddenly. She met his eyes to deny his concern, and to say it was nothing, when the look in his eyes stopped her once again. Oh no...she thought. The feelings were still there. She had hoped they had dissolved in the cooler night air, but they had not. She found herself wanting to be held in his arms, and kissed and more. She had loved her husband, and she had missed him terribly. But never had he made her feel such chaotic feelings, such heat, with just a light touch of a hand, or a simple glance from his eyes.

"No, Sir Gandalf. You didn't step on my foot." Althea's voice trailed away as he reached out to lightly touch her jaw line, stroking his fingers lingeringly across her petal-soft skin.

"Good. I would hate the thought of hurting you," Gandalf told her softly, his fingers now stroking across her full, lower lip. "In any way, any place or any time."

Althea shook her head as Gandalf took her hand and pulled her slowly to her feet. She was unaware that she said "no" until he questioned what she was saying no to.

"What is it that you say 'no' to? No more dancing? No more sitting outside in the cool night air?"

Althea shivered as he pulled her close to his chest, his strong arms enfolding her slender form gently. He bent his head and lightly kissed her lips. Althea surprised them both by surging forward in his embrace, her arms moving to hold his head close. Her own mouth opened and her tongue stroked along his lips.

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Gandalf didn't need any further encouragement. He met her tongue with his own, stroking hers eagerly. His one hand moved from her back, caressing her spine all the way down, until he cupped one rounded buttock. He squeezed her full flesh, and captured the moan that escaped her parted lips in surprise. But there could be no denying the way she moved against his own growing hardness, her hips squirming, wiggling back and forth across his cock.

Gandalf lowered his head to kiss her neck, all the way down to her cleavage, which showed delectably above her gown. Althea moved in his grasp, not to escape, but to get closer to him. Her movement allowed him to slip his hand between their bodies and find the edge of her dress. He tugged downward, until her nipple was exposed to the cool night air. He lifted his head, to gaze down at her womanly beauty. He smiled at the peaked nipple.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered softly, just a moment before he enveloped her turgid bud in his hot mouth. His sucking began instantly, drawing her deeper into his heat. Althea gasped in arousal, and her hands caressed his hair as he suckled her breast. She didn't care if someone saw them either!

"Do you like that, my sweet?" he asked her gently. He licked at her nipple, and then pulled the dress a bit farther down until her whole breast popped free.

He quickly cupped the small globe in his large hand. His touch was gentle but firm as he stroked her nipple, and then he began squeezing her small, pert breast. Althea moaned in agreement. He laughed softly. He wanted this woman. She was like a fire in his loins, almost from the first moment he saw her.

He moved them back to the bench, seating himself, and pulling her down onto his lap. He easily captured her mouth, and then his hand moved to lift her skirts. He caressed her soft thighs eagerly, and when he neared the top, Althea spread them for him. When his fingers moved between them, she cried out in surprise, shocked at the intensity of emotions and sensations winging their way through her body at his touch. He moved his fingers over her soft bush, and caressed her lips. When he moved his finger to her clit, she jerked in surprise. He pulled back as her eyes flew open and she stared at him as he teased her tender, sensitive love button.

"What are you doing?" Althea gasped in stunned disbelief. Her husband had never touched her like that. "Oh, dear Lord!" Her voice broke as he pressed and pulled back, touching her over and over.

Gandalf persisted, flicking her clit relentlessly, stroking his fingers along her lips, teasingly inserting one finger, then two, and working her higher and higher. He lowered his head to find her taut hard nipples, licking them, nipping at them gently, sucking them into his hot mouth. Releasing her nipple with a loud plopping noise, the cooler night air beaded her nipple even tighter than before.

Soon Althea couldn't control the restless movement of her body, her hips squirming on his lap, and Gandalf increased his erotic tempo even more. Finally, when Althea felt totally confused, elated and overwhelmed, her body released its sexual tension. She reached her first orgasmic height right there, on a virtual stranger's lap, in the middle of her uncle's garden, and on her cousin's wedding day. She gasped in air frantically, as her flesh spasmed around Gandalf's tender fingers and her hips jerked out of her control.

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Gandalf folded her close against his chest as her emotions raced out of control, and then stroked her lightly along her soft womanly lips, her thighs, and finally kissed her mouth tenderly. He was so hard he could barely contain himself, but he had also realized that the gentle woman he held in his arms, even though she was a widow, was still a “near virgin” in her experience with sex. He could wait. He had decided in those few moments with Althea that he wanted more than just one time with this woman.

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When her eyelids finally drifted upward, it was Gandalf’s warm, soft brown eyes that she saw first. And then she saw the small smile that barely curved his lips. Lips that had only moments ago been sucking at her breasts, she realized with a start. He gently moved his fingers over her brow, moving back wisps of hair. Althea became conscious that those same fingers had, only seconds earlier, been touching her —

Althea cried out softly in the night, and jerked her body out of Gandalf’s relaxed grip. She pulled her gown up to conceal her breasts, and stepped a few steps from the bench.

“Oh dear Lord!” she whispered half to herself. “What have I done?”

Before Gandalf could react, she turned once again, and took flight from him, back through the garden. Gandalf reached the hall to find that everyone was taking his or her places for the wedding to begin. He ran his fingers through his tousled hair, and moved over to join Brand. He ignored the odd, questioning look his friend had given him.

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Althea had pulled free from Gandalf a second time that evening the minute her feet left the last stair leading to the main hall of the castle. She was hurrying away from him, across the hall, before he had a chance to say a word. But he was just as determined to talk to her as she appeared to be avoiding him. They needed to talk about what had occurred earlier, between them in the garden. But every corner he rounded, he would see her scooting around the far corner, just seconds ahead of him. Gandalf, though, was persistent, perhaps even stubborn about certain things.

Althea was a scant second away from closing her bedchamber door, when a large foot stuck itself between the door and the jam. Althea fought for a few moments, pushing against his weight. But it was a losing battle. He gave one good shove and Althea tumbled backward into the room. Tripping over her feet, she continued falling backward until she landed on the bed. She rose up on her elbows, looking as he closed and locked her door. She watched as he slipped the key into a pocket of his clothing.

"Give me that key!" Althea protested, though her voice sounded weak and without conviction, even to herself.

Gandalf moved across the room, standing at the edge of her bed, looking down at her. "Not until we talk about what happened earlier."

Althea tried to right herself, but there was no way to do so gracefully because when she had fallen, her legs had parted. And that is where he chose to stand. If she sat up, she would be facing his abdomen, and groin—or she could try and scoot across her bed, but that would be totally undignified. She paused to remind herself that she had already lost a good deal of her dignity in the garden, earlier in the evening. And thinking of that just caused her to blush bright red.

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Gandalf smiled, guessing where her thoughts were probably taking her. He moved one hand out to touch her hair. His touch was soft, light, but Althea reacted by jerking away, and trying to scoot across the bed after all. But Gandalf was quicker. He planted one knee on the bed, between her thighs, and catching her dress beneath it. She was pinned helplessly as he moved over her.

She lowered herself back onto the bed, and his hands came to rest on the bed beside her. She looked up at him, looming above her. Her breath came rapidly, and unevenly, as she waited for his next move.

But Gandalf didn't say anything. He just stayed above her, letting her feel his presence, his heat, seep into her body. Finally, Althea tried pushing at his chest. When he didn't move, or react still, she yelled at him, "Are you going to rape me, like your liege lord did to my cousin?"

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The silence that followed her words was oppressive. She could feel the tension in Gandalf's body, and for a moment she wondered if she had pushed him too far. Gandalf lowered his body to rest on hers, his hips meeting hers, his chest mashing her soft breasts. He let his body control her completely.

"Brand has never taken a woman by force. I don't know what happened between your cousin and him, but I seriously doubt it was rape. I have never forced myself on a woman. I didn't force you earlier, if you will but be honest with yourself for a moment, and stop being so scared about your own emotions."

Althea glared back at him. "I am *not* scared!"

Gandalf stroked his fingertips along the side of her face so lightly that she shivered. "I saw the look on your face when I touched you, Althea. I felt the tremors in your body, your surprise, your confusion." He shifted himself to lie

beside her, his fingers stroking down the side of her neck to tease along the tops of her heaving breasts. "Tell me that wasn't the first time for you."

Althea glared back at him. "I *am* a widow, sir!" she declared hotly. Then she added quickly, as if she'd forgotten earlier, "And a lady."

He smiled. "That is not what I meant, my sweet, and you know it."

Althea blushed brightly. Oh yes, she knew. She had heard other women talking over the years, and she knew that she had never experienced what they had been talking about in her marriage bed. She was angry at herself for feeling it now, with a man who wasn't her husband. "I am not a slut, sir!"

Gandalf laughed. "I would kill anyone who said you were, my love. You are a beautiful, kind and caring woman. You are a woman who obviously has a great capacity for feeling, and loving."

His words, spoken so softly in the silent room, warmed her to her soul. "But, we only met, sir...and you are not my husband —"

Gandalf smiled even bigger. "A lot of men and women are not married and they find physical pleasure with each other." He cupped one of her breasts, fondling her through her dress, feeling her nipple beading up under his fingers. "I can feel how you respond to me, Althea. You cannot deny your body's deepest responses."

Althea fought against her feelings, and her thoughts. She loved his touch, wanting so much more, but her mind was telling her it wasn't right. She opened her mouth to deny her feelings, when he kissed her deeply, his tongue finding her own. And then he spoke again, and his words stunned her to silence.

"Marry me, Althea. Come away with us tomorrow. I don't have a lot to offer, but I know we could be happy. And you could still be with your cousin —"

Althea didn't know what to do, but mentioning that she could stay with Avalon made a great impact on her. She was worried about her future; she was worried about how Avalon would adjust to her new home. Even if Gandalf

added the part about Avalon to entice her into making the decision in his favor, she doubted he added the last part knowing that she had confided her worries about her own future here to him earlier.

“Say yes!” He kissed her again.

Althea lay beside him quietly, stunned, nervous, and very scared. He excited her, thrilled her, not like her husband. He had been safe. Stunned, she heard her own voice answer “yes.”

Gandalf kissed her again, and then dragged them both off the bed. “Come, now. We will be married tonight, before the priest leaves.” A disbelieving Althea followed him downstairs to the hall. And a short time later, Althea found that she was married to a stranger.

Chapter 5

Brand stood at the back of the hall, watching his best friend get married. To say he was surprised would have been a gross understatement. He had awakened a short time earlier, and decided it would be better to let his wife continue sleeping. He wasn't in the mood for an argument, and so he had gone in search of Gandalf. And instead of a sympathetic drinking buddy, he found another wedded man. Damn! He thought to himself, what the hell could have come over his friend in such a short time? He turned and left the hall before the new revelers had time to discover him. He walked quietly back to his bedchamber.

The room was as he had left it, in darkness, his wife sound asleep in the bed. She was even still partially dressed. He gently pulled the covers down and began to undress her. He moved her easily from side to side to undo fastenings, and then to pull her gown down off her shoulders. He paused to stare at her full white breasts, gleaming in the faint light of the single candle he had lit at the bedside table.

As he watched, her nipples beaded up tightly in response to the slightly cool air that danced over her naked flesh. Very lightly, he circled one nipple with the tip of his index finger, enjoying how it puckered up even more tightly. He then moved to the other nipple, treating it to the same sweet attention. He stopped as Avalon shifted in her sleep.

After she quieted, he pulled her gown off the rest of the way. He didn't pull the covers back over her now naked body. He trailed his hand slowly upward from her knee, enjoying the feel of her warm, soft flesh beneath his palm. He

rested his hand over her shaven mound for a long moment, and then he began touching her lightly, teasingly. He wasn't surprised when she shifted about restlessly in her sleep, and her thighs eased apart.

He took advantage and his hand slid between her warm thighs. He stroked the soft lips, and eased his fingers deeper into her pussy. One finger slid forward to find her hidden clit, which he knew was extremely sensitive.

He touched her lightly, and her hips reacted instantly, jerking in response to his touch. It didn't take too many more touches, and he felt her wetness around his other fingers. He eased one, then two fingers inside her. He moved more fully onto the bed, between her spread thighs. His fingers never stopped moving as he lowered his head to her smooth mound. He eased his tongue between her soft lips, nuzzling and pushing until he found her love center.

He licked her lightly, and then firmly, alternating quickly; light flicks of tongue with softer, gentler and longer strokes. His fingers continued to work her flesh eagerly, pressing forward. Suddenly Avalon cried out, coming awake, and her liquids flooded his hand and mouth at the same time. Brand moved back from her body, kissing her mouth, letting her taste her own passion on his lips. He kissed her and soothed her, and told her to go back to sleep.

Avalon, confused in passion and still half asleep, thought she must be having a dream, and went back to sleep.

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Avalon awoke to Althea's voice telling her to get up; they didn't have much time to get ready. Avalon sat up slowly, unaware of her nakedness, and let the covers drop to her waist.

"Not much time? What do you mean?" She pushed her hair back behind her shoulders. She reached over to where Althea had set a tray with some tea upon

it. She sipped the tea, frowning at her cousin who was bustling around the room. Althea tossed a robe to her.

“Get up, Avalon! Brand has given us an hour to pack and then he is leaving.”

Avalon swung her long slender legs out of the bed, pulling the robe on as she went. “Good!” she said happily. “Good riddance, I say. Let him go and I’ll stay here.” She poured some water into a basin, rinsing her face.

Brand’s voice startled her, coming from the doorway. “If you are not packed and ready to leave in one hour, my sweet wife, I will toss you over my horse and ride out of here with you.”

Avalon spun around and threw the damp towel she had been using at him. “How dare you give me orders? I am no peasant to be talked to in such a manner.” She walked back over to the bed and sat back down, sipping her tea. Suddenly, her chin was lifted by Brand’s strong hand.

“Wife, if you are not ready, you will leave here over my horse, even if you are buck naked. Now get dressed, damn it!” Brand spun on his heel and slammed the door behind him.

Avalon hurled the cup of tea she was holding at the door. She turned and saw Althea was standing there staring at her with her mouth open. She blushed brightly. “I’m sorry, Althea. Things aren’t going the way I thought, are they?”

Althea shook her head at the younger woman. “Avalon, dear, there is something you don’t know...” She stumbled over her words. It was obvious to her that her dearest friend’s wedding night had not been a “maiden’s dream.” So how could she tell her that she had gone and gotten herself married last night also, and enjoyed the most fabulous night of lovemaking in her entire life! Her mind raced back over the events last night.

How she made it through the wedding ceremony with her knees shaking so badly was a mystery to her! Her uncle had toasted them several times, and then he had disappeared for a short time. He had returned with a small parcel

wrapped in velvet. He handed it to her with tears in his eyes, saying he wanted her to have a small token of his esteem and thanking her for all she had done for his daughter over the years. He had ignored her protests and insisted that she accept it. She had opened it to find the most exquisite pearl necklace she had ever seen. With tears in her eyes, she had hugged her uncle. Shortly after that, Gandalf had suggested they go up to her room, since they would be leaving early in the morning.

Blushing brightly, she had followed her new husband back up the stairs to her room. Once inside, he had taken her into his arms and proceeded to kiss her deeply. Her mouth had opened eagerly to meet his. Gandalf maneuvered her easily back onto the bed. He took the package from her hands, setting it aside. His hand held her chin and he gently kissed her mouth.

Slowly, he loosened the fastenings of her gown until he could pull it up over her head. He stroked his hand down the side of her neck, over her shoulder and down to her small, pert breast. He lightly caressed her responsive flesh, playing with her nipple until it was budded up tightly. He lowered his head to lick the nipple before he took her deeply inside his mouth.

Althea moaned as he suckled her nipple, laving it now and again with strokes of his tongue. Her back bowed upwards off the bed, toward the heat of his body. She moved her hands to caress his head, his shoulders. Her fingers began pulling and tugging at his clothes. She wanted to feel his flesh against her own. She must have spoken out loud because Gandalf lifted his head and quickly tossed his clothes aside. It was his turn to moan as he felt her hot body next to his own.

He cupped her breast again, massaging the small globe and then sliding his hand down over her tummy. He tangled his fingers in her nest of curls for a moment before sliding between her thighs. Althea shifted on the bed, eagerly giving him full access to her body. Her hands couldn't stop touching and

stroking his chest, his own taut nipples. When she teased one nipple with her fingernail, it was Gandalf who groaned in response. But he didn't stop his own tormenting caresses of her soft womanly flesh.

Gandalf found her secret spot of arousal and began lightly stroking her, while continuing to caress her soft lips. He felt her wetness just a moment before he heard her soft whisper of "yes." Over and over, he continued to tease and caress her until she finally demanded that he continue, with a cry of "please." He moved over her in the bed, pausing to kiss her open mouth deeply.

"Althea." He spoke her name softly. "Althea, open your eyes, my sweet wife."

He waited until she slowly lifted her lids to gaze at him. He lifted her thighs, placing them around his waist, and thrust home. He paused, feeling her tightness, which surprised him, but Althea's legs closed tightly around, pulling him close and refusing to let him stop. She reached up and pulled his head down to kiss him, then her hands reached up to squeeze his chest and tease his nipples.

Her soft cries of "yes, yes" grew louder and faster, matching his thrusts into her hot sweet flesh. And when her fingers closed on his nipples, squeezing them tight, he cried out and shot his seed deep within her body. Althea felt her body take control and she climaxed around his shaft, milking him dry.

Exhausted, Gandalf fell to the bed next to her. He pulled her into his arms, kissing her hair lightly. And that was the last Althea remembered of her own wedding night, since she had fallen asleep almost within the next moment. His kisses, soft and sweet, had awakened her this morning. She had reached for him eagerly, but had found he was already dressed. She frowned, unsure of what was to happen now. He had kissed her worried brow though.

"We must hurry, my love. Brand has decided that we are leaving this morning for home. We don't have much time for you to pack."

Althea had sat up abruptly. "Avalon?"

"Don't worry, darling. You'll have to time help her also. But you will have to get a move on." He kissed her again and then left her alone.

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Shaking her head to clear away the erotic memories, Althea looked at her younger cousin. "Last night...well, after you and his lordship retired, I... Uhm..."

Avalon rushed over to her dearest friend. "What is wrong, Al? Has something happened? Did one of his lordship's men harass you?" She was angry and was ready to rush to her friend's defense.

Althea shook her head. "No, Avalon. I married Sir Gandalf last night."

Avalon felt as if she had been hit in the stomach. "What? You don't even know him!"

Althea blushed brightly as her cousin pointed out the obvious. "I know him as well as I knew my first husband!" Remembering their hot encounter in the garden, she added, "I know him better, in fact."

Avalon saw her dear cousin's flush and felt immediate guilt. She hugged Althea. "I'm so sorry, my dearest friend. I am taking my anger and hurt out on you like a silly child. Please forgive me."

Althea nodded, wiping away the tears that had gathered in her eyes. "Of course, Avalon. But you see, this way I will be coming with you, so you won't be alone."

Avalon paused in picking out a traveling garment to wear. "That isn't why you..."

"No! Of course not, silly goose. He asked me to marry him, and even though you and I had not really discussed it, we knew that my position here in your father's house would be questionable," Althea reassured her. Avalon nodded

and poured out more water to bathe with. She stripped off her robe, and taking up the damp cloth began running it over her face.

Avalon thought to herself that it would be wonderful to have Althea with her, since it appeared she truly had no way out of this marriage after all. She picked up the sweet scented soap and lathered it lightly on the cloth. She ran the cloth over her arms and then down to her breasts. She paused as she felt the sensitivity in her nipples. She absently rubbed them back and forth, not wanting to feel the tingling feelings that rushed back through her as she did so. Abruptly, she moved to her legs and feet.

Lastly she moved the cloth to between her upper thighs. She distinctly felt sensitive there! She stopped suddenly and made lather in her hands and smeared it over the stubble she felt on her mound. She pulled the razor from its leather sheath and started to shave off the pesky stubble.

She stopped suddenly, turning to look at Althea. "Did you have time to..."

Althea looked up from her packing and saw what Avalon was referring to. She blushed brightly. She shook her head, knowing it was the custom, but time had not permitted all the "niceties" last night. Avalon finished her mound and lips then. She rinsed herself thoroughly, enjoying the smooth feeling beneath her fingers. She put the memory of Brand's surprise out of her mind. She set the razor down and ran across the room, locking the bedroom door. She grabbed her cousin's hand on the way back.

"Let's do it now then! I can help you this time."

Althea wanted to protest, but tradition won over. At Avalon's direction, she lifted her skirt high and lay down on the bed on a dry cloth. Avalon was immediately next to her, smiling at her cousin. She looked at her cousin's darker brown bush. Her own had been a pale blond to match her hair. "I doubt I will do as good a job as you and Tilda did on me, but I will try." She picked up a small pair of scissors and began snipping away the brown bushy pubic hair. Finally

she had it down to stubble, and rubbed her fingers over it. Althea shivered in reaction, but nodded for Avalon to go on.

Avalon lathered up her sweet soap again and spread it over her cousin's mound and lips. Slowly she picked up the razor and began shaving off her cousin's pubic hair.

Avalon looked up at Althea once. "Did you and Gandalf... last night?"

Althea blushed brightly. She nodded yes. She could feel herself getting aroused even though it was her cousin's fingers touching her. She couldn't help but remember how wonderful it had felt when he had touched her last night. Avalon wanted to ask more, she could see it in her face, but she held her tongue and finished shaving her. She rinsed her off and said, "Done!" She pulled Althea back to her feet and the two women hugged each other.

Avalon pulled back. "How does it feel to be hairless again, Althea?"

Althea reached down and rubbed her fingers over her shaven mound and lips. She felt her wetness. It felt wonderful, she thought to herself. She dropped her skirts and said that it had been a long time and would take a bit to get used to again. She picked up the razor and soap and dropped them into Avalon's satchel.

Both women spun suddenly as a key turned the lock in the door. Brand walked in and for a moment Gandalf and the guards in the hall had a clear view of his voluptuously beautiful wife. He slammed the door shut though and glared at Avalon. "What the hell have you two women been doing up here the last hour? We are leaving now!"

He couldn't miss the bright blush that stained both women's cheeks, nor the guilty and concealing look that passed between them. He turned to Althea. "Is that her bag?"

"Yes, Lord Brandeis. We are almost finished, truly." She pointed to the traveling clothes laid out over a chair.

"All right," Brand spoke roughly. "I give you five more minutes. I'll be back through that door then and you will travel in whatever you have on!"

Angrily, he slammed the door once again behind him. This time, though, he noted he didn't hear any china breaking on the wall behind him. He noticed that Gandalf had sent the guards on their way and was waiting for him. He was leaning on the opposite wall, his arms folded casually across his chest. "Is Althea all packed?"

Gandalf nodded. "She had Avalon's maid pack for her while she went to help Avalon." He rubbed his slightly stubbly chin in thought. "You know, Brand, the two of them are very close it seems."

Brand nodded his head. Thinking back over the two women's guilty looks a short time earlier, he wondered just what had been going on in there. He had heard of women who preferred the affection of another woman, to a man. He had even seen examples of such loving at the king's court in London. But surely...

His friend interrupted his thoughts. "I could see that Althea considered the fact that she would be traveling with her cousin a plus as I asked her to marry me. She was unsure of what her position would be here, with her cousin gone."

Brand didn't feel any better as his friend went on talking. Damn! He thought, surely it couldn't be... He had seen how Avalon had reacted to his touch, his lovemaking. He stopped, though, as he remembered that her reactions had been almost against her will.

"We are ready, milord." Avalon's cool voice interrupted him. He turned and saw how beautiful and stately she could look. She was dressed in a lovely deep green traveling gown and cloak. Her feet were covered in sturdy boots and her long blond hair had been braided into a single thick rope at the base of her neck. She didn't stop, but walked past him, carrying her satchel. Althea followed, but

she smiled at her own husband as she followed her cousin. Gandalf gave his friend a rueful smile and followed the ladies down the stairs.

Brand was the last to come into the open courtyard. He was surprised to see that Avalon had already seated herself astride her horse, her satchel hanging from the saddle. He saw her father had tears in his eyes, and was pressing some things into her satchel for her. He noted that all of his men were mounted as was Althea, now wearing a lovely burgundy cloak, and Gandalf, who was looking quite pleased with himself.

Brand shook his father-in-law's hand and vaulted himself into the saddle of his destrier. He sat taller than anyone, Avalon noted. She turned her horse abruptly and cantered out of the courtyard, through the gates. Brand turned angrily. It was custom for the "lord" to lead the riders, but Avalon seemed determined to make him angry. Before he could charge after her, he felt a hand touch his knee. He looked down and saw her father looking up at him.

"Have patience, my son. She is a headstrong and willful girl. It is my fault for letting her have her way in most things, so please don't blame her."

Brand met the older man's eyes and nodded. He signaled his men and then cantered out the gates also.

Chapter 6

Avalon rode her horse proudly, not wanting to show that riding a horse today, of all days, was just not something she was enjoying. Her tender womanly flesh was protesting, but she wouldn't give any sign of weakness to the man who was now her husband. When they broke for lunch, she thought she would eat with Althea, but Gandalf had other plans. And after gathering some food for them both, he spirited her away, a short distance from the group.

Avalon ignored the grins and sly sidelong looks that followed the departing couple. She seated herself a short distance from Brand and his men, eating her food silently. She couldn't stop from shifting uncomfortably on the hard log. She was having her doubts about being able to finish the day's ride at all just then.

Finally, they started to break their camp. Avalon mounted her horse gingerly, shifting about, not able to find any comfortable place anymore. She saw Althea and Gandalf returning at the last moment and couldn't believe the bright flush that stained her cousin's face, or the few tiny leaves that were in her hair. It was easy to see what they had been doing during their lunch break. Gandalf just laughed heartily as the men made a few jesting remarks. Avalon, though, was quite surprised when he pulled Althea up to sit across his thighs, in front of him. He turned his large horse and followed Brand's lead.

Avalon stayed in the middle of the caravan, not really wanting to have any more contact with her husband, or her cousin, at that moment. They rode on, and Avalon kept squirming and shifting on her horse, which was making the poor beast skittish. She never knew what alerted Brand, but he turned his horse suddenly, and rode back to her side. Without a word, he reached across and

pulled her onto his own thighs. He gave an order to one of his men to take charge of her horse, and then galloped back to the front of the caravan.

His strong, muscular arm around her waist prevented her from struggling. It didn't take long, though, for Avalon to realize that to ride this way, cushioned by his thighs, was much more comfortable than astride her own saddle. But she was not going to thank him. She turned her face forward, and tried to ignore the man that held her in his arms so intimately.

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Brand just shook his head as she tilted her chin upwards. He was a wise man and decided not to press any further confrontations with his new bride. There would doubtless be more than enough of those ahead of them.

The sun was just starting to set, when he ordered them to stop and make camp for the night. He had hoped to make it to his castle by nightfall, but he had significantly slowed the pace once he had seen how uncomfortable Avalon was. At least they were on his lands. It didn't take long at all for his men to settle the horses for the night and get a fire going. A tent had been erected, and Avalon and Althea had disappeared within it as soon as they could. He imagined that Avalon was lamenting her sorrows to her cousin.

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Inside the small tent, Avalon had poured a small basin of water and was washing herself. She felt dirty and tired and sore. Althea was all smiles though, talking about Gandalf this or that. She talked about how lovely this land was, and how Gandalf had kept pointing all different points of interest as they passed them. Avalon listened in silence as Althea talked about anything and everything. She couldn't be rude to her dearest cousin, because it was so obvious that she

was truly happy, which was something Althea had not been for a long time. She would not do anything to make her sad, nor would she let anyone else, she decided just then.

Althea was already washed and changed before Avalon had made much progress at all. The older woman offered to help her, saying it would be time to eat soon. Too tired to argue, Avalon let Althea begin to wash her tired, aching body. She was surprised she was so tired. She was used to riding, so why was she tired now? She knew why she was aching between her thighs. She blamed her husband for that! Avalon was standing naked in the tent, having just finished washing, when the tent flap opened. She gasped, looking hastily for something to cover herself. Althea was delving in her bag for something for her to wear.

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Brand took in the beauty of his naked wife. She was a beautiful woman, he reminded himself. Her full breasts, nipped in waist curving into rounded womanly hips and buttocks, and finally her long thighs that guarded her most passionate secrets. Just looking at her could make his cock rock hard. He was tempted to tell Althea to leave, and to hell with food. But he remembered how uneasily Avalon had sat her horse, and he knew that tonight was not the night for reminding her of her wifely duties.

He spoke brusquely. "It's time to stop your dawdling. The food should be ready soon. As soon as everyone has eaten, we'll need to be getting down to sleep." He turned away and missed the look of panic on Avalon's face at his last words.

He was sitting a short distance from his men when Avalon finally left the tent. Althea had joined Gandalf several minutes earlier, and he had begun to wonder if Avalon had decided to escape out the back of the tent. He wouldn't put it beyond her. He spoke up as she neared the fire.

"Come here, Avalon."

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She knew from the tone of his voice that she wouldn't win any confrontations. She imagined he was probably as tired as she was. He probably had even less sleep than she. He motioned for her to sit down. She noticed that he had placed several folded blankets on the log for her to sit on. He left to get her a plate of food, and then returned to sit beside her.

Avalon took the plate and picked up a piece of the cooked meat. She was surprised to find it so hot and tasty. She closed her eyes as she savored the hot food since lunch had just been a very quick, cold meat and bread.

Brand smiled when he saw the enjoyment on her face. "One of my men is quite a cook, though he doesn't boast about it." He paused to offer her a drink from his cup. Avalon took it and sipped gingerly. The wine was very good, and she took a couple longer swallows before she returned it to him. He smiled and held her gaze as he took the cup. She watched as he quite deliberately turned the cup until he drank from the same spot she had drank from just a moment earlier. She blushed brightly and turned away to take another bite of the delicious meat.

"We all will be retiring soon so we can get an early start in the morning, Avalon. I thought you and Althea could share the tent tonight." Avalon started in surprise at his words, which she noted that Brand ignored. Avalon watched as he turned away, and she guessed that he assumed it was relief she felt that she wouldn't be sharing it with him.

Avalon ate the rest of the tasty food on her plate, occasionally glancing around the group of men nearer the fire. She could barely make out Althea and Gandalf, who were seated at an even greater distance from the fire than she and Brand. They were sitting very close together on a fallen tree and she could see they were laughing softly as Gandalf playfully fed Althea small pieces of food

from his plate. When he stole a kiss from her cousin, Avalon blushed brightly and turned away quickly.

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Brand raised his cup to accept more wine from one of the men who was circling about and filling everyone's cup. He had seen Avalon watching her cousin, and then the bright flush that had stained her cheeks. He was very happy for his oldest friend, but he couldn't help feeling a pang of jealousy as he watched the other married couple happily sharing the little things in life. He held his cup out silently to his wife, who took it and drank quite deeply from it. He nearly spoke to warn her against the potent wine, but he stayed silent as he thought it would probably help her sleep better on the hard ground tonight.

A short time later, his men started preparing their beds for the night. Brand stood as Gandalf and Althea approached them. The other couple was smiling and had their arms wrapped around each other's waists. Avalon smiled at her cousin. She stood to go in with her to their tent when Gandalf's words stopped her.

"I know you suggested the ladies share your tent tonight, Brand. But Althea insists on joining me on the hard ground. She says she has never slept outdoors before and would like to be near me." He smiled down at his wife as he spoke.

Avalon frowned at his words. She had hoped to talk with Althea once they were alone in the tent again. Brand stood and smiled at his friend. "Very well, Gandalf. But if you get cold during the night, Althea, just come in and tell me. It might be a little cooler out here than you are expecting."

Althea laughed and smiled. "I doubt I will get cold. Gand has promised he has secret ways to keep me warm all through the night."

Avalon was the only one who blushed brightly at her cousin's words. Brand laughed, then turned and took Avalon's plate from her. He handed her his cup of wine. "You go on in then, Avalon, and I will leave the plates with one of my men." In just a few short seconds, Avalon was left alone as Althea and Gandalf went back over to where he had made a very cozy nest for the two of them. Brand was giving the plates to one of his men, talking to a couple of them quietly. She shrugged her shoulders, grabbed the blankets she had been sitting on and took off for the tent.

Once she was safely inside the tent, she saw that a wide pallet had been spread out with several blankets already on it. She realized that Brand would be there in just a moment to share that bed with her. She drank down the remaining wine in nearly one gulp. She quickly shed her outer garments and settled between the blankets. Maybe she could pretend to be asleep and he would leave her alone, she thought in her wine-fogged brain.

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It was but a few moments later that the tent flap moved again, and Brand entered the small enclosure. He saw her lying on her side, facing away from him, the covers pulled up, almost over the top of her head. He chuckled softly to himself, and quickly shed all of his own clothes. He knew that their combined body heat should keep them plenty warm during the night. He extinguished the single candle and moved to lie next to her on the low pallet.

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Lying on her side, at the farthest edge of the pallet, she could feel his heat behind her. He almost completely took up the remaining space since he was lying on his back. She stiffened her spine, trying not to let her body touch his in

any way. That lasted about a minute. Avalon gasped in surprise as she felt Brand shift and literally turn her in the bed to face him.

Suddenly she saw he was lying on his side, facing her now. The rush of heat from his body, combined with the wine she had consumed, plus being tired from all the stress and strain of the day, hit her at once. She couldn't keep her body stiff. She seemed to turn into butter and melted into his hard, hot body. Brand rearranged the pillows and positioned her body so that her head rested on his upper arm.

"We will stay warm all night as long as we stay close to one another like this." His dark eyes looked deeply into hers. He raised one hand and stroked it along the side of her face, smoothing her hair back. "You are a very beautiful woman, Avalon. How many men have told you that before?"

His words startled her. Surprised, she answered truthfully. "Maybe one or two, milord. I can't really recall at the moment."

* * * * *

Brand smiled at her candor. A more experienced woman would have told him he was the only one. "Well, you are truly a beautiful woman, my wife. Not only do you have a beautiful face, you have a very beautiful body also." His hand moved down her shoulder and onto her upper chest as he spoke. Avalon's breath seemed to catch in her throat as she thought he was going to touch her breast. But he didn't. His hand rested on her upper chest, feeling the erratic rise and fall of her breathing.

It was Avalon herself who finally scooted up a bit so his hand slid onto her full, firm breast. Her eyes closed as she felt his heat enclose the sensitive mound. If asked, she would deny she had moved.

Brand answered her movement by squeezing her full breast, massaging her gently. He could feel her nipple pearling up hard and taut against his palm. God, he thought to himself, this woman could make him hotter and harder than any experienced woman he had ever been with. And her movements were almost always innocent, and not deliberate. He wanted her just then with a white-hot spear of desire. But he knew that she was still too tender from last night, as evidenced by her restless squirming atop her horse today. Any lovemaking tonight would have to be of a different kind, and he wasn't sure if his inexperienced wife was really ready for anything like that just yet.

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Avalon sighed softly in the darkness of the night as Brand continued to tease and caress her breast. She was almost unaware of her own hips squirming about and moving closer to him. Brand of course was completely aware of her every move. "Avalon, honey..."

Her eyelids drifted up slowly to meet his, and she smiled softly. "Yes?" Her throat gave almost a purring sound as he continued to caress her sensitive body.

"You are too sore for us to make love tonight."

His words caused her eyes to come fully open and alert. She became aware of how intimately she was pressed against his hard body, and how his hard shaft was pressing into her soft belly. She tried to scoot away, but he stopped her.

"It is all right, my sweet. There are other ways to appease the hunger that is in both of us tonight, if you want." He spoke softly, waiting to see her response.

"I don't understand what you mean..." Avalon was confused, both by his words, the wine, and the heat that his body was generating and the response her body was giving him.

Brand eased her onto her back, and moved to lie above her, propping himself up by his strong arm. "I will show you, my sweet." Before she could protest, he had pulled her shift up and over her head. She lay naked below him now and his hand moved over her breasts, caressing her full globes, massaging each, until they felt even fuller, firmer, and much more sensitive than before.

He lowered his head to lick her taut nipples and roll his tongue around them. But instead of suckling her as he had before, he lowered his hand to her womanly mound, and gently moved her thighs wide apart. He smiled at the surprised look on Avalon's face as he began to tease her flesh very gently and carefully. When he slid a finger over her hidden pleasure point, her hips jerked upward sharply in response.

"Yes, my sweet, that is what I want. I want you to respond to my touch. I want your body to become mine." His words seduced her as much as his erotic touches. She moaned as he slid one, then two fingers inside her cunt, moving gently within, while his thumb continued to tease and torment her clit.

He watched her face closely, as her passion grew higher and higher, as her body responded more and more to his clever hands. Her hips started jerking and he covered her mouth just as she started to cry out in passionate release. He drank her soft cries of desire as her body came over and over beneath him. His hand became flooded with her sweet juices as she climaxed for him.

As her breathing slowed and her body calmed, he lightly kissed her lips over and over. He raised his hand finally, smoothing it over her body all the way until he once again cupped her breast. The wetness from her climax spread over her skin as he moved his hand. She opened her eyes to look up into his face. She expected to see a gloating look, but instead, he only looked down at her as if trying to read her thoughts. She couldn't stop the smile that seemed to spread her lips just then. He smiled in return, moving just a bit.

Avalon immediately became aware of his hard cock, still hot and pressing against her naked body. "But what about you, milord?" she asked softly, looking up at him.

He smiled at her. "I can wait, my sweet."

"But is there not something I could do for you, as you just did for me?"

Her softly spoken words caused him to groan deeply in near passionate despair. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I would not ask that of you, my sweet wife, not here."

Avalon lay quietly for a moment or two. She was not a selfish person, though some might argue with her. She knew he was in pain, she knew that much about men and women. She also figured that if he could satisfy her with his hand, perhaps she could do the same for him. Without saying a word, she moved her hands down his chest until she felt his hard shaft. Her hands moved to surround it, and Brand groaned loudly in the darkness.

Almost as if he couldn't control it, he shuddered and moved to lie on his back. Avalon followed him, her hands not leaving the hard rod. She quickly noticed that if she moved her hands up and down, he groaned in response. She continued in silence for a while, and then she spoke to him softly. "Tell me what to do, milord, to please you as you did me."

All of Brand's better intentions disappeared at her simple words. He moved his hands down and shifted hers, showing her how and where to touch him. Avalon smiled as he responded with his own groan of passion this time as she continued to caress and stroke his cock. When she moved to cup his sac, his body shivered in response. To both of their surprise, it didn't take long and he was spurting forth like a youth with his first woman. Avalon was not sure what to do next. Brand solved the dilemma for her by pulling her back up into his arms, kissing her deeply and then settling her to sleep in his arms. Soon, they were both soundly and deeply asleep.

Chapter 7

The next day passed uneventfully for everyone. Avalon wasn't as sore, and rode alone. She was glad, though, when the heat of the day reached its highest and Brand called a halt. They were near a small lake, and Avalon and Althea decided a bath sounded like a fine idea. Without saying anything, they gathered up a few necessities and made for the water. They walked a bit, finding a smaller section that was more secluded from where they had made their camp. Avalon stripped her clothes off completely, and walked into the water. She couldn't hold back the little shriek of surprise at how cold the water was. Althea smiled and went into the water, but still wore her short shift.

Althea busied herself washing her hair while Avalon swam around, just enjoying the freedom and the peace and quiet. She floated on her back for a while, listening to Althea talk about some of the things Gandalf had been telling her about their future home. Obviously, Gandalf was sharing personal tidbits so Althea would know what to expect.

But Brand hadn't told her anything about his home, about the people who lived there, or what would happen once they arrived there. She waved her hand in response to Althea saying she was getting out now. Avalon wasn't ready to return to reality yet. She couldn't help but feel that her freedom, what was left of it anyway, would disappear once she reached Brand's home.

Angrily, she turned and dove into the water, swimming under it for a bit and coming up much farther from the shore. She didn't look back to the shore though, just continued swimming. Finally, she was starting to feel tired and knew she would have to head back. She began swimming back to the grassy

shoreline. When she could, she stood and began walking toward the incline. She watched where she was going, wringing her hair out as she went. She was about 10 feet from the shoreline when she sensed something was amiss.

She glanced up, and saw that Althea had been tied up and gagged and several men were standing around. She started to turn to swim away for help when one of the men spoke to her.

"I wouldn't do that if you value the life of your friend here."

Avalon turned and saw that one of the two men holding onto Althea had raised a knife and had it pressed to her throat. She froze, fear rising up in her throat, and she wanted to scream. But she didn't for fear of what they would do to Althea. One of the men walked to the edge of the water, holding his hand out toward her. When he spoke, she realized he was the one who had threatened her friend.

"Come!"

Avalon walked toward him, but refused to take the hand he offered to help her up the grassy bank. He shrugged at her slight, and reached over for her clothes, tossing them to her.

"Get dressed and don't make a sound."

Avalon slowly pulled her shift on over her head, followed by her long gown and the protective over-dress. She saw her boots and walked over to them, not wanting to acknowledge the bright flush of embarrassment staining her cheeks. She pulled her soft boots on, lacing them up slowly, trying to delay until her husband, or one of the other men came along. But no one arrived and her arm was pulled until she stood. Neither she nor Althea were allowed to ride their mounts. Avalon was pulled up in front of the man who had spoken to her, and Althea was mounted before the large bearded man that had been holding her captive.

Once they had ridden some distance, Avalon saw that Althea's gag was removed and her hands untied. There was something familiar about the man who was sitting so close behind her. But she couldn't place his face with a name. She tried to hold her body away from his, but it became impossible and she had to lean back into him.

His arm was wrapped around her waist, and held her close. There was no way she could miss the aroused manhood pressed against her fleshy buttocks. She tried to push him away when he slowly raised the hand encircling her waist until he was cupping one breast. She gasped when he began fingering the taut nipple. He chuckled softly when he heard her gasp, and began to pluck and gently tug at it.

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They rode long past sunset, wanting to get as much distance between them and the men they suspected would be following them soon. Althea and Avalon were lifted off the horses and tied to each other, hand and foot. Avalon glared at the giant that had ridden with Althea, but he didn't even notice. Avalon noticed Althea was shivering and leaned closer to whisper.

"Don't worry, Althea. I don't know what these ruffians want, but Brand and Gandalf will find us soon, and then they will be made to pay dearly for what they have done."

Althea looked at her younger cousin, realizing that she had not yet seen what their true peril was. Before the night was out, Althea feared their captors would rape them. She didn't know if they were going to kill them afterwards, or if they even had a plan. Before she could voice her fears though, Avalon went on.

"As soon as they go to sleep, I will need you to maneuver around and reach into my right boot, the heel of it. I have a small knife hidden there, and we can cut ourselves free and get away."

Althea admired Avalon's courage, but also knew she didn't see the risks in trying to escape. "Avalon, we don't have the slightest idea where we are. Where would we run to?"

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Avalon frowned, upset that she hadn't thought that far ahead yet. Her plan was full of holes, but they could still try and make a run for it. Maybe they could manage to steal one of the horses, or even find a cave nearby where they could hide out. She turned her head as she heard the giant address the other man, the one she had been riding with.

"Robert, perhaps we should eat and be on our way."

The handsome, younger man shook his head, turning to look at Avalon. She didn't like the look in his eyes, as he looked her over. "No, Balec. I believe a good night's sleep will do us both a world of good. You may have the quiet one and I will have the saucy one. I have a need to sample the wares I looked upon earlier."

Avalon felt a frisson of fear travel through her body. She realized what he meant. This man obviously had taken them for ransom, or perhaps to sell them as slaves, but he had decided to have a taste of her flesh before he sold or returned it. She looked at Althea and saw by the look of fear in her eyes that she had heard him also. Just when this "tasting" was to occur was not yet stated.

Left alone and ignored, since they had been restrained, Avalon tried to plan a way to escape. There was always the knife she had hidden, but it would require the right timing for it to work.

The warmth of Althea's body made her drowsy and she dozed restlessly for a short time. A hand shaking her shoulder and holding out some food for her to take awakened her. She shoved her hair off her face, accepting the food gingerly.

She knew she had to eat to keep her strength. She saw that she had been untied from Althea, and the other woman was gone. She turned to glare at Robert.

“Where is Althea? What have you animals done with her?”

Robert smiled at her protective attitude. He squatted down next to her. “She had to relieve herself, so Balec is escorting her to a secluded spot. I will take you if you need to relieve yourself also.”

Avalon glared at him. “My husband will be coming after you, you barbarian! And he will chop your head off for what you have done to me!”

“A husband, you say?” Robert asked disbelievingly. Seeing the two women, and the plain dress they had, he had assumed they were peasants, or lower gentry. He wasn’t sure about the husband, but he did doubt that anyone would come after the two women. “I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting, my sweet pet. I doubt anyone will come after you, assuming the worst, of course.”

Avalon spit her words at him, seething with anger, and trying to cover up her fear. “So you plan on raping us, do you? Well, you will find yourself not unscathed if you attempt to rape me! And if you hurt Althea, I will cut your heart out, you bastard!”

Robert just smiled back at her, unconcerned. He found the little virago quite attractive, and was finding he was getting more aroused with each passing moment in her presence. Her figure had entranced him the whole time they were riding. Now he hungered to taste the hard nipples topping those large breasts while he tested the sweetness of coming inside her body. He saw she had finished eating, so there was no reason to delay any longer. He stood, reaching down to take her arm in his strong grasp. He pulled her to her feet and began directing her away from the small campsite.

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Avalon tried to quell her fear, knowing that her only chance may come at any time and she needed to be able to think clearly so she could act decisively. She saw that he had set his bedroll a short distance away. Avalon considered her options. She could submit and escape when he fell asleep and return with help to free Althea, or she could try and fight her way away from him, but he might call for the others and she wouldn't get far before she was recaptured. The thought of letting him touch her, come in her body...she shuddered in revulsion.

Robert gestured for Avalon to be seated on the blankets. Her mind raced to think of a delaying tactic but fear and nervousness had addled her brain, she finally conceded. She took a deep breath and started to lower herself to the blanket. Before she could decide on a further course of action, Robert was beside her and pressing her backward onto the blanket. Avalon tried to press against his chest, but he was much too strong. In body size, he reminded her of Brand. And then he was taking her mouth with his own, his tongue taking advantage of her open mouth, gasping for air.

He kissed her hotly and his hands were busily moving her clothes out of the way. He paused to caress her full naked breasts, enjoying the feel of the firm globes in his hands. He lifted his head and lowered it again to take her nipple into his mouth, sucking on it loudly.

Avalon started hitting at him, trying to get in a good blow when he grabbed both her hands and held them with one hand, above her head. She gasped as she felt the cool night air on her legs as he began dragging her skirt upward. She cried out for him to stop as she felt him getting closer —

Avalon felt the sudden tension and cessation of movement in Robert immediately. She was afraid to open her eyes, though, for what she might see. She had just decided things couldn't possibly get any worse and she didn't want to open her eyes to see the horror of what might be happening.

"Get off her slowly."

Avalon's eyes flew open and saw that Brand was standing over them with a knife pressed to the side of Robert's neck. She felt a thrill of joy racing through her body at seeing her husband standing there. She didn't pause to think about the change in her feelings though; she would take that back out later and consider it. As Robert moved away from her, Avalon scrambled to her knees and moved a short distance away. She quickly righted her clothing.

Brand still held the knife to the other man's neck, not taking his eyes from him. "I should slit your throat..."

Robert didn't move, but spoke softly. "If I had known she belonged to you, my friend, I would have left her alone."

Brand moved away, recognizing the other man's voice. "Damn! Robert! What the devil were you thinking? You will get yourself killed someday marauding this way."

Avalon stared from one man to the other. She couldn't believe that this was happening. She moved her hand to her boot, slowly removing her knife. She had not wanted to pull it out too soon. It hadn't been easy, but she had decided that if she had to she would wait until he was caught up in his manly throes. Then she would have moved her leg, plunging the knife into her rapist's back. It appeared as if her husband wasn't going to kill him. Then she would. Before she could react, Brand was holding out his hand to help the other man to his feet.

He reached out as Brand put the knife away, giving his cousin a bear hug. "It is good to see you, cousin. Don't tell my father about this, or he will have my head. You know how he feels about the old ways. I agree with him, except when I see a pretty woman." Robert shrugged his shoulders. "Good thing, I guess, you got here when you did. I don't think our fathers would have liked it if you murdered me."

Avalon could stand it no longer, and she lunged at her attacker. She managed a tiny scratch to his arm before her husband stopped her. Brand held her tightly, easily wresting the knife from her hand, dropping it to the ground.

"Avalon! Stop!" Brand finally loosened his grip when Avalon stopped struggling. He released her slowly, but when she reached for the knife again, he was forced to wrap both arms around her from behind. "Stop it, Avalon, right now! Robert obviously made a mistake," Brand told her between gritted teeth. The only thing that saved his younger cousin was the fact that he had not known that Avalon was his wife.

Avalon glared at Robert. "You must kill him, husband! I don't care who he is. He has dishonored your wife! You must!"

Brand tightened his hold, surprised at the vehemence Avalon was showing. "Darling, I can't kill him. Our fathers are brothers. Surely you understand —"

Avalon shook her head. "What about Althea? I have to avenge her honor. God only knows what horrors she has suffered at the hands of these louts!"

Brand turned her around, holding her upper arms tightly. "Althea is fine, Avalon. We found her first, before you. And since you had left the main camp, it took me a little longer to find you. Now, I suggest we all go back and make sure no one else has been killed."

Robert grabbed Avalon's knife, not wanting to leave it anywhere near the angry woman. He let his eyes travel over her one more time, shaking his head regretfully, but when he saw Brand glaring at him he stopped and led the way back to the camp.

Chapter 8

When Avalon awoke the following morning, she stretched slowly. She became aware around her that the camp had already awakened. She could smell breakfast cooking and realized she was starving. She sat up slowly, pushing her blankets down. She remembered then that Brand had decided they would stay at Robert's camp until morning, and then start the final ride to his home. They had not put up any of their usual tents, and she had slept outdoors, like everyone else. She pushed her hair back, out of the way, again thinking about their return to camp.

Brand had seemed distant all evening, not touching her, and not kissing her even once. And when she had finally asked about sleep, he had laid her blankets out for her, but not beside his own. She couldn't push the thoughts away that perhaps he couldn't bear to touch her now that he had seen Robert with her. Maybe Brand assumed that what he had interrupted had not been the first time...

Avalon jumped up suddenly, but she never took more than half a step. She tripped and fell to the ground. She turned angrily, thinking she had caught her feet in the blankets. She stopped though, seeing that there was something around her ankle. She pushed aside the blankets and her long skirt and shoved the soft leather of her boot down. Avalon gasped in surprise to find a finely woven, but amazingly strong leather chain surrounded her ankle.

Her eyes followed the soft leather and she saw that she was tied to a small tree a few feet away. She flushed angrily as she realized she had been tethered to

a tree like a horse. Her fingers scrambled to undo the leather, but it was secure. She glanced over at the tree, and started to crawl toward it.

A pair of boots stepped into her path, halting her. She looked up and saw Brand. She glared up at him. "Husband! Someone has dared to tie me to a tree! Give me your knife so I may cut this ridiculous tether!"

Brand ignored her demands and reached down and hauled her to her feet. "I have tethered you, madam wife. I am tired of these ridiculous games. Until we reach the castle and I can fashion something else, you will wear this." He turned and unfastened it from the tree, and replaced the loop around his own wrist. "Althea! Bring Avalon her breakfast, and then we will be on our way."

Avalon glared at her husband. How dare he treat her like an animal! There would be hell to pay for this treatment, and in front of his men, as well. She turned as Althea neared with a plate of food. She thanked her cousin, accepting the plate. She didn't sit back down, but ate quickly.

"I need to relieve myself, sir!"

Brand nodded and started walking toward the dense surrounding bushes. Avalon was forced to follow or fall down. He stopped a few feet inside the cover, and folded his arms across his chest. He stared right back at her when she started tapping her foot impatiently.

"I'm waiting for privacy, sir!"

Brand nodded, but shook his head the very next moment. "I know you are, wife, but you aren't getting any. Now do your business and we'll be off."

Avalon shrieked her anger and frustration, but it was obvious he was determined in this action. She stretched the leather leash as far as possible and turned her back on him. She raised her skirt, and squatted.

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Brand smiled as he watched his proud wife dealing with this overwhelming frustration. He could have allowed her this small courtesy, but he was determined to teach her who was in charge. And he was damned tired of her little games. When she walked back toward him, she didn't even look his way, but went right past him, obviously expecting him to follow her back to camp. Brand didn't move and Avalon was brought up short a few steps later. He waited until she turned to glare at him angrily. He then calmly walked at a fast enough pace so that she had to hurry to keep up with him.

He put her on his huge destrier and mounted behind her. He urged his horse into a gallop, and soon the others fell in alongside them. It was nearly noon when they came atop a ridge and could see the castle below. Brand paused, taking in the magnificent stone structure. It could rival any castle in the land, and hold off any invader for months, if needed. He spurred the horse to a gallop and started headlong down the hill. He heard the cry being raised as he and his men neared the castle. The gates were opened and people were soon spilling forth.

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Avalon saw people cheering and greeting him eagerly. Someone tossed a bouquet of freshly picked flowers into her arms. Inside the courtyard, Brand slid from the horse behind her. He took the leather from his wrist and handed it to Avalon. His voice was soft as he spoke.

"I will spare you the embarrassment of meeting my family on my tether, if you promise to behave yourself."

Avalon looked at the leather in her hand. She knew that he didn't have to do this, so she nodded quickly. She didn't relish having everyone wonder why Brand had his wife tethered to him. He lifted her down and offered her his arm to lead her up the steps of the impressive castle. Seeing the glazed windows, Avalon was most strongly assured of the wealth and importance of this castle.

Avalon looked behind her and saw that Althea and Gandalf had followed a few steps behind them. Althea smiled with encouragement and Avalon tried to match her cousin's surety and confidence. But of course, Althea was obviously in love with her husband, and he with her. Their marriage had not been contrived and forced upon them.

Avalon stopped thinking as she saw an older man with the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen at his side, coming toward her. She watched as Brand greeted his father, Lord Carlton, and his stepmother, Lady Elizabeth. Avalon was too nervous to do more than murmur greetings, and accept the kiss on the cheek from her stepmother-in-law. They spent the next two hours in the main hall, talking and then eating an early dinner.

Lady Elizabeth stood finally and indicated that she would escort Avalon to her rooms. Avalon looked toward Althea, begging her silently to come with her. She watched as Althea whispered to her husband and then stood and walked upstairs with the other two women.

Avalon was shown to a large room that was a hive of bustling activity. The bed had been freshly made, and she saw that flower petals had been scattered across it. She listened as Elizabeth pointed out different things around the room before leaving the two younger women alone, or at least, as alone as you could be with three serving girls. It was obvious that a hot steaming bath had been prepared for her, so Avalon undressed and climbed in. She felt embarrassed being attended to by so many servants. At home, she had one, and of course Althea was always there for her.

With her hair freshly washed and combed, and dressed in the softest of sleeping gowns, Avalon sat on the bed. Fresh water had been brought in a moment earlier, and she realized it was for Brand. No one had commented on the leather around her ankle, she had been happy to see. The serving girls had

just left when the door opened again. She was surprised to see Brand was not alone. Gandalf stood at his side.

Gandalf grinned and held his hand out. "I've come to reclaim my wife, Lady Avalon. We won't promise to see you tomorrow, because once I hit that comfortable bed, we may not rise for days." He laughed heartily as Althea blushed.

Brand closed the door behind them, and looked over at his wife sitting cross-legged on the bed. With her hair loose and streaming over her shoulders, she didn't look old enough to be anyone's wife. He moved into the room, and began discarding his clothing as he went toward the tub of water. He saw his shaving kit had been laid out on the table beside the tub.

With a great long sigh, Brand climbed into the tub. As his body relaxed in the hot water, he sighed once again. He leaned back and slumped down into the water. A few minutes later, he held a hand up with the sponge in it.

"Come and wash my back, Avalon."

Avalon paused for a moment, but slid off the bed and walked over to him. She took the sponge and dipped it into the water, and then rubbed it on the bar of soap. She spoke softly and told him to lean forward, but Brand took the sponge from her first.

"You had best slip your gown off, or you'll get it wet," Brand reminded her softly.

Avalon considered his words and finally dragged the gown up and over her head. Not looking at Brand, she took the sponge and knelt at the side of the tub. Brand leaned forward and she began washing his back. She went to hand him the sponge, but he grasped her wrist firmly.

"There's a lot more of me to wash, wife. It will be easiest if you climb in here with me." A huge smile curved his lips.

Avalon paused, finally acceding to his logic. She stood and stepped into the tub facing him. He spread his thighs and had her scoot between them, handing her the soap.

“You can just soap your hands, instead of the sponge,” Brand told her softly.

Avalon flushed, guessing he was saying that so she would touch his skin. She was already aroused, just being this close to him. She raised her soapy hands and started by washing his shoulders and down each arm. Washing under his arms seemed very sensual to her, but she didn’t know why. And when she moved her hands to his chest, her hands seemed to be unable to move away from his nipples. And it was Brand who finally moved her hands down his body.

There was no soap as her hands curled around his hard shaft. He moved her hands to cup and fondle his balls. Brand began whispering to her how to touch him. It was Avalon who moved in the water, actually sitting on his lap and wrapping her legs around him. Her hands guided his cock toward her body as she rose upward in the water. She didn’t give him a chance to help her, and brought their bodies together. She welcomed him eagerly, threading her hands into his hair. She tugged his head backward and kissed him wantonly.

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Brand was surprised at her aggression. He felt her hips moving and setting their sexual rhythm. Her lips kissed him eagerly, and then slid to the side of his neck. She kissed and licked and finally bit him, even as she rode his cock. Brand slid his hands to her waist, trying to slow her hell bent drive toward climax. But Avalon was too intent, and worked her body on his, rubbing against his hardness, even as it slid in and out of her cunt. She cried out a moment later as her climax washed through her. And as her sweet aftershocks shook her body, Brand’s hands moved and directed her until he groaned a few moments later and filled her with his cum.

Brand leaned back in the tub, with Avalon draped over and around him like a wet cloth. It felt so sweet and delicious, being inside her body, and each time it was something new. He stroked his hands up and down her back, caressing her skin. He shifted her hair to the side, and then moved one hand back to cup the side of a breast, mashed against his chest. She certainly had proved to be a handful, he thought to himself, in more ways than the obvious. He remembered the previous night, after Avalon had gone to sleep.

He and Robert had sat talking as the fire died down. It was Robert who had told him he had better “seed his wife’s belly quickly, or that firebrand would singe him.” He had laughed at the time, but he knew it was probably true. The only thing that would tame Avalon would be to get her with child. Nothing slowed a woman down like a rounded belly, followed by a babe suckling at her breast.

Brand closed his eyes as he eased her breast more fully into his hand. He could imagine Avalon’s body as she carried his child. Her belly would round itself slowly as her breasts got bigger. And as her belly neared her sixth month, it would be obvious to everyone that she was expecting. He visualized her breasts, fuller, more rounded, and drooping from the milk she carried to suckle his child. He would happily suck her tits every day, helping prepare them for an eager baby. He did enjoy sucking big tits, and he was getting hard again just thinking about it. His cock flexed inside Avalon’s cunt, eager for more exercise. He lowered his head and kissed the side of her neck.

Brand eased his other hand between their bodies to cup both breasts, and began squeezing them even as he started to move his hips. He watched Avalon’s face, but her eyes stayed shut, even as he came inside her body a second time. They stayed joined until the water cooled, and finally Brand helped her from the tub. She was asleep before her head even hit the pillow. Brand smiled and covered them both up with the blankets. And twice more during that long night,

he came into her body. He had decided that Robert was right and the easiest way to settle his wife down was to give her a baby.

Chapter 9

Avalon's days and nights flowed into one another. During the day she learned how the castle was run, and how things were done. And nights were spent making love to her husband. He had removed the leather leash and not replaced it as planned. She was glad for that, at least. She had a hard time accepting that this was to be her life from now on. She went riding, but only with her husband, never alone.

Elizabeth gave up trying to teach her certain things, finally convinced by Althea that she had been trying for so many years, that she had decided it was hopeless. The second month, Avalon was becoming bored. She had started wandering the courtyards, introducing herself to the different people who came and went. There were many peasants and peddlers, and one day she met an old woman who had a small wagon that she pulled herself.

Avalon had taken to the wrinkled and wizened old woman instantly, and the second day she had come out looking for her, she had brought a huge pouch stuffed with all kinds of foods she had pilfered from the kitchen. The woman had looked surprised to see the lady return a second day, but had gratefully accepted the woman's food. The third day, she told Avalon she must leave the next morning, but offered Avalon a package, wrapped in brown cloth. When Avalon came the fourth morning, the woman was gone.

Avalon returned to her room and pulled the package out from beneath the bed where she had hidden it. Seated on the floor, half-hidden by the bed, from anyone who might enter, she removed the thin brown cloth concealing the old woman's gift. Inside she found it was a book. On each page was writing, and a

pressed flower, or herb or grass. She quickly learned it was a book of scents, which the woman had sold small vials of from the back of her cart. The last page contained a recipe for a scent that was called "Lady Avalon." Avalon realized the old woman must have added it before she gave her the precious tome of knowledge. She closed the book and looked at it for the longest time. Finally, she decided she was going to follow in the old woman's footsteps, and not let these precious scents die.

Avalon didn't tell anyone her plans, but found a deserted room in the castle that received lots of light throughout the day. She began gathering what she needed slowly, asking different people for different things. By the end of two weeks, she had her laboratory ready to begin. She needed to start finding the different plants listed in the book, and for that she would have to go herself. She could leave the courtyard on foot, and no one seemed to notice. She began carrying water, a sandwich, and a large bag to place her finds into.

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Avalon had been gathering and drying her finds for over a month before Brand came looking for his wife in the middle of the day. Of course, no one could say where the lady was. One was sure he had seen her here, but another said no, she had been outside with the children. After an hour of fruitless searching, he had mounted his destrier angrily and gone in search of his wandering wife. All the while he looked for her, he began devising ways to confine her to the bed.

He had been out for two hours searching when he finally began riding back toward the castle. He was stunned to see her sitting in a field just a short distance from the side entrance of the castle. As he rode toward her, he saw that it appeared she was picking blades of grass, weeds and flowers.

Avalon turned as she heard the thunder of hooves behind her. She smiled as she saw her husband. She didn't see his furious expression at first. "Good

afternoon, husband! I'm nearly done here, just a few more minutes." She turned back to her gathering as he dismounted. When he didn't reply, she looked up at him about a minute later. She was immediately struck by the look on his face. "Is something wrong, sir? Is it your father?"

Brand shook his head angrily. "Where the devil have you been, woman?"

Avalon stared up at him. The force of his anger stunned her. "I've been in the field all day, sir. I told the guard at the side gate where I would be."

Brand could see by the look on her face that she was surprised at his anger. He knew he was acting out of proportion, but the fury he had felt when he realized that she had gone missing once again, compounded by the fear when he couldn't find her, had been overwhelming and clouded his reason. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his emotions. "Come, I'll take you back with me."

Avalon smiled up at him. "I need a few more things first. You can go on back and I'll walk back when I'm finished. I don't mind."

Brand could see that she was too preoccupied in what she was doing to pick up on his unspoken cues. He considered pulling her up and tossing her onto his horse, but he paused in his actions. Things had been going so well between them of late that he didn't want to "upset the apple cart," so to speak. After a moment, he dropped the destrier's reins, knowing he wouldn't move until commanded, and lay down beside his wife. He watched her lean down and peer at what looked like a weed, in his opinion, and then she carefully worked her fingers down to the earth and eased it free, bringing it with its roots pretty much intact.

"Might one inquire as to what you are doing? My father has a hothouse of flowers if that is what you are seeking."

Avalon didn't look up from her task of gently shaking the dirt from the root. She shook her head though. "I don't want those kinds of flowers yet. I'm starting with what grows wild, in nature." She carefully placed it in her bag. She then opened a small book and wrote in it. Brand watched as she shifted her bottom,

and then scooted a few feet to the left. She seemed intent on a blade of grass this time, and he admitted that maybe this marriage and uprooting her from her home had been too much for her. Perhaps she had lost her wits from the strain.

"If you want flowers in your room, Avalon, you have but to ask," Brand offered as a solution to a problem he wasn't sure of.

Avalon shook her head. "No, but thank you. I must follow the instructions exactly, that is what the book says, or it won't work." She paused to study something, but shook her head, closed her bag, and came to her feet. "I'm ready to go back if you are," she told him with a smile.

Brand followed her over to the huge horse waiting so placidly. He took her sacks and looped them over the horn of his saddle. He mounted and then held his hand down for Avalon. As he looked down at her mussed hair and grass-stained clothes, he was struck by how youthful she looked. She could easily be mistaken for a young girl, as long as one didn't look beneath the loose fitting clothing. Avalon hiked her skirts up and put her foot atop his and then took his hand. He easily pulled her up to sit in front of him.

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Avalon shifted to get a sturdy hold because she expected him to gallop back to the castle. She was quite surprised when he set the horse to a gentle amble across the field, as if he had all the time in the world. She felt his arm encircle her waist.

"We haven't ridden like this since after the wedding."

Avalon flushed remembering the trip to his home. She shook her head, not saying anything. She had been embarrassed as some of her adventures had been recounted over the dinner table, or she overheard the servants whispering. She felt him catch the reins with the hand at her waist while the other hand came up

and brushed her hair to one side. He lowered his head and lightly kissed the side of her neck, just below her ear. He moved up and lightly nibbled and teased the lobe of her ear. She shivered at his touch.

Ever since their arrival at his parents' home, he had kept all of his amorous advances confined to their bedroom. He had made love to her every night since they had arrived, and often more than once a night. She often overslept in the morning, and when she would come downstairs, she would be greeted with "newlyweds" and "you remember how it used to be." And Avalon would blush once again.

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Brand moved his hand back around her waist and up to cup her breast. He let the gentle bouncing caused by the horse's gait move the globe in his hand. His fingers brushed the already hard nipple, and he heard a soft sigh escape Avalon's lips. Brand smiled as he continued to nibble her ear and play with her breast. He stopped a short distance from the gate, not wanting anyone to see him fondling his wife in public. He rode to the front steps and dismounted. He tossed the reins to a young stable boy, who had run across the yard to take charge of his master's steed. Brand reached up and lifted Avalon down. When she stumbled, he caught her, seeing her blush.

Brand wondered if Avalon's "weak knees" could be blamed on her response to his playful lovemaking during their ride back to the castle. He doubted she would credit it, but he was hopeful. The surprise on her face was quite evident when he didn't leave immediately. She blushed when she heard him order dinner to be delivered to their room later, and then he walked up the stairs with her.

The door no sooner shut than he took her sacks from her and lifted her into his arms. He traveled the few steps to the bed and lay her down. He was beside her a moment later, and moving her clothes out of his way.

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Avalon gasped as he bared her legs and caressed her soft lips between them, finding her wetness already pooling there. He managed to shift her upper clothes and bare her breasts to his mouth. While he sucked and teased her breasts and nipples, his hand found her pleasure point, and worked it without mercy until she cried out in ecstasy. He moved over her, and filled her wet, clenching channel slowly, easing himself into her body. When he was fully seated, he had her lift her legs and encircle his hips.

His hips began moving more quickly, thrusting into her heat, and pulling back. Her flesh clung and tugged at his hard male organ each time he pulled back, making each movement more erotic and arousing. And then, without warning, he cried out and stiffened. His body jerked forward and back quickly and filled her womb with his seed.

He rolled them on the bed so she was lying over him, draped across him like wet cloth. He repositioned her legs to lie atop his, capturing and holding his cock within her cunt. He wanted to keep his seed buried inside her so it might take root and get her with child. He wasn't sure, but he didn't think she'd had her monthlies since they had wed. But he had also learned that some women never had them regularly.

He had been busy since his marriage learning other useful things as well. One interesting fact he learned was that by elevating a woman's hips immediately after making love could sometimes help as well. So the last few nights, he had propped Avalon's bottom on a couple of pillows, and asked her to stay there, but didn't give her any explanation. She had fallen asleep and slid off

them, and he managed to not reawaken her to reposition them beneath her once again.

Brand heard Avalon's soft snore, and realized she had fallen asleep, literally on top of him. He smiled. He wished he knew whom to ask about Avalon's monthlies. If his own mother were alive, he might ask her to broach the subject, but he didn't feel comfortable enough with his stepmother for that topic. He was sure that Althea would know, but he didn't think he should approach her. He did finally decide with a great sigh of relief, just before he dozed off, that he would ask Gandalf to ask Althea.

Chapter 10

Avalon was out in the field near the side entrance the following day when she heard her name being called. She looked up and saw it was Althea. She waved to her, inviting her to join her. Althea was on horseback, so she crossed the field quickly. She dismounted and looked at her cousin, who was sifting through flowers, weed and grass.

"What the devil are you up to now, Avalon?"

Avalon looked up at her cousin and grinned. "I'm on an adventure, Althea. And it is a secretive one at that. Can you keep a secret?"

Althea paused before answering. It wasn't good for a wife to have secrets from her husband, especially if the husband were Lord Brandeis. But she nodded her head once, and sat down beside Avalon.

"The most amazing thing happened to me. I met this old woman in the courtyard. She was one of the peasants who came through to sell different things. She didn't seem to be doing too well, so I brought her food each morning I found her there. On the third morning, she gave me this wonderful old book. After I'd removed the wrapping, I discovered it was how to make all different kinds of scents, and even medicinal potions and unguents are in there. When I went back to thank her, she was gone. So, now I'm gathering what I need, as specified in the book, and then I will start the process of drying, or extracting oils. Who knows what kinds of wonderful things I can make!"

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Althea looked at Avalon's excited face. She didn't want to discourage, but somehow she didn't think Brand would want his wife to be an alchemist of any sort. But she also knew how Avalon had been chafing at nothing to do. She had no interest in sewing, recipes, or gossip, as the other ladies of the castle. At least she had not gone hurrying off on one of her independent hunting expeditions. Or, if she had, no one had found out about it yet. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she proceeded with her mission.

"Avalon, there is something I need to talk to you about."

Avalon didn't look up, but filled Althea's lap with different kinds of weeds. "I'm looking for one like this," she held up the example. And just as quickly went back to poking among the grass and weeds.

"Avalon, dearest, there are things we talked about, before you were married. Do you remember?"

Avalon looked at Althea and grinned. "Silly! We talked about everything, so what are you talking about?"

Althea realized why Brand had gone to Gandalf for her help, instead of confronting her straight on. "Have you been feeling well in the mornings?"

Avalon didn't look up as she replied. "Sleepy is all. I am tired a lot, but I started taking a nap, and that is helping. Of course, if Brand would let me sleep through the night, I probably would wake up feeling great."

Althea blushed. "Well, dearest, that's how it is with husbands. Since you mention it, it reminded me of something else I was wishing to discuss with you."

"They certainly can be a pain, can't they? Is that why you are here? I do hope you are happy with Gandalf. He does seem to be a nice enough fellow, but you can't tell always by how they are in public."

Althea gasped in surprise and choked back a laugh. "I'm very happy, Avalon. But, since your mother died and I became your mentor as you grew up, I feel it is my place to discuss something with you now." Althea paused as she

looked at the mess of weeds in her lap. "I was wondering about your monthlies. You always would come to me, when we lived at your father's. And I just wondered how you were getting along, and if you needed to talk about anything. You know, about being married, or anything like that."

Althea stopped, out of breath, but still took a mental sigh of relief that she had finally gotten the gist of her speech said. She looked at Avalon, but she was still looking at the grass. She suddenly shrieked, and began digging in the earth with her fingers. Less than a moment later Avalon held up proudly what was probably the most ugly-looking weed with the longest roots that Althea had ever seen.

"Ah hah! I've been looking for this all day. Now, what were you saying, Althea?"

Althea closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She took a deep breath. "I was asking if you were having any troubles with your monthly flow. Or if you had any questions about married life, or the like."

Avalon finished putting the precious weed in her bag. "I haven't had any since we left home. So, I guess they haven't bothered me. And as far as married life, it's all right. Uhm, is your married life all right, Althea?"

Althea wasn't sure what to do now. She sat in stunned silence for a couple of moments, trying to take it all in. She finally regained her composure. "My married life is wonderful, Avalon. Gandalf is a wonderful man and an excellent husband. But I think we need to discuss something else..."

Avalon nodded and reached for the wine flask she had filled with water. She drank and then offered some to Althea. Althea took a swig and wished it had been wine. She was tempted to return to Gandalf with the news, and let Brand deal with the next part. Before she could go on, Avalon was standing.

"Well, I've enjoyed chatting, Althea. But I must get back and start drying these all out. We should do this more often. In fact, maybe you would like to start helping me gather things."

Althea stood, half-relieved and half-stymied. Before she could decide what to do next, Avalon kissed her cheek, and then took off at a near run back across the field with her sacks in tow. Althea mounted her horse slowly, and rode back to the separate quarters within the castle that she shared with Gandalf.

She wasn't at all surprised to find Brand seated at her kitchen table with her husband. He looked up at her hopefully as she came through the doors. Althea wondered if her frustration was evident on her face.

Gandalf rose and kissed his wife, and offered to pour her some water. She surprised him by saying she needed a glass of wine. She drank it straight down, and ignored the surprised expressions of both the men. Setting the flagon back down on the table firmly, she folded her hands in front of her.

"I tried my best, but Avalon was quite distracted. And no matter how I tried to redirect her, she was always seeing something that wasn't there." She stopped and held her glass out for more wine. Her husband only gave her half a glass this time. She sipped it, several times. "I did try, honestly. I believe that she is pregnant, but completely unaware of it."

Althea lifted her glass and drained it down, letting her words settle in. When she looked at Brand, he didn't look happy.

"How can she be unaware of it? She's a woman, and she should know these things!"

Gandalf tried to choke back his laughter, but to no avail. Althea saw her husband laughing and was unable to stop her own from bubbling forth. Brand's glare didn't stop either of them.

"I am sorry, milord, but Avalon's mind was somewhere else the whole time. And when I started to ask her about married life, well, she assumed I was having

problems! You can imagine my frustration. Anyway, it took quite a while before I finally learned that she has not had her monthly flow since your wedding. Therefore, she is probably several months along. I couldn't tell today, but has she had any physical changes?"

Brand flushed. The fact that he was talking about this had him embarrassed, and also stunned that he was discussing it at all, with anyone! He had hoped that Althea would handle it all. "Possibly, but I haven't really taken the time to look. I meant to study her in detail...Oh, hell!"

He stopped as Gandalf started on a new fit of laughter. He stood abruptly, looking at his cousin and best friend with disgust. "I can see I'll get no more help here!" he announced with disdain, and walked out.

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Brand waited until at least an hour after Avalon had retired for bed. He had formulated a plan in his head. He would wait until she was asleep, and then he'd creep in, and pull back the covers to look at his wife's body in detail. Hating that it felt like he was sneaking around, he reminded himself that he needed to check her for a rounded belly, or whether her breasts looked fuller, or different.

In theory it was a good plan. It fell short of success in that in the hour he had to wait, he ended up sitting with his fellow knights and drinking. By the time he recalled his plan, since he had first started drinking to forget it, he had a hard time just walking up the stairs to his bedchamber. He did manage to open the door without too much noise, and walk across the room to the bed.

He was glad to see that Avalon had left a candle burning at the bedside, since he had forgotten to bring one. Reminding himself to be quiet, he pulled the covers down. He found that Avalon had gone to sleep naked, as he often had her do when they made love. So he found it really quite easy to look at his wife's naked body.

Easing down to sit beside her sleeping form, he let his eyes move over her face and down to her firm and full breasts. He paused, considering and thinking, and then decided he needed to check her belly. He let his eyes rove down and stared at her slightly rounded tummy. Of course, with her lying on her back, it was rather difficult to tell.

Then he hit upon the excellent idea of checking her physically, with his hands. That he might awaken her was beyond his mental capabilities at that moment. He reached out and cupped one breast. He held it for a moment, and then squeezed it. Not too sure with his findings, he massaged it, stopping to catch the nipple between his fingers as it hardened, and then just cupping it again. He sat for a few minutes, and then decided he would have to check the other. He spent just as much time assessing the other breast, when he decided he would have to do them at the same time. It was as he was holding and checking both breasts, that Avalon opened her eyes.

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Avalon looked at her husband, and realized that he was most decidedly “in his cups.” Of course, she had seen many of her father’s knights and soldiers in a similar state, but this was the first time for her husband. She studied his face as he molded and weighed her breasts, all the time looking quite serious and thoughtful. His touch felt different than when he usually was intent on making love to her. She spoke and startled him.

“Are you looking for something in particular?”

Brand jumped in surprise and lost his precarious perch on the side of the bed. He slid to the floor with a loud thump. He looked up a moment later and saw Avalon watching him, and trying desperately hard not to smile. Hitting the floor seemed to have sobered him up, because he shook his head and came to his feet. He brushed and straightened his clothes.

Avalon bit her lower lip and asked him gently, "Are you all right, sir? Did you hurt...yourself?"

Brand bristled at appearing so foolish. He cleared his throat, moved away from the bed, and began to remove his clothes. "I am quite fine, madam wife. Thank you for your concern, but it is unnecessary. I apologize for waking you."

Avalon sat up in bed with the covers pooled at her waist, watching her husband. She had never seen him acting so odd. "That's all right. I hadn't been asleep for long. I tried staying awake, but I dozed off. I'm glad I woke though, because I need to speak with you."

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Brand stiffened with his back to his wife. Could this be it? Did she really know and had only been waiting for the right moment to tell him? He turned slowly and saw that she was naked from the waist up. He, of course, had his usual and immediate reaction to seeing her lovely breasts. He continued to remove his clothes, but kept his voice even as he spoke.

"Of course, my dear. Please feel free to speak to me at any time." He sat in a chair and removed his boots. His arousal rose about one hundred percent as Avalon kicked free of the covers and scooted to the foot of the bed to perch on her knees, facing him.

"The strangest thing happened today. Althea came to talk to me, and she seemed quite distracted. I'm not at all sure why she wanted to talk in the first place, but it seemed as if she had a purpose in the beginning. And then, I got the distinct impression that she is not happy in her marriage." Avalon paused, looking at her husband.

Brand barely held back his laughter. He nodded, trying to look serious and absorbed in what she was saying. "Actually, I saw them both earlier today, and they appeared to be very happy."

Avalon considered his words. "Perhaps, but I am not completely convinced." She turned abruptly and dove back under the covers. Brand wasn't sure, but he thought he heard her mutter something about "making sure."

Chapter 11

Brand had one hell of a headache when he awoke late the following morning. It didn't take him long to realize he was alone in the bed, and in spite of the battle being waged in his skull, he descended the stairs a short time later. He was surprised to see Althea and Gandalf seated at the main table, speaking with his father and stepmother. All stopped speaking as he neared.

Brand's father grinned at him. "I understand congratulations are in order, son. In truth, Elizabeth has suspected for some time, but wouldn't let me broach the subject with you. But it appears you decided to take the bull by the horns yourself."

Brand stood still while his father clapped him on the back. He did look at Althea, who shrugged. Obviously, the conversation had been pretty intense before he arrived. He turned towards Gandalf, who shrugged his shoulders, indicating he was merely an observer.

Althea cleared her throat to speak. "I came to speak with my cousin, Lord Brandeis, but it appears she has disappeared. Would you happen to know where she might have scurried off to?"

Brand met Althea's eyes, wondering at her use of words. He shook his head as he spoke. "I suspect she is out gathering more weeds, although what the hell she is planning is beyond me."

Althea had already checked the field just beyond the castle walls before returning for Gandalf to come to the main keep with her. She had felt badly about not being more aggressive in her questions with Avalon the previous day, and had decided to make things right. After all, Avalon's knowledge, or lack of

it, was her responsibility. She stood suddenly and pinched her husband's arm. Gandalf rose quickly as she thanked the castle's master and his mistress for the wine, and then he almost had to run to keep up with his small wife.

Outside in the courtyard, he stopped Althea. "What is the hurry? I thought we were going to stay and have our midday meal..."

Althea was shaking her head and walking for the stables. Gandalf followed, wondering what was upsetting his wife. As he caught up with Althea, he heard her questioning one of the young stable boys. He was quite surprised to learn that the Lady Avalon had ridden out quite early that morning, and it appeared the lady had gone hunting! Upon questioning, they discovered that she had taken her crossbow with her, but had refused any guard to ride with her.

Gandalf didn't wait for his wife this time, but shouted "hell's fire" and took off running back toward the main keep. Althea hadn't had time to re-cross the courtyard, when her husband was running back down the steps, this time following Brand. Brand passed her without a word, but Gandalf stopped.

"I think you should come with us, my love. Brand didn't take too kindly to the news that Avalon had ridden off hunting."

Althea turned and walked quickly back to the stables. As they arrived, they caught the tail end of Brand's castigation of the stable hands. He'd grabbed the reins of his hastily saddled horse and started to leave the stables.

He paused just beyond the stable doors, looking back at Althea. "You should probably come too, Althea, if you want to spare your cousin's life!"

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Avalon had awakened at dawn that morning, and not wishing to disturb her husband, she had put on her hunting clothes, gathered her knife kit and crossbow, and headed for the stables. She was in the mood for some real exercise,

she had decided, and felt like hunting might do the trick. A young stable boy had been the only one awake, and he had been easy to convince she would be fine without any assistance.

As the morning had passed, she had discovered she really had no taste for hunting after all. And instead, she found herself looking down at the different flowers, weeds and grasses as she rode through different fields. It was nearly noon when she stopped by the small creek to eat the bread and cheese she had packed earlier. She sipped wine from a flask, eating slowly, and sorting through her finds of the morning. After today, she would start working in her “laboratory” to prepare her first mixture. She looked up as she heard the thunder of hooves.

Avalon quickly ducked behind some bushes, and pulled her rather deadly looking knife from its sheath at her waist. She hadn't really thought about the dangers she might run into when she had taken off that morning. She realized that she was too used to hunting on her father's land, where everyone knew who she was and would never dream of bothering her. She heard her own horse snicker, and cursed that whoever was coming had probably heard the mare.

Just then, a huge black stallion entered the small clearing. Her mare nickered again, and Avalon realized it was the impressive steed she had glimpsed a few times held in a separate part of the stables. She stood and came out from behind the bushes. She still held her knife as she saw her husband glaring down at her. As she slid it back into its resting place, she spoke softly.

“That damned mare of mine! She'd be no good on a real hunting expedition.”

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Brand stayed atop the stallion, attempting to control his temper. He was still seething from learning his pregnant wife had gone hunting alone. He looked

down at her and saw she was wearing leggings, and her hair was braided down her back. He glanced around to see if she had any luck, but didn't see anything. Before he could tell her what he thought and how angry he was, she turned her back on him and went back to where she had her belongings spread out. She sat down just as Gandalf and Althea rode up, both breathing as hard as their horses.

Avalon looked at her three visitors, while they looked at her. She finally grinned up at them. "What luck! I can use all of your help. If you'll come here, I'll show you what I need to find, and with the four of us looking, we should have enough in no time at all."

Brand choked back his angry surprise at her casual acceptance of their presence. Before he could dismount or begin to reply, Althea was dismounting and hurrying to her cousin.

"Avalon, we've all been worried about you when we heard you'd gone hunting."

Avalon smiled at Althea. "That's silly, Althea. You know what a good hunter and tracker I am. And besides, I changed my mind and went looking for more specimens instead." She held up several handfuls of weeds and grasses.

Brand dismounted and crossed the short distance between himself and the women. "Althea, please leave with Gandalf now." He kept his control tightly reined as he spoke.

Gandalf spoke quickly, agreeing with his cousin. But Althea wasn't all that sure that leaving the two of them together just then was the right thing to do. She started to protest, but gave in when her husband added a terse "now."

Avalon didn't speak as the other two rode away. But as soon as they were gone, she looked at her husband, obviously still unaware of his anger. "There! Did you see how he spoke to her? He ordered her about as if her opinion mattered naught! I told you something was wrong."

Brand stared at his wife for a long moment. He wasn't sure which of them was going insane after all! His anger was dying down, seeing she was safe. Of course, she would still have to be lectured, but her complete innocence and lack of guile convinced him that she had not snuck away out of spite. He sat down on the lush grass beside his wife.

"Avalon, you are driving me crazy!"

Avalon looked at her husband, her surprise at the unexpected words quite apparent on her face. "I am sorry if I've upset you, husband. I did not intend for you to be unhappy. Please tell me what I've done so I can attempt to undo the wrong."

Brand shook his head, feeling like he was standing in quicksand every time he tried to talk to his wife. "I don't want you to leave the castle ever again without my guards or myself accompanying you. Even though my father's lands are safe, that doesn't mean intruders might not be wandering through. Is that understood?"

Avalon frowned but nodded. She opened her mouth to comment, but her husband was going on. "Secondly, you are not to go hunting, unless it is with a hunting party with Gandalf or me. Agreed?"

Brand watched his wife's face carefully, waiting for her answer. His anger had subsided, but he couldn't shake the worry that he had felt. What was worse was that he could clearly see through Avalon's facial expressions that she was not whole-heartedly in agreement with his decisions. It looked like she started to say something, but then changed her mind. Instead, she began casually packing the different greens into her bag. Once she was done, she started to stand, but Brand caught her wrist in his hand.

"Please, sit back down."

Avalon eased back to the ground. "Is something wrong?"

Brand closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Are you with child?" he blurted out a moment later. He could see by the surprised look on his wife's face that she had not considered the possibility.

"Surely not!" she protested. "It's much too soon."

Brand shook his head to clear it, for he was having trouble keeping control of the conversation. "What do you mean by too soon?"

Avalon brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "All the married couples I've ever known never have a baby for at least a year. It's only been a few months, so I don't see how it could be possible." She smiled at him, her logic perfectly sound in her mind.

Brand looked around for a tree or a rock to bang his head against. He took a deep breath. "It is quite possible that you are with child already, Avalon."

Avalon leaned over and patted her husband's arm. "I really don't think so. And considering it is my body, I do think I would know." She stood. "I have to get back now. I'm ready to get started."

She picked up her bags, grabbed her horse's reins and started walking back to the castle. It took Brand a long time before he found that he was able to follow his wife back.

The following morning, Avalon awoke with stomach cramps and started her flow shortly afterwards. Brand kept his thoughts to himself, and didn't reveal his sadness. Instead, he stated that he and Gandalf would be taking some men and go hunting for a few days. Tears rained down Althea's face as the men left, but Avalon smiled and waved, her mind already leaping ahead to processing her plants and herbs.

Chapter 12

Avalon didn't leave her new room all that day, except to go to bed quite late that night. The next morning, she was back up quite early and eagerly returned to her workroom, taking water, bread and some cheese with her. That way, she could continue her work. She eagerly read the pages of the old book, sometimes not sure that what she was reading could be right. But finally, she was ready to start mixing and combining the different plants and herbs and flowers she had collected.

Althea stopped by close to the end of the second day. Althea knocked on the door, but then noticed that there was a very pungent odor coming from within.

"Come in!" Avalon called out.

Althea walked in and had to stop abruptly as she was assailed with the odors. She gasped and choked. "Avalon! What in the name of all that is decent are you doing, girl? It smells awful up here."

Avalon looked up from her table. She had managed to set up several small fires and was heating small pots of something. She shoved her hair back. "Hello, Althea. I'm making scents today. I thought I would leave the healing potions and poultices for tomorrow. I'll make you a scent if you wish." She smiled at her cousin.

Althea barely concealed her repulsion. "How nice of you, Avalon. But perhaps you should make one for Brand first." She lifted a small handkerchief to cover her nose. There was little doubt that Brand would not appreciate her generous offer, but at that point, she didn't care.

Avalon looked thoughtful. "I guess I could, Althea, although I'm not sure he would like to smell like flowers."

Althea stopped abruptly. She lowered the handkerchief to sniff very briefly. No, she didn't smell anything that smelled in the least like any flower she'd ever come across before. "I'm sure he would like it simply because you made it, dearest."

Avalon gave a very unladylike snort, and began chopping some of the grass she had collected. Suddenly, she looked over at her cousin. "You know, Althea, Brand has been acting most strangely. Just when I think I have it all figured out, I am at a loss again."

Althea walked over to the window and opened it, breathing in fresh air. She turned and smiled at Avalon. "Whatever do you mean, dearest?"

Avalon added some cut up things to one of the pans and stirred it slowly. "He seemed to think I was going to have a baby! Have you ever heard of anything quite so ridiculous, Althea?"

Althea paused, looking at the younger woman and thinking she probably should have had a few more "instructional" talks with her. "Avalon, it would be a possibility. After all, you've been married for several months now..." Althea let her voice trail away, hoping Avalon would take the hint, and agree with her so she could drop this embarrassing inquisition of her cousin, and escape this awful smell.

Avalon sniffed her concoction and wrinkled her nose. "I know, Althea, but everyone I've always known has never had their baby for a year or so. I told Brand it was impossible." She paused, sniffing again. "You know, Althea..."

"Yes, Avalon?" Althea turned from the window where she had been attempting to fan the bad smells out the window. She'd already looked around and been quite disappointed to discover this was the only window!

"I didn't want to say anything..."

Her cousin's pause made Althea hopefully think she had gotten through to her. "Please, Avalon, go on. You know you can tell me anything."

"Thank you, Althea. You are always so sweet and understanding to me. What I was going to say, though, is that I don't think this smells quite right. Do you?"

Althea stared in disbelief at Avalon. Not quite sure what to say or do next, she watched as Avalon wiped her hands down the side of her dress. She looked back at the book, squinting to reread the small print. She nodded, seeing she had followed the directions. She looked back up as Althea spoke.

"What about your monthly flow, Avalon?"

Avalon shrugged. "The morning Brand and Gandalf left is when it started again. I hadn't really given it any thought, but it had been awhile since the last time. Now, come over here and help me make some sense of this, please?"

Althea looked at the younger woman. Sometimes she didn't understand Avalon at all. There was nothing more in the world that she would want right now than to be expecting her husband's child. And Avalon, in all her naiveté, didn't seem to grasp... Althea shook her head and moved towards the table. If nothing else, helping Avalon would keep her occupied until her husband returned.

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Avalon gave up on scents the next day, and decided to try her hand at a different type of concoction. She spent most of the day searching far and wide for different things, many of them she could find inside the castle grounds. No one really questioned her, or at least not until she was out in one of the far fields, and walking about, in between a goat herd. The elderly herdsman saw her

wandering about, and finally got up from his comfortable perch and made his way over to her.

“Young lady! What are you doing in my herd?”

Avalon looked up and smiled at the gray-haired man. He had a flowing white beard, and looked quite put out to have been interrupted. “Good morning, sir. I am sorry if I’ve disturbed your slumber...”

“Bah! I wasn’t sleeping. I was merely resting my eyes from the sun.”

Avalon nodded, held back her smile and slipped her hands into her pockets. “I was hoping I wouldn’t disturb you.”

“Are you here to steal a goat?”

Avalon laughed and shook her head. “No, but I’m sure you’ll think I’ve quite lost my mind when I tell you what I’m doing.”

The old herder looked her over slowly. Avalon was sure he doubted her sanity, and once she told him what she needed, he’d be sure of it. She watched as he shook his head negatively, but his eyes wandered over her, from head to toe. The herder startled as he spoke. “Who are you, woman? Your clothes say you must be a peasant, but from the look of your face, and the soft skin on your hands, I doubt that you’ve ever done a decent day’s work!”

“I am looking for some goat dung.” Avalon grinned. “But not just any goat’s dung. It must be from a male goat, and one who is...” She paused, blushing. “I need it from a goat that is well-hung, and it must be fresh.”

The herder stared at her in disbelief. She could see his conclusion in his eyes: she really was daft. His next words surprised her. “If you’ve come to kill me and steal my goats, be fair-warned, missy! I am much stronger than I look!”

Avalon laughed as she saw the look he gave her. “I’m not crazy, sir. I just need this for a potion I’m making. It’s a secret, but it is for my husband.”

The herder chuckled. "Maybe the quality folk have changed since his younger days, but I don't think your husband is going to truly appreciate this potion when he receives it." He shrugged nonetheless.

"Might I inquire as to whom you are wedded?" His face revealed that perhaps he should consider defending his liege lord's holdings a might more aggressively.

Avalon nodded, still looking at the ground and watching where she was stepping. "My husband is Lord Brandeis. I thought this land was part of his father's holdings."

The herder straightened a bit. "I heard the randy young lord had gotten himself a wife finally. And it looks to me as if he has a spitfire on his hands." He couldn't help but chuckle as he imagined the proud man's reaction to this "present" he would be receiving soon.

"Yes, this is indeed in the liege lord's holding, ma'am. I would be honored to help you search for what you need."

Avalon smiled. "Why, thank you, sir. I am a bit tired. Perhaps we could stop for a bit, and I will share my luncheon with you. And then we could start afresh after a short nap."

The herder nodded and pointed to the place he had been sitting. He paused and introduced himself as Thomas, removing his old hat and bowing his head. Soon he and Avalon were enjoying wine, cheese, fresh bread and an apple she had tucked in at the last minute.

Avalon watched Thomas as he eagerly dug into the food. She told him after a few bites that she wasn't all that hungry after all, and insisted he take the entire apple, and to please keep the rest of the food for later. She listened while he talked in between bites, and told her of how things had been when he was a young boy. He had served Brand's father all of his life, and now he mostly just tended the goats for his son, who farmed this area for Lord Carlton.

After finishing half the bread, cheese and the entire apple, Thomas finally got around to telling her which goat she would need to locate, and how she might discover what she needed. Avalon left the old man drifting to sleep, and returned to her quest. It took over an hour, but she finally got lucky. She picked up her specimen, and put it into the wrappings she had brought. The sun was beginning to set as she left the field for the castle, feeling quite pleased with the way her day had gone after all.

Chapter 13

Brand and Gandalf returned to the castle three days later. Brand had wanted to stay away longer and think about the way his life was going, but Gandalf had finally told him he was leaving. Gandalf had muttered he was sick and tired of listening to his cousin's moaning and groaning about missing his wife, but still not heading back to the castle.

This morning, in a disgusted tone of voice, Gandalf had announced that he had reached the end of his patience, and he was going home where he had a soft bed and a lovely wife waiting for him. He added that Brand could make his own mind up what he was going to do. Gandalf had slung his belongings together without further ado, but added that if Brand didn't think his wife was missing him, he could stay out here alone! It was a surly group that returned to the castle, because Brand and Gandalf had not been speaking since they had started for home that morning.

The first thing they noticed was that the courtyard seemed to be exceptionally full of people. There were many more people than what was normal. Brand didn't think they had come out to greet the returning hunters, although he did spot Althea quickly enough, but no sign of Avalon. He didn't like the feelings he experienced either as he realized that he was hoping Avalon would be waiting for him eagerly. He glanced at Gandalf, getting ready to point out his waiting spouse, when something else assailed him.

"What the hell is that?" he asked Gandalf, as he smelt the most god-awful odor he'd ever encountered. Gandalf's eyes were watering and he was already

placing his hand over his nose and mouth. Gandalf shrugged and shook his head, not willing to lower his hand to speak.

“Brand!”

Brand turned and saw his father standing off to the side, waving toward him. He saw Elizabeth was at his side, but still no sign of Avalon. He dismounted quickly, and strode over to his father. As he reached him, Althea came running up as well. Brand noticed that both his father and stepmother had handkerchiefs covering their lower faces. He turned as Althea came to his side, and noticed she had one as well.

“What’s happened? Why is everyone outside? And where the devil is Avalon?” he shouted in exacerbatation. He was surprised when his father gestured towards Althea to speak.

But before Althea could open her mouth, Gandalf reached her side. He hugged his wife close, and basically repeated Brand’s first two questions. As far as the third, he spoke what he was thinking out loud. “I’m beginning to wish we had never gone to get Brand a wife.”

Silence followed his hastily spoken words. Before he could apologize, his wife spoke softly, tears in her eyes. “Then we never would have met.”

Gandalf hugged Althea tightly. “I’m sorry, my love. I spoke out of frustration. Meeting you...” his voice broke.

Althea nodded quickly. “I understand, darling. Avalon can be a little frustrating at times.”

“She’s nothing compared to the pain Brand has been since we left here.” Gandalf stopped as he heard Brand’s father chuckling. Looking at Lord Carlton he explained. “All he has done since we left here is talk about his wife, sir. I couldn’t stand another moment this morning, and told him I was going back home to my wife!”

Althea hugged her husband back and then turned to Brand. "Avalon is still inside. She is cleaning up."

Brand frowned, wondering what *his* wife was doing cleaning up anything. Before he could speak, though, there was a loud bang from within the castle, and then some funny colored smoke came out of the window, where Avalon's workroom was. He cursed and strode toward the castle. Obviously, he was going to have to get to the bottom of this on his own. Part way up the stairs, though, he was forced to pause and take his shirt off, and rip it to form a small piece of cloth, which he could tie over his mouth and nose. He reached the workroom and didn't pause before flinging the door open.

* * * * *

Avalon looked up from her worktable. She had doused the fires, but had discovered that pouring the mixes into one pot for disposal was not a good idea. She was now covered in a fine mist of pinkish droplets that had formed when she had tossed the one foul smelling concoction into the large, cold, black iron pot Althea had brought up for her to start dumping things into.

But it was now apparent that placing the very hot liquid into a cold iron pot was not a good idea after all. She had just begun to think that the little old lady had not given her a book on making scents and love potions after all, when the door bounded open. Seeing her husband, his face half-covered, did not help her mood. There would be no keeping him from finding out now!

Avalon decided to brazen her way out of this fiasco. She smiled brightly at Brand. "Why, this is a pleasant surprise, sir! I didn't realize you would be coming home today."

Brand took another step into the room. He paused a foot from the table, glaring at her across the short distance. He ripped the cloth from his face. "Why? Had you planned on having the castle blown to bits before I got back?"

Avalon's smile faded, and she couldn't keep the tears from her eyes. She rubbed at her eyes quickly, unaware that she was only smearing the color. She sniffed. "No, sir. I was attempting to make you something special, a special scent to wear, when things got out of hand." She decided not to tell Brand about the other concoction she had been working on.

"Hellfire, woman! You expected me to put this hellacious smelling swill on my body?"

Avalon jerked back. She knew it didn't smell as she had hoped, but she also hadn't expected such a virulent attack either. "It didn't turn out like I wanted, so

no, this is not what I was going to give you. Now, if you would be so kind as to pick up that pot for me, I'll show you where we can dispose of it."

* * * * *

Brand looked around the workroom. He doubted that was the only thing making this smell. He surprised Avalon by shaking his head. Instead, he rounded the table, coming straight towards her. He didn't say a word, but he bent as he neared her, and her stomach connected with his shoulder, effectively tossing her over it. Without pause or any more words, he strode out of the room, through the castle and outside.

Outside the castle, he shouted to his father's housekeeper to fetch the pot and all the materials from the workroom. He quickly ordered several of his men to dig a hole out beyond the castle gates and bury the whole mess. He didn't stop, but kept on walking. When he came to his horse, he seated Avalon and climbed immediately behind her, trapping her. He ignored the worried looks on Althea's and Elizabeth's faces, and rode out of the castle courtyard.

He rode until they came to the stream about half a mile from the castle. The stream widened here, but made a nice place for bathing. He didn't pause in

dismounting, and lifted Avalon down. He tied his horse to the tree, and picked Avalon up again. Carrying her to the stream, he walked with her into the water.

Avalon started kicking and screaming when she saw what he was doing. She was small, but she was feisty. As Brand reached waist-high water, she was able to push free of his hold. She fell into the water, and came up a moment later, soaking wet and angry. She was still fearful, but anger was foremost as she shoved her wet hair back off her face.

"You have no right to drown me, husband, no matter how vexed you may be! My father will kill you and your whole damned family, once he finds out what evils you've done to me!" She tossed her head defiantly.

Avalon paused, realizing that when her father did find out, she would most likely be dead, unless she did something in a hurry. She bent to grab the knife from her boot, but it wasn't there. She had gotten so lax lately that she had stopped putting it on in the mornings.

Brand glared at Avalon, her clothes soaked, as well as her hair. He was soaking wet now, as well. "I'm not drowning you, damn it! We both stink to high heaven. We will be lucky if we aren't stoned when we return if my stepmother can't get rid of that odor."

He started to strip his clothes off, throwing them back onto the riverbank. He almost lost his balance as he pulled his boots off and he wished he had stopped to take them off before entering the water. Finally, naked, he turned to look at Avalon, who was still glaring at him. "Hurry up, Avalon, and strip. This water will begin to feel cold soon. Hand me your clothes and I'll throw them to the far side of the bank."

Avalon evidently saw the logic of his words. She slipped her own boots off first, regret in her eyes as Brand threw them away. Next she removed her overdress, the shift and finally her undergarments. And then, she was as naked as he, facing him with her arms crossed in front of her.

Brand turned back after hurling the last of her clothes to the far side. He shook his head at her reluctantly, amazed at his own patience with the woman. He should have been strangling her. And he doubted anyone would have been surprised if he had drowned her.

"My dear wife, I'm sure you are unaware of this, but you have a pink face and pink hair. I think you should try and scrub some of that off."

Avalon gasped and lifted one hand to rub at her face. She then looked at the pink fingers in horror. She pulled her hair over her shoulder and saw that it was pink-stained as well. She ducked under the water, scrubbing furiously at her face. When she came back up, her face was back to normal. Brand came closer and offered to help her with her hair.

Avalon turned her back and let her husband begin washing her hair with just water and rubbing. Finally, he pronounced her clean. He leaned forward and sniffed and then told her she was smell-free as well. He started back toward the edge of the stream and walked out. He went over to his horse, and reached into one of the pouches at the back of the horse's saddle.

As Avalon stepped onto the grassy bank, she saw Brand pulling on extra clothes from the pouch he had. He had pulled on pants, and then turned and tossed her the shirt to slip on over her head. It came down to just a few inches above her knees. She then found a sunny spot of grass and sat down, acting as if she wasn't paying the least bit of attention to what Brand was doing. After a few minutes, though, he came over and stretched out beside her on the warm grass.

"Thank you for the shirt. It is the only one you have?" she asked him softly. "Thank you for not making me ride back home naked."

Brand had just propped his head on his interlaced fingers. The warm sun felt good on his naked chest. His eyes wandered over Avalon's naked legs stretched out in front of her.

"What were you trying to do, Avalon?" Brand asked her softly.

Avalon looked down into Brand's eyes. "I was trying to make you a scent. I had that book of herbs, and it has recipes in it."

"That is not what I mean, Avalon. Why did you even start on this venture? You know nothing about herbs, and the mixing of such things. You have seen what can happen."

Avalon fidgeted with the long wet strands of her hair. She moved her legs restlessly, before she finally answered. "I was bored! There is nothing for me to do. I'm no good at household things. And besides, with Elizabeth and all the other women, there is nothing left for me to do. I'm not good at needlework. At home, I always had lots of things to do, and I was never bored there."

Brand sat up slowly. "This is your home now, though."

Avalon nodded. "I know, but you aren't happy with me as a wife, Brand. I don't think my father would mind if you sent me back."

Brand frowned as he looked into Avalon's eyes. Her words cut him to the bone, realizing she was that unhappy here. He didn't want to acknowledge the hope as he rode into the castle keep today that Avalon would be smiling, and waving happily to greet him and welcome him home.

He'd been a fool to think that he could keep his relationship with his wife on a level where emotions would not become entangled. He didn't want to admit that he was coming to care for her. He had not even wanted to accept that he was feeling a need to be with her that had much more to it than just a need for sexual satiation. Brand enjoyed being with her. Talking with her, hearing her laugh, seeing her smile—all these things had become much too important to him since they had returned home. "So you hate being here that much."

* * * * *

Avalon saw the hurt in his face as he spoke. She had thought she was “just a wife” to him, and nothing more. “I don’t hate it, Brand. But I know that I am not what you want in a wife. I’m not that much of a woman, either, I guess. I’m not a good housekeeper, and I could never manage the servants for my father. I never had to do that stuff at home. Althea gladly took up those jobs. The Good Lord knows I can’t sew or embroider. I was free to do my own things, follow my own wishes.”

She paused, shifting nervously on the grass. “I guess I’m pretty spoiled,” she admitted to him quietly. “I spent most of my time riding, hunting and visiting my father’s farms. He always said I was good with people.” Her voice cracked and she had to swallow several times before she could go. Surreptitiously she lifted one hand to brush away her tears. “You could send me back, I guess, and I’ll tell my father that it is like fishing. You got one that was too small and not mature enough, so you are throwing it back after all.”

Avalon’s voice broke at the end. She was startled at how much speaking the words out loud hurt. She had it all reasoned out in her head. But saying it out loud was different. Brand may not have been satisfied with her as a wife, but she had begun to like being with him. She certainly liked being his wife in bed. There was no denying that! She felt her cheeks flame as a blush crept up her face. Yes indeed, she did enjoy the delicious feelings she had when he touched and kissed her. And when he was inside her body, she was no longer just herself, but felt joined with him beyond just the physical.

She acknowledged silently that she had been foolish to think he might have started to feel the same about her. She was no good as a wife, not like Lady Elizabeth or Althea, anyway.

Avalon didn’t realize she had spoken the last sentence out loud until Brand spoke, reaching his hand out to lightly caress the side of her face. “You aren’t too small in some places, wife. And as far as maturity, that comes with age and

experience. I feel that I must ask if you are unhappy with me as a husband. Have I not performed well?"

Avalon flushed even brighter. "No, sir. I have no complaints. If anything, I would praise..." Avalon stopped abruptly, realizing what she had said. Brand grinned back at her.

"So it is safe to say that neither of us is displeased by the other." He paused, waiting for Avalon to say something, but she remained silent. "I have no desire to return you to your father."

"Oh." Avalon spoke softly. "I thought you were unhappy with me."

* * * * *

Brand stared at his young wife. Something had gone wrong along the way, and he wasn't sure what it was. He doubted it was something Avalon did, because of her naiveté and openness. She was impulsive, and that was leading her down some bad paths. Of course, it could be that he wasn't the right kind of husband for Avalon, but he didn't want to consider that.

"I may have thought I wanted a wife like Althea or my stepmother in the beginning," Brand told her softly. He slipped a finger under her chin and held her face up to meet his eyes. "But I have since then learned that I am not as complacent as Gandalf or my father. I would be bored within a day with a woman like either of them." He leaned over and lightly kissed her lips. "I'll never have a bored hour with you, my sweet."

Brand slowly pressed Avalon backward, into the lush, warm, green grass. He kissed her face, cheeks and then her mouth once again. This time he found her lips parted and her tongue waiting for him. He moved his hand down to the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up to her waist. He groaned when she spread

her thighs eagerly and he felt her wetness on her pussy. He held back for a moment though.

“Darling, what really caused that horrible stench?”

Avalon wiggled beneath him, unable to stop the eager seeking of her hips. “Goat dung, Brand. I needed it for something special I had decided on.”

Brand settled between her widespread thighs. His hard cock touched the wet lips and slipped inside a bit. “I can’t imagine any scent needing goat dung, my love.”

Avalon smiled and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her thighs circled his hips. She pulled him close and Brand thrust into her eager body. His groan and harsh breathing delayed her reply. She shifted her body beneath him, and rocked and shimmied her bottom, enticing and arousing him even more.

“It was a love potion I found, stuck way back in a little piece of paper at the back of the book.”

Brand froze and lifted up on his arms, pausing in his thrust. “What? A love potion! I don’t think I need any help in that department, my sweet wife.”

Avalon giggled and tightened her muscles rhythmically, squeezing his cock inside her body. She was a fast learner. She repeated the action, squeezing his cock, over and over.

“I didn’t mean potency potion, Brand. I wanted you to love me with your heart and your head, not just with...”

Brand chuckled loudly. He resumed his thrusts, and felt her answering moves. A moment before they reached simultaneous climax, he demanded she open her eyes and look at him. “Darling, you’ve had my heart! I just wasn’t smart enough to give it over into your loving hands. It is yours, forevermore, as am I.”

Avalon sighed, feeling his cum rushing into her belly. She loved him so much, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. "I love you, too!" she told him joyfully.

She held him tightly to her, arms and legs wrapped around him as she felt him jerk, shudder and send the last of his juice into her body. Brand's groan of satisfaction and contentment told her more than his words of his true feelings. She knew he would soon feel freer to talk, but for now, they had each other to hold on to, and that was all that really mattered.

Epilogue

The next spring arrived and Avalon was out once again looking for wildflowers, grasses and weeds. With a good deal of persistence and diligence, Brand had found another woman who was talented with potions. He, as well as the rest of the castle, was quite glad when he had arranged for his wife to have lessons in the ancient art of mixing natural ingredients for sundry objectives. If this was what she wanted to cook, then she would at least be well taught!

Her apron was filling quickly today since the weather had been so mild this year. Perhaps she would have enough to try a scent for Brand's father. It was too bad that Brand started sneezing every time he tried to use any of the sweet smelling potions she had made for him both for Christmas and as she tried something new. Hopefully his father wouldn't suffer from the same ailment.

"Althea told me you were out here, wife!"

Avalon looked up as her husband approached. "I stopped to see her and the baby before I came out. I have a new recipe to try for the baby's colic. He kept both of them up the last two nights."

She tied her apron into a holding bag as she watched Brand dismount his destrier. "I'm surprised to see you. I understood that you and Gandalf were going to get some practice in today. Althea said Gand feels as if he is getting soft since the baby came. No more travels and running about with you."

"Well, he got tired from the lack of sleep so we quit early. And I promise you that you need not worry that I will be getting soft any time soon."

Avalon lifted her lips for her husband's kiss as he stopped in front of her. Since they weren't too near the castle gates she slid her hand down and cupped his cock. He immediately proved the truth in his words.

"Hmm. No softness there, husband," Avalon whispered against Brand's lips.

Brand grabbed her upper arms and pulled her closer to his body. His mouth eagerly covered hers and stopped her words. Several long moments later they eased back from one another. His right hand, which had slid over to cup her breast, continued to gently massage the firm, full flesh.

"You had best stop that, husband. Remember what your father said about good examples and how making love in full view of the castle gates is a distraction?"

"Yes, damn it all! We can't go back because someone will undoubtedly stop us the minute we cross the threshold."

"No more sneaking away to our bedchamber for those lovely long naps anymore." Avalon paused and rubbed her hand over her swelling belly. Those delicious long afternoon interludes had certainly paid off. But she did regret the way they seemed to disappear once her pregnancy became evident to everyone in the castle. It was as if everyone now assumed there was no reason for them to be enjoying those sweet, hot escapes from the daily grind!

Brand covered her hand. "Is something wrong? Do you feel all right?"

"Yes, my love, I feel fine. I just need more of my husband's restorative love making."

"I am starting to believe that there is a conspiracy afoot to keep us from enjoying our midday naps since the coming of our babe was known."

Nodding slowly, Avalon stopped abruptly. "I have bread, cheese and water in my sack, sir. I brought it just in case I got hungry. I even put some fruit in there. If you took me in front of you on your destrier, we could be at that lovely

pond quite quickly, almost before anyone even knew we had gone. The grass there is usually nice and thick."

Brand grinned down at his wife. "Grab your belongings then, Avalon."

In just a few minutes they were riding toward the lovely pond where they had discovered and resolved their mistakes the previous year. Brand's arms held her securely in front of him. He leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"And after I've fed and watered you, my love, I'll show you how sweet being in front of me can truly be." He lightly nibbled her earlobe with his lips. "Holding you tightly in front of me, lying on our bed, I can think of several different ways to show you what a fun and interesting position that can be."

Avalon's laughter joined his as they rode the short distance to the water. There would be twigs to pick out of her hair and clothing later, but she would enjoy the gentle chiding and laughter she would most likely receive from the other women in the castle. That was just one of the perks of being married to the lusty heir of the castle!

The End

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